

EDITORS' PICK

The Human Library Is Tackling Diversity And Inclusion One Person At A Time

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I cover the intersection of business, psychology and gender.

Jul 13, 2020, 10:09am EDT



The Human Library promotes empathy and understanding through one-on-one and small group discussions. ... [+] RONNI ABERGEL, HUMAN LIBRARY

There finally seems to be a genuine interest in improving diversity and inclusion at work, but transformative solutions are still hard to come by.

Diversity and inclusion efforts struggle because they often attempt to find a one-size-fits-all solution to eliminating bias. The truth is, there is no effective one-size-fits-all solution because we all come with different backstories and different views of the world. [The Human Library](#) is making an impact, because their approach is tailored to each individual's own biases and prejudices. They're tackling diversity and inclusion one person at a time.

The Human Library challenges stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue. In the Human Library, people, instead of traditional books, are on loan to readers. Founder, [Ronni Abergel](#) says the Human Library was started to create a space “where you can walk in, borrow a human being and talk to them about a very challenging topic. Ideally, we wanted people to talk about issues that they normally would not talk about, or potentially don't like to talk about, but that we need to talk about.”

These human “[books](#)” are volunteers that come from diverse backgrounds and have experiences that they are willing to share with their human readers. Just like traditional books, the human books have titles that describe their experiences like Black Activist, Chronic Depression, Survivor of Trafficking, Muslim, Latino, Transgender and many more. Sometimes one-on-one and sometimes in small groups, the Human Library creates a safe space where people can engage with someone different from themselves.

When the library aids in corporate diversity and inclusion efforts, the readers are the organization's employees who are encouraged to ask difficult questions of the human books—things they always wanted to know but never had the opportunity to ask. Since Covid-19, the Human Library has continued its work virtually, allowing human books from all over the world to connect with readers.

“It’s easy to hate a group of people, but it’s harder to hate an individual, particularly if that person is trying to be friendly and open and accommodating and totally non-threatening,” says Bill Carney, a volunteer book in the Human Library. His book title is “Black Activist,” and he’s also a university instructor, a dad and identifies as an Afropolitan.

The power of one-on-one meetings was something that resonated with Carney immediately. “I’m not pompous enough to believe that a 25-minute conversation with me is going to change anybody. What I am pompous enough to believe is that if I can just instill the slightest bit of cognitive dissonance, then their brain will do the rest for me. And it will at least force them to ask questions.”

Carney says readers typically want to hear about his experiences with discrimination, and he doesn’t hesitate to share. Despite the lack of progress in the fight for racial equality and the daunting task ahead, Carney remains optimistic. His experience talking to participants in the library has given him hope, “I’m surprised that so many white folks are so woke at the moment. And it seems genuine. I don’t get the impression that I’m getting the PC speech of the month,” he says.

The Human Library has helped some heavy hitters in the United States address diversity and inclusion including eBay, IMF, World Bank, Eli Lilly, Delta Faucet, Masco and Google. Founder Ronni Abergel says that before the pandemic, the human books were available at U.S. Public libraries, high schools, colleges, universities, and festivals like Burning Man to encourage a wide range of people to have a dialogue with a stranger. The Library started connecting human books to readers twenty years ago in Denmark, where the concept originated.

Employees from the home improvement giant, Masco had virtual visits from the Human Library in June. Erin Swartout, Director of Talent and Organizational Development at Masco says she was frustrated with

traditional diversity and inclusion efforts and was searching for “ways that felt more organic, real, a little bit intense, and experiential that can get at that mindset shift and can speak to the heart.” When she heard about the Human Library, she knew she was on to something.

Masco employees who participated were eager to engage after the event and wanted to tell coworkers about their books and share their stories. “It’s one of those things where you put the pebble in the pond, and you see the ripples,” Swartout says. One Masco employee told Swartout, “I have Muslim neighbors and friends and my book was Muslim, and I was able to ask the book things that I sadly never felt comfortable asking my neighbors. I learned more in twenty minutes than I have from people I’ve known for many years. And I now have the courage to go engage differently with my neighbors and my community.” Another commented on the group chat that followed the experience, “I have heard of transgender people, but I never knew anyone. Putting a real face behind it and hearing their story was very powerful.”

Unlike scripted diversity and inclusion programs and events, no two Human Library sessions are the same. Instead, participants can tailor the session to their own needs, prejudices, concerns or curiosities, without judgment.

What does science say about this type of interaction? Contact with people from other groups has been shown to decrease prejudice, and social psychologists call this phenomenon the [contact hypothesis](#). In addition, research indicates that getting people to actively engage and take another’s perspective for as little as ten minutes can have long-lasting effects. For example, in one study, those canvassing door-to-door for transgender rights were able to substantially [reduce transphobia](#) by imagining the world from a transgender point of view.

Organizations are currently spending about [\\$8 billion](#) per year on D&I training with little to show for their efforts. In fact, [research](#) shows that current diversity programs can even have a negative effect, leading to less

diversity within the organization and reinforcing stereotypes about a particular race or gender. It's time we start thinking outside the box. Sharing a moment with a complete stranger might be worth a try.
