

Simple Doesn't Mean Easy

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Are you the type of person to strike up a conversation with a stranger on an airplane? If so, then I'm not your favorite seatmate. Most often you'll find me head down in my laptop working on an article like this one or preparing content for an upcoming speaking or training program. Recently, however, I found myself deep in conversation with "Roxie", my new 72-year-old acquaintance who has lived her life in a small town in Louisiana and is travelling to see yet another new piece of the American landscape.

We chatted for almost 2 hours, talking about her children, grandchildren, and her adventures. Somewhere in there the conversation turned to me, and my family. I took a long slow deep breath before I dropped in "my wife" as we talked about careers, reminding myself that we were trapped in a tube in the sky, and there wasn't much room for hatred, or discomfort. She didn't skip a beat as she asked if we had children, travelled together very often, and many other questions that didn't differentiate my life from hers. As we parted ways, I hoped I would see her again in the friendly skies and wished her well on her travels. AND, thought about how different the world is today than it was even 5 years ago.

I've been part of the LGBTQ community my whole life. I've experienced discrimination in many ways, including and especially the workplace. In more recent times, I've had lots of conversations about the reasons for affinity groups in organizations, that we are past the need for them and creating an inclusive workplace means not having groups that create alliances. I see all sides of that discussion, and I wonder how we create more inclusion without first creating safety? Safety is critical to enjoy the full compliment of talents your team have.

Think about all the different components of who you are. First you were a child. Perhaps you still are! Remember how safety played a part in your upbringing? You may not have called it that, but I'm sure you knew a time when you didn't feel safe (break the rules, anyone?) and the pit in your stomach that came along with it. Imagine living with that day in and day out. We have many different aspects of who we are, that go with us no matter where we go, or what we do. For instance, parents don't drop that aspect of themselves when they drive to work. Same for aunts, uncles, godparents, grandparents, and any other active affiliation to raising young ones. Other components are religious groups, athletic groups, book groups, LGBTQ, and many others not named here. These natural affinities provide us a safety net of folks like us, a comfortable place to relate, share, and commiserate about those who are different. All the ways we are different.

It's simple really, this whole inclusion conversation. It's about getting past seeing the difference to see the sameness...the human inside all of us. And simple doesn't mean easy. Humans expend a good bit of energy in discernment, in distinguishing ourselves apart from one another. Blue eyes or brown? Blonde or red hair? Those are the easy ones. Smart (which really means as smart as me)? Nicely dressed (do I like your attire)? Personal grooming (beards, tattoos, piercings, what do these mean to me)? These deepen our judgments, which lodge us in separation and eventually create *privilege*. Privilege is defined as a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people.

In the advantage of privilege, we release our empathy, the ability to understand the feelings of others. Now the “separate” feels fine and off we go to function in our lives without knowing we are attending to the difference. We have multiple points of privilege, often overlooking it as it is engrained in us. Hence the significance of having the crucial conversation of inclusion. And, I’m not sure we have that down any more than we have inclusion as a strategy in our organizations. The conversation started in diversity – the difference - many years ago. The discussion has advanced from acknowledging the difference to recognizing the sameness, the inclusion. Organizations have been attending to policies around diversity for a long time now. Policies are a backstop, a landing place for the reaction to non-diverse actions and behaviors. Our opportunity is to change the conversation to focus on inclusion. To approach inclusion proactively and recognize that as leaders we must step up first. That inclusion is a competitive advantage.

Where do you start? Courage. Courage to speak up when conversation creates slights. Courage to address inappropriate comments regardless of title or reporting lines. And courage to advance the conversations at the top of your organization to go beyond policy and begin creating project teams that gather different perspectives, to reward failure by recognizing learning, and by advancing our hiring practices to reach outside the “top tier” schools we’ve focused on in the past. Yes, looking at candidates beyond the schools you’ve focused on for years means opening your eyes to a wider variety of talent and training. Maybe consider the Rooney Rule from the NFL - where every job opening must include at least one African American candidate for all NFL teams. Make your own version of it, include more diversity in your candidate pool by your determination, and then start measuring success of it. It will be easy to measure failure – resist it.

Deloitte studied 1300 employees and this idea of belonging, of feeling included. Eighty percent said inclusion was important. Almost 40% (39%) leave for more inclusion. Twenty three percent already left for more inclusion (30% of that was Millennial in demographic). Here’s the most interesting piece – 71% choose inclusive *behaviors* over inclusive *programs*. We want practice over policy. Get off the backstop. We are good at policy. It’s time for practice.

How do we do this? Understand your culture. Does your organization have diversity and/or inclusion in the core values it espouses? Remember culture is more about what is rewarded than what is said. And, employees consider inclusive behaviors in choosing their employer. Providing training introduces new knowledge and self-awareness, and these are foundational to changing behaviors. The lasting opportunity for inclusion happens in the accountability to these behaviors, and the commitment to champion inclusive behaviors, no matter the courage required. What values are you rewarding? Is one of them inclusion? What conversations are you having with your team, and across your organization to level up the culture to more inclusive? A culture that provides *belonging* to the people who work there.

Have you looked at your personal privilege to up your inclusive leadership skills? Leadership skills begin with self-awareness. Recognizing the privilege you enjoy is a big step toward understanding how that impacts those around you. This understanding leads to acceptance, which opens the door to changing behaviors and appreciating how others without this privilege contribute too. This all leads to effectiveness, a desired measure of success when we push our people to achieve more without more resource. At a time when employee engagement is hovering around 35%, leaders who step into self-awareness open the door for differentiating their organizations and improving the levels of engagement of their staff.

My conversation with Roxie reminded me that anyone can grow in their awareness of our world. We all have opportunities to explore our biases and change our leadership approach to engage our workforce in meaningful and inclusive ways. It really is good business sense and cents.

TO 80%
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For more information and further reading on Diversity and Inclusion, visit our [online library](#).



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Judy understands leadership and teams. And, she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, and finance to help organizations improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

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