



JENNIFER BROWN

HOW TO BE AN **INCLUSIVE** LEADER

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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Your Role in Creating Cultures of
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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

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.

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

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.

*Not being able to draw the best
out of your people or attract
and retain top talent can be
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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.

Introduction

From Unaware to Advocate

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.

The hardest part about becoming an inclusive leader can be that initial work to switch the pilot light on, to become aware that you are already equipped with the ability to make a difference and to learn how much your efforts are needed. It can be a total shift in mind-set, not unlike a spiritual awakening. Having that internal flame can create a greater sense of purpose, enriching life in wonderfully unexpected ways—for yourself *and* others.

*You are already equipped with the
ability to make a difference.*

But to truly ignite that power, you must look inside yourself to uncover your blind spots, prejudices, and biases and overcome them. It's a humbling journey of discovery that's not always easy. Leadership is not leadership unless it's uncomfortable. If you aren't pushing yourself to do more, and pushing others around you to improve, chances are, you aren't doing enough.

Of course, this necessary discomfort is an indelible hallmark of leadership, of any kind. Often, not only are those who are considered inclusive leaders also considered great leaders in the traditional sense, but they lead with an additional vigilance, care, and intention: to perceive and then address what might be getting in the way for others around them. They are dedicated to the thriving of others, particularly those who have struggled proportionally more to be heard and valued. They honor and value input, nurture purpose in others, and encourage authenticity for those who fear the repercussions of being authentic. They are passionate about challenging whatever obstacles to potential and performance they can, and they constantly seek to learn more about what they *don't* know when it comes to cultural competency so that they can better resonate across

difference and maintain trust. And they don't pursue any of this as a chore, but with enthusiasm and joy.

They take a strong stand against bias, even its most subtle forms. They understand where and when they can step in and use their voice to address bias when it occurs, they think about the systemic reasons for it occurring, and they endeavor to tackle those reasons at the root.

Inclusive leaders bring more of themselves to the workplace than other leaders, believing that through their own vulnerability and authenticity, they can create a space in which others can do the same. They don't just push others to be blindly authentic but plan with them to stretch forward, to take calculated risks, while never encouraging someone to push themselves out there before they're ready or put themselves into career peril. They always offer to be present, alongside others, to lend a voice.

They seek as much feedback as they give.

They are aware of, and know how to utilize, their privilege to raise issues, to challenge norms and behaviors, and to root out and prioritize core issues that perpetuate exclusionary dynamics.

They push themselves as much as they push others.

And they do all of this consistently.

Why Does It Matter?

Many talented employees in organizations all over the world tell us through focus groups that they don't feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to work. They are just getting by every day, and they are leaving their true talents and deepest passions elsewhere. In any organization where this is true, you can bet the bottom line is affected.

When people are actively hiding their deepest truths, gifts, unique insights, struggles, and experiences, they aren't able to fully leverage

those same things for their success. Not only does this struggle to fit in lead to diminished performance, but it also saps extra energy that would be better spent working toward helping the company remain nimble and competitive.

The importance of cultivating an inclusive environment where everyone can thrive is only increasing as the world's workforce demographics continue to change. By 2020, Millennials will be more than 50 percent of the workforce. This generation and the generation after them, Generation Z, have little patience for those organizations that don't value diversity. They expect inclusive workplaces. To focus on just two characteristics, they are much more ethnically and racially diverse than previous generations. For example, American Baby Boomers are 75 percent white whereas Millennials are 55.8 percent white. And quite a few states have significantly more racially diverse populations of Millennials, such as California, where less than one third of Millennials are white.¹ With these rapidly shifting demographics, all leaders should take notice of the change on the horizon. When companies and leaders fail to cultivate inclusive environments, employees will vote with their feet, leaving to seek better options where they will be embraced.

With all this in mind, it's perhaps not surprising that two thirds of executives consider diversity and inclusion a rising priority.² But that may not solely be due to the negative repercussions that can occur when you don't prioritize inclusion; there are also many inspiring statistics that *support* inclusion in the workplace. For example, when companies chose to promote their female employees to top management teams between 1992 and 2006, they generated an average of one percent more economic value, which typically translated to over \$40 million.³ Similarly, Fortune 500 companies with at least three directors who are women have seen their return on invested capital increase by at least 66 percent and their sales increase by 42 percent.⁴ And that's just diversity in gender for high-level leaders.

When companies improve their inclusion of other groups, the results are similarly impressive.

For instance, organizations that embrace best practices for employing and supporting more individuals with diverse abilities in their workforce have achieved 28 percent higher revenue, doubled their net income, and earned 30 percent higher profit margins than their peers. (As a leader, you might be interested to know that people of diverse abilities are an untapped talent pool of 10.7 million people.)⁵ Further, companies with the most ethnically diverse executive teams are 33 percent more likely to outperform their peers on profitability.⁶

No matter which industry you're in, being profitable matters. Leaders at every level are expected to model the behaviors and take the actions that support financial success. And, increasingly, core leadership competencies are shifting to prioritize the ability to engage and retain diverse talent, with a focus on making them feel included and supported. The importance of these soft skills has been underestimated in the past, but the world is changing rapidly and leaders need to adapt as these become hard skills that will increasingly be expected, measured, and compensated accordingly.

Your Role

All of the aforementioned data shows we have much at stake in making our workplaces more inclusive and that we need to make a serious course correction. We have the opportunity to build a different future, a better future. We can choose to jump into the river and start swimming, but many of us are lingering on the shore. And yet all of us are needed—to chip in, to contribute, to get involved—not just on paper, registering our good intentions, but doing the actual work of change, especially *within* ourselves, and following a learning path with discipline and commitment. This book provides a structure

for that important path as well as ideas for action steps to take at each stage.

Anyone can (and should) be an inclusive leader. Whether you're a powerful CEO or a brand-new employee who doesn't have any direct reports yet, you can incorporate behaviors and actions into your routine that will help drastically change the day-to-day reality for many of your coworkers. The same is true about your current level of advancement on the topic of inclusion. Whether you consider yourself an advocate or are just dipping a toe in the water and beginning to learn what you don't know, you're in the right place. I wrote this book to equip leaders everywhere who have ever felt uncertain about their next steps when it comes to inclusion with a proven step-by-step process they can put to work right away.

I've always admired Martin Luther King, Jr., and his confidence that the world would become a better—more just—place for us all. I have long considered his words, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice,” as my guiding star, particularly when the tenets of inclusion are being challenged everywhere we look. His words give me hope when I wonder—as others did, then—“How long will it take?” His words assure me that my advocacy is not in vain. But most of all, I don't believe his words condone passivity or inaction, for any of us—or that we are all swept up in a larger momentum over which we have no control. We can't sit back and wait for the arc of history to bend by itself, believing that we are somehow inconsequential, or that we can't have an impact, or that our voices don't matter. And we can't hope for more opportunities, for *all* kinds of talent, to magically appear on their own. We have to do our part, and we still have a long way to go.

If we want a more just world, one in which more vulnerable people are spoken for and supported to succeed and in which the playing field begins to equalize, we need to grasp the urgency of our *own* role and responsibility to bend that arc.

A New Theory of Change: The Inclusive Leader Continuum

After working with countless teams on diversity and inclusion, I started noticing commonalities in leaders' perspectives and learning patterns. The people who were just beginning to understand the importance of inclusion had similar struggles and opportunities. Similarly, the people at the other end of the spectrum—those who had dedicated their careers to becoming advocates for those who are less represented (including themselves, in some cases) also had their own set of struggles and opportunities. Because I had gotten to know so many people on their journey to becoming more inclusive leaders, it seemed natural to develop a multistage model for learners to use to identify their current state—in terms of knowledge and mindset—and most importantly, to anticipate next steps and develop goals for progress *toward* something. As human beings, we need to have at least a sense of what we're shooting for. We may all agree that inclusion seems important, and that we want to be inclusive leaders; each stage in this book makes visible the journey to get there, with its own learning points, opportunities for growth, and actions that will help you start building or activating the muscles that will ultimately help you advance to the next level.

The stages of the Inclusive Leader Continuum, which illustrate how anyone can begin to shift their thinking, gain new perspectives, use their voice, and take meaningful action to create cultures of belonging, are as follows:

UNAWARE When you are in this stage, you don't notice or understand that certain demographic groups, or those with specific backgrounds and experiences, have a much harder time thriving at work. You think diversity is compliance related and simply tolerate it. In this stage, people are disengaged from the

conversation around diversity and inclusion and/or uninterested in it. This resistance may be silent or public.

AWARE You realize the playing field is not level in the workplace or in other group or organizational contexts and that you have been blind in some ways when it comes to inclusion. This stage is about beginning to understand other people's perspectives and stories and working through your own stories and biases.

ACTIVE You are proactively working toward equity and equal opportunities, supporting those with underrepresented or marginalized identities, backgrounds, and experiences. This stage is about pushing outside of your comfort zone, building new muscles, and finding your voice as your inclusive actions become more visible and you shift your priorities.

ADVOCATE You are becoming a voice that is capable of transforming biased systems and sparking meaningful, widespread, and scalable lasting change. This stage is hallmarked by brave public actions that challenge deeply rooted beliefs and practices and taking some calculated personal or professional risk to shift behaviors.

We all currently reside somewhere among these stages when it comes to our general mindset and daily actions, and there are no judgments about where you find yourself today. Some inclusive leaders bloom late in life into the desire to change and grow—maybe thanks to a single point in time or an aha moment, or a series of realizations over time—while others grow up already more attuned to the world around them and the part they have to play. Whether your journey ignites with one moment or takes many years, it begins with a series of important steps.

In addition to residing in one of these stages for our mindset, we revisit each of these stages over and over again when we learn about

demographics and experiences that are new to us. For example, even though it's my job to know about diversity and I'm a woman and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I don't begin to assume advocate-level knowledge of all unique groups of people in the world. So when I broaden my knowledge on, say, military veterans' unique challenges and opportunities when they reenter the civilian workforce, I start back at the beginning of the continuum and make my way forward.

You will have the same experience with the continuum. It's not a linear journey that we travel only once. We travel forward and backwards many times as we learn, make mistakes, and grow. All of this is to be expected. It can help to think of your growth toward becoming an inclusive leader as being like a new habit you want to build, and then grow comfortable with being a bit (or very) uncomfortable along the way.

Visit inclusiveleaderthebook.com to take the How to Be an Inclusive Leader assessment and discover where you currently reside on the continuum, as well as which steps you need to take next in order to move forward.

During this journey, it's essential that we don't become critical of ourselves or others or place judgment based on where people are in the continuum. Instead, let's focus on making progress. Everyone who reads this book will be starting from a different place, and we all have a great deal to learn at every stage. That's why I recommend

reading through each stage in this book, which I've organized into individual chapters, no matter where you think your starting point might be today.

Think of your inclusive leader journey as an investment in yourself and your career stock, no matter what your level in your organization. It is my strong prediction, which is backed up by multiple research and thought leadership organizations, that the mindset and skills needed to be an inclusive leader will be top of mind in nearly every organization as we move deeper into the twenty-first century. Not only is the topic frequently in our headlines with so many institutions grappling with a lack of diversity and so many big names being toppled after they misused their power and privilege, but many organizations are in a panic about recruiting and retaining the best talent from all kinds of backgrounds, because they know their cultures are not supportive of all newcomers and they struggle even with retaining their current employees. As a leader who understands and supports inclusion, you will have the right kind of skills to get the most out of your team, at the very least maintaining your job security through times of great disruption, but I anticipate and am confident that you will discover much more.

Glossary: *Part of being an inclusive leader is understanding key words and concepts, and being able to incorporate this language into your vernacular. I included a glossary in the back of the book to define keywords and concepts. From Chapter One forward, I put these terms in **bold** when I first mention them in the book (with the exception of the different stages of the continuum, which are discussed in detail in this first chapter), and I often provide a short explanation or story to help illustrate their meaning. If you come across a term again later in the book and you want a refresher on the meaning, you can flip to the Glossary and look it up.*

If You Can Get Them, Can You Keep Them?

Forward-thinking leaders know that diversity in their workforce translates into an enhanced ability to build better, more innovative products and services, as well as attract the best and brightest teams. But they also know that hiring certain percentages of diverse talent won't solve all their problems. Bringing more nontraditional candidates in is not the same as being able to keep them, particularly over time; bias still permeates organizations and affects certain employees more profoundly. All talent needs to be supported properly along their career journey or they won't thrive, and this is most true for talent who don't see many, or any, who look like them at the leadership levels. This is a key reason why widespread corporate diversity and inclusion efforts have not resulted in much representational change at the top of organizations. For instance, as I write this only three Fortune 500 CEOs are people of color (the lowest figure since 2002), only one is openly gay (Apple's Tim Cook), and only 4.8 percent are women.

Arguably more attention needs to be directed toward retaining said talent by developing a culture of belonging, where everyone is included, within an organization. If inclusiveness isn't a priority, then discerning employees, only hired to fill a quota or deflect accusations of discrimination, won't thrive or stay for long. An inclusive workplace only happens when leaders agree to take a closer look at themselves, unravel their biases, and do the hard work that's necessary to bring about a fair shot for all.

Before We Embark

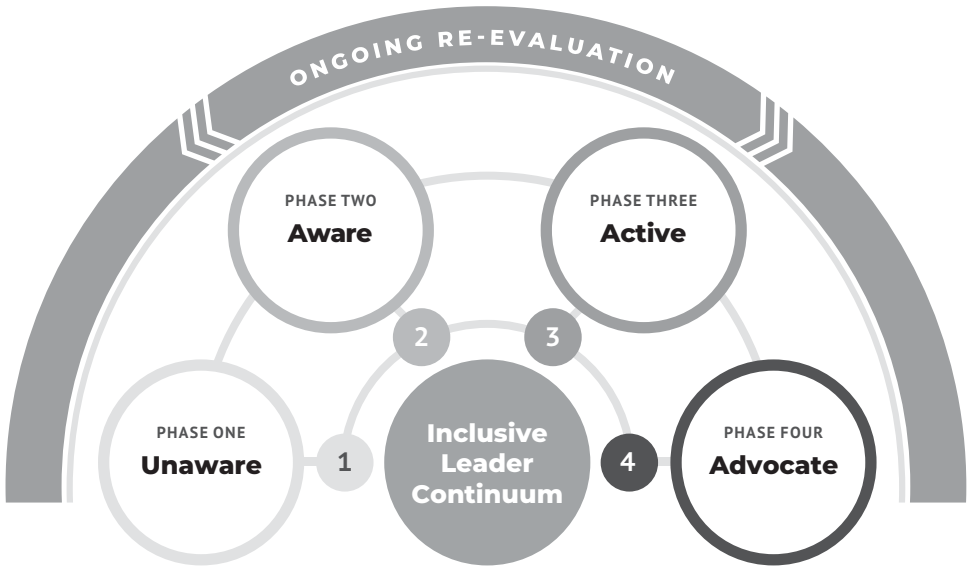
Over many years of supporting diversity networks in companies of all sizes, I have learned that each person is differently affected, through the lens of their particular identity, by what's happening

outside the proverbial four walls of a company. As leaders, it is essential that we understand this context, because it strongly influences what we see in the workplace. I've spoken to people firsthand who don't have the luxury of being able to check that reality at the door when they come to work. These are people who are either overtly or subtly discriminated against—perhaps because of their gender, age, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or socioeconomic status—and who are having a radically different experience at work than those with relatively more privilege or advantage, and they often hide these experiences beneath the surface.

Awake to uncertain tides, some are more on guard than ever, hoping to avoid conflicts with their coworkers. They are distracted, worried, and feel compelled to blend in wherever possible, rather than risk bringing their true selves to work and face being stereotyped, losing trusted relationships, missing out on upcoming promotions, or worse.

Even if inclusion is not top of mind for you, it is worth everything to other people. Compassion and empathy for others' stories and experiences starts with us. We can't outsource the work to others or delegate it to the diversity team or diversity leaders in our organizations. We all have a responsibility to act. I challenge you to humble yourself to all that you don't know and see learning as the opportunity that it is: your access to breakthrough thinking and results. The key thing is to remember to keep moving forward, however incrementally.

The Inclusive Leader Continuum



UNAWARE

You think diversity is compliance-related and simply tolerate it. It's someone else's job—not yours.

AWARE

You are aware that you have a role to play and are educating yourself about how best to move forward.

ACTIVE

You have shifted your priorities and are finding your voice as you begin to take meaningful action in support of others.

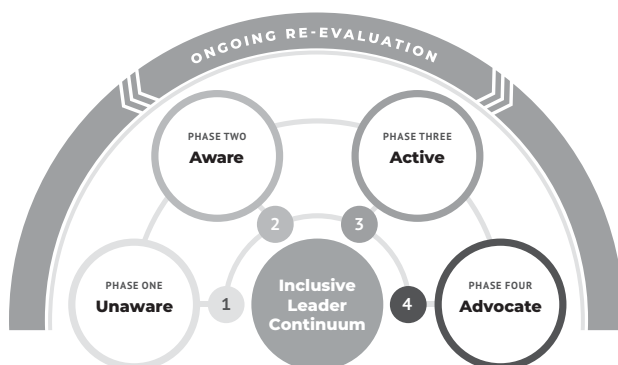
ADVOCATE

You are proactively and consistently confronting discrimination and working to bring about change in order to prevent it on a systemic level.

Private // Low Risk // Individual Perspective

Public // High Risk // Organizational Perspective

To support your learning journey and discover where you are currently on the Inclusive Leader Continuum, take our proprietary online assessment at inclusiveleaderthebook.com.



CHAPTER ONE

Starting Your Journey

You are empowered. If you want to get healthy, you don't wait for someone to hand you vegetables—you get informed, you research nutrition, and you challenge yourself to start exercising! Don't wait for someone to hand you a broader worldview. Go get it.

—LESLIE SLATON BROWN, Chief Diversity Officer, Hewlett-Packard

As you begin turning pages in this book, you will find that I won't always be able to provide simple answers for dealing with complex situations. Each organization is unique, and each diversity dilemma has its own dimensions. What I *do* commit to is giving you a new framework with which to understand yourself as a key player in your company, our society, and in the wider world in this critical moment as we move toward greater and greater diversity. I am going to give you the tools to wield so you can be an active leader

rather than a passive **bystander** and be someone who attempts to make positive change, rather than someone who's at the mercy of the changes happening all around them.

In my bid to simplify a complex topic, reflect what I have observed to be true, and inspire you, the reader, into action, I came up with what is the central architecture of this book—the *Inclusive Leader Continuum*. The more I share it with audiences around the world, the more confirmation I receive of its universal applicability. Everyone can find themselves in it somewhere, often at multiple points, depending on their knowledge about and level of advocacy on behalf of different communities of people.

When it comes to something as multilayered as diversity, none of us is an expert. We can always be doing something more, specifically for communities that need the support of our voice and social or professional **capital**. You will learn more about such opportunities in this book.

*When it comes to something as
multilayered as diversity, none of
us is an expert. We can always be
doing something more.*

The Stages of the Inclusive Leader Continuum

The Inclusive Leader Continuum has four stages, each with a few distinctive characteristics (see Figure 1.1).

Unaware

Everyone has to start somewhere, and the first stage of the journey along the continuum is hallmarked by not knowing much about the issues around inclusion or how inequalities are perpetuated. It's easy

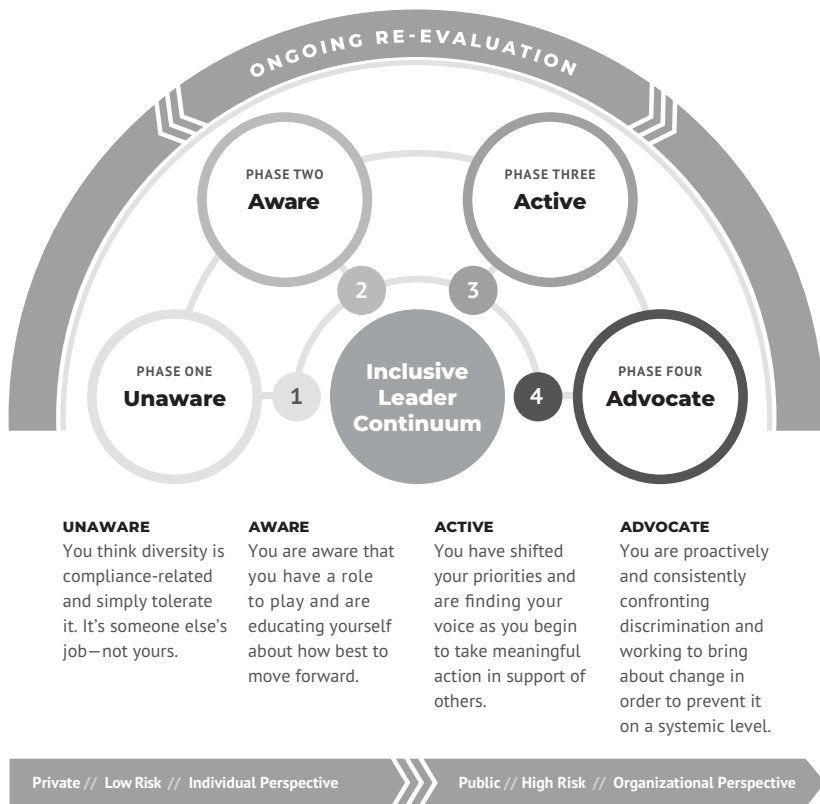


Figure 1.1. The Four Stages of the Continuum

to live in this stage if you're part of a majority demographic and you grew up without being exposed to many different types of people. Inclusion might not seem like a pressing issue because you haven't really experienced the feeling of exclusion.

Many people remain at this stage because they believe they're well-intentioned and that things will just work out. They might believe in their own innate goodness and that their progressive values are obvious to other people, so they don't think they need to say or do anything differently. What they don't realize is that inequalities are so baked in to systems and processes that it takes real effort to disrupt the status quo. They also don't realize that the

benefits of an inclusive workplace often need to be fought for and are worth fighting for; those benefits include better team cohesion, higher productivity and retention and, ultimately, higher profitability.

To work toward equality, many individuals must work together, including those who *haven't* felt excluded in society or the workplace. This stage is about beginning to understand the reality of inequalities in the workplace and the role every inclusive leader should play in making a difference.

Aware

At this stage, you begin to understand how much you don't know and realize you have so much left to learn. This stage is for deep self-reflection and internal dialogue about how your perceived experience does not square with others' world reality. This stage will likely require you to acknowledge your own inner discomforts and the experiences that led you to experience them. In the process, you may realize that you've been making work decisions based almost solely on your own experiences without considering other perspectives. In addition to such overwhelming realizations, this stage may also come with some shame or guilt about missed opportunities. You may come to understand your colleagues' advantages and disadvantages and what has made their lives and career progressions relatively easier or harder. These insights contain clues for action.

At this stage, you reflect on whom you've sought out for support and where you haven't felt supported, and you explore, perhaps for the first time, what kind of support you can give and who is most in need of it. This stage awakens you to your own limitations and advantages and asks that you activate in order to make changes for yourself and your workplace.

Active

What good is knowledge if it's not applied? The choice to become active is the do-or-die moment for anyone aspiring to be an inclusive leader. This is the moment when you sign up to do more, to put yourself into places of discomfort, and to assume a new level of responsibility as a friend, colleague, and especially as a leader. In this stage, you also need to shed unproductive behaviors, mind-sets, and resistance points that have either prevented you from taking action in the past or that continue to distract you and slow you down.

At this stage, you're communicating ideas that are new to you and are trying to find your voice, which can feel awkward. This stage might come with more risk because you are more visibly taking action. As you start to express your own perceptions and try to be more inclusive, things won't always go smoothly. Some people won't agree with your views, and others won't like the way you communicate those views—even if your heart is in the right place. As with anything, humility and resilience are key. If you feel the sting of criticism, don't decide it's easier to watch from the sidelines. Remember, nothing worth fighting for is easy.

Advocate

Once you've exercised your fledgling skills during the Active stage, you are ready for more. Now you can focus on not just who needs support, but also how systems need to evolve to interrupt harmful practices that perpetuate an unequal playing field. In other words, you're committed in word and deed to making your workplace more inclusive.

You may find yourself increasingly ready to be more public with your efforts to be bolder, to challenge others more directly, and to

question systems that so many people have taken for granted. This seemingly fearless stance becomes your new normal. You learn the language of inclusion and get comfortable with knowing you will make mistakes. Others begin to follow along and gain inspiration from you.

You can think of this stage as a natural inclination: when you see something, you say something and you do something. You speak up when you hear inappropriate language or humor. You wonder why the new intern pool isn't more diverse and suggest strategies to change it. You are used to being uncomfortable, routinely, and you can confidently use the tools at your disposal to influence others or gain their support.

I organized this book into chapters that align with this journey. Think of it as a step-by-step guide to become an inclusive leader. However, one of the most important things to remember is that *no one travels along the continuum only once*. You will travel back and forth between stages multiple times, depending on which community or identity you're currently educating yourself about. For example, you may feel confident advocating for the LGBTQ+ community as a whole but still find yourself unaware of the challenges that transgender or non-binary people face. As the saying goes, you don't know what you don't know. That's why I believe all leaders can benefit from returning again and again to the Unaware stage and working their way back through the continuum.

You are apt to find that the stories and examples in the earlier chapters will broaden your thinking and help you gain new perspectives on a range of issues. As you uncover your knowledge gaps and biases and change the way you think about supporting different groups of people, you will move on to the next stage. You may also learn how to better relate to colleagues who are at the beginning of their journeys to becoming inclusive leaders and begin to understand how you might help them advance. Rather than considering

advocacy a destination, it's better to see the continuum as a journey, one on which you try to make progress every day.

Diversity Dimensions

If you've been thinking that inclusion doesn't affect you directly, think again. Most of us have both visible and invisible aspects of diversity, or so-called **diversity dimensions**. These parts of our identity make us who we are. Many people do not feel totally comfortable sharing all these parts of themselves at work, so they downplay who they are in order to belong. This is called **covering**. In a white paper entitled "Uncovering Talent," New York University School of Law Professor Kenji Yoshino and former Deloitte University Leadership Center for Inclusion Managing Principal Christie Smith identify four main categories across which many people feel the need to downplay their identities:¹

APPEARANCE Individuals alter their self-presentation, including grooming, attire, and mannerisms, to blend into the mainstream (for example, a Black woman might straighten her hair to deemphasize her race,² or a Jewish man might go to synagogue in the morning, then take his kippah off when he gets to work).

AFFILIATION Individuals avoid behaviors widely associated with their identity in order to negate stereotypes about that identity (for example, a mother may not talk about her children in case anyone infers she is less committed to her work, or someone older than others in their position might be careful not to mention their age or anything that might date them).

ADVOCACY Individuals avoid specific topics related to their identity so they don't have to defend that particular group (for example, a veteran might not challenge a joke about the military,

or someone of Chinese descent might not correct people if they make comments that use Asian stereotypes).

ASSOCIATION Individuals avoid being around certain others (for example, an LGBTQ+ person may not bring their same-sex partner as a +1 to work functions, or someone who is not a social drinker may not attend the after-work drinks they were invited to by their manager).

According to the white paper, most employees actively downplay one or more identities at work, and those who are less represented in the workforce, particularly at leadership levels, report covering more often. When people don't feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work, there are serious issues for both individuals and organizations. People who are constantly covering can feel isolated and unsupported by their colleagues. Such situations aren't ones in which people do their best work or in which they choose to stay if they have other job options.

*Most employees actively downplay
one or more identities at work.*

I reveal in my keynote speeches how I've become quite good at covering, myself—expending extra energy to manage my more stigmatized identities. I first developed this skill when I came out as a member of the **LGBTQ+** community in my 20s and downplayed this deep personal truth in a series of professional roles, from stage performer to HR professional to entrepreneur. I saw no role models who shared my story (at least, who openly shared it, or who were visible to me). I eventually reached a point of professional status where I found the courage to be my authentic self—most of the time. Owning my own business played a major role in this, since I didn't feel at risk of

being fired or ostracized from my own staff. But I still feel vulnerable when I consult with clients and meet prospects and sense they might hold stereotypes or biases about aspects of my identity.

I am certainly not alone in this experience. Many people are worried about being judged or discriminated against at work if they draw attention to a certain part of their identity, so they never reach the point where they feel comfortable being their whole self at work.

The Tip of the Iceberg

When my consulting company works with clients, we often use the metaphor of an iceberg to explore what it means to cover. Consider Figure 1.2, which shows an iceberg floating in water, with certain diversity dimensions visible above the water and others beneath the waterline.

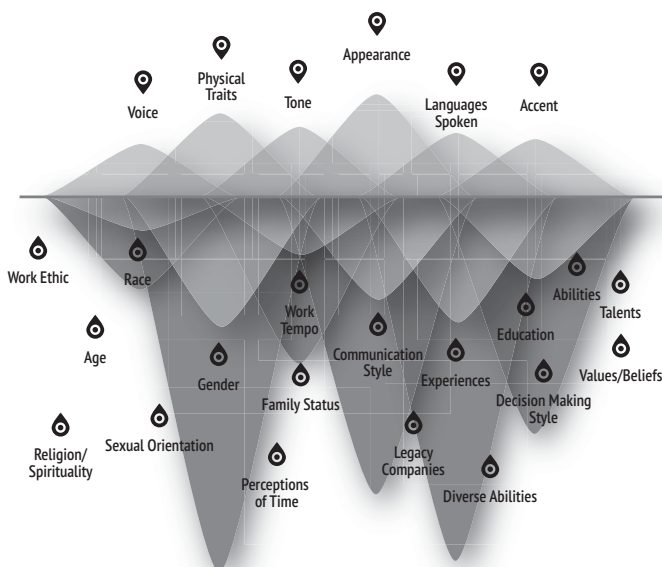


Figure 1.2. The Iceberg

Certain life experiences, like the following, can also play a huge role in our personal identity but remain invisible to our colleagues.

SOME OF THE WAYS PEOPLE COVER³

- I don't talk about my child who has Down Syndrome.
- I don't talk about my children and my spouse.
- I couldn't tell the executive team that I was missing important meetings to take my daughter to appointments during their transition to a man.
- I don't go out to lunch with other people because I don't want them knowing I am a diabetic.
- I go to my AA meetings during lunch and avoid events with drinks at all costs, which makes it seem like I am antisocial.
- My executive team doesn't know I have a child in prison.
- I don't share that my parents are still very poor and live in rural Appalachia.
- I don't tell people that I changed my Russian name to an American name and took classes to remove my accent.
- I take sick days to go to dialysis.
- I have to take personal days for Jewish high holidays.
- I turned down the request to lead the Disability Employee Resource Group as a sponsor because I was afraid people would find out I am bipolar.
- No one knows I have an intense fear of public speaking and I have to take medication every time I speak in front of clients.
- No one knows that I care for my father, who has HIV.
- I "pass" for white so don't keep pictures of my biracial parents at work.

- No one knows that my parents came to this country by crossing the border and that they don't speak English.
- No one knows that I am transgender.

In my company's consulting work, we meet with teams to help them understand how the iceberg metaphor plays out in people's work experiences. During our diversity workshops, we discuss the following questions:

- Which aspects of you float in plain sight for all to see?
- Which do you keep concealed beneath your waterline?
- Where do you set your waterline to feel safe?

Every one of us is so complex that it makes no sense to assume you know who someone is based on what's visible, but people make assumptions about each other nonetheless. Instead, it is immensely helpful to simply be aware that we all have an iceberg where potentially just the tip is showing.

When people meet me or work with me for the first time, they probably assume correctly that they know my race, gender, and generation, but they are likely to misidentify the less observable aspects of who I am, such as my religion, educational background, or sexual orientation. I have passing **privilege**, which means I can allow myself to be mistaken for a straight woman and choose not to bring up the fact that I have a same-sex life partner. Depending on how comfortable I am in my environment, and what behaviors or attributes are valued in my workplace, I may or may not bring up more of what has shaped my work experiences. If I do, that effectively lowers the waterline of my personal diversity iceberg.

Many others carry certain identities and are extremely familiar with this balancing act. National Public Radio began a program within the last few years using a term from linguistics as its title: *Code*

Switch. Linguists typically use **code switching** to mean the instant and frequent switching between two distinct languages, like Spanish and English among many Puerto Rican New Yorkers. But journalist Gene Demby, lead blogger for NPR's *Code Switch* team, says many of us subtly, reflexively change the way we express ourselves all the time. "We're hop-scotching between different cultural and linguistic spaces and different parts of our own identities—sometimes within a single interaction."⁴

Yoshino and Smith's research on covering in the workplace and Demby's explanation of code switching have illuminated the extent to which many individuals feel they don't belong in the workplace. They have internalized messages of exclusion and feel forced to cover and code switch in order to be included.

In exploring your role in this dynamic, you may discover that you are also covering, and that this is affecting your potential. Of course, you don't need to share all the details of your private life at work, but if you anticipate being negatively stereotyped about a certain aspect of your identity, it takes extra effort to adjust how you show up, and this valuable energy could be leaking away from your productivity.

When I'm conducting diversity workshops, I challenge executive leaders in particular to share more of who they are—to get vulnerable. It is especially critical for leaders to do this because thousands of eyes are on them and many decisions about authenticity and bringing one's full self to work can have an impact on whether or not an individual employee, looking upward, sees their story and their background reflected. In one of my workshops, a leader responded to the challenge to stop covering by "coming out" as Jewish to his Christian management team. In another workshop, an executive shared that he didn't have a college degree. Yet another shared that he'd grown up in an abusive and alcoholic family. In an age in which particularly younger talent isn't going to be persuaded to follow senior leaders

based on title alone, it behooves every leader to revisit where they set the waterline on their personal iceberg and to show up more fully and honestly as human beings.

As you work to transform yourself into an inclusive leader, remember that we all know something about diversity through our own experiences, and people around us are covering on a daily basis. When a significant number of people in an organization are not reaching their full potential because they don't feel like they belong or can bring their whole selves to work, everyone is affected.

The Road Ahead

We're at a point in history in which people are increasingly ready to live their truth, both in their personal lives and at work. The myopic leadership and talent management norms that worked in the past will not keep working in the future. The dialogue about the importance of inclusion in our workplaces is accelerating, and people are finding their voices and learning how to use them. Any leader out of step with these developments, who has little curiosity about or commitment to standing up for this conversation, risks their reputation, their credibility, and most importantly, their opportunity to resonate with coworkers in a way that unleashes creativity and results. Companies that have not been prioritizing inclusion won't be able to stay competitive moving forward.

I have talked with thousands of leaders who want to be more inclusive in how they value everyone's voices at the table so they can hear diverse perspectives offered up by those voices. Like it or not, the work begins with you rolling up your sleeves and taking a long, hard look at yourself—your biases, what you say or don't say, how you might resist taking action by deflecting responsibility—before determining how you can do better and how your entire organization might do better. It also requires that you honestly assess how you

show up at work—especially if you have ever felt a compulsion to downplay who you really are in order to belong.

Fortunately, in my work with so many well-meaning leaders, I have noticed a consistent pattern in their journeys from uncertainty to confidence. You can follow a well-trodden path from trepidation to transformational leadership to become the true champion of progress you have always wanted to be. By deciding to read this book, you have demonstrated that you are committed to growth, to pushing yourself, to being uncomfortable with your own limitations and inadequacies, and to opening yourself to the experiences of others—even if there is no fast track to success. And this is the best possible place from which to start your journey as an inclusive leader.

So, let us begin.

About the Author

Jennifer Brown is an award-winning entrepreneur, speaker, diversity and inclusion consultant, and author. Her work in talent management, human capital, and intersectional theory has redefined the boundaries of talent potential and company culture. Her bestselling book, *Inclusion: Diversity, the New Workplace and the Will to Change*, creates the case for leaders to embrace the opportunity that diversity represents, for their own growth and for the success of their organizations.

Jennifer is the host of the popular weekly podcast, *The Will to Change*, which uncovers true stories of diversity and inclusion. The podcast receives thousands of downloads each month and has featured multiple notable guests including New York Times bestselling author Sally Hogshead; ex-NFL player, advisor, and consultant Wade Davis; Priya Parker, facilitator and author of *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*; and theoretical neuroscientist Dr. Vivienne Ming.

As the founder, president, and CEO of Jennifer Brown Consulting (JBC), Jennifer's workplace strategies have been employed by some of the world's biggest companies and nonprofits in order to help employees feel like they belong and can bring their full selves to work. As a successful LGBT entrepreneur, Jennifer has been featured in media such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Harvard Business Review*, *AdWeek*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, *Forbes*, *Inc.*, *CBS*, and many more.

Jennifer has spoken at many top conferences and events such as the International Diversity Forum, the Global D&I Summit, the Forum for Workplace Inclusion, the NGLCC International Business & Leadership Conference, the Out & Equal Workplace Summit, Emerging Women, SHE Summit, Responsive, the Better Man Conference, INBOUND, Interbrand's Best Global Brands event, as well as at organizations such as Allstate, Pepsico, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the NBA, Google, IBM, and many more.

In the past several years, Brown has been named Woman of the Year by Pace University, Social Entrepreneur of the year by the NYC National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO), a finalist for the Wells Fargo Business Owner of the Year Award, a finalist for Ernst & Young's Winning Women Program, one of the Top 40 Outstanding Women by Stonewall Community Foundation, and NYC Controller Bill Thompson's LGBT Business Owner of the Year.

About Jennifer Brown Consulting

Jennifer Brown Consulting (JBC) believes in unleashing the power of human potential, embracing diversity, and helping people—and organizations—thrive. The company is on a mission to set a new tone for business, and the world, and to create a more inclusive reality for generations to come by helping organizations create the type of workplace where people no longer feel pressure to downplay aspects of their identity in order to survive; instead, they begin to feel free to bring their full selves to work and motivated to contribute in a way that fuels bottom-line growth.

As a certified woman- and LGBT-owned strategic leadership and diversity consulting firm, JBC understands how important it is to empower leaders to drive positive organizational change and the future of work in today's rapidly changing business landscape. Based in New York City with a global presence, JBC partners with HR, talent management, diversity and inclusion, and business leadership teams on change management efforts relating to human capital everywhere from North America to Southeast Asia.

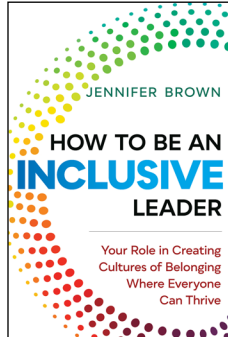
Whether JBC is building classroom training on unconscious bias, setting up a diversity council, leveraging its proprietary ERG Progress ModelSM to transform resource groups into true business

partners, launching an executive learning curriculum, rolling out a diverse talent program for an entire organization, or providing eLearning training, everything is customized to resolve each client's unique challenges.

Past clients include Walmart, Starbucks, Toyota Financial Services, Microsoft, the City of New York, T-Mobile, and many others, from the Fortune 1000 to government agencies and nonprofits.

JBC has worked with clients at all stages of their diversity and inclusion journey. Get in touch today to assess your readiness for change with a free consultation: visit jenniferbrownconsulting.com or email info@jenniferbrownconsulting.com and mention this book.

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from
How to Be an Inclusive Leader.



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