

# NAVIGATING INCLUSION IN A POLARIZED CLIMATE

"Resources for Courageous Leadership in Human Rights Work"



TAWANA BHAGWAT



## IAOHRA Conference

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# *FOOD FOR THOUGHT*



*"An individual has not started living  
until he can rise above the narrow  
confines of his individualistic concerns  
to the broader concerns of all  
humanity."*

-Dr. Martin L. King Jr.



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# *Learning Objectives*

## **You will learn to:**

- Identify performative inclusion
- Align strategies with human rights values
- Lead with accountability
- Build inclusive cultures in challenging climates



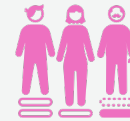


# *Why This Conversation Now?*



- ➔ **DEIB and inclusion increasingly politicized**
- ➔ **Polarization has created fear and silence in public institutions**
- ➔ **Strategic, heart-centered leadership is needed**

# *Political & Social Climate*



**DEI is framed as divisive**



**Polarized policies emerging**



**Culture war dynamics affect  
Human Rights enforcement**

# TABLE TALK

QUESTION 1

*JOURNAL*

Where are these tensions most visible in your work? How has it impacted daily decisions?

# *Organizational Risks*



**Fear of  
reputational harm**



**Fear of funding  
loss (EEOC, HUD)**



**Policy shifts that  
stall action**

# *When Inclusion Gets Distorted*



**Token gestures**



**Cosmetic policy shifts/changes**

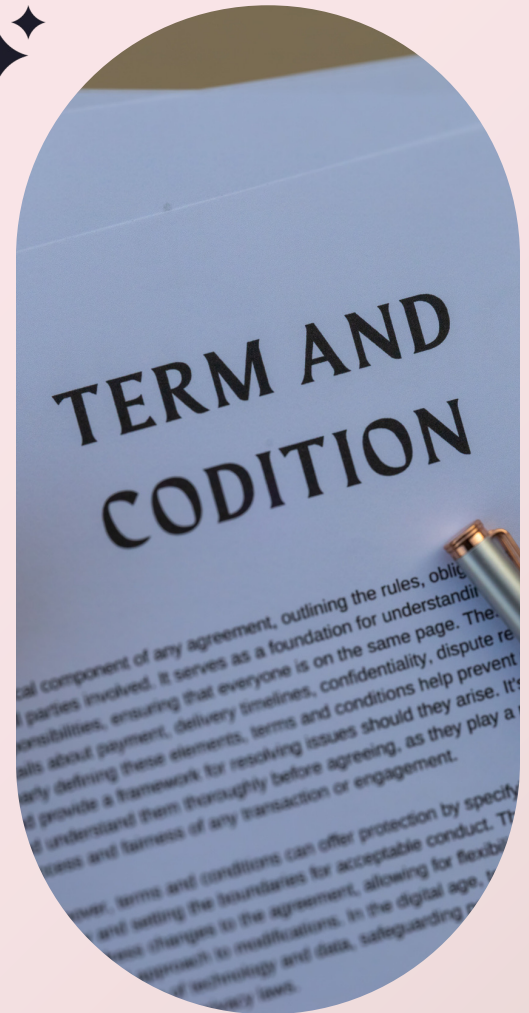


**Silent internal resistance**



# *The Compliance Trap*

- **Legal compliance is not cultural transformation**
- **Laws shift/change — values endure**
- **Courage and intention required**



# TABLE TALK

QUESTION 2

*REFLECT*

Where has compliance created comfort but not true change in your agency? What is one example where the law was followed but trust was not built?



# *Values-Driven Leadership*

**Avoid fear-based decisions**

**Anchor inclusion in mission and values**

**Be consistent under pressure**

# *Framework for Courageous Inclusion*



**Compliance  
+ Mission**



**Integrity in  
Messaging**



**Shared  
Accountability**



**Culture of  
Belonging**





# *Accountability Structures*



**Leadership  
Scorecards**



**Peer and upward  
feedback**



**Transparent  
reporting**

# TABLE TALK

QUESTION 3

*CONSIDER*

Where is accountability clear and where is it weak? What tools, like scorecards or regular reporting, could strengthen it?

# Messaging with Integrity

WORDS  
MATTER

AVOID  
DIVISIVE  
LANGUAGE

COMMUNICATE  
SHARED  
VALUES





# *Belonging in Action*



**Celebrate  
diversity fairly**

**01**



**Create safe  
spaces + make  
people feel seen**

**02**



**Support growth  
for all staff**

**03**

# *TABLE TALK*

QUESTION 4

*REFLECT*

What daily actions in your organization make people feel seen?  
What's missing?

## **CASE SCENARIO:** *Inclusion Under Fire*

### SCENARIO

A leader removes  
'inclusion' from a policy  
to avoid conflict.

### DISCUSSION

How do you respond?  
What actions preserve  
trust?



# *Strategy Discussion*

---

01.

**Use data, mission & values to stay grounded**

02.

**Build internal allies**

03.

**Communicate with clarity and consistency**

# *Tools For Courageous Leadership*



**Policy  
audits**



**Inclusive  
communication  
review**



**Mediation &  
coaching**



**Allyship  
training**



# *Courage as a Daily Practice*



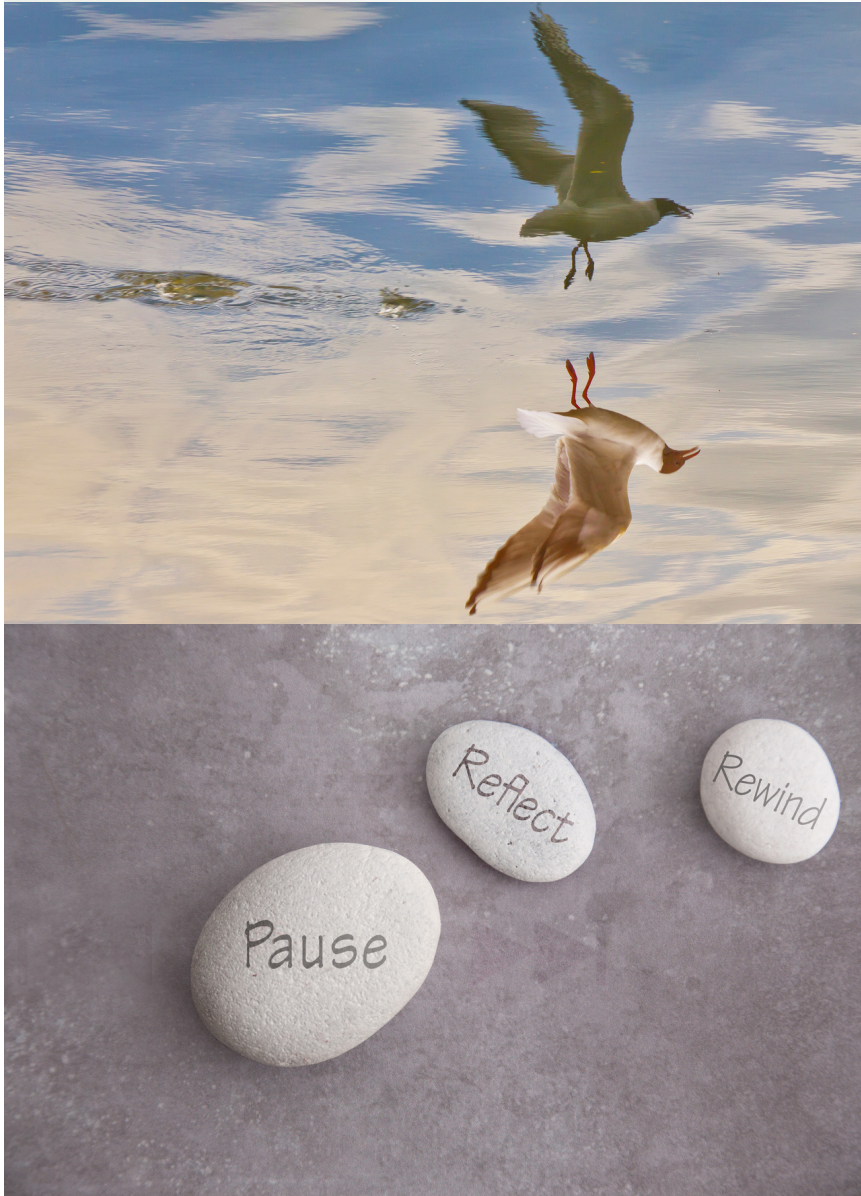
Inclusion is a mindset



Practice daily  
actions



Lead with intention  
every day



# *Reflection Point*

What will you do  
differently?

What support do you seek?

# *Sector Pain Points*



**Funding  
uncertainty  
(EEOC, HUD)**



**Lack of resources  
and capacity**



**Widespread  
anxiety about  
federal cuts**



# TABLE TALK

QUESTION 5

*SHARE*

Where are you feeling the greatest pressure-funding, staffing, community expectations? How has that pressure shown up in your planning?

# Reaffirming Our Core Mission



1

Support all protected classes: race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40+), disability, genetic information, veterans

2

Title VII protects employees and job applicants

3

Fair Housing Act prohibits harassment and discrimination

# *Clear Messaging to Marginalized Communities*



'We are still here to help and support you.'



Direct reassurance builds trust



Address fears head-on with facts and compassion



# *Planning Beyond Federal Funding*



**Avoid reactive  
measures—be  
proactive**



**Diversify revenue  
streams beyond  
federal dollars**



**Brainstorm local/state  
funding and  
partnerships**

# *Collaborative Action*

- **Brainstorm funding ideas together**
- **Share best practices across agencies**
- **Take solutions home to implement**



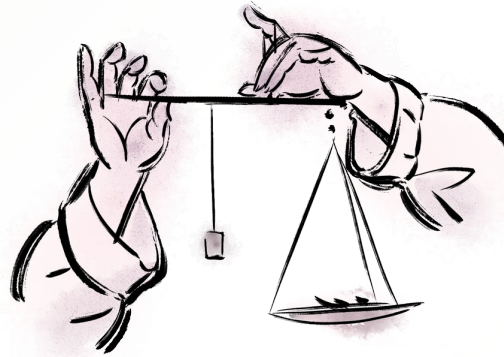
# *10 Strategies*

FOR ADVANCING INCLUSION

IN POLITICALLY SENSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS



# *Acknowledge Sector Pain Points*



- Funding uncertainty (EEOC, HUD, etc.)
- Resource limitations
- Fear-driven leadership responses
- Silence around policy shifts

# *Center Your Legal Mission*



- **Protect Title VII categories:** race, color, religion, sex, national origin
- **Uphold the Fair Housing Act:** disability, familial status, sexual harassment
- **Keep civil rights as your compass:** serve and protect

# *Speak Directly to the Marginalized*



- **Let people know: 'We are still here for you.'**
- **Address fears with facts & compassion**
- **Use plain, values-based messaging**



# *Train Your Frontline*



- Ensure all staff know protected categories
- Rehearse values-driven messaging
- Build confidence to counter misinformation

# *Diversify Revenue Streams*



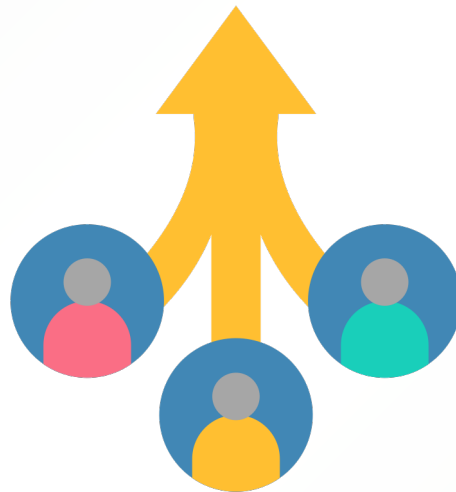
- Explore grants beyond federal
- Leverage community partnerships
- Fundraise with local business or philanthropy

# *Share a Unified Message*



- **Align internal & external communications**
- **Avoid contradictions across departments**
- **Elevate community confidence**

# *Build Internal Coalitions*



- HR, legal, outreach, investigations—must align
- Regular cross-functional briefings
- Foster agency-wide ownership of inclusion goals

# *Collect & Use Local Data*



- Know your community's challenges
- Track outcomes to show impact
- Leverage data in advocacy and budget decisions

# *Prepare Scenario Plans*



- Anticipate funding or legal changes
- Be prepared to address complaints
- Create proactive response plan; don't panic



# *Reignite Your 'Why'*



- Inclusion isn't a buzzword—it's civil rights
- Reconnect with mission & purpose
- You are not powerless.

## *CALL TO ACTION*

- 1 Share these 10 Strategies with your team**
- 2 Facilitate your own brainstorm**
- 3 Lead with courage and humanity, not compliance alone**





# Thank You!

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*Contact  
Us*



# TABLE TALK

QUESTION 2

*JOURNAL*

Where have you felt these pressures most acutely in your work?