



The Inclusivity Project: Inclusivity Training and Conversations Around Skin Color, LGBTQ Status, and “Other” in Greater MN

Introduction

The horrific death of George Floyd and subsequent protests-turned unrest/massive property destruction in the Twin Cities (and in other American cities) have sparked a sudden urgency to comprehensively address the systemic racism that is present in all corners of the state. Indeed, this is the call that Governor Walz has echoed and it's inherent in the goals underlying the “One Minnesota” program.

Yet, Minnesota is a crossroads not only on the subject of skin color and systemic racism, but also on the larger issue of what does it take to accept and live with anyone who is considered “Other” by virtue of their LGBTQ status, gender, disability status, religion, socioeconomic level or veteran status.

The truth is that particularly in greater Minnesota, people are afraid. White-color, Black, Brown, Indigenous people and other persons of color fear talking about skin color and prejudice because of what those conversations may produce. LGBTQ-identifying persons are afraid to be “out” because of the risks to their jobs or personal/emotional safety. Women are afraid to speak up or succeed beyond the limits that someone else has set. Persons with disabilities fear being further marginalized. Those of “non-mainstream” religious or spiritual beliefs fear persecution. People on the lowest economic rungs fear never getting out of poverty. Finally, our vets fear being labeled as emotionally unstable.

To date, we've done things backwards: we've attempted to solve the problems of racism and marginalization of persons who are “Other” without ever honestly examining why it is that racism and “Othering” exist. As a result, we simply don't appreciate or understand the true depth of racism and marginalization in our state. Even worse, the result is that our state has some of the greatest skin color and socioeconomic disparities in the nation.

For Minnesota to truly become and be a welcoming place, every Minnesotan must understand certain core concepts about human inclusivity. In summary form, this document sets forth what a comprehensive inclusivity training project for greater Minnesota could look like. I call this initiative “The Inclusivity Project.”

Core Concepts

To undertake this work, several core concepts must be understood:

1. Humans are habituated to group and label other humans. (Another phrase for this is “unconscious bias.) Often, this grouping/labeling is around identifying those who look and act like “us” versus those who don't—which makes people “Other.” When we encounter humans with similar skin color, socioeconomic levels, and a

host of other things, it's much easier to develop affinities, and thus build community. For those who don't share such commonalities—who are viewed as "them" or "Other—affinity usually lags, and community-building becomes more difficult, if not impossible.

2. Positive contact between diverse groups of humans (e.g. storytelling, personal story sharing, collective or joint project building, other activities that require or permit getting to know one another) break down barriers between "us" and "them."
3. It's possible to bring persons from different affinity groups together using intentionality, trust-building, vulnerability, and the right catalyst. ("Catalyst" is defined as a person [such as a charismatic leader] or event [think 9/11] that forces humans to transcend their normal boundaries.) In the absence of a catalyst, humans avoid such boundary transcending because it's often uncomfortable and requires a degree of introspection relative to biases, trauma, and self-perception.
4. Real culture change (the day-to-day lived human experience of those who belong to an organization, or even a society, that involves norms, expectations, and aspirations) can only occur when leaders urge and model such change. Rarely, if ever, does positive and lasting culture change occur from bottom-up.
5. "Human inclusivity" is the extent to which a human or group of humans feel that they matter to another group of humans, whether that be an organization or a society. (Some equate the concept of "belonging" with human inclusivity.) If a person feels that they matter, they are far more likely to invest in that organization or society at large. If, on the other hand, they don't believe or feel that they matter, that person will disengage from the organization or society.
6. Metrics for this kind of work are difficult to measure. At a minimum, this is long-term work, requiring possibly a decade to see results. Often, one must rely on anecdotal reports to initially gauge results. Otherwise, progress is proven by data: lesser organizational attrition, fewer persons living in poverty, higher student reading or other test scores, or higher mixed residential density of persons with different skin colors or socioeconomic levels.

The Inclusivity Project—Mechanics

I envision a project that will provide human inclusivity training and related conversations across greater Minnesota. This would be accomplished via:

1. The project would begin with a pilot, or test, initiative in one of the state's ten Economic Development Regions (excluding the 11th region for the greater Twin Cities)¹ as designated by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (MNDEED). After working out any bugs or issues, the project would then expand to the other nine regions. (Again, excluding the 11th region.)

2. In a post COVID-19 world, the human inclusivity trainings and conversations would occur in person, at multiple locations within each Region. If the trainings occurred before the virus is contained/before a vaccine, the trainings could occur online. (Note: I recommend commencing the trainings/conversations immediately; humans have short attention spans and frankly, current events in America highlight the need for immediate action.)
3. With the use of collaborators (broadly defined to include local governments and schools, the local United Way office and other nonprofits, major employers, health care organizations, library systems, and media outlets), the benefits of participating in Inclusivity Project trainings will be promoted and local residents ages 10 and above would be encouraged to attend. This could also include the expectation by employers that their team members would receive the inclusivity training.
4. Volunteers would be recruited to assist with each training (live or online). The roles would include assisting with registration/check-ins, assisting with various training needs (e.g. role-playing, acting as facilitators for conversations, etc.), and most importantly, for helping to keep the conversation around inclusivity going forward within their communities. The goal is to have the inclusivity training be the starting point for broader grass-roots efforts to make individual communities more welcoming and inclusive.
5. The inclusivity training must be dynamic, thought-provoking, challenging (but not too much), educational, and inspiring—on the latter point, humans don't respond to ordering but if inspired, they are more likely to change both their thinking and behavior.
6. Each training would be followed by a survey to participants to help identify weaknesses/blind spots in the training and to provide a sense of ownership to attendees.
7. To ensure that the project is self-perpetuating, the project will include a "train the trainer" component. This would require creating a training program with some process of selecting appropriate training candidates.

Cost

The cost of the Inclusivity Project has yet to be determined. Presumably, the cost of undertaking the project in the pilot/test Region would be higher compared to latter work in the other Regions, where economies of scale would factor in.

At an interested party's request, I would be happy to sketch out costs and a rough budget. Without even putting pencil to paper, I can assure the reader that this work, especially if online tools are used, will not be cost prohibitive.

Summary

In early June, Governor Walz effectively said, "We only have one more chance to fix" the problems inherent in structural racism. I would further proffer that unless we act quickly, the state may lose what very well may be a narrow window of opportunity to change how Minnesotans see and interact with anyone who is "Other" or "them."

Unfortunately, there is presently no comprehensive plan on how to deal with prejudice and "Othering" in Minnesota. The Inclusivity Project seeks to be such a plan.

I would welcome your assistance in making the Inclusivity Project a reality.

Respectfully submitted,

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1. Because the Twin Cities is ripe with resources to train on human inclusivity, the Inclusivity Project is only directed at greater Minnesota.

A Brief Bio for Ellie Krug: In 2009, when she was a civil trial attorney in Cedar Rapids with 100+ trials, Ellen (Ellie) Krug transitioned from male to female; she later became one of the few attorneys nationally to try jury cases in separate genders. The author of *Getting to Ellen: A Memoir about Love, Honesty and Gender Change* (2013), Ellie has trained on diversity and inclusion to court systems/governmental entities, law firms, Fortune 100 corporations, and colleges/universities on nearly 1000 occasions.

From 2011 through 2016, Ellie founded and oversaw a Twin Cities legal access nonprofit that was conferred an American Bar Association award for innovatively increasing legal access.

A hopeless idealist, Ellie has presented her inclusivity training, Gray Area Thinking®, across the North America. In 2016, Advocate Magazine named Ellie one of "25 Legal Advocates Fighting for Trans Rights" and in 2019, OutFront Minnesota conferred Ellie its Legacy Award. In 2019, the Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal conferred Ellie and her company its Business of Pride Career Achievement Award. She is also a monthly columnist for Lavender Magazine and a weekly radio host on AM950 radio. Her monthly e-newsletter, *The Ripple*, reaches 9000+ readers and can be found at www.elliekrug.com. Ellie presently lives in Minneapolis.