

## Language is your first intervention.

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum



*7-minute read*

“What looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity.” – Dan and Chip Heath, “Switch”

“Very different than what I expected.”

This is one of the most common kinds of feedback I get following a corporate workshop or presentation on diversity and inclusion. This feedback speaks to one of the biggest challenges facing this work and also one of our greatest opportunities. While we are increasingly gathering around conference room tables and talking about diversity and inclusion today, we are still not talking about the same thing.

### No common language

I have surveyed live and online audiences, asking them to simply tell me what “diversity” means. My experience has been that asking 100 people will get you close to 100 different answers, and some of those answers are polar opposites of each other. I also hear from many folks that “they hadn’t really thought about it before.” This explains why so few of our conversations about diversity and inclusion are meaningful or actionable.

There is real resistance to overcome. There is real bias, conscious and otherwise. But the single biggest barrier facing this work is likely the underlying confusion, misunderstanding, and lack of clarity.

We have not taken good care of our language and today there is no common language or narrative around D&I.

This means we are fighting a lot of battles that need not be fought. It is increasingly clear that this work must begin with and be anchored in a clear, common, consistent language and logic.

Today there are people in your workforce who think D&I is “political correctness run amok.” There are people who think it means quotas, a lowering of standards, special treatment for certain groups of employees, or hugging and drum circles. There are people who think it is some form of sneaky political agenda. None of these things are remotely true (well, there is occasionally some hugging). But when you say “diversity,” and when you say “inclusion,” these are the associations that some of your employees make. These are the things they are resistant to – not the actual work you are proposing.

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Diversity and inclusion are, to some extent, complex ideas. I am not saying they cannot mean different things to different people. Within your organization, there is a need for a common language. The work will still be hard, but everything gets much easier and more efficient when everyone is at least talking about the same thing.

### **A useful and clear definition of diversity**

A definition is, in some ways, a model, and one of my favorite lines about models comes from George Box. He said “all models are wrong, but some are useful.” Rather than trying to come up with the most perfect and poetic definitions for diversity and inclusion, I want definitions that are useful and clear. We continue to write beautiful, lyrical, rambling statements of commitment that are of no use. I am not super prescriptive in most aspects of this work, but I am increasingly prescriptive when it comes to language. If you want to change the D&I paradigm in your organization, begin with language. Let’s start with diversity.

Diversity means difference. This is what I find in the dictionary and I have found no good reason to use the word differently. Difference is what I mean every single time I use the word. When I need to speak about a particular kind of difference, I will add another word to the equation. If you use the word differently, I think you are inviting trouble and inefficiency. I see a lot of organizations that define diversity as the “ways we are different and alike.” This makes no sense to me, and I do not think it provides clarity.

Diversity means difference and difference is universal. There are very few things universally true of all human beings, but one of them is that we are all different. There are a lot of ways we can be different from each other. It should go without saying that not all kinds of difference have the same consequences, but they do have consequences – they are all potential building blocks for walls or bridges. Difference is relational. **Diversity does not exist in people; it exists between people.** We have to stop talking and thinking about difference as an individual attribute. Difference exists in relationships, interactions, and groups. Any time two or more people are interacting, diversity is present. Some folks think this is a small point, but I think it is rather large. This is where we start to change the existing paradigm.

If you label one person in a relationship or a group as “the diverse one” (which happens every day), you are also labeling the others in the group as “the normal ones.” And that has consequences.

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Properly understood, diversity is more of a force or dynamic than it is a thing, good or bad.

Compare it to gravity, for which we have never wasted any time calculating the business case. Gravity exists. It simply is, regardless how you feel about it. And it has consequences. How you interact with gravity makes all the difference in the world. Pushing a boulder up a hill is very different than pushing the same boulder down the same hill, as you are in a very different kind of relationship with gravity. Diversity is similar. It exists. Human beings are positively riddled with difference. It shows up in every single human interaction. It exists, and it has consequences. More diversity does not automatically make things better. It also does not automatically make things worse. What diversity consistently does is make things different. It is a catalyst – pushing social groups in one direction or another. More difference makes a social group more complex, which can be a good thing, as long as the group is strong enough and intentional enough to navigate that complexity. For example, more diversity generally means there is more potential for disagreement, tension, and conflict. Disagreement done well can be incredibly valuable; in fact, this may be one of the highest competencies for a group of people. Unfortunately, most groups (in and out of the workplace) do not know how to do disagreement well, and they end up suffering for their differences. The nature of the interaction determines whether it provokes performance or dysfunction. If we want to maximize the positive consequences and minimize the negative consequences, we have to do stuff. We might call this stuff the work of inclusion.

### What we mean by inclusion

I am less prescriptive with the word inclusion than I am with diversity. I think there is justification for greater variance. In general, I use the word inclusion in a couple of different ways. I use it to talk about the work itself – the active process of change, the things we do as individuals, groups, and organizations to more consistently and fully include people.

I also use it to talk about the experiential outcome, about what it means to be fully included in this organization or this community. In my experience, most organizations do not have much clarity in either direction. They have not identified which behaviors and practices are inclusive in their organization and they have no definition or model for what it means to be included.

All of this makes it really difficult to move forward, hold folks accountable, and measure progress and success.

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The experience of being fully included without consequences for real or perceived identity is one of the final products of this work, and if it is our product, we should be able to speak to its characteristics. What does it look like, feel like, sound like, and smell like to be included here? How do we know when it is happening? How do we know when it is not happening?

Wrestle with these questions; they are difficult, but important. We are talking about an experiential thing and our definitions are sure to be incomplete and imperfect. But they will be of value. Once we have captured in language what it means to be included, we can much more easily identify what kinds of behaviors and practices need to be in place to deliver that experience. We can also take that definition to our employees and ask them if it reflects their experience. Their answers become an incredibly meaningful metric.

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