



Brandon Hall Group  
**EXCELLENCE  
AT WORK**

# Executive Interview

with **Dr. Varsha Sreevatsa**,  
Author of *Apples & Oranges*; Founder at  
LetsDRIVE; Proponent of Cognitive Diversity  
and Total Inclusion

and **Rajeev Menon**,  
Author of *Apples & Oranges*, DE&I proponent,  
Human Capital Measurement and Development,  
Sales & Product Strategy, Innovation, Cognitive  
Diversity and Total Inclusion, Board Member

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Frameworks and Actionables  
to Inculcate a Culture of Inclusion

## About LetsDRIVE

LetsDRIVE drives cognitive diversity and inclusion at corporations. Unlike traditional outsourcing, LetsDRIVE seeks to provide extraordinary value to its customers, whether it's by creating awareness about the difference they bring to the table or enabling them to practice an inclusive mindset with its in-house workshops and academy. LetsDRIVE helps corporations provide an inclusive work environment with its frameworks and solutions. LetsDRIVE is committed to empowering people and organizations for this cultural and personal change.

LetsDRIVE is a pioneer in creating frameworks for Cognitive Diversity and Total Inclusion. LetsDRIVE is led by a purpose: to make an impact that matters and to enable corporations to experience the real business impact of diverse thinking.

## About Dr. Varsha Sreevatsa

**Dr. Varsha Sreevatsa** has dedicated her work to helping others with the belief that everyone should be treated fairly and equally. This started as she studied for her Ph.D. in psychology and worked to create awareness of child rights. In her book *Apples & Oranges: A Practical Approach to Implement D&I For Organizations and Individuals*, Varsha and her co-author, Rajeev Menon, use everyday stories to explain that diversity, equity and inclusion are essential for the future of work.



Varsha recently founded LetsDRIVE, a consulting firm to help organizations introduce cognitive diversity and a culture of inclusion. Varsha has developed frameworks and assessments to measure and implement Cognitive Diversity and Total Inclusion strategies. She uses a conceptual framework and implementation to develop programs. For example, Varsha has delivered guest lectures on Building Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Southern California for students pursuing master's degrees in human resources, specializing in organizational change and development. Varsha has also led workshops on Emotional Intelligence, Psychological Impact during the Covid Crisis and Decoding the Culture for multi-national organizations such as IBM and Infosys.

Varsha is consulting with the Foundation for Talent Transformation to create frameworks and quizzes to help individuals thrive by better understanding themselves, others and the future of work.



## About Rajeev Menon

**Rajeev Menon** is an experienced product and innovation professional and a business strategist. He has worked in the area of Human Capital Measurement for over 16 years and is an elected board member of EAA (e-Assessment Association). He is also on the board of Snehadhara Foundation, a not-for-profit that uses the arts as a medium for building an inclusive society for those with mental disabilities. At LetsDRIVE, he works to evangelize and consult on Cognitive Diversity and Total Inclusion. He brings insights on the conceptual framework, product design and consumer psychology to a global audience. Rajeev also writes and consults on HR practices, technology, and business and mentors startups. A student of people practices and interactions in organizations, he believes that technology will impact interactions positively and help improve employee interconnections from transactional to collaborative.

## About Rachel Cooke



**Rachel Cooke** is Brandon Hall Group's Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research, and Performance Improvement industries.

**Q** **RACHEL**

What are the common failures and pitfalls that leaders and organizations fall into during DE&I implementation?

**A** **VARSHA**

Looking at DE&I as a social obligation rather than a genuine need to bring about a culture change driven by passion is one of the biggest pitfalls. Even in evolved organizations, we see the first step they take is to start onboarding minority groups rather than spreading awareness on DE&I or even preparing their organization and people for an inclusive culture. What this leads to is too much focus on diversity and not so much on inclusion. There's a focus on numbers and policies, etc., but not on awareness, which is the first step in this process. We also see a lot of focus on the result and not the process. For example, an organization says the goal is: Let's have 25% of a particular minority group onboard before the end of the next fiscal year. But how are you going to make that 25% be heard, seen and represented in a true sense?

There are a lot of other pitfalls I could mention. It could be a fear of change. To bring in such a huge cultural difference is not a simple task. It could be very daunting and overwhelming, and it definitely involves a tough conversation. That's exactly why some organizations fail to embark on this journey. Then there is a lack

of accountability for DE&I initiatives and an inability to create champions for DE&I within the organization. Another important point is some organizations fail to see the connection between DE&I initiatives and business outcomes or profits. The efforts don't work because they are focused on propagating superficial inclusiveness without really understanding inclusion. Say there is a lot of focus on celebrating special days like Women's Day or Bride Month, but after it's over there's no actual measurable change in the culture and there is no real outcome. A basic lack of understanding of what DE&I really is is the real problem.

**Q** **RACHEL**

What efforts don't work?

**A** **VARSHA**

For example, there's an organization that advertises that the average age of their employees in the office is 24.5 years. What is the message this organization is trying to give its employees? Is it that those who don't fit in this age range don't belong in the organization? These kinds of messages that organizations convey without intending any harm can sometimes work against them. That's where I'd emphasize creating awareness of DE&I and preparing people for an inclusive culture.

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Some people feel excluded when you celebrate certain things. Even the so-called dominant white male needs to be part of this inclusive journey. That group would add to the cognitive drivers that we speak so much about in our book, *Apples & Oranges: A Practical Approach to Implement D&I For Organizations and Individuals*.

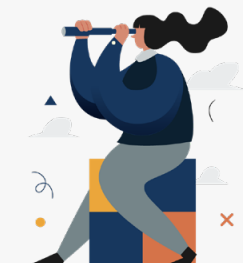
**Q** **RACHEL**

How can the current approach to DE&I in corporations be improved?

**A** **RAJEEV**

There's been a lot of advancement over the past six decades of work that, in the end, have not led to the benefits that people imagined when they started. The number-one issue is there is still not enough conviction that DE&I impacts business positively at the top leadership levels. It seems to be a way to respond to people's and the public's feelings about including minority groups rather than actually figuring out that diversity improves business performance significantly. Diverse thinking helps foster innovation, better problem-solving, etc.

**It's not just about race and gender, it's about looking at diversity from the prism of cognitive diversity.**



We need diversity because different people from different cultures can bring different viewpoints — not because they are physiologically different. From a corporate perspective, I am saying: “What can improve my top line and what can improve my bottom line? What can give me a better competitive advantage? How can more of my customers buy more of my products?”

Once the leaders are convinced, the second point is to create awareness. If you go around asking employees why they need diversity, and that it's important to you, everyone will just point to the fact this is something HR does. Let's say there are eight events in a year where it's Hispanic diversity, African-American diversity or Indian diversity and we celebrate that as a special day. We do some fancy stuff and that's about it. Do the people at the lower rungs of the organization realize that they can benefit a lot by having people with different viewpoints about processes? The answer is no. To do that, you need to do training sessions.

The second is to do an open house or town hall and be transparent about why you want diversity. The third is to demonstrate from the very top in terms of meetings and representation. For example, a company that I work closely with ensured that every town hall was led by a different leader or another person. It could be someone with a different background or gender, etc. That gave the message that diversity is celebrated in this organization. That helped push the point through.

The fourth is about measurement. Do you have the diverse thinking that is required for improving innovation? Is there a way to formally measure it?

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We discuss a lot about how it can be measured in our book. Measure specific actions — not just in terms of saying that I want to hire more people from different backgrounds and stuff, but also in terms of how this can get woven into the performance framework, KPIs, OKRs, etc. If you don't put this in the right place, no one is going to even look at it; it's just something that they have to do. Next is to review and keep reviewing; make changes, move forward, increase the pace. In many cases, you might have to do it at different paces. In some cases, the awareness is already so high that you can go into a DE&I culture in a very strong way. In other cases, it might be slower. The awareness phase itself might take a longer period. Ultimately, if people don't move away from physiological diversity and talk about cognitive diversity, the chances are that these initiatives will not go forward in a way that creates maximum impact.

Start with representation because that's the easiest way. I'm not against getting different representations into the organization. This can happen through quota systems or specific mandates. This is the most important part — when you get people in through these mandates, you need to bring those people to the table to have a conversation with someone who has been in the majority class for so long. Are there programs to upskill? Are there meetings, etc., that have to be followed to ensure that people from different backgrounds or thinking processes have their voices heard? Over time, move the conversation to completely talking about cognitive diversity and not about physiological diversity. If people can take these steps, there's a good chance you will progress well ahead on the topic of diversity and you will have a diverse workforce giving you the right kinds of dividends.

Q

**RACHEL**

What is your framework for DE&I?

A

**VARSHA**

Finding a deeper sense of purpose and clarity of what DE&I is should be the approach for organizations. Every organization has a different take on it. It depends on the location and other factors, but the intent must be in the right place to create a culture of DE&I. Our framework should be something that everybody can relate to and implement. It should help navigate through fear, resistance or even anger that can come up during a culture change. It's also important that the future of the workplace not just happen on the surface but evolve from within.

**Our approach is inclusion before diversity. It's a three-step process. You measure the current status, identify gaps and fill them.**



*(continued)*

While they look simple, it can be a little overwhelming when you start putting them into practice. Without a deep dive into the mindset of people, it's not really possible for any of the DE&I initiatives to be successful. Our framework also includes a lot of tips and information about DE&I at personal and professional levels. At the core, we have assessments. Measurement is the key. It provides a personal element to kick-start the DE&I journey. Organizations have pulse surveys, etc., but we want to measure how included people feel and how diverse they are, cognitively or otherwise. These are the points that give us input and feed into a training program that can create a habit or practice of inclusion. Our book talks about this and has a lot of assessments, worksheets and tips to get started on the journey.

**Inclusion very clearly comes first. If you don't have an inclusive culture, there is absolutely no way diversity can thrive in an organization.**



If you want to get a forest in a barren area, you first need to irrigate the land. And then you put in the seeds. You can't just throw in the seeds and hope the forest will grow. Inclusion is exactly like that. Inclusion is also the more difficult part to do, because as humans we have our own biases. There is homogeneity where we want to be with people of a particular type who are like us. Opening ourselves to people who are atypical of us is difficult. It has to be through force of habit.

Cultural change is not easy. I can talk of a multinational company with a very aggressive target of having 50% representation of women within a particular time. They gave a mandate to recruiters to hire them no matter what. Recruiters did that without getting convinced that this is going to help in the overall cause of improving the business. They reached the target of 50% women in the organization. In about three to six months, the churn of women employees was much higher. When they dug deep they found out that while they got the women in, they had not put in the steps to make the culture inclusive and welcoming of them. They did not participate; they just made up the numbers. That is when the organization introduced a program where they actually got the entire set of employees to understand why diversity is important and what they bring to the table. They ensured that women were upskilled so they could be at the same level as their colleagues.

*(continued)*

**Q** **RACHEL**

What comes first: Diversity or Inclusion? What's the connection between them?

**A** **RAJEEV**

There's a lot of talk about diversity, but there isn't much on inclusion.

If you don't have a culture of inclusion from the time that someone steps into the company, if you don't exhibit inclusion with every single conversation in every single meeting, if you don't demonstrate it constantly, if you don't have the measurement, you will have a situation where you might be able to get diverse people into the organization but you will not get the outcomes you are expecting. In fact, it will negatively impact you.

We always talk about D&I. It should be I&D. Inclusion should come first.

Here are some ways to listen to the interview on Brandon Hall Group's Excellence at Work Podcast:





# About Brandon Hall Group

With more than 10,000 clients globally and 28 years of delivering world-class research and advisory services, Brandon Hall Group is focused on developing research that drives performance in emerging and large organizations, and provides strategic insights for executives and practitioners responsible for growth and business results.

## Professional Certifications

Self-paced certification programs. Virtual group sessions for companies. In-person conferences and summits.

## Membership

Individual and Enterprise Membership Options: Includes research assets, advisory support, a client success plan and more.

## Advisory Offerings

Custom Research Projects, including surveys, focus group interviews and Organization Needs Assessment for Transformation, Technology Selection and Strategy.

## Excellence Awards

Two annual programs recognize the best organizations that have successfully deployed programs to achieve measurable results.

SOME WAYS WE CAN HELP

### ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

recognizes world-class HCM programs that transform their organization and achieve breakthrough results. This designation is the next step beyond the HCM Excellence Awards, which focus on a single program, and looks at the department as a whole.

### SMARTCHOICE® PREFERRED PROVIDER PROGRAM

uniquely places HCM service and technology companies at the top of organizations' consideration list of vendors. It adds an unmatched level of credibility based on BHG's twenty-eight-plus years of experience in evaluating and selecting the best solution providers for leading organizations around the world.