

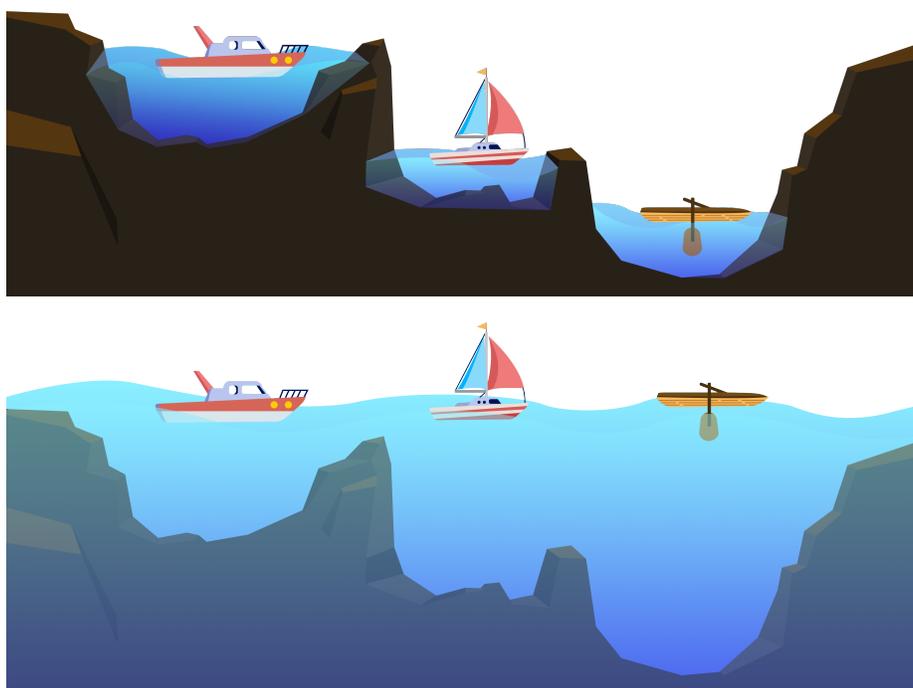


A Rising Tide Of Inclusion Does Not Lift All Diversity Boats Equally

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Summary: The aphorism “a rising tide lift all boats” is used to suggest that an improved economy benefits all those who take part in it. When it comes to diversity & inclusion, raising the level of inclusion can actually have a greater impact on the segments that were enjoying the least amount of inclusion.



John F. Kennedy is credited [with popularizing the aphorism](#) “a rising tide lifts all boats,” to suggest that investing in economic development can benefit everyone who participates in the economy. The mental image of many different boats floating in a marina and being lifted equally by a rising tide is elegantly simple.

A similar argument is often made in support of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, suggesting that greater diversity can lead to benefits for the entire organization, such as greater innovation or higher profitability. However, this argument has encountered resistance in the workplace: corporate leaders, even when they believe in the value of diversity, often express the concern that investing in DEI initiatives designed to benefit a specific identity group may cause other groups to feel left out. An additional concern is sometimes raised by individual employees

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from privileged groups, who fear that DEI is detrimental to them as it creates unfair advantages for underrepresented groups.

To counter these common concerns, when my colleagues and I first started measuring inclusion, we often used the rising tide aphorism to suggest that [fostering greater inclusion, rather than focusing strictly on representation, is beneficial to everyone in the organization.](#)

Having now conducted Inclusion Assessments for dozens of organizations, and having collected and analyzed inclusion data from thousands of employees around the globe, a different conclusion has emerged: *increasing the overall level of inclusion within an organization benefits everyone, but it leads to an outsized benefit for those groups within an organization that are most likely to feel excluded.*

Building on the popular aphorism, we can say that “a rising tide of inclusion gives the greatest lift to boats that are normally the most excluded.” The two drawings at the top of this article give a pictorial analogy to help convey this idea. In each drawing, different boats represent different groups within the organization. The uneven terrain is meant to represent the presence of structural biases that cause disparities between groups—biases that exist within the organization and also within the broader society. Water represents inclusion. And the level of each boat represents the overall well-being of that group.

The upper drawing represents the current state of affairs in many organizations, where structural barriers and a paucity of water cause the boats to sit at different levels. In other words, different groups experience different levels of inclusion and enjoy different overall levels of well-being.

In this pictorial analogy, creating a more inclusive environment is akin to raising the water level across the entire landscape, as shown in the lower drawing. As water rains down across the landscape, the boats in the deeper basins have the potential to enjoy the greatest improvements, as their well-being is brought up to a level comparable, and eventually equal, to the levels of the other groups.

The pictorial analogy addresses the common concerns mentioned at the outset of this blog. First, regarding the fear that trying to increase diversity for a specific group may cause other groups to feel left out, raising the overall water level is done by “raining” over the entire landscape, *i.e.*, it does not require that you choose on which boat the rain should fall. This reflects the fact that driving greater inclusion does not require that you focus on only one specific group, because any initiative that removes exclusionary practices can improve matters for all impacted groups. For example, removing biases from your promotion processes, thereby making your promotion process more inclusive, will benefit all groups that are typically impacted by promotion biases.

The pictorial analogy also addresses the second concern: raising the water level of the lower basins does not require pumping water out of the higher basins. Even the most skeptical individuals should understand that increasing the overall level of inclusion in the organization does not require lowering the level of inclusion of those who already enjoy it. In fact, as depicted in the drawings, the overall water level should rise even for the boats that were already at the highest level.

Given these observations, how can an organization, in practice, “rain inclusion” on everyone? Here is a simple recipe: go through the processes that shape the experiences and success of your staff, such as recruitment, hiring, task assignment, compensation, promotion and retention. As you review each process, look for any policy or practice that either introduces bias, or that allows



individual biases to impact certain identity groups. If you find any, change them to remove or prevent those biases.

For an example of a process that introduces bias, if your organization favors recruiting college graduates from ivy-league schools, you are explicitly creating a bias because of existing disparities in those student populations (and [you are actually making a poor business decision](#)). Fix this problem by making sure that your outreach and recruiting activities are targeting a mixture of schools from different tiers and geographical areas.

For an example of a seemingly unbiased process that allows individual biases to go unchecked, if your performance and compensation review processes include significant subjective and qualitative elements, any conscious or unconscious biases on the part of a manager toward specific identity groups will lead to unequal treatment of employees from those groups. Fix this problem by developing detailed guidelines and metrics that leave little room for subjective evaluation.

Fixing any of these organization-wide processes will be tantamount to raining down inclusion over the entire landscape, causing the inclusion tide to rise for everyone, but especially for those who have most suffered from the impact of individual and systemic biases.

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