

HADAR GOREN



To learn inclusion skills, make it personal

Laboratory heads need training, support and accountability to connect people across cultures, says David Asai.

When universities invite me to speak to their faculty members about excellence in science, I emphasize the importance of diversity and inclusion. At one of these talks, about a year ago, I added a simple exercise on privilege. I asked the audience members to reflect on situations in which they had been outsiders, and then to share in small groups how it had felt. The room filled with the cacophony of conversations — here, one participant spoke of being the only woman on a committee; there, another described looking different from most professors in the university. I reminded them that many of their students, especially those from under-represented groups, might also feel that they don't belong, and that it is our collective responsibility to create an inclusive environment.

Afterwards, a participant came to me with a confession: the only time he had felt like an outsider was when visiting a non-English-speaking country. He seemed embarrassed, perhaps feeling guilty that he had not experienced more significant discrimination or that his personal experience was inadequate. I reassured him that he had done exactly what I had hoped: reflected on how it felt to be in a disempowered minority, albeit fleetingly. Learning the skills of inclusion starts with empathy, the ability to recognize and share another's feelings.

That conversation reminded me of how my personal journey convinced me that the lessons of inclusion must be taught to senior academics. I am not from a group under-represented in science. Nearly two decades ago, when I was head of biological sciences at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, I was a reluctant participant in a multicultural forum there. (These began in the 1990s and ran for a decade.) I resented my dean's insistence that I take time away from researching cell biology to spend a weekend hearing lectures on oppression. And I dreaded the prospect of having to get 'touchy-feely' with faculty colleagues.

In one exercise, 30 or so faculty members sat in rows. A facilitator, speaking only in Spanish, gave instructions on how to solve a simple problem. Because I did not understand, I could not produce the right answer, and I was sent to the back with the other low achievers. I was embarrassed and angry about being made to feel a failure.

Facilitators got us to speak openly about race, rather than holding back for fear of saying the wrong thing. We practised respectful listening — working to understand another's thoughts without personal interjections. We shared how it feels to be in a disempowered position, as well as in the position of privilege.

On the final morning of the workshop, we were joined by a few former students of colour: an African American biologist, a Latina physicist. They huddled together in a 'fishbowl'; we faculty members encircled them, sitting quietly to practise respectful listening. Our former students spoke to one another about how it felt to be at our

university. They talked about always being watched, but never seen. They talked about shedding expressions of their cultural identities — such as certain colloquialisms — to be safe. Their stories made real what US Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor later described as the daily wounds inflicted by "the slights, the snickers, the silent judgments that reinforce that most crippling of thoughts: 'I do not belong here.'"

That is when I began to understand that inclusion is about paying attention to feelings — how it feels to have to justify every day that you belong, how it feels to constantly be on guard to survive in an environment not of your making.

I introduced a similar multicultural forum when I moved to Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California, in 2003. In the 'fishbowl', we learnt that homework assigned over the weekend forces some students to choose between going home to family and staying on campus to work with their study groups, prompting questions about academic rigour with which the college continues to grapple. The forum also led us to rethink how to recruit faculty members. Today, applicants are asked for a statement of their planned contributions to diversity and inclusion. Hiring committees are encouraged to decide on selection criteria before beginning a search, rather than relying on the easily biased 'I'll know it when I see it'.

Ten years ago, I joined the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) in Chevy Chase, Maryland, a major US funder. Our team works to ensure that diversity and inclusion are core values of all our programmes. We understand that scientific excellence depends on creativity, that creativity emerges from diversity, and that

the advantages of diversity are realized through inclusion. There are systematic issues that must be addressed through policies that specifically target under-represented groups, but that is not enough. The responsibility for creating an inclusive environment lies with those who teach, mentor, manage, recruit and hire the scientific workforce, and learning the skills of inclusivity demands opportunities to make emotional connections.

This is why HHMI's Gilliam graduate fellowship programme — which aims to increase the diversity of students who will become scientific leaders — requires recipients' thesis advisers to engage in programmes to explore cultural identity and practise communicating across cultures. It is also why we invite universities and colleges to apply for matching funds to facilitate faculty conversations about inclusion.

Diversity without inclusion is an empty gesture. Inclusion is a feeling of belonging, and so creating an empowering, embracing, egalitarian environment starts with the heart. ■

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