VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY SCORE

FEATURED TOPIC | WORKPLACE

How Critical-Theory Concepts Appear in Corporate Policy

How ideas about power, privilege, oppression, and group identity appear in workplace training, corporate policy, public messaging, and vendor expectations.

9-minute read • Workplace • Updated July 2026

Not every diversity initiative, reference to systemic discrimination, or use of terms such as “allyship” or “unconscious bias” reflects critical race theory or Marxism. Companies can discuss discrimination and historical injustice responsibly. Concern arises when contested theories about group identity, power, privilege, and oppression are presented as institutional truth, used to assign duties or status based on identity, or connected to employment opportunities and expectations.

Why It Matters

Corporate policies do more than regulate conduct. Training programs, leadership expectations, public education campaigns, and hiring practices can also teach employees how to interpret society and perceive their colleagues.

Problems arise when disputed theories are treated as settled corporate doctrine, employees are classified by group identity, or professional expectations depend on accepting particular views about privilege, oppression, guilt, or power.

What These Frameworks Mean

Critical race theory is a body of legal and social scholarship that examines how race, law, institutions, and power interact. It developed through several intellectual traditions, including critical legal studies and broader critical theory. Some critics trace important structural features to Marxist and neo-Marxist thought, especially the emphasis on conflict between dominant and subordinate groups and on transforming institutions rather than correcting only identifiable acts of discrimination.[1] [2] [3]

CRT is not identical to classical economic Marxism. Classical Marxism centers on conflict between economic classes, whereas CRT focuses on conflict between identity groups. Contemporary critical frameworks take Marxist concepts such as power, marginalization, domination, and liberation and apply them to race, sex, gender, and other identities.

Scholars disagree about how closely critical race theory should be associated with Marxism. For corporate policy, the key question is not which label applies, but whether company materials organize people and institutions around recurring ideas of group power, privilege, oppression, assigned responsibility, and structural change.

In corporate materials, these ideas seldom appear under academic labels. Instead, they surface through recurring assumptions about group identity, power, responsibility, and the need for structural change.

Recurring Concepts in Corporate Materials

Oppressor and oppressed classifications	People are interpreted primarily through group power rather than individual conduct.
Privilege and complicity	Individuals may be assigned unearned advantage or responsibility because of identity.
Equity as outcome correction	Differences in outcomes may be treated as evidence that systems must be restructured.
Allyship and institutional transformation	Employees may be expected to use influence to redistribute space, power, or opportunity.

How These Ideas Appear in Corporate Policy

Companies rarely state that they are adopting critical race theory or Marxism. The influence is more often visible through recurring assumptions and vocabulary. These concepts can reach corporations through consultants, professional associations, ESG initiatives, training vendors, and human-resources programs.

- Employee training on unconscious bias, privilege, systemic racism, allyship, microaggressions, intersectionality, or anti-oppression.
- Leadership competencies that treat ideological advocacy as a measure of inclusive management.
- Hiring, promotion, mentoring, or candidate-slate practices designed to change demographic outcomes.
- Public education campaigns that instruct customers or communities to dismantle privilege or adopt so-called anti-racist language.
- Vendor and community initiatives that extend the same approach beyond the company's workforce.

Good for Business Coalition resources warn that DEI and the social component of ESG can carry contested political and cultural ideas into corporate policy. They recommend reviewing training, policies, and vendor requirements on their substance rather than assuming that programs are neutral because they use the language of inclusion.[4] [5]

What the Evidence Shows

The Index does not draw conclusions from a single word. It looks at the surrounding language, the context in which a concept appears, and what employees or audiences are expected to do.

Relevant questions include whether materials classify people by group power, presume bias or oppression based on identity, assign duties according to group status, or present disputed systemic explanations as conclusions that employees must accept.

Source note: Company examples are drawn from 2026 Viewpoint Diversity Score research records supplied for this draft. Each published company card includes a link to the underlying evidence.

Workplace Training

Workplace training is the most direct way these assumptions can shape employees' experience. When a company incorporates contested theories into required or leadership-directed training, employees may be expected to engage with them as settled truths rather than as perspectives open to debate.

KeyCorp

Concepts identified: mandatory training, privilege, racial justice, allyship

Key's three-course DEI curriculum included "tackling racism at work, understanding privilege, and addressing racial and affinity biases."

Why it matters: KeyCorp treated privilege, racial justice, and allyship as part of a formal employee curriculum rather than an optional discussion.

View evidence

Twilio

Concepts identified: anti-racism, oppression, power, inequity

People managers participated in "Living into Anti-Racism" workshops addressing "bias, power, and inequity," while the company continued "anti-racist and anti-oppression learning opportunities."

Why it matters: The training asks managers to interpret workplace relationships through bias, power, oppression, and inequity.

View evidence

Bank of America

Concepts identified: white supremacy, decolonization, power redistribution

According to materials reviewed and reported by City Journal, an employee program characterized the United States as a system of "white supremacy" and encouraged white employees to "decolonize" their minds and "cede power to people of color."'

Why it matters: The reported materials assign race-based responsibilities to employees and frame workplace change in terms of redistributing power.

Source note: City Journal reported the language based on materials it reviewed; it is not drawn from a Bank of America-hosted document.

View evidence

Public Messaging

Public messaging presents a different concern. A public article, event, educational guide, or corporate campaign does not ordinarily carry the same employment consequences as required training. It can, however, reveal the ideas a company has chosen to endorse, teach, or encourage among customers, employees, and the broader public.

Airbnb

Concepts identified: privilege, marginalized groups, structural change

Airbnb's guide described allyship as using privilege to create space for marginalized people and ultimately "dismantl[ing] the structures of privilege, even one's own privilege…"

Why it matters: The guide moves from classifying people as privileged or marginalized to assigning those with privilege a responsibility to surrender influence and challenge structures viewed as preserving that advantage.

View evidence

Lyft

Concepts identified: intersectionality, power, liberation, oppression

Lyft stated that identities can confer "privilege" or leave people "more vulnerable to oppression and discrimination," and described embracing identity as "an act of power and liberation."

Why it matters: Lyft used intersectionality to explain how identity affects power, privilege, vulnerability, and personal experience.

View evidence

Toast

Concepts identified: systemic racism, white supremacy, colonialism, directed commerce

Toast advised consumers to shift spending toward BIPOC-owned businesses and described racial oppression and cultural erasure as consequences of "systemic white supremacy and colonialism."

Why it matters: The framework moves beyond internal education and recommends identity-conscious commercial action.

View evidence

Vendor and Supplier Expectations

Corporate expectations can also move into the supply chain. Some businesses use supplier codes and contracts to call for vendor policies, training, demographic reporting, or spending targets tied to particular groups. These requirements can influence the governance and business practices of independent suppliers, especially when smaller vendors depend on relationships with major corporate customers.

Northern Trust

Concepts identified: supplier DEI policy, governance, workforce diversity, training

Northern Trust encouraged suppliers to maintain a "documented Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Policy," establish "governance and accountability … to oversee the implementation," foster workforce diversity, and "provide inclusion and diversity training…"

Why it matters: Northern Trust's guidance reaches beyond its own workforce by encouraging suppliers to adopt formal policies, oversight structures, and training.

View evidence

Fidelity National Information Services

Concepts identified: supplier-diversity program, documentation, demographic spending reports

FIS required suppliers to "provide evidence" of their "supplier diversity program[s]" and, upon request, report "diversity spend[ing]" with designated categories of diverse suppliers.

Why it matters: The provision moves beyond the company's own procurement decisions by requiring vendors to document and measure their participation in group-based supplier programs.

View evidence

KeyCorp

Concepts identified: diverse-business utilization goal, second-tier spending, subcontracting targets

KeyCorp set a 20% "target goal" for supplier spending with designated "diverse businesses" in work connected to its contracts.

Why it matters: The quantitative target can influence vendors' contracting decisions based on race or other non-merit-based categories rather than ordinary commercial considerations.

View evidence

Why This Can Be Harmful

- It can replace individual assessment with assumptions based on race, sex, religion, or other group identity.
- It can assign employees a predetermined status—such as privileged, oppressive, marginalized, or victimized—and attach moral expectations to that status based on identity.
- It can make disagreement professionally risky when dissent is treated as evidence of fragility, bias, complicity, or harm.
- It can blur the line between requiring respectful conduct and requiring ideological affirmation.
- It can undermine equal opportunity when hiring, promotion, mentoring, or leadership expectations depend on identity or demographic outcomes.
- It can create stigma for intended beneficiaries by raising doubts about whether opportunities or recognition reflect individual achievement or identity-based preferences.

Critics of CRT emphasize its tension with neutrality, equal treatment, merit, and individual rights. [1] [2] The G4B DEI paper similarly argues that oppressor-oppressed classifications and identity-conscious employment practices can produce division and legal risk and recommends replacing them with merit-based systems and equal treatment for each individual. [5]

How the Index Evaluates It

The Viewpoint Diversity Score Business Index does not penalize a company merely for discussing racism, inequality, history, or respectful conduct. It examines whether companies teach or publicly advocate divisive concepts as settled doctrine, including whether materials:

- suggest that people are inherently guilty, biased, oppressive, inferior, or assigned victim status because of race, religion, or sex;
- require employees or audiences to affirm contested identity-based assumptions as a condition of participation or belonging;
- teach or advocate allyship, privilege, intersectionality, systemic oppression, or similar contested theories as settled truth rather than perspectives open to discussion;
- connect contested identity theories to employment expectations, opportunities, or professional standing; or
- leave employees free to disagree while still requiring professionalism, nondiscrimination, and respectful conduct.

The concern is heightened when training is mandatory, disagreement may affect employment standing, or a company extends the same expectations to independent vendors through supplier codes, contract terms, reporting requirements, or training expectations. The degree of concern depends on context. Mandatory employee training carries different implications from an optional public event, a corporate blog post, third-party content offered to customers, or contractual requirements imposed on suppliers. The Index evaluates workplace instruction, public advocacy, and vendor requirements under separate standards.

What Companies Can Do

- Focus training on conduct, professionalism, civil rights obligations, and equal treatment.
- Present contested theories as perspectives for discussion, not conclusions employees must affirm.
- Avoid assigning guilt, privilege, complicity, oppression, or victimhood based solely on immutable characteristics, religion, or other personal identities.
- Protect employees from compelled ideological statements or participation in advocacy exercises.
- Keep hiring, promotion, mentoring, and leadership development open to all qualified employees.
- Review training vendors, leadership materials, and public education campaigns for divisive concepts.
- Distinguish unlawful discrimination and targeted harassment from disagreement over political, religious, or social ideas.

What Employees and Consumers Should Know

The appearance of terms such as "equity," "allyship," or "unconscious bias" does not by itself prove that a company has adopted CRT or Marxism. Context matters. The more important questions are whether the company treats contested theories as unquestionable, classifies people according to group power, imposes different expectations by identity, or connects professional standing to ideological agreement.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is every DEI program based on critical race theory?

No. Some programs focus on lawful nondiscrimination, broad recruiting, accessibility, respectful conduct, or equal opportunity. The concern is with programs that impose contested identity theories, group-based preferences, or compelled affirmation.

Is discussing racism or inequality inherently problematic?

No. Companies can examine discrimination, history, and unequal treatment. The distinction is between education and requiring employees to accept a particular theory of power, privilege, guilt, or oppression.

Can companies require respectful conduct?

Yes. Employers may prohibit discrimination, threats, targeted harassment, and unprofessional behavior. Those rules should be clear, applied equally, and separated from demands that employees endorse disputed social or political beliefs.

Why discuss Marxism if CRT is not classical Marxism?

Because critics identify structural similarities in how the two frameworks analyze conflict, dominant and subordinate groups, ideology, and institutional change. The relationship is contested, so this article distinguishes between the traditions and evaluates specific corporate policies and practices rather than relying on labels alone.

What is the better alternative?

A company can address discrimination, require respectful conduct, and broaden opportunity without assigning moral status or professional duties according to group identity. The better approach emphasizes equal treatment, individual dignity, merit, clear standards, and freedom to disagree with contested social questions.

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[1] Christopher F. Rufo, "What Critical Race Theory Is Really About," Manhattan Institute, May 6, 2021. Commentary describing CRT as an identity-based adaptation of Marxist class analysis and discussing its use in training and HR programs.

[2] GianCarlo Canaparo and Hans A. von Spakovsky, "Marxist 'Critical Race Theory' Seeps Into U.S. Courts," Heritage Foundation, Dec. 23, 2020. Commentary emphasizing tension with neutral principles, merit, equal treatment, and individual rights.

[3] Ian Paul, "Is Critical Race Theory Marxist?," Psephizo. Essay tracing CRT through critical theory, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, and critical legal studies while distinguishing it from classical economic Marxism.

[4] Good for Business Coalition, "Tackling the 'S' in ESG," pp. 1-9. See especially pp. 3-4 on DEI within social-policy initiatives and pp. 8-9 on audits, transparency, and alternative policies.

[5] Good for Business Coalition, "Dismantling DEI Programs," pp. 1-6. See pp. 1-2 on oppressor-oppressed classifications, pp. 3-5 on legal and cultural risk, and pp. 5-6 on merit-based alternatives and training audits.

Editorial note: Company examples are drawn from publicly available corporate reports, policies, career pages, regulatory filings, and verified reporting reviewed for the 2026 Viewpoint Diversity Score.