

How the Pandemic Helped me Drive Inclusion

The pandemic has unleashed a cascade of unforeseen impacts. In the area of work-from-home, I'm seeing a five to ten-year fast-forward into the future of the "where" of work, and it presents unique opportunities to have a profound impact on the people around us.

I quickly observed that meetings with 100% virtual attendance had more people participating in conversations than prior meetings of mixed online and in-person attendance. My insight: the playing field had been leveled somewhat for all. The people that used to sit together in a meeting room and the people that used to attend by video or phone were now **all** "remote". Where a two-class system once existed, with remote workers having more difficulty being heard than those in "the room", now a single class remained. But it wasn't that simple. An opportunity space to drive value around this insight arose to identify and to break through the remaining barriers in the virtual space that prevent some from contributing-- and enlighten others about those barriers to recognize and liberate those around them.

There are many things that can lead to people being marginalized in a team interaction. The societal factors of race, gender, disability, and age can weigh on the comfort level people have in a group setting and will vary based on the diversity of the rest of the group. In a business setting additional factors like job title, pay grade, department, experience, role, and shyness will add to that weight. When summed with the societal factors, the cumulative weight is too much for some people to overcome. I've personally felt marginalized by some of these factors myself, and the pain of feeling excluded is akin to a physical injury, a fact proven by scientific research on the subject of social exclusion.

How do we address this problem? It takes a high-level of intentionality in two key areas.

- **Permission:** it's about people knowing that it's not just OK to talk-- it's encouraged. You can help make it happen, first by limiting the number of people in your meeting (no passengers, only crew), and then by setting a standard at the start of your meeting. Call people out for why they were included: "Janet, you've done this well before, so we're looking to you to share those experiences. Carl, you can see dependencies in workflows like no one else, please don't let us go down the wrong path on this. And Sara, you're in the know about every other project in the division, so jump in anytime to educate us on potential duplication on our proposed work." Be careful to give general permission as well, so people will speak outside of their core competencies.
- **Safety:** you're not just encouraged to talk, but what you say will be cherished. Give people openings to chime in. Tee it up to make it easy: "John, the other day, you and I were talking about ____ and you had a great observation about ____ ; would you be willing to share that with the rest of the team?" Or: "Lara, you've had some experience in this, what do worry about the most?" Warning: don't put a shy or fearful person on the spot. You may have to start the story for that person, calling out that that you admire their modesty or humbleness. "Terri, you're the epitome of the

humble superhero. As I recall, you were concerned about _____. Maybe you can word it better?" In extreme cases, reaching out to such people one-on-one before a meeting could help them to speak up at a specific moment or on a cue that you give them. Most important: never allow a "thud". That's the situation where someone speaks, and no one acknowledges the value of what was said, or it is ignored completely. Make it your business to see to it that everyone's words are validated. Ask a clarifying question, agree with them, or suggest a related context into which the comment fits— just don't let it "thud".

Permission is moot without safety and safety is hypocrisy without permission. But when generously ladled out together, they form a single master tool to re-integrate marginalized people.

Recently I was in a meeting and one person was silent for the first half-hour. Her role was to supply a resource that the team would soon be consuming in great quantity. I was concerned that there might be something to her silence, so I broke through permission and safety in a single question: "Tamara, what is the biggest risk that you see over the next 60 days?" Right question! She shared a fear that her team would be overwhelmed by demand. It was obvious that she didn't think she had a say in it. But, she did have a say, the team listened, and everyone was better off for it.

In another meeting, I had to give a leader permission to speak. He was afraid to disrupt the team's momentum with a question challenging the direction of the work. I knew his concern in advance, and cued him at the right moment: "Tim, what questions do you have about the team's current priorities?" He asked his question, and an important meeting of the minds took place.

The best way to escape marginalization is to experience the satisfaction of participation, then to be emboldened by the experience to seek more. If you are being marginalized, reach out to those that can help you unleash your full value. If you are in a position to spread permission and safety to people around you, do it intentionally, measure it, and teach it to others. It's the right thing to do. Our greatest untapped resources are all around us, waiting for the moment of liberation!