
As you read the list were there particular identity characteristics that you connected with more than others? Reread the list and select the three that you feel are the most important characteristics to you when you are with your professional colleagues and acquaintances. Are these the same three characteristics that you would select if you were thinking about your identity when you are with your family and friends?

Which three characteristics do you want people to focus on when describing you?

When we run this exercise in workshops, most people find that at least one, and most often two, of the characteristics shift as the context shifts. With enough time, most people in our workshops can identify several contexts in their lives that have no overlapping identity characteristics at all.

Are our identities truly that transient? Yes and no. Each of our identity characteristics is a critical component of who we see ourselves to be; however,
different characteristics become activated in different contexts either as an out-group identity (being underrepresented, feeling threatened, feeling excluded, etc.) or as an in-group identity (being adequately represented, feeling safe, feeling included, feeling valued, etc.).

In workplaces, the more characteristics we believe we share with those in leadership, the more likely we are to feel part of the in-group. These characteristics then become the dominant part of our identity in that context, whether or not we realize it. The more characteristics we feel we don't share with the leadership, the more likely we are to feel part of the out-group. Our in-group/out-group identities often become the identities through which we connect (or not) with our workplaces.

These identities are at the core of diversity and inclusion, but most workplaces have not yet harnessed the power of shifting identities to reconfigure in-groups and out-groups to achieve greater inclusion. In the absence of alternative data, many of us default into initial workplace identities based on visible characteristics — gender, race, ethnicity, physical appearance, physical abilities, etc. — and inclusion efforts have worked to build "sensitivity" around these visible differences. That's laudable, but it is not enough. To achieve real inclusion, we must deliberately identify and communicate alternative characteristics that have meaning in the workplace and are strong enough to override the visible and/or familiar differentiators.

In the classic illustration of shifting identities, Jane Elliott created a Brown Eyes group and a Blue Eyes group in her third-grade class the morning after Martin Luther King's assassination. She assigned the Blue Eyes group privileges including extra helpings of food at lunch and extra time at recess; she also encouraged the Blue Eyes group to play only with each other and ignore the children in the Brown Eyes group. The kids resisted at first because Elliott's differentiation was based not on new differences, but existing characteristics that were now being reframed as differences with meaning. In spite of the hesitation, the kids quickly adopted the new in-group/ out-group identities. The Blue Eyes
group started taunting the Brown Eyes group for being inferior and the Brown Eyes kids accepted their "inferiority" as quickly as the Blue Eyes kids accepted their "superiority."

Most diversity and inclusion practitioners have understood Elliott's Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes exercise as an example of how quickly prejudice can set in or be internalized, but many missed the larger point of this exercise — the ability we all have to shift identities quickly and seamlessly.

We have found that the stronger and more positive an organizational identity is, the more likely it is for an under-represented group to prioritize the organizational identity over their out-group identities. Inclusive organizations shift identities the same way that Elliott did, except they do it by expanding the in-groups until out-groups become irrelevant. Similarly inclusive leaders shift identities by communicating their own characteristics in a way that includes more people in their in-groups until out-groups have no meaning.

Southwest Airlines, for example, has been one of the most profitable airlines for more than 30 years and it has half the employee attrition (across all demographics) among its competitors. Southwest's leaders created a positive privileged identity in being a Southwest employee. The organizational identity has become the in-group identity and the competitors have become the out-group. The visible differences between people within the in-group then became secondary to the primary identity of being a Southwest employee.

Shifting identities is not about changing who you are. It is about changing where you feel you fit in given who you are.

Shifting identities is about expanding the universe of our similarities because our differences are only valuable once we connect on our similarities.