



ICC Academy New Zealand
White paper series
Issue 3

Coaching for diversity, equity, inclusion & belonging

Great to have you here!

Hello and welcome to the third paper in this three-part series, from the New Zealand branch of the International Coaching Community.

These papers focus on the challenges and opportunities of coaching in the modern world.

- The first paper looked at how coaching approaches can be used to support organisational change and transformation.
- The second paper explored the value and limitations of virtual coaching and AI tools in coaching.
- This third paper will explore how coaching might support 'DEIB' efforts – or diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

All white papers can be downloaded from the ICC Academy's website – just look for the Resources tab.

Enjoy!

The team at ICC Academy New Zealand

Introduction

You're probably hearing more about Diversity and Inclusion lately (**D&I**), or its longer form, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (**DEIB**).

In this white paper, we explore the intersection between DEIB and the world of coaching – because, “In an era where some organisations are retreating from DEIB investments, coaching offers a uniquely human way to keep the work alive, and impactful,” says Raechel Ford, head of the ICC Academy New Zealand.

The white paper considers:

What does DEIB really mean, and why should organisations continue to prioritise it?

How might individual and team coaches support DEIB efforts?

When coaching clients with ADHD more specifically – what should coaches keep in mind?

We'd like to thank the experts who contributed to this paper, including:

- **Callum McKirdy**, Specialist ADHD coach, facilitator and speaker.
- **Natasya Jones**, Co-Founder and Managing Director of DivergenThinking.
- **Christina Nicholson**, Leadership and Talent Development Partner, Financial Times.
- **Russell Windsor**, PwC Partner, Deals People and Culture Leader, and LGBTQI+ Advocate.
- **Mary Haddock-Staniland**, Global Culture and DEIB Executive.

DEIB – What is it all about?

In simple terms, DEIB is about creating an inclusive work environment where everybody can be themselves, and add value in their unique way.

- **Diversity is about representation** in the workplace. Ideally, employees will reflect the diversity that's present in the population – so people of different genders, ethnicities, ages; differently abled people, people from the rainbow or LGBTQI+ community, neurodiverse people, and so on. When thinking about diversity, a useful question is – who is in the room?
- **Equity is about fair treatment.** The term 'fair' is often loaded and misunderstood. Equity isn't about equal treatment for everyone – it's about giving people what they need to have an equal chance of thriving in the workplace. Equity is reflected in systems, policies and workplace norms. A useful question is, can everybody get into the room?
- **Inclusion is about enabling full participation** from employees. Inclusive workplaces ensure that everybody has a chance to share their views and contribute, actively removing the barriers that prevent full participation. A useful question is – are people just in the room, or are they fully involved in the conversation? Have we created the opportunities for everyone to add value?
- **Belonging is a subjective feeling that results from diversity, equity and inclusion.** When organisations foster belonging, employees feel they can 'bring their whole selves to work,' and they feel accepted and valued. A useful question is – do people feel they belong in this room?

(Sources – Bloznalis, 2024; McKinsey, 2022; Murray, 2024)

In the words of our interviewees, DEIB is about:

“Acknowledging and valuing differing voices, perspectives, opinions – and creating space where everyone feels able to be their whole selves, without fear of judgement or retaliation.”

(Christina Nicholson, Leadership and Talent Development Partner, Financial Times)

“Fostering an environment where differences are valued. It's about ensuring people are seen, and heard, and empowered.”

(Mary Haddock-Staniland, Global Culture and DEIB Executive)

“How do you create an inclusive environment for all, so that we can all come to our place of work and thrive?”

(Russell Windsor, PwC Partner, Deals People and Culture Leader, and LGBTQI+ Advocate.)

What does DEIB look like, in practice?

DEIB efforts are like health and safety – with organisations sitting at different points on a maturity curve, and specific DEIB practices dependent on the context. However, our interviewees highlighted the following best practices, when it comes to DEIB.

Lead from the top, with majority support.

To succeed, DEIB initiatives need the vocal support and advocacy of senior leaders and people leaders. DEIB is also more likely to succeed if there's a focus on educating non-minority groups, which creates allies across the business. “You need the mass to say ‘I accept you and I understand you.’ It's got to go beyond the minority group – there's got to be allyship.” (Russell Windsor, PwC Partner, Deals People and Culture Leader, and LGBTQI+ Advocate.)

Driven by clear strategy and measurable goals.

It's useful to have a few DEIB focus areas, and to make traction that people can see and celebrate. For instance, organisations could review their wage policy with a gender equity lens, ensuring that female-dominated roles receive equivalent salary increases to male-dominated roles.

‘Baked in’ across the employee journey.

There is often a focus on diversity in recruitment – as HR seek to ensure they are attracting and hiring a diverse set of candidates. If recruiters aren't intentional, as specialist ADHD coach Callum McKirdy explains, there's a risk they will hire ‘for fit,’ which tends to be less about values fit and team fit, and more, who looks like me and thinks like me?

One way to get around this, according to Natasya Jones of DivergenThinking, is to determine the best ‘brain wiring’ for the role, and then recruit for fit. (See ‘Hiring for Neurodiversity’ for more.)

While a recruitment focus is a great start, a DEIB lens needs to be applied across the entire employee experience, covering recruitment, training, work allocation, team norms around who speaks and who does what, promotions, etc.

With a feedback loop to track progress.

It's important to gather both quantitative data and qualitative feedback, to track the efficacy of DEIB initiatives. As global DEIB advocate, Mary Haddock-Staniland observes, "We need to gather data and know where we stand, and what needs to improve. We need to share what we're measuring – benchmarking against success in other organisations and internally, holding the mirror up and seeing how we might do better."

Within DEIB, there's been a recent focus on understanding and supporting neurodiverse cohorts. We'll now briefly define neurodiversity, and explore how a DEIB lens could support neurodiverse candidates during recruitment.

Spotlight on Neurodiversity

Neurodiverse people process information differently, compared to neurotypical people. Neurodiversity is an umbrella term, typically covering:

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)
- Autism, and Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Specific learning or movement disorders, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia / coordination disorder, dysgraphia (Cambridge University Hospitals, 2025)

An estimated 15–20% of the population are neurodiverse, though this figure could be much higher, as neurodiversity may go undiagnosed. People often present with multiple labels, eg ADHD and dyslexia (Diversity Works, 2020).

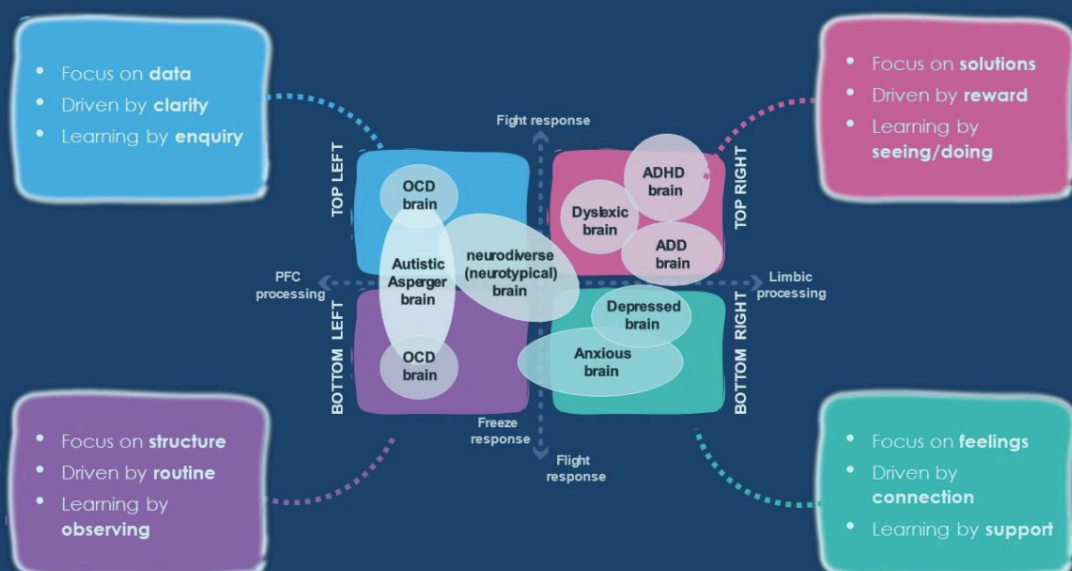
A hallmark feature of neurodiversity is a 'spiky profile' of cognitive abilities – like verbal skills, working memory, and processing speed – with people excelling in some fields but experiencing challenges in others (Doyle, 2020).

Hiring for Neurodiversity

Natasya Jones from DivergenThinking explains that recruiting managers may unintentionally hire in their own image—a natural brain shortcut that can lead to groupthink and exclude diverse thinkers, especially neurodiverse talent. Natasya and co-founder, forensic psychologist Anton Ashcroft, developed the nQuadrant model (below), for organisations to design for neuro-inclusion, and identify the brain wiring best suited to the role and the team.

In Natasya's words: "High-performing teams need cognitive diversity: top-left (data), bottom-left (structure), bottom-right (empathy), top-right (innovation). When each type is represented and supported in a psychologically safe environment, collaboration sharpens, burnout drops, and innovation rises. The key? Know your team's wiring, spot what's missing, and recruit to complete the picture. That's how you build teams that truly work."

"For example, a data analyst likely sits in the top-left and bottom-left nQuadrants—analytical and structured—so job ads should be precise and data-led. Target key strengths and tailor how you attract, assess, and onboard, to get the right brain into the right role."



Why should organisations continue to prioritise DEIB?

DEIB efforts can generate a win-win: helping people to thrive and organisations to perform at their peak.

- **Thriving employees.** When organisations are diverse and inclusive, people from marginalised groups and people from the majority will be able to bring their whole selves to work. When there is less guarding and masking, people can focus on their actual role, and contribute ideas without fear of judgement. People ask for help quickly, which prevents minor issues from escalating. They can seek work that aligns with their strengths, and so forth. All of this is good for wellbeing and performance.
- **Greater creativity and innovation.** When you have diverse people in a room – with different backgrounds and lives and ways of thinking – there's a corresponding lift in creativity. In fact, the Boston Consulting Group found "a strong and statistically significant correlation between the diversity of management teams and overall innovation" (Lorenzo et al, 2018). This innovation ladder led up to revenue streams, as management teams with above-average diversity generated 45% of total revenue from innovation, versus less diverse teams who generated only 26% of revenue from innovation (ibid).
- **Better decision making.** Diverse and inclusive teams make better decisions – safer decisions, faster decisions, and decisions that get better results. On the first point, of risk, Christina Nicholson from the Financial Times explained that more diverse teams will experience less groupthink, reducing the risk that comes from designing new products, services, campaigns and so forth – because the group can 'see' the issue from different perspectives. On the speed and quality of decisions, research has shown that teams that follow inclusive processes make decisions twice as fast, with half the meetings, and the decisions that are actioned lead to 60% better results (Larson, 2017).

This data comes from an analysis of over 600 business decisions made by 200 teams – so it's robust.

- **Brand boost and loyalty.** Organisations that prioritise DEIB tend to have more engaged employees and better staff retention, explains Mary Haddock-Staniland. These brand benefits extend to customers, who often appreciate and are loyal to organisations with strong values and ethics, says Christina Nicholson. In contrast, organisations that backtrack on their commitments to DEIB may face a consumer backlash, which ultimately affects the bottom line.
- **Better performance and profitability.** Firms that prioritise DEIB don't need to suffer financially – in fact, research cited by McKinsey shows that "Companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35 percent more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians" (Hunt, Layton and Prince, 2015). Or as our interviewees observed:

"Diversity and inclusion is non-negotiable when you're operating a business – it enables better performance."

(Russell Windsor, PwC Partner, Deals People and Culture Leader, and LGBTQI+ Advocate.)

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"It's good for employees, it's good for productivity, it's great for the profits."

(Mary Haddock-Staniland, Global Culture and DEIB Executive)

Coaching & DEIB

The first consideration – who gets coaching?

If equity is ensuring people have comparable opportunities, consider – who typically has access to coaching, and is this equitable?

There's value in democratising access to coaching, so that a wider range of employees can benefit from this form of professional development. As Russell Windsor of PwC puts it, "I think it's the organisation's role to come in and ask – who are we not capturing in our leadership development or coaching programmes, and what support do we give those people?"

The first step is to know the status quo – for instance, by reviewing who gets access to coaching and who doesn't.

From there, organisations can take steps to expand access to coaching, by:

- **Taking a broader view of who has 'potential,'** explains Callum McKirdy, ADHD coach. High performers, or potential high performers, don't all look, think and act the same.
- **Providing formal coach training to HR and people leaders,** so they can effectively coach employees or team members, in their day-to-day roles.
- **Establishing peer coaching / mentoring** – pairing more junior staff with more senior team members who they can learn from.
- **Considering team coaching** – even short-term coaching can be powerful, for example, working through a psychometric assessment to gain personal insights and to work more effectively as a team.

- **Establishing network groups, for coaching and peer support.** At PwC they've established groups to support specific cohorts, explains Russell Windsor. There's the Shine network for the LGBTQI+ community, and various networks including those for women, Māori and Pasifika staff, and neurodiverse staff.
- **Consider using AI for 'simple' coaching.** As Christina Nicholson, Leadership and Talent Development Partner, explains, AI coaches could be a 'game changer' for straightforward coaching assignments like setting goals and action steps. AI coaches can also free up human coaches to focus on more complex coaching scenarios.

How might individual coaching support DEIB efforts?

Diverse clients may seek coaching for similar reasons – and while there are some best practices, the best coaching is always *responsive to the individual*.

Common challenges

We asked our interviewees what people in minority or marginalised groups often seek coaching for, and observed a very common theme.

Lack of confidence, imposter syndrome and limiting beliefs are highly prevalent amongst people from diverse groups – be that diversity of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, neurodiversity and so forth.

Coachees may ask themselves questions like, what am I doing here, am I valued, and am I good enough? As Russell Windsor explains, people may think "I don't see myself here. I like the work I do, but actually, how do I fit in?"

These feelings can be particularly acute for neurodiverse coachees, who, explains Natasya Jones from DivergenThinking, “have often been told they’re bad, naughty or stupid.”

Three key strategies to support clients

Ensure strong coach-coachee fit. It’s useful to know and be able to describe your coaching style, so you can attract and support clients who are a good fit. Coaching may also be more effective if the coach and coachee have similar backgrounds – for instance, a woman may prefer a female coach, a client with ADHD may prefer a neurodiverse coach, and so forth. (See case study on clients with ADHD).

Adopt a strengths-based approach. To powerfully coach your client, you need to view them with ‘unconditional positive regard,’ in the words of Carl Rogers, believing in their inherent worth, and in their ability to grow in confidence.

We recommend adopting a strengths-based approach with clients, helping them to articulate and leverage their unique traits, skills and experiences. You may find Gay Hendricks’ Zone of Genius tool useful, as this helps clients to articulate the areas where they uniquely excel and the strengths that they love using. When clients are operating from their zone of genius, their confidence will increase in turn.

Draw on your coaching toolkit to address limiting beliefs. At the ICC Academy, we use a structured approach to help clients identify and address their limiting beliefs, as follows:

- 1) State the limiting belief in words. For instance, “I will not succeed in this firm, because I don’t have the same background as everyone else.”
- 2) Explore the belief with questions, like – Have you always believed this? What experiences led you to believe this? When have you had any experiences when this was not so?
- 3) Uncover the positive intention behind the belief – in other words, the ways in which this belief somehow serves the client.

- 4) Ask ‘What would you prefer to believe, instead of this?’ Write it down.
- 5) Set a small action step, based on the new belief. For instance, if the client would like to believe, ‘My different background means I can offer a unique perspective,’ then a small step would be for the client to speak up during their next team brainstorm, with an idea informed by their unique background. Then gather feedback, was the unique background a hindrance or a help?

The best coaching is responsive to the specific client

As always with coaching, the most powerful interactions come when you respond to the person in front of you. Just because someone is in a minority of some description, does not mean they *only* sit in that category. They are a complex, nuanced human, and the best coaching approach will therefore depend on the specific client. Our interviewees had the following advice:

Remain curious. Seek to understand your client in all their uniqueness, and avoid the temptation to put people into boxes. As Christina Nicholson from the Financial Times explained, “creating individual relationships with the coachee, and dealing with things as they arise in the session keeps me present, and objective, and stops me from making assumptions or generalisations.” Russell Windsor of PwC adds, “The key thing is to be curious. Ask questions and know that you don’t need to know everything.”

Focus on individual needs and behaviours, not labels. People who have the same ‘label,’ such as ADHD, may experience some of the same challenges – but this is not a given. As Callum McKirdy observes, “you’ve got to be specific and narrow down and talk about the behavior and not the label. Treat the person as a person, and focus on – what are we here to coach, and how can I help?”

Having said this, there are some general things to keep in mind, when coaching clients from a specific cohort. In the next section, we look at useful insights to support clients with ADHD.

Coaching insights for clients with ADHD

Public awareness and rates of ADHD diagnosis are increasing – which means a growing number of ADHD clients are seeking out coaching. Here are some pointers, to more effectively coach people with ADHD.

A quick primer: ADHD strengths and challenges

People with ADHD can intensely focus (or ‘hyperfocus’) on topics that interest them and that lead to the release of dopamine in the brain, but they may become inattentive or restless with tasks that don’t interest them, or that require sustained concentration over a long period of time.

They’re often highly verbal, creative and innovative, able to connect disparate ideas and see things from new perspectives.

They may experience ‘time blindness’ or challenges perceiving and managing their time, along with task planning and execution.

Why people seek coaching

There are some common themes that crop up amongst ADHD clients, including:

- **Time management** – because of challenges with time blindness, focus and forward planning, as described earlier.
- **Plateauing of potential**, or performance management. This can be driven by a range of circumstances.

For instance, Natasya Jones of DivergenThinking had a client who was being performance managed for resting their head on their desk twice a week. Through a process of curiosity-led discovery, the client realised they had ADHD traits, hyperfocusing and working at 120% effort for three days – then burning out. Now with a greater individual and team understanding of the client’s brain, this person can feel safe, advocate for what they need – and they’re thriving at 130%.

Useful strategies and approaches

Ensure coach-coachee fit. As noted earlier, coach-coachee fit is a critical first step. Callum McKirdy, specialist ADHD coach, explains, “When you’re saying “You just need to write a couple of to-do lists and leave them on your bench, and then you’ll have no trouble forgetting your keys, and you’ll get to work on time . . . But fitting us into a neurotypical box and having quite typical ways of changing behaviour doesn’t work – because we’re not typical, right?”

Consider whether trauma needs to be addressed first. Many neurodiverse people have experienced trauma at school or in the workplace, Natasya Jones explains, and therapy may be required before coaching can be effective.

Focus on strengths. Again, the strengths-based approach is vital for clients with ADHD. As Callum McKirdy puts it, “How do we amplify the things that you are good at, and dampen down the effects of the things that you’re not so good at?” At DivergenThinking, Natasya and her team help clients identify their motivational drivers and core strengths, and when and how to leverage them.

Scale down structure, scale up care. Clients with ADHD may rally against highly structured frameworks and processes. Embody care and concern, along with curiosity, flexibility of approach, and a focus on outcomes – rather than rigidly fixed processes.

Use gentle accountability, and reminders of progress. Some clients with ADHD may have a love-hate relationship with accountability. Coaches should avoid carrot/stick accountability, and instead, help clients to get timely feedback on their progress, and to determine how to enjoy dopamine boosts throughout the process. There is value in finding, visualising and celebrating all proof of progress.

While the focus here is ADHD, many of these approaches, like strengths-based coaching and flexible accountability, will be useful across diverse coaching contexts.

How might team coaching support DEIB efforts?

Team coaches can equip senior leaders to drive DEIB, foster psychological safety and belonging, help to harness diversity, and ensure conflict remains productive.

Senior leadership coaching – to champion DEIB from the top

DEIB efforts should ideally be spearheaded and championed by senior leaders, who set the tone for the organisation. Mary Haddock-Staniland, Global Culture and DEIB Executive, emphasises that senior leaders don't need to aim for perfection – and it's OK if they are vulnerable about their DEIB journey. The key thing is that leaders are committed to change and improvement, both personally and in their organisation.

In a similar vein, managers and team leaders will need to actively foster an environment that promotes belonging. They will ideally display certain attributes – like openness and empathy, as Russell Windsor from PwC explains:

"I've got quite a diverse team and I think our culture is really good. I don't think we do anything special except show empathy and be approachable leaders. I've never rolled out a program specifically, but I know I've got a diverse range of ethnicities, ages, sexualities. It's just about being open and transparent and human (Russell Windsor, PwC Partner, Deals People and Culture Leader, and LGBTQI+ Advocate.)"

Senior leaders and managers may need coaching, or training, to lead in a more inclusive manner. For instance, Diversity Works New Zealand offers a course on Inclusive Leadership, providing leaders with the skills they need to manage diverse teams, and "turn differences into opportunities for growth and innovation."

Team coaching – to foster psychological safety and belonging

Every team member plays a part in fostering psychological safety in a team, which ladders up to a greater sense of inclusion and belonging. Psychological safety is often misunderstood as simply 'playing nice,' but according to Professor Amy Edmondson, it really means that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. Author Timothy Clark explains that it's a continuum – first there's a sense of inclusion, then the sense that you're safe to learn, safe to contribute, and safe to challenge the status quo.

If teams are psychologically safe, everyone can show up to work as themselves, rather than changing to 'fit in.' Moreover, people can call out behaviour that undermines DEIB, and address it in a constructive way.

Team coaches can help teams to build psychological safety, which promotes DEIB and high performance more generally. You can begin by facilitating exercises to get team members opening up, sharing their experiences, and finding commonalities. Then you may like to try more challenging exercises – like the 'Stinky Fish' canvas that gets team members sharing their unspoken fears or anxieties. (See <https://www.fearlessculture.design/blog-posts/uncover-the-stinky-fish-canvas> for more guidance on this.)

In general, try to get people feeling comfortable, dialling down their sense of defensiveness and dialling up their curiosity, says Mary Haddock-Staniland. From that baseline, you'll be better placed to have brave, transformative conversations.

Team coaching – to harness diversity

Diverse teams will naturally have diverse strengths, and different ways of working. Coaches can first help team members to understand their individual motivations, styles and strengths; second, to better understand their team mates; and third, to work together more effectively.

As Christina Nicholson observes,

“People are not having these conversations with each other day to day. They don’t understand or have the language to say “This is what I need to be my best, this is how I prefer to work, this is what you can expect to get from me, what can I expect from you and what do you need?”

(Christina Nicholson, Leadership and Talent Development Partner, Financial Times).

Natasya Jones of DivergenThinking recommends using their ‘four brains’ tool (see page 3), to help team members understand their individual and collective strengths, challenges and triggers. You could also use standard psychometric tests, like DISC profiles, Strengths Finder, or the Hogan Assessment – but note that these tools are designed with neurotypical employees in mind.

Once team members have self-insight and other-insight, coaches can lead discussions about how best to work together, so that everybody can contribute to the team’s performance. These conversations are powerful for everyone – not just people with neurodiversity or other forms of diversity. As Callum McKirdy puts it –

“How do we create environments where it’s safe for people to go, ‘Hey, I’ve got this thing, and sure, I suck at this, but I’m amazing at this. How do I do more of this?’ That’s culture. That’s a great culture.”

“We don’t make anywhere near the best use of the amazingness that’s hidden, and that hasn’t been acknowledged for the last few decades.”

(Callum McKirdy, Specialist ADHD coach, facilitator and speaker)

Team coaching – for more productive conflict

Diverse teams can feel uncomfortable, at times. In fact, research has shown that in homogenous teams, people feel better but team performance is worse, while in heterogenous or diverse teams, people feel worse but team performance is better (see Rock, Grant and Grey, 2016).

Coaches can help teams to engage in more productive conflict – focusing the discussion on *how we best get the work done*, rather than on personal in-fighting. As Callum McKirdy puts it, “What we need is teams who don’t necessarily get each other. We can teach people and leaders ways of facilitating conversations where we can have some conflict around an *idea* rather than *personality* conflict. That’s what leadership is.”

For more guidance on productive conflict, check out the ICC Academy’s online resources, including Raechel Ford’s webinar ‘From Tension to Teamwork.’

Conclusion

DEIB efforts help employees and businesses to thrive. DEIB ladders up to creativity, innovation, better decision making, improved brand metrics, staff engagement and retention, and lifts in performance and profitability.

What’s more, individual and team coaches can contribute to the success of DEIB – by addressing limiting beliefs and harnessing strengths, fostering psychological safety and belonging, and much more. As Mary Haddock-Staniland says below, supporting DEIB is a no-brainer. And it’s our hope that this white paper has provided you with the knowledge and skills to keep supporting DEIB, and diverse individuals, at this crucible moment in time.

“For the feel-good factor, the brand equity factor, the employee experience, for your community and your customer – it’s a no-brainer”

(Mary Haddock-Staniland, Global Culture and DEIB Executive).

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For more from our experts

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- **Natasya Jones**, Co-Founder and Managing Director of **DivergenThinking**. Please visit www.divergenthinking.co.nz

About the ICC Academy

The International Coaching Community is one of the largest professional organizations for coaches in the world, with more than 15,000 coaches certified in 78 countries.

In New Zealand, the ICC offers three key programs:

- **Foundation Coach Training Program** – which helps participants to develop fundamental coaching skills that can be applied within organisations or in the personal sphere.
- **Team Coaching Certification** – where the focus is helping teams to improve engagement, performance and morale, at a systemic level.
- **Advanced Executive Coaching Certification** – which focuses on coaching executives to develop their authentic leadership, so they can be their best and effectively develop other leaders.

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