

Diversity Wisdom: From Diversity Management to Value Creation

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Abstract: This study aims to position diversity wisdom as a subsequent, qualitatively distinct stage in the evolution of organisational approaches to diversity, and to identify its key constitutive dimensions. The article responds to the need to overcome the limitations inherent in existing approaches and to more fully leverage diversity as a sustainable source of organisational value, extending beyond the logic of regulatory compliance and instrumental efficiency. Organisational approaches to diversity have evolved from reactive efforts focused on legal compliance to strategic diversity management, and now to DEI initiatives and ESG frameworks. This evolution reflects growing awareness of diversity's value-creating potential. However, each stage has revealed significant limitations, underscoring the need to shift from managing diversity to a reflective, normative approach grounded in organisational wisdom. The study is based on a systematic literature review that covers the evolution of diversity management, various approaches, and existing conceptualisations of wisdom in management and organisation studies. The synthetic analysis focuses on identifying the barriers that earlier approaches to diversity management sought to address and on delineating areas in which a wisdom-based perspective offers a qualitative advantage. The study is embedded within the theoretical frameworks of the Resource-Based View, the Deep Rational Theory of Wisdom, and the Pragmatic Theory of Wisdom. Diversity wisdom constitutes a distinct organisational meta-capability that integrates knowledge, values, experience, and the capacity for deep reflection on diversity in the context of long-term goals and social responsibility. Three constitutive dimensions are identified: flexibility, reflexivity, and empathy. Flexibility enables adaptive responses that transcend rigid compliance frameworks; reflexivity facilitates deep organisational learning and continuous refinement of diversity approaches; empathy allows authentic understanding and the valuing of diverse perspectives. Each dimension addresses specific barriers of previous approaches. From a wisdom-based perspective, diversity is not a problem to be managed but a fundamental source of value that requires conscious, responsible, and reflective cultivation.

Keywords: Diversity wisdom, Diversity management, DEI, ESG

1. Introduction

In 2025, Google announced the dissolution of its diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programmes, citing changes in the legal and political environment. Within a short time, other major corporations followed suit, among them Meta, Ford, and Walmart, withdrawing from commitments previously presented as integral components of responsible business strategy. The pace and scale of this phenomenon raise a fundamental question: how could approaches declared to be strategic, values-based, and deeply embedded in organisational life be dismantled so readily?

This research advances the thesis that an explanation lies in a structural property of dominant approaches to diversity management that has hitherto remained theoretically underdeveloped. The common denominator across successive stages in the evolution of this field is a concentration on organisational systems as the principal vehicle for sustaining diversity commitments. These approaches are necessary, yet structurally insufficient: they do not fully account for the role of individual attitudes and decision-making dispositions, upon which the durability of any systemic solution ultimately depends. The regulatory compliance approach reduces diversity to a legal obligation; strategic management treats it as an instrument for competitive advantage; DEI programmes operationalise it through scalable yet revocable initiatives; ESG reporting captures it as measurable indicators. When these systems come under political, economic, or legal pressure, their mere presence proves an inadequate anchor for diversity commitments. Systemic mechanisms function durably only when grounded in the reflexive attitudes and values of organisational participants. More significantly from a theoretical standpoint, none of these approaches fully addresses which individual dispositions are necessary for diversity management tools to produce lasting effects. The complementary element that remains theoretically underdeveloped is wisdom.

This paper introduces the concept of diversity wisdom (DW) as a construct that overcomes the limitations of earlier approaches by grounding itself in individuals rather than procedures and reorienting organisational diversity efforts from managing diversity towards value creation. The central research question is: in what ways does a wisdom-based perspective complement existing approaches and address their structural limitations, enabling a more complete realisation of diversity's value-generative potential? The article pursues two related research objectives. The first, diagnostic in character, involves systematically identifying classes of structural limitations in diversity management as documented in the empirical literature. The second, conceptual in

character, demonstrates that the construct of DW, built on Deep Rationality Theory and the pragmatic conception of wisdom, systematically addresses each identified class of barriers. Strategic justification is provided by the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), which situates DW within the logic of sustainable competitive advantage grounded in value creation. Methodologically, the paper adopts a conceptual approach, the systematic literature review serves as a diagnostic instrument, providing the empirical basis from which the theoretical construct is derived, rather than constituting a research contribution in its own right.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of Approaches to Diversity Management

Diversity management has evolved from reactive approaches focused on regulatory compliance to strategic orientations, and now to integrated DEI and ESG frameworks. Each stage brought a new understanding of the value of diversity while simultaneously revealing the limitations of preceding paradigms. This evolution reflects a growing awareness of diversity's potential as a source of value, a potential that no existing approach has yet fully captured.

Initially, the dominant logic was one of compliance, in which organisations treated diversity as a regulatory requirement, concentrating on representation and formal conformity without any deeper cultural change (Syed, Kramar, 2009; Tatli, 2011). A turning point came with the business case paradigm (Cox, Blake, 1991), grounded in the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), which recognised diversity as a strategic resource. This instrumental approach, grounded in economic logic, provides an important strategic justification for diversity efforts; however, it proves insufficient as a standalone basis for sustained commitment. Without embeddedness in organisational values, it remains vulnerable to withdrawal in the face of shifting external conditions (Ng, Wyrick, 2011; Georgeac, Rattan, 2023).

The next stage saw the emergence of DEI frameworks that expanded to encompass equity and inclusion and emphasised the need to dismantle systemic barriers (Bell, Leopold, 2021; Kendi, 2019). With the development of ESG, diversity was incorporated into broader corporate accountability frameworks (Hummel, Jobst, 2024). Their growing institutionalisation, as evidenced, *inter alia*, in S&P 500 companies' reporting, nevertheless failed to resolve the central problem: how diversity translates into lasting organisational value.

Despite increased organisational engagement, the outcomes of DEI implementation remain inconsistent and, at times, negative (Sieweke et al., 2024; Hudson, 2025). A visible manifestation of this is diversity washing, the declaratory communication of activity without genuine structural change (Bader et al., 2025). Research indicates that such activities frequently arise from institutional pressure rather than deep commitment (Hofer-Bonfim, Weder, 2025). The growing backlash against DEI initiatives confirms their susceptibility to reversal under volatile conditions (Ng et al., 2025). This indicates that existing approaches, by focusing on diversity management as a process, do not fully activate its value-generative potential, which requires the systemic tools to be complemented by the reflexive dispositions of those who deploy them.

2.2 Wisdom in Management and Organisation Studies

The concept of organisational wisdom, rooted in the tradition of phronesis, emphasises the capacity for sound action in complex situations. Wisdom is situated at a higher level than knowledge, encompassing ethical reflection, an orientation towards stakeholder well-being, and attentiveness to the long-term consequences of decisions (Bierly et al., 2000).

Two conceptualisations are of relevance to the present study. Ryan (2012) defines wisdom as a multidimensional cognitive disposition encompassing sound reasoning under conditions of uncertainty, epistemic reflexivity, and an orientation towards the good of others. Grossmann (2017) conceives of it as the capacity for reasoning in complex social situations, incorporating intellectual humility, multiperspectivism, and awareness of the limits of one's own knowledge. In both accounts, wisdom is not a resource but a decision-making capacity.

Placing the evolution of diversity management alongside theories of wisdom reveals a significant gap. Despite the proliferation of tools and policies, diversity initiatives are not grounded in the reflexive decision-making capacity of their participants. Compliance, the business case, and DEI frameworks provide structures for action but do not address how to act in conditions of ambiguity. The wisdom perspective fills this gap, offering a normative and reflexive foundation.

From an RBV perspective (Barney, 1991), procedural approaches to diversity management are readily imitable and fail to meet the VRIN criteria. DW, grounded in individual dispositions and organisational experience,

satisfies these conditions and constitutes a direct mechanism of value creation — enabling the integration of diverse perspectives and more reflexive decision-making under conditions of complexity.

3. Research Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual research design, in which empirical analysis serves the purpose of theory development rather than constituting a research contribution in its own right. The study is conducted in two complementary stages. The first is inductive: a systematic literature review and reflexive thematic analysis empirically ground the diagnosis of diversity management failures. The second is deductive-analytical, demonstrating that the construct of DW, grounded theoretically in wisdom theory rather than emerging from thematic analysis, constitutes a systematic response to the identified barriers.

The systematic literature review followed a procedure designed to ensure transparency, replicability, and minimisation of selection bias (Tranfield et al., 2003; Denyer, Tranfield, 2009). The search was carried out in Scopus using a query covering titles, abstracts, and keywords:

(diversity management) AND (failure OR challenges OR issues OR barriers) AND (workplace OR organisation) AND (strategy OR policy OR practice OR initiative)

The use of Scopus as a single database and the application of an Open Access filter were deliberate methodological choices reflecting coverage adequacy and source verifiability respectively, with the resulting selection constraint acknowledged as a study limitation.

The search returned 3,706 documents. After applying five formal filters, the corpus was narrowed to 149 publications. A two-stage substantive assessment of titles and abstracts retained articles addressing barriers and conditions affecting the effectiveness of diversity management in organisations, excluding 96 irrelevant items and yielding a final corpus of 53 articles (see Table 1).

Table 1: Search Strategy for the Systematic Literature Review

Stage	Step	Procedure	Result
Identification	Database search in Scopus		n=3,706
Screening	Publication date	Filter:2016–2025	n=2,146
	Field	Business, Management; Accounting, Economics.	n=709
	Publication type	Peer-reviewed articles	n=388
	Language	English-language publications	n=367
	Access	Open Access	n=149
Eligibility	Thematic assessment of titles and abstracts	Excluded:96	
Inclusion	Final analytical corpus		n=53

Source: Own Study

The 53 articles were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase model of Braun and Clarke (2006), one of the most established qualitative approaches to content coding in organisational and management research (Maguire, Delahunt, 2017). The inductive, exploratory nature of the research question required codes to emerge from the empirical material rather than from pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Thomas, 2006).

In Phase 1, sources were read systematically with analytical notes on identified barriers, tensions, and contradictions. In Phase 2, relevant passages were extracted through keyword searching and analysis of the gap between declared and actual practice; first-order coding was inductive and semantic. In Phase 3, codes were grouped into thematic clusters based on semantic similarity, co-occurrence, and causal relationships. Phase 4 verified themes for internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Phase 5: assigned names, operational definitions, and detailed codes, illustrated by quotations from at least 3 sources. The resulting codebook (Phase 6) comprises 8 macro-themes with associated detailed codes.

A single coder conducted the analysis, a limitation partially offset by constant comparison and an audit trail of analytical notes and successive coding versions. Coding operated at both semantic and latent levels, capturing manifest content as well as underlying assumptions and tensions between declared and actual practice.

The second stage proceeds through analytical synthesis, systematically confronting the dimensions of the DW construct with each identified class of barriers and demonstrating their adequacy through causal mechanism analysis.

4. Findings

4.1 Results of the Thematic Analysis: Structural Sources of Diversity Management Failures

The analysis identified eight macro-themes documenting the structural limitations on the effectiveness of diversity management (see Table 2).

Table 2: Themes Identified in the Thematic Analysis

Code	Macro-Theme
T1	The gap between rhetoric and practice
T2	Structural and systemic barriers to equality
T3	Resistance and lack of managerial commitment
T4	Compliance-driven rather than value-driven approach
T5	Prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination
T6	Insufficient resources, tools, and evaluation
T7	Contextual and institutional factors
T8	Selective inclusion and the neglect of intersectionality

Source: Own Study

The most pervasive theme is the gap between organisations' declared and actual commitment to diversity (T1). Organisations communicate commitment through mission statements and reports, while practices remain superficial or legitimatory (Ravazzani, 2016; Rosa, 2024). Diversity washing and SDG washing indicate the substitution of symbolic performance for substantive action (Hofer-Bonfim, Weder, 2025; Bader et al., 2025).

The second theme concerns the persistence of structural inequality operating independently of formal policies (T2). Routinised practices reproduce hierarchies despite declared equality (Omanović and Langley, 2023; Sang et al., 2022), and informal networks, communication practices, and performance criteria sustain exclusion even in organisations with well-developed DEI policies (Wolfgruber et al., 2022; Makuyana, du Plessis, 2025).

The third theme identifies leadership as a key factor in failure (T3). The literature documents both active resistance and passive non-compliance among managers (Skordoulis et al., 2024), as well as competence and volitional deficits (Ladwig, 2023; Gip et al., 2024), underscoring the decisive role of leadership in the fragility of procedural approaches (Mason, 2020).

The fourth theme concerns the dominance of compliance-driven approaches (T4). Organisations implement diversity practices under regulatory or institutional pressure (Ravazzani, 2016; Mason, 2020), resulting in bureaucratic, superficial actions that are documented as ineffective across diverse contexts (Uslu et al., 2025; Hudson, 2025).

The fifth theme addresses the persistence of prejudice and stereotypes (T5). Recruitment bias (Tran et al., 2024), leadership stereotypes (Gulati et al., 2024), and intersectional discrimination (Ladwig, 2023) are widely documented. These biases are dispositional and do not readily yield to training-based correction (Lämsä et al., 2019).

The sixth theme identifies an implementation deficit (T6): declarations are not accompanied by resource allocation (Ravazzani, 2016; Rosa, 2024), while the ineffectiveness of training programmes and the absence of systemic evaluation constrain organisational learning and accountability (Morin, Burrell, 2025; Hosoi et al., 2020).

The seventh theme points to the strong contextual conditioning of diversity management (T7). Competing institutional logics, regulatory weaknesses, and the cultural misfit of imported models all limit the effectiveness of universal approaches (Lindheim, 2024; Mushaathoni, 2025).

The final theme concerns the selectivity of diversity approaches (T8). Concentration on certain dimensions marginalises groups such as refugees, migrants, and persons with disabilities (Maj et al., 2025; Allin et al., 2024), while tokenism reproduces existing hierarchies (Morin, Burrell, 2025; Fonseca, Kogut, 2023; Mason, 2020).

Collectively, these themes indicate that diversity management tools, though necessary, reach the limit of their effectiveness where complementary grounding in the reasoning and conduct of organisational participants is absent. Systems create conditions but cannot substitute for the dispositions upon which their durable functioning depends. Effectiveness requires not better procedures, but a qualitatively different form of engagement rooted in individual dispositions.

4.2 Diversity Wisdom as a Theoretical Response to the Identified Barriers

DW is defined as the capacity to act within conditions of organisational diversity through reflexive, context-sensitive reasoning, oriented towards the epistemic, practical, and moral dimensions of rationality.

Three elements of this definition merit emphasis. First, DW is a capacity, not a collection of practices: in accordance with Ryan's (2012) Deep Rationality Theory, it signifies a deep commitment to rationality in its epistemic, practical, and moral dimensions, not a checklist of prescribed behaviours. This is precisely what distinguishes DW from DEI. DEI can be implemented as a programme, DW can only be cultivated as a disposition. Second, DW resides primarily in individuals. It is grounded in the person, tacit in character, and developed through experience. Because it is constitutively person-embedded, it cannot be switched off by an organisational decision. Third, organisational conditions do not substitute for individual wisdom; they create the environment within which wisdom can be expressed, practised, and developed.

At the individual level, the theoretical framework adopted in this study identifies three fundamental dimensions of DW: reflexivity, flexibility, and empathy. The eight macro-themes of diversity management failure identified through thematic analysis cluster along these three domains, demonstrating that each dimension of DW addresses a distinct class of structural barriers documented in the empirical literature (see Table 3).

Table 3: Dimensions of DW, and the Barriers They Address

Dimension	DRT	Pragmatic Conception of Wisdom	Themes Addressed
Reflexivity	Epistemic rationality	Intellectual humility	T1,T3,T5,T6
Flexibility	Practical rationality	Situationally wise reasoning	T3,T4,T7
Empathy	Moral rationality	Perspectivism	T2,T5,T8

Source: Own Study

The assignment of dimensions to themes follows from the type of barrier each addresses. Reflexivity pertains to themes where the source of limitation is an inability to examine one's own assumptions and behaviours critically. It directly addresses the gap between rhetoric and practice (T1): where systems may produce an appearance of commitment, reflexivity exposes its absence and confers moral significance upon it. It also mitigates managerial resistance (T3) by undermining the unreflective assumptions of dominant groups, and combats bias and stereotypes (T5) by generating sustained self-awareness inaccessible to standard training interventions. Finally, it counteracts the evaluation deficit (T6) by introducing internal accountability, as a reflexive individual perceives the discrepancy between declarations and practice independently of external indicators.

Flexibility pertains to themes in which the barrier lies in rigidly applying universal solutions without contextual sensitivity. In Ryan's (2012) framework, it corresponds to practical rationality, and in Grossmann's (2020) account to the capacity to read and accommodate situational specificity. Flexibility mitigates resistance and backlash (T3) because engagement grounded in practical rationality does not depend on institutional legitimisation. It overcomes the compliance-driven approach (T4) by replacing standardisation with contextual judgement and enables effective navigation of institutional and cultural complexity (T7) where universal solutions fail.

Empathy pertains to situations in which the limitation is the inability to understand others' perspectives and experiences genuinely. It renders structural mechanisms of exclusion visible (T2), making legible the informal practices and hierarchies that formal policies cannot reach. It mitigates bias and stereotypes (T5) by enabling perception of subtle, intersectional forms of discrimination, and counteracts selective inclusion (T8) by extending attentiveness to the full spectrum of diverse experiences.

DW is not an alternative to diversity management tools, nor a denial of their value. It is the condition that enables those tools to function as intended. Programmes can create structures conducive to inclusion, but only the wisdom of their participants determines whether those structures become enduring practice or merely temporary infrastructure.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The research procedure leads to a structural diagnosis: diversity management tools reach the limit of their effectiveness where they are not reinforced by the complementary engagement of organisational participants at the level of individual dispositions. The eight identified themes do not constitute discrete implementation failures but manifestations of a single structural problem. The construct of DW, grounded in Deep Rationality Theory and the pragmatic conception of wisdom, addresses this problem through three dimensions: reflexivity, flexibility, and empathy. Reflexivity reduces the gap between rhetoric and practice (T1) and the evaluation deficit (T6) by exposing discrepancies from within. Flexibility counteracts resistance and backlash (T3) and compliance logic (T4) by anchoring action in a practical rationality resilient to shifting external conditions. Empathy mitigates structural barriers (T2), bias and intersectional exclusion (T5), and selective inclusion (T8). These dimensions are complementary and only in combination constitute the capacity for durable transformation.

The Google case and the wave of corporate DEI rollbacks in 2025 do not attest to the failure of DEI as such; they reveal its vulnerability to external change and expose the structural fragility of approaches grounded exclusively in systemic mechanisms. The solutions in use remain important tools, but their effectiveness depends on the configuration of knowledge, processes, and relationships within which they are embedded. DW defines the developmental framework necessary for these mechanisms to produce lasting effects. Programmes can create conditions for representation, but only wisdom enables authentic belonging.

The article makes three theoretical contributions. First, it identifies classes of structural limitations in existing approaches to diversity management through a systematic literature review, providing empirical grounding for the proposed construct. Second, it introduces DW as an integrated theoretical response, demonstrating the utility of Deep Rationality Theory and the pragmatic approach in this domain. Third, it establishes that the effectiveness of diversity management tools depends on the wisdom of those who deploy them and cannot be achieved solely through procedural refinement.

The study has several limitations. The systematic literature review relied on a single database (Scopus) with an Open Access filter, potentially introducing selection bias. The analysis was conducted by a single coder, limiting inter-rater verification. The construct of DW requires further empirical validation. The present article is conceptual in character and provides a theoretical grounding for future empirical research, encompassing measurement instrument development, longitudinal studies, comparative analyses across organisations at different levels of diversity practice maturity, and investigations into the antecedents of DW and its impact on organisational effectiveness.

Ethics Declaration: This research didn't involve human participants; therefore, ethical clearance was not required.

AI Declaration: AI tools weren't used during the preparation of this paper.

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