

Including the Most Privileged in Inclusion & Belonging

By Pam McElvane



Whether people believe it or not, companies can and must do a better job culturally including white men, particularly those in supervisory, plant, and field-level positions. Yes, I said it. And no, this isn't a contradiction of inclusion, it's an expansion of it.

In today's polarized DEI environment, where terms like "inclusion" and "equity" are often politicized or misunderstood, many companies are shrinking back from bold moves. But here lies an opportunity. The truth is: white men, especially those in middle management, field operations, and industrial roles have often been left out of meaningful diversity and belonging conversations. Ironically, it's because they're seen as the most privileged. But privilege doesn't equate to belonging. It doesn't guarantee community, psychological safety, or cultural affirmation.

Let's talk about it. The Overlooked Group in DEI: White Men in the Ranks; affectionally known as the frozen middle.

For decades, diversity, equity and inclusion has rightly focused on opening doors for historically underrepresented groups Black and Brown professionals, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those with disabilities. That work is essential and far from over. But inclusion was never meant to be exclusive.

In many field settings like manufacturing plants, logistics hubs, and remote work sites white men are often the majority. They've created their own subcultures for years. Hunting weekends. Friday fish fries. NASCAR watch parties. Their sense of identity is tied to those communities. It's not wrong, it's human.

So, what's the big deal about formally acknowledging their cultures within the broader workplace inclusion & belonging framework?

We already celebrate cultural expression at work. From Irish heritage parades to Diwali events, from Lunar New Year festivals to Black History Month celebrations, we uplift traditions because they help us understand one another better. They give people a sense of pride. Why should it be controversial to recognize the cultural identity of white men, especially those who have felt displaced or disconnected during this period of social reckoning?

Let's be real: culture is not a zero-sum game. In fact, many white men don't feel seen in today's workplace culture conversations. That sense of invisibility has fueled backlash, cynicism, and fear. But it's not DEI, that's the problem, it's the way we've failed to fully live it out. You see, inclusion isn't about subtraction, it's about expansion.

Creating space to honor white male identity doesn't mean we're reducing support for women or people of color. It means we're saying, "*You belong here too. You matter too.*" And when we do that, something powerful happens *resistance turns into participation*.

Think about the impact of that. What would change if the very people who were once skeptical of diversity and inclusion became its fiercest champions? What if they saw themselves reflected in the mission and values of their organization, not just as contributors to performance, but as humans with culture, history, and pride?

Leading by Example: Oshner Health & Advocate Health

Some companies are getting it right and they're not afraid to break the mold.

Ochsner Health recently launched a **Men's Employee Resource Group** (ERG). That might sound simple on the surface, but it's actually revolutionary. This ERG creates a safe space for men, many of whom are white to discuss mental health, work-life balance, generational shifts, and yes, cultural identity. It opens the door to *real inclusion* by meeting people where they are.

Similarly, **Advocate Health** has boldly stepped forward to **celebrate white culture** not as a counter-movement to other cultures, but as a meaningful part of the organization's broader belonging framework. This isn't about pandering or erasing others. It's about widening the lens so that everyone feels part of the workplace fabric.

These examples aren't just symbolic. They represent a deeper understanding that the pathway to stronger teams, better performance, and healthier work environments begins with cultural respect and honest dialogue.

We're in a new era and companies are reimagining what diversity, equity and inclusion could be. The social upheavals post-2020 forced many organizations to invest deeply in DEI, but with today's political tensions and budget constraints, many of those commitments are being walked back. That's not just unfortunate, it's dangerous. We can't afford to move backwards. We need to evolve.

To do that, we must tell a new story: one where Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion isn't about blame, it's about belonging. One where we stop treating white men as the obstacle and instead invite them to be part of the solution. This doesn't mean ignoring privilege. It means acknowledging the full complexity of identity, how someone can hold privilege in one area but still feel excluded in another.

Inclusion has to grow up. It must transcend checklists, compliance training, and optics. It must reach into the overlooked spaces the breakroom, the shop floor, the rural field site where culture is alive and real.

What Can Companies Do?

Here are a few steps organizations can take right now to begin building a more expansive vision of inclusion:

- 1. Create ERGs for White Men or Regional Identity Groups**

Don't be afraid to allow cultural identity to form organically. If you can have a Women in Leadership or Black Professionals ERG, you can have one for Men of the Midwest or Field Ops Brotherhood. It's not exclusion, it's inclusion with intention.

- 2. Include White Men in Belonging Conversations**

Ask them what belonging looks like to them. What makes them feel connected or disconnected at work? You'll be surprised at how open and vulnerable the dialogue can become. Leaders do this well; ask those in the ranks.

- 3. Celebrate All Cultures—Yes, All**

From Irish heritage to Appalachian traditions, Scandinavian customs to Southern Americana every culture brings a richness to the table. Use that as a bridge, not a barrier.

- 4. Offer Allyship Training that Goes Both Ways**

Don't just teach people how to be allies to others. Teach everyone how to receive allyship. It builds empathy on both sides.

At the end of the day, the most powerful truth about inclusion is this: it doesn't have color, gender, or a department. It's a principle. A choice. A commitment to see people, value people, and bring them into community regardless of how we label their identities.



Let's stop treating inclusion like a limited resource. There's enough belonging to go around. And to my white male colleagues reading this: *you belong here too.*