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PREFACE

The 2020 coronavirus pandemic has put a spotlight on the stark differences in socioeconomic standing that we as a global society face and how it disproportionately impacts different groups of around the world. Inclusive conversations are sorely needed if we, as humans, are going to figure out how to share the planet in ways that foster peace and mutual understanding rather than hate, polarization, and divisiveness. There is increasing evidence in all sectors—from politics to the workplace—that we are not doing a very good job with the former and the latter is becoming a way of life. More and more, our way of communicating about racial, ethnic, gender, religious, gender identity, socio-economic, and political differences is contentious and filled with derogatory personal attacks. When we disagree on matters big or small, we dig in deep defending our own positions, denigrating those who may have a different belief. This polarizing way of communication is all too prevalent in social media spaces, where personal attacks proliferate, and it is rare to see evidence of inclusive conversations. This became evident during the coronavirus outbreak, with people even taking up arms to protest decisions that states made about the length of time social distancing would stay in effect.
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Our inability to engage in inclusive conversations can fuel violence in the workplace, in schools, on the streets, and in places of worship. The increasing global climate of acrimony seeps into our everyday lives in ways that we may not even realize. It can impact personal and workplace relationships, our sense of safety, and our ability to trust each other. Inclusive conversations are needed to build and restore our connectedness as humans, to kindle respect for the dignity of every individual, and ultimately to lead to better outcomes for historically marginalized groups.

From engaging in routine performance discussions in the workplace across dimensions of diversity to talking with children about differences, we often struggle to find the right words. In my work as a diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) consultant, I regularly witness these struggles. It is not that most people do not want to engage in inclusive conversations; they do not know how. They do not know what to say so as not to offend or be accused of insensitivity or worse. In today’s divisive climate we may be afraid to offer our perspective fearing that it might spark a verbal attack.

In 2017, I wrote *We Can’t Talk about That at Work: How to Talk about Race, Religion and Politics and Other Polarizing Topics* to provide a road map for the prerequisites for engaging in conversations on what are often divisive subjects. *Inclusive Conversations: Fostering Equity, Empathy, and Belonging across Differences* goes deeper to lay out the conditions for effectively engaging in dialogue that fosters equity, empathy, and belonging, not only in the workplace but also in other settings. The book chronicles both the challenges and the solutions in creating and sustaining these conditions.
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I have learned from consulting with many organizations over the years that the ability to have difficult conversations effectively across difference is more about creating the right conditions than having a list of dos and don’ts about what to say (and not say). We have to go deeper in understanding why we should and should not say certain things across diversity dimensions. We need to have a more fundamental understanding of the historical inequities disproportionately suffered by some groups, many of which persist today. We have to create organizational cultures that are equitable, trusting, empathetic, accepting, forgiving, inclusive, and willing to acknowledge and address power dynamics. Inclusive conversations are not easy, but they are much more likely to be fruitful when these conditions are met. Most organizations strive to be all of these things. They have values and purpose statements, principles and guidelines that purport to create equitable and inclusive environments. The problem is too many of us have opposite experiences of inequitable, unaccepting, mistrusting environments, and inclusive conversations cannot happen under these conditions.

*Inclusive Conversations* provides practical guidance for engaging in inclusive conversations while elucidating the layers of complexities involved. The book is written for those who have historically found themselves in dominant, power positions as well as those who have historically been subordinated and marginalized because of their identity including race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or other dimension of difference. Terms such as “dominant,” “subordinated,” “marginalized,” and others that may not be familiar to all readers are highlighted in the text and defined within the main text, as well as in a comprehensive glossary in the back of the book. If you lead a team or are
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a member of a team at work; if you are an educator, a religious leader, a politician, or a volunteer; if you are in any environment where different identities and cultures come together, this book can help you have more effective and inclusive conversations—a prerequisite for dismantling inequitable systems.
What Are Inclusive Conversations and Why Are They Important?

In today’s increasingly polarized world, developing the capability for inclusive conversations is imperative. If we hope to effectively address our differences and move forward as a society with a shared vision for equity and inclusion. We have to learn how to have meaningful discourse with each other.

What Are Inclusive Conversations?

*Inclusive conversations* are dialogues between two or more people of different cultural backgrounds (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, *gender, gender identity*, ability status, class/socioeconomic, or other dimension of difference) attempting to achieve an equitable outcome. Inclusive conversations consider power dynamics and *systems of inequity*. Inclusive conversations require the courage to critically self-reflect, to acknowledge what you don’t know, and to embrace a willingness to learn. The desired outcome of inclusive conversations is enhanced mutual understanding that leads to equitable solutions.
**Why Do We Need to Have Inclusive Conversations?**

Inclusive conversations are needed to enhance cross-difference understanding so that we can address the widening divide across racial, gender, religious, socioeconomic status, and gender identity lines. At the extreme, we are witnessing an increase in hate crimes and violence, and in everyday encounters we see growing inequities in our schools, workplaces, and political and religious spheres. We are experiencing a level of polarization like no other in modern time. Conversations are becoming less civil, more hate-filled, and consequently society is making little progress in resolving our differences and achieving inclusion.

Incivility and hateful rhetoric regularly play out in social media feeds, where verbal attacks are common. In face-to-face settings we are more apt not to talk at all about potentially polarizing topics. When we do, the conversations are either contentious or shallow; either way, we are stuck. If we don’t learn to talk about our differences, there is no hope for achieving equity, inclusion, and belonging.

**Why in the Workplace?**

The workplace is a microcosm of larger society. Many people spend more time at work than they do in other life pursuits. Research shows that during a typical fifty-year stint of employment, most people spend 25 percent of their waking hours working. Therefore the workplace can have a substantial influence on shaping the broader society as a site where understanding, kindness, compassion, inclusion, and empathy are the norm, rather than incivility, hate, violence, and a whole string of “isms,”
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including racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination.

The workplace struggles to hold inclusive conversations. A recent study from the Society for Human Resource Management on toxic workplaces reported that nearly four in ten working Americans say their manager fails to frequently engage in honest conversations about work topics. Similarly, one in five Americans are uncomfortable engaging in such conversations with their manager. The report goes on to say that toxicity is rampant in the workplace and often plays out as sexual harassment and discrimination. The lack of effective conversations impacts employee retention and productivity. The discomfort and inability to effectively interact across difference impacts performance and career conversations (e.g., who gets selected for special assignments).

As a result of the recent attention on sexual harassment from the #MeToo movement, 60 percent of men say they are afraid of mentoring, socializing, or being alone with women at work. According to research by McKinsey and LeanIn.org, women of color are less supported by their white leaders, which has contributed to their inability to move up the corporate ladder. Their bosses are less likely to promote their work contributions to others, help them navigate organizational politics, or socialize outside of work as they do with their white direct reports. These outcomes for women, and women of color specifically, will continue if we do not find ways to have inclusive conversations in the workplace.

Even though some employees may be uncomfortable talking with their managers, they are increasingly willing to stage
protests for what they feel is unfair treatment. According to a recent article in an HR magazine, employees aren’t afraid to challenge their employers on workplace and social issues. For example, in 2018 more than twenty thousand Google employees participated in a walkout to protest the handling of a sexual harassment claim where the alleged perpetrator was granted a large payout to leave. In 2019 some employees planned a sit-in to protest alleged retaliation against those who had participated in the walkout. In 2019 the furniture and home goods retailer Wayfair came under fire after press reports revealed that they had sold beds to furnish migrant detention centers. Employees organized walkouts to protest the sales. These protests illustrate what experts see as a cultural shift in the workplace fueled by millennial workers. Without effective ways to engage in inclusive conversations, such protests are likely to become commonplace.

**Why with Children?**

It is important to start having inclusive conversations with children to enhance their self-concept and their ability to value and respect differences. Starting young can improve children’s ability to eventually enter the workplace with a greater capacity to engage in inclusive conversations. However, according to research released in 2019, most parents hardly ever discuss race/ethnicity, gender, class, or other categories of social identity with their children. The survey of more than six thousand parents conducted by Sesame Workshop and National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, found that the fact that parents are not discussing these issues with their kids is a real concern because children are hardwired to notice differences at a young age and ask questions. Even parents who responded
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that they are comfortable talking about diversity topics such as race and sexual orientation admitted that they do not. If we leave children alone to make sense of differences that they see with only stereotypical references from media as their source for understanding, children may enter the workforce continuing to perpetuate the discomfort and lack of skill in engaging in inclusive conversations.

Why with Religion?

With the increase of different religions in the global workplace and the rise of religious violence, it is important for us to learn how to have inclusive conversations about religion. According to Pew Research, more than 50 percent of respondents said that they do not discuss religion even with family. Learning to engage in inclusive conversations about religion can enhance cross-cultural understanding and create more inclusive work environments as well. Understanding the various practices of your co-workers can increase the likelihood that you will not make embarrassing mistakes and that you can take others’ practices into account when planning workplace activities.

We continue to witness increased religious intolerance globally, with violence against Jewish synagogues on the rise. Violent crimes against Jews in the United States doubled in 2018, according to the Anti-Defamation League’s annual audit of anti-Semitic incidents. Of course, the most notable of these in the United States was the mass killing of eleven Jewish worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018. There continues to be violence against Muslims around the world, including the 2018 attack in New Zealand, killing fifty-one. Muslims in the United States report having high levels of anxiety and fear.
Within Christianity there is polarization around such issues as sexual orientation. The United Methodist Church, the largest protestant denomination in the United States, voted in 2019 by a narrow margin (53 percent to 47 percent) to keep the “traditional plan” of not allowing clergy to perform same-sex marriage or ordain noncelibate gay pastors. These events may be triggering and may cause trauma for students and employees, which impacts their ability to do their best work. Learning how to respond when these unfortunate events occur is key to creating inclusive environments and enhancing sense of belonging.

**Why with Politics?**

Politics has always been an off-limits topic, especially in the workplace. While political discussions may still be best avoided at work, it is increasingly difficult not to have politics come up in conversation. For example, a global company may have to deal with restrictions on employees being able to easily enter certain countries or even come back into a country where they reside due to restrictive immigration policies. For example, the 2019 protests in Hong Kong about democracy and political independence from mainland China sparked extreme political polarization and violence. The Winters Group was asked to support developing training for employees of multinational companies to develop skills to engage in conversations where co-workers may have different political ideologies.

Right-wing conservative political ideologies are gaining in popularity as evidenced by who is getting elected around the world. Nationalism has always been a feature across Europe’s political spectrum, but there has been a recent boom in voter support for right-wing and populist parties in countries like
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Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Spain. Of course, with the current administration in the United States, there are strong anti-immigrant policies and practices. While “right wing” does not necessarily mean anti-inclusion, the characteristics typically include nationalism and ethnocentrism, and “far right wing” often means anti-immigration and anti-integration stances toward groups that such ideologies often deem inferior and undesirable. The capacity to discuss political differences and advocate for equity for all will increasingly be a necessary skill.

Why with Social Media

Political conversations and discussions about diversity topics such as race are rampant on social media feeds, where the discourse is often hate-filled. Social media will continue to be a prime venue in the foreseeable future for sharing different perspectives, and we can either learn how to do so in constructive ways that foster understanding and learning or continue the unproductive use as a tool to proliferate hate and the “cancel culture” (discussed in Chapter 7).

The Winters Group conducted a virtual learning lab in late 2019 focused on the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work called “What Lies Ahead.” We polled the approximately 150 participants with this question: Do you think social media will continue to foster polarization and hate in the future, or will it be an enabler for inclusive conversations and learning? Two-thirds of participants responded that social media would continue to fuel hate. I was really disheartened by that response but perhaps not surprised. We need to learn how to have inclusive conversations on social media or suffer the consequences:
extremes can and do lead to violence. I discuss strategies for inclusive conversations on social media in Chapter 11.

**Why for Other Aspects of Society?**
The inability to effectively talk about, understand, and address our differences leads to the proliferation of segregated neighborhoods, unfair criminal justice systems, health-care disparities, serious wealth gaps, inequitable education, violence against women and other identities, and the list goes on. To ameliorate the vast inequities that continue to persist, conversations about social injustices need to address the systems that perpetuate them. If we can’t even effectively talk about society’s problems, how can we hope to go deeper to dismantle the root causes? Many conversations about solutions to our social problems recommend Band-Aid fixes that do not address the underlying system. It is hard to even understand the systems because they are so interconnected, entrenched, and insidious. Learning how to dialogue about systems and then take a systems approach to these issues is the only way we can hope to eradicate inequities in our workplaces, our schools, and society in general.

**Inclusive Conversations Yield Positive Workplace Results**
While social justice advocates primarily in the not-for-profit world have encouraged and taught skills for dialogue on race and other social identity topics for some time, this type of dialogue is fairly new to the corporate arena. Corporate leaders are finding that developing structured opportunities for such conversation is good for business and can actually lead to greater productivity, engagement, innovation, and retention among employees.
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Tim Ryan, CEO of PricewaterhouseCooper (PwC), conceived the CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion Initiative, a consortium of more than 450 organizations, which declared a Day of Understanding on December 7, 2018, for member organizations to hold formal discussions about race. On the heels of one of PwC’s Black employees, Botham Jean, being killed by an off-duty police officer in Dallas (she entered his apartment thinking it was hers and shot Jean), Ryan beckoned his fellow CEOs to use the opportunity to engage in dialogue to foster greater understanding. That day, 150 organizations heeded the call using a variety of conversation methods to talk about race, including panel discussions, town hall–type meetings, and outside speakers. Ryan said, to put it simply, “if we listen and understand each other better as human beings, we’ll do things differently.” The Winters Group supported several organizations that responded to Ryan’s call. The Day of Understanding is now an annual event among participating organizations.

The Winters Group conducts a three-day Train the Trainer session based on the principles in *We Can’t Talk about That at Work* to equip organizations with skilled facilitators to conduct conversations. Companies and public entities such as Merck, UnitedHealthcare, Shell Oil Company, Alaska Airlines, Mass-Mutual, and the State of Minnesota, among many other organizations, have received certification in Engaging in Bold, Inclusive Conversations. Other organizations are developing models and spaces for identity-based dialogues. For example, Progressive insurance used the principles in *We Can’t Talk about That at Work* to develop a series of dialogues initially around race that have been so successful that other topics (such as LGBTQ, disabilities, and...
age) have been added. Called Courageous Conversations, these interactions are designed to create space for growth, sharing, and learning as it relates to dimensions of difference through a variety of lenses. Courageous Conversations leverage short case studies about the real-life experiences of people from various backgrounds to spark dialogue.

Sodexo, the food services and facilities management company, has used the principles in *We Can't Talk about That at Work* to develop learning experiences for its Business Resource Groups (BRG) around authentic dialogue. The Winters Group has supported the design of a Train the Trainer curriculum to equip BRG leaders in facilitating authentic conversations. In addition, The Winters Group has codesigned a dialogue series that focuses specifically on race, religion, and politics. Merck has also embraced the Engaging in Bold, Inclusive Conversations model and is successfully conducting sessions across the company teaching the principles of effective cross-cultural dialogue.

Since 2016 a large professional services consulting firm has retained The Winters Group to design and conduct several dialogue sessions around the country to address external events that have incited fear and anxiety among their employees. Many employees at the firm work remotely at client sites, and this is an opportunity to provide a brave space to share experiences and concerns particularly in light of the current sociopolitical climate in the United States. Through inclusive conversations, the goal is to create safe and trusting spaces for employees to have complex, and sometimes difficult, discussions about diversity and inclusion topics. The sessions seek to bring employees from all backgrounds to listen and act with empathy and build trust.
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At the beginning of each session we conduct a live poll asking for one word that captured how they felt about the current sociopolitical climate. The responses include “exasperated,” “concerned,” “helpless,” “fatigued,” “frustrated,” “polarized,” “unsettled,” “open-minded,” and “dismayed.” A few had more positive responses like “curious,” “optimistic,” and “blessed.” By the end of the sessions the responses are much more positive, including such words as “encouraged,” “educated,” “knowledgeable,” “optimistic,” and “equipped.” Many employees shared that it was cathartic to be given the opportunity to discuss their feelings, to be affirmed by colleagues, and to have some tips for engaging in inclusive conversations about polarizing topics.

In an interview, Michele Meyer-Shipp, chief diversity officer at KPMG, shared that as a result of very successful dialogue sessions across the company’s footprint on the Day of Understanding in 2018, they have continued dialogue sessions with the “Talking Inclusion Series,” which focuses on specific topics of interest that surfaced in a survey KPMG conducted. Employee input was consistent in their acknowledgment that “we don’t know what we don’t know, and we want to be better allies.” Discussion topics have included how to be an ally, the “T” in LGBTQ, the language of diversity, and a video series focused on people with disabilities. More organizations, in both the public and private sectors, recognize that inclusion is a key ingredient to achieving organizational goals. If they truly want their employees to bring their whole selves to work—if they want to create environments of psychological safety, where differences are appreciated and understood, inclusive conversations are critical.
SUMMARY

› Learning to engage in inclusive conversations is critical for organizations that want to foster diversity, equity, and belonging.

› Inclusive conversations are needed in the workplace, in our educational institutions, and with children, about religion, politics, and other aspects of society where vast inequities exist.

› The stakes are higher than they have ever been to learn to engage in inclusive conversations given the global sociopolitical climate marked by polarization and intolerance.

› Employees are encouraged to bring their whole selves to work and bring multiple aspects of their identities that may be impacted by the socioeconomic climate.

› Employees are more vocal about sociopolitical events, and many expect their organizations to take a stand on issues.

› We need to teach children how to engage in inclusive conversations as they are very impacted by the current climate, and they notice differences in race, gender, and other aspects of identity at an early age.
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Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. What is the rationale in your organization for learning how to engage in inclusive conversations?

2. To what extent do you have effective conversations across different dimensions of diversity? What makes them effective? Ineffective? What would make them more effective?

3. To what extent do you personally feel comfortable talking about diversity topics? Which ones are you most/least comfortable with? Why?

4. What are the personal/organizational benefits of learning how to have inclusive conversations?

5. Why is it important to have inclusive conversations with children?
Mary-Frances Winters came of age during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Starting with her days as editor of her high school newspaper, Winters realized that diversity, equity, and inclusion work is her “passion and calling.” Founding The Winters Group was the next step in fulfilling what she believes is her true purpose on this earth—breaking down barriers and building bridges across differences. As CEO of The Winters Group for the past thirty-six years, Winters has been able to magnify the impact of her thought-provoking message and has gained extensive experience in working with senior leadership teams to drive organizational change.

Among her many awards and distinctions, Winters received the Winds of Change award, conferred by the University of St. Thomas at the Forum on Workplace Inclusion, for her efforts to change lives, organizations, and communities. She has served as a torch bearer for the Olympics and has previously been recognized as an ATHENA Leadership Award winner from the
About the Author

Chamber of Commerce for her professional excellence and for actively assisting women in their attainment of professional excellence. Winters received the Hutchinson Medal from her alma mater, the University of Rochester, in recognition of outstanding achievement and notable service to the community, state, or nation. She has also been recognized as a diversity pioneer by Profiles in Diversity Journal and named by Forbes as one of the top ten trailblazers in diversity and inclusion.

Winters is a life member of the Board of Trustees of the University of Rochester and has served on the boards of the Chamber of Commerce, United Way, and the National Board of Girl Scouts of the USA. She is the author of four other books: We Can’t Talk about That at Work!: How to Talk about Race, Religion, Politics, and Other Polarizing Topics; Only Wet Babies Like Change: Workplace Wisdom for Baby Boomers; Inclusion Starts with “I”; and CEOs Who Get It: Diversity Leadership from the Heart and Soul. She also wrote a chapter in the book Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion and numerous articles.

Winters has impacted hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals that often describe her as thoughtful, credible, results-oriented, and innovative. She is known as a provocateur, especially in sharing the importance of Bold, Inclusive Conversations® that was developed to encourage organizations to create brave spaces and have dialogue around difficult workplace conversation topics such as race, religion, and politics.
We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from Mary-Frances Winters’s *Inclusive Conversations*

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