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HOW TO BE AN
INCLUSIVE
LEADER

Your Role in Creating Cultures of Belonging Where Everyone Can Thrive

Introduction

*Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed
until it is faced.*

—JAMES BALDWIN

There is a sea change underway. When I wrote the first edition of
this book, organizations and their leaders were already navigating
through a period of dramatic change. Globalization, population
shifts, the climate crisis, advances in technology, political divides,
and a range of other societal issues were spilling over into the work-
force, creating new and unprecedented challenges for leaders. Since
then, the rate of change has only accelerated.

The global pandemic made permanent dramatic shifts to the
way that work is done. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the
social movements that followed put a spotlight on the harsh reality
that too many people in the United States continue to experience
discrimination, racism, and violence. But it also served as a call to
action, with millions of Americans marching, advocating, rallying,
and organizing to put an end to centuries of systemic inequity.

The stakes for transformative conversations about diversity,
equity, and inclusion (DEI) could not be higher. The wealth gap in the
United States is the greatest it has ever been. Representation is still

sorely lacking in boardrooms and at senior levels across every indus-try sector. Women and people of color are disproportionately overrep-resented in low-skill, low-wage occupations, and disproportionately underrepresented in high-skill, high-wage jobs. Pay inequities, low wages, and lack of benefits continue to characterize many jobs in the nation's labor force. These are hard truths, and they have an impact on generations, communities, society, and the economy overall.

The growing transparency about inequities in the workplace has been a wakeup call for many organizations and leaders.

We're at a point in history in which people are finding their voices and using them to apply pressure on those organizations and leaders who are lagging behind social and demographic changes. The demand for equity is growing louder by the day. Today, employees expect com-panies to create value for all stakeholders—customers, communities, society—not just shareholders. Incoming generations of employees in particular crave purpose in their jobs. They are concerned with community, social responsibility, and the environment, and they look for a business purpose that aligns with those concerns. Custom-ers are more discerning; they pay attention to business dealings, cor-porate ethics, how companies treat their people, and what they do for communities. If we want to resonate with the external consumer market as organizations, we must reflect those markets internally, both in our values and the representation in our workforce.

In this fast-changing world and marketplace, there really is no room for complacency. Our workplaces must evolve to center the

individual and create cultures that accept, support, and respect differences and policies and practices that promote DEI.

In working with organizations and leaders during this period of massive transformation, I have found that the lessons of inclusive leadership are more relevant than ever. I originally revisited the first edition of the book with the goal of making the book more actionable and aligned with the shifts that need to happen in organizations in the current times. However, I found that once I started making updates, it was hard to stop. But I'm proud that the second edition of this book has evolved in ways that will help leaders and organizations respond to the changes unfolding around us in relevant, culturally competent ways and take action to address systemic inequities that persist in the workplace.

I believe we can and must do better. The inequity gaps we see today are a result of systemic failures that haven't been openly challenged and addressed. The root causes behind a lack of progress are almost always a lack of organizational understanding when it comes to what the issues are and a lack of courage on the part of senior leaders to take action and step into the role of advocate and activist on behalf of employees and the greater societal good.

As leaders, if we are ever to reach our full potential as employers and corporate citizens, we must consciously choose to take action. We must understand how inequities are manifested and exacerbated by institutions, workplaces, and social systems. We must uncover our prejudices and biases and take a hard look at ourselves and our participation in and perpetuation of inequitable systems.

Persisting Even When It's Challenging

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. 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 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.

As I've come to realize the potential—and impact—of all of my identities, my definition of doing enough has changed dramatically.

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. To provide guidance and direction, I added a new chapter that delves deep into the role identity and privilege play in propelling change. I like to think of the chapter as a call-in to those leaders who are still on the sidelines.

My goal for this book is to help you grow your capacity to contribute to positive change and a more equitable and inclusive future. 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.

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.

> *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.*

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 by nature 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.

Inclusive leaders understand that the status quo only works for certain identity groups and that people are having radically different experiences in society and the workplace.

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 seem similar, they mean distinctly different things, and the implementation of one versus the other can lead to dramatically different outcomes for marginalized people. In this second edition, I have intentionally prioritized the concept of equity and its role in the change effort. In reality, equity has become a core pillar of diversity and inclusion.

Equality assumes that 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.

Many of us were taught not to see or remark on differences. The statement "I don't see color" is an example of this. 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.

Becoming an inclusive leader requires learning, reflection, and changing old habits and mindsets. But I believe that no matter whether you already consider yourself an advocate for diversifying the teams, communities, and workplaces in your life, or whether you 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 help you progress to become a more inclusive leader.

A New Theory of Change: The Inclusive Leader Continuum

Over years of doing DEI work with countless organizations and leaders, 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.

In the book, I use the Inclusive Leader Continuum as a four-stage framework to help individuals at all levels locate themselves and progress forward in their journeys to become inclusive leaders. I am so proud that the Continuum has enabled so many to ground themselves in their learning journeys and has given them a common structure and language to not only share about those journeys, but to get and give support to others along their way. This is not work we undertake alone.

The four stages of the Continuum are the same four stages in this second edition of the book as they were in the first. To make your journey more actionable, in this second edition, I have created a new structure for each of the stages, added new stories, and shared new tips. In addition, I have provided Discussion Guides for each of the four stages.

Here are the four stages:

UNAWARE   In the Unaware stage, you learn more about the experiences and challenges that people with other identities face. You educate yourself about the concept of bias and begin to examine your own biases and how they impact your perceptions of the world and the people around you. You embrace humility and acknowledge what you don't know.

AWARE   In the Aware stage, you learn more about the concept of privilege and understand better that the playing field is not level for everyone. You educate yourself about your own identities and those of other people and how our identities shape the way we experience the world around us. As you learn more about different lived experiences, you develop empathy and are motivated to contribute to the change effort.

ACTIVE   In the Active stage, you put your learning into action. You take risks in the interests of positive change and embrace a

mindset of failing forward. You allow yourself to be vulnerable. You share your story and seek out the stories of other people. You lead and participate in difficult and uncomfortable conversations as learning opportunities. You dive deeper into DEI and get personally involved.

ADVOCATE In the Advocate stage, you leverage your power and influence to propel change. You draw attention to systemic inequities and get involved in solving them. You work in allyship with others to shift systems and behaviors and take action to disrupt the status quo. You exhibit resilience when you encounter resistance and continue to move forward even when it means breaking away from old norms and groups.

During this journey, it's essential that you don't become critical of yourself or others or place judgment based on where people are in the Continuum. Instead, the goal is to 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 no matter where you think your starting point might be.

It's also important to point out that the four stages of the Continuum are not presented as pejorative or value judgments, but rather neutrally, in a circular versus linear shape. The iterative nature of the model is important to me because there is so much to learn, and language and context are always evolving.

Sometimes we leap forward, and have great success, and sometimes we step back and regroup, recognizing how little we know.

We all reside somewhere among the four 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, the important thing is that you've started.

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 DEI 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 backward 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 a new habit and mindset you want to build. The good news is, there isn't a wrong starting point if your intent is to grow.

To get a sense of where you are at this moment, please consider pausing and taking our Inclusive Leader Assessment before you proceed; it will give you a starting point from which to begin to observe your own learning journey in action.

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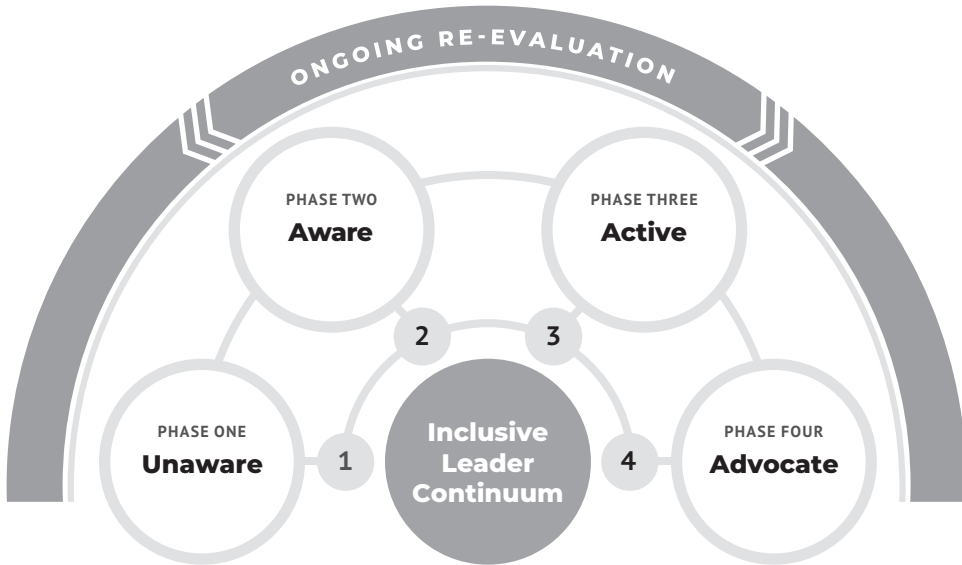
Call to Action

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.

The Inclusive Leader Continuum

ONGOING RE-EVALUATION

PHASE TWO
Aware

PHASE THREE
Active

2

3

PHASE ONE
Unaware

1

Inclusive Leader Continuum

4

PHASE FOUR
Advocate

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 inequities and 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.
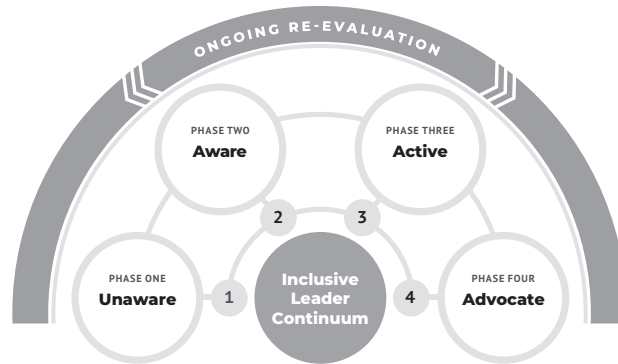
CHAPTER ONE

Finding Your Role as an Inclusive Leader

Every society has its protectors of status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions. Today, our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Over the past several decades, companies have invested heavily in DEI programs and initiatives. Yet most programs that exist today are still focused on compliance and performative actions, are siloed in HR departments, and lack the commitment and involvement of senior leaders. Few are designed to shift systems or address the patterns of

exclusion, oppression, and disadvantage underrepresented and marginalized groups continue to face in the workplace.

To build a more inclusive and equitable future, leaders in positions of power and influence must play an active role in disrupting the status quo. The hard truth is that, with a labor market that's becoming more competitive and more diverse, leaders who aren't making an effort to become more inclusive, accountable, and equity minded will be left behind. Yet I have found that most leaders are still holding back.

In my twenty years of DEI work, I often encounter three types of leaders. I have worked with some leaders who really get it, who grasp the extent to which the playing field is not equal, and who understand that they have a role in fixing that. They lead with purpose and are on the front lines of challenging inequities and changing systems. When we work with leaders like this, we can dig in and get right to work.

Then there are other leaders who have awakened to the realities of the world around them but are reluctant to get involved. Many don't do anything because they're afraid of making a mistake, of getting it wrong. This is new territory, and they don't feel like they have the right words or vocabulary to step into the conversation. They are not even sure if they are welcome. So they stay on the sidelines and their lack of action maintains and protects the status quo.

And there are still too many leaders who just don't understand the depth and impact of the inequities that surround them. They don't see what any of it has to do with them. With these leaders, I can't count how many times deflections fill the room when I start to talk about DEI and why it matters. These are just a few that are verbalized:

- People need to stop being so sensitive.
- I'm buried—I don't have time to prioritize this work.
- I prefer to see past race and gender—we're all just people.

- We did unconscious bias training, so I don't think we have any major issues here.

- Are you suggesting we should have quotas?

I think of these as deflections because they aren't genuine curiosities about the way forward; they are barriers and distractions that are often raised to obscure or delay responsible action. But being unwilling to look clear-eyed at the dramatic changes around us—in our colleagues, in our professional landscape, in global markets—is a classic tactic of avoidance.

Don't get me wrong—I don't think of these types of leaders as bad people. But I *do* think many people who are in leadership roles probably have no idea what many of their colleagues are going through at work since the experience is likely vastly different from their own reality. And because they don't understand the problems people with other identities experience, they aren't able to take the brave and necessary leadership actions needed.

When the world around us looks like us and is designed to work for us, it can be hard to grasp the extent to which the playing field is skewed in our favor. For those who have more privileged backgrounds, it can be easy to dismiss or downplay the experiences and outcomes of people who've been historically marginalized and underrepresented in a given system. The truth is, privilege can be invisible to those of us who have it.

The reality is that biases and inequities have permeated just about every aspect of the professional world, from decades (if not centuries) of pattern build-up. This is not a problem that will just go away if we all think good thoughts or avoid facing the truth about the systems around us. As the ground rapidly shifts under our feet, our inability to see the once-in-a-generation opportunity for change is a liability for all of us. Our future impact—and legacy—depend on how we step up during this moment.

*Our inability to see this
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all of us.*

The unwillingness to look at what needs to change and how we as leaders can contribute is a missed opportunity to evolve, to transform, and to equip ourselves to build something that works for more of us—and that will benefit *all* of us.

Unfortunately, no business strategy, including DEI, will deliver optimal results if individuals with power and influence are disconnected from that strategy. If the very people who are in the position to make change happen are unaware there's a problem, in denial that inequities exist, or throwing their hands up about the supposed complexity—or cost—of fixing the problem, we will never scratch the surface of what's possible.

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

I have always found this quote by MLK inspirational. In the midst of confusion, overwhelm, and uncertainty about our increasingly chaotic world, it gives me hope that an inevitable shift toward a more just world is possible, where all people are treated equitably and respectfully. But most of all, I don't believe his words condone passivity or inaction, for any of us.

It used to be enough for me to take solace in MLK's words, but because I've been focused on building more inclusive workplaces now for nearly two decades, I've come to realize a hard fact: just a relative few of us are doing the lion's share of the work to bend the arc.

The pressing question this leaves us with is, who's missing from the change team, and why?

Historically, DEI programs have been centered around the needs of marginalized and underrepresented employees and addressing the barriers and inequities these groups experience. Although unintended, the impact of this focus has distanced many people in leadership positions from understanding their potential contribution and role in DEI efforts.

For the most part, it is members of marginalized communities who take up the mantle to do the work of challenging discriminatory practices and systems. But every time we automatically turn to the woman, the Black or Brown leader, the person with a disability, or any other individual belonging to a marginalized community to take responsibility for identifying and addressing organizational inequities, we are abdicating our own role and responsibility. This needs to change.

Each of us must begin to take responsibility for the roles that we can play, especially if we hold positions of privilege, power, and influence but have been passive or inactive. We may not have been directly affected by inequities; we might feel it's not our fight. But this in itself is a privilege: to have the choice to remain on the sidelines in the fight for equity while others struggle.

The ability and choice to remain on the sidelines is a privilege available to some—not all.

Whenever my company begins work on an organization's DEI strategy, we recommend involving top leaders. When it comes to disrupting the status quo and creating equity in the workplace, much

power lies with leaders who set the standards and tone for everything from who gets hired and who advances to what the workplace culture looks like. We understand that without their buy-in and personal involvement, our efforts will have more limited impact and will be more difficult to sustain. The reality is, leaders are an influential employee group in the workforce to drive real change.

As leaders, we can't sit back and wait for the arc of history to bend by itself or keep expecting others to put their shoulders to the wheel. If we want a more just world, one in which the playing field begins to equalize, we need to grasp the urgency of our own role and responsibility to bend the arc. We have to do our part, and we still have a long way to go.

Finding Your Way into the Conversation

Privilege is not in and of itself bad; what matters is what we do with privilege. We have to share our resources and take direction about how to use our privilege in ways that empower those who lack it.
    —AUTHOR AND ACTIVIST GLORIA JEAN WATKINS (PEN NAME BELL HOOKS)

The greatest opportunity of inclusive leadership is being able to interrogate ourselves about the role we play in the systems around us and how we can affect positive change in those systems. Yet, when it comes to addressing systemic inequities, it is almost always a lack of understanding on the part of leaders about what the issues are, what role they should play in resolving those issues, and how they get started that is holding them back.

One way to get started is to do your homework to learn more about the privilege you hold and to understand better how your privileges may contribute—even unintentionally—to discrimination, inequity, and exclusion. As you learn more about your privileges, you

will come to recognize what parts of your world, your workplaces, and your communities work *for you* and are, indeed, optimized for you. You develop an awareness that the same system can be experienced completely differently by different people. The fundamental question about privilege is this: *How much of my world was built with me in mind?*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw the answers to that question play out before us. Asian communities were "othered" during the pandemic and scapegoated for the virus merely because they looked like the people from the part of the world where it was first reported. Hate crimes against the community increased significantly throughout the pandemic across the world. But the Asian American community has always experienced inequities, exclusion, violence, and dehumanization. Historically, anti-Asian racism predictably increased during times of war, economic declines, and disease. These are hard truths.

As the pandemic wore on, Black and Hispanic communities were hit the hardest. They were overrepresented in low-paying jobs that were less likely to provide health coverage or paid time off. They got sick and died at higher rates. They disproportionately held front line jobs with high levels of public contact that put them at greater risk of contracting the virus while others with more privileged identities had the opportunity to safely shelter in place. These types of disparities didn't happen overnight in the face of a pandemic. They have always been with us and are deeply embedded in systems and structures around us.

The pandemic was also devastating for women, with caregiving demands driving millions from their jobs. Yet women were paying a price for caregiving even before the pandemic. The advancement of women has always been hampered by workplace policies that fail to support work-life balance; the pandemic merely brought into focus the disproportionate burden women carry when it comes to

caregiving and the cost of that burden to their careers. Despite the overwhelming evidence and research about the impact of caregiving on women, most companies continue to fail to prioritize their needs.

*As the pandemic made
so very clear, we may all weather
the same storm, but we are
in very different boats.*

Privilege is a fundamentally loaded topic, and for those of us with privileged identities, it can be difficult to talk about. In working with senior leaders over the years, I have noticed that many of them are uncomfortable with the concept of privilege, don't know how to deploy their privileges for systems change, or are ashamed of the personal advantages that privilege offers them.

Many of us assume that by admitting our privileges, we somehow invalidate how hard we have worked. We may assume that the label *privileged* implies we don't deserve to have what we have, or it infers that we have never experienced hardship. Having privilege does not mean that an individual is immune to life's hardships. But it does mean having an unearned benefit or advantage by nature of one's identity.

I have struggled with the concept of privilege personally. In many ways, people view me as the kind of person unlikely to experience any challenges with inequity. After all, I am White, cisgender, and able-bodied. I have other invisible privileges: 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. I had access to a quality education and the opportunity to go to the college of my choice. These aspects of my identity have enabled me to function more easily in the world, more safely,

with more automatic—and often unearned—protections. They are the invisible, silent tailwinds that speed me along just that much more quickly.

I have also come to understand that my privilege is about what I did *not* have to experience, the ways in which I don't struggle on a daily basis—the ways in which I'm safer, more protected, more shielded from the harsh realities of bias, exclusion, and violence.

Privilege is also the way
in which we didn't—and
don't—have to struggle.

Yet, for most of my adult life, I have also identified with and led from a mindset of marginalization as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and as a woman, each of which can be detrimental in the business world. 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. Unfortunately, this is still the case.

Anxiety about my identities in the workplace often dominated my thoughts. I had a pervasive fear that if people knew the real me, it would hurt my relationships and my reputation. So, for a long time, I hid the parts of me that I feared would be rejected. I avoided sharing personal stories. I felt like an outsider at work.

As someone with a foot in several worlds of identity-based privileges as well as identity-based disadvantages, for decades I have been on my own journey of endeavoring to feel seen, heard, and valued, while at the same time grappling with how I can use my privilege and influence to drive equity and inclusion for others.

Privilege is not an absolute. It can coexist alongside identities that leave us feeling marginalized and disadvantaged.

Rather than feeling confused, frozen, or disconnected from the fight for equity, or ashamed of my place of privilege in many systems, I realized it's more important to understand what I *can* do, to learn more about the role I *can* play. For those of us who routinely benefit from privilege, the challenges are to acknowledge its existence, to make it visible to ourselves, and to leverage the advantages it confers.

I believe it is time to reframe the concept of privilege in a way that doesn't cause defensiveness, or fear, or keep us frozen in place but rather feels like something we can acknowledge, own, and activate.

All too often, I've observed that the concept of privilege is employed to *call out* or otherwise criticize and dismiss the potential contributions of people with privileged identities. I believe this is holding us back. Although it is critical for people belonging to dominant groups to understand the advantages their identities confer—and how people with other identities aren't afforded those same advantages—if we are only calling them out for being part of the problem, we are alienating them from getting involved in solving those same problems.

I'm not discouraging anyone from calling out individual harmful behaviors and microaggressions, but when we call out and dismiss entire groups of people only because of their privileged identities, we may inadvertently be distancing them from getting involved and using their power and influence for the greater good.

I encourage each of us to practice *calling in* behavior to invite people of all identities, including those with privileged identities, to take a seat at the table. Calling in creates the space for individuals

to take responsibility, to learn more, and to do better. We will never build momentum to create meaningful change if we continue to work in isolation or as adversaries. We need to learn how to work in partnership and in solidarity.

Getting Off the Sidelines

Change will not come if we wait for some other person or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.

<div align="right">—FORMER PRESIDENT OBAMA</div>

There is no such thing as the perfect time or the right way to do this work. The time is now, and these conversations are already underway. It's incumbent on those of us whose identities make us insiders in a system to go first. The only choice we have is to step up and show up, however imperfectly—to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. If you aren't pushing yourself to do more and pushing others around you to improve too, chances are, you aren't really leading.

Being an inclusive leader starts with a spark to do better. That spark lives inside all of us, almost like a pilot light. It's always there, ready and waiting to create a bigger flame. Inclusive leaders have that spark. They have a genuine desire to make the world a better place. They are aware of, and know how to utilize, their power and 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.

When you have that spark, you start to see all the opportunities to better support others unfold. You want to *do* more. To learn, to grow, and to contribute. To challenge the status quo and participate in creating lasting change. To fulfill your potential as a person and as a leader. To leave things better than you found them.

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.

But to ignite that light, you must uncover your biases and learn to manage them. You must own your privileges and the advantages they have afforded you and acknowledge that it is not an equal playing field for many around you. This can be an uncomfortable and humbling journey of self-discovery that's not always easy.

Leadership is not leadership
unless it's uncomfortable.

I deeply believe that each of us has the capacity to affect meaningful change. The question is, can you ignite your *will* to change?

This book lays out a step-by-step process to becoming a more inclusive leader, to finding your role and voice in affecting societal and workplace change. By deciding to read this book, you have demonstrated that you are already committed to growth, to pushing yourself, to being uncomfortable with your own limitations and inadequacies, and to opening yourself to the identities and experiences of others.

The road of inclusive leadership is a very personal one. As you dive into the four stages of the Inclusive Leader Continuum, I urge you to push yourself. To examine not only your own actions but also the ways that your inaction can create a safe space for broken systems to continue unchecked.

As leaders, our sphere of influence is bigger than we perceive, and we squander the resources we have access to every day we remain inactive and uninvolved. So, let's get started.

Chapter Discussion Guide

What You Can Do

- Learn more about the concept of privilege and how it personally advantages and disadvantages you and how that may be different for other groups of people.

- When thinking about the privileges you hold, what emotions come up for you? Why do you think that is? Are these emotions holding you back from activating your power and influence in the change effort?

- If you haven't gotten involved in your organization's DEI efforts, reflect on what's holding you back and start to think about what role you can play.

Conversation Starters

- Discuss the concept of privilege as a group, and explore how we all have identities that may advantage and disadvantage us to gain a better understanding of the unique lens with which we all view the world.

- Discuss as a group the different ways privilege plays out in your organization and workplace. Talk about how privilege benefits some and disadvantages others.

- Strategize ways the group can get more proactively involved in DEI and the change effort. Identify areas where you may need support, training, or education to approach this work in a meaningful and relevant way.

About the Author

JENNIFER BROWN (she/her/hers) is an award-winning entrepreneur, speaker, diversity and inclusion consultant, and bestselling author. As the founder and CEO of Jennifer Brown Consulting (JBC), a twenty-year-old certified woman- and LGBTQ+-owned industry-leading DEI consulting firm, Jennifer and her team are best known for their process of designing workplace DEI strategies and educational programming that have been implemented by some of the biggest companies and nonprofit organizations in the US and globally, including FedEx, Hearst, American Red Cross, Under Armor, Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, Toyota, Wells Fargo, and many more.

Jennifer envisions inclusive organizations where *all* of us can thrive. As someone who has experienced both the advantages of privilege and the sting of stigma, Jennifer is boldly redefining what it means to truly belong—in the workplace, in our families, and in our communities—and she openly shares her powerful and unforgettable true story with audiences to help us challenge our assumptions—about ourselves, about leaders, and others—and take inspired action today for a more inclusive tomorrow.

Jennifer is a sought-after keynote speaker for executive leadership on the topic of leading inclusively in uncertain times and has presented at many top conferences and events such as the International Diversity Forum, the Global D&I Summit, the Forum on Workplace Inclusion, the NGLCC International Business & Leadership

Conference, the Out & Equal Workplace Summit, Emerging Women, SHE Summit, Responsive Conference, the Better Man Conference, INBOUND, Alt Summit, South by Southwest (SXSW), PBWC (Professional BusinessWomen of California), the Pennsylvania Conference for Women and Texas Conference for Women, and HR Transform.

She 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. In addition, she sits on the Influencer Advisory Board for cultural intelligence consultancy sparks & honey, as well as L'Oreal's Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Advisory Board.

Her thought leadership accolades include Top Small Business Female Executive in 2019 (*DataBird Business Journal*), peopleHum's Power List of the Top 200 Thought Leaders to Follow in 2021, a Top 50 D&I and Gender Equality Influencer by Onalytica, one of Engagedly's Top HR Influencers, and an Inspirational Diversity & Inclusion Leader of the Year by d&i Leaders Global Benchmarking Survey 2021.

Jennifer is the bestselling author of three books, the first being *Inclusion: Diversity, The New Workplace and The Will to Change*. The first edition of this book, *How to Be an Inclusive Leader: Your Role in Creating Cultures of Belonging Where Everyone Can Thrive*, was named one of Catalyst's 5 Must-Read Books on Workplace Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in 2021, a shortlist winner of the OWL Award, winner of the 2019 Nautilus Book Awards' Business & Leadership category, and a top SABA 2020 Book Awards Audience Vote. The book and its Inclusive Leader Continuum have found a large and enthusiastic audience as a tool for mindset and behavior change in a wide array of organizational systems, from corporate leadership to academia to trade associations. Jennifer also recently coauthored a groundbreaking book on diversity, equity, and inclusion in society with thought leader and fellow bestselling author, Rohit Bhargava. The book,

Beyond Diversity: 12 Non-Obvious Ways to Build a More Inclusive World, was announced as a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller and listed in *Inc.*'s 22 Books to Read (or Reread) in 2022. It also won Gold in the prestigious Axiom Business Book Awards for 2022.

Her popular podcast, *The Will to Change*, appeared on Feedspot's Top 15 Diversity and Inclusion Podcasts You Must Follow in 2020, and as the host of over 200 episodes, Jennifer interviews leading CEOs, bestselling authors, and entrepreneurs about how we must continue to courageously evolve to ensure greater equity in today's and tomorrow's workplaces.

For information on JBC's consulting and training services, please visit us at *www.jenniferbrownconsulting.com*.

To learn more about Jennifer's speaking services, please visit us at *www.jenniferbrownspeaks.com*.

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 authentic selves to work and motivated to contribute in a way that fuels bottom-line growth.

As a leading certified woman- and LGBT-owned strategic DEI 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. 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 interactive workshops on bias, assessing gaps in employee experience, setting up diversity councils, or leveraging its proprietary ERG Progression Model to transform resource

groups into trusted business partners, 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 by meeting its clients where they are and guiding them all the way through. 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.