The Inclusion Paradox

3rd Edition

The Obama Era and the Transformation of Global Diversity

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# Table of contents

**Author’s note** ........................................................................................................................................... i

**Foreword** ................................................................................................................................................ ix

**Introduction** ............................................................................................................................................. 1

**PART 1: THE URGENCY OF INCLUSION** ................................................................................................. 22

Chapter 1  
An upside-down world ............................................................................................................................. 25

Chapter 2  
Sustainable diversity: Relevant, profitable, and game-changing ...................................................... 51

Chapter 3  
Deeply embed D&I into your talent management systems ................................................................. 75

Chapter 4  
This thing is global! ................................................................................................................................... 91

**PART 2: CALLING OUT DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIPS** ................................................................. 108

Chapter 5  
I need your differences ... and you need mine .................................................................................... 113

Chapter 6  
Are you evil, clueless, or just plain incompetent? ............................................................................. 137

**PART 3: CALLING OUT DIFFERENCES IN GROUPS** ................................................................................. 156

Chapter 7  
I see White people ................................................................................................................................. 159

Chapter 8  
Women in leadership: Why current best practices will not be enough to shatter the glass ceiling .............................................................................................................................................. 181

Chapter 9  
The Millennials: Why this generation is challenging the workplace like no other .......................... 209

Chapter 10  
Disability: The diversity issue we fear the most .................................................................................. 229
Introduction

It turns out that the warm, let’s-all-just-get-along connotations of inclusion are misleading. Achieving true inclusion is hard—very hard. It’s harder, in fact, than achieving awareness, tolerance, and sensitivity. It’s harder than diversity itself. Ironically, at the same time, it’s actually become easier and more hip to talk about diversity and inclusion. Around the world, corporations, not-for-profits, educational institutions, police departments, governments, and the military are catching on that the workforce is changing in dramatic, unstoppable ways. After years of ignoring the swelling demographic tsunami, finally they grasp that these changes raise myriad implications for how organizations hire, manage, develop, promote, and reward their workers in ways that will motivate them to stay and do their best.

Over the past decade, think tanks, boutique consultancies, magazines, and books have showcased stories of winning strategies and programs. Conferences are abuzz with high-voltage diversity energy, while across organizations, an array of initiatives—from mentoring and diversity training to diversity councils and affinity groups—sprout up like mushrooms in the forest after a rainstorm. Stories abound of CEOs making brave statements about their organizations’ commitment to diversity, of innovative strategies and programs that crack the glass ceiling, and of members of traditionally marginalized groups landing on career platforms and performing to their full potential. All this has indeed resulted in organizations becoming more diverse overall.

Such accomplishments give us plenty to celebrate, if only for a moment. After a generation of diversity work, organizations increasingly worry that—despite their success at bringing diversity in the door—even the most diligently executed initiatives will not be enough to shatter the glass, concrete, bamboo, tortilla, and rainbow ceilings. Despite years of incremental progress, truly meaningful breakthroughs remain elusive, with managerial and leadership ranks falling far short of reflecting what should be the most diverse workforce in the history of civilization. Increasingly, top-of-the-house leaders realize if they don’t get this right—if they fail to tap into the ranks of diverse talent around them—their organizations face weakened financials at best, and extinction at worst.
As a leader in the diversity and inclusion space and consultant to many multinational organizations, I’ve witnessed firsthand how employers across the United States, Canada, India, South Korea, China, and various countries across Latin America and Europe—even those who have heartily embraced diversity—were caught off guard by the implications of an increasingly diverse workforce. As they seek to portray themselves as being open to a workforce that looks different, they have done little to adjust to a workforce that thinks different. Such thinking leads to different behaviors, which, in turn, further churn up the usual organizational undercurrents.

Consider the complexities of the following scenarios: White females managing African-American males, who in turn manage White males, Latina women, and immigrant- and US-born Asians—all of whom are charged with delivering profitability for an enterprise statistically still run by White males. Then there are Indians managing teams in the United States, Argentineans shaping the global financial system of a US-based multinational, and Muslims making global real estate decisions from their offices in Dubai.

These workforce shifts take place amidst massive global demographic, political, and economic changes, where trends in each of these arenas accelerate those in another. For example, the Obama Era—a time when the US had its first-ever Black president—carried with it profound cultural implications, both in the United States and globally, that affected not only personal, group, and institutional relationships, but also how we do our work strategically and day-to-day. Among the populations most significantly impacted has been the emerging workforce. An increasingly multicultural workforce requires a deeper cultural understanding from many different angles—not only what cultures are in the mix, but also what individuals believe, how they act, and why they act that way.

The Inclusion Paradox: The Obama Era and the transformation of global diversity 3rd edition explores the impact of the Obama phenomenon from a cultural—rather than political—perspective. Sure, there are myriad political observations to be made on blue state/red state shifts and in the many legitimate yet contentious policy debates swirling in Washington. But whether our views align more with the Tea Party, the Occupy Wall Street crowd, or the uncategorized, regardless of how such matters end up getting hashed out politically, there’s an undeniable, transformative story that has been unfolding that includes all of us globally. Whatever one’s political preferences or passions, we’re all unwitting players in this culture-change drama.
In the context of extensive consulting and speaking, I have identified eight cultural implications that I believe have been hallmarks of the Obama Era. I believed these to be true at the start of the Obama Era, and as time takes us to the post-Obama Era, I believe that these will continue to be true.

1. Inclusion is a transformative force.
2. Our actions have global impact.
3. Diversity and inclusion require intentionality.
4. We’ll experience a renaissance of values-driven decision making.
5. We must have a heightened focus on results.
6. The bottom-up is as important as the top-down.
7. “Both/and” trumps “either/or.”
8. True diversity and inclusion require calling out our differences, not minimizing them.

Because he is a full reflection of today’s contemporary, pervasive diversity—Kansas-born White mother, Kenya-born Black father, single-mom raised, Hawaii-shaped, Indonesia-influenced—let’s explore these hallmarks in more detail, using Obama’s own biography-influenced words to frame the discussion.

Admittedly, the selections are from the aspirational moments—some of which have been bound to crash head-on into harsher realities. But these aspirations reveal forces of diversity unleashed in this era that are unprecedented, so much so that they also generate counterforces of resistance that further confirm that we are in the midst of a transformational era.
Inclusion is a transformative force*

“If there's anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer. It's the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches in numbers this nation has never seen, by people who waited three hours and four hours, many for the very first time in their lives, that their voice could be that difference. It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, Black, White, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled, and not disabled.”

– President-elect Barack Obama's Acceptance Speech in Grant Park, Chicago, November 4, 2008

Changing demographics have radically transformed the workplace. Massive immigration and aging populations have significantly changed the face of the American workforce. More generations are in the workforce than ever before, forcing organizations to deal with and benefit from the differing perspectives of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials. At the same time, women and racial/ethnic minorities account for a rapidly growing portion of the workforce, with some reaching the upper echelon of their organizations. Xerox, Yahoo, HP, Kraft, and PepsiCo all have strong female CEOs, while Merck, United Airlines, and MasterCard have African-American, Latino, and Indian chief executives.

It's no coincidence that we're seeing these demographic trends. A generation ago, women and minorities were achieving breakthroughs in the arenas of sports and entertainment. Today, gender and color glass ceilings are cracking in the corporate and political arenas of power. With this new talent comes

* Since that historic night, President Obama has continued to speak about the transformative force of diversity: “An America that doesn’t simply tolerate people of different backgrounds and beliefs, but an America where we are enriched by our diversity. An America where we treat one another with respect and with dignity; remembering that here in the United States there is no ‘them’ or ‘us’; it’s just us. An America where our fundamental freedoms and inalienable rights are not simply preserved, but continually renewed and refreshed.... Put simply, we must be the America that goes forward as one family, like generations before us, pulling together in times of trial, staying true to our core values and emerging even stronger. This is who we are and this is who we must always be.”

– President Obama’s remarks during iftar dinner, August 10, 2011

And

“For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swirl of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.” – President Obama’s Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009
new styles of leadership, new business strategies, new corporate policies, and new approaches to creating more inclusive environments.

When there are more people who “look like me” up the succession path, more employees can hope that they, too, have a chance to succeed. Just over 15 years ago, Linda DeLavallade, an African-American diversity practitioner whose career trajectory has included meaningful stints at Hewitt and Allstate, was working for a major bank. She was told she could not aspire to a certain role because “we only have one Black man and one Black woman in the executive recruiting organization at a time.” This meant she had to wait until the Black woman who currently occupied the position resigned.

In the wake of Obama’s 2008 and 2012 elections, Linda reflected on how different corporate America feels now, compared to that time at the bank. “I’ve received quite a bit of support in recent years from the diverse teams I’ve been on,” she said. “Not only have I seen greater opportunity, the leaders of those teams supported me by letting me be me and not force-fitting me into a certain mold.”

Our actions have global impact

“Throughout human history, societies have grappled with fundamental questions of how to organize themselves, the proper relationship between the individual and the state, the best means to resolve inevitable conflicts between states. And it was here in Europe, through centuries of struggle—through war and Enlightenment, repression and revolution—that a particular set of ideals began to emerge: The belief that through conscience and free will, each of us has the right to live as we choose. The belief that power is derived from the consent of the governed, and that laws and institutions should be established to protect that understanding. And those ideas eventually inspired a band of colonialists across an ocean, and they wrote them into the founding documents that still guide America today, including the simple truth that all men—and women—are created equal.

“But those ideals have also been tested—here in Europe and around the world. Those ideals have often been threatened by an older, more traditional view of power. This alternative vision argues that ordinary men and women are too small-minded to govern their own affairs, that order and progress can only come when individuals surrender their rights to an all-powerful sovereign. Often, this alternative vision roots itself in the notion that by virtue of race or faith or ethnicity, some are inherently superior to others, and that individual
identity must be defined by ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ or that national greatness must flow not by what a people stand for, but by what they are against.

...“The ideals that came to define our [North Atlantic] alliance also inspired movements across the globe among those very people, ironically, who had too often been denied their full rights by Western powers. After the Second World War, people from Africa to India threw off the yoke of colonialism to secure their independence. In the United States, citizens took freedom rides and endured beatings to put an end to segregation and to secure their civil rights. As the Iron Curtain fell here in Europe, the iron fist of apartheid was unclenched, and Nelson Mandela emerged upright, proud, from prison to lead a multiracial democracy.”

– President Obama’s remarks to European youth at the Palais des Beaux Arts Brussels, Belgium, March 26, 2014

The US election was followed with deep, vested interest by people in capitals, towns, and hamlets outside the United States with the understanding that the choice made in both Novembers in 2008 and 2012 would have an impact not only for Americans, but for people around the world. From the beginning, Barack Obama got this, as evidenced in his 2008 acceptance speech: “To all those watching tonight from beyond our shores, from parliaments and palaces to those who are huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of our world—our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared.” Similarly, choices made at multinational corporate headquarters in London, Stuttgart, Paris, New York, Mumbai, Shanghai, Chicago, and Los Angeles have great impact on the far-flung global corners of their companies.

In a world where events in Washington, Delhi, São Paulo, Athens, and Dubai have instant impact everywhere, the challenges that President Obama has faced have been, in some ways, similar for all business leaders. Our words, decisions, and actions have immediate impact on employees’ commitment and enthusiasm, and, by extension, on the quality of their work. “This challenges us as diversity leaders to step it up and come up with transformative ways of doing things,” says Deb Taylor, former Director of Global Diversity at Deere & Company.

Pauline Kiejman, a global human resources consultant and a French citizen working in the UK, viewed the dawn of the Obama Era in light of its effects on global diversity: “Obama’s election simply gave me hope. In a gloomy economic climate, watching the world celebrate this election together was truly uplifting. It made me feel there’s hope for the values of diversity, for real change in how we interact with each other. As I looked around me in our
London office, I thought about how diverse we are as a team—from Australians to Indians, Swedes, French, English, Scots, Irish, and Americans—and I hoped this could go even further in the future.”

Diversity and inclusion require intentionality

“To realize more fully the goal of using the talents of all segments of society, the Federal Government must continue to challenge itself to enhance its ability to recruit, hire, promote, and retain a more diverse workforce. Further, the Federal Government must create a culture that encourages collaboration, flexibility, and fairness to enable individuals to participate to their full potential.... By this order, I am directing executive departments and agencies to develop and implement a more comprehensive, integrated, and strategic focus on diversity and inclusion as a key component of their human resources strategies. This approach should include a continuing effort to identify and adopt best practices, implemented in an integrated manner, to promote diversity and remove barriers to equal employment opportunity, consistent with merit system principles and applicable law.”

– President Obama, Executive Order 13583 – Establishing a Coordinated Government-wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce, August 18, 2011

True inclusion begins with a deliberate proclamation, but it can’t end there. It must then be followed by relentless intentionality at every level of the organization.

When I first met Russ Fradin at the start of his tenure as Hewitt’s CEO a few years ago, he told me about his commitment to diversity, stressing that he was not so much for talking about it than doing it. “As I create my leadership team, I plan to have a diverse executive council,” he said matter-of-factly.

Sure enough, his intentionality surfaced when four of his nine direct reports were women and two were people of color. “Hewitt has a proud legacy of inclusion that is part of what makes us a special company,” he said then. “Our strong and long-standing commitment to creating a diverse workforce is not only the right thing to do, but it’s good for business.” He added pragmatically that Hewitt’s clients spanned the majority of the Fortune 500—“a diverse set of companies with a diverse set of employees. We find that reflecting this same diversity in our own workforce allows us to approach our work from multiple perspectives.”

Many other CEOs have led with this point of view, including Korn Ferry’s CEO Gary Burnison. “The world is more diverse than ever before, a multicultural mosaic of endless variety,” he says. “Celebrating the richness of that diversity
is the heritage of trailblazing societal changes that have empowered people to stand up for themselves and their identities. But diversity, alone, is not enough. Inclusion is diversity’s companion. While diversity honors our differences, inclusion bridges them. When a particular work environment or society is inclusive, there is a seat for everyone at the table. Conversations become enriched and exchanges of ideas gain texture as people contribute viewpoints and perspectives from how they see, experience, and participate in the world.”

Korn Ferry’s clients agree, plus add their own rationale. Says Bob Lane, Deere & Company’s former Chairman and CEO, “If we’re to succeed in today’s very competitive environment, which requires us to have the best talent from as many different diverse pools as possible, we need to treat diversity with the same focus and dedication as we have put into our company hallmarks, such as quality.”

Sodexo’s Chief Diversity Officer Rohini Anand reflects further on what this means in terms of changing the way organizations have operated in the Obama Era and beyond. “It might mean reframing how work is getting done. It’s a new day in many ways, and I think that we’re seeing a new generation, a generation of folks who have not necessarily seen the hardships of the Civil Rights movement. I think we know that there’s a lot more work to be done, but we need to reframe how that’s done. And think about new strategies to get there.”

We’ll experience a renaissance of values-driven decision making**

“We the people declare today that the most evident of truth that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls and Selma and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone; to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on

** Here the President continues the oft-repeated theme regarding the common bonds Americans share, and which represents his deeply felt value that we are each other’s keepers. “There are mothers and fathers who will lie awake after their children fall asleep and wonder how they’ll make the mortgage, or pay their doctor’s bills, or save enough for college. There is new energy to harness and new jobs to be created; new schools to build and threats to meet and alliances to repair. The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep...but America—I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we’ll get there. I promise you—we as a people will get there. So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other.”
– President-elect Barack Obama’s 2008 Acceptance Speech
Earth. It is now our generation’s task to carry on what those pioneers began, for our journey is not complete until our wives, our mothers, and daughters can earn a living equal to their efforts. Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law, for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal, as well. Our journey is not complete until we find a better way to welcome the striving, hopeful immigrants who still see America as a land of opportunity, until bright young students and engineers are enlisted in our workforce rather than expelled from our country.”

– President Obama’s, 2nd Inaugural Speech, January 21, 2013

Recently, a CEO prefaced a presentation regarding some tough decisions about cost management by saying, “Speaking from my heart...” He went on to explain how his leadership team had considered the tight economy and how difficult it would be for laid-off workers to find jobs. As a result, the company chose to offer voluntary reduced hours and unpaid sabbaticals, so employees would be able to keep their jobs and full-time healthcare benefits.

During the global financial crisis that began in 2008, Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) pledged to lay off people only as a last resort, and instead asked every employee to take responsibility for making hard cost-reduction decisions within their spheres of influence. Other companies made similar choices. As Pauline Kiejman observes, “As we work with leaders, part of the message now, more than ever, is the need for them to speak from the heart and, rather than draw on people’s worst fears, draw from their best hopes.”

Today’s Millennials in particular are demanding nothing less than for corporations to act as moral players who care for their people, the communities around them, and the planet. A company’s track record of making values-based decisions is as carefully scrutinized as their job offers, and what they find could either clinch or break the deal of whether they say yes or not. These rivers of doing social good run deep. Neither symbolic gestures nor inconsistent policies around common-good impact are tolerated as good enough. And as Millennials hopscotch into being half of the world’s workforce and, therefore, move more fully into leadership and management, they won’t be asking for values-based leadership—rather simply just doing it themselves.
We must have a heightened focus on results***

“I feel confident in being able to say that every one of the agencies in this government has been focused on how do they improve, get smarter, get better, get faster, become more focused on delivering good value to the end user.”

– President Obama’s remarks before the President’s Council on Jobs and Competitiveness, January 17, 2012

The Obama Administration has faced huge challenges in terms of the economy, the environment, terrorism, healthcare, and retirement. Every organization faces some of these same issues, albeit on a smaller scale. How do we come out stronger following a worldwide recession? How do we harness our know-how—our core knowledge and skills—to help our customers, clients, and constituents better address these huge challenges and still remain viable and financially strong?

Diversity and inclusion must not merely inspire, it must also contribute tangibly to business and organizational objectives. “Clearly in these tough economic times, heightened focus on results applies to diversity and inclusion as well. It’s not immune from the need to deliver results,” says Sodexo’s Anand. “We have to focus on the bottom line. And yes, in addition to contributing to profits, the work must lead to tangible and visible improvement to a company’s representation and culture of inclusion. Results must positively impact on our clients’ and customers’ quality of life.”

In 2008, Robert Parkinson, then Chairman and CEO at Baxter International Inc., launched the 75-year-old company’s sustainability philosophy and strategy. His approach is typical of an emerging mindset that puts its stake in the powerful combination of both a results- and values-driven orientation. Here’s how Parkinson framed it on Baxter’s website:

“**No global corporation can afford not to act responsibly in today’s marketplace. Baxter’s approach to sustainability reflects the quality of our management, our people, and our company culture. It also reflects the responsibility and accountability we must demonstrate to remain a global leader in our industry. We also see sustainability as a way to***

*** The President, like business leaders everywhere, is assessed on his results. Diversity is no exception to this political and business reality. “America, we have come so far. We have seen so much. But there’s so much more to do. So tonight, let us ask ourselves—if our children should live to see the next century; if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper [the 106-year-old voter he referred to earlier in the speech], what change will they see? What progress will we have made?***

– President-elect Barack Obama’s 2008 Acceptance Speech
attract and retain talent and make Baxter a rewarding place to work and develop. Ultimately, we believe our efforts in sustainability enhance shareholder value by making Baxter a more competitive company in an increasingly challenging business environment. Our efforts to bring lifesaving therapies to countries where many people still go untreated for conditions such as hemophilia, kidney disease, and others are not altruistic. It’s our business. But the goal is similar to other elements of sustainability—to save and sustain lives. It’s this higher purpose that binds everyone at Baxter together as a company and as global citizens.\footnote{1}

In his presentations to employees, Parkinson also emphasized diversity and inclusion’s role in creating a sustainable and profitable culture.

The bottom-up is as important as the top-down

“And above all, I will ask you to join in the work of remaking this nation the only way it’s been done in America for 221 years—block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand. What began 21 months ago in the depths of winter must not end on this autumn night. This victory alone is not the change we seek—it’s only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It cannot happen without you.”

– President-elect Barack Obama’s 2008 Acceptance Speech

For the diverse crowd of 250,000 in Chicago’s Grant Park on election night, the emotion of the night went beyond history-in-the-making or even beyond a partisan victory. What seemed to come from deep in the hearts of homemakers, professionals, janitors, executives, massage therapists, hip hop teenagers, actors, homeless people, college students, retirees, able-bodied and disabled people, and gay and straight people was the visceral sense that this moment wouldn’t have been possible without each group and each individual having actively chosen to participate. The consensus analysis of the 2012 election result was that this was even more critical the second time around.

Obama grounded his inclusion philosophy in the American national motto of “Out of the many, one” (E pluribus unum). Empowerment is much more than a state of mind. In the case of Obama’s election, it yielded a tangible historic result. When traditionally marginalized individuals are given an opportunity to have their voices heard and their talents showcased, the potential that is revealed will make what seemed impossible, possible—not just for them, but for the world around them. The culture’s sense is that we’re all part of making this happen.
There’s a lesson here for organizations seeking diversity breakthroughs. Baxter’s former Vice President of Global Inclusion and Diversity Don Wilson explains, “As much as we look to our leaders to set the course, no matter how right the path may be, it means nothing unless all of us, regardless of our role or pay band, find our place to contribute and step into it.”

“Both/and” trumps “either/or”

“For it’s precisely the pursuit of ideological purity, the rigid orthodoxy, and the sheer predictability of our current political debate that keeps us from finding new ways to meet the challenges we face as a country. It’s what keeps us locked in ‘either-or’ thinking: the notion that we can have only big government or no government; the assumptions that we must either tolerate 46 million without health insurance or embrace socialized medicine. What’s needed is a broad majority of Americans—Democrats, Republicans, and Independents of goodwill who are reengaged in the project of national renewal and who see their own self-interest inextricably linked to the interests of others…. I imagine they are waiting for a politics with the maturity to balance idealism and realism, to distinguish between what can and cannot be compromised, to admit the possibility that the other side might sometimes have a point. They don’t always understand the arguments between right and left, conservative and liberal, but they recognize the difference between dogma and common sense, responsibility and irresponsibility, between those things that last and those that are fleeting.”

- From *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* by Barack Obama, 2006

Through this mindset, Obama attempted to chart a course to move the discourse from either/or to both/and possibilities. Admittedly, this has proven significantly more difficult than anyone had imagined. However, as elusive as this has been, the only way out of polarized either/or debates and thinking is both/and.

While his realm is in politics—attempting new ways of addressing foreign policy, abortion, gay civil rights, healthcare—this also creates new possibilities in organizations. “There’s speed, quality, and low cost,” the workplace adage says, “but you can only have two out of the three.” Today’s upside-down, fast-paced world is rejecting this either/or choice. The times demand solutions that can deliver all three.
Both/and allows us to celebrate individual accomplishments, while still reveling in being our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers—to celebrate a working woman for her accomplishments as a mother and her success as a senior executive of a leading corporation; to create a more inclusive definition of diversity that goes beyond race and gender, but that still addresses the unfinished business of underrepresentation in management and leadership. That moving forward the work of diversity does not entail doing it at the expense of the White male, but rather including him in it in ways that he also benefits.

**True diversity and inclusion require calling out our differences, not minimizing them**

Here’s Obama on race:

“For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances—for better healthcare, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the White woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the White man who’s been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny…. In the White community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of Black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds—by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our Civil Rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of Black and Brown and White children will ultimately help all of America prosper.”

— Senator Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” Speech, March 18, 2008
Here’s Obama on sexual orientation:

“No longer will our country be denied the service of thousands of patriotic Americans who were forced to leave the military—regardless of their skills, no matter their bravery or their zeal, no matter their years of exemplary performance—because they happen to be gay. No longer will tens of thousands of Americans in uniform be asked to live a lie, or look over their shoulder, in order to serve the country that they love. As Admiral Mike Mullen has said, ‘Our people sacrifice a lot for their country, including their lives. None of them should have to sacrifice their integrity as well.’ … Finally, I want to speak directly to the gay men and women currently serving in our military. For a long time your service has demanded a particular kind of sacrifice. You’ve been asked to carry the added burden of secrecy and isolation. And all the while, you’ve put your lives on the line for the freedoms and privileges of citizenship that are not fully granted to you. You’re not the first to have carried this burden, for while today marks the end of a particular struggle that has lasted almost two decades, this is a moment more than two centuries in the making.”

– President Obama’s remarks at the signing of the repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Act, December 22, 2010

In the Obama Era, effectively calling out differences matters more than ever—not just in our interpersonal relationships, but also in product design, development, and marketing. Pharmaceuticals, for example, are realizing they need to address differences in their clinical trials, because the bodies and chemical levels of homogenous male participants respond differently than women’s bodies, and the physiological response of African Americans to certain medicines may be different than those of Africans or Latinos.

Likewise, BASF, the German chemical company, had a breakthrough on behalf of its client Adidas when it tuned into the reality that Asian feet are different from Western feet. That explained why Adidas running shoes were not selling well in Asia. As soon as the company redesigned the shoes to the realities of Asian feet, sales skyrocketed.

The same concept applies to people. For people to feel included in their work organizations, we must get better at constructively calling out the differences among the talent in our midst. This, in turn, will help us shape programs and opportunities that entice the best talent to come work for us, and then to do their best work and thrive. More than ever, organizations must build platforms that give voice to their diverse populations, which are still highly concentrated in the lower levels of our organizations.
“The Obama election taught us that we need to recognize and tap into the various different constituencies and their unique needs and points of view,” says Edie Fraser, CEO of STEMconnector® and its Million Women Mentors (MWM) initiative. “So, it’s very clear that the active participation of women, Hispanics, LGBT, and so many others in the electoral process—there’s recognition that in order to win, you’ve got to include diversity and inclusion in terms of volunteers, money, and votes. And so you’ve got to have the policies that call out and address the unique needs of various different groups.”

This quote of then Senator Barack Obama from his seminal speech on race, “A More Perfect Union” delivered at Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on March 18, 2008, captures the diversity and inclusion ethos of the Obama Era which is that calling out differences constructively rather than either destructively or, conversely, minimizing them as inconsequential, is much more effective: “I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.”

What is the Inclusion Paradox?

This brings us to the concept of the Inclusion Paradox, which will be used throughout the book to explore the various cultural dimensions of the Obama Era and beyond.

Before we can define the paradox, however, we must first distinguish between diversity and inclusion. These terms are often bandied about as synonyms. While they relate to the same ultimate goal, they are in no way synonymous. In The Inclusion Paradox, I offer a differentiated view of these two terms—one that has resonated with clients in diverse industries and different countries:

*Diversity is the mix. Inclusion is making the mix work™.*

Many diversity best practices have focused on bringing those who are different in the door. Many of these efforts have been quite successful, and companies have achieved diversity—the mix. But in many places, the mix is not working well. We end up with *diversity without inclusion*. Here, diversity’s promise—that greater diversity leads to greater innovation and profitability—dies.
Our inclusion deficiencies show up in higher turnover rates for people of color across the board, and for women in certain companies and industries. The non-budging nature of the different ceilings (glass, concrete, bamboo, tortilla, and rainbow) attests to the fact that inclusion has fallen short of its promise.

Without inclusion, advancement becomes difficult. Good management and leadership skills often are not recognized when they are manifested differently than the organization’s mainstream. And, rather than leading to new ways of doing things, “different” ends up being defined as poor performance.

How do we achieve both diversity and inclusion? For starters, we must challenge the long-standing “best practice” belief that to achieve inclusion, we need to minimize differences. Differences based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, faith, income, education, sexual orientation, physical abilities, military experience, and other dimensions are too ingrained, too hard-wired into what makes us and shapes our thinking. Trying to submerge these for the sake of a definition of inclusion rooted in sameness is unrealistic.

In other words, in order to have inclusion, rather than minimizing differences, we need to call them out constructively. This is what I refer to as the Inclusion Paradox.

Calling out differences has significant implications for workforce policies and programs. “The diversification of the workforce means that the term ‘average employee’ is fading away,” says Andy Hiles, former National Benefits Leader at McKinsey & Company and now VP Strategy, Actuarial and Underwriting, National Accounts at Aetna. “Workforce policies and programs designed to support the ‘average employee’ increasingly miss the mark in meeting employees’ needs and desires.”

Calling out differences unleashes the true creative contributions of diverse perspectives that play off each other and lead to better work relationships, greater innovation, and profitability that benefit individuals, teams, and organizations.

And throughout this book’s discussion, the Obama Era and its legacy will be the canvas against which we’ll explore how to apply the Inclusion Paradox.

A three-step approach to mastering the Inclusion Paradox
The foundation for creating true inclusion lies in organizations and individuals who can manage these called-out differences. They must possess a bundle of
skills—referred to as crosscultural agility—which entails three fundamental steps for navigating the Inclusion Paradox. Because the levels of awareness are interdependent and sequential, we must master these three steps in the following order:

1. It’s all about me. Know who you are and what you believe. What is the foundation for these beliefs? How do you put these beliefs into action? How do others perceive you and your actions?

2. It’s all about them. Know how others are different. What do you see in others? Why do they act as they do? How are their beliefs reflected in their actions?

3. It’s all about us. Know how to navigate the gap. Since you can’t know everything about everyone, consider how you can bridge the gap between what you know and don’t know. When is an issue personal, cultural, or something else? How do you make sure that what you said is actually what is heard? How do you resolve cultural differences to arrive at mutually satisfying solutions?

These three steps, coupled with the eight Obama Era implications, will help equip you for the lifelong journey of mutually transforming yourself, the people around you, and the organizations of which you are a part. Becoming culturally competent is an essential skill in our global, multicultural, multigenerational diverse world. Those who master it will be best positioned to thrive in this transformative time.

Site map for book

I wrote this book from the perspective of a get-it-done, strategy-focused, corporate officer and later C-suite consultant. It’s geared toward stimulating paradigm-shift thinking to achieve diversity and inclusion breakthrough in the workplace. At the same time, it is not a book about best practices and not intended as a detailed road map for change.

Every workplace is unique. What works for some may not work for others. Rather, The Inclusion Paradox looks beyond best practices and gets readers to open themselves to new ways of thinking about common and vexing challenges. In The Inclusion Paradox, I share stories as well as strategic steps that individuals, teams, and organizations can take to create true inclusion.
The Inclusion Paradox is divided into five major sections:

- Part 1: The urgency of inclusion
- Part 2: Calling out differences in relationships
- Part 3: Calling out differences in groups
- Part 4: Calling out differences in organizations
- Conclusion: Be the change you wish to see in the world

There’s a logical build from the first to the last section, but the chapters within Parts 3 and 4 are written topically, which means they stand on their own and can be read in any sequence based on what interests you the most.

Part 1: The urgency of inclusion

The emerging workforce is more diverse, virtual, autonomous, and empowered than ever, yet it is also smaller and less skilled. In this section, I lay out the business case for addressing the major global forces—demographics, technology, longer life spans, and financial risk management by corporations and government—that require a fundamentally different approach to the workplace. While drastic changes will be needed to engage and harness the energy of this emerging workforce, this book focuses on the need to create more powerfully inclusive environments.

Part 2: Calling out differences in relationships

Workplace clashes are inevitable. The seemingly minor mismatches and judgments of those who are different contribute to underlying tensions between people. When these differences are minimized rather than called out, “going along to get along” often leads to greater conflict and frustration rather than resolution. This section focuses on ways to create profitable interpersonal relationships in the workplace. It touches on the various ways in which we’re different—gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, and ability—and how this plays out in relationships among people who work together.

Part 3: Calling out differences in groups

In this section, I explore the challenges and opportunities related to today’s multicultural, diverse teams. I examine the sociological characteristics of diverse groups, as defined by gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, age, and ability—and how these play themselves out in intergroup interactions. By calling out differences and managing them effectively, organizations can achieve true inclusion and successful group relationships, which in turn leads to more profitable products and services.
Part 4: Calling out differences in organizations

Organizations have a compelling story to tell. In this section, I highlight those that have effectively, legally, and profitably utilized differences to execute human resources programs such as recruiting, performance management, benefits, leadership development, succession planning, and employee engagement. By recognizing differences, organizations can more effectively evaluate the success of their corporate brand, communications, and performance management processes, and as a result, can attract, engage, and retain the best talent from all backgrounds.

Conclusion: Be the change you wish to see in the world

I conclude this book on a note of hope. While the threats of the new world order are evident, so are the possibilities for an exponential explosion of creativity, innovation, and life-improving products and services birthed through the union of diversity and inclusion. Embracing the mix and knowing how to make it work will give us the power to create an alternative, uplifting, and creative vision.

On a more immediate note, I’d like to leave you with the message that corporations, not-for-profits, government, law enforcement, and the military will have to attract and retain the best talent from multiple labor pools if they are to survive the Talent War—and the key to attraction lies in creating truly inclusive environments. However, don’t be fooled by how soft and effortless that sounds—inclusion is one of the hardest things to achieve.

“This is our moment. This is our time,” Obama proclaimed as he closed his 2008 acceptance speech. In a world where rules are changing at a dizzying rate and we find ourselves facing unparalleled and simultaneous threats and opportunities, the question of the moment is this: In the urgency of now, in your life and in your work, what new possibilities do you see? The Inclusion Paradox is meant to help you answer this question.