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Countering otherness: Fostering integration within teams

Exploring our feelings of otherness can help us discover how we are the same.

by Sabah Alam Hydari

By all accounts, 2020 was a momentous year. George Floyd's brutal murder spurred protests and riots across the globe and brought renewed passion to the Black Lives Matter movement. The coronavirus pandemic has been fostering a rise in discrimination toward those of Chinese and Southeast Asian heritage, while also affecting the lives and livelihoods of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic people more than it has affected white people.

These events have raised the level of awareness of the insidiousness of subtle and systemic racism for nonminority ethnic people—as has the #MeToo movement, which overlaps Black Lives Matter in its goal to dismantle oppression. There is also a rising willingness to recognize and overcome microaggressions at both the personal and the professional level; these ostensibly "casual" comments or behaviors perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes and reinforce a sense of otherness. For companies, especially those that, as a result of the pandemic, are shifting toward a hybrid mix of virtual and on-premises workers, these changes present an opportunity. What if business leaders could use this moment to increase the trust and performance of the teams they depend on by eliminating the interactions that cause some workers—whether virtual or on-site—to feel disadvantaged, excluded, minimized, or deflated?

My own path

As the daughter of the Pakistani ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, Mexico, Egypt, and Moscow, I grew up moving around the world, being the "other" in the countries we lived in. And yet, with the exception of a period of time during my high-school years, I forged my own path by *not* seeing myself as "other." This path led to studies at the London School of Economics and INSEAD, consulting at PwC, founding my own business, and serving in an advisory role at Aberkyn, a McKinsey company: it also led to work as an independent transformation consultant, coach, and facilitator. Most recently, my personal and professional experience has come together in the form of a process I call the forging team inclusiveness loop (FTIL).

This powerful mix of personal and professional experience felt particularly acute and bittersweet on a cold afternoon in October of 2017, when I left the hospital bedside of my ailing father—the ambassador, whose career and character had so directly influenced my own—and made my way to the London offices of a global tech company for which I was consulting.

I had been invited to the company to meet J, a recently promoted senior vice president. J already ran one highly diverse, multicultural team and had just inherited another. She was seeking the most effective way to integrate these disparate team members, who comprised old and new guard, men and women, several religions, various nationalities, and even different geographical offices. How could J, as their leader, quickly create a sense of shared identity and direction? How could she better assimilate and connect with the whole team and foster trust?

As I dashed from the hospital toward the client, I knew, as a team specialist and leadership coach: this is my niche. The confluence was painful and striking—my father lay dying at the very moment when I was about to give the inclusiveness loop its first tryout with a client.

Identity threat

The idea for the forging team inclusiveness loop first came to me after the string of devastating terror attacks in London in 2017. Alongside my visceral reaction to the atrocities, I felt the familiar sense of otherness creeping back into my being. It brought forth echoes of my high-school days, when I was on the receiving end of physical and verbal racial abuse—the racist slur "Paki" was hurled at me regularly. While mourning the senseless loss of lives, I was simultaneously compelled to recognize that my identity as a Muslim—a community being categorized indiscriminately, in an emerging global narrative, as "villains"—had begun to overshadow all my other identities. I found myself responding defensively during conversations with colleagues, referencing Muslim-led antiterrorism protest marches, for example, and citing instances of high-profile Muslims publicly condemning the acts.

Given my background and training, such defensiveness prompted introspection, during which I recognized how my feelings connected to a sense of "identity threat." Part of everyone's self-identity, of course, derives from belonging to social groups whose membership has a certain social significance attached to it. When a group we belong to does well, we relate that success to ourselves. But it works the other way around, too. Belonging to a minority group can lead its members to feel marginalized, disconnected, and deprived of opportunity. Belonging to a minority group with a stigma or negative association attached to it can compound these feelings. When people attempt to hide their threatened identity or to make an increased effort to fit in, authenticity can be diminished, fueling resentment within the person and further feelings of separation from colleagues or society as a whole.

As I began to understand my own internal dialogue, I became interested in finding ways to support others who shared these feelings. Leaders, after all, have to manage and maneuver within a complex melding of self- and social identity. Being perceived as out-group or other is likely to affect and even reduce their influence in organizations.

Successful leaders must therefore be skilled entrepreneurs of identity, managing their own internal and external responses in the face of perceived identity threat. It was exactly then, during the aftermath of the London bombings, when I decided to devote my professional energy toward creating inclusion for minorities and minority leaders and countering otherness within their teams.

These thoughts—and my thesis research at INSEAD—led to the four-part, interrelated inclusiveness-loop process. During my research, as I interviewed multiple leaders and team members, it became apparent that while being an obvious minority creates its own complexities, otherness can be inherent in *everyone's* experiences, including those of the archetypal white male. Research shows that perceived dissimilarities can affect the climate of inclusion that is crucial to team success.[1]

Shared identity

At the tech-company offices, the team's diversity was clearly a strength. J described them as a team that was accustomed to comparing experiences, asking broader questions, and reaching innovative responses to problems. Their diversity also made them an ideal test group for the inclusiveness-loop process. J and I had discussed the importance of nurturing each member's voice and sense of equality by addressing any feelings of otherness within the team. The goal was to increase empathy, alignment, and belonging, not just for team members but also for J herself, since leaders who practice inclusion help ensure team success. Social-identity theorists propose that effective leadership and influence depend greatly on the ability of leaders and teams to share a sense of direction and group identity. Leaders also act as a critical force in team development and success given their positional power and authority to implement formal and informal policies and accountability systems, which can help ensure team members treat one another with respect, value one another's contributions, and are rewarded in line with their contributions through performance reviews, informal acknowledgments, and other means.

FTIL is represented structurally as an infinity sign in order to symbolize the flexible and adaptable nature of the synergistic process (exhibit). Its structure also indicates that there is no start or end to the process of working to create powerful bonds, acceptance, and fairness among teams and leaders.

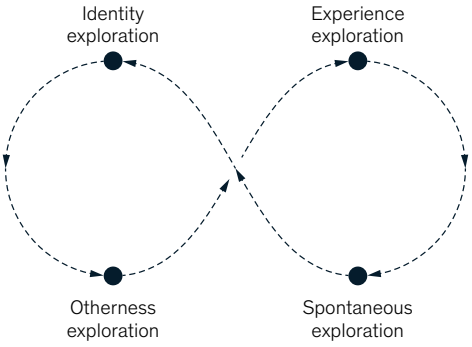
The inclusiveness loop consists of four parts. Before starting the FTIL process, however, a facilitator (who may come from within or outside the organization but who typically isn't a member or leader of the team in question) must make a crucial judgement: Is there sufficient psychological safety to undertake a process in which participants reveal vulnerable aspects of their inner lives? To make this assessment, and to proceed with the process, the facilitator will need to play a dual role—as a part of the process and as the person who both holds and contains the space. This dual role won't always be easy, and it requires skillful navigation of one's own inner landscape, since the facilitator's inner state will affect the ability to create the conditions of safety and containment that the

[1] Edwin J. Boezeman et al., "Looking beyond our similarities: How perceived (in)visible dissimilarity relates to feelings of inclusion at work," *Frontiers in Psychology*, March 2019, Volume 10, frontiersin.org.

Exhibit

The four-part inclusiveness-loop process creates powerful team and leadership bonds.

Forging team inclusiveness loop (FTIL)



process needs. In my own case, with my father critically ill in the hospital on the day of the workshop with J, I needed to make a concerted effort to acknowledge and "park" my anxiety, and to shift toward being present and open.

Facilitators will also need perspective on the team's culture, and its intrateam-leader dynamics, which will help them gauge the openness and commitment the leader has toward creating team integration. Some leaders may have come of age in an "achievement" environment, in which they were encouraged to compete, strive, and attain goals: grades, plum jobs, promotions, and so forth. In such an environment, and as a generalization, they may have spent less time learning about or developing themselves and their self-awareness than they have spent pursuing achievement goals. For example, many people remain unaware of the influence their past has on their present. Under stress, they can unconsciously transfer the past onto the present moment and behave destructively as a result. Moreover, if they are struggling with enough unexamined childhood trauma, leaders can be resistant to facing, owning, or healing their unconscious impulses—it can just seem too dangerous for them to do so.

That's why it's crucial that the facilitator be capable of gauging the emotional capacity of the team leader, as well as the psychological safety of the team. If the leader lacks that capacity, the facilitator would first need to help the leader toward a more open place of self-understanding.

Exploring hidden identity

The first phase of the FTIL process involves *exploring multiple identities*. Social psychologists have outlined how an understanding and appreciation of different identities and roles can be crucial to connection and integration.[2] Connection and integration within a team or organization (or even society as a whole) may be lacking when we aren't consciously aware of the wide range of characteristics and skills possessed by our colleagues, aside from their professional identities. Recognizing these differing facets can help humanize leaders, particularly in situations where leaders keep different aspects of themselves concealed out of fear of prejudice. But how do we encourage the sharing of hidden identities?

Start by creating a psychologically safe space in which to do so. An effective method of producing a safe, and playful, environment is through the use of art. Drawings can

[2] Catherine E. Amiot et al., "Integration of social identities in the self: Toward a cognitive-developmental model," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, December 2007, Volume 11, Number 4, pp. 364–88, journals.sagepub.com.

provide access to subconscious material and make it available for exploration in order to promote openness, learning, and healing. Indeed, getting the participants in my test workshop in touch with their creative sides has led to some introspective moments.

When J presented her own work (see illustration) to the group, for example, the team met her voice-over explanations with exclamations and nods of understanding; they had found unexpected common ground with her. J's powerful visual both demonstrated the challenges she faced in her life—juggling different responsibilities—and created resonance with the other team members, many of whom had similar personal and professional relationships and roles in their own lives. The visual also highlighted J's fun and playful side, which helped open the hearts and minds of the team while giving them silent permission to open up in similar ways.

As this first phase of the workshop continued, a Mexican national presented artwork relating to his religious identity, while a French national felt comfortable, for the first time, sharing his own religious beliefs with colleagues. Exploring their individual identities enabled the team members to connect with one another in new ways.

Exploring narratives

The second phase of the FTIL process involves *exploring experience* through storytelling. Stories are a powerful tool to lower barriers and encourage sharing in a safe and comfortable way—even within professional environments. Our individual narratives often highlight similar experiences and shared emotions, such as fear, anxiety, excitement, and hope. Sharing stories can tap into the deeply embedded archetypes in our collective unconscious. This can help increase empathy, raise tolerance, and ultimately create a sense of commonality within teams.

Drawings like this one can help teams share their hidden identities.

Moreover, storytelling has a restorative benefit for the storyteller—beyond the benefits to the team—especially when participants take the time to discuss, reflect upon, and affirm the story that's been shared. Because some people may feel apprehensive about sharing, the need to create a psychologically safe space for participants becomes even more important.

In this instance, we asked team members to recall a challenging or proud moment in their lives, ideally unrelated to work. Each individual used this exercise to tap into vulnerable, courageous, and inspiring memories. It was deeply moving to hear everyone's personal

journeys, to feel the humanity in the room. One member of the team, a divorced father, poignantly shared the moment when his daughter called him and joyfully announced that she had gotten the lead in the school play. He was her first call, and in that instant his fear about their lack of connection was lifted. I observed the second-most-senior team member's eyes soften and become teary upon hearing this colleague's story. The group had connected on a new and deeper level.

Exploring otherness

Perhaps the most delicate, and important, phase of the FTIL process involves *exploring otherness*. This step asks participants to be at their most vulnerable as they reveal their own sense of otherness. It also invites honesty about occasions when we have treated people as if they are other.

Opportunities for growth, understanding, and integration within teams come from collectively acknowledging and examining lived experiences in which individuals have felt judged or estranged because of some aspect of their identity. Openness can create awareness of underlying biases and of the negative impact of stereotypes. Not only can this help us understand our own feelings and responses in such situations, but it can also create a vital understanding of both similarities and differences in the experiences of being othered.

At this point in the workshop, as I shared my own story about the heightened Muslim identity I experienced after the London terror attacks, I felt a tremor within and connected to the remembered feelings of shame and sadness. Leading with this personal vulnerability broke the ice. A member of the team from Ireland spoke up about the negative impact of Irish jokes in the London office; a female member recalled walking into a team meeting and finding a flip chart with a sexual drawing; the American Jewish member spoke about hearing an antisemitic joke while traveling; the 37-year-old remembered being part of a team where most people were under the age of 26. The stories themselves were unique yet similar and relatable. The openness and sharing created an understanding about the impact of subconscious bias and how no one is really safe from it.

I then asked everyone to out their own biases by recalling a time when they had treated others differently: judging a new team member at work before meeting them; remembering the hostility toward the different kid at school; experiencing fear or apprehension about people, either at work or in one's personal life, because of how they look; inviting certain members into teams because they remind us of us and leaving out those who are harder to connect with; wanting to work with people because of their age or gender. By uncovering preconceptions about such things as age, race, gender, or physical appearance, future displays of bias may well be reduced.

A shared symbol

The final stage of the inclusiveness-loop process features a more organic exercise. This phase, *exploring spontaneity*, requires an approach that is physical, intuitive, or sensory, one that creates a new space that is meditative, reflective, energetic, and/or challenging.

Since the purpose of the workshop at the tech company was for J and her team to create a shared identity and goal, I asked the participants to work together to create a symbol that reflected both their team identity and their collective vision.

They debated and collaborated; they agreed and disagreed; they changed their minds several times. In the end, they created a multicolored bird with a great wingspan. This fantastical bird represented the team's collective ability to take a high-level view of their markets while also "landing" on precisely targeted aspects of that market. It celebrated the diversity of the team and the togetherness that they felt despite the geographical space between members. They were flying together to reach their performance goals.

What about results? The session ended with spontaneous hugs and high fives, which might indicate that, in the short term at least, the team had become closer. But to further evaluate the outcome of this FTIL process, I designed surveys to assess feelings of belonging and community and circulated these before and after the workshop. Post-FTIL, team scores were much higher for each of the following crucial metrics: knowing one another, feeling like a team, being willing to support one another, having a shared goal, and understanding the self. Results like these can boost communication and collaboration within teams and have a positive effect on company-wide culture—all of which have become especially critical during the COVID-19 crisis, with so many teams working remotely yet desiring a personal connection to their colleagues.

When I started my research at INSEAD, I worried that revealing too much about my anxiety might heighten my otherness. Toward the end of my journey, I felt a deep acceptance of self—and of others. It is through the recognition of joint anxieties and responsibilities that we can be empowered to create shifts in the way we perceive our own humanity and what we have in common with others.

Two weeks after that first workshop, my father passed away. During his long career as a diplomat, I saw him embrace each country and its culture, language, and people with complete openness. This valuable early life experience undoubtedly gave me the tools I needed to create an inclusiveness-loop process that can help individuals, leaders, and team members overcome their sense of otherness. During these seismic times, as we witness and support historic and catalytic movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, professional organizations are obligated to take action to stop any form of identity-based injustice. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are now recognized as more than just the injection of minority hires into companies, but instead as a way of making the most of the unique strengths of a multiracial, gender-balanced, and interconnected workforce. By introducing a process like FTIL, leaders can more effectively help their teams break down the silos created by otherness and, through intergroup contact focused on nonwork activities, foster a sense of belonging, authenticity, and meaning for all team members. Ultimately, exploring our otherness can help us discover our sameness. Q

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