

Empathy 101: We Are Not the Same

People often perceive common diversity and inclusion training as being told to change how they act. “Don’t do this”, “you’re part of the problem”, and so on. To compensate, we’re seeing an explosion of euphemisms such as “unconscious bias” which, in assuaging the guilt of being biased by calling it “unconscious”, only reaffirms that people should feel guilty in the first place.

Too often the rhetoric around bias is full of judgment, about failures to overcome something that is, in fact, a universal function. We will never get rid of bias, and arguing that just makes people feel more of that guilt and discomfort. The best we can do is seek to understand it, identify it at work, and create work-arounds for ourselves to mitigate its effects.

In our workshops, Smooth Sailing Solutions discusses the differences between bias, prejudice, and discrimination in individuals, organizations, and systems. Then we explore ways people experience those phenomena. We root our workshops in cognitive and linguistic science, which gives participants a layer between themselves and the social and ethical implications of “diversity”.

In *Empathy 101* participants explore how different identities, both self-selected and externally imposed, affect our experiences. After brief introductions, we begin by establishing community agreements as boundaries for the group that enable individuals to feel safer stepping outside their own. These agreements in themselves represent a small exercise in trust and community building.

We continually solicit input from participants, leveraging the community agreements to encourage people to be honest, vulnerable, and a little uncomfortable. We then pivot away from discomfort to a more encouraging topic: ways people have (or could) make others feel



more at ease, more valued, and more supported in the face of bias, prejudice, and discrimination.

The Identity Game

The Identity Game is an exercise in group affinity and identification and how they work. It ensures the workshop is more interactive and keeps things personal and impactful for all participants.

Participants spend five minutes listing ten labels they identify with. Identifying ten labels is a difficult exercise for many people, requiring a certain amount of out-of-the-box thinking

and introspection. After a few minutes of discussion, we ask the participants to rank their labels in order of affinity. Then it’s on to the next task: listing ten labels they think *other* people would assign to them.

The lists may be similar, or they may be very different; comparing them helps us understand that the way we see ourselves—what we know about ourselves—may not be the way other people see us, know us, or judge us.

In an optional part three to the *Identity Game*, participants list labels for each other, either in pairs, small groups, or as a “fishbowl” exercise (where two people conduct the exercise and the room watches). We recommend this for smaller groups in high-trust environments, and it may not be appropriate for every workshop.

Empathy 101 concludes with instruction on conscious and intentional processes all of us can use to overcome our biases. Recognizing and identifying them is a fundamental first step. We discuss other practices as ways to compensate for the effects of entirely natural neuro-cognitive processes, such as: breathing to slow down, asking ourselves how another person might perceive things, adopting mantras, and separating the intellectual brain and the emotional brain when making decisions and value judgments.