

## **Toward Inclusion: A Key Necessity to Benefit from Diversity in a Multicultural World**

Bernardo M. Ferdman, Ph.D.

Distinguished Professor of Organizational Psychology, California School of Professional Psychology, Alliant International University, San Diego, California, U.S.A., & Editor, *Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion* (Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2014)

“...if we desire that change, we must first change ourselves” -Mahatma Gandhi

“We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him.... We need not wait to see what others do”  
-Mahatma Gandhi

Learning how to better communicate and engage across cultures is a fundamental requirement for success—perhaps even for survival—in today’s world. Certainly, it is quite important and necessary to recognize that the people with whom we come into contact do not necessarily share our values, world views, or ways of living and doing things, and that appreciating these differences can lead to better interactions and less conflict. Yet, I would argue that this recognition and the associated multicultural competencies do not suffice to permit gaining the benefits of diversity.

Diversity is more complex than group-level cultural differences: many or even most of us have cross-cutting and multiple identities, as well as many cultural influences and reference points, and so don’t easily fit into simple categories. Knowing about cultural differences is one step, but will not be sufficient to help us effectively interact and work with a variety of people who may not easily fit into preconceived categories. To work effectively with diversity and more importantly to derive its many possible benefits, we need greater fluidity; most critically, we need to understand and create inclusion. And we each need to do our part to build and foster inclusion in our groups and organizations and in our everyday interactions.

***What is inclusion?*** Inclusion involves creating full belonging and participation without requiring anyone to give up their differences. Indeed, inclusive groups and organizations provide an opportunity for everyone to belong, to contribute, to feel valued and safe, and to work with others without having to give up or hide important aspects of who they are. Inclusive groups and

organizations encourage their members (and potential members) not only to maintain their distinctiveness, but also to use those differences for collective benefit. When I feel included, I feel safe, accepted, engaged, valued, supported, and authentic, and I believe other members of my identity groups do too; I can be fully myself and so can others who are like me, as well as others who are different. I can be proud of my many strengths, affiliations, and identities, and I can use them in the service of my own and others' growth. When I am included, because I can feel secure in who I am, without sensing that my being or my core identities are threatened, I can stretch outside of my comfort zones, and be more likely to grow and develop into my best self. When I can be and become my best self—not in someone else's image, but in my own—I can contribute more fully and effectively as well as support others in doing so. When everyone in a group or organization can do this, then we will have truly made room for diversity and permitted ourselves to reap its benefits.

Building and sustaining inclusion requires practice, intention, leadership, and appropriate skills and competencies. And it often requires both individuals and organizations to change. For individuals, this does not mean that we have to change who we are, but rather that we must change the expectation that others should be just like us or that we need to give up important parts of ourselves to be full members and contributors. We each need to develop skills for behaving inclusively, for engaging in dialogue (especially in difficult or conflictual situations), and for working across differences. Another key component is courage: courage to be ourselves, and to permit and encourage others to do so. And we must learn to be comfortable with discomfort. Inclusion starts with ourselves—with believing in who we are and in making room for others to be who they are.

Organizations and their leaders need to work to eliminate invidious and systemic discrimination, to treat everyone fairly and supportively, and to build a culture of inclusion—one where everyone expects to be included and to include others. This means not only recognizing and honoring the reality of differences between groups —cultural and otherwise—but also removing historical patterns of discrimination and subordination and making sure not to use acknowledgment of group-level dynamics or differences as a way to force people into particular or limiting categories. In many cases, building inclusion requires examining and addressing long-held assumptions about power and voice. Leaders may even need to build room for and to encourage dissent. And so creating and building inclusion is not necessarily easy or simple. It requires attention, planning, and resources.

Inclusion is something that most people want, at least for themselves. To fully reap the benefits of diversity and truly build inter-cultural understanding, we must not only create inclusion for ourselves, but also build our individual and collective capacity to create and sustain it for each other, especially for those who are most different from us.

## References & Additional Resources

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**Bernardo M. Ferdman**, Ph.D., is passionate about helping to create a world in which more of us can be fully ourselves. Dr. Ferdman is Distinguished Professor at the California School of Professional Psychology of Alliant International University, in San Diego, California, U.S.A., and a leadership and organization development consultant specializing in diversity and inclusion, with almost three decades of experience. He consults, writes, speaks, teaches, and conducts research on diversity and inclusion, multicultural leadership, Latinos & Latinas in the workplace, and bringing one's whole self to work. Ferdman served as President of the Interamerican Society of Psychology and as Chair of the Academy of Management's Diversity and Inclusion Theme Committee and of AOM's Gender and Diversity in Organizations Division. He is a member of the Diversity Collegium, a think tank of diversity practitioners, as well as a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (including four of its divisions) and of the International Academy for Intercultural Research. Ferdman is the editor of *Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion*, the most recent volume in the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology's Professional Practice Series. He is a recipient of the Gordon Allport Intergroup Relations Prize from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. Dr. Ferdman received his Ph.D. in Psychology from Yale University in 1987. For more information and to contact Dr. Ferdman, please visit <http://ferdmanconsulting.com> or <http://practiceofinclusion.com>.