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What Does Inclusion Look Like?

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Inclusion can happen *now*—in an instant—with *genuine* positive communication directed at someone who has a different identity than you. A person feeling included really comes down to an individual having a sense of belonging and value within a group of people. Over the past year as hosts of the Fisheries Diversity and Inclusion Podcast have interviewed guests, significant themes have emerged in context to “inclusion.” One such theme is the idea of marginalized people feeling isolated. Multiple podcast guests explained that “not seeing people that look like me is a challenge” and “we feel like we are floating around in isolation” (Episode 2). As one podcast guest explained in context to being isolated “you just don’t know the feeling that comes with that; it is a burden” (Episode 5). Another said, “being the only person of color in a room is a heavy weight to have; it is not something that is easy” (Episode 2). For those of us who don’t immediately identify with these experiences, let’s dissect the idea of isolation a bit and do a little walk through the imagination.

Many of you may have never experienced this, as there is a high probability you are part of the majority in a room at any given time. Let’s empathize for a bit and imagine putting yourself in someone else’s shoes who is not part of the majority. You walk into a room filled with people, none of which look like you, speak like you, dress like you, and even if there is absolutely no intention of belittling you with their stares, many are looking because they know you are different. The noticing stops, and things go on as they were, but then no one makes an effort to include you in conversation even if you try. No one shows positive nonverbal communication, which cues you to think you aren’t welcomed even if this may not be the case. You find yourself alone in a corner and wonder why you are even there in the first place. When you present your scientific research to the same group, you get bombarded with questions noticeably more so than others as if you are being unfairly tested. You feel a lack of respect in general despite no one saying anything directly demeaning. You find yourself mentally exhausted. You end up asking yourself, why am I putting myself through this? You remember back to grade school when you didn’t see many people of color in the sciences, and you originally thought you couldn’t do science because no one looked like you. You continually remind yourself that you can overcome these issues, your passion for fisheries resources will continue to motivate you, and you will overcome. Okay, let’s come back to your own shoes now. This example comes directly from a compilation of situations discussed by several podcast guests. It is real and people deal with this regularly. It doesn’t have to be this way. I am willing to bet you can think of a time where this has happened to a minority individual at a meeting or in your office. However, with some caring and compassionate people called “allies,” things can turn around quickly. The idea of “allyship” is to build trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalized people.

Therein lies the rub...it takes effort to be an ally, it takes effort to be inclusive, it takes effort to make others feel welcomed. Sadly, many people don’t realize what they are doing,



A Virginia Conservation Police Officer assists during a youth fishing day. Photo credit: Aaron Bunch.

how they are perceived through nonverbal communication, and what others truly feel. Yes, I identify as a straight Caucasian man who used the word “feel.” People are emotional beings that have feelings no matter how much they want to brush them away or conceal them. Many people can get caught up with being macho and not expressing their own feelings in a positive way or disregarding other people’s feelings. Compassion for people seems to get lost in the shuffle. It is time to prioritize being compassionate and empathetic. Become an ally and work towards being inclusive out loud. What does being inclusive out loud entail you may ask? If you hear something that sounds odd or demeaning towards an individual or group, speak up and say that it is not okay. As one podcast guest said, “an ally can give a sign or cue of disapproval and it usually stops people in their tracks” (Episode 2). In the introductory sentence I used an important word when it comes to being inclusive. A person must be perceived as “genuine” or there is risk of unintentionally coming off as fake or ingenuine. That can often do more damage than good. Another source of harm that is critical to being an ally is not questioning the experiences of marginalized community members, but accepting that their experiences are real and actively working toward changing that experience for the better. But also realize, as one guest stated, “allies are going to screw up and no one is perfect so just learn from it and move on” (Episode 2). That is where the trust comes into play as an ally.

As employers take important steps towards building a diverse workforce, it is paramount to also have a strong focus on inclusion. There is inherent value in being inclusive, but ultimately employers should strive to do so as it can increase employee retention rates. It is one thing to recruit and hire a diverse candidate, but another to retain them if the workplace is not inclusive and welcoming. To increase inclusivity



A young boy and his grandfather view their catch. Photo credit: Aaron Bunch.

and a welcoming workplace environment, it is as simple as consistent positive nonverbal communication while passing someone down the office hallway, out in the field, or at a professional meeting that makes the receiving person feel safe and welcomed. But you can do so much more to create a space for folks to feel like they are truly part of the team and organization. If you want to be part of the solution, emphasize inclusion principles into your daily routine and set the following goals with people who are not like you: (1) find commonality through daily chats and do more listening than talking, (2) become a mentor, whether its formal or informal, (3) build meaningful relationships, and (4) be willing to be inclusive out loud as an ally. A clear example of being inclusive out loud comes from the Twittersphere, where someone's colleague at a meeting stated, "I am uncomfortable with the only woman in the room delegated to note-taking; I can take over that task." If you spend some dedicated time to accomplish these goals, you are helping to create a welcoming



Instructors pose during a course at Old Dominion University. Photo credit: Meredith Bunch.

workplace environment that is creating a sense of belonging for your marginalized colleagues, and you are well on your way to building intercultural competence and positive relationships.

Workplace colleagues aside, as a biologist, manager, or academic, you can practice becoming more inclusive of the underrepresented constituents you serve. This means working and finding ways to communicate with people that are not like you (Episode 7), researching the needs and desires of marginalized communities (see Episodes 7–9), and placing attention on all fisheries user groups. Outside of standard creel surveys, have you ever walked over to a minority subsistence fisher and discussed their opinions on the fishery? Their opinions should matter just as much as the vocal angler that shows up at public meetings, because they share equal stake in the resource. Do you find yourself or your organization prioritizing fisheries research and management that benefits some user groups over others? If so, think critically of inclusion principles and equality and how they relate to the resources you manage or conduct research on. Meaningfully engage with marginalized fisheries user groups. Learn from Episode 7 and consider the guiding framework of "Two-Eyed Seeing" (*Etuaptmunk* in Mi'kmaw), which embraces "learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing, and to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all."

Building bridges and improving relationships with all constituents will aid in building a stronger angling and science community moving forward, which will ultimately help all involved. But don't just take it from me, hear all of the voices shared from episodes of the Fisheries Diversity and Inclusion Podcast. The primary goal of the podcast is to amplify underrepresented voices and educate people with focus on the fisheries profession. Have a listen to bi-weekly podcast episodes that are shared through The Fisheries Podcast feed through any major podcast source or find episodes and other important AFS diversity, equity, and inclusion resources at <https://diversity.fisheries.org>. Put yourself in someone else's shoes for a bit, become an ally, and your world just might become a better place.

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