

# Inclusive Dialogue Wins the Race

Vital practices for busting biases across organizations



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Cries for justice resound today more loudly than ever; we have no choice but to look inside and outside of ourselves. The leaders and organizations who choose learning dialogue over defensive disregard of groups seemingly opposed, will build an inclusive society. From #metoo, polarizing political parties, LGBTQ to black lives matter, now is the time to focus on our common aspirations and dreams. We cannot erase the past. However, the past serves as a reminder to commit to create a better future TOGETHER.

In recent months, the groups who believe they're disenfranchised have been joined by furloughed leaders who have also felt the sting of being undervalued or just plain excluded from the ongoing conversations. Even if temporary, learning that you've been 'marginalized' to the sidelines from the core group doesn't feel good.

The gravity of systemic challenges around inclusion in our society today makes this topic worthy of its own headline. International research conducted by Dreyfus Advisors, led by Rachel Dreyfus, has identified early mental shifts among senior corporate leaders that might be further leveraged.

### Positive Outcomes from Pandemic n=75



Our results show that most leaders believe they have developed a more caring communications style as they led through the pandemic. Does this include encouraging everyone to speak up while listening to diverse voices on the team? Based on the open-ended comments where many leaders mention more meaningful and more "human-centric" relationships with their team members, it appears so.

Many leaders commented on their virtual setting being more inclusive of different levels of team members. Some specifically noted the important role of diversity on the team in a remote setting as leaders had a chance to form strong bonds with team members beyond their inner circle or “In Group.” With an increase in team emotional support, listening more attentively and having more meaningful conversations, we are hopeful that a wide variety of experiences across societal groups were shared and appreciated.

Here are few comments from our C-level respondents:

*“Focusing on body language, voice pitch and subtle queues to direct a conversation. Taking time to listen to the response to 'how are you?'. Supporting outcome- based working [understanding...] the critical role of diversity of people and how to bring that together remotely.”*

*“The most positive outcome is enhancing human relations. Better 1:1 conversations... Colleagues are discovering new version of themselves and their colleagues.”*

Based on information gleaned from the research, we encourage all leaders to challenge themselves and their teams to take a hard look at implicit and unconscious biases. Does a diverse team member truly have a voice, an invitation to express themselves authentically and a pathway to reach their full potential? We’ve never before had such unequivocal permission and such high expectations to engage in dialogue, empathic listening and to take action on typically taboo subjects around race and biases. In fact, in today’s atmosphere, silence around the subject of racism is going to be received as consent.

### **Now What? Activate the Learning**

- a) Begin with comprehensive research, **assessing all areas of your organization’s eco-system** – a living organism with the DNA being a combination of every person your company employs, partners with, invites to be part of the board, sells to, allows to be an investor etc. Where are you and they today and where must you and they be in 2-6 months, 1-3 years on giant inclusive strides?
- b) Understanding the **neuroscience on implicit biases** is fundamental as biases exist in everyone with a brain. Rather than suppressing biases surrounding diversity, share real stories to see and hear perspectives across many topics linked to identity, judgement, aggression and obstacles to succeed. Boost awareness of day-to-day conscious and unconscious bias. Oblige responsibility and cultivate courage for all to “notice and speak up” on biases.
- c) Facilitate **appreciative inquiry-focused dialogues** to raise positive awareness on the possibilities of what a just and totally inclusive world looks like and feels like — and how to get there. As part of this, define key vocabulary around inclusion, racism and anti-racism to find common definitions and language.
- d) As a result of all of the above, **Identify and implement policies** to hold your organization and all stakeholders accountable. Advocate powerful public programs such as:
  - *parity partners* – only work with vendors, providers, service firms who walk the talk on an inclusion strategy;
  - *panel pledge* – refuse to participate in industry events/conferences when diverse speakers and panelists make up less than 30% of the pool. (Learn from other organizations such as Male Champions for Change <https://www.propertycouncil.com.au/downloads/OurCommitment.pdf>)

Many of my personal insights are based on my experience growing and serving as President of a global network for nearly a decade that was all about inclusion. [PWN](#)Global focuses on advancing women in decision-making roles across 20+ countries.

I had the privilege of participating in hundreds of conversations with corporate partners ranging from Oracle and IBM to Salesforce.com and Coca-Cola. We heard the stories of PWNGlobal’s 300 volunteer board members, the membership community, mentoring groups and male champions for the advancement of women in leadership. It opened my eyes to unconscious biases.

We learned that each culture, each country has common and unique stories around inclusion and what has slowed and accelerated the advancement of those “not in power.” Two statements that stuck with me the most over the years are,

“Those in power are blind to their privileges” and “those in power created the system, work cultures and protocols through their lenses”, resulting in unintentional biases and barriers to success.

A question was posed to me and a female black executive at a diversity and inclusion conference years ago, “What do you see when you look in the mirror?” I suspected our answers would begin the same, “a woman, a leader, a mother, a spouse” and so on. Her answer was, “A black person, a woman, a leader, a mother and so on.”

This was an instance when I was blind to my privilege of identity and that has imprinted in my memory. I now ask this question of leaders in global programs I facilitate to generate dialogue around the power of differences. If a person is living in a country outside of their birthplace, their first line of identity will likely be that of their nationality - a Japanese, an American, a Spaniard and then they will see their gender, a leader, a father and so on. I learned the most about what it was like to be an American while living in Spain for more than 12 years. People’s identity is influenced by how much they stand out, what makes them feel less included in the larger group.

It’s complicated, no doubt. **Do the blind privileges of those in power make them reluctant to move over and create space for others so different from themselves, be it women, LGBTQ, blacks or others?** Change is hardly easy and especially if it reduces your position of authority.

### **Now What? Activate the Learning**

- a) **Inclusive Network Assessment.** Prioritize the power of diversity as part of your learning and development programs. Assess the diversity, trust and proximity of individual’s formal and informal networks from LinkedIn, clubs, membership groups, to party affiliations. Use key diversity criteria to surface “**similar to me biases**” – that make up our “in group” or trusted networks.
- b) **Explore the role of identity** and how it links to personal views on leadership. Assess if your culture allows authenticity to be expressed or if your leaders lose their identity publicly as they adhere to strict leadership norms shaped by the company culture. Uncover private identities.
- c) **Mandate Positive Learning Dialogue Skills.** Include [Difficult Conversations](#) and how to deconstruct, diffuse differences on opposing views, and then reconstruct a learning dialogue in leadership programs across all levels. Role-play “emotionally charged topics” and create key performance targets (KPT) linked to dialogue skills.

Our suggestion on ways to activate the growth around inclusion is only a start. We have a long way to go since it’s something we’ve put aside, consciously or unconsciously, for decades.

Busting biases requires inclusive dialogue. It takes intention, attention and practice. There’s no time like the present. Let’s get to work.

If this topic interests you, take a look at the other articles in this series:

1. [Strengthening Your Leadership as Fear and Exhilaration Collide](#)
2. [Now What? 8 team exercises to move forward](#)
3. [Momentum - Identifying High Potentials & Keeping Everyone Engaged](#)

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