



A Book Ombuds Can Use: Review of *How to Be an Inclusive Leader*

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ABSTRACT

This review of *How to Be an Inclusive Leader: Your Role in Creating Cultures of Belonging Where Everyone Can Thrive* by Jennifer Brown (2019, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.) covers the structure and nature of the book's content, and comments on its usefulness for organizational ombuds. It recommends that ombuds add this book to their lending library as well as read it for their own development.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion, diversity, leadership, trust, culture, how-to, ombuds



Jennifer Brown's *How to Be an Inclusive Leader: Your Role in Creating Cultures of Belonging Where Everyone Can Thrive* (2019) is a short book with a big goal. Grounded and accessible, it is appropriate for anyone wanting (or needing) to move from good intentions to meaningful impact in service of truly inclusive organizations. Brown, an established diversity and inclusion consultant and entrepreneur, takes an approach that is both supportive *and* challenging enough to help readers of many kinds learn and change. She writes from a perspective that is equal parts expert guide and humble co-traveler, making *How to Be an Inclusive Leader* welcoming to all yet coddling to none.

Intended as a “how to” guide, the book presumes that most readers already believe diversity and inclusion have value. The introduction does, however, include a few research-backed reminders on why inclusion matters—and that inclusive teams and organizations regularly outperform non-inclusive ones. This book builds on Brown's first (*Inclusion: Diversity, The New Workplace & The Will To Change* (2016)) to help people put ideas into action. Her fundamental framework for doing so is what Brown calls “The Inclusive Leader Continuum,” an iterative developmental model that includes four stages: Unaware → Aware → Active → Advocate. The book walks through each stage in turn, giving relevant guidance, exercises, and real-world examples, and concluding with a series of Next Steps that point toward the subsequent stage.

The advice in *How to Be an Inclusive Leader* is straightforward, but it is not simple. Much of what Brown offers pertains to reflection, perspective shifting, and developing good habits of mind. Inclusion is not a cookie cutter practice; its core premise is that one size does not fit all. Accordingly, most of Brown's advice is about how to position oneself for the growth and challenges inherent in becoming an inclusive leader, with reminders peppered throughout that the journey is long but worthwhile. Brown nicely scaffolds the core ideas of her book, using a glossary, graphics, and call-outs to explain concepts clearly and usefully. The Inclusive Leader Continuum is an efficient if basic framework that will feel familiar to anyone who has previously encountered psychosocial developmental models (e.g., Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1986) or Janet Helms's Racial Identity Development Theory (1995)).

At a mere 150 pages, *How to Be an Inclusive Leader* is more handbook than textbook and so not expected to be comprehensive or highly detailed. Even so, there are a few instances where it could be more rigorous. For example, Brown uses a known mischaracterization of the violent sexual assault and murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964 as her sole example of the phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility (closely related to the bystander effect and bystander apathy). Brown's claim that “...no one called the police or tried to intervene” (p. 111) in the attack has been established as inaccurate for many years now (Manning, Levine, & Collins, 2007; Merry, 2016).

More concerningly, Brown introduces The Privilege Walk exercise as one of two to “illustrate how different identities relate to privilege—for better or worse” (p. 55). She acknowledges that The Privilege Walk puts less privileged participants in the “tricky situation of bearing the weight of the exercise...” (p. 57) but I find that euphemism insufficient. This exercise has received important critique for its potential to out, harm, and shame participants (Bolger, 2018; Ehrenhalt, 2017; Siliman & Kearns, 2020; Torres, 2015), and relying heavily on it here struck me as irresponsible. Brown does note that the exercise has “a few critical drawbacks” and includes a reference to one of the critiques in the notes (Bolger, 2018), but again, I question her choice to feature it so prominently.

These instances do not diminish the utility of *How to Be an Inclusive Leader*, but rather help illustrate the importance of one of Brown's key take-aways: We will all make mistakes—big and small—along our inclusion journeys. An essential corollary, however, is that we also need to be held accountable when those mistakes occur. This is particularly so of leaders, whose power and



position often mean that their mistakes or oversights have outsized effects, especially on those most vulnerable or marginalized.

As an experienced consultant, Brown has seen firsthand how critical it is that leaders sincerely engage inclusion efforts on a personal as well as structural level if the efforts are to succeed. She also understands how difficult or even dangerous doing so may seem to many leaders. Instead of chastising them to simply do more or be better, *How to Be an Inclusive Leader* addresses leaders with clarity and empathy. Thoroughly in line with contemporary research on leadership in general, Brown emphasizes the importance of vulnerability, humility, adaptability, and comfort with discomfort in the practice of inclusive leadership. She also stresses the need for a systems approach, a perspective that can help one see beyond individual issues to identify broader dynamics and patterns that may impede (or enhance!) inclusion. Finally, Brown unequivocally and repeatedly asserts the importance of taking action. If a reader remembers only one thing from the book, she says, it should be that “to be an inclusive leader, you need to *do something*” (p. 110).

How to Be an Inclusive Leader belongs in every ombud’s lending library—it is a book you can feel safe and good about putting into the hands of any current or aspiring leader, even those still on the fence about the value of inclusion or reeling from accusations of discrimination. If you are an ombud who facilitates reading groups at your organization (or wants to start doing so), this book would also be a smart, accessible selection for a group of managers, administrators, or the like to engage.

Many ombuds will also have much to gain from reading *How to Be an Inclusive Leader* for themselves. While the earlier sections of the book provide some nice tools for working with visitors, the chapter on the Advocate Stage of The Inclusive Leader Continuum is what might resonate with ombuds most vividly. Brown describes this stage as being about “spotting flaws in a system or process where bias intrudes” (p. 100), and insists that “[f]ar from being powerless, advocates at every level of a company know how and when to ask powerful questions and to question norms as well as move conversations toward more public commitments to change” (p. 102). Brown never explicitly specifies who qualifies as a leader, but it is clear throughout that her definition is not limited to those with formal power.

How to Be an Inclusive Leader may be a step-by-step guide, but it will not tell you what policies to enact or meetings to hold to “achieve inclusion.” Rather, it will bring you along a journey of personal growth and perspective on how to use your power—whatever form it takes—for positive, inclusive change. Whether you are just beginning on that journey or have already traveled the road many times, this book can be a useful and motivating companion.

Learn more at inclusiveleaderthebook.com, where you can find a free self-assessment tool and a link to Jennifer Brown’s podcast, *The Will to Change*.



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