

## EXCLUSION, INCLUSIVITY<sup>1</sup>, AND LAXNESS STORIES<sup>2</sup>

### How to Use These Stories

Leadership begins when people exhibit virtues with excellence. Virtues are standards of moral behavior, such as courage, integrity, kindness, and humility. This document focuses on the virtue of inclusivity. When we lead with exceptional inclusivity, we feel deeper satisfaction over what we accomplish, we help and benefit others, and we improve the world around us.

Like all virtues, too much or too little of a virtue is a vice. Thus, when people are not inclusive enough, they exclude others and make them feel unwanted, left out, unappreciated, or belittled. When people are too inclusive, they become lax, lowering their standards and failing to set high expectations for behavior and performance.

Leading with exceptional inclusivity is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of inclusivity between exclusion and laxness. It is difficult because an inclusive action in one situation is not an inclusive action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit inclusivity, and in many of these cases each person—including you—will be partially right and partially wrong, and we need to learn from each other and work through conflict to sort this out. Even when you figure out how to exhibit exceptional inclusivity, it is also important to communicate what you are doing to others so that they will understand what you are doing.

This document contains stories of people being inclusive and of failing to be inclusive. (The titles next to people's names are their titles at the time the story occurred and may not be their title currently.) Discussing diverse situations in which people failed or succeeded to live up to their values often helps people to recognize and act on other opportunities when they arise. By discussing these stories in meetings, on teams, over internet or intranet forums, or in classrooms, groups can come up with ideas for leading with exceptional inclusivity, learn each other's perspectives, work through disagreements, and generate ideas. For example, you might read and discuss one story at the beginning of a weekly meeting, post a story on a team forum and ask people to share their thoughts, begin a work shift by discussing a story, use a story in a town hall meeting, or use the stories as fodder for discussion in classroom settings. The following questions may be helpful in discussing the stories. Choose whichever questions are most helpful for your group.

---

<sup>1</sup> In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of inclusivity, these stories may also be used for discussions about diversity and supportiveness.

<sup>2</sup> The stories in this document were written or told by the protagonists. Ryan Quinn edited them and added the reflection questions. The stories are to be used as the basis for class discussion, and not to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of a particular situation. Some protagonists agreed to use their real name, others asked for us to use a pseudonym. The goals of this document include becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations you may encounter in the future.

1. What, if anything, did people do in this story that was inclusive?
2. How could the people in this story have been more inclusive? How could they have been exceptionally inclusive?
3. How might some experiences from your own life be similar to this story?
4. What inspires or elevates you about this story?
5. What disappoints or angers you about this story?
6. What might you have done in this story to overcome your disappointment or anger and help the person who disappointed or angered you to do better?
7. What caused the people in this story to behave the way they did?
8. Who in this discussion disagrees with you? What could you do to understand this person's point of view?
9. How might your perspective on this story be wrong?
10. What ideas can you take from this story and discussion to apply in your own life?

### **Story #1: Luvelle Brown, Superintendent**

When I arrived as a newly-hired superintendent, there was a court case over a racial issue which had been filed against our district. Some White males were bullying a Black female on the bus. They were calling her all kinds of names. It was happening every day. The mom tried hard to let folks know it was happening. It was just falling on deaf ears. The school district was irresponsible and irresponsive through the entire process. I think some people saw the emails, and saw that this was happening, but quite frankly, they felt like they didn't need to do much about it. They thought, "It will get taken care of," or "It can't be that bad," or "They will figure it out." It just felt like it was a bureaucratic system that could care less about serving this county. To allow something like that to happen just showed a lack of love from our leaders, and that cannot happen.

The school district ended up losing a million-dollar civil case associated with this. It came down the fact that nobody responded to emails from the parents begging for help.

This incident ignited a lot of racial issues, that ended up deeply dividing our community for years. Some of the parents back then said that they did not know who to call when the Board of Education did not answer emails.

When I arrived, I thought returning calls and emails was key to establishing trust. We created an expectation to respond to every inquiry in our school district within 24 hours, and if we do not accomplish this, we expect folks to let us know about it so we can do everything we can to fix it. Also, we make sure everybody in our community knows that if there is an issue, this is who you contact first, who you contact next, and so on. All of this is very public now. We learned to do better at communicating and we learned that we must engage in two-way dialogue.

Then there was a bigger issue around empathy, the care of the young people, and customer service. Our employees and our community saw our school district how they saw our

federal government: too big and bureaucratic to get things done. In their minds, that was why customer service was so bad. Everyone's frustration level was so high with trying to navigate the bureaucracy, that they just gave it a pass. That was just the way it was. After I arrived, we started saying that it is not going to be that way anymore. People are reconditioning themselves to think about our organization differently. Its size is just a fraction of many responsive, caring school districts. We took that excuse away as well. I think we changed some minds there.

So now, every issue we handle, we tackle it with an approach of love. Our culture has changed. We cannot allow the young people to feel like their voices are not heard.

## **Story #2: Kevin Potts, Physician**

I wondered how I could help lead our medical school as I prepared for my first medical school admissions committee meeting of the year. The importance of this process cannot be understated. The metrics and qualities that are used have to be in a proper balance or we could fail in accepting and training the best possible young physicians.

As I thought about how to approach the process, I thought about my experiences serving on the committee for the last three years. Typically, the committee would emphasize, and even fixate on, specific performance metrics. I saw this as a problem, and I tried to solve it. My attempts to "solve" their preferences typically led to unproductive debates on what is more important, test scores or accomplishments and personality traits learned from the interview process.

This time, during the meeting, I tried to keep my expectations to a minimum. Instead of waiting for an opportunity to push my agenda and expect people to agree with my approach, I decided to focus on the overall purpose of this committee: To admit the best overall applicants, while adhering to our mission of diversity and inclusivity. For example, at one point in the meeting I advocated strongly for an applicant that I interviewed. One of my colleagues confronted me with this applicant's Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) scores and grade point average (GPA). The committee had deliberately withheld these scores until the meeting to avoid biasing the interviews. The applicant's scores were slightly below the average.

Because I had decided in advance that I would not try to solve the problem of how to convince my fellow committee members to my point of view, and instead was trying to work together with them to admit the best overall applicants (which included adhering to our mission of diversity and inclusion), I did not become argumentative when I was presented with the applicant's MCAT scores and GPA. I simply raised the question of whether it was more important for our medical students to perform well in a test on a single day, or whether we wanted compassionate, properly motivated and dedicated individuals.

The committee admitted the applicant unanimously. This kind of agreement is uncommon this early in the admittance process.

### **Story #3: Patrizia Castiglione, Worldwide Manager, Product and Process Quality Assurance**

An employee in my area had gender dysphoria and was transitioning from presenting as a male to presenting as a female. This employee arranged an individual meeting with me. She wanted to share her plans and answer any questions I had. (She presented as a male at the time, but she has now transitioned to presenting as a female, so I will refer to her with female pronouns). She also offered to loan me a book called “Trueselves,” which is a resource for the coworkers and family of transgender people. After the individual meeting, the next step was to hold a meeting with this employee, her first line manager, another second line manager, myself, and a representative from Human Resources in order to develop a plan for communicating about her transition to the rest of the organization.

As I prepared for this meeting, I realized that I did not really know how this employee felt. In addition to my job, I was enrolled in an Executive MBA program at the time and was overwhelmed with reading. In spite of this, I read the book she had lent to me because I did not feel like I could do a good job in the upcoming meeting if I could not understand how she felt. The book helped me tremendously.

The planning meeting went very well. We listened to the employee’s proposal and offered suggestions. My increased understanding of gender dysphoria made it easier for me to understand why the employee proposed the plan that she did and helped me to be more effective in making suggestions for improvement. We all agreed on a solid plan to help the employee manage the stress of transitioning, to help coworkers be supportive and respectful, and to avoid awkward situations at work. Another employee ended up transitioning at the same time, the two of them supported each other through the process, and most of their colleagues were supportive.

### **Story #4: Aisha Bibbs, Assistant Brand Manager**

When I first came on board to my company as a diverse hire, I was unaware of the numerous resources available to create and support diversity, from employee resource groups, to pride parades, to constant touch points and training. It was great that the company had such resources, but the company did not do a good job of letting employees know about these resources. I felt like this was a missed opportunity. However, I could see why this detail was overlooked, as I was one of only two diverse hires on my 20-person team. It can be hard to remember to tell people about resources when you never use those resources.

I decided that I was going to create a strategy to inform new hires about these resources so that the next hire would have a better experience than me. The retention rate of diverse hires was low in our company, and I felt that if we did a better job of informing new hires about these resources, we could create a support system that would keep them around longer. The Human Resources team was ecstatic to join in on the project and provided me with statistics to present to managers to get their support for moving our plan forward. The support from Human Resources

made me feel validated, and my own team expressed an eagerness to learn how to improve as well.

On one hand, my project expanded. Not only did we provide diverse hires with existing resources, but we also created a marketing strategy to communicate an inclusive working atmosphere to customers. We even changed the stereotyped image of the company's mascot. On the other hand, the longer I worked on the project, the more it felt like executives wanted to check a box, rather than enact real change for the long term. My own department was also very hesitant to implement our strategies in their internal and external messaging. Eventually, I felt like the workplace became too toxic and discriminatory and I left the organization.

### **Story #5: Brad Smith, Superintendent**

Before I became superintendent, there was a pattern in which the school district collected the student learning data required by law and provide the data to the school board, but no one did anything with the data. When I asked why we did nothing, people would answer that we could not expect anything different from "these kids." No one said it explicitly, but it was clear that the phrase, "these kids" referred either to children of color or kids of low socioeconomic status. Some people would dress up these sentiments in nicer academic language, but the message was the same: "You cannot expect high performance from kids that are intrinsically low performing." When our teachers or administrators did not expect success from our students, it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If they believed that "these kids" could not succeed, then they would not push them to succeed, and if they did not push them to succeed then they would not succeed. It became a downward spiral. That idea was embedded in the district's culture.

When I became the superintendent, my highest priority was to purge that attitude. I did it as aggressively and as consistently as I could. I would tell teachers that I expected their students to achieve a specific level of high performance. I can think of a few, specific teachers who would look at me in the face and tell me that I cannot expect that level of performance from their students. I just looked back at them, square in the eye, and said, "Ethically speaking, you are off your rocker. Either you are ignoring the facts, or you are so ethically compromised that you cannot see the inherent racism in what you are saying. Either way you do not belong in this district." I had just that level of point-blank conversation with folks. Sometimes I think it was warranted and necessary. Sometimes it may have been overstated on my part. However, that is how deeply ingrained that attitude was. I could have that conversation with people, and they would look at me like I was from another planet. In some ways, we made significant progress. In other ways, our district was still struggling with this issue when I left.