

"Staying True in Changing Times: A Conversation on Why DEI Remains at the Heart of How We Work"

Intro:

In a world of rapid disruption, staying anchored in your values isn't just admirable - it's essential. Dr. Ernesto Marinelli, Chief People Officer, and Sandra Hendro Chief Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Officer talked about the moral urgency and strategic value of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) in today's business world. In their words, inclusion isn't optional - it's the foundation of how we thrive, innovate, and grow.

Sandra:

Let's start with the bigger picture. Why do you believe DEI is more important now than ever before - especially as some organizations seem to be stepping back from it?

Ernesto:

We're living in paradoxical times. Technology and global connectivity are accelerating, yet at the same time important social values are being shaken. It's tempting for companies to retreat into so-called "neutrality" to avoid controversy - but in moments like these, neutrality is actually complicity. We can't build future-ready organizations on old-world mindsets. DEI isn't optional but it's what makes us adaptable and sustainable.

Sandra:

Exactly. DEI isn't a passing trend - it's part of the DNA of resilient and innovative companies. When exclusionary politics rise,

businesses have a choice: adapt to reflect the world we operate in, or cling to outdated hierarchies. For us, inclusion is non-negotiable, not just because it's right, but because it's smart.

What would you say to those who claim there's no "business case" for DEI?

Ernesto:

The idea that there's "no business case" for DEI is outdated and incorrect. There's a wealth of data from credible sources like McKinsey and BCG showing that diverse leadership teams outperform on profitability and innovation. And beyond the numbers, it's about people. Engaged, diverse teams perform better because they bring richer perspectives, challenge assumptions, and solve problems creatively. Our role as leaders is to create environments where every voice is heard and to create psychological safety for everybody and that's what drives real business results.

Sandra:

Yes, and let's be honest - homogeneous teams are more prone to groupthink. DEI is about unlocking the potential of our workforce. It's not performative - it's performance-enhancing.

How do you view the connection between inclusion and innovation?

Ernesto:

Innovation depends on psychological safety, curiosity, and courage - all of which are fueled by inclusive environments. When DEI efforts are rolled back, what's actually being cut is the pipeline to future ideas and progress. You cannot innovate in a space that punishes difference or discourages dialogue. Fear-based leadership and outdated hierarchies don't just stifle innovation, they paralyze it.

Sandra:

Absolutely. A static company doesn't survive in a dynamic world. Inclusion is about fairness and at the end about future-readiness. We see it again and again: when people feel safe and seen, creativity flourishes.

We've seen some companies return to rigid structures mandated office presence, top-down decisions. What's your take on that shift?

Ernesto:

We need to keep evolving and not retreat. The post-pandemic world showed us that flexibility, trust, and outcomes-based work cultures actually produce better results. Rigid RTO (Return to Office) mandates often reflect a lack of trust, and they shrink our talent pool. The flexible interplay between working on site in the office – especially for collaborative work and inspiring exchanges – and working remotely is a central component of an innovative hybrid working environment. The best intrinsic motivated people want more than a paycheck, they want purpose, autonomy, and inclusion. Clinging to control signals fear and not leadership.

Sandra:

I couldn't agree more. Hierarchical control suppresses innovation and drives disengagement. Empowerment, not micromanagement, is the way forward. Inclusion by design – not accident – creates high-performance teams.

You've talked about DEI as a values-driven strategy. Can you share more about how it connects to our company's purpose?

Ernesto:

Our purpose is to build a workplace and a

company, that reflects the world we want to live in. That means fairness, opportunity, and shared growth. DEI helps us live that purpose daily. It's a lens through which we make decisions, support people, and build our future. It's embedded in how we lead.

Sandra:

Exactly. Symbolic gestures aren't enough. What matters is real, measurable progress. DEI aligns with our business objectives because it powers innovation, trust, and culture. Without it, those goals are just talk.

What's your message to leaders who are feeling uncertain, those who are questioning whether DEI is "worth it" right now?

Ernesto:

My message is simple: look ahead, not behind. The organizations that thrive in the coming decade will be those that lead with courage and not caution. Inclusion is about progress. And progress is essential for survival, let alone growth.

Sandra:

Yes – and it's time to ask tough questions: Do we want to be part of the future or part of the past? DEI isn't a side project. It's a strategic foundation. Ignoring it in 2025 isn't just risky – it's reckless.

As Ernesto so clearly shared, the work of inclusion is not behind us – it's an ongoing process. Staying true to our values in uncertain times is what sets us apart. Because the future doesn't belong to those who stand still. It belongs to those who lead with empathy, courage, and vision.

"We're not going back. We're moving forward – and so should business."

About



Dr. Ernesto Marinelli is Chief People Officer at Aareon Group since July 2022, leading the people transformation to build a resilient, growth-oriented, and customer-focused

organization. Prior to Aareon, he spent over 15 years at SAP, where he held various senior HR leadership roles, including Head of Global People Success Services. He began his career at SAP as a recruiter in 2005. Since 2023, Ernesto also serves on the Advisory Board of Miss Germany Studios, promoting modern and inclusive leadership. He holds a PhD in Linguistics from the University of Würzburg and speaks five languages.



Sandra Hendro, Sandra Hendro is the Chief Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Officer at Aareon, a role she has held since 2023. In this position, she is responsible for shaping and implementing the company's strategy on

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI), Learning & Development, and Employer Branding. Sandra is a passionate advocate for inclusive leadership and is committed to creating an environment where all employees feel a strong sense of belonging and are empowered to thrive. Sandra brings a wealth of experience to her current role, having previously served as Director of Corporate Marketing & Communication at Aareon.