In Trump’s shadow: questioning and testing the boundaries of inclusion

Bernardo M. Ferdman
California School of Professional Psychology, Alliant International University, San Diego, California, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the challenges and opportunities created for inclusion by the election and installation of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the USA.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses the author’s personal and professional experience and perspectives to raise and address questions about the limits of inclusion, alternative perspectives on inclusion, and approaches for sustaining attention to and continuing to foster inclusion.

Findings – Although inclusion can be conceptualized in different ways, a nuanced and complex view that incorporates limits to tolerance of behavior that undermines inclusion along with clear rules of engagement, civility, and respect may be most useful and productive.

Originality/value – The paper applies a paradoxical perspective to understanding the implications of a Trump administration for the practice of inclusion, including those particularly relevant for organizational diversity and inclusion practitioners.

Keywords Paradox, Leadership, Inclusion, Politics, Diversity initiatives, Multicultural societies

Paper type Viewpoint

The election and installation of Donald J. Trump as President of the USA present a set of unique challenges and opportunities to those of us – scholars and practitioners – who specialize in, believe in, and would like to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion. Mr Trump and many of his appointees, through their words and actions, have cast a long shadow on diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts, particularly those of the US federal government, in many cases calling into question these initiatives and the principles that undergird them (e.g. Colby and Larson, 2017; Peters et al., 2017). Yet, perhaps in reaction to perceptions of the Trump administration as setting back previous societal advances in D&I, we have simultaneously seen strong and vociferous support for continued efforts to maintain and enhance those advances both in the country and across organizations of all types (e.g. Colby and Larson, 2017; Olson, 2017; Yee, 2017; see also http://inclusioncoalition.info and www.ceoaction.com).

A problematic shadow

During his campaign for the presidency, Mr Trump expressed a range of views, many of which were understood as being demeaning of immigrants, racial minorities, Muslims, women, and many other groups (e.g. Fausset et al., 2016; Fisher, 2017; Johnson and Hauslohner, 2017). Both during the campaign and since then, many have seen Trump as encouraging – or at least actively avoiding criticism of – white nationalists, neo-Nazis, the so-called “alt-right,” and others in the USA who advocate exclusionary, xenophobic, and extremist views and policies (e.g. Thrush and Haberman, 2017a, b). Mr Trump’s cabinet,

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with 25 percent of appointees (and none in the “inner cabinet” or highest positions) being White women or men or women of color, was described by The New York Times as “more White and male than any first cabinet since” that of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s (Lee, 2017). In contrast to Barack Obama’s cabinet, which had eight White men (together with 11 White women or men or women of color), and that of George W. Bush, which included 11 White men (along with nine White women or men or women of color), Mr Trump’s initial cabinet included 18 White men (out of 24 total members).

At the same time, Mr Trump has expressed his desire to be “President for all Americans,” as stated in his election-night victory speech (The New York Times, 2016). He has spoken about the need to be “one nation,” for example in his inaugural address, in which he also stated that “there is no room for prejudice” when people are loyal to the country and therefore to each other (Trump, 2017), and, in August 2017, stated that “we must love each other, show affection for each other, and unite together in condemnation of hatred, bigotry and violence” (www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/14/statement-president-trump). And, notwithstanding the relatively smaller proportions compared to prior administrations, Trump has nonetheless included various men and women of color and White women in high positions (Lee, 2017).

However, these and similar expressions seem hollow when assessed against the administration’s policies and actions, such as the executive order regarding travel to the US that was widely interpreted – including by the courts – as a Muslim ban (Saletan, 2017), the directive to exclude transgender people from the military (Diamond, 2017), proposed deep cuts in aid for the poor and those with disabilities (Hiltzik, 2017b), cancellation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program (Bennett and Tanfani, 2017), and numerous others. Similarly, Trump’s failure to forcefully and unequivocally condemn certain extremist hate groups – for example, in the wake of neo-Nazi and “alt-right” demonstrations and violence in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 (Thrash and Haberman, 2017a, b) – and his statements suggesting the similarity of these groups to those who would protest against them (Bump, 2017) have been strongly criticized by a range of voices (Thrash and Haberman, 2017b) across much of the American political and organizational spectrum.

Questioning the limits of inclusion: personal and professional challenges
How can those of us committed to diversity and inclusion address the Trump administration’s approach to these issues, especially after many years of explicit and substantial attention to D&I by the prior administration (e.g. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/03/11/building-inclusive-diversity-more-numbers; https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/civil-rights/empowerment). What are some of the implications for our work to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion, and for how we understand what may be needed to truly foster and sustain organizational and societal change in these areas?

At a basic level, one could simply dismiss Mr Trump as a leader who does not particularly support inclusion and who may even undermine it, as someone who does not see or does not agree with the business case for D&I, or as someone who is not familiar with some of the arguments for, benefits of, or practices needed to advance diversity. One could interpret his attitudes and behavior at an individual level, or perhaps look at his family history for clues. These perspectives would then lead to seeking to educate him (and his associates) about the importance of diversity, the benefits of inclusion, and the problems with bias and discrimination. Or one could focus on sharing “best practices” for organizations (e.g. O’Mara et al., 2016). But the depth of support he has received, and the polarization that the country has experienced, suggest that a different kind of analysis and perspective are warranted. Those of us who work on D&I may benefit from looking at ourselves and our own assumptions and behavior, rather than only or first focusing
on the others – those whom we may believe have not yet “seen the light” or may be misguided in some way.

As a practitioner, scholar, and researcher of inclusion and diversity and as someone who has devoted his career to helping create inclusive organizations and fostering inclusive behavior, I very much believe in and work toward creating a society and workplaces where people of all views and backgrounds can fully participate and contribute, as equals. For me, inclusion is not about promoting assimilation, but rather a way of creating conditions to allow diversity to flourish and its benefits to be realized:

Inclusion is an active process in which individuals, groups, organizations, and societies – rather than seeking to foster homogeneity – view and approach diversity as a valued resource. In an inclusive system, we value ourselves and others because of and not despite our differences (or similarities); everyone – across multiple types of differences – should be empowered as a full participant and contributor who feels and is connected to the larger collective without having to give up individual uniqueness, cherished identities, or vital qualities (Ferdman, 2017, p. 238).

Thus, inclusion is not only about people’s rights but also about the collective’s capacity to grow and to be better. I also strongly believe in democracy and the importance of including everyone’s voices and perspectives in governance and policy development at all levels. At the micro level, I work toward developing individual and collective practices – by leaders and by all members of a group or organization – that will increase everyone’s experiences of inclusion (Ferdman, 2014). At the organizational level, I work with leaders and representative organizational groups – such as D&I councils – to develop and implement strategies that will systematically incorporate inclusion and diversity as core values and approaches across the organization. I have also been involved – most notably with AmericaSpeaks (www.americaspeaks.org) – in helping to design and facilitate large-scale civic events to bring people together across a range of views and identities to collectively consider and address difficult policy issues, such as health care and budget reform, working together dialogically to find points of convergence and consensus and to give their considered input to policy makers.

Mr Trump’s election to the US presidency – and particularly the fact that so many people voted for him – has forcefully challenged my approach and my commitment to this fundamental belief in the power and equality of all voices. I have found myself, for example, wanting to avoid conversations with certain people whom I know (or suspect) are very supportive of Mr Trump or his policies. I have less patience than I used to when people readily express what I interpret as ethnocentric, xenophobic, or parochial views. And I have found myself frustrated at the need to engage in conversations about and advocacy for principles and practices that I thought had been settled, and yet are now back on the table and in question.

The challenges to my approach and commitment go beyond my individual convenience or behavior, and relate more fundamentally to the nature and boundaries of inclusion itself. These challenges involve questions such as the following:

- When I advocate for the importance of engaging with and including people with different beliefs, does this include those who steadfastly oppose inclusion itself?
- Do I truly believe that the views of people whose political goals and policy preferences would – in my estimation (or that of others, including the proponents of those views themselves) – undermine or subvert the very principles of democracy itself deserve the same weight and consideration as more inclusive views?
- How do I appropriately and productively engage with those with whom I completely disagree and/or who try to minimize or exclude me or others I care about?
- For inclusion to truly take hold and thrive, what limits may be necessary? How can those be put in place (and by whom) in ways that do not belie inclusive principles and practices?
These are all questions that, in the aftermath of the 2016 Presidential election and in the context of much of what has happened since, have become much more salient and important to address for D&I work and by D&I practitioners.

One could interpret these issues and questions as grounded in my individual and unique concerns, background, and values. For example, I am an immigrant to the USA; yet, I believe — and both law and history indicate — that as a citizen I have and should have the same rights and the same stature as any other citizen, whether natural-born or naturalized. I have a daughter as well as two sons, and I want them to have similar and equal opportunities in their life, in their occupational and educational journeys, and in how they are treated in the society; yet, half the population is comprised of women. I have friends and family members who belong to the LGBT community, and I want them to be able to live and work freely without being subjected to hostility, discrimination, or bias; yet, these are views shared by a large proportion of the US population, according to opinion surveys (e.g. Drake, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2017). I want all of us to be able to live in a country where we can be treated and regarded as equal; yet these are values enshrined in the US Constitution. So surely, these are not parochial, idiosyncratic, or partisan views or values. A large proportion of conservatives, for example, would support similar views and values.

These and similar concerns raise issues about the nature and boundaries of inclusion, and particularly about the role of power in fostering equality, diversity, and inclusion:

- Who decides who should be included, and to what?
- How and by whom are the boundaries of inclusion — both of membership in the community and of what is acceptable and what is not — determined?
- What types of diversity are too much, and in which contexts?

More practically, D&I practitioners such as myself must reassess how to address these issues in the organizations we work with, learning how to more directly engage even with those who can be quite skeptical — at least initially — of the underlying premises of D&I work, and who may even actively advocate against it. With Mr Trump and his administration in power, those who oppose or wish to challenge D&I initiatives can see themselves represented at the highest levels in the country, and so can feel encouraged or authorized to speak out against or resist such initiatives more boldly and loudly than in the recent past.

Although this is not necessarily a major problem by itself, there has been increasing use of the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion to justify speaking out against it. Recently, for example, a Google employee wrote a critique of his company’s approach to diversity that went viral, sparking attention and news coverage around the country and a great deal of tension across Silicon Valley companies (Hiltzik, 2017a), many of which had already been under fire for insufficient diversity, for both unconscious and overt bias across the organization, and for not doing enough to create change and foster inclusion. Google fired the employee, which led to further analysis and questioning (e.g. Mejia, 2017; Page, 2017; Schmidt, 2017). Was this the right move on the part of Google’s CEO? Might it have been better for the organization to use the controversy as an opportunity for learning and dialogue? While I believe this may have been preferable, it is also the case that the polarization in the country and the perceived hostility to diversity and inclusion on the part of the Trump administration may have provided part of the spark not only leading the employee to write his critique but also to the subsequent interest in it and to its rapid spread — including by many supporting the ideas in the document. There seem to be more and more cases of backlash against D&I initiatives, perhaps paralleling the election itself. But what has especially changed is the frequent use of freedom of speech and other values linked to inclusion to defend the right to speak out in opposition to inclusion or against specific groups. At the same time, the polarization between
those advocating for equality, diversity, and inclusion and those who criticize them appears to have increased, with each side taking stronger positions and less likely to listen to each other. These phenomena present new challenges to D&I practitioners.

Expanding (and bounding) our views of inclusion: toward more nuance and complexity

By considering my own challenges in accepting Trump’s ascension to power, I can find ways to move beyond my practice comfort zones and learn more about the possibilities and limits of D&I approaches. On the one hand, I and other practitioners must be more sensitive to and inclusive of a broader range of perspectives and views. At the same time, we need to be clearer and more precise about the hard boundaries involved in inclusion, and the important reasons for them.

Inclusion does not mean that everything goes (Ferdman, 2017) and it is not an all-encompassing construct. Inclusion constitutes a particular way of being and working together – with and across differences; those of us in the D&I field need to stand for that and to be clear with and about that. It means that we must be more precise in clarifying both the meaning and the limits of inclusion. It is much too easy to treat inclusion as a somewhat soft concept and fuzzy practice, leaving a great deal to interpretation. For example, I have heard people jokingly explain that they copied dozens of people on an e-mail chain because they wanted to be inclusive, or inviting too many people to meetings for the same reason. These are problematic distortions and dilutions of inclusion, and it is up to expert scholars and practitioners in the field to support more sophisticated and nuanced understanding and use of the term and more widespread understanding of the complexities and of the importance of the practice of inclusion (Ferdman, 2017; Ferdman and Deane, 2014).

There are at least three ways to view inclusion, but I believe only one of them is helpful if inclusion is to provide a systematic and systemic way to benefit from diversity and to foster equity in organizations and societies. These alternative (and often confounded) views of inclusion are described and discussed in the following sections.

(Conditional) inclusion – only for selected people or groups

This view of inclusion involves granting full and complete privileges of belonging for those deemed worthy of admission to the organization, community, or society, usually combined with the requirement to assimilate or blend in. The condition for joining and for receiving the benefits of membership is to accept and adopt the values, norms, and premises of the prior members, along with their definition of what the collective identity represents and how it must be enacted and/or embodied. While slight variations may be permitted, this is essentially an assimilationist perspective, and so is not the type of inclusion that permits, encourages, or facilitates diversity (Ferdman, 2017), at least not beyond a very superficial level. Mr Trump’s rhetoric – for example, regarding “making America great again,” or the need to exclude certain types of immigrants – focuses on this view of inclusion. It is the type of inclusion that is defined and managed by those in power, based on their conditions and criteria for admission and full participation, their construction of reality, and their ongoing control of the boundaries. But, this is not truly inclusion and certainly does not value diversity.

Full and unconditional inclusion for all

This approach involves inclusion and incorporation into the collective – the organization or society – of anyone and everyone, without criteria and without processes for creating respectful and/or civil engagement across differences. In this approach, all people and all ideas are welcome, with very few conditions or boundaries, if any at all. The more diversity, of all types, the better! From this perspective, all speakers and any form of protest or dissent
should be welcome on university campuses, for example, regardless of the extremity of the views expressed or the manner of doing so, or the degree to which these might incite division, discord, and even hatred. While enticing in some ways, this approach to inclusion can be especially problematic when some of those participating in the collective or society look to take over; work to undermine, exclude, or even eliminate some categories of people; or refuse to engage in civil or respectful behavior. As the philosopher Karl Popper (1945) argued, unconditional tolerance can be quite problematic:

Less well known is the *paradox of tolerance*: Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. —In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be most unwise. But we should claim the right to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal (p. 581, italics in original).

In prior work (Ferdman, 2017), I discuss a similar paradox regarding inclusion and boundaries, leading to the third – and I believe preferred – view of inclusion.

**Inclusion into a permeable, evolving, yet bounded collective**

This is a type of inclusion that does not require conformity, but that is nonetheless characterized by strong, unifying, and egalitarian bases for ongoing engagement that allow both maintaining and assessing the meaning and limits of collective principles and values, even as these evolve and are adapted to new conditions and members. Although inclusion and diversity involve continued exploration of both boundaries and what is in the boundaries, they also require standing firm for certain principles: diversity and inclusion should and do not mean that everything goes, and there must be consensus and alignment around core values and norms, even as these are tested in practice. From this perspective, inclusion is dynamic and proactive, and requires continuously considering and addressing practices at multiple levels of system, ranging from micro to macro (Ferdman, 2014).

Paradoxically, it is standing firm for the values and processes – and especially the experiences – of inclusion that can permit ongoing, rich, and equitable engagement across differences (Ferdman, 2017). One recent example of this in the political arena was the reaction of owners and players in the National Football League (e.g. ESPN.com, 2017), along with many others (e.g. Sunstein, 2017) to Mr Trump’s strong criticism of football players who were protesting police brutality and racism by taking a knee rather than standing during the pre-game playing of the US national anthem. Most of these responses reinforced the importance of freedom of expression and respectful dissent, and spoke to the simultaneous importance of unity and of diversity as strength. On this view of inclusion, dissent (cf. Berg, 2011), when not used to undermine but rather to strengthen the collective, can be seen quite positively, in contrast to Mr Trump’s efforts to impose the type of assimilationist inclusion described earlier. Notably, even Robert Kraft, the politically conservative owner of the New England Patriots and a well-known and highly visible supporter of Mr Trump, expressed that he was “deeply disappointed by the tone of the comments made by the President” and reaffirmed his pride in the players and the unifying
power of sports; he also indicated his “support [for the players’] right to peacefully affect [sic] social change and raise awareness in a manner that they feel is most impactful” (Kraft, in New England Patriots, 2017).

Similarly, over 300 CEOs at a broad range of large corporations, universities, non-profits, and other organizations, as part of a new initiative named “CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion,” recently issued a pledge to support “a more inclusive workplace for millions of our employees, our communities and society at large” (www.ceoaction.com). The group’s website lists a pledge taken by the leaders to foster opportunities for open dialogue on diversity in their organizations, to confront bias, and to share their practices and learning. Regarding their approach to conversations about diversity and inclusion in the workplace, the pledge states that “by encouraging an ongoing dialogue and not tolerating any incongruence with these values of openness, we are building trust, encouraging compassion and open-mindedness, and reinforcing our commitment to a culture of inclusivity” (www.ceoaction.com/the-pledge). What is notable about this is the combined commitment to exploring a range of differences while making it explicit that this encouragement of and openness to a range of views and their expression does not mean that the culture of inclusion and trust can be undermined in the process.

Years ago, in reflecting on the implications of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the subsequent US attacks on Afghanistan for our understanding of inclusion and its limits, Martin Davidson and I addressed the issue of boundary exploration as follows:

Full inclusion requires implementing processes that involve all members of the community in setting and giving meaning to the boundary. Paradoxically, participation in this process requires an a priori commitment to the larger community—in a sense assuming a predefined boundary—yet at the same time a willingness on the part of members to relax that definition of the collective—a willingness to be wholly part of something that is yet without a clear boundary or limits. What this means is that none of us alone, and no subgroups alone, can own or set the boundary. That boundary, those limits, must be marked together; and once they are marked, we must be willing to constantly reexamine them, in light of changes in ourselves and in others (Ferdman and Davidson, 2002, p. 44).

To be able to engage in this type of exploration, we need some degree of consensus on how to go about doing it. This must be combined with, on the one hand, ways to address and limit violations of the norms of inclusion, and on the other hand, willingness on the part of members to listen to and to be influenced by each other, for the sake of evolving into a better and stronger collective. On this view, the commitment to inclusion as a foundational principle is paralleled by the recognition that inclusion means that the group, organization, or society will be in ongoing dialogue and flux, thus the constant tension between stability and change (see also Ferdman, 2017). We went on to describe this as follows:

As the two of us have struggled to make sense of current events, and have also wondered whether sometimes some differences are just “too different,” we have become more aware of the importance of the processes used to define and redefine the container within which such judgments are made. Dialogue, mutual adaptation, and engagement are key practices in this regard. So, for example, in the current dilemmas over the appropriate breadth of the container we call the “United States of America,” we believe that the price of admission should not be a particular skin color, ancestry, or religion, but rather a willingness to engage in a two-way process of mutual adaptation. This may very well result in a container that is different than it was at other times in the past, but one that, by its ability to adapt, remains truer to its original intent (Ferdman and Davidson, 2002, p. 45).

In the shadow of Trump, over 15 years after we wrote these words, they seem to be particularly resonant once again. Now, however, rather than perceived dangers from outside the country, the challenge seems to be perceived danger from within.
We need to consider not only individual experiences of inclusion (Ferdman, 2014), but also the context in which these occur. When those in authority seem to actively undermine the principles and practices of inclusion, this can call into question the security and sense of safety of people in groups that are under attack – directly or indirectly – or whose needs are ignored or rejected. Ultimately, it is not about who is right and who is wrong, but rather about creating spaces in which we can engage these differences in a productive way that values everyone, where no one must hide or demean valued identities to contribute to the larger whole.

In working on D&I, we often bend over backwards to include multiple points of view and different kinds of people. But inclusion, based on the view expressed here, must also include some clear boundaries – for example, regarding process and acceptance as well as civility and respect. This also means that inclusion very much involves intention and attention, individually and collectively, and must be continually co-constructed. Inclusion is an active process, something we do on an ongoing basis; it is not an action that is done once and can then be forgotten. Rather, it is an active, everyday process at multiple levels of analysis. On the one hand, inclusion involves safety, with people being at ease and able to do their own thing. On the other hand, because in a diverse society or group we will constantly need to engage across differences, more of us are going to be more uncomfortable more of the time (Ferdman, 2016, 2017). The challenges to diversity and inclusion during the Trump administration remind us that this discomfort extends to D&I practitioners; those of us focused on fostering inclusion in organizations and society must continue to find appropriate ways to address our own discomfort with those who may have different views or experiences, while we simultaneously continue to learn about and champion inclusive practices and policies and help to define (and redefine) appropriate boundaries for inclusion. In the last section, I outline some specific implications for practitioners of this more complex and nuanced view of inclusion.

Implications for D&I practitioners
I believe that the dynamics discussed so far have several implications in the context of seeking to foster and maintain the complex type of inclusion discussed in the preceding section, which I propose here. What must D&I practitioners change, what must we continue, and what must we adapt as we work in Trump’s shadow and its consequences?

Continue to learn, develop, and apply our inclusive mindsets and behaviors
As D&I practitioners, we must be prepared to engage in ongoing learning and dialogue, and not to expect others to accept our views or see things our way simply by virtue of our roles or expertise. It does not help the cause of inclusion to vilify or dehumanize others or to completely and permanently write off individuals or groups – even when they blatantly undermine or work against inclusion. We must be willing to be self-reflective, to test our assumptions, and to engage in inclusive dialogue not only with those who may already agree with us, but also with those who have doubts or who may disagree. In short, we must be prepared to do ourselves that which we advocate, including but not limited to, listening to those who think differently. Doing so, however, does not mean giving up the value or goal of inclusion, but rather being willing to test it with our own practices and in our own hearts and minds, to model it in our behavior and approach, and to learn and develop new options and approaches. And doing this can ultimately give us more, rather than less, credibility, strength, and courage to clarify and to stand firm for what we believe is non-negotiable about inclusion and to reinforce (and model) core inclusion principles, norms, and behavior.
Partner on many fronts while continuing to speak out about inclusion, what it means, what it looks like, and why and how it matters

Recognize that there may be many avenues to working for equality and to fostering inclusion, and that it is the collective efforts and overall trend line that will most likely make a difference. The seeds of positive change for inclusion may emerge from unexpected sources (e.g. Robert Kraft’s statement discussed earlier); overt challenges to diversity and inclusion – which can feel like and may often be major setbacks – can evoke counter-reactions that, together, can help maintain momentum for or reinforce the forces working toward more diversity and inclusion. The collective outrage expressed across a broad range of the political spectrum after the White nationalist and neo-Nazi demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 is but one example of this. Similarly, there is growing and more visible discussion of the structurally embedded and systemic nature of racism (e.g. Muhammad, 2017) or sexism (e.g. Hsu, 2017) and their effects, and frequent articles and opinion pieces in mainstream outlets about White supremacy (e.g. Blow, 2017). In this context, it is important to remember that the nature, dynamics, and history of systemic racism and White supremacy should lead to an expectation of pushback and countervailing forces to any efforts to make more visible or to dismantle that system.

An important role for D&I practitioners and organizational leaders is to help frame these efforts toward change in light of overarching values and perspectives – to help give them meaning and purpose – and to continue to articulate not only a broad vision of inclusion, but also specific views and expectations regarding inclusive norms and behavior. It has been encouraging to see more CEOs and other leaders speak up, engage in the conversation, and address their commitment to diversity and inclusion. D&I practitioners should be ready to note, highlight, and appreciate any positive movement; to continue to promote inclusion in a variety of clear, engaging, and compelling ways; and to do so at multiple levels, ranging from individual behavior to leadership practices to organizational and societal policies and practices.

Seek to reduce or mitigate – and when possible, avoid – polarization, while advocating for inclusive values and norms

D&I practitioners must lead in understanding, discussing, and helping to explain the challenges and paradoxes of inclusion (Ferdman, 2017). By acknowledging and incorporating the role of ambivalence and opposing forces in our work (and in ourselves), we can help those with whom we work (and ourselves) move away from simplistic or either/or solutions – which rarely work in this domain and result in greater polarization (Ferdman, 2017) – toward seeking more nuanced solutions that recognize and address the true complexities of diversity and its manifestations. For example, the issue of free speech on college campuses in the USA has turned into a very divisive and polarizing debate; yet, if addressed and framed differently, I believe it may very well be possible to find inclusive and respectful ways to recognize and make room for the perspectives and needs of vastly divergent and seemingly incompatible stakeholders. But this can only be done in the context of clear and firm boundaries and norms regarding what constitutes allowable expressions of views (i.e. allowable speech) – even when those views may repel others, opportunities for dialogue and listening across differences (i.e. opportunities for people to come together in diverse settings to practice inclusive behavior), the recognition that no single participant or group should be able to dictate all the terms of engagement, and efforts to discover values, needs, or goals that can provide points of collective convergence. When boundaries and limits are tested, D&I practitioners have a key role in reminding and advising leaders and members of organizations regarding the basic principles of inclusion, holding space for inclusive dialogue, helping people move away from polarizing language and behavior, and supporting the collective in identifying what is truly out of bounds and why.
These suggestions provide an initial framework for generating more specific approaches, which may vary for different practitioners depending on their context, role, experience, goals, values, and other factors.

Conclusion
The challenges to inclusion and diversity that I and many others are experiencing as we work in the shadow of Mr Trump and his administration are certainly large and can be quite discouraging. At the same time, I believe that to the extent that we address these challenges with resilience, openness, self-reflection, and persistence, we will be better prepared for disagreement, cynicism, and pushback, and thus more able to foster inclusive practices and policies in organizations and society that can be sustained across a broad range of political conditions. Staying the course is fundamental to this; but so is remembering that we cannot be self-righteous, complacent, or closed to different perspectives, ideas, or approaches. We must continue to learn, to create and nourish broad coalitions, and to clarify and advocate for the core principles of inclusion. If we test and question the boundaries of inclusion in this way, I believe we will ultimately only make it stronger.

References


About the author

Bernardo M. Ferdman, PhD is Distinguished Professor at the California School of Professional Psychology, Alliant International University, and a Leadership and OD Consultant and CCE Board Certified Coach (http://ferdmanconsulting.com) with over three decades of experience working with diverse groups and organizations to increase individual and collective effectiveness and inclusion. He consults, coaches, writes, speaks, teaches, and conducts research on inclusion, diversity, inclusive leadership, and bringing one’s whole self to work. He is passionate about helping to create an inclusive world where more of us can be fully ourselves and accomplish our goals in ways that are effective, productive, and authentic. Bernardo M. Ferdman can be contacted at: bferdman@alliant.edu

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