

Who Killed EDI: Bureaucrats?

A man with leprosy approaches Jesus. By every rule in the book—biblical, cultural, bureaucratic—he should not have. Lepers were untouchable: unclean in the eyes of the Law, exiled from the community, and—most painfully—believed to be cursed by God. Regulations in Leviticus, reinforced by the Mishnah, made clear what had to happen: exclusion, distance, shame. Mosaic Law (if strictly applied at the time) required that the victim of such a disease must isolate himself from human company, maintain a scruffy and unkempt appearance, and warn others of his approach by shouting out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ The system was working exactly as it was designed to.

Jesus pitches up in an unspecified Galilean city. Leper sees Jesus, and wants to approach. But he’s not allowed. Computer says no. But this man ignores the rules, falls on his face and says, “Lord, if you dare, you could make me clean.”

And Jesus does something no policy could permit. He reaches out—and touches him. “I am daring. Be clean.”

This is not just a healing. It’s a defiant act of human contact. One touch, and the entire structure of ritual exclusion collapses.

1. Bureaucracy as Systemic Avoidance

In fact, you could say bureaucracy is a form of government that – literally – puts the desk in charge. Bureaucracy is a system of administration structured around formal rules, hierarchical authority, and impersonal procedures, designed to manage large organisations efficiently. It disguises domination as neutrality. While it aims to ensure order and consistency, it often becomes synonymous with rigidity, delay, and the prioritisation of process over people.

Computer says no.

By embedding power in procedures, it allows injustice to present itself as sad inevitability. “I’m sorry, but those are the rules” becomes the sacred refrain of unaccountable systems—where no one decides, and everyone enforces. Bureaucracy doesn’t just manage inequality; it launders it – in the name of the law.

To be fair, at its best, bureaucracy can level the playing field. In the realm of EDI, it has helped make offensive language and workplace discrimination harder to ignore. “Those are the rules.” And after a while, external rules can become internalised ethics.

But at best, bureaucracy only limits the damage.

2. When Policy Becomes Avoidance

The trouble is, once rules are instilled, people can stop thinking and stop taking responsibility. Instead of engaging in difficult conversations, we defer to policy: “We don’t need to talk about that. We have a statement.” And so **symbolic gestures** become substitutes for real inclusion: rainbow logos, Black History Month panels, unconscious bias training. These require minimal effort, minimal personal engagement, minimal financial cost.

But real EDI is a constant, uncomfortable battle—a willingness to be exposed to our own bias, hypocrisy, and blind spots. Bureaucracy prefers comfort: box-ticking, targets, and measurability.

Yet anyone with a modicum of emotional intelligence knows: We say “we value diversity”—but ask yourself: Who gets to belong comfortably, and who is only ever tolerated?

An 18-year-old barista at Maison Clément once told me that whenever Cambridge students parade their EDI credentials, she asks, “What’s the name of the person who cleans your room?” Who isn’t on the radar of our well-meaning inclusivity? Who do we look through? And what would they say about our commitment to equality?

3. When Bureaucracy Becomes Anti-EDI

Once inclusion becomes selective, polished identities are welcome—but disruptive ones are sidelined. But ... EDI means embracing the people we find distasteful. Not just the people we agree with. Not just the ones who affirm us. But the ones whose presence unsettles us, whose views infuriate us.

There are people of my parents’ generation—my parents included—who would fail every EDI audit. They’re Brexit-voting, Trump-supporting, unwittingly racist, nationalistic, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic. Even their language makes your blood boil.

But they’ve also spent their retirement driving refugees to appointments, feeding families in food banks, housing asylum seekers. In fact, they’ve done all three.

They tick none of the boxes of EDI correctness. And yet they’ve given themselves to the gritty, face-to-face, unmeasurable work of inclusion—far beyond the reach of most institutional EDI. They didn’t follow the rules. They followed their guts. They got their hands dirty – actually doing the stuff the EDI policy tries to legislate.

And of course, it is possible to engage in the soul-less conformity to bureaucratic EDI without ever having to get your hands dirty, without ever reaching out, and touching the leper.

And when EDI is reduced to bureaucratic EDI – it becomes a dangerous box-ticking tool for exclusion, for saying no, for demanding conformity, for averting our gaze from real humans. That, is how EDI quietly and unselfconsciously turns into its own exact opposite. – Bureaucratic EDI is how EDI destroys itself.