

# **DEI Is Not Dead**

## **Leading Boldly in Divided Times**

### **A Leadership Handout for American Bus Association Professionals**

**By Carole Copeland Thomas**

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#### **Why This Matters Now**

Across the country, leaders are feeling pressure to retreat from conversations about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Headlines are loud. Legislation is confusing. Misinformation has turned DEI into a lightning rod.

For professionals across the American Bus Association community—motorcoach operators, tour companies, drivers, destination partners, hotels, attractions, and suppliers—this environment can feel especially challenging.

Yet the reality is clear:

DEI is not dead. Walking away from it is not leadership.

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#### **What DEI Is—And What It Is Not**

At its core, DEI is not about political correctness or ideology.

DEI is about:

- Building resilient, adaptable businesses
- Attracting and retaining talent
- Managing risk and reputation
- Strengthening teamwork and trust
- Ensuring fairness, access, and opportunity

DEI is not about:

- Lowering standards
- Excluding groups
- Forcing ideology into the workplace

Effective DEI focuses on creating systems, policies, and leadership practices that allow all employees to contribute fully and safely.

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## **Why DEI Is Strategic for the Bus & Tourism Industry**

The travel, tourism, and transportation sectors operate in:

- Highly visible environments
- Fast-moving, high-responsibility settings
- Multigenerational and multicultural workplaces

Your customers are diverse.

Your workforce is diverse.

Your success depends on people working together across differences—often under tight timelines and high expectations.

Ignoring that reality does not protect your organization.  
It weakens it.

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## **The Cost of Avoiding DEI**

When employees feel respected and supported:

- Engagement increases
- Attention to safety improves
- Retention strengthens

When employees feel dismissed or invisible:

- Performance suffers
- Turnover rises
- Risk increases

In an industry already facing labor shortages and retention challenges, inclusive leadership is not optional—it is strategic.

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## **What Bold Leadership Looks Like Today**

Leading boldly in divided times requires clarity and courage.

Silence may feel safer—but it creates a vacuum that confusion quickly fills.

Employees notice when leadership avoids difficult conversations.

Customers notice when values feel inconsistent.

Partners notice when organizations lack direction.

Bold leadership means:

- Standing firm in core values
  - Communicating with intention and care
  - Choosing language that informs rather than inflames
  - Framing DEI around business goals such as teamwork, trust, safety, and shared success
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## **Engaging Skeptics Without Alienating Them**

Not everyone enters DEI conversations with the same experiences or understanding.

Effective leaders:

- Listen before reacting
- Educate without shaming
- Invite dialogue rather than shutting it down
- Focus on common ground: safety, respect, performance

At the same time, they mobilize allies—those who understand the value of inclusion and are ready to help move the culture forward.

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## **DEI and Brand Trust**

The travel and tourism industry is built on relationships and reputation.

How an organization treats its employees often mirrors how it treats its customers.

Inclusive workplaces foster:

- Stronger customer service
- Better problem-solving
- More authentic engagement with diverse travelers and communities

In a competitive marketplace, trust translates into loyalty—and loyalty drives long-term growth.

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## **A Leadership Reality Check**

DEI is not a trend to abandon when the climate becomes uncomfortable.

It is a leadership discipline—one that demands:

- Consistency
- Courage
- Accountability

In divided times, the strongest leaders do not retreat. They show up with clarity, speak with purpose, and act in alignment with their values.

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## **Final Thought**

DEI is not dead. It is evolving.

And for leaders willing to lead boldly, it remains one of the most powerful tools for building organizations that are resilient, inclusive, and prepared for the future.

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## **About the Author**

Carole Copeland Thomas is an award-winning TEDx speaker, trainer, and global thought leader who has moderated conversations on diversity, equity, inclusion, and multiculturalism since 1987. She has spoken in 45 states and nine countries and has visited 32 countries on six continents. Carole serves on the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors at Meet Boston and chairs its Multicultural Committee.

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