



# IMPACTFUL INCLUSION TOOLKIT

52 Activities to Help You  
Learn and Practice Inclusion  
Everyday in the Workplace

Yvette Steele, Founder, DEI Insider

WILEY

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## **Praise for *Impactful Inclusion Toolkit***

“Yvette Steele has created one of the most practical, useful, and comprehensive guides to enable everyone—regardless of title, department, or status—to be powerful change agents for inclusion in their own organizations. Steele has gathered a wealth of resources, tools, and real-world examples to illustrate to readers what true inclusion looks like in action. Steele then takes this further by providing actionable, hands-on steps for readers, which helps to solidify and deepen the reader's understanding of their learnings. This is an invaluable resource for leaders seeking to create safer and more inclusive work environments for all.”

Susanne Tedrick, author of *Women of Color in Tech*

“*Impactful Inclusion Toolkit* by Yvette Steele is a powerful tool for starting some difficult and necessary conversations. Happily, there are 52 activities, so you can tackle one a week and not try to address all of these topics at once.

“This book is emerging at the perfect time. Events in politics, race relations, and the global society have converged in such a way that the world is ready to begin the hard work of addressing diversity and inclusion at a higher level than ever before. Yes, we've talked about these issues before but often from a watered-down perspective. Some people got a pass. Compromises have always been made. Yvette Steele's work breaks through all that and proclaims that the time is now to stop giving passes and making compromises and to start addressing the reality of exclusion that permeates our institutions and society. *Impactful Inclusion Toolkit* is not a vague call for awareness or action. It is a thoughtful and powerful tool for

starting the conversations that need to take place across the country and around the world. The last few years have been very difficult when it comes to addressing matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion. But those tough times made it possible for a work this powerful to emerge and to help people get past the rhetoric and politics to work on the actual details of making the workplace a welcoming place for everyone.”

Karl W. Palachuk, author, coach, and community builder

“I highly recommend every business leader pick up this book and use it as a guide. Yvette Steele has structured this resource to be highly actionable with ways to create an inclusive work environment and shift your workplace culture. It is not a one-and-done training guide but provides practical steps through prescribed activities that will help you self-assess as well as promote inclusion over time. I recommend you give one to every employee as part of their new-hire toolkit. It helps both individuals and leaders to find their own way and adjust their own habits and practices to behave with intentional inclusion. As a leader, I have read and participated in many trainings and guides. None was as practical and insightful as this one.”

Gavriella Schuster, former Microsoft corporate vice president and DEI advocate

“*Impactful Inclusion Toolkit* lives up to its promises of helping anyone at any level create a more inclusive workplace. Whether you are just starting your inclusion journey or have been on this road for a while, Yvette Steele lays out a roadmap of activities, follow-up actions, and resources to help us understand what inclusion looks like for people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, individuals with disabilities, and others, as well as provide practical steps we can take each day. I highly recommend

this resource for all who want to create a more inclusive work environment and society.”

Kathryn Rose, founder and CEO of getWise



# **Impactful Inclusion Toolkit**

**52 Activities to Help You Learn and Practice Inclusion Every Day in the Workplace**

**Yvette Steele, Founder, DEI Insider**

**WILEY**



# Foreword

The explosive growth in interest of the diversity, equity, and inclusion field over the years is unsurprising to many, particularly as we all have watched a number of events across the globe that highlight the continued oppression of marginalized groups. From the waves of anti-Black and anti-Asian violence to the promulgation of laws authored with the intent of excluding the LGBTQ+ community, examples of inequitable and exclusionary practices are many. It is this collective societal reckoning with diversity and our complicated history with various identities that has driven this wave of investment in new DEI programs and business functions.

Yet even with an abundance of new DEI certification programs and the like, we as practitioners still find ourselves faced with a familiar set of questions from those who are looking to apply these principles to their daily lives: What do I do? How do I make a difference? How do I demonstrate my commitment to DEI and to people who are different from me?

It's a persistent set of questions that practitioners like me in the corporate space face regularly. While these questions generally come from a place of genuine curiosity, I also acknowledge that they are often driven by fear. Many people do not want to mistreat those around them and certainly fear the perception of being any type of "ist" in a world where what has been labeled as "cancel culture" (also known as accountability) has found prominence. Still, these questions persist not because the tools we provide are impractical or even extremely difficult to apply. Rather, it's usually because there is additional foundational, introspective work that the learner must do, and worse yet,

there is little to no instant gratification. Transformational change at both the individual and corporate levels takes time and consistent investment. The flawed view that one can just call themselves an ally because they have that one gay friend or they stopped a woman from being interrupted in a meeting that one time is just not going to cut it. Learners and organizations alike must actually unlearn behaviors and practice new and inclusive behaviors to the point where they become habitual and normal.

Learning in the DEI space is plagued with cursory modules that focus only on anti-harassment and compliance, especially as it relates to the workplace. Don't misunderstand me here; the content of those modules is important and should be used to continue to address some of the ills of toxic and noninclusive corporate cultures. But that alone does not speak to the everyday needs of a learner or give them the opportunity to think about the ways that identity impacts how they navigate the world. More important, most corporate diversity training does not provide learners with the opportunity for ongoing practical application.

It is in this gap where the author finds her audience. Yvette Steele grounds her work in both authenticity and practicality for the reader. Her authenticity—and of course her ability to sell me an idea—is what sparked our connection years ago. She has been a great collaborator and partner as I have taken on more expansive roles building both the DEI and environmental, social, and governance business functions in global Silicon Valley tech organizations. I have been an excited supporter and observer—and hopefully somewhat helpful—as she has really turned her focus to diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Leveraging her own personal journey, multiplicity of identities, and investment in learning inclusive and equitable practices, she takes the reader on a journey that

begins with self-awareness and leads them to behavioral changes.

As you move through the activities herein, you are not so subtly encouraged to pause, reflect, and even role-play—to really think about what you would do in any of these scenarios. And that is coupled with small yet impactful actions that individuals can take in the course of their daily lives to effect change. She encourages you to take this in small bites, focusing on a couple of activities at a time and doing the necessary reflective work to truly understand what you read and what it looks like in practice. If you are a seasoned practitioner in this space, this book is rightfully not written for you. This is for those who have found themselves looking for ways to get started on a personal journey of re-learning.

It is important to note for any work focused on DEI practices that things change over time. As people become more comfortable identifying themselves in various ways both in and out of the workplace, and societal norms change, so too will these scenarios and activities. That makes this a great, living piece that can be revisited and offers readers the chance to also examine the field's growth over time alongside your personal development. Stay the course, dear reader. The journey is a long and difficult one, and you are given a great guide to help you along the way.

Ulysses J. Smith  
Global DEI strategist and executive

# Introduction

Have you ever found yourself wondering “What can I do to support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace?” I believe that at some time or other, many people ask themselves this question. Just imagine a place that you helped to create where everyone feels included and empowered to thrive in their authenticity. That's the place where everyone wants to be, and that's what we're striving for. Inclusion starts with the letter *I*—meaning that it starts with you. You begin by being Intentional. There's that *I* again. Your consistent intentional actions lead to impact or as I like to call it “Impactful Inclusion.”

This book is born from my desire to help my many friends and colleagues who have approached me for guidance on how they can be a part of the solution to the inequities taking place not only in the workplace but society as a whole; and I love them for asking. Thank you for sparking this idea and creating this opportunity to share my personal experiences as well as those of family, friends, and colleagues.

There are hundreds of DEI books written for leaders and managers—people with positional authority. However, few books focus solely on the everyday person—the individual contributors who keep businesses humming. No matter their job role, everyone either experiences or perpetuates exclusion in daily interactions. We are often left without the tools or knowledge needed to recognize and address exclusive acts and replace them with acts of inclusion. My goal is to get this book in the hands of 10 million people for the good of all humanity. I believe that when we know better, we can do better. We can build a world where historically excluded people are included and valued.

Regardless of your position within an organization, you can incorporate the activities found here into your day-to-day interactions for better relationships, greater gratification, and profound business outcomes. You can be a catalyst for change. The key to success on your inclusion journey is to pack an open mind, receptivity to change, and willingness to learn. While these activities are simple, they may not always be easy. Inclusive behaviors are a skill, and like any skill, they will improve over time with practice. Lean into the discomfort. You're going to make mistakes. It's okay. It's how you learn. Stay with it. Visit my website, [DEInsider.com](http://DEInsider.com), for continued insights and resources. Join others on the journey by engaging in our LinkedIn group "Champions of Inclusion."

The Merriam-Webster dictionary has several definitions of inclusion. I was thrilled to see this one: "the act or practice of including and accommodating people who have historically been excluded (as because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability)."

I remember a time when inclusion simply meant the act of being included. We've evolved into a society with an increased awareness and sense of responsibility to make the world inclusive for all. Throughout the book, I use the term "we," referring to you the reader, and me the author, as I am working to become more inclusive along with you. Thank you for joining me on this journey.

## **How to Use This Book**

Let me begin by saying that this is not a quick read over the weekend; rather, it should be taken in weekly doses where you make time to acquire a new skill to practice every week until it becomes a habit. Journal about your reflections, what you've discovered about yourself and

others. Capture successes and lessons learned. Celebrate wins.

Inclusion is everybody's job that anybody can do. Place this book somewhere where it will stay top of mind. Set weekly reminders to build your inclusion muscle. Each week, work to incorporate the actions into your day-to-day interactions and review the action accelerators to increase your understanding. My hope is that your successes and energy will lead to others joining you. Journeys are always more fun when you share them with others. There are 52 activities. Start with the first one of getting to know yourself. When you get to activity number 52, begin again at 1, and note how much you've evolved. Imagine the impact you'll make year after year.

Commit to actively changing thought processes and behaviors that ultimately create more inclusive work environments. Above all, enjoy the journey!

## **My Battle with Exclusion**

I grew up during a time where societal norms judged and frowned upon divorcées, single motherhood, working mothers, men marrying women with children, and other ridiculous beliefs that in effect stigmatized women like my mother. Society got to decide who was acceptable and unacceptable or worthy of respect. My mother was raised in poverty in the slums of Chicago by a single mother and never met her father. A blend of German, African American, and Cherokee Indian, her green eyes, French vanilla skin, and long sandy brown hair made her stick out like a cherry in a bowl of milk. I recall the dozens of stories she shared, lamenting about the bullying at school, or the summers spent in Minot, North Dakota, with White family members, and the impact of constant reminders of the darkness of her skin. By the age of 25, she had been through two

divorces and had two children. I was three years old and the youngest when she and my father went their separate ways. But I have to give it to her: Mom was a strong and determined woman. With the support of her mother and uncle, she attended nursing school while my grandmother cared for me and my brother. Looking back, I can only imagine the scars and the emotional trauma she endured and carried her entire life just trying to fit in. Those experiences definitely informed the way she cared for her children. She was determined to be accepted by society no matter the cost.

My first brush with exclusion happened when I was five. My mom took me and Tonia (not her real name), the five-year-old daughter of her best friend out for shopping and dinner. She dressed me in an outfit that made me feel like an old lady. I'll never forget that hideous blue ruffled front dress with lace-top ankle socks that kept sliding down into the back of my black patent leather Mary Jane shoes. I wore thick cat eyeglasses, and my hair was pulled into a wild, bushy ponytail. I envied Tonia. Her hair was pressed bone straight and cascaded just past her shoulders. She wore the cutest jumper and go-go boots. And my mother? Well, stunning. Her hair swept into a French roll, and she wore a knee-length sheath that not only accentuated her curves, but it was also a shade of green matching her eyes. Everywhere we went, compliments poured about the beauty of her daughter Tonia and how much she looked like her mother. Mom beamed at every flattery while I waited for her to correct them and identify me as her daughter. By the third instance, my eyes welled with tears. I could not understand why I wasn't her daughter that day. I did not realize until I was well into my 40s that it was her desire to fit in with the picture-perfect child that drove her decisions to not correct the mistaken identity.

She remarried when I was seven. Soon after, my brother started living with his paternal grandmother. I was told that he chose to leave us because his grandmother promised him a dog. Mother explained that she wanted no one who desired a dog over her, so she opened the door and allowed him to leave at only 11 years of age. I felt abandoned. How could he leave me as well for a dog? Why couldn't I go too? I don't recall him ever saying goodbye. He just left for a weekend visit with his grandmother and never returned. I now believe that the stigma of a ready-made family led to my brother's quick departure. Alone, I tried hard to be the perfect daughter for my mom and stepdad. Turns out, I was awful at being perfect and was criticized or punished for every spoken and unspoken rule I ever broke. I maintained a relationship over the phone with my brother for a few years as best I could, but eventually that wasn't enough, and we grew apart. Three years into the marriage, my sister was born. Mother blamed me for having to give birth to another child because I could not bring myself to call my stepfather "daddy," something he so desperately wanted. For me, it felt too awkward to say "daddy" to someone with whom I had no emotional connection. I knew my father, and *he* was daddy to me. My sister was my stepfather's first child and would ultimately become his only child. The excitement from his family members around her birth brought frequent visitors and loads of gifts. Often, these visits relegated me to another room rendering me invisible. Seemingly, no one wanted to engage with the child from the previous marriage. I remember stepping out once to see all the presents, and when I attempted to touch one, I was scolded by one of his relatives. There was one relative who visited for years every weekend bearing gifts, none of which were ever for me, and she made that clear. By the time I was 11 years old, I was made to feel unlovable regardless of how hard I tried. I could not remember the last time I saw or even spoke to my biological father.



Attempts to connect with him were forbidden because he never paid child support. The photos of him that I had hidden in a drawer were discovered and destroyed. It's as if my mother wanted to wipe out his existence. Except, there I was, a constant reminder of her past. In the midst of struggles to fit in at home, I still had a privileged life. I attended private schools off and on, never missed a meal, took family vacations, and always had plenty of Christmas and birthday presents. We were a picture-perfect family.

I grew up in an area that was transitioning from White to Black residents. My first encounter with racism happened in the fourth grade. I walked to a Woolworth store with a friend who was also Black. Back then they had over-the-counter food service, and we wanted pizza. The White woman behind the counter took what seemed like forever to acknowledge our presence. So my friend finally blurted out that we wanted to order two slices of pizza. The first thing the woman said was, "Do you have money?" Proudly we placed our crumbled bills and loose change on the counter. The woman counted it down to the last penny, looked at our excited faces, and said in a condescending tone, "You don't have enough." We knew how to count, and we knew that we had enough money; but we had been raised not to challenge our elders, so we did not question her. Determined to have our pizza, we then requested to order just one slice to share. She told us again that we didn't have enough money. The excitement melted from our faces and was replaced with sadness and confusion. We scooped our money from the counter and left. For weeks I was troubled, trying to figure out what happened and wanted to ask for help, but I didn't know how to articulate it. A part of me was afraid that I would discover that somehow it was my fault and that I would be punished.

In public grade schools, I was bullied for being either taller than most, light skinned with long hair, or speaking proper

English. Once again, it was hard for me to build relationships due to things that I could not control. Speaking slang was reprehensible in mom's house, so I seldom used it unless I was certain that she would never find out. The so-called friends I did make played with me only to “borrow” my toys and clothes that they never returned. In the private grade school I attended, I was subjected to mean girl pranks long before it became a popular movie. In the eighth grade, just after spring break, someone started a rumor that I had sexual intercourse with a boy in class who was incidentally ostracized because he had the darkest shade of brown skin. It was what most Black people refer to as blue-black. The rumor claimed that I now had cooties and warned everybody to stay away from me so that they would not catch it. Everybody in the class heeded the warning. I had no idea why I was being avoided at every turn—in the lunchroom, on the playground—and was uninvited to parties. A classmate secretly told me what was going on. She shared how she didn't like the prank and pitied me yet blamed me for it. This treatment lasted to the end of the school year.

By high school, I still had no best friend to call my own. I was the one who was busy being a friend and expecting friendship in return that never materialized. My first year of high school was totally wild. I had never been around hundreds of teens from so many environments. It was a predominantly African American public school accessible to kids from low as well as the upper middle-class backgrounds. I struggled to find my tribe. Cliques were already well established as the friendships made in grade school continued into high school. While striving to fit in somewhere, I met my now lifelong friend Jacqui. We struggled together, but she was better at fitting in than I was. When we hung out, bullies bypassed her to pick on me. I never understood why. I just figured that she was a

cool kid and for some reason or another must have thought that I was cool too. One afternoon I cut class and ran into a group of classmates smoking marijuana. When they asked me to join them, I jumped at the chance. This was my opportunity to make friends. I had heard the term “Cloud 9” before but had never been there until that day. Cloud 9 was a place of extreme bliss. I had no pain, no cares, and felt totally free. I could escape it all for a few hours, and I never wanted to leave. It wasn't long before mother figured out my new bad habit and newly found friends and assured me that the following year I would be back in private school, and oh, by the way, she wasn't going to pay for it. I had better get a job or find somewhere else to live. At 14 years old, she advised me to claim to be 16 years of age on job applications, as that was the minimum age required for employment. It worked. I landed my first job in a few short weeks so that I could pay my high school tuition. Back in the 70s, all one had to do was write their age on the job application, and no one verified it like they do today.

Sophomore year, I entered a private school on the near north side of Chicago and worked afternoons and weekends at a fast-food chain just blocks away. This school was very diverse. Not only did students converge from various socio-economic backgrounds, but they were also other cultures and races—and everybody loved to party. I had finally found my tribe, and most of them were of another race! I was never bullied and was considered one of the cool kids. Working after school and weekends kept me out of the house for sanity's sake, with the financial freedom to support my bad habits. Home life was still miserable. After a full day of school, a four-hour work shift, a ninety-minute commute on public transportation, I returned home to a set of chores. Keeping the entire house clean was another full-time job that I deeply resented, but it was how I earned my keep of food on the table and a roof over my head. The fact

that I was exhausted by the time I got home and that I had homework to do was not her concern. I needed to figure it out. I was disillusioned into thinking that because she wasn't covering any of the costs of my education and no longer supplying an allowance that the cost savings would extend me some grace. My friends nicknamed me Hazel, the namesake of a 1961 sitcom about a live-in maid. When the time came for us girls to hang out, I was not permitted to leave until every chore was completed to mother's satisfaction, so they often arrived early to help me clean. I'm sure that they didn't know it at the time, but for the first time, I felt like I belonged. What mattered to me, mattered to them, and come hell or high water, we were leaving together for a night of fun.

As high school graduation grew closer, my mother insisted that I start college immediately and not wait until the fall semester. She made the choice easy. Either college or move out. And, oh, by the way, tuition was again, my responsibility. She asserted that no one paid for her education and literally said to me, "Yo ass ain't no better than mine." By now, my sister was nine years old, and I could not help but notice the stark contrast in her life as a nine-year-old and mine at that age. By all accounts, she was living her best life. She had no chores, a father who was present, and she got the adoration and accolades from our mother, while I was continuously criticized, especially after the discovery of my love for marijuana. Apparently, while doing all that was expected of me—cleaning house, working, and going to school while maintaining a B average, I still could not get anything right. At this point in my life, my brother had been erased. Our mother was now claiming to have had only two daughters when she talked about family with neighbors, acquaintances, and co-workers. The drug of acceptance is powerful. In my mind, she wanted no ties to her past. The fear of someone

connecting the dots of three children, three fathers, and three marriages made space for judgment and possible rejection. Today, many people consider those situations as just a fact of life. Things happen. We now live in a time where the attitude about these circumstances is “Yeah and so what?” I wish that mom could have been that strong and not feel forced to live her life on society's terms. I wish someone had been there for her to help navigate the world she lived in.

College life was not much different than that of high school. I still lived at home, worked a full-time job during the day, and attended classes at night. I continued to be Hazel, and my friends had now moved on to their next chapter of life, either away at university or in the workforce full time. One of my jobs during college was a marketing assistant at an ethnic hair care company in the early 1980s. I was ecstatic to be a part of a prominent company in the industry founded by African Americans. By the end of my second year, I was fried. I found it to be a cutthroat environment plagued with individuals with a dog-eat-dog or crabs-in-the-bucket mentality. I experienced and witnessed exclusion based on classism (preference toward those of a certain class), colorism (a prejudice based on skin tone), and chauvinism (a male attitude of superiority over women). No one played by the rules, and the rules didn't apply to all. I've always prided myself on my sense of style and fashion. In any other environment, I was complimented for it. Here, I was labeled bougie and asked how I could afford my style of dress on my salary. People insinuated that I must have had a sugar daddy and treated me as such. I was ostracized and envied based on stereotypical beliefs. My manager, a woman about my age, never missed an opportunity to point out my mistakes and embarrass me in meetings. When I confided in a co-worker who I thought I could trust, I soon learned that she betrayed my confidence. Who knew that a

toxic work environment could be created by Black people and perpetuated by Black people on one another? I left vowing to never work for “my” people again. (That said, my posture has since evolved to view that as an unfortunate situation and not a fit for me.)

After graduation, with a bachelor's degree in business administration I pursued an advertising career. It was my dream. I applied to every local advertising agency listed in the phone book and monitored the newspaper for job openings. For the first two years after graduation, I checked every few months and kept applying. I never got called for an interview and eventually gave up. I have since learned that I was fighting a losing battle as the advertising industry has a longstanding lack of racial diversity. While I don't have an ethnic-sounding name to signal my race, the college I attended and my address were clear indicators that I was not White. Eventually, I landed a sales job in a Fortune 500 tech organization. I was the first in my family to work in corporate America. My parents worked for the City of Chicago. My mother's advice for success was to have only one martini during the two-martini lunches and that bullsh!t runs the world—be prepared to give it and take it. I wasn't sure what she meant or how to apply it. Mom was not the type to explain herself. I just figured the meaning would reveal itself in time.

Six months in, I discovered that the grass was not greener on the other side. In fact, the green grass was loaded with minefields. I was the first and only Black woman on my team—maybe even the company. For the first few years, there was no one who looked like me, anywhere. I was a fish out of water with no lifeline. I had no experience in this game of sales or office politics. I was completely oblivious to the fact that I was never going to be accepted, valued, or even fit in. I was the brunt of jokes, ridiculed for carrying a purse, made to second guess every decision, and found