Fostering Equity, Empathy and
Belonging across Differences

INCLUSIVE
CONVERSATIONS

MARY-FRANCES WINTERS
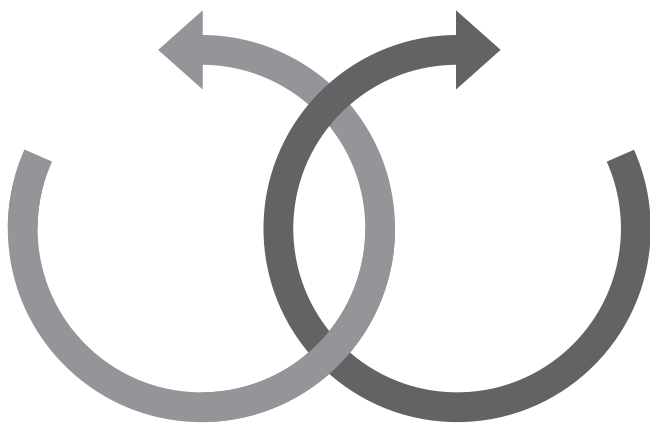
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Inclusive Conversations

To the generations of freedom fighters, civil rights leaders, and social justice advocates who preceded me in the ongoing quest for an inclusive, equitable world that values the dignity of all people.

And especially to those, past and present, who have lost their lives in the struggle.

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CONTENTS

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PREFACE

The 2020 coronavirus pandemic has put a spotlight on the stark differences in socioeconomic standing that we as a global society face and how it disproportionately impacts different groups of around the world. Inclusive conversations are sorely needed if we, as humans, are going to figure out how to share the planet in ways that foster peace and mutual understanding rather than hate, polarization, and divisiveness. There is increasing evidence in all sectors—from politics to the workplace—that we are not doing a very good job with the former and the latter is becoming a way of life. More and more, our way of communicating about racial, ethnic, gender, religious, gender identity, socio-economic, and political differences is contentious and filled with derogatory personal attacks. When we disagree on matters big or small, we dig in deep defending our own positions, denigrating those who may have a different belief. This polarizing way of communication is all too prevalent in social media spaces, where personal attacks proliferate, and it is rare to see evidence of inclusive conversations. This became evident during the coronavirus outbreak, with people even taking up arms to protest decisions that states made about the length of time social distancing would stay in effect.

Our inability to engage in inclusive conversations can fuel violence in the workplace, in schools, on the streets, and in places of worship. The increasing global climate of acrimony seeps into our everyday lives in ways that we may not even realize. It can impact personal and workplace relationships, our sense of safety, and our ability to trust each other. Inclusive conversations are needed to build and restore our connectedness as humans, to kindle respect for the dignity of every individual, and ultimately to lead to better outcomes for historically marginalized groups.

From engaging in routine performance discussions in the workplace across dimensions of diversity to talking with children about differences, we often struggle to find the right words. In my work as a diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) consultant, I regularly witness these struggles. It is not that most people do not want to engage in inclusive conversations; they do not know how. They do not know what to say so as not to offend or be accused of insensitivity or worse. In today's divisive climate we may be afraid to offer our perspective fearing that it might spark a verbal attack.

In 2017, I wrote *We Can't Talk about That at Work: How to Talk about Race, Religion and Politics and Other Polarizing Topics* to provide a road map for the prerequisites for engaging in conversations on what are often divisive subjects. *Inclusive Conversations: Fostering Equity, Empathy, and Belonging across Differences* goes deeper to lay out the conditions for effectively engaging in dialogue that fosters equity, empathy, and belonging, not only in the workplace but also in other settings. The book chronicles both the challenges and the solutions in creating and sustaining these conditions

I have learned from consulting with many organizations over the years that the ability to have difficult conversations effectively across difference is more about creating the right conditions than having a list of dos and don'ts about what to say (and not say). We have to go deeper in understanding why we should and should not say certain things across diversity dimensions. We need to have a more fundamental understanding of the historical inequities disproportionately suffered by some groups, many of which persist today. We have to create organizational cultures that are equitable, trusting, empathetic, accepting, forgiving, inclusive, and willing to acknowledge and address power dynamics. Inclusive conversations are not easy, but they are much more likely to be fruitful when these conditions are met. Most organizations strive to be all of these things. They have values and purpose statements, principles and guidelines that purport to create equitable and inclusive environments. The problem is too many of us have opposite experiences of inequitable, unaccepting, mistrusting environments, and inclusive conversations cannot happen under these conditions.

Inclusive Conversations provides practical guidance for engaging in inclusive conversations while elucidating the layers of complexities involved. The book is written for those who have historically found themselves in dominant, power positions as well as those who have historically been subordinated and marginalized because of their identity including race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or other dimension of difference. Terms such as "dominant," "subordinated," "marginalized," and others that may not be familiar to all readers are **highlighted** in the text and defined within the main text, as well as in a comprehensive glossary in the back of the book. If you lead a team or are

a member of a team at work; if you are an educator, a religious leader, a politician, or a volunteer; if you are in any environment where different identities and cultures come together, this book can help you have more effective and inclusive conversations—a prerequisite for dismantling inequitable systems.

I Don't Know What to Say

I recently consulted with a large technology company on how to effectively engage in Bold, Inclusive Conversations. Based on topics I explore in *We Can't Talk about That at Work: How to Talk about Race, Religion and Politics and Other Polarizing Topics,* one of the participants, a leader in the organization, asked how he might have handled a difficult situation in the moment. This company is very progressive in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion and routinely offers structured opportunities for employees to share their unique experiences, to tell their stories. To demonstrate vulnerability, one of the company's values, this leader shared a story about a time when he made a mistake when referring to someone in the LGBTQ community. He used the wrong terminology, which upset the employee. His

purpose for sharing this situation was to illustrate that we will make mistakes, but we can recover from them if we are willing to acknowledge our mistakes and learn from them.

As this leader was sharing the story, several in the audience of about three hundred were snickering and laughing. Although he was not sure what sparked the laughter, it made him feel very uncomfortable. He thought perhaps the laughter was targeted at the particular reference to the LGBTQ community because it seemed to start at the point where he named the mistake. What should he do? Address the situation in real time, or wait until after the session and reach out to those who were laughing? If he chooses to address it immediately, what should he say? If he does not address it immediately, what will other participants think? If he addresses it immediately, will he embarrass the "perpetrators"? I share my perspective on this example in Chapter 4.

At another site conducting a similar session on Bold, Inclusive Conversations, a client asked, "What do I do when people accuse me of being too sensitive when I bring up something I feel is inappropriate?" For example, it is common in this organization for people to use the phrase "you guys" generically across gender identities. I admit that I am guilty of using that phrase pretty indiscriminately as well, so when a participant brought it up, it gave me pause. This participant wanted to know if there are boundaries to inclusion, and if we are just moving to an environment of extreme political correctness where anything you say might be interpreted as racist, sexist, homophobic, or xenophobic. Is this the world we really want to live in? The client asked, "How do we talk about this?" I share my answer in Chapter 11.

In yet another situation, the client brought The Winters Group in because they were hearing rumblings from white male employees who had been with the company for a number of years that they did not feel relevant anymore. "If you are not a woman, a person of color, or from the LGBTQ community," as the sentiment was described, "you don't seem to matter much anymore." How do we ensure that everybody feels like they belong? How do we talk about this? Read my ideas in Chapter 10.

In a cultural proficiency session with teachers in a public school system, one of the participants shared her belief that Black parents do not care as much about their children's education. Another participant vehemently disagreed and an uncomfortable conversation ensued. What should the facilitator do to turn the conversation into an effective learning experience that maintains the dignity of all involved? I discuss this issue in Chapter 7.

In each of these scenarios the questions are the same: How *do* we have meaningful conversations across difference? How do we know the "right" things to say? Conversations about any challenging, controversial topic are not easy, and conversations about topics that deal with dimensions of diversity are even harder and require a different skillset. Leaders, employees, educators, and students all need to learn how to dialogue across difference to achieve organizational goals. Many organizations—both in the corporate and not-for-profit sectors—have been intentional in creating more processes for structured dialogue about such topics as race, gender, gender identity, religion, and other dimensions of difference. They recognize this as a key ingredient in fostering a culture of inclusion and belonging, allowing them

to reap measurable benefits such as increased equity, innovation, and retention. *Inclusive Conversations* helps you effectively address dilemmas like the ones posed above and more. The book also provides you with a deeper understanding of the underlying social psychology of why these types of conversations can be so challenging.

What Are Inclusive Conversations and Why Are They Important?

In today's increasingly polarized world, developing the capability for inclusive conversations is imperative. If we hope to effectively address our differences and move forward as a society with a shared vision for equity and inclusion. We have to learn how to have meaningful discourse with each other.

What Are Inclusive Conversations?

Inclusive conversations are dialogues between two or more people of different cultural backgrounds (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, **gender, gender identity**, ability status, class/socioeconomic, or other dimension of difference) attempting to achieve an equitable outcome. Inclusive conversations consider power dynamics and **systems of inequity**. Inclusive conversations require the courage to critically self-reflect, to acknowledge what you don't know, and to embrace a willingness to learn. The desired outcome of inclusive conversations is enhanced mutual understanding that leads to equitable solutions.

Why Do We Need to Have
Inclusive Conversations?

Inclusive conversations are needed to enhance cross-difference understanding so that we can address the widening divide across racial, gender, religious, socioeconomic status, and gender identity lines. At the extreme, we are witnessing an increase in hate crimes and violence, and in everyday encounters we see growing inequities in our schools, workplaces, and political and religious spheres. We are experiencing a level of polarization like no other in modern time. Conversations are becoming less civil, more hate-filled, and consequently society is making little progress in resolving our differences and achieving inclusion.

Incivility and hateful rhetoric regularly play out in social media feeds, where verbal attacks are common. In face-to-face settings we are more apt not to talk at all about potentially polarizing topics. When we do, the conversations are either contentious or shallow; either way, we are stuck. If we don't learn to talk about our differences, there is no hope for achieving **equity**, **inclusion**, and **belonging**.

Why in the Workplace?

The workplace is a microcosm of larger society. Many people spend more time at work than they do in other life pursuits. Research shows that during a typical fifty-year stint of employment, most people spend 25 percent of their waking hours working. Therefore the workplace can have a substantial influence on shaping the broader society as a site where understanding, kindness, compassion, inclusion, and empathy are the norm, rather than incivility, hate, violence, and a whole string of "isms,"

including racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination.

The workplace struggles to hold inclusive conversations. A recent study from the Society for Human Resource Management on toxic workplaces reported that nearly four in ten working Americans say their manager fails to frequently engage in honest conversations about work topics. Similarly, one in five Americans are uncomfortable engaging in such conversations with their manager. The report goes on to say that toxicity is rampant in the workplace and often plays out as sexual harassment and discrimination.[1] The lack of effective conversations impacts employee retention and productivity. The discomfort and inability to effectively interact across difference impacts performance and career conversations (e.g., who gets selected for special assignments).

As a result of the recent attention on sexual harassment from the #MeToo movement, 60 percent of men say they are afraid of mentoring, socializing, or being alone with women at work.[2] According to research by McKinsey and LeanIn.org, women of color are less supported by their white leaders, which has contributed to their inability to move up the corporate ladder. Their bosses are less likely to promote their work contributions to others, help them navigate organizational politics, or socialize outside of work as they do with their white direct reports. These outcomes for women, and women of color specifically, will continue if we do not find ways to have inclusive conversations in the workplace.[3]

Even though some employees may be uncomfortable talking with their managers, they are increasingly willing to stage