

DEEP DEMOCRACY

Let's get this out in the open from the start: embarking on the work of inclusive leadership can be scary. Time and time again, I see leaders coming to DEI work with great commitment but also an underlying sense of trepidation. They are worried about saying or doing the wrong thing. More than anything else, they are afraid of offending someone, of hurting someone's feelings. So they tighten up and employ a variety of defensive measures, including deflection. They play it safe. They avoid taking risks.*

Playing it safe will not get you where you want to be. The only way to build a truly inclusive culture (and the only way to build a thriving organizational culture, period) is by being fearless, authentic, and vulnerable. Letting your defenses down is never easy. And it's especially difficult in building inclusive leadership, where you may well feel there are potential land mines all around you. Guess what? You're probably going to step in one of those eventually. But you've got to take the leap anyway, knowing

* As you've seen, I've had my moments of doubt and trepidation as well. I used to hesitate more before speaking up. Such as at LightHouse, when my first instinct was just to keep my head down and "do my time." But I got used to the discomfort and found out that I could usually recover from my mistakes. I found out, as well, that this was the best way to learn.

that you can attempt to repair and trusting that we can forgive or accept the sometimes hard consequences of learning.

Remember, most everyone on your team is feeling some variation of anxiety or trepidation. The middle-aged white guy doesn't feel qualified to speak about racism. The young Black woman doesn't want to sabotage her career by being seen as "the angry Black woman" or as constantly "playing the race card." After reaching an initial agreement on the broad objective of creating a safe and welcoming environment, a lot of people will want to hold back and play it safe, all for their own diverse reasons.

You as a leader have to make it safe for them to *not* play it safe. The best way you can do that is by modeling fearlessness, authenticity, and vulnerability.

I say all of this at the outset to clear the air and to disabuse you of the notion that your inclusive journey as an individual or as an organization is going to be all unity and harmony. There are going to be bumps in the road, what appear to be setbacks, and some seriously difficult and uncomfortable conversations. Those challenging moments are not obstacles in your inclusive journey. That is leadership.



A number of years ago, I encountered and later studied the Lewis Method of Deep Democracy; it profoundly informs my approach to coaching in general, and especially to DEI work. Myrna and Greg Lewis experimented with a new approach to conflict that built on the work of Arnold Mindell when they were hired in the 1990s to help a large South African company work through the legacy of apartheid. The violently oppressive apartheid regime that ruled South Africa for almost fifty years was one of the most brutal in history. In its wake, the country had an enormous

divide of anger, fear, and distrust between whites and Blacks. The process of reconciliation has not been easy, at the national level or at the level of individual communities, companies, or organizations.

So why was the Lewis Method so successful in such a divided and potentially volatile situation? At the heart of Deep Democracy is the mindset that—in the right context, with the right leadership—tension is a good thing. The Lewis Method calls for leaning into tension, and leaning into it hard, rather than shying away from it or trying to smooth it over or tamp it down.

It's not just tension for the sake of tension. The tension rising to the surface is a manifestation of a deeper tension below. Again, it is essential that leadership set the right tone and that the group has healthy norms in place—healthy, *inclusive* norms. Above all, it has to be clear that all voices will be heard, valued, and considered. In fact, an inclusive environment in which all voices are expressed virtually guarantees there will be tension and conflict, which is one reason why disagreement is seen as a healthy sign.

Another core concept of the Lewis Method is that there is *wisdom in dissent*. When someone resists the majority, the status quo, or a statement by leadership or a peer, that resistance isn't coming out of the blue. Something is being said or done to provoke that resistance.

So the resistance, the friction, is a healthy sign that you are onto something. The appropriate next step is not to try to resolve the tension but to dig deeper into it—to, as I like to put it, go below the waterline.* If as a group you dig deeply and fearlessly enough, you will find gold.

Deep Democracy also encourages us to keep leaning into discomfort and resistance even after a decision has been made. (As opposed to the

* A phrase I likely first encountered in Arnold Mindell's book *The Leader as Martial Artist*, in which he also first sets out his ideas about Deep Democracy.

standard approach of just trying to get everyone to “move on.”) Dissenters are asked what they would need in order to be able to come along with the majority decision. This is an act of radical inclusion. This process continues to find the wisdom in dissent and does the hard work of forging unity within disagreement.

All too often, however, companies and organizations don't take the time to do all that digging and properly air things out. As a result, unresolved tension, contradiction, or conflict stays below the waterline—where, unnamed and unaddressed, it will silently but surely undermine the culture.

UNITY MUST BE EARNED

Unity is sometimes invoked as a reason for tamping down conflict rather than fully exploring it, as if unity were simply the absence of tension. When I see this dynamic play out, I think of Dr. Martin Luther King's distinction between a positive peace, which is the presence of justice, and a negative peace, which is the absence of tension. A negative peace dressed up as unity is not a meaningful unity. Unity can't simply be invoked; it must be earned.

I also think of my former teacher Marcelo, who would point out that each individual will experience unity differently. This is especially the case when there are deeply contested issues at stake. The Lewis Method begins with an earnest attempt to see the issue from all points of view. Yet in an organization, decisions must be made, and at some point, the group will take a vote and everyone must take a side. If the process of hearing and considering every viewpoint is meaningful and the decision-making process is transparent, people will buy into and respect the ultimate decision.

That doesn't mean they have to feel good about it. Unity is sometimes confused with harmony, with feeling good. Deep Democracy, while it may keep the group together and prevent it from falling apart, doesn't necessarily bring about harmony. In fact, just as an initial tension is often a