



## Virtual Diversity and Inclusion Training: Lessons Learned

*My name is Audie McCarthy, and I am a white, boomer, cisgender female. I also happen to be the President & CEO of Mohawk College Enterprise. Aisha Zafar, co-author of this article, is one of MCE's amazing Instructional Designers. She is a millennial, a Muslim with Pakistani roots. This is our story.*

Our story is one of being open, to learn about each other and find ways to help our customers learn. It is about respect for individual beliefs and values while supporting a corporate mission, vision, and values. It is about understanding diversity and inclusion by first exploring our own implicit biases. Through reading, listening, researching, and discussion, Aisha and I arrived at a place where we were ready to share with others.

Or so we thought.

Aisha designed a series of virtual learning sessions focused on understanding implicit bias, using emotional intelligence as a tool to deeper understanding, and applying inclusive leadership. The content and design were excellent. The delivery of the first session did not go as well as planned. The audience was uncomfortable. Was it the content? Was it the unveiling of, and being confronted by, personal biases? Was it that Aisha, a young Muslim woman was the facilitator and, by the very nature of her presence, caused discomfort with the predominantly white audience?

We did not know. So, we explored each possibility. We revisited and revamped content and we made the decision to co-facilitate the next session. It was very well received.

This is what we learned.

### **Lesson #1: Set Implicit Bias as your foundation.**

Before discussing Diversity and Inclusion (D&I), it is essential to build awareness about implicit bias. Awareness provides the rationale for D&I by helping us to self-reflect and, thereby; understand our unconscious framework of thoughts and leading behaviours. This creates the opportunity to openly discuss diversity and inclusion as the mitigating forces of implicit bias once we have self-explored and understood our stereotypes and assumptions.

But be patient. This is about building trust. This is also very personal. Your audience will not automatically be comfortable sharing and they may not share at all at first. It is up to you to build that trust and to find ways to help them explore their biases in a safe environment.

We did this by applying some virtual tools.

First, we started with polls, asking what participants knew about implicit bias. This allowed for anonymous “discussion” and sharing, increasing comfort levels within the group.

Second, we shared statistics and stories of individuals who experienced the impact of implicit bias (such as unfair recruitment, gender pay, exclusion etc.). This fact-driven presentation raised the group’s awareness levels.

Third, we brought it back to the personal level. We shared some of our stories which encouraged them to share their stories.

Finally, we asked them to self-reflect. We encouraged individual exploration of implicit bias in their lives.

One of the activities we used was, ‘The Circle of Trust’; a great activity to demonstrate affinity bias. Participants are provided with a table to note down all the people (names or initials) they trust who are not from their immediate family. The facilitator then calls out a variety of categories and characteristics, such as age, gender, native language, profession, qualification, etc. Each participant places a checkmark beside the name or initials of the persons who share those characteristics with them. The group quickly appreciates how little diversity is shown on their list of trusted people – that is, their ‘Circle of Trust’ has persons in it that look just like them.

### **Lesson #2: Move beyond race.**

Diversity and Inclusion training cannot just focus on race; we need to consider and discuss diversity as an integrated whole. So instead of trying to change behaviours in one area to make *some* people more comfortable and feel inclusive, we must focus on transforming ourselves and our workplace to fit *all* people.

When training, add examples, articles, and activities that focus on the breadth of differences, both visible (physical disability, gender, age, etc.) and invisible (mental health, personality, etc.). This approach is more inclusive. We found conversations expanded by encouraging participants to share their diversity stories.

### **Lesson #3: Focus on belongingness and uniqueness.**

This strategy helped us focus the participants on the positives. We looked at the benefits of creating a culture where everyone feels they belong and can celebrate their uniqueness.

Here are two common definitions of inclusion.

- Including others who otherwise might be left out (e.g., members of underrepresented groups) by an invitation and appreciation for their contributions (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006)
- “the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure.” (Dictionary.com)

Based on our research, the following definition is the one we use and model. “The degree to which an individual **perceives** that they are the esteemed member of the group through experiencing treatment that satisfies their needs for **belongingness** and **uniqueness**.” (Randel, et al., 2017)

Build the two factors of belongingness and uniqueness into your training by incorporating various activities. We used group activities such as Zoom breakout rooms and other virtual tools such as Trello Boards and Mindmaps to foster collaboration and belongingness during sessions. For uniqueness, we encouraged sharing through polls (Sli.do, Mentimeter or Poll Everywhere), Zoom annotation, self-reflection, and storytelling to gain everyone’s perspective and encourage contribution.

### **3. Model Diversity and Inclusion.**

We co-facilitated our training, and we feel strongly that this made a difference in acceptance of content. By sharing our personal stories, we modeled the behaviour we hoped our participants would apply to their own situations. We made sure participants knew it was acceptable, and not unusual, to feel uncomfortable; it is all part of learning about, and understanding, others that are not like us.

We acknowledge we are not perfect. In a world where so much is happening at rapid speed that seems to be pulling us in a backward motion, we want to do our part to keep moving forward. We do this by asking questions, challenging our assumptions, and through continuous learning. To receive a copy of our list of resources regarding diversity and inclusion, please contact either Aisha Zafar ([azafar@mcecor.com](mailto:azafar@mcecor.com)) or Audie McCarthy ([amccarthy@mcecor.com](mailto:amccarthy@mcecor.com))

Thank you for listening to our story.

*Aisha & Audie*

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