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BELONGING

We're not here to make the case for diversity and inclusion. Yes, that case still needs to be made in some organizations or, to be more precise, still needs to be better understood and more widely embraced. If you or someone you love is in this camp, convinced that inclusion is a nice-to-have management luxury, to be prioritized only after you solve more important business problems, then we will first refer you to the fantastic scholarship on the competitive advantage and moral imperative of being a champion for difference. One headline is that true inclusion—not just diversity—will help you solve those business problems *faster* and *better*.¹

As we began to explore in our chapter on trust, organizations win when people can bring their complete, multidimensional selves to work. And it's not just underrepresented employees who benefit. We are all better off in inclusive spaces where authenticity can flourish. This chapter takes that observation as a given and explores your next set of challenges: the practical tasks of building and leading inclusive teams.

Our goal is to help you empower teams that excel, not in spite of their differences, but *because* of them. Many good leaders we know

are committed to this idea but are still having a hard time getting it done and fully unleashing people who don't look and think and talk like them. This chapter is about how to overcome this dynamic.^a

Begin at the beginning (and everywhere else)

We break up our discussion according to the traditional human resources life cycle, meaning the phases through which someone experiences your organization. Starting with the recruitment of new employees, we then move on to creating spaces where everyone has an opportunity to thrive and advance, and then close with retaining great people. We look at these challenges through the lens of empowerment leadership that makes being different not only safe but also welcome, celebrated, and cherished.

To be clear, this is meant to be an intuitive structure, not our suggested order of operations. Our advice is to do—or at least to *start* doing—as much as you can simultaneously. When people ask us about the optimal timing for inclusive change, our standard response is, “How about now?”

First, there's a strong, rip-off-the-Band-Aid argument for simply getting on with things. Anticipation of change introduces anxiety into an ecosystem, and the antidote is to replace it with *actual* change. The longer you wait, the more space the human imagination has to hallucinate—a favorite term of our friend and fellow educator Tom

a. We disproportionately focus on women and LGBT+ perspectives in this chapter, as stand-ins for differences that are visible and (mostly) invisible. This choice reflects both our space limitations and our particular experience navigating the world as members of these two groups. Needless to say, only some of our advice is transferable to other populations, but we still hope it remains directionally useful, regardless of the type of difference you seek to support. Wherever practical, we broaden the discussion.

DeLong—about all the catastrophic turns the future could take. Getting started also allows you to create enough momentum to help you up the inevitable learning curve and around whatever resistance you may meet along the way.

Here's the main problem with *not* doing as much as you can, as quickly as you can, to promote inclusion: failing to act in the presence of bias is demoralizing and inhumane. Once you've identified systemic barriers to the contributions of your fellow human beings, delays can be interpreted as comfort with their inequity and unrealized potential. Imagine saying something like this to your colleagues: "Look, it's come to our attention that we're only empowering the straight, white men on the team, but we have a lot on our plate right now, so we're going to wait until later to deal with it." That's essentially what you're communicating when you move slowly in response to unveiled bias.

There will always be people telling you to slow down and do less. Always, always, always. They often have long institutional memories, care deeply about the organization, and worry most about the good things that may be lost in a transformative change process. When we took on gender inequalities at Harvard Business School (more on this in chapter 6), well-meaning colleagues who believed they were acting in the school's best interest advised us to wait a year. One year didn't seem like much to ask for a hundred-year-old institution.

In our experience, it's everything to ask. We've learned the hard way that big organizational change almost always happens quickly, so our advice is to start now and slay all the dragons you can find. We've partnered closely with change makers at every level, and we've never heard anyone say, "I wish we had taken longer and done less." Indeed, we frequently hear the opposite. (See the sidebar "Ten Signs Your Organization Is Stalling.")

Ten Signs Your Organization Is Stalling

Let's say you're making progress toward a more inclusive operating environment, but you suspect your colleagues are trying to slow you down. Resistance to change can show up in many forms, some of them hard to decipher. The following ten signs reveal that your organization is digging in its heels:

1. **A task force has been assigned to the problem.** A small, intrepid team of reformers is one thing; indeed, it's among the most important tools for accelerating action. Most task forces, it turns out, do not fit this profile. If your organization is pushing you to rely on a structure like this that's outside the typical chain of command, make sure it's a mechanism with the legitimacy and decision rights to make a difference.
 2. **You're being thanked for your time and effort.** If you suspect you're being indulged and dismissed, then you probably are. By the way, this is not the same thing as being disagreed with, which is a perfectly acceptable response to you. Your obligation as a change maker is to make the persuasive case for your ideas. Your colleagues' obligation is to engage with them in good faith, not to meet all of your demands.
 3. **People doubt whether the organization (really) has a problem.** Be prepared for your colleagues to push back on the diagnosis that the company has an inclusion problem. Hard truths are, by definition, difficult to face, and this is particularly true for data that confirm a tolerance for bias (or worse). Stay strong. Be fluent in the evidence you've gathered and also in resonant stories about the cost of barriers to everyone's full participation.
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4. **You're asked to respond to the grave concerns of unidentified critics.** These exchanges often start with some variation on, "As your friend, I think you should know what people are saying." This is usually a tactic to keep you in check rather than empower you with information. Don't take the bait and react to rumor and hearsay. Encourage your critics to reveal themselves so that you can engage directly with their concerns, which may very well be valid. Collaboration happens in daylight.
 5. **The specter of "legal issues" is being invoked.** The antidote to this one is to work directly with the legal team, which is often made up of people who are far more creative, flexible, and solutions oriented than the detractors who are using their name. Lawyers are rarely the risk-intolerant killjoys they're made out to be by non-lawyers, so partner with them early.
 6. **Your colleagues point out all the other things that are changing.** This critique assumes there's some kind of measurable limit on a firm's capacity to absorb positive change—and you're getting dangerously close to that line. People tend to underestimate their company's capacity to adapt to a better reality, as well as the true cost of continued inaction. We'll say it again, for the absence of doubt: failing to act in the presence of bias is demoralizing and inhumane.
 7. **You keep hearing about a future state where the conditions for change will be much, much better.** This may be the most common expression of resistance we see, the fantasy that it's going to be easier to change things at some point in the future. In our
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experience, this is almost never the case, and the opposite is usually true. The clarity and momentum you have right now are tremendous assets, but they're also perishable ones. In most cases, the "fierce urgency of now" wins the day, particularly when the well-being of the people around you is on the line.

8. **The timeline for action is growing.** This is another common delay tactic, a proposed antidote to the concerns expressed in numbers six and seven. Your ideas are embraced at a conceptual level, but the timetable for change keeps being extended. Treat this development as an existential threat to your mission. When it comes to promoting inclusion—a mission so critical to the health of your organization—the right time to act is now.
 9. **Your colleagues think they can wait you out.** Management thought leader Earl Sasser calls this "kidney stone management," the assumption that this too shall pass. Make it absolutely clear that you're not going anywhere, preferably with a smile. If it takes showing up at someone's office door with a cup of coffee (just the way they like it) every morning until you get the meeting, then so be it. That tactic, by the way, has never failed us.
 10. **You keep hearing, "We've already tried that."** Some version of your proposed actions may have been tried before. If so, do the work to understand that history. Figure out whether the strategy or execution of past efforts was flawed and learn as much as possible from whatever went wrong. Regardless, context changes, including the very material context of your willingness to lead on these issues. *You* haven't tried before, which can make all the difference.
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