

# How Sharing Our Stories Builds Inclusion

by Selena Rezvani and Stacey A. Gordon, *Harvard Business Review*, November 2021

***Summary: It's time for the conversation around inclusion and diversity to take a human-centric approach. It's not just about the numbers — it's about the people. Storytelling, one of the most universal human experiences, gives us a rare chance to look through new lenses. And perspective-taking is a life skill, not just a workplace one. Companies that prioritize inclusion will emerge from crisis stronger, and stories are one major vehicle to help them get there. Inclusion consultants Selena Rezvani and Stacey A. Gordon offer steps to implement a story-based approach to DEI where employees are encouraged to tell their stories, own them, and consider how they impact their day-to-day experiences at work***

Conversations around inclusion are on the rise in 2021 following an intense and unprecedented two years. Converging events like the Covid-19 pandemic; the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery; hate crimes against Asian and Jewish communities; and stalled progress among working women are creating an awakening in many organizations. But is this reinvigorated conversation translating to results? What's the actual impact?

As inclusion consultants, we see more and more companies doubling down on diversity metrics like business cases, scorecards, and targets. After all, what matters gets measured, right? These programs track things like workforce demographics, diversity hiring, retention, promotion rates, and utilization of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) resources. While those measures have their place, we've found that they're insufficient to create inclusion on their own. In fact, an overly mathematical approach actually deemphasizes the very thing we hope to build in inclusive workplaces: awareness, connection, empathy, and mutual respect.

In our attempts to create more awake and aware environments, we're forgetting that numbers typically don't inspire us to change our behavior — people and stories do. With our corporate clients, it's the exchange of human experiences via stories, focus groups, and listening sessions that tend to inspire lasting change for people on a personal level.

We can make actual progress on inclusion by implementing a story-based approach where employees are encouraged to tell their stories, own them, and consider how they impact their day-to-day experiences at work.

## **Whose Stories Get Told?**

So now you might be thinking: If we're going to tell more stories, it makes sense to start with leaders, right?

Not necessarily.

One study published in the journal *Academy of Management* revealed that newcomers prefer to hear stories from their peers rather than leaders. If that's true, why do most inclusion programs leave so little space for peers to share their lived experiences?

It's up to leaders to facilitate that sharing. Failure to do so leaves employees, especially women and people of color, feeling unrepresented. One of our clients at a consumer goods company called us because women weren't "raising their hands" for opportunities at the same rate as men. After dozens of one-on-one interviews, we found that women *had* been raising their hands — and were continually being passed over and dismissed. We then facilitated a session with leaders and employees, presenting themes from their interviews. A principal at the company called it the most raw, honest dialogue they'd experienced in years, thanks to the unfiltered stories and voices of employees.

When people hear stories that feel representative, it creates a vehicle for nuanced conversations, which are what truly drive change. Stories invite perspective-taking: the concept of standing in someone else's shoes and imagining what it's like to be them. It's a drastically underutilized inclusion tool. One study found that taking the perspective of others "may have a lasting positive effect on diversity-related outcomes by increasing individuals' internal motivation to respond without prejudice."

One CEO we worked with in the entertainment industry didn't really understand what ERGs (employee resource groups) are or why the company needed them. Still, he signed off on starting them and even allocated some budget for them. He was skeptical and didn't see the point *until* he attended one of the events held by the LGBTQ ERG and heard, through stories, how bias affected those employees. Later, he heard how much happier they were at work once they began feeling as though they belonged, and they began working on ways to improve the company — not just for LGBTQ employees, but for everyone.

## **Look in the Mirror**

Because traditional DEI programs can make things too abstract and overlook the fact that DEI is about the people, we tell all leaders — even cisgender, white, heterosexual men — to first look in the mirror and examine their own diversity stories. Doing this work helps leaders understand and empathize with the narratives shared by others. Once they uncover their own stories, they may be invited (and expected) to share their own — in addition to, not over and above, the stories of individual contributors.

People crave authenticity, texture, and transparency in leaders. They don't want the diluted, "professional" version of who you are. There's a false narrative that our unique and personal backgrounds are somehow unprofessional and should never be addressed at work. But, regardless of whether we ignore them or bring them to the fore, they shape the way we interact with others in every situation — nobody is ever fully objective. Bringing our own stories to the table helps us create contrast with others and better see the nuance in ours and their perspectives.

If you feel stuck or unsure of how to dig into your own diversity story, here are few prompts to get you started:

- When did your privilege afford you different treatment than someone else?
- When did someone advocate for you? (Did someone with privilege help you?)
- Did you ever need to search to find your own sense of belonging?
- When did you discover a bias/privilege you had and how did you overcome it?
- Have you ever felt pressure to conform or fit in?
- Did you ever witness an unconscious bias play out in the workplace?

Here's what we learned from this exercise ourselves:

Selena: As a biracial person, I dismissed and minimized my personal diversity stories for so long. I'm half-Pakistani and brown-presenting — and also half-Caucasian and at times white-passing. Being mixed can make you feel like you don't belong anywhere. Once I finally told my story about the contrasts that I experience being multiethnic, I felt a sense of freedom that allowed me to connect with others — even clients — more deeply and authentically.

Stacey: As a Black person in a white world, growing up as one of very few Black children in my school, I never felt that I fit in. I thought that would change when I moved to Brooklyn, New York, but surprisingly, it didn't. Because once I arrived, I realized everyone saw me as "the British girl." It took years to embrace my nontraditional culture, but owning my background helped me gain that sense of belonging, and now I use that journey to help our clients do the same.

More than 500 professionals responded to our organization's [DEI Blueprint survey](#), and only 4% of respondents were able to answer in the affirmative that "Our leadership is aligned on the commitment to diversity and inclusion in the organization." How can leaders show up and tell their stories if there's no alignment on the importance of DEI? That's a gaping disconnect, and a *big* problem. It means the stories we hear from them are often watered down and unrelatable. They don't serve a purpose, they're just lip service, and they don't help people see the leader's humanity.

So, what's a leader to do?

Share! Share your story as authentically as possible. Share how it made you feel. Share the mistakes you've made. Be honest.

### **Create Space for Storytelling**

The best way to create a cascading inclusion effect in an organization is to offer safe spaces where stories can be heard without judgment. This works best when psychological safety is being actively cultivated. There is a natural give and take to storytelling — a vulnerability that comes with sharing — and an instinct to reciprocate. That means that in the most psychologically safe workplaces, people aren't *required* to

share, but they're *safe* to share. The vulnerability employees are placing in leaders' hands has to be cared for by the organization. To encourage team members to talk regularly about their diversity stories, consider the following actions:

- Do a round-robin question in a meeting
- Hold listening sessions
- Host discussion-heavy book clubs
- Schedule storytelling town halls
- Include stories in blogs, videos, celebrations, promotions, and onboarding
- Be transparent about surveys and focus groups that show negative perceptions and harmful treatment
- Have social forums and meetups
- Develop dynamic social media campaigns that share stories

Many people may be walking around with powerful experiences but don't see them as "good stories." Reassure them that their stories don't need to be perfect, they just need to be *real*.

As you open up forums for your team, encourage people to tell their stories in their own words by:

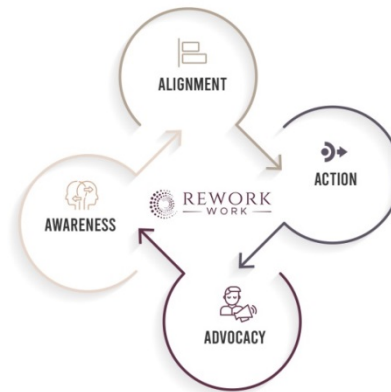
- **Bringing a beginner's mindset.** Let go of what you *think* you know so you can actively listen to what is being said.
- **Receiving diversity stories with empathy and warmth.** Affirm the stories you hear, even if you don't relate or completely understand how a person feels. If someone is emotional or uncomfortable, affirm that you're there to support them.
- **Not asking storytellers to "over-verify."** After someone is done sharing, even if you have questions, don't challenge or ask people to give evidence for their stories. If you do have questions, ask them directly if you can pose a follow-up question about their experience when they're done.
- **Thanking people for sharing.** It's important to let people know that you hear them and you appreciate them sharing.
- **Checking in about continually improving safe spaces.** As more storytelling forums take place, check in with people. Ask if they feel you've created a space where people can tell their stories and be heard.

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- **Selena Rezvani** consults with employers on how to make work truly "work" for women — through cultural diagnostics, focus groups, and by implementing cutting-edge inclusion programs. Selena is the author of two leadership books, *Pushback: How Smart Women Ask—and Stand Up—for What They Want* and *The Next Generation of Women Leaders*. In 2019, Selena's TEDx talk, "Interrupting Gender Bias Through Meeting Culture," was recognized with the Croly Journalism award. To learn more, visit [www.selenarezvani.com](http://www.selenarezvani.com).

- **Stacey A. Gordon** is executive advisor and diversity strategist of Rework Work, where she and her team coach and counsel executive leaders on DEI strategies for the business, while offering a no-nonsense approach to unconscious bias education for the broader employee population. Stacey's unconscious bias course is number 1 on the LinkedIn Learning platform and has been translated into at least four languages. You can find Stacey's book, UNBIAS: Addressing Unconscious Bias at Work, wherever books are sold.

<https://www.reworkwork.com/about-us/workplace-assessment/>



- THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO TAKE OUR DIVERSITY EQUITY AND INCLUSION (DEI) WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT.
- This is a tool for you to assess your company's journey along the path to creating a sustainable inclusive workplace.
- You are already taking the first step to becoming an inclusive leader by seeking resources to support your workplace as you foster inclusion, not as a checkbox activity, but as the beginning of awareness as you move towards advocacy.
- Based on our extensive experience working with thousands of employees at companies around the globe, we believe the categories and statements you will encounter, collectively characterize behaviors of inclusive leadership and the cultivation of an inclusive workplace culture.
- Please take your time to consider each assessment statement and respond as it relates to your workplace culture. This tool was made for you to be honest about where your workplace is today and where you would like to be in the future. There is also space for personal reflection as you move from awareness to action.
- Your responses to the DEI workplace assessment will generate feedback indicating where you appear to fall on the Rework Work Unbias™ Blueprint and provide suggestions for advancing your workplace to the next level.
  - Take the assessment

