



How to Maintain an Inclusive Mindset in a Time of Polarization

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The past year has been a challenging one in many ways from the fears and restrictions of Covid-19 and the gut-wrenching instances of racial injustice to the brutal political campaign leading to the November elections. Powerful emotions and vehement opinions emerge when we deal with such potentially threatening and value laden issues. Often, we find ourselves at odds with others over differing views and reactions. When this happens, it is easy to jump to judgments and labels and write off those who don't see it our way.

Inclusion is impacted when this kind of polarization happens in our relationships, whether in workgroups, among friends or in families. We're left with trying to find healthy ways to deal with these differences. Here are a few actions you can take to maintain open communication and intact relationships when polarization threatens to shut them down.

TAKE A WALK IN THEIR SHOES.

One basic principle of human behavior is that no one does anything that does not make sense to him or her. Try to find alternative reasons for the other's views or behaviors by asking yourself how it makes sense to them. Consider what needs or experiences might have led them to think this way.

BE CURIOUS.

Seek to understand the person by asking questions with an open mind. For example, one of our colleagues posted a request on Facebook after an election in her

community. While 71% of people voted for a change in state laws regarding slavery, 29% voted to keep the existing statutes. Instead of demonizing the 29%, she invited them to have a conversation with her. Her discussions with a number of them gave her new insights and surprising information.

TAKE A LOOK INSIDE.

A strong reaction to someone's views is telling you that something important in you has been tapped. Ask yourself what value or need is being threatened. Why does this difference in opinion bother you? What does it mean to you?

OWN YOUR PART.

Examine your own behavior and reactions. Put the shoe on the other foot and consider how your opinions and reactions might be off putting to others. Where are you being close-minded, making assumptions or judging others?

TELL AND SOLICIT STORIES.

Slogans and emotionally charged words can inflame and push people apart. What brings us together are stories that are heartfelt and humanizing. No one can legitimately argue with another's experience or feelings. When we pay attention to someone's story and listen without judgment, we often find common ground where we least expect it and we gain deeper understanding and connection. The film "Best of Enemies," based on the true story of the unlikely coming together of a Black community activist and the local KKK chapter leader, does a wonderful job of showing how this can happen.

Maintaining an inclusive mindset takes work. It requires more energy to operate from the frontal cortex of our brains rather than from the automatic, knee jerk reaction center in our lower brain. However, it gives us the best chance to be in charge of our reactions and choose responses that are more effective and inclusive. We always say, diversity is a reality, inclusion is a choice. We all have that choice.

Here are few additional activities from our [Diversity Tool Kit](#) that may be helpful in developing and maintaining an inclusive mindset:

Diversity in Your Life
Modifying the Golden Rule
Assessing Plusses and Minuses of Different Cultural Norms
Interviewing: Recognizing Your Biases and Assumptions

Be sure to watch "**Sue Padernacht: Interview with Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe**" on [YouTube](#).