

The strategist's bookshelf

Repaving the road of good intentions

Harvey A. Hornstein

INCLUSIFY: The Power of Uniqueness and Belonging to Build Innovative Teams, Stefanie K. Johnson, 288 pages (Harper Business, 2020).

Even if they can affirm their genuine absence of bigotry and heartfelt embrace of the proposition that all people are created equal, too many organizational leaders, swayed by unconscious biases, undermine the work lives of minority group members who are their subordinates. One remedy, offered by Stephanie K. Johnson, an Associate Professor of Management at the University of Colorado Boulder's Leeds School of Business, is to "inclusify," a word that she has coined and used as the title of her new book, *INCLUSIFY: The Power of Uniqueness and Belonging to Build Innovative Teams*.

According to Professor Johnson, leaders who inclusify, "live and lead in a way that recognizes and celebrates unique and dissenting perspectives while creating a collaborative and open-minded environment in which all employees feel that they truly belong." These leaders "embrace their team members' differences" while simultaneously affirming that each of them "is a valued, essential piece of a larger group with an important mission."

Successful "inclusification," she contends, fosters innovative ideas and employee engagement, an empirically documented correlate of business success.

The book's straightforward, easily understood organization is likely to

assist readers wanting to apply its ideas. Writing plainly, without neglecting relevant empirical research, its first three chapters discuss the critical role that feelings of belonging and uniqueness play in human social life. Then, after linking the presence or absence of these feelings to instances of organizational success and failure, these initial chapters chart some pathways that will help managers become "inclusifiers" – people skilled in creating work environments in which employees feel that they belong and that their unique qualities are being embraced.

The next twelve chapters focus on malpractice "maladies" arising from unconscious biases that afflict even the most well-intentioned organizational leaders, causing them to mismanage employees who are members of minority communities. In these chapters Professor Johnson's examples are limited to women and racial minorities, but it's clear that she believes the practice maladies result in similar harm to members of all other communities that frequently experience workplace or hiring discrimination, such as LGBTQ workers. There are six malady chapters, each followed by a remedy chapter that describes actions leaders can take to avoid the set of harms that each type of mismanagement causes.

She identifies six types of malady-afflicted managers:

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Meritocracy Manager – whose single-minded efforts to find the best person for the job causes neglect of employees' unique qualities.

Culture Crusader – whose excessive focus on building a team causes them to pare down potentially beneficial individual differences in thought, opinion and perspective.

Team Player – a subset of the Culture Crusader group, Team Players are members of minorities who so want to fit in that they eschew speaking or acting in ways that reflect their unique heritage.

White Knight – avid protectors of minority community members, White Knights unintentionally disempower the very people they want to protect, often arousing the alienation and antagonism of other, non-minority team members.

Shepard – a subset of White Knights who erode work teams' cohesiveness by mismanaging the development and introduction of organizations' policies and procedures that are relevant to minorities.

Optimist – believing that the arc of change in organizations progresses toward valuing employees' uniqueness and belonging, Optimists conclude that their job is to let it happen by staying out of the way, opening a door to the risks of excess passivity.

Each of the remedy chapters contains examples of actions that managers

could take to rectify their faulty approach. These actions are consistent with the general principles she presents for building employees' sense of uniqueness and belonging. She doesn't suggest that readers must memorize and mimic the specific actions in the examples described. On the contrary, through both her writing and organization of these remedy chapters, Professor Johnson widens readers' perspectives, stimulating them to shape solutions suited to their specific circumstances. Additionally, instead of relying on a feel good “let's change minds” strategy, Professor Johnson focuses on concrete substantive changes that might fundamentally correct flaws in managerial behavior.

To her credit, she offers readers who want to become “inclusifiers” two valuable action aids. First, interested readers can take an on-line assessment test offered in the book and then receive diagnostic information about their current status as “inclusifiers.” Second, she offers leaders a set of practical “Inclusifying Actions” to hammer home steps they need to take.

Throughout the book, Professor Johnson uses personal stories to introduce and illustrate important points. Her stories not only enliven the text, but they also stimulate readers' self-reflection and insight.

Finally, addressing the plight of one minority group, women, Professor Johnson does not rest her arguments entirely on the much touted “business

case” for having more women in organizations. That is, she doesn't make the claim that hiring more women directly correlates with better organizational performance. This claim, although it has gained considerable currency, is not borne out by social science research. Despite some anecdotal evidence, it has been questioned by several of the field's leading researchers.[1] What Professor Johnson sensibly contends is that, though there is no empirical evidence that supports a policy of preferring job applicants because of their particular minority group membership, organizations that fail to effectively institute inclusivity will miss out on its potential benefits.

By focusing on organizational leaders who are trying to be inclusive, but are doing it in the wrong way, this book is an important contribution to the practitioner's bookshelf. It offers managers at every organizational level a practical guide for repaving the well-intentioned path that they want to tread.

Note

1. Eagly, A.H. and Heilman, M.E. (2016), “Gender and leadership,” *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 3 No. 27, pp. 349-353; and Eagly, A.H. (2016), “When passionate advocates meet research on diversity, does the honest broker stand a chance?” *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 72 No. 1, pp. 199-222.

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