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IF I'M COMFORTABLE DOES THAT MEAN I'M INCLUDED?

And If I'm Included, Will I Now Be Comfortable?

Bernardo M. Ferdman

If being comfortable—at ease, without fear or stress, unconstrained, and relatively relaxed—is fundamental to the experience of inclusion, does that mean that when I am comfortable in particular social settings, including those in which people like me were previously uncomfortable because of their identities, beliefs, values, or styles—I am now included? And if I am included, isn't it reasonable to expect that I should be relatively comfortable and at ease? Most of us would answer affirmatively. But the relationship of comfort and inclusion is not as straightforward as it might initially seem.

As a diversity practitioner who greatly values the contributions of Positive Organizational Scholarship, I often highlight how focusing on inclusion provides an appealing way to advance diversity and derive its potential benefits. People typically resonate with the idea that inclusion involves increasing comfort and reducing discomfort for more people, especially those previously excluded or marginalized. In other words, the experience and benefits of inclusion—previously restricted to a few—should be extended to the many, eliminating barriers stemming from identity-based biases or invidious discrimination. From this perspective, inclusion in diverse groups and organizations requires people across a range of social identities to become more comfortable with each other and with themselves, in the process enabling smoother and more mutually supportive engagement and collaboration across all types of differences. Similarly, discomfort or conflict grounded in our social identities (e.g., Ruderman & Chrobot-Mason, 2010) may be taken as a signal that more work on inclusion is needed.

Yet this quite reasonable point of view tells only part of the story. A complementary and also vital way to think about inclusion—if it is to be the basis for truly reaping the benefits of diversity—is that it is not necessarily about making all of us fully comfortable, but rather that it involves more of us being *uncomfortable*—albeit

with discomfort that is distributed more evenly and equitably. This is the perspective that I develop here.

Inclusion Does Involve More Comfort across Differences

First, it's important to acknowledge how inclusion does involve fostering more comfort for more people. To gain the full benefits of diversity, groups and organizations must take steps to become inclusive; they must proactively create, foster, and sustain "practices and conditions that encourage and allow each of us to be fully ourselves—with our differences from and similarities to those around us—as we work together" (Ferdman & Deane, 2014, p. xii). In this view, a key goal of inclusion is to maximize the degree to which individuals "feel safe, trusted, accepted, respected, supported, valued, fulfilled, engaged, and authentic in their working environment, both as individuals and as members of particular identity groups" (Ferdman, Barrera, Allen, & Vuong, 2009, p. 6)—in short, to increase experiences of inclusion that are positive and affirming.

There is much social psychology literature that speaks to the comfort felt by people when they are with others who are like them or who like them, or to the ways in which people are drawn to others who are similar to them. And work on prejudice and discrimination suggests that a foremost effect of exclusion is the sense of discomfort and of being undesired that is felt by those who are different. Inclusion involves reducing or eliminating this feeling. Thus, it is certainly apt to think about creating comfort as a core component of inclusion. At the individual level, inclusion involves a sense of belonging and participation, without having to give up or compromise valued aspects of oneself (Ferdman, 2014; Ferdman & Roberts, 2014). Similarly, members of an inclusive group or organization must develop mutual comfort with their differences and similarities.

For this reason, suggestions to increase inclusion by making room for differences often involve extending a sense of ease to more members of a group or organization and to reduce problematic conflicts associated with those differences. The Future Work Institute (quoted in Ferdman, 2014, p. 29), for example, in describing components of inclusion and the importance of how people and especially newcomers are treated, states that "a warm and welcoming atmosphere eases the process of 'learning the ropes' for the new member and aids in making the member comfortable in the new group environment." Hubbard (2004, p. 23), highlighting the importance of belonging, describes its two aspects as involving social connection or affiliation on one hand, and social acceptance on the other—the latter enabling people "to be with and among others with a sense of comfort and entitlement, or in short, a sense that she belongs and that she has a rightful place in the world." In my own work, I summarized this theme as follows: "Inclusion involves creating more comfort for more people, so that access, opportunity, and a sense of full participation and belonging are facilitated across a greater range of diversity than ever before, for the benefit of all" (Ferdman, 2014, p. 46).

Yet Inclusion Also Involves Discomfort

So inclusion certainly involves expanding people's sense of comfort. But, paradoxically, inclusion also involves creating more—and sometimes new types of—discomfort. Making space for and bringing out more differences in a diverse group or organization can often elicit discomfort and unease; it can be challenging for all involved. Comfort and inclusion do not necessarily go hand in hand; indeed, inclusion can sometimes lead to more, rather than less, discomfort—especially for those accustomed to prior ways of doing things. Importantly, this needn't be problematic, especially when members of the group, organization, or society learn to hold and address these differences and the associated discomfort in constructive, productive, and authentic ways. In contrast, it is to be expected and necessary.

When organizations and groups truly foster diversity and inclusion, differences among members in identities, values, ways of achieving goals, and preferences about both major and minor aspects of work and life become more salient. Rather than emphasize commonalities, inclusive groups and organizations work to incorporate both similarities *and* differences. And when the group or organization is truly inclusive, those previously in power should be less likely to impose their perspectives or ways of doing things. But these dynamics create stresses for the members and for the group as a whole with regard to managing the differences. And both the differences and these stresses create discomfort. This is how I have previously described the issue:

Rather than treating membership and participation as a privilege granted by those traditionally in power to those previously excluded—often with assimilation to established norms as a condition of full acceptance—inclusive practices redefine who the "we" is in an organization or work group so that all have the right to be there and to have an equal voice, both in managing the boundary and in defining (and redefining) norms, values, and preferred styles for success (Ferdman & Davidson, 2002; Miller & Katz, 2002). This can be challenging because in many cases it requires ongoing reexamination of previously accepted or taken-for-granted ways of working and interacting. It means developing skills and practices for collectively reevaluating notions of what (and who) is "normal," appropriate, and expected in ways that incorporate more voices and perspectives, many of those unfamiliar or uncomfortable for those previously in power.

(Ferdman, 2014, pp. 12–13)

Inclusion, then, can involve a good measure of discomfort, especially for those who were relatively comfortable with the previously less-inclusive system. The difference is that now, the discomfort is distributed more evenly and more equitably. Previously, discomfort was typically reserved for newcomers, for those with

subordinated or marginalized identities, or for those seen to be deviant or different in ways judged to be inappropriate according to dominant norms. But in an inclusive group or organization, everyone must now experience some discomfort, in a milder form. This is particularly so for those who must shift their notions of what is correct or must incorporate these new and different—but now equal—participants. Many years ago, Miller (1994, p. 39) provocatively described the challenge this way: “*Inclusion turns comfortable upside out and inside down*” (italics in original). Inclusion requires all of us to engage in new and sometimes unfamiliar ways—necessarily moving us out of individual or collective comfort zones—while continuing to grow and learn for the benefit of all (Ferdman, 2014).

Toward Comfort with Discomfort

We need to think about creating inclusion not simply as being about the comfort or ease that we will all now experience when everyone is an “insider.” Inclusion does not mean reproducing the dynamics of exclusive groups, except now with a greater diversity of members. Inclusion does not mean that everyone—both newcomers and old-timers alike—can simply relax, on the expectation that others in our group or organization will think and behave more or less like us.

Rather, to create inclusion, we must all become “outsiders” to some degree, expecting that others will not read our minds or agree with our perspectives. Inclusion requires expecting that the relative discomfort that comes from having to more regularly confront and engage with differences will be an everyday experience. In many ways, then, creating and engaging with inclusion “requires becoming more comfortable with discomfort, both individually and collectively” (Ferdman, 2014, p. 47). When we practice inclusion in a diverse group or organization, we are more likely to find ourselves in situations in which we do not fully understand our counterparts, and so must cultivate “the ability to not understand” (Gurevitch, 1989, p. 161) as well as to “lean into discomfort” (Katz & Miller, 2013, p. xi), which can facilitate learning and engagement, as well as trust (Katz & Miller, 2013).

Engaging effectively across differences requires us to be alert, attentive, and intentional. If being comfortable means feeling psychologically and physically safe, and trusting that one’s contributions will be considered and valued, then this is certainly a critical part of inclusion. At the same time, inclusion means that we cannot assume that our way will be everyone’s way, that others will easily understand us, or that we will easily understand them. To be attentive to and welcoming of diversity, we must effectively live with and even welcome the discomfort that comes from learning and growing, individually and collectively, when we engage with and truly face differences. As we expand our individual and collective comfort zones and experience the discomfort that comes with that type of stretching, we can also gain comfort from knowing that this will provide greater and more valuable benefits to us and to our groups and organizations.

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For Practitioners: Becoming Comfortable with the Discomforts of Inclusion—Key Skills and Practices

To work and live inclusively in diverse groups, organizations, and societies, we need particular skills and practices to prepare us and those around us for the discomforts that inevitably arise when we must deal with differences. Here are a few:

- **Be fully alert, aware, and mindful.** Notice and take responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, and reactions, including those that are negative or possibly biased, especially about others who are different from you. Review and test your assumptions, especially about difference.
- **Learn about yourself and your identities in relationship to others.** Become familiar and conversant with your multiple identities and those of others, and with the complexity of those identities as they are expressed by individuals in their historical and social contexts. This includes learning about and acknowledging patterns of intergroup domination and subordination and our participation in those dynamics.
- **Expect and engage positively with differences.** Learn about and engage with others with a spirit of curiosity and appreciation. Be aware of and intentional with language. Invite dialogue and interaction across a range of differences. Understand that differences (and the associated discomfort) can be a source of growth and learning.
- **Learn to work with and skillfully manage differences, including those that are difficult or conflictual.** Develop your capacity to engage in conflict in ways that are effective, productive, and authentic. Recognize when the discomfort can or does become too difficult or intense and find ways to keep it productive and manageable, for yourself and for others.

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POSITIVE ORGANIZING IN A GLOBAL SOCIETY

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