



BECOMING AN INCLUSIVE LEADER

Jennifer Brown

Change is hard.

I guarantee it is an uncomfortable and humbling journey to dive in and really understand how radically different many people's experience of the world is. Fear of the unknown—often about backlash and resistance—makes implementing change daunting. Especially when we know little about the topics, are still learning the vocabulary, and sense we will be on the receiving end of criticisms and will be blamed personally for the inequities that are uncovered.

This is hard work—I know this personally. My early days as a DEI practitioner were driven from an activist mindset as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. I came out in my twenties at a time when you could still get fired in the workplace for being gay or experience harassment or violence if you walked down the street with the person you loved. Sadly, this is still the case in far too many parts of the world—even in America. The workplace was broken for me, and I used my voice as a community member to advocate for equity and inclusion. I led with a marginalized mindset and my identities as a woman and member of the LGBTQ+ community. I founded my company with this mindset and committed myself to the role of an advocate and to empowering other marginalized communities.

But as I've progressed through my own journey to become an inclusive leader, I've come to better understand the other identities I hold, those that enable me to function more easily in the world, that provide me with certain advantages that aren't available to many others. When I said earlier that it is a humbling and uncomfortable journey to become an inclusive leader, I meant it personally. When I began to learn more about how the more privileged aspects of my identity afforded me access and platforms not available to many others, I felt guilt and shame and wasn't sure anymore where I fit in the change effort or what my role should be.

But that's the thing about identity. None of us is a monolith. Although I have experienced marginalization as a woman and member of the LGBTQ+ community, I also have positional power and social capital many others lack. I've realized that I share certain identities with many in senior leadership—I am White and cisgender, as well as a member of the generation that tends to dominate leadership ranks today. These elements provide me with some automatic trust and connection in what can be challenging conversations. Because of these shared aspects of identity, I am able to gain access, tap into networks, and leverage contacts to have my message heard at different levels, on different platforms. I realized these were tools I could also wield in the change effort.

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It can be challenging to learn about your identity and grapple with issues related to privilege. It's a complex and loaded topic that can hold people back because they don't know what role they play in the change effort or how and if they should get involved. But leaders have a particularly important role in making change happen.

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A NEW TYPE OF LEADERSHIP IS CALLED FOR

Power and authority are changing fundamentally. Today's workplaces are full of outdated management practices and the very premises around which many leaders have built their careers, and perhaps organized their lives, are being challenged. We're in the midst of a chaotic and uncertain time in which the workplace is literally being reinvented and leaders are being asked to step up in new and different ways. A new type of leadership is called for. Marshall Goldsmith's book title *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* rings true here. It's time to throw out the playbook and correct course.

I believe 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 and respond to the emerging challenges we face as organizations and leaders. Think of your inclusive leader journey as an investment in yourself and your career stock, no matter what your level in your organization. As a leader who deeply understands the challenges we face and the value of inclusion, you will have the right kind of skills to get the most out of your team and navigate through this time of great disruption. But I also anticipate and am confident that you will discover much more.

Inclusive leaders operate on a more personal level, building connections to people at all levels and from all identity groups, to better understand the problems at hand and what's needed to fix them. Those same qualities that were once seen as signs of "weakness" have now emerged as the key attributes of effective leadership. We value and expect leaders who are vulnerable, empathetic, purpose-driven and socially responsible, and who are transparent about their journey.

Inclusive leaders are great leaders in the traditional sense, but they also lead with an additional vigilance, care, and intention. They deeply understand that the status quo only works for certain identity groups and that many people are having very different experiences in society and the workplace. They recognize where and when they can step in and use their voice to address inequities and they endeavor to tackle those inequities at the root. They understand their identities and biases and recognize how they have shaped the way they view the world and the people around them. They take a strong stand against bias and discrimination, even in their most subtle forms.

Inclusive leaders understand the capital they have access to, and they know how to deploy it for the greater good. Inclusive leaders are dedicated to the thriving of others, particularly those who have struggled proportionally more to be heard and valued. They align themselves in solidarity with marginalized groups to amplify the voices and experiences of these groups, and they leverage their power and influence to accelerate the change they seek. Through their intentional and visible commitment to DEI, they are able to instill high levels of trust in their organizations, which in turn drives the followership that is needed to achieve real change. When senior leaders get involved and set clear expectations for equity and inclusion, it can send a ripple effect throughout the organization.

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An important aspect of being an inclusive leader is understanding and internalizing the difference between equality and equity, yet I've observed that many leaders often use the terms interchangeably. Although the two terms sound similar, they mean distinctly different things, and the implementation of one versus the other can lead to dramatically different outcomes for marginalized people.

In reality, equity has become a core pillar of diversity and inclusion. Equality assumes each individual can succeed as long as they are given the same resources, fair treatment, and access to opportunities. In the workplace, equality looks like a one-size-fits-all approach to rules, policies, protocols, and opportunities for all employees. Although at first glance this may seem like a good inclusion strategy, companies often fail to acknowledge that not all employees are starting from the same place, or share the same set of experiences and circumstances, and that the journey is much harder for some people than others. By treating everyone the same, employee-specific needs are not taken into account.

Instead of ignoring or denying differences, we need to acknowledge that we all have identities that impact our experience in the world and in the workplace. We need to recognize the impact of bias, stereotypes, and dominant cultures on people with marginalized identities, not have them swept under the rug by pretending they don't exist. When we recognize that the journey is more arduous for people of certain identities, we begin the real work of challenging systems and building equity.

Equity levels the playing field by recognizing that we don't all start from the same place or need the same things. Equity acknowledges that each employee has different needs and circumstances and ensures that each employee has the specific set of resources and opportunities that they need to succeed in the workplace.

With a mindset toward equity, companies acknowledge specific needs related to demographics such as ethnicity, race, gender and gender identity, disabilities, and more. The needs and struggles faced by certain individuals are taken into account in decision-making and all employees have the support and resources they need to succeed.

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CALL TO ACTION

Our choices right now matter more than ever, for current and future generations. If we don't unpack and process how we are showing up at this moment in time, we will be unable to contribute in all the ways we are capable of—and in all the ways that are sorely needed, now more than ever. As change agents, we all have our best roles to play—our strongest cards. Each of us contains change tools, which include not just what we know, but who we are and how we appear. The question we must ask ourselves is “Am I effectively using everything I have been given to create informed positive change?”

We have much at stake in making our workplaces more equitable and inclusive. We have the opportunity to build a different future, a better future. 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. So I invite and urge you to learn with humility, connect with empathy, share with vulnerability, and lead with courage and resilience. I believe that we each have the capacity to effect change, especially if we've been waiting on the sidelines. Our sphere of influence is bigger than we perceive, and we leave much on the table every day when we don't see our role in driving change. **Let's collectively commit to building a more equitable future together.** 📌

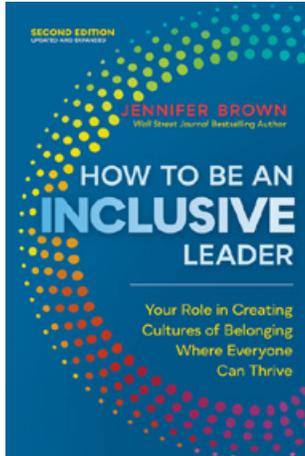
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Brown is an award-winning thought leader, speaker, and author. She has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, and many other publications. Her firm, Jennifer Brown Consulting, is globally renowned for its diversity, equity, and inclusion thought leadership and its expertise in organizational change, partnering with top companies across the world to build an equitable and inclusive future.

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