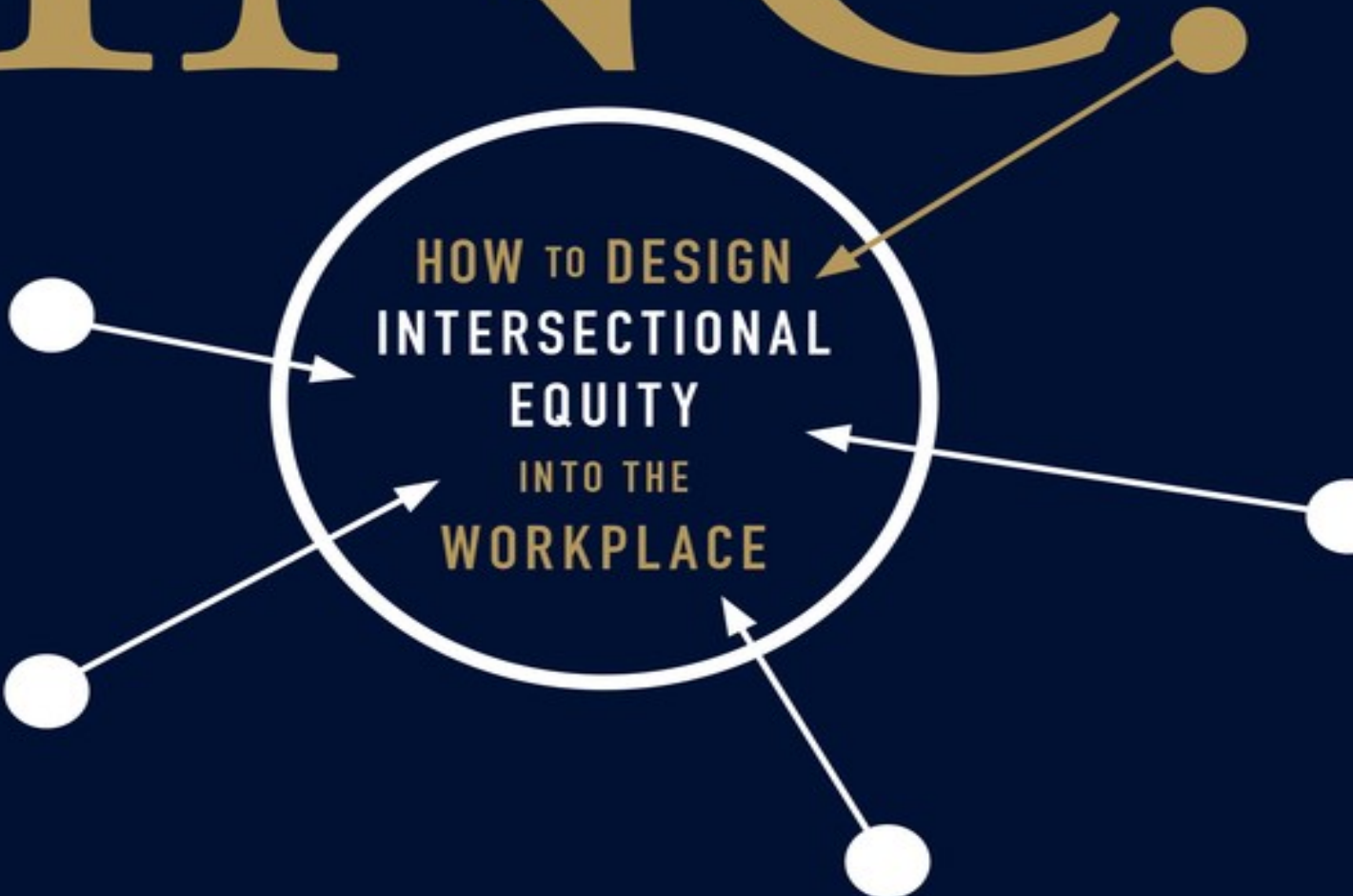


SARA SANFORD

INCLUSION, INC.



HOW TO DESIGN
INTERSECTIONAL
EQUITY
INTO THE
WORKPLACE

WILEY

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SARA SANFORD

INCLUSION, INC

**HOW TO DESIGN INTERSECTIONAL
EQUITY INTO THE WORKPLACE**

WILEY

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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sanford, Sara, author.

Title: Inclusion, inc : how to design intersectional equity into the workplace / Sara Sanford.

Description: Hoboken, New Jersey : Wiley, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021062103 (print) | LCCN 2021062104 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119849766 (cloth) | ISBN 9781119850038 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781119850021 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Intersectionality (Sociology) | Work environment.

Classification: LCC HM488.5 .S26 2022 (print) | LCC HM488.5 (ebook) | DDC 305.3—dc23/eng/20220119

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021062103>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021062104>

Cover Image: Wiley

Cover Design: Wiley

*For my parents, for always believing.
And for anyone who's ever been underestimated.*

Language Guide

Readers will come to this book with varying levels of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) vocabulary. The dialogue around DEI is continuously evolving, and words can have different meanings for different people. This brief guide provides a common language framework for the rest of the book. It is not intended as a glossary, but rather to clarify how DEI language is being used in *Inclusion, Inc.*

Black

Why is “Black” capitalized in this book, but not “white,” when referring to race?

In July 2020, the *New York Times* announced that, after a month of discussion, they would capitalize *Black* when describing people and cultures of African descent.¹ Hundreds of news organizations, including the Associated Press, made the same choice in the spring and summer of 2020. Most news organizations have declined to capitalize “white” because it is an identifier of skin color, rather than of shared experience.

For the reasons stated by these organizations, I have chosen to capitalize “Black” and not “white” when referring to race in *Inclusion, Inc.*

DEI

The term “DEI” stands for diversity, equity, and inclusion. In this book, it is used to refer to the field of work that focuses on ensuring that employees of all backgrounds—especially underestimated backgrounds—are included,

treated fairly, and given the same opportunities to advance as their peers.

Diversity. The presence of individuals who differ from one another in a range of ways, such as socioeconomic status, age, gender identity, ethnicity, race, language, and religion.

Equity. Fairness of treatment for employees of all backgrounds. The distinction between *equity* and *equality* is important: Equity does not mean equal treatment, but rather creating equal access to opportunities through equitable practices.

Inclusion. Moving beyond recruiting underestimated individuals to involving them in decision-making and valuing and rewarding their contributions. One of my favorite definitions of inclusion came from DEI expert Verna Myers: “Diversity is being asked to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.”

Intersectionality

How class, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and other aspects of identity “intersect” with one another or overlap. For example, the experiences of being Latinx *or* being a woman are not the same as being Latinx *and* a woman. Certain biases are only experienced when living at the intersection of these two identities.

Neurodivergent

Refers to individuals who experience different neurological functioning than the majority of the population.

Neurodivergence may present as autism, attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette syndrome, or in a number of other forms.

Underestimated

Why is the term “underestimated,” rather than “underrepresented,” used to refer to individuals and groups that experience bias in the workplace?

In 2015, Arlan Hamilton founded the Los Angeles-based venture capital firm, Backstage Capital, to invest in “underestimated founders,” including founders of color, women, and those who identify as LGBTQ. She also used the term “underestimated” in the title of her book, *It's About Damn Time: How to Turn Being Underestimated into Your Greatest Advantage*.

I wanted to adopt this term because in many cases, I believe it is more accurate than “underrepresented.” For example, “underrepresented” is not accurate when women make up over half of a group. Although they may not be *underrepresented*, they remain *underestimated*.

When you see the term “underestimated” throughout this book, I am using it to refer to groups that have historically experienced systemic bias toward a facet of their identity, such as race, gender, age, nationality, disability status, or other characteristic that is not considered the “default.” I think this term better reflects the untapped potential of these groups.

I still use the term “underrepresented” occasionally, when it is a contextually accurate descriptor of the group or individuals being discussed.

Note

- [1.](#) John Eligon, “A Debate Over Identity and Race Asks, Are African-Americans ‘Black’ or ‘black’?” *New York Times*, June 26, 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/us/black-african-american-style-debate.html>.

PART 1

Equity—It's Not Personal, It's Systemic

CHAPTER 1

Beyond Good Intentions

I thought 2016 was going to be a year for the underdogs. The Cubs were having their moment. It had been 108 years since they had won a World Series.

Yes, Cleveland had home field advantage. Yes, the Cubs were coming back from a 3-1 deficit, and only five teams in history had come back from that far behind to win. But when I deplaned in O'Hare, I believed the fanaticism surrounding me could beat any odds. I hadn't felt that kind of energy since Seattle's "Refuse to Lose" euphoria in '95.

I wasn't in town specifically for the Series, but I came from a baseball-loving family, and my parents had Chicago roots, so I was going to soak it up while I had the chance. Everywhere I went, I was seeing either Cubs signs or Hillary signs. *#ImWithHer* banners peeked out from under *End the Curse!* flags. All around, history seemed to be in the making.

I was in Chicago for work, and at the time, I had what I thought was a corporate do-gooder's dream job, overseeing DEI programming for a large financial company. I had spent the first part of my career advocating for equity from the other side, either in nonprofits and international NGOs, or through the lens of public policy. I had seen the limits of working on systemic problems from the outside, and I wanted to drive change from within. So, I had made the leap to the financial sector, determined to diversify the original old boys' club.

At the time, I felt optimistic. My employer had invested both time and budget. Employees, including executives, had attended trainings. We made sure our website didn't

feature only stock photos of white men, and we ramped up our recruiting efforts to diversify our candidate base for job openings.

We had also created affinity groups for people of color and women, to provide a sense of community and opportunities for networking. To support our women's affinity group, we decided to invite a dozen members to join our executive team at a major financial services conference in Chicago. They would have an opportunity to get to know our executives over an intimate dinner and learn how committed our leadership team was to our diversity initiatives.

The dinner fell on the seventh game of the Series. I caught the top half of the first inning in the hotel lobby before we all left together. At the restaurant, a mainly Black waitstaff showed us to our private dining room. Pseudo castle doors separated us from the rest of the restaurant. The waiters gripped the iron door handles with both hands, braced themselves, and heaved backward to unseal them and haul them open.

We had our own décor—mock Medieval. I imagined the instructions the waitstaff had probably been given to provide us with “exceptional” service in this finance-friendly steakhouse that resembled so many others.

For me, the dinner was a means to an end. I needed to see that our leadership team understood the promise of diversity initiatives as a business imperative. I wanted management to genuinely believe supporting inclusion was a good call.

Those hurdles had now been cleared. Our affinity group had made it to the castle. Around us hung wall art in powerful frames: out-of-period noblemen in braided coats on rearing steeds, both species puffing out exaggerated

chests. These were no rough-shod ponies of the Wild West; flaxen manes cascaded over their elegantly rounded shoulders. Hooves glistened. These were proper equine trophies, symbols of their riders' net worth.

“Have you decided on your order?” A waiter interrupted my thoughts.

“The salmon, please. Thank you.”

As he left the room, I overheard a snippet of the Cubs game broadcast in the restaurant. Bottom of the fourth. I couldn't hear who was ahead.

I was seated between the VP of Business Development and my boss, a woman I looked up to and had learned from. She was one of few female leaders in the industry. Glancing around the table, I felt a brief sense of pride. The women from our affinity group seated with the executive team made this the most gender-balanced financial dinner I had attended.

I had gotten to know one woman at the table a little better during the conference. I'll call her Irene. She had confided to me that she had waited for decades to launch her own career in finance because she felt that, as a woman, she wouldn't have been taken seriously until a few years ago. I had assured her that she was in the right place, that our affinity networks were created with her in mind.

As the night went on, I lost track of how long we had been there. I excused myself to use the restroom. As I pushed open the heavy door to reenter the main restaurant, I saw there were no guests left. Tables had been wiped and chairs were stacked against the walls. I cringed. The waitstaff were patiently standing by the walls, hands folded over their aprons, waiting for us. We were already an hour over our time. We were the customers I had dreaded in a

previous life. I apologized and said I'd try to get our group to wrap it up.

The kitchen radio blasted the game. They were headed into extra innings.

When I returned to our room, I told the group that we were the only ones keeping the place open and suggested we take the party back to the hotel bar. But the conversations carried on. After another 20 minutes, one of the Black waiters slipped in gingerly and asked if everyone was happy with their evening before they wrapped up for the night. He was ignored. He tried again. "I'm so sorry to put an end to what looks like such a fun night, but we are going to have to be closing up soon."

Irene cut him off. "Oh, honey, we pay your bills, so we'll be leaving when we're leaving."

Our server nodded and retreated. As the door was slowly closing, but still partially open, Irene exclaimed loudly, to the whole room, as if sharing a joke she needed everyone to hear the setup for, "You know what I miss? *Back in my day*, I could have called him 'boy' and no one would have had a problem with it. *Back in my day*, I could have had him fired for speaking to a white woman that way."

A moment later I found myself standing. I was on my feet, an involuntary reaction, irrepressible. I was not weighing questions of correctness; it was far more basic. Somehow I thought I could not be the only one, but around the table my colleagues were only staring, staying seated, saying nothing.

"Oh honey, sit down, don't get upset," Irene urged.

Nervous laughter rattled through the room.

My hands went cold. *How could I be the only one? They all said they cared. They made public statements. What are*

they doing? Why is nobody saying anything?

A roar was audible from the kitchen. The Cubs had gone ahead.

When my voice came, it was shaking. “Back in your day,” I reminded Irene, “you wouldn't be sitting at this table. *Back in your day*, you wouldn't have been taken seriously as a woman in this profession. We're all here tonight because we don't want to go back to that time.”

An exec nervously pushed around chunks of his surf and turf. I picked up my purse and coat, gave the castle doors one last shove, and left.

I rushed past the servers waiting to clear our table, out of the restaurant, and into a lone taxi waiting like a lifeboat.

On the way back to the hotel, triumphal horns blared throughout the city. I wanted to rejoice with my euphoric driver, but I was stunned.

I was not a victim in this situation. Nor was I a hero—I was simply mistaken. I thought that because our company had invested in these inclusion initiatives, our culture had actually changed. I thought the executives sitting at that table who had stated their commitment to diversity and attended trainings would have stood with me. I didn't think I was going to be alone.

We had checked all the right boxes, but the unspoken code of conduct hadn't changed. We had had our moment of truth, and nobody stood up.

And by running the programs that let us think we were the good guys, I was complicit.

How had this happened?

≈

The following Monday, I got the call from HR: My position no longer existed in the organization. I was terminated, effective immediately. The reason given was a recent merger. I knew about that merger. I had helped coordinate the resulting reorg, and I knew that all staffing decisions had been made months ago, so I found this difficult to believe. Either way, we were happy to part ways.

A few months later, I attended a CEO panel at the top of Seattle's World Trade Center. The topic: *What Does It Mean to Be an Effective Leader?*

The year was 2017, and the #MeToo hashtag had turned into a rallying cry for millions. Social activist Tarana Burke had coined the phrase in 2006 to build solidarity among survivors of abuse. More than a decade later, Alyssa Milano retweeted the phrase one night, and by morning, a movement was born. Around the world, women were taking the secrets they had kept inside whisper networks out into the international spotlight. Hollywood's leading ladies founded Time's Up to cover legal costs for victims seeking justice. Everywhere I went, I heard "Me Too."

Tarana Burke held the movement accountable, continuing to speak out for women who weren't going to be protected and still had to show up to hostile workplaces every day. For the movement's legacy to have meaning, she argued, employers would need to take meaningful action. It was up to business leaders to take the next steps.

In the audience at the Trade Center, I was waiting to see which CEO was going to take that next step. The panelists spoke about managing growth in a quickly scaling business, retaining customers in the face of increasing competition, and the impact of artificial intelligence on their industries. For all these topics, they had best practices, data, evidence, key performance indicators, and actionable takeaways.

Then the moderator asked the question I had been waiting for: “What is your approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion?”

A silent pause. Chairs creaked as the panelists' postures changed, their legs uncrossed and recrossed, they leaned backward slightly, getting a little distance from the microphone. Women in the audience made eye contact with each other. I realized many of us were holding our breath.

Finally, one of the panelists took the mic. It was the first time I had heard hesitation in any of their voices. The brave volunteer paused after each word, as if looking for approval that he was on track. Like a spelling bee contestant, he was waiting for each syllable he spoke to be the one that would disqualify him:

“Honestly...my...my approach to DEI...Well, I...I lead with love.”

The others followed:

“Everyone at our company knows that we care about diversity. We don't have an [air quotes] approach [end air quotes] as much as it's just in our DNA.”

“Every day, I come in being my most authentic self, and I think that lets everyone else know they can be their authentic self, no matter their background or gender.”

Polite applause.

These answers cited no data. No best practices. No KPIs. No plan.

No next steps.

≈

Fast-forward to three years later. In the summer of 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, corporate statements of solidarity flooded LinkedIn feeds. CEOs publicly renewed

their pledges of commitment to racial justice, to equity, to inclusion. The Black Lives Matter movement had gained unstoppable momentum, and business leaders felt the pressure to vocally reaffirm their support of Black communities.

I was living in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood at the time, three blocks from the East Precinct that had become the movement's infamous ground zero. I think the zone's temporary residents in tents and makeshift shelters were still deciding whether they were occupying the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) or the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP). Clickbait-seeking helicopters had become my round-the-clock white noise reality. From my apartment balcony on the third floor, Seattle's downtown peaks floated above Puget Sound. The corporate trapezoids of the financial district cut the skyline in business-casual shades of blue and silver.

Down on the street, at metropolitan basecamp, Black lives mattered. "I'd rather repaint gray buildings than bury my Black friends!" a leader of the movement shouted across the street through a bullhorn. In the afternoons, teenagers marched—hundreds of middle school and high school students under my window together, singing, making sure everyone knew the words to the songs that drowned out the helicopters. I felt hopeful, knowing that this time, their voices hadn't just reached my windows and faded out. They had traveled beyond, to those downtown windows, to the top floors.

Employees and consumers were demanding a new level of accountability, and national publications held CEOs to account, to ensure that they were walking their talk. For the first time in years, business leaders were forced to revisit their diversity data.

An email showed up in my inbox from a colleague who had attended the CEO panel with me three years earlier. Subject line: “Lead with Love.” He had forwarded me an article calling out executives who had made very public statements over the previous few years that they valued diversity, that it was “baked in” to their companies' cultures. The feature was a two-page spread. On the left side, dossiers of the self-proclaimed Good Guys and their solidarity statements. On the right, diversity reports from the companies they oversaw. A decade of diversity data showed little to no progress, year after year, with some companies regressing. The CEO who proclaimed “I lead with love” as his guiding DEI philosophy had the largest photo. The caption below: “Leadership or Lip Service?”

Good Intentions, Few Results

These individual companies and leaders are not anomalies. While some strides have been made toward workplace equality over the last 50 years, over the last two decades progress has stalled. Looking beyond the wage gap, women and minorities are still underrepresented in leadership,¹ receive less access to senior leaders,² and are leaving the fastest-growing sectors, such as tech, at higher rates than white men,³ citing “culture” as the primary reason. Women—especially women of color—are more likely to have been laid off during the COVID-19 crisis,⁴ and experts estimate that decades of progress toward workplace equality have been erased by the pandemic.⁵

Despite the rise of MeToo and Black Lives Matter, many workplaces have taken a step backward: Men are less likely now to want to mentor women than they were before the MeToo movement.⁶ Managers are less likely to advocate for employees of color than they are for white employees,⁷ and

employees are more receptive to constructive criticism from a male manager than from a female manager.⁸

In short, we're still stuck.

Despite this sobering snapshot of the status quo, when it comes to equity and inclusion, there is good news:

We've been doing it all wrong.

The DEI Overwhelm

I was asked during a recent interview to pick one word to describe how business leaders feel about DEI. I think they were looking for “committed” or “optimistic.”

I chose “overwhelmed.”

This feeling isn't limited to business leaders. I spend my days listening to employees across all levels of organizations talk about what diversity and inclusion mean to them. In these conversations, I hear a lot of recurring themes:

- White employees want to support their peers of color but don't know where to start.
- Employees of color are told over and over again, “We need to hear voices like yours. We need more people of color to speak up.” Then, they do speak up and they hear, “You're making your peers uncomfortable. You should just focus on leading your team. You're pulling the race card.” Some find, after speaking up, that they're suddenly left out of meetings and important projects.
- Men want to be allies, but they're worried they're going to say the wrong thing.

- Women take advice to “Lean In” and stand up for themselves or negotiate for a raise, only to be told they're too aggressive or arrogant. Other women see these consequences and avoid speaking up, and then are told it's their own fault that their careers aren't progressing.
- Managers and executives start to explore DEI strategies and become paralyzed by an ever-changing DEI vocabulary, contradictory messages, and seemingly endless nuance. If they do implement new inclusive policies, they find a new segment of their employee base is angry at them.
- Employees who feel their neurodivergent status, age, or caretaking responsibilities impact how they're treated at work aren't sure they have a “right” to speak up, because what they're experiencing doesn't seem as bad as overt racism or sexism.

This is just the beginning. Whatever the particular mix of overwhelm looks like in each organization, I see the same repeated outcomes: Underestimated employees eventually realize their only choices are to assimilate or leave, and the businesses and employees both miss out. (Arlan Hamilton coined the term “underestimated” to refer to groups that have historically experienced bias.) Even if businesses manage to hold on to these employees, employers won't get the benefits of their unique insights, since they will never feel comfortable showing up authentically.

Employees who do choose to leave find they don't know how to determine if another employer will be better. Many “Most Inclusive Workplaces” lists are sponsored, or their criteria are unclear or unsubstantiated. Large organizations that appear more diverse than others don't show their attrition numbers. They may just be in a

continuous cycle of losing and rehiring employees to keep their diversity numbers up. Alternatively, they may have diverse overall numbers, but zooming in could reveal that none of that diversity shows up in leadership.

Employees don't know where to look. Employers don't know what to do. In general, there's a lack of clarity about what works—what behaviors, processes, and practices should be tracked to catalyze progress toward equity at work.

I wrote *Inclusion, Inc* to provide this clarity.

To get out from under the overwhelm, we have to start by understanding the status quo. What have businesses been doing to address DEI, and why isn't it working?

Stop the Trainings

American businesses spend \$8 billion a year on diversity trainings.⁹

The quintessential diversity training came out of a 1960s workplace focused on compliance. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had made it illegal for employers to discriminate on the basis of race, religion, sex, or national origin, and a barrage of discrimination suits quickly followed. One of the most common remedies was a court-ordered mandate for the organization to train all employees in anti-discriminatory behavior. Many companies wanted to avoid costly and embarrassing lawsuits and preemptively implemented trainings, collecting signatures from employees afterward, acknowledging that employees understood the consequences of noncompliance.

Over decades, trainings expanded to accommodate LGBTQ employees, as well as other groups, and many workplaces now prefer to call them “unconscious bias” trainings. Even