FUTURE TALENT COUNCIL

Measuring What Matters: A New Approach to DEI

A Conversation with Paolo Gaudiano

Meet Paolo Gaudiano, a former rocket scientist and neuroscientist who took on what he calls his toughest challenge yet: cracking the code of workplace inclusion. After working on the complexities of aerospace and brain science, he's now applying that same analytical mindset to revolutionize how companies think about DEI.

As Founder and Chief Scientist at Aleria and an Adjunct Professor at NYU Stern, Gaudiano is championing a fresh, data-driven approach that promises both better profits and happier employees. His new book *Measuring Inclusion* challenges conventional wisdom, arguing that we've been measuring the wrong things all along.

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Measuring Inclusion: Higher Profits & Happier People

Before we dive into the specifics of your work, what motivated you to write *Measuring Inclusion*? What was the spark that made you think, '*this needs to be written*'?

The spark came from two things. First, the growing backlash against DEI initiatives was becoming increasingly evident. I had been approaching DEI differently for years, focusing on inclusion in a way that avoids the backlash. I felt it was time to share this perspective more broadly.

Second, by late 2022 and early 2023, the backlash had become undeniable. I had actually predicted this as early as 2018, warning that if organizations continued prioritizing diversity and representation as primary goals, it could provoke resistance. What I hadn't anticipated was the sheer intensity of the pushback.

So, I wrote this book to show that there are ways to drive meaningful change—without the backlash. The response has been incredible; many people have reached out, eager to find a way forward.

The Invisibility of Inclusion

You argue that inclusion is the foundation for diversity and equity, yet it remains largely invisible until exclusion is felt. Do you think this invisibility makes organizations hesitant to prioritize it? How do you convince leaders to address something they can't readily see?

That's an excellent point. I like to use an analogy with health. When someone introduces me, they might highlight my work, my credentials—but they won't say, '*Paolo is very healthy*'. However, if I had a sore throat and couldn't speak, it would be noticeable. We're much more aware of sickness than health. Inclusion works the same way: people notice exclusion far more than they notice inclusion.

This creates a challenge because most leaders, by definition, have been included throughout their careers. They've never personally experienced exclusion in the workplace, which means they struggle to recognize it, let alone address it.

So how do we make it visible? By measuring it. We've developed a methodology that quantifies inclusion and directly links it to financial outcomes. When leaders see the numbers—how exclusion leads to lost productivity, retention issues, and financial losses—they start paying attention. If inclusion is framed as a business imperative rather than just a moral one, leaders engage with it more seriously.

The DEI Backlash and Its Causes

In your book, you discuss what you call a *DEI bubble* and the subsequent backlash. We've seen this backlash intensify, particularly in early 2025. Could you elaborate on how this backlash is connected to flaws in traditional DEI approaches? How can organizations address these flaws while maintaining momentum?

This is a difficult but necessary conversation. One of the biggest mistakes in DEI has been the single-minded focus on diversity and representation. By wrapping everything around identity, organizations inadvertently create a zero-sum game mindset.

For example, if a company sets a goal to increase the number of women in leadership from 20% to 30%, that mathematically means reducing the percentage of men. Even if the company argues that diversity improves performance, it often fails to show *how* that happens. When leaders don't see tangible benefits—and when some employees feel overlooked—the result is resentment, frustration, and ultimately, backlash.

We've also seen companies make clumsy DEI decisions, which have fueled this backlash. Employees—often white men, but not exclusively—report feeling like opportunities are being taken away from them in the name of diversity. This perception, whether accurate or not, creates resistance.

The solution? Shift the focus to inclusion. Rather than pushing for representation quotas, organizations should fix the structural issues that create exclusion in the first place. If a system is genuinely inclusive, diversity will emerge as a natural outcome.

Intersectionality and Inclusion

Your book explores how different aspects of identity compound exclusion. How does your methodology account for these complexities in measuring inclusion?

This is a crucial point. Traditional DEI methods often start by identifying groups most affected by inequities—Black women, LGBTQ+ employees, people with disabilities—and then trying to fix their specific problems. But this approach can be limiting.

Instead, we reverse the process. We ask all employees, '*What workplace experiences have prevented you from performing at your best?'* Then, we analyze the responses. What we find is that people who differ more from the majority—whether in gender, race, disability status, or any combination—are consistently more likely to report exclusionary experiences.

By focusing on workplace experiences rather than predefined identity groups, we address the root causes of exclusion. When we fix those systemic issues, we help the most marginalized employees *without alienating others*.

Inclusion as a Universal Concept

You position inclusion as a universal concept, unlike diversity, which varies by context. How should multinational organizations balance a universal approach to inclusion with local cultural norms?

This is something we've tested with global organizations like AstraZeneca. We assumed inclusion could be measured universally—and we were right.

Rather than asking about identity, we ask employees worldwide to share workplace experiences that impacted their ability to perform. These responses fall into categories like work-life balance, career advancement, or participation in meetings—universal challenges.

What differs across cultures is *how* exclusion manifests. For instance, in China, individualism is less of a concern than it is in the U.S., so exclusion may look different there. But the core methodology remains the same. By measuring workplace experiences rather than enforcing identity-driven frameworks, organizations can tailor inclusion strategies to local needs while maintaining a consistent global approach.

The Future of Workplace Inclusion

Despite the current challenges, your perspective on workplace inclusion remains optimistic. Given the political and societal headwinds against DEI, what gives you confidence about the future?

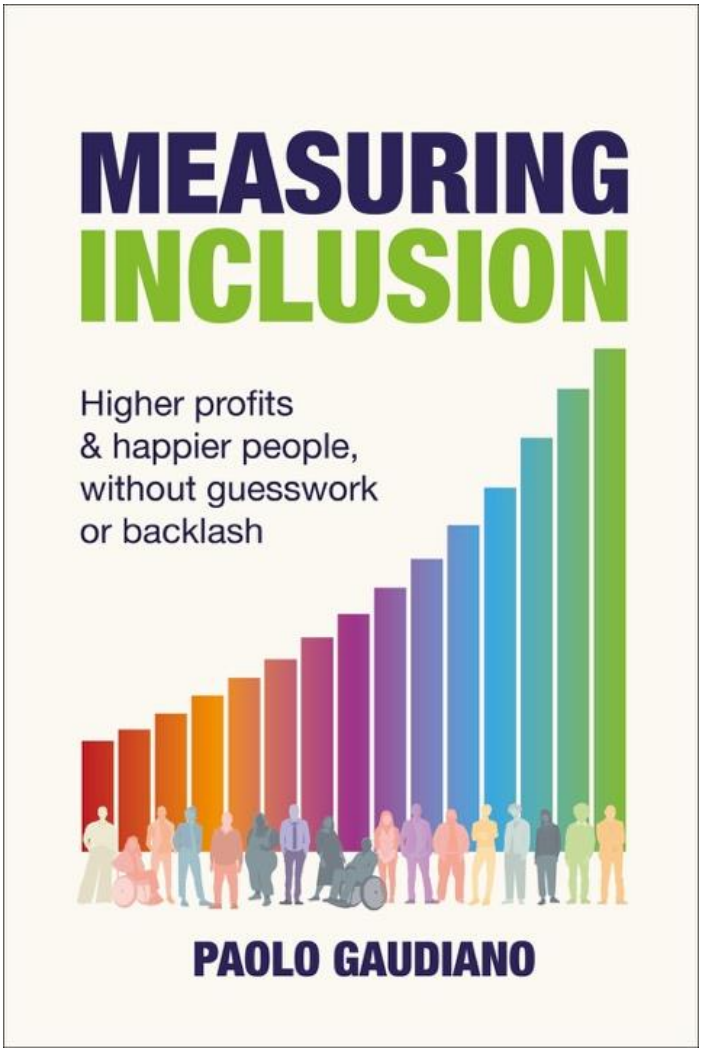
Every crisis presents an opportunity. Right now, we're seeing a painful reckoning in DEI, but I believe it will ultimately lead to a stronger, more effective approach.

We're moving beyond DEI as a monolithic, politicized label and toward a more holistic understanding of talent management. Organizations are realizing that treating employees fairly and fostering inclusive environments isn't just about checking boxes—it's about maximizing human potential.

We've seen similar shifts before. After the dot-com bubble burst in 2001, skeptics dismissed the internet as a fad. Yet, the companies that *embraced* digital transformation thrived. The same will happen with inclusion. The organizations that learn to quantify and optimize human capital—just as they do with financial and operational assets—will dominate their industries.

That's an insightful perspective, Paolo. Before we wrap up, what's one key message you'd like our audience—HR executives, academic leaders, and policymakers—to take away from this conversation?

Be clear about what you're asking for. If you focus solely on increasing diversity numbers, you may end up with a workforce that looks different but still operates under the same exclusionary systems. Instead, ask: '*Are all my employees empowered to perform at their best?'* If you solve for inclusion, diversity will follow—and your organization will be stronger for it.

Thank you, Paolo. This has been an incredibly insightful conversation. For those interested, *Measuring Inclusion* is available now, and more about Paolo's work can be found at www.aleria.tech. Thank you all for reading.

Thank you, Emir. It's been a pleasure.