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Expansion: The Missing Link To Sustainable Diversity And Inclusion



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Why do diversity and inclusion initiatives often fall short? Why do some efforts actually increase tension and resistance? How can we prevent “[diversity fatigue](#)” that arises when advocates become burnt out from lack of real change?

Part of the struggle to embrace inclusion is that we human beings are not hardwired for it. We instinctively seek safety, stability, and similarity. We protect ourselves from anything we perceive as a threat - to our beliefs, way of life, or sense of self.

Diversity and inclusion initiatives shake things up, asking people to [recognize biases](#) and become vulnerable. When people perceive such efforts as an inherent threat to their social status or success, they involuntarily become defensive and disengaged.

Moreover, as mobility and technology have given us more opportunities to be exposed to diversity, ironically we are [less empathetic](#). We've become more entrenched in our own views, and gravitate toward those who think, believe, and behave the same way we do.

The missing link to sustainable diversity and inclusion change efforts is [expansion](#).

Expansion is building community across the landscape of our differences. Expansion requires us to explore beyond the comfortable social networks in which we typically reside, where we not only tolerate but actually seek out divergent voices and perspectives, and constantly challenge our own ideologies.

In the dialogues I have facilitated globally on diversity, culture, and identity, I have identified three practices that can encourage expansion.

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1) Embrace multiple realities.

Acknowledge that one's perception of the "truth" is just that: a perception, based on one's lived experiences.

In September 2019, [America in One Room](#) brought together 500 people representing the geographic, demographic, and economic diversity in the United States. Participants engaged in dialogues about polarizing issues like climate change, taxes, healthcare, and foreign policy.

Rather than arguing about who was right on these issues, people opened up and shared personal stories. They disagreed without dehumanizing, listened with compassion, and found common ground. By the end, 95% agreed that they "learned a lot about people very different from me, about what they and their lives are like."

By embracing multiple realities, we recognize that the "whole" truth is a summation of our stories. We're looking at an issue through the lens of our lived experiences.

2) Perspective taking.

In his book, [The War for Kindness](#), [Jamil Zaki](#) says that when you empathize with someone, "you take on their emotions, decode their thoughts, and worry about their welfare." That level of empathy takes immense courage because we must care deeply about the wellbeing of the people we see as the "other."

However, we often find ourselves wanting to "one-up" others when we have stories of being in the "one-down" position. It takes real effort to practice curiosity when we naturally feel compelled to judge, blame, or "what about...?"

In truth, we all have facets of our identity that automatically afford us advantages and disadvantages. Our stories of pain do not preclude any of us from having privilege in certain situations.

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3) Emotional ownership.

Our identity conflicts carry powerful emotions: pride, anger, fear, grief. By verbalizing the emotions that drive our stories, others can connect with us.

In her book, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, Rebecca Traister says anger at injustice is a fuel for social change, but must be contained:

A necessary accelerant, it can drive...noble and difficult crusades. But it is also combustible, explosive.

Emotional ownership requires us to articulate, but also to manage those emotions so they don't cloud our ability to take the perspective of others.

So what does expansion look like in action?

A company I consulted with hired its first female CEO in a [male-dominated industry](#). The men on her leadership team were respectful, yet often skeptical when she pushed for more organizational focus on gender equity.

They argued that the organization was doing great, considering the fact she was there as a sign of sufficient progress. She said:

The other day we went to a meeting with a contractor. He spent the meeting only making eye contact, asking questions, and responding to the men in the room. I was invisible to him, even though I had the most formal authority.

The men on her team looked stunned. Several of them had been at that meeting and admitted they had not noticed this behavior. She replied:

You didn't notice because you've never had to. It hasn't happened to you. To me, it is a daily occurrence.

There was an uncomfortable silence, and then one of the male executives

said:

I want to help change this. What can I do?

The energy in the room shifted from discomfort to collaboration, and the team brainstormed ways to be more intentional about promoting inclusiveness and support for people who often were ignored or discounted based on race, gender, age, and other identity dimensions.

This interaction demonstrates the power of expansion. The CEO was honest and vulnerable about her experience. The men in the room were willing to listen and take her perspective rather than become defensive. The dialogue led to a healthy conversation where the team created norms for adopting inclusive practices.

Expansion is not merely a call for civility, or a yearning for some false narrative of everyone getting along. In fact, expansion calls for dissent and divergent perspectives. Inviting dialogue around uncomfortable topics is the only way to let the light in and create real change.

[Related: [Nine Tips for Succeeding as a Woman in a Male-Dominated World](#)]

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Maria Morukian has sixteen years of experience coaching and training government, nonprofits, and corporations to build thriving organizations and equip leaders with the skills to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion. She is president of MSM Global Consulting, and a faculty member at American University and the Federal Executive Institute.

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