

Comprehensive View on the Relationship Between Evil in Administration and DEI

Introduction

Administrative evil is an enduring ethical dilemma in public organizations, describing how harmful, discriminatory, or unethical outcomes can occur even when individuals believe they are acting correctly or neutrally (Adams & Balfour, 2016). This phenomenon poses a direct threat to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts within public institutions. DEI initiatives rely on moral integrity, transparency, and accountability to dismantle systemic barriers that marginalize underrepresented groups. However, administrative evil—often masked by bureaucratic neutrality or technical rationality—can perpetuate inequities under the guise of fairness, efficiency, or compliance. This paper explores how administrative evil, including its passive form, undermines DEI principles in the public sector. It examines how moral passivity, compartmentalization, and a lack of personal integrity in administration contribute to the persistence of discrimination and bias. Scholars arguably help push administrative evil by leaving the concept of moral passivity out of their work. A lot of attention has been paid to administrative evil, but passive evil is often not talked about enough in scholar's work. This paper aims to explain how both concepts impact public institutions negatively, as well as examine examples of both taking place in institutions. The paper will also offer solutions on how public managers should avoid and deal with administrative evil and passive evil in institutions. The paper concludes with strategies to mitigate administrative evil by embedding democratic and ethical values into DEI governance frameworks.

Administrative Evil and the Threat to DEI

Adams and Balfour (2016) define administrative evil as unethical outcomes produced by ordinary individuals functioning within legitimate bureaucratic systems. When public managers interpret DEI merely as a technical or compliance requirement—such as meeting diversity quotas or filing mandated reports—without moral engagement, administrative evil can arise. A seemingly neutral hiring or promotion policy can reinforce structural inequities if it is not implemented with genuine consideration of equity outcomes. Instrumental rationality, which treats employees as objects to be managed rather than individuals with intrinsic worth, mirrors what Hoffman, Pyne, and Gajewski (2012) call the “masks of administrative evil.” This perspective leads organizations to justify discriminatory or exclusionary practices as necessary or efficient. For example, a department might rationalize a lack of diversity by emphasizing “merit-based” hiring while ignoring the structural biases embedded in performance evaluations or candidate pipelines.

In these ways, administrative evil distorts DEI policy implementation—not through overt malice, but through institutionalized practices that mask inequality as neutrality.

Moral Passivity and the Maintenance of Inequity

Passive evil, or moral passivity, occurs when administrators witness injustice but choose silence or inaction. Samier (2008) notes that avoidance tactics—such as rationalizing unethical behavior or waiting for leadership change—allow harm to persist under the guise of professionalism. In DEI contexts, this passivity is evident when employees overlook microaggressions, tolerate exclusionary norms, or fail to report biased decision-making.

Public servants who fear retaliation or social isolation may avoid confronting racism, sexism, or ableism, effectively becoming complicit in the continuation of inequitable systems. This dynamic mirrors the “bystander effect” in organizational ethics: inaction becomes a form of participation.

As Adams and Balfour (2016) emphasize, administrative evil thrives when moral reasoning is subordinated to organizational loyalty or procedural conformity.

Integrity, Culture, and the Role of Leadership

Personal integrity determines whether individuals resist or enable administrative evil. Dobel (1990) argues that integrity is a dynamic moral ideal, shaped by one's environment and sense of responsibility. Within DEI implementation, a lack of integrity can result in performative compliance—publicly endorsing inclusion while privately maintaining exclusionary networks or norms. Dominant workplace cultures, particularly those led by homogenous leadership groups, shape the moral expectations of employees. If discriminatory jokes, biased comments, or inequitable workloads are normalized, staff may compromise their ethical standards to align with those in power. This erosion of integrity mirrors what Hoffman et al. (2012) describe as compartmentalization—separating one's personal values from organizational behavior. Over time, compartmentalization in DEI work leads to symbolic diversity (representation without inclusion) and policy stagnation. Effective DEI leadership therefore requires cultivating moral courage. Leaders must model ethical reasoning, empower staff to challenge inequity, and institutionalize accountability mechanisms that reward moral action rather than silence.

Dominant powers mean people that hold power in an institution usually shape the culture of the workplace. This fact is what makes Dobel's point about the deterioration of integrity important because it raises the question of how dominant norms in the workplace negatively impact the commitment of people to speak up? Are people willing to disregard their commitments to themselves and others just to fit in with these dominant powers? To answer the first question, dominant norms play a huge part in the integrity of the firm because they shape what will be allowed in the institution and what won't be tolerated. It is proven that workers in

the workplace will engage in unethical behavior if that is a norm in the organization. If managers in the workplace typically make racial jokes that push stereotypes or gender remarks in the workplace chances are high that the employees will engage in the same behavior, this means that it is possible that people will disregard their commitments to fit in with dominant norms. The common avoidance tactic in this case will be the presumption that these comments in the workplace are just jokes, but in fact they are not just jokes, they are harmful ideas that should not be tolerated in not only the public sector but all three sectors.

Whistleblowing and Moral Courage in DEI Contexts

Whistleblowing represents one of the most direct ways to challenge administrative evil and protect DEI integrity. Nisar, Prabhakar, and Torchia (2019) define whistleblowing as the disclosure of unethical or harmful conduct that undermines an organization's moral or legal obligations. Within DEI policy frameworks, whistleblowing can expose discriminatory hiring, biased disciplinary actions, or exclusionary workplace cultures. However, as Lindblom (2007) observes, whistleblowers often face moral dilemmas—torn between loyalty to their organization and responsibility to justice. This tension is heightened in DEI settings, where the issues reported may be systemic rather than isolated. Fear of retaliation or job loss often discourages employees from speaking out, reinforcing the cycle of passive evil described by Samier (2008).

Organizations that protect whistleblowers and create transparent reporting channels contribute to the moral regeneration necessary for genuine equity (Samier, 2008). By legitimizing dissent, leaders prevent administrative evil from taking root in DEI operations.

Solutions: Embedding Ethics into DEI Governance

To combat administrative evil, public organizations must move beyond technical compliance and embrace DEI as a moral and democratic imperative. Adams and Balfour (1998) advocate for replacing technical rationality with democratic values rooted in justice, empathy, and public service. Similarly, Samier (2008) highlights moral regeneration as essential to reforming institutions that have normalized ethical passivity. Embedding ethics into DEI governance involves:

1. Establishing value-based codes of ethics that explicitly link DEI to public service ethics.
2. Encouraging open dialogue about bias, discrimination, and systemic inequity.
3. Implementing training focused on ethical decision-making and cultural humility.
4. Recognizing moral courage in performance evaluations and leadership development. When DEI frameworks are guided by ethical principles rather than bureaucratic compliance, they resist the organizational forces that enable administrative evil.

Conclusion

Administrative evil undermines the moral foundations of DEI by disguising harm as neutrality, allowing injustice to persist through silence, and eroding individual integrity in public administration. The fight for diversity, equity, and inclusion is not only a legal or procedural one—it is an ethical and moral battle against the bureaucratic structures that normalize exclusion. To safeguard DEI, but public leaders must also cultivate integrity, transparency, and moral courage across all levels of governance. Only when organizations replace passive compliance with ethical conviction can they realize the promise of equity in public service. The persistence of inequity in public organizations often stems from moral passivity—administrators witnessing harm yet rationalizing inaction as professionalism or organizational loyalty. Without deliberate resistance, discriminatory policies and biased outcomes continue unchallenged, even in agencies

publicly committed to equity. Integrating Samier's (2008) work on passive evil, it becomes clear that silence in the face of injustice functions as complicity, particularly when DEI violations occur under the guise of efficiency or tradition. At its core, DEI work requires moral courage and ethical clarity. Technical compliance alone—such as filing diversity reports or adopting surface-level policies—cannot transform organizational culture. Public sector leaders must align DEI strategies with democratic values, integrity, and a genuine commitment to dismantling systemic barriers. Doing so requires embedding ethical reasoning into administrative processes, protecting whistleblowers, elevating marginalized voices, and developing leadership structures that reward moral courage rather than silence.

Ultimately, combating administrative evil in DEI contexts is not a singular task but an ongoing organizational responsibility. The public sector must embrace DEI not merely as a programmatic requirement but as a moral imperative central to the public service mission. Only when ethics and equity operate together—reinforced through policy, culture, and leadership—can public institutions meaningfully advance justice and ensure that administrative systems serve all communities fairly and humanely.

References

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