



JENNIFER BROWN

# HOW TO BE AN **INCLUSIVE** LEADER

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Your Role in Creating  
Cultures of Belonging  
Where Everyone  
Can Thrive

## **Praise for *How to Be an Inclusive Leader***

“Though most leaders possess the desire to have more inclusive organizations, many quietly struggle with the challenge of not knowing how. Jennifer Brown’s *How to Be an Inclusive Leader* gives courageous and compassionate executives a simple yet powerful blueprint for how to create true belonging and a culture where everyone can thrive. I highly recommend this book.”

—**Rha Goddess, founder and CEO, Move the Crowd, and author of *The Calling***

“Jennifer and I have a shared purpose in inspiring people to become the inclusive leaders our world needs. This book brings that purpose to life in a necessary read—an intuitive, accessible road map that will inspire you to step up, put your voice into action, and discover how to play a part in building inclusive organizations for all.”

—**Torin Perez, TED Resident and author of *Who Am I to Lead?***

“With this important contribution, Jennifer Brown invites readers to see themselves in the inclusion conversation and in the solution. *How to Be an Inclusive Leader* provides a road map to step into conversations, however imperfectly, and to learn to take action—and ultimately become someone others would consider an ally or advocate.”

—**Michael Skolnik, cofounder of The Soze Agency**

“From subconscious biases that affect hiring decisions to systemic blind spots that perpetuate unequal advancement opportunities, the modern workforce is rife with inequalities. *How to Be an Inclusive Leader* is all about deepening your awareness so you can be a part of the solution. Jennifer is giving the call to action we all need!”

—**Adam Pisoni, founder and CEO, Abl Schools**

“This is the essential book so many people have been asking for. A clear how-to guide that meets leaders where they are and helps them move forward as inclusive leaders. Jennifer Brown guides us with grace and candor through her easy-to-understand framework of becoming an inclusive leader. Whether you have long been part of this conversation or are just joining it, this book has much to offer.”

—**Dolly Chugh, Associate Professor, NYU Stern School of Business, and author of *The Person You Mean to Be***

“Sometimes it seems like inequality is a massive, unfixable problem. This book shows that isn’t true. Every single person can take simple steps to make his or her organization a more welcoming, inclusive environment where everyone can thrive. This book is an exceptional resource for the modern leader!”

—**Aaron Hurst, cofounder and CEO, Imperative, author of *The Purpose Economy* and *Fast Company*’s Purposeful CEO series, and founder of Taproot Foundation**

“Jennifer’s book is a must-read for anyone passionate about excelling in the art of inclusion.”

—**Tina Alexis Allen, actress and author of *Hiding Out***

“To feel joy at work and do good work, we need to be ourselves and be appreciated for the talent we bring. Yet it’s not easy to create an inclusive workplace without the skill and information we need to do that. Jennifer Brown’s book provides that resource to enable us, as employers, to transform our workplace into one in which all employees feel that they belong.”

—**Louise Chernin, President and CEO, GSBA, Washington State’s LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce**

“Creating a culture of belonging requires each of us to harness our ability, and our responsibility, to ensure others are welcomed, valued, respected, and heard. With this book, Jennifer is empowering each of us with the tools to effect meaningful change in our workplaces.”

—**Kimberley Messer, Global Diversity Business Development Leader, North America, IBM**

“With *How to Be an Inclusive Leader*, Jennifer Brown clearly shares what any individual can do to leverage one’s privilege on behalf of those who may not yet have an influential voice, as well as help shape the solutions. It’s ultimately about becoming a leader—a meaningful ally and equality advocate for all.”

—**Monica L. Boll, Managing Director and Operations Account Executive, Accenture**

“Wow! Jennifer Brown really gets it. Her book *How to Be an Inclusive Leader* is a smart, moving, and—best of all—convincing manual for how to become the inclusive leaders we so desperately need. Her sage advice is perfect for all leaders, regardless of where they’re starting on the path to becoming aware of privilege and bias and no matter the industry. This is one heck of a human book that really just might change the world.”

—**Erica Keswin, founder of the Spaghetti Project and author of *Bring Your Human to Work***

“Jennifer takes a tricky and nuanced subject and makes it accessible and encouraging. I love how she gives the tools needed to create change from both an individual and organizational level, using compelling examples across industries.”

—**Claire Wasserman, founder and CEO, Ladies Get Paid**

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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

# How to Be an Inclusive Leader

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*Several generations of very special women  
have served as my pilot lights.*

*To Deb Ziegler, who lifted me out of  
despair and showed me another way  
to make my voice matter.*

*To Mimi Brown, with whom I've conspired  
for years on deep matters of the soul.*

*And most importantly, to my partner  
Michelle whose activist spirit and  
companionship I take respite in, every  
day of our lives together.*



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# Preface

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When I was thinking about the title for this book, including the word *how* seemed crucial. As a diversity and inclusion consultant and speaker, the question I get asked most often from audiences who are craving guidance, direction, and ideas is, “How can I improve and how do I start?”

Focusing on *how* inspired me to write this book. Ample literature out there focuses on *why*—why diversity is important, why it matters, and why leaders everywhere should cultivate cultures where people feel welcomed, supported, and driven to do their best. But, for those I know who are poised and ready to do the work that’s needed, I couldn’t find a clearly written, step-by-step guide that honestly laid out the pieces of the personal and emotional journey we undertake when we decide to awaken to our potential to be more inclusive.

After more than ten years of working directly with leaders in a range of industries, I’ve observed firsthand that understanding *how* to embark on this journey is the single most important factor when it comes to making real progress on inclusion. Although some of us embody a mindset in which we’re constantly immersed in thoughts of fairness, privilege, equality, and advocacy, others are only vaguely aware of these topics on a daily basis—or are not aware of them at

all. No matter where we start, as leaders, we all have a responsibility to learn how to improve our knowledge, skills, and competencies to better support our colleagues, companies, and the people around us.

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*No matter where we start, as  
leaders, we have a responsibility.*

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Based on many years of watching all kinds of people react to the issues surrounding diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, my team and I developed what I call the *Inclusive Leader Continuum*, a four-step journey that codifies a set of easy-to-remember developmental stages. This book describes each of the four stages in the continuum and shows how leaders can begin to think differently, gain new perspectives, and take meaningful action to make a bigger impact in each stage. No matter your title or how advanced you already consider yourself to be as an inclusive leader, this book will lay out simple steps to help you evolve, understand your role, take action, boost your self-awareness, and become a better version of yourself in the process.

As someone with a foot in several worlds of identity-based disadvantages as well as privileges, for decades I have personally been on my own journey of endeavoring to feel seen, heard, and valued.

My earlier years as a professional were about wrestling with what it meant to be underrepresented, or simply invisible, in the workplace as a member of the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning) community. I came out when I was twenty-two and struggled to find examples of professionals who were like me in the roles I aspired to fill one day. Very few women, and even fewer openly gay professionals, seemed to be at the top. Feeling like the other in the workplace often dominated my thoughts. I had a

pervasive fear that, if people knew the real me, they would like me less or even view me with disdain. So, for a long time, I hid the parts of me that I feared would be rejected. I avoided sharing personal stories; I didn't even talk about what I did on weekends. Eventually, the weight of covering up who I really was felt too heavy to bear. I decided that ripping off the proverbial Band-Aid would be best for me. One day, I marched into my boss's office with a picture of my partner, Michelle, thrust it in front of him and blurted out, "I want you to know about this person who is so important to me." I paused, holding my breath. My boss looked surprised for a moment. Then he smiled and asked me to tell him all about Michelle. I was so relieved to come out of that dark, dark closet.

What's interesting is that, in many ways, people view me as the kind of person unlikely to struggle with inequality. I am Caucasian, able-bodied, and was raised in a world of privilege. I grew up in a safe home where I didn't want for anything and where I was told I could be anything I wanted. And yet I still felt like an outsider at work, which seemed like a major disadvantage when it came to me progressing up the career ladder. It made me think about how many other people feel the same way, for a whole range of reasons, some hidden underneath the surface, but some most certainly not. If I could hide the parts of myself that didn't appear to be valued or even accepted, then what about those who don't have the same option—to hide things—and who must regularly face indirect, subtle, or overt discrimination because of who they are?

We all have such different experiences in life—certain advantages and disadvantages. But what if, instead of hiding our truths, we could bring our *full* selves to work—without it feeling like a liability—and empower others to do the same? This question has been a driving force for me since I first entered the workforce, and it was a major factor in my decision to start my own business. I wanted to use my experiences and passion for advocacy to help organizations create

cultures of belonging where everyone can thrive and contribute to their fullest potential. Today, my team and I advise Fortune 500s and many others on how to build more inclusive workplaces in which all kinds of talent can feel welcomed, valued, respected, and heard. This is especially poignant because I used to be that voiceless employee who was hiding, not bringing my full self to work, and not able to align myself with my organization's mission because I never knew for certain whether or not I was a valued part of the workforce.

The hard truth is that, with a labor market that's becoming more and more competitive, and with a workforce that has grown increasingly diverse, leaders who aren't making an effort to become more inclusive are at growing risk of falling behind. Not being able to draw the best out of your people or attract and retain top talent can be disastrous for business. I've seen this play out in organizations all over the world. The root causes are almost always a lack of understanding from leadership when it comes to what the issues are, and what role they should play in resolving those issues, and a lack of managerial courage to take action and step into advocacy for *all* of their workforce, current and future.

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*Not being able to draw the best  
out of your people or attract  
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No matter whether you already consider yourself an advocate for diversifying the teams, communities, and workplaces in your life, or are just starting to consider how some of the people around you might have a tougher climb up the ladder, this book will meet you where you are and show you how you can begin to become more inclusive.

The good news is, there isn't a wrong starting point if your intent is to grow. I welcome you and commit that, in this book, you won't be shamed; rather, you'll be awakened, equipped, and inspired by the knowledge that you are needed, that your voice can make a difference, and that taking a single step is a great and honorable place to start.

As we learn how to generate an experience of belonging for others, the surprising benefit is that we often discover and begin to understand those parts of ourselves that we (or our organizations or, indeed, society at large) have negated, marginalized, or denied. We can revisit our own stories of exclusion and examine where our voice gets lost, isn't heard, or where we aren't showing courage in authenticity. Exclusion is a universally understood feeling and, when we finally embrace all our human experiences, we realize we each have plenty to work with; instead of our lives having throwaway or irrelevant details, we discover we have wisdom to share. This book will empower you to activate from this deeply personal place so that you can go on to become a true instrument of change.



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# Introduction

## *From Unaware to Advocate*

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I'm in a conference room with twenty-five white male executives. Every face I look at is either scowling at me or watching the clock. I'm certain none of them wants to be here. As I start to speak, I notice my palms are sweating.

I'm here to talk about inclusion and why it matters. It's not the first time I've spoken to the Fortune 500 about this subject, but this particular company has been in the headlines lately, in a very unflattering light. Homophobic and sexist comments were made on the trading floor and a harassment suit followed. The CEO is not okay with what transpired, so he hired my team to gather employee reactions and find out how this happened. Today I am here to deliver some not-so-great feedback. Unfortunately, the CEO is not attending the meeting. This, in itself, may be sending a message that the issues they are up against aren't truly a priority.

In rooms like this, while I'm not in any physical danger, I still don't feel safe. I'm on high alert before I say a word. I scan the room and confirm that, from what I can observe, I'm the only woman present. It's a familiar feeling, but I'm reminded again, in this moment, of the lower status of my gender in the business world. I wonder if they've

already written me off and how I can overcome this automatic dismissal. Although I can't be certain, I suspect that I'm also the only person in the room who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. I'm positive my sexual orientation hasn't crossed their minds because, in many ways, I defy the stereotype that others hold about how someone thus identified "should" look.

As I begin to facilitate the conversation, I'm also calculating: How brave am I feeling? To what extent have I personally experienced what I'm reporting, and should I share that? Does doing so strengthen, weaken, or distract from my argument? Will I have less credibility, in their minds, if I align myself and my personal experiences with those experiencing exclusion, and even harassment? I sense my success with this group will be determined by my ability to detach and appear objective. I present the data in a dispassionate, clinical way so that no one can accuse me of positive bias toward certain identities. This is necessary because I suspect I am already only holding their attention by a thread.

Strong opinions are part of every executive discussion, and today is no exception. Several loud voices dominate the conversation, question the data, and minimize the feedback I share. They back each other up, building on each other's points, and the momentum of resistance increases. Deflections fill the room (and these are just the ones that are verbalized):

"I don't want to know about people's personal challenges."

"People need to stop being so sensitive."

"I don't care if you're black, white, or purple—I hire the best person for the job."

And the inevitable "Are you suggesting we should have quotas?"

After hearing what they have to say, I decide that I made the best decision by carefully leaving much of myself out of the conversation. I

continue with the session, sharing the messages the CEO hired me to share, but it's hard to feel like my words might be sinking in when so many in the room aren't open to change. They have invested heavily in my being there and yet spend all of their time with me, the expert, shooting holes in the research and data (from my firm and other, much larger research institutions), and in their own employees' first-hand, self-reported experiences. I leave feeling diminished, discouraged, and unsure how many of those leaders would support me if we were working together directly. If I worked for that company, I would have serious doubts about my ability—and desire—to stay.

This experience is being repeated across workforces everywhere, every day, and I believe it's a key factor in the difficulties that organizations are facing in retaining talent. Who wants to go through this exhausting ritual, day after day? Many companies talk about making diversity, equity, and inclusion a priority but are continuing to fail in building cultures where employees of *all* demographics have a real chance to thrive.

I wrote this book to change that.

## The Power of Being Inclusive

### *What Does It Mean?*

Inclusiveness starts with a spark to do better. That spark lives inside leaders, almost like a pilot light. It's always there, ready and waiting to create a bigger flame. Leaders can create a culture of belonging where everyone can thrive in countless ways, and this book covers myriad examples. But all of those actions start with a spark—a desire or drive to evoke change. When you have that spark, you start to see all the opportunities to better support others unfold. You want to *do* more. To fulfill your potential as a leader, colleague, community member, parent, or friend. To learn, to grow, and to contribute.