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"Structural Exploration of Workforce Diversity Challenges in Engineering Procurement and Construction (EPC) Project Teams: A DEMATEL-Based Approach"

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Abstract
Managing workforce diversity presents significant challenges within global project environments, particularly in engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) project teams. This paper aims to identify and analyze the complex causal relationships among these challenges to provide a structured understanding for effective mitigation. An exploratory literature review, spanning sources from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and relevant academic publications, was conducted to identify commonly reported diversity management challenges specific to EPC contexts. This review, augmented by theoretical frameworks and expert refinement, led to the identification of 16 prominent challenges (C1-C16). These challenges were subsequently categorized into four thematic dimensions: Structural & Systemic Barriers (F1), Interpersonal & Communication Barriers (F2), Organizational Policy & Leadership Gaps (F3), and Integration & Team Dynamics Issues (F4). For data collection, an expert panel of 83 professionals from Singaporean EPC firms, possessing at least five years of experience in diverse teams, was purposively selected. These experts evaluated the direct influence of each challenge on others using a 0-3 scale, generating 83 individual direct influence matrices which were then aggregated into a collective matrix. The Decision Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory (DEMATEL) technique was then rigorously applied to this aggregated data, utilizing Python's pyDEMATEL package, to thoroughly explore both intra- and inter-dimensional causal relationships. This methodology provides a robust framework for identifying critical causal factors and their hierarchical structure, offering valuable insights for strategic interventions in managing diversity within EPC project teams.

INTRODUCTION

Workforce diversity has emerged as a strategic imperative in modern organizations, particularly in project-based industries like Engineering, Procurement, and Construction (EPC). Diverse teams are known to bring varied perspectives, enhanced creativity, and problem-solving capabilities (Cox, 1993; Shore et al., 2011). However, alongside these benefits, diversity also introduces a range of challenges that can hinder collaboration, communication, and overall team performance if not managed effectively (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). In the context of EPC projects, which typically involve high levels of task interdependence, strict timelines, and multicultural environments, managing diversity becomes even more critical. Challenges such as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, resistance to inclusion, and implicit biases can escalate into team conflict and reduced cohesion (Hofstede, 1980; Stahl et al., 2010). Moreover, these challenges are rarely isolated—they are interrelated and often form complex causal loops, where one barrier may intensify another.

Traditional approaches to understanding workforce diversity have often treated challenges as independent variables, relying heavily on linear statistical models. However, such methods fail to account for the systemic and interdependent nature of these barriers (Liou & Tzeng, 2012). To address this gap, the Decision-Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory (DEMATEL) method provides a powerful tool to model the causal relationships among complex factors in a structured way (Tzeng & Huang, 2011). This study aims to explore and analyze the structural interrelationships among workforce diversity challenges in EPC project teams using the DEMATEL method. By grouping identified challenges into thematic

dimensions and examining their causal influence, the research provides insights that can inform targeted interventions and inclusive workforce strategies in the EPC sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of Workforce Diversity and Team Performance

Workforce diversity has gained significant attention in both academic and corporate domains due to its dual impact on organizational innovation and team dynamics. On one hand, diversity brings varied perspectives, better problem-solving, and innovation (Shore et al., 2011; Cox, 1993); on the other hand, it can give rise to misunderstandings, communication breakdowns, and interpersonal conflicts (Jehn et al., 1999). In project-based industries like Engineering, Procurement, and Construction (EPC), where teams operate under high pressure and uncertainty, managing diversity effectively is critical. However, most prior research has examined diversity-related variables in isolation, often overlooking the intricate interdependencies among them (Stahl et al., 2010). To address these gaps, the present study organizes diversity challenges into four thematic dimensions to explore their structural relationships.

2.2 Factor 1 (F1) : Systemic and Structural Barriers

Systemic and structural barriers include deeply rooted institutional and social challenges that obstruct inclusive work environments and sustainable team performance. These barriers are often embedded in the organizational culture and recruitment systems, influencing performance indirectly by limiting access to opportunities and reinforcing inequality (Kanter, 1977; Ely & Thomas, 2001). Key challenges in this category include implicit biases, gendered stereotypes, ethnocentrism, resistance to inclusion, and tokenism/sticky floor phenomenon.

Code	Challenges	Description	Sources
C1	Implicit Biases	Unconscious associations influencing decision-making and interactions.	Greenwald & Krieger (2006); Bertrand & Mullainathan (2004)
C2	Gendered Stereotypes	Cultural beliefs impacting perceptions of competence.	Eagly & Karau (2002)
C3	Ethnocentrism	Prioritizing one's own culture over others.	Thomas & Inkson (2003)
C4	Resistance to Inclusion	Opposition to diversity efforts due to discomfort or perceived threat.	Mor Barak (2015); Plaut et al. (2011)
C5	Tokenism & Sticky Floor	Symbolic inclusion and lack of upward mobility for minorities.	Kanter (1977); Vinkenburg et al. (2011)

Table 1 : Systemic and Structural Barriers

2.3 Factor 2 (F2) : Communication and Cultural Barriers

Communication and cultural barriers are among the most common and disruptive challenges in managing diverse teams, particularly in multinational or project-based industries like EPC. These barriers can hinder knowledge sharing, create misunderstanding, and damage team cohesion. The major sub-factors in this dimension include:

Code	Challenges	Description	References
C6	Language Barriers	Misinterpretation and inefficiency due to linguistic differences.	Tenzer et al. (2014)
C7	Cultural Misunderstandings	Differing norms affecting collaboration and expectations.	Hofstede (1980); Thomas & Inkson (2003)
C8	Generational Communication Gaps	Variations in communication styles and preferences across age groups.	Smola & Sutton (2002); Cekada (2012)

Table 2 : Communication and Cultural Barriers

2.4 Factor 3 (F3): Leadership and Organizational Gaps

Organizational and leadership shortcomings are significant contributors to failed diversity initiatives. The effectiveness of diversity management is closely tied to the presence of inclusive leaders and institutional support structures. The sub-factors in this dimension include:

Code	Challenges	Description	References
C9	Lack of Inclusive Leadership	Leadership not equipped to foster inclusion.	Nishii & Mayer (2009); Shore et al. (2011)
C10	Lack of Diversity Training	Absence of formal training leads to exclusionary behavior.	Roberson (2006); Bezrukova et al. (2016)
C11	Poor Integration of Diverse Teams	Peripheral participation of minorities in teams.	Mor Barak (2015); Ferdman (2014)
C12	Lack of Clear Diversity Policy	Inconsistent handling of diversity across departments.	Sabharwal (2014)

Table 3: Leadership and Organizational Gaps

2.5 Factor 4 (F4) : Team Dynamics and Behavioral Differences

At the micro-level, behavioral variations among team members due to diverse cultural, generational, and personal values often affect performance. These differences, if unmanaged, lead to interpersonal conflict, misunderstanding, and low team cohesion. Key sub-factors include:

Code	Challenges	Description	References
C13	Varying Work Ethics and Norms	Differing values on work pace, punctuality, and hierarchy.	Thomas (2006); Jehn (1995)
C14	Conflict Due to Value Misalignment	Disagreements due to cultural value clashes.	Jehn & Mannix (2001)
C15	Poor Conflict Resolution Mechanisms	Lack of structured methods to address conflict.	De Dreu & Weingart (2003)
C16	Power Dynamics and Dominance	Dominant groups control dialogue, suppressing others.	Tsui et al. (1992); Mannix & Neale (2005)

Table 4: Team Dynamics and Behavioral Differences

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative-quantitative mixed method approach to explore and prioritize the challenges associated with managing workforce diversity in EPC project teams. The methodology involves the use of Decision Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory (DEMATEL) to identify causal relationships among challenges and to categorize them into interrelated dimensions.

Identification of Challenges associated with Workforce Diversity:

An exploratory literature review was carried out using sources from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and relevant books and conference proceedings to identify commonly reported challenges in managing workforce diversity, particularly within the context of engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) project teams.

Based on the review and prior theoretical frameworks, a list of 16 prominent challenges was identified. These challenges were refined with expert inputs to ensure contextual relevance to EPC project environments. Each challenge was coded from C1 to C16 and subsequently grouped into four thematic dimensions based on conceptual similarities:

F1: Structural & Systemic Barriers
F2: Interpersonal & Communication Barriers
F3: Organizational Policy & Leadership Gaps
F4: Integration & Team Dynamics Issues

This grouping provided a structured basis for further analysis using the DEMATEL technique to explore both intra- and inter-dimensional causal relationships.

Data Collection:

An expert panel comprising 83 professionals (project managers, HR executives, team leaders, and diversity officers) from EPC firms in Singapore was selected using purposive sampling. Experts had at least 5 years of experience in managing or working within diverse teams. Experts were asked to evaluate the degree of direct influence of one challenge on another using a 0 to 3 scale, where:

0 = No influence
1 = Low influence
2 = Medium influence
3 = High influence

Each expert filled out a 16 × 16 direct influence matrix, resulting in 83 matrices. The 83 matrices were aggregated using arithmetic averaging to produce a collective direct influence matrix (Z).

DEMATEL Procedure:

The classic DEMATEL technique was applied using Python (via the pyDEMATEL package). The following steps were executed:

Step 1: Construction of Direct Influence Matrix (Z)

This matrix captures direct pairwise influence between each pair of challenges. Each expert evaluated the influence of challenge *i* on challenge *j*. Let x^h_{ij} denote the evaluation score given by expert *h* for influence of *i* on *j*.

The average direct-influence matrix A is calculated as:

$$a_{ij} = \frac{1}{H}\sum_{h=1}^{H} x_{ij}^{h}$$

Where:

H = total number of experts (83 in this study)
n = number of challenges (16)

Step 2: Normalize the Average Matrix

To ensure comparability, the matrix A is normalized using

$$s = \min\left\{\frac{1}{\max_i \sum_{j=1}^{n} a_{ij}}, \frac{1}{\max_j \sum_{i=1}^{n} a_{ij}}\right\}$$

$$X = s \times A$$

Where, X is the normalized direct-influence matrix.

Step 3: Compute the Total Influence Matrix (T)

The total influence matrix includes both direct and indirect effects and is given by:

$$T = X(I - X)^{-1}$$

Where, I is the identity matrix and T is the total influence matrix $[t_{ij}]$.

Step 4: Determine Prominence and Relation

Let:

R = row sum of T = total influence *given* by factor
C = column sum of T = total influence *received* by factor
R + C = *Prominence* (importance in system)
R – C = *Relation* (positive: cause; negative: effect)

Each challenge is then classified as cause (net influencer) or effect (net receiver).

Step 5: Visualization and Interpretation

The final Influence Relation Map (IRM) was generated using matplotlib in Python, where each challenge was plotted on a 2D graph with the X-axis representing relation (R−C) and Y-axis representing prominence (R+C). Challenges with positive R−C values were identified as cause factors, while those with negative R−C values were effect factors. This analysis allowed prioritization of root causes for targeted diversity interventions.

Data Analysis and Interpretation:

This study applied the DEMATEL (Decision Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory) technique to analyze the causal relationships among various diversity challenges within the organization. The analysis generated values for R (sum of influences dispatched to other factors), C (sum of influences received from other factors), their sum (R+C) indicating prominence or overall importance, and the difference (R–C) indicating the net causal effect. Positive R–C values indicate causal (cause) factors, while negative R–C values indicate effect factors.

Code	Factor	R	C	R+C	R–C	Role
C7	Cultural Misunderstandings	30.79	30.53	61.32	0.26	Cause
C2	Gendered Stereotypes	30.97	30.31	61.28	0.66	Cause
C3	Ethnocentrism	31.01	30.14	61.15	0.87	Cause
C16	Power Dynamics	30.10	30.70	60.80	-0.60	Effect
C13	Varying Work Ethics	30.17	30.60	60.77	-0.43	Effect
C4	Resistance to Inclusion	29.89	30.83	60.72	-0.94	Effect
C15	Poor Conflict Resolution	29.80	30.90	60.70	-1.10	Effect
C9	Lack of Inclusive Leadership	30.58	29.73	60.31	0.85	Cause
C5	Tokenism & Sticky Floor	29.25	30.83	60.08	-1.58	Effect
C8	Generational Gaps	30.27	29.75	60.02	0.52	Cause
C10	Lack of Diversity Training	30.26	29.64	59.90	0.62	Cause
C11	Poor Team Integration	30.26	29.64	59.90	0.62	Cause
C14	Value Misalignment	29.50	30.10	59.60	-0.60	Effect
C6	Language Barriers	30.40	29.04	59.44	1.36	Cause
C12	Lack of Diversity Policy	28.31	30.73	59.04	-2.42	Effect
C1	Implicit Biases	30.00	28.84	58.84	1.16	Cause

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Table 5: Detailed Influence Metrics of Identified Factors

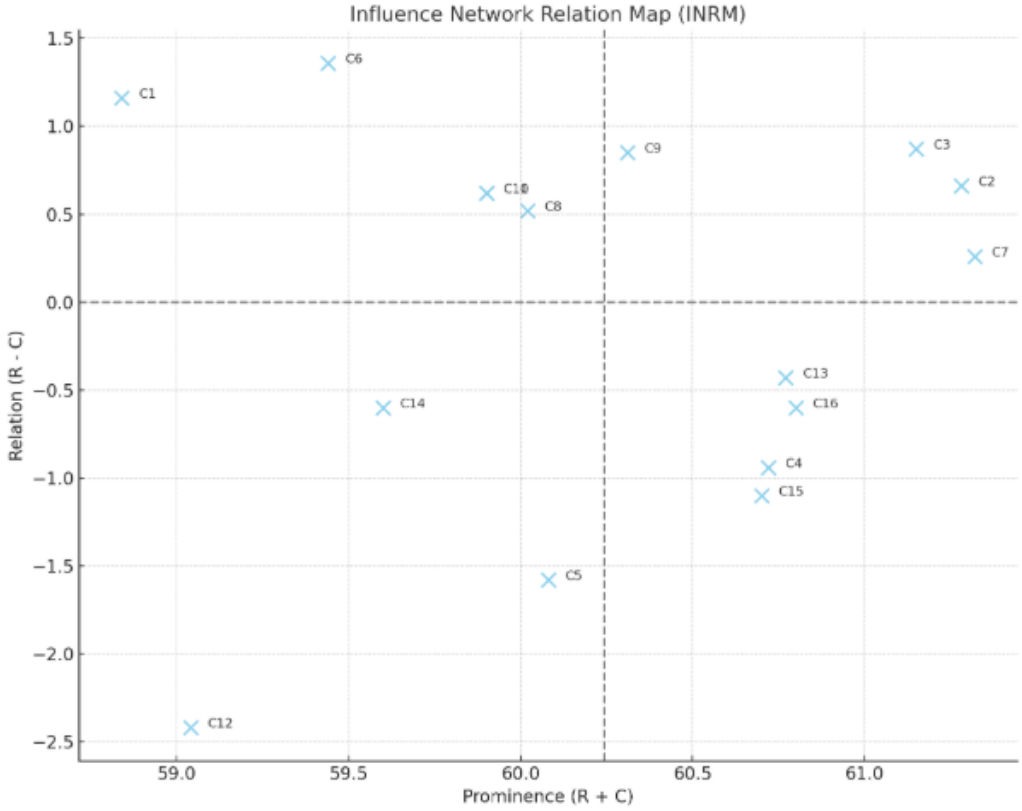

Fig 1 : Influence Network Relation Map.

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the identified factors and their interrelationships, utilizing an Influence Network Relation Map (INRM) supplemented by detailed quantitative data. The INRM (Figure 1) visually represents each factor based on its 'Prominence' (R+C) and 'Relation' (R-C), derived from an initial structural analysis. 'R' denotes the sum of direct and indirect influences a factor receives, while 'C' represents the sum of direct and indirect influences a factor gives to others.

Prominence (R+C): Positioned on the x-axis, this metric quantifies the total influence a factor possesses within the network, encompassing both its receiving and giving aspects. Higher R+C values indicate a more central and significant factor.

Relation (R-C): Located on the y-axis, this metric reveals the net influence of a factor. A positive R-C value signifies that a factor is primarily a 'Cause' (influencing more than being influenced), while a negative R-C value indicates an 'Effect' (being influenced more than influencing).

The analysis of both the numerical data (Table 1) and the graphical representation (Figure 1) allows for a nuanced understanding of each factor's role and its position within the broader influence structure.

Analysis of Cause Factors (Positive Relation, R-C > 0)

Factors classified as 'Causes' are those that predominantly exert influence on other elements within the system. Their positive R-C values indicate that the sum of influences they receive is greater than the sum of influences they give.

Highly Prominent Causes: Several factors emerge as highly prominent causes, clustered in the upper-right region of the INRM, signifying both high overall influence and a strong causal role.

C7 (Cultural Misunderstandings): With an R+C of 61.32 and an R-C of 0.26, C7 is the most prominent factor overall, serving as a primary driver within the network.

C2 (Gendered Stereotypes): This factor shows significant prominence (R+C = 61.28) and a strong causal role (R-C = 0.66).

C3 (Ethnocentrism): Also highly prominent (R+C = 61.15), C3 exhibits the highest positive relation (R-C = 0.87) among the top three, underscoring its profound influence as a cause factor. These three factors,

C7, C2, and C3, are critical to understand as their pervasive causal influence likely impacts numerous other elements in the system.

Moderately Prominent Causes: Other factors demonstrate a clear causal role with moderate prominence.

C9 (Lack of Inclusive Leadership): Positioned relatively centrally on the INRM, C9 (R+C = 60.31, R-C = 0.85) is a significant cause, indicating that deficiencies in leadership directly propagate negative influences throughout the network.

C8 (Generational Gaps): With an R+C of 60.02 and an R-C of 0.52, C8 also functions as a cause, highlighting the impact of intergenerational differences.

C10 (Lack of Diversity Training) and C11 (Poor Team Integration): These two factors share identical metrics (R+C = 59.90, R-C = 0.62), suggesting a strong correlation or intertwined causal mechanism. Both contribute significantly to the issues by their presence.

Less Prominent, Strong Causes:

C6 (Language Barriers): Though less prominent (R+C = 59.44), C6 exhibits a remarkably high R-C value of 1.36, making it one of the strongest 'causes' in terms of its net directional influence. This suggests that language barriers, despite not being the most central factor, have a very direct and forceful impact on other elements.

C1 (Implicit Biases): Similarly, C1 (R+C = 58.84, R-C = 1.16) is the least prominent cause factor, yet its high R-C value indicates a strong, foundational causal influence, likely underlying many other issues.

Analysis of Effect Factors (Negative Relation, R-C < 0)

Factors identified as 'Effects' are primarily influenced by other elements within the network. Their negative R-C values indicate that the sum of influences they receive is less than the sum of influences they give. These factors are generally located in the lower half of the INRM.

Highly Prominent Effects: These factors are significant within the network but are largely consequences of other causal elements. They are situated in the lower-right quadrant of the INRM.

C15 (Poor Conflict Resolution): With an R+C of 60.70 and the most negative R-C value (-1.10) among the prominent effects, C15 stands out as a critical outcome influenced by multiple other factors.

C4 (Resistance to Inclusion): This factor also displays high prominence (R+C = 60.72) and a significant negative relation (R-C = -0.94), indicating it is a strong resultant effect.

C16 (Power Dynamics) and C13 (Varying Work Ethics): Both are prominent effects (R+C = 60.80 and 60.77 respectively) with negative R-C values (-0.60 and -0.43), suggesting they are shaped by, rather than shaping, the primary causal factors.

Moderately Prominent Effects:

C5 (Tokenism & Sticky Floor): This factor has moderate prominence (R+C = 60.08) but a highly negative R-C of -1.58, making it one of the strongest 'effects' in the entire system. Its position on the map reinforces its role as a significant outcome of other dynamics.

C14 (Value Misalignment): With an R+C of 59.60 and an R-C of -0.60, C14 is also an effect factor, suggesting that discrepancies in values are a consequence of underlying influences.

Least Prominent, Strong Effect:

C12 (Lack of Diversity Policy): Positioned uniquely in the bottom-left of the INRM, C12 exhibits the lowest prominence (R+C = 59.04) but the most negative R-C value (-2.42) of all factors. This indicates that while it may not be widely connected or influential, 'Lack of Diversity Policy' is overwhelmingly an 'Effect', highly reactive to and shaped by other, more fundamental causal factors within the network. Its extreme R-C value suggests it is a crucial indicator of systemic problems.

DISCUSSION

The DEMATEL analysis offers critical insights into the complex interplay of diversity challenges within organizational contexts. The clear separation between cause and effect factors allows us to understand not only which issues drive diversity problems but also how these issues propagate and manifest as organizational symptoms.

5.1 Root Causes of Diversity Challenges

A key finding is that attitudinal and cultural factors such as ethnocentrism, implicit biases, and gendered stereotypes stand out as fundamental root causes. Ethnocentrism, which reflects a tendency to view one's

own cultural group as central or superior, showed the highest causal influence. This indicates that when individuals or groups within the organization operate with ethnocentric mindsets, it creates barriers that exacerbate misunderstandings and reduce empathy towards diverse colleagues. This aligns with previous research emphasizing the detrimental impact of ethnocentrism on workplace inclusion and collaboration (e.g., Cox, 1993; Triandis, 1995). Similarly, implicit biases which are automatic, unconscious attitudes and stereotypes are strong drivers that shape interpersonal interactions and decision-making processes, often disadvantaging minority groups unintentionally. Their prominence as cause factors underlines the importance of awareness and bias mitigation training to foster fairer workplace dynamics. Gendered stereotypes also emerged as a significant cause factor, highlighting how ingrained assumptions about gender roles continue to influence organizational culture and employee experiences. This finding corroborates literature showing persistent gender biases affect recruitment, promotion, and everyday interactions (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

5.2 Communication and Leadership as Leverage Points

The role of language barriers and lack of inclusive leadership as major cause factors further highlights the importance of communication and leadership styles in shaping diversity outcomes. Language barriers can hinder effective collaboration and lead to misunderstandings, thereby increasing workplace tension and reducing team cohesion. Organizations operating in multicultural contexts must therefore prioritize inclusive communication strategies and language support programs.

The critical influence of inclusive leadership suggests that leaders who actively foster openness, respect, and equity can mitigate many diversity challenges at their root. Leaders set the tone for organizational culture, and their commitment or lack thereof directly impacts the success of diversity initiatives. This finding aligns with research underscoring the importance of transformational and inclusive leadership styles in driving positive diversity outcomes (Nishii & Mayer, 2009; Shore et al., 2011).

5.3 Manifestations and Consequences of Diversity Challenges

On the other hand, effect factors like lack of diversity policy, tokenism, poor conflict resolution, and resistance to inclusion represent the organizational and interpersonal challenges that arise when root causes remain unaddressed. The identification of lack of diversity policy as the most heavily influenced effect factor suggests that formal mechanisms for promoting diversity tend to lag behind cultural and behavioral issues. Without foundational shifts in attitudes and leadership, policies alone may be insufficient or symbolic rather than transformative. Tokenism and the sticky floor phenomenon reflect superficial diversity efforts where minority representation exists but without substantive inclusion or empowerment. Such practices often result in decreased morale and increased turnover among marginalized groups, further hindering organizational performance. Resistance to inclusion and power dynamics highlight the social and political nature of diversity efforts. Resistance may stem from perceived threats to status or entrenched privilege, emphasizing the need for change management strategies that address emotional and identity-related concerns alongside procedural changes.

5.4 Implications for Practice

These findings suggest several practical implications for organizations seeking to enhance diversity and inclusion:

Target Root Causes First: Interventions must address deep-seated attitudes like ethnocentrism, implicit bias, and gender stereotypes through continuous education, dialogue, and cultural competency training.

Invest in Inclusive Leadership Development: Building leaders' capabilities to model and promote inclusive behaviors is critical. Leadership accountability for diversity outcomes should be institutionalized.

Enhance Communication Support: Addressing language barriers and promoting inclusive communication channels can reduce misunderstandings and improve team integration.

Develop Holistic Diversity Policies: Policies should go beyond compliance and token representation to embed diversity as a core organizational value, informed by ongoing feedback and data.

Manage Resistance Strategically: Recognizing and constructively addressing resistance through engagement, transparency, and inclusion can ease transitions and foster buy-in.

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