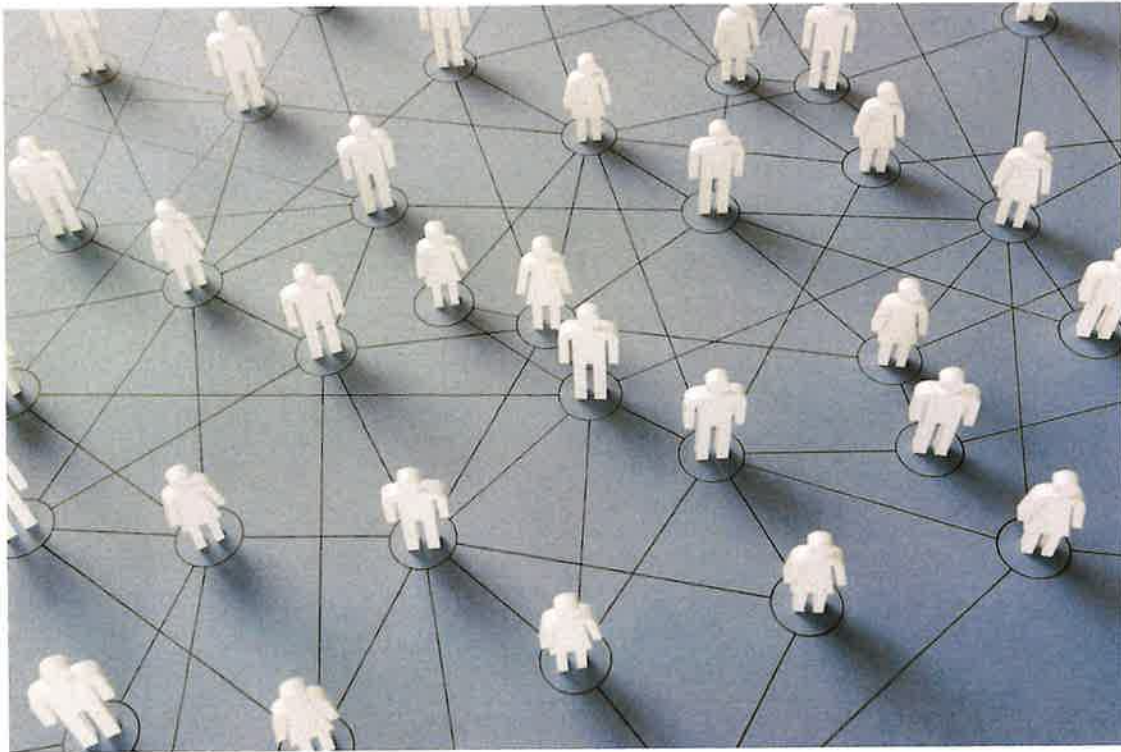




Inclusive Leadership: Shaping Your Brand, Building Your Circle

A dynamic session on social awareness, personal branding, and intentional networking to build a more inclusive workplace.

Your Presenter Today



Vernon (Vern) Johnson, Ph.D.

He/Him/His

Vern is a thought leader, educator, and inclusion strategist with a doctorate and decades of experience helping organizations build equitable, high-performing cultures.

His work focuses on developing emotionally intelligent leaders with authentic personal brands and strategic networks to drive meaningful change.

Session Agenda



Introductions

Connect with the room and set the tone for courageous conversation.



Reading the Room

Explore how social awareness shapes inclusive leadership.



Build Your Brand for Success

Define and communicate your authentic leadership identity.



Master Networking

Expand your circle with intention, purpose, and equity in mind.



Takeaways and Resources

Leave with actionable strategies and resources to sustain your growth.

Courageous Conversation Ground Rules

To make the most of our time together, commit to these norms as the foundation for meaningful dialogue.

Assume Positive Intent

Approach every contribution with good faith.

Dialogue, Not Debate

Seek to understand, not to win.

Be Open and Transparent

Share honestly, even when it's uncomfortable.

Humble Listening

Hear others fully, without judgment.

Create Safe Spaces

Embrace discomfort as the beginning of growth.

Speak Up to Bridge Divides

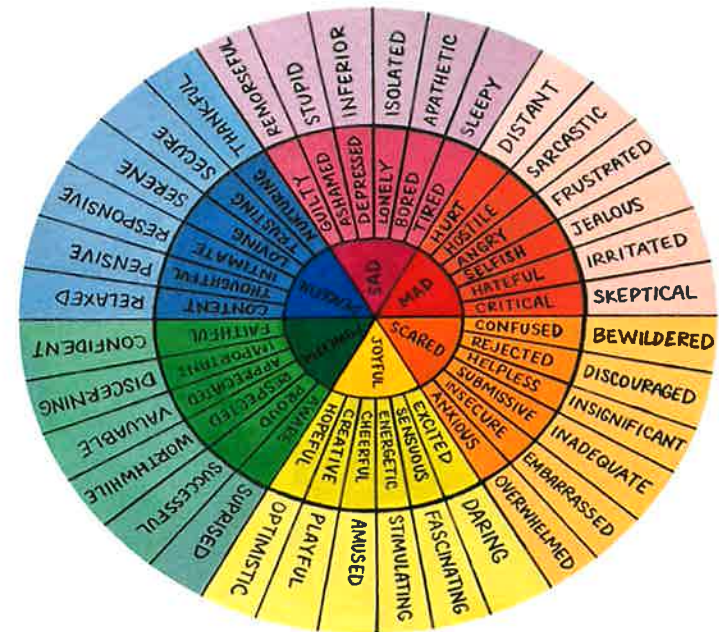
Commit to conversations that move us all forward.

Show and Tell ✨

Grab an object nearby, something that represents **how you're feeling today** or how you're showing up to this session.

Share it with the group and explain why you chose it. There are no wrong answers.

- ❑ Use the emotion wheel to help name what you're feeling — emotional vocabulary is a core EQ skill!





Why Reading the Room Matters at Work

Social awareness is **vital for workplace productivity and harmony**. It helps leaders and team members recognize and respond to emotions effectively.

Improved Communication

Empathetic messaging reduces misunderstandings and fosters clarity.

Conflict Reduction

Socially aware leaders de-escalate tension before it divides teams.

Stronger Teamwork

Feeling understood deepens collaboration and builds trust.

Greater Job Satisfaction

Social awareness cultures drive higher engagement and retention.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY

What Colors Are You Bringing Today?

Just like these markers, each of us brings a **unique set of colors** we bring skills, experiences, emotions, and perspectives to every room we enter. That diversity is what makes our teams vibrant and capable.

As you engage in this session, consider: **What "color" are you contributing?** Inclusive leaders are aware of both what they bring *and* what others are contributing.



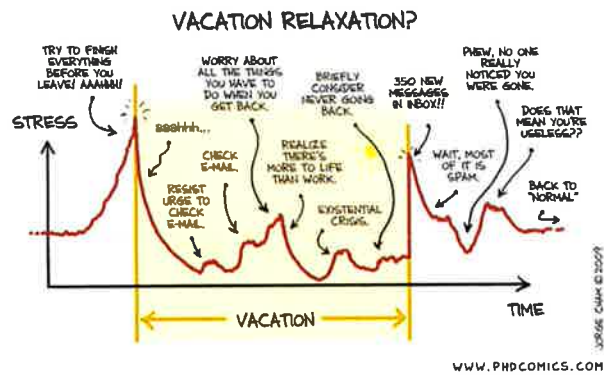
Our Individual Dimensions Are Complex, Unique and Beautiful

Every person carries a rich, layered identity shaped by age, culture, gender, faith, and lived experience — these intersecting dimensions are **assets that fuel innovation and belonging**.

Inclusive leaders **create space for the full spectrum of human experience**, recognizing that psychological safety and authentic expression are prerequisites for peak performance.

We Carry More Than We Show

These images reveal the anxiety and overwhelm that exists beneath professional composure. Awareness is the first step toward empathy.



Even "relaxation" carries invisible burdens that affect how people show up at work.



Compounding stressors accumulate in ways rarely visible to colleagues and leaders.



"I try to make sure my i's are dotted and my t's are crossed. So no one can come up and say the quality of the work [isn't good enough].

So again, that's another burden, another string.

The feeling that I cannot afford to make any mistakes. We're human beings, we all do make mistakes at times. But the perception is that I cannot make a mistake. It can bite me harder if I make a mistake."

- Jacque, Black Woman, Individual Contributor

"I try to make sure my i's are dotted and my t's are crossed. So no one can come up and say the quality of the work isn't good enough... The feeling that I cannot afford to make any mistakes. It can bite me harder if I make a mistake."

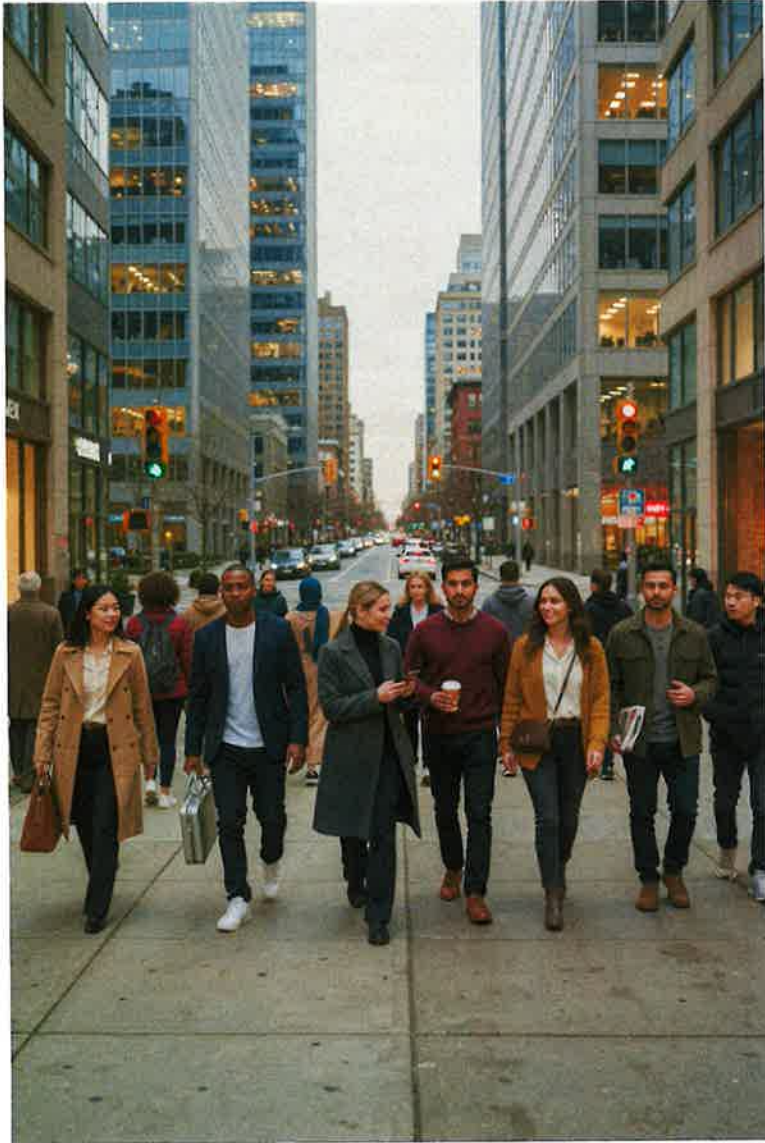
Jacque, Black Woman, Individual Contributor

This is the lived reality of many from underrepresented groups: a **constant, exhausting vigilance** that takes a profound toll on energy, creativity, and belonging.

"I stood up, and I did not think about my job, and I did not think about the money... I said, 'I'm a human more than a Muslim. I'm a human more than a Pakistani Muslim woman.'... But you are judging me as a Pakistani Muslim woman.... After speaking out, I gave my resignation letter. Because this is too much."

Kay, South Asian woman, Manager

When people feel reduced to a single identity rather than seen as whole human beings, **organizations lose talent, trust, and potential.**



Our Workforce & Economy Dynamics Are Changing...

By 2045, the U.S. is projected to become a **majority-minority nation** — a shift already reshaping our workplaces.

58%

of new workforce entrants

are people of color, women, and immigrants.

5

generations in the workplace

from Baby Boomers to Gen Z, requiring leaders to bridge divides.

35%

productivity lift

from inclusive teams vs. non-inclusive counterparts (Deloitte).

Inclusive leaders aren't just doing the right thing — they're building the **resilience** required to thrive in this new landscape.



The Hidden Cost of Exclusion: A Quick Recap

Three foundational concepts from your earlier sessions underpin everything we'll explore today.

Psychological Safety

When people fear speaking up or making mistakes, inclusion breaks down and critical voices go silent.

How Exclusion Feels

Employees experience hypervisibility, invisibility, or exhaustion — feelings that are real, cumulative, and harmful to performance.

Emotional Tax

The chronic effort of navigating a workplace not designed for you erodes productivity, well-being, and retention.

CASE STUDY & REFLECTION ACTIVITY



Emotional Tax in Action

Read the scenario below, then reflect individually or discuss with a partner.



Meet Jordan

Jordan is a high-performing Black woman on a 12-person team who daily navigates comments about her hair, being talked over in meetings, and pressure to speak for her entire community. She stays silent to avoid seeming "difficult" and is now exhausted, disengaged, and quietly job searching.

Questions for reflection:

1. What specific behaviors are contributing to Jordan's Emotional Tax?

2. As Jordan's manager, what is one concrete action you could take this week to reduce her burden?

3. Where might you be unintentionally contributing to someone else's Emotional Tax?

No right or wrong answers, just honest reflection and courageous conversation.

CONFIDENTIAL POLL

Have You Ever Personally Experienced or Witnessed...

Reflect honestly: This poll is **confidential** and helps drive meaningful conversation.

Disparaging Comments, Words, or Actions

Language or behavior that demeans or stereotypes a person's identity.

Not Being Acknowledged by Team

Being ignored, spoken over, or having contributions go unrecognized.

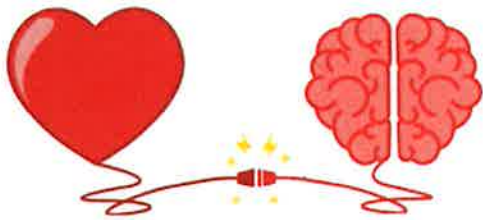
Credential or Ability Questions

Having your qualifications questioned based on identity rather than merit.

Exclusion from Team Activities

Being left out of gatherings that build team cohesion and relationships.





Building Inclusive Excellence

When leaders actively support their employees' success and well-being, individuals feel **valued, seen, and empowered** to contribute fully.

The three tenets below form an integrated framework for becoming a more conscious, courageous, and connected leader.

Reading the Room

Notice what's unsaid and respond with social awareness.

Personal Brand

Define your values and model the culture you want to build.

Networking

Break down silos and build bridges across identity and power.



No One Is Perfect...

And that's precisely the point. **Inclusive leadership is not about having all the answers** — it's about committing to continuous learning, honest self-reflection, and genuine growth. The most effective leaders acknowledge their blind spots, welcome feedback, and model humility, creating psychological safety and authentic connection for their teams.

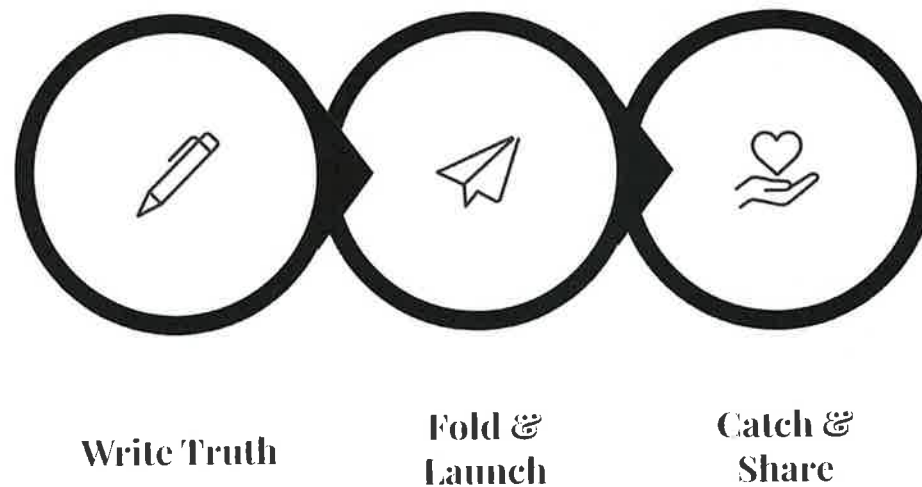
- ❑ The goal isn't perfection. The goal is progress: one courageous conversation, one honest moment, one intentional choice at a time.

INTERACTIVE ACTIVITY

The Airplane Activity

Anonymously **write something personal** : a challenge, fear, hope, or experience — fold it into a paper airplane, and launch it into the room.

When you catch one, read it aloud and respond with empathy. This builds **vulnerability, perspective-taking, and connection**, cornerstones of inclusive leadership.



Remember our ground rules: assume positive intent, listen humbly, and honor every voice in the room.

BIAS AWARENESS ACTIVITY

Who Would You Rather Sit Next to on a Plane?

Notice your *first instinct* — which seat would you choose and why?

1

A Basketball Player

2

A Person with a Bald Head and
Piercings

3

An Astronaut

4

A Former High-Security Prisoner, Jailed for Over 26
Years

5

A Refugee

Who Would You (Really) Like to Sit Next To?

Meet your travel companions. Each matches one description from the previous slide — what does your reaction reveal about your assumptions?



Megan Blunk

Paralympic gold medalist



Rhonda Johnson

Child cancer survivor and advocate



Anousheh Ansari

First female private space explorer



Nelson Mandela

Anti-apartheid leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate



Michaëlle Jean

Former Governor General of Canada

☐ First impressions are shaped by bias. Inclusive leaders look beyond the label. Every person carries a story far richer than any single descriptor.

The "Raise Your Hand / Stand If" Exercise

This activity invites you to **physically signal your lived experiences**. As prompts are read aloud, raise your hand or stand if the statement applies to you.



This is not a competition — it's an opportunity to **witness each other** and recognize that awareness of our shared and unique experiences is the beginning of empathy.

SOCIAL AWARENESS IN ACTION

Reading the Room: Social Awareness as Inclusive Leadership

Social awareness is the ability to accurately read people, group dynamics, and emotional undercurrents. It is one of the most powerful and underutilized skills an inclusive leader can develop.



See What Others Miss

Inclusive leaders notice who is disengaged, talked over, or visibly uncomfortable and act on it with care.



Listen Beyond Words

Tone, silence, and nonverbal cues carry meaning, respond to the full message, not just what's spoken.



Adapt in Real Time

Adjust your approach, energy, and language to meet people where they are, not where you expect them to be.

Social awareness builds the **psychological safety** that allows diverse teams to innovate, speak up, and bring their best selves to work.



VIDEO: READING THE ROOM

If You Can't Read the Room, You Can't Lead

Watch this short clip by **Dr. Peter Rios** on the **3 critical reads** every leader must make before speaking:

1. **Who actually holds influence** — by relational power, not just title
2. **What's NOT being said** — silence often reveals more than speech
3. **What's culturally at stake** — history and identity shape how your message lands

As you watch, reflect on where you naturally excel and where you might grow.

 [Watch the Video \(42 sec\)](#)

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Let's Discuss: Reading the Room

Break into **groups of 2 to 3** for 8 minutes. Choose the question that resonates most or explore all three.

1

Question 1

Describe a time someone truly "read the room." What did they do, and what impact did it have?

2

Question 2

When did the emotional temperature of a room shift unexpectedly? What would you do differently as an inclusive leader today?

3

Question 3

What's one social awareness habit you could practice in your next team meeting to build inclusion and psychological safety?

✦ Would anyone like to share a highlight from their conversation?

Personal Branding Techniques for Inclusive Leaders

Your personal brand is the story others tell about you when you're not in the room by communicating your **values, voice, and commitment to equity**.



Leverage LinkedIn & Social Media

Curate your digital presence to reflect your authentic leadership identity and amplify voices in your network.



Showcase Leadership in Department & Company Opportunities

Volunteer and lead initiatives that demonstrate your values in action.



Know How to Tell Your Story

Own your narrative — your background, your path, your "why" — and share it with clarity and confidence.



Highlight Unique Skills & Qualities

Your distinct background and perspective is your competitive advantage. Name it, claim it, and build on it.

Tips for Building Your Personal Brand

🎯 Define Your Values First

Clarify what you stand for and how inclusive leadership shows up in your daily behavior.

👤 Be Consistent Across Contexts

Your brand should feel cohesive in 1:1s, town halls, and on LinkedIn.

👥 Seek Mentors & Sponsors

Mentors offer guidance; sponsors open doors. Build both relationships intentionally.

🌐 Attend Events & Network

Show up in spaces where your presence expands others' sense of what's possible.

▶ [Watch: Personal Branding Tips Video](#)



SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Let's Discuss: Personal Branding

Break into **groups of 2 to 3 people** for 8 minutes and reflect on how your personal brand shows up with inclusion at the center.

1

Question 1

How would colleagues describe your leadership brand today — and what gap exists between that and how you *want* to be known?

2

Question 2

Think of a leader whose brand reflects inclusion and integrity. What specific behaviors built that reputation?

3

Question 3

What one action could you take in the next 30 days to strengthen the inclusive dimension of your personal brand?

✦ Would anyone like to share a highlight from their conversation with the group?

10 Tips for Effective Networking

Intentional networking breaks down silos, amplifies underrepresented voices, and builds bridges that create opportunity for everyone.

01

Prepare Ahead

Know your goals and research who will be in the room.

03

Always Be Ready to Give Your Pitch

A crisp, authentic 30-second introduction opens doors and sparks conversations.

05

Expand Your Online Presence

LinkedIn and professional communities extend your reach beyond the room.

02

Present Yourself Well

Be intentional. Your first impression communicates your values.

04

Ask Questions and Listen Actively

Great networkers lead with curiosity and listen first.

06

Stay In Touch and Grow Your Network

Follow up consistently and show up for others to nurture lasting relationships.

VIDEO: THE POWER OF NETWORKING

Why Networking Is an Act of Inclusive Leadership

For inclusive leaders, networking is fundamentally about **expanding access and opportunity for others** by using your connections to open doors, make introductions, and amplify underrepresented voices.

Watch this TEDx talk by Lisa Fain, CEO of the Center for Mentoring Excellence, on how intentional relationship-building fosters inclusion and sparks meaningful change.

"The secret is to focus on what you can offer, not just what you can get. Inclusive networkers are connectors, champions, and door-openers."

 [Watch: How Intentional Connections Boost Your Career \(TEDx, 14 min\)](#)

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Let's Discuss: Networking

Break into **groups of 2 to 3 people** for 8 to 10 minutes and reframe networking as a practice of generosity and inclusion.

Question 1

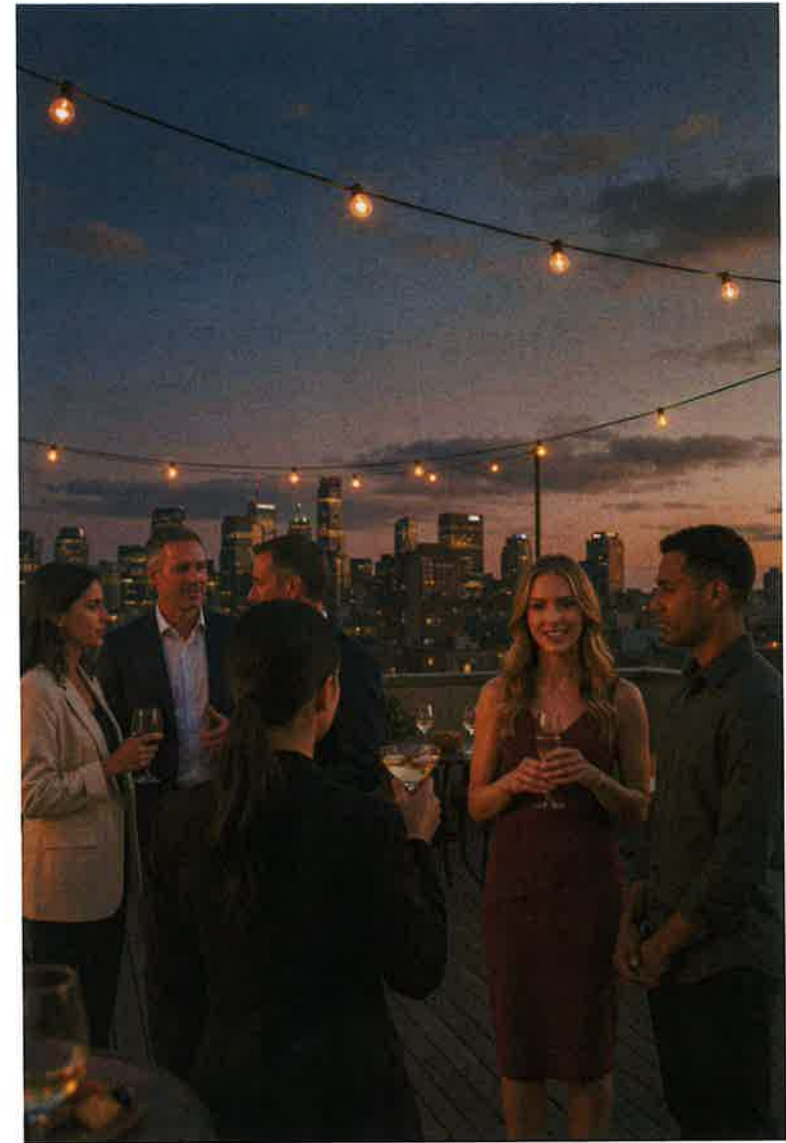
- 1 Think of your most meaningful professional connection. How did it happen, and what made it feel different from a typical exchange?

Question 2

- 2 Who in your network might benefit from a connection you could make, and what would it take to act on it?

Question 3

- 3 How might you use networking to deliberately diversify the voices and perspectives in your professional circle over the next year?





Key Takeaways

1. Reading the Room and Social Awareness

Empowers leaders to empathize with diverse perspectives, **build psychological safety**, and manage bias with authenticity.

2. Personal Branding

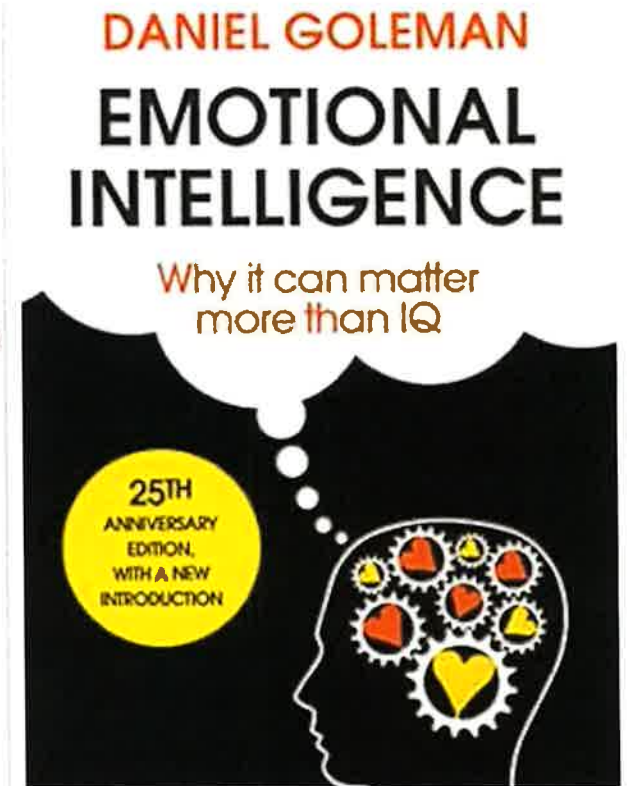
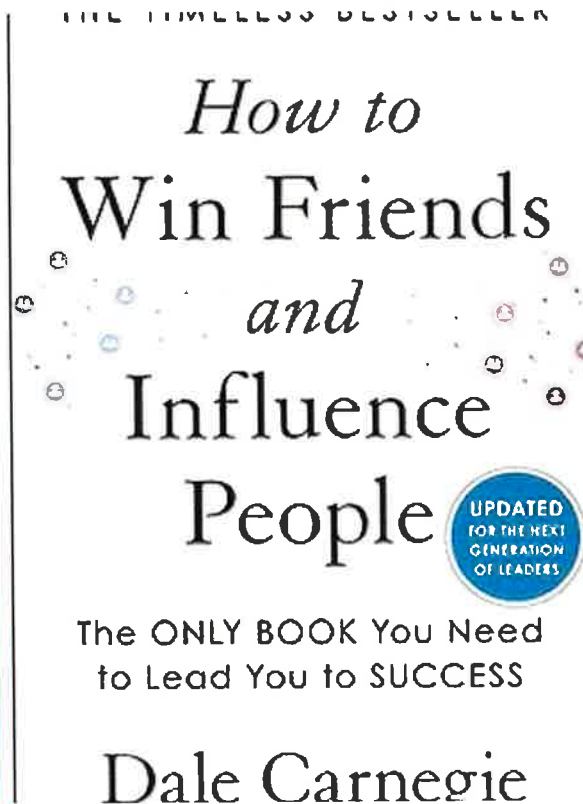
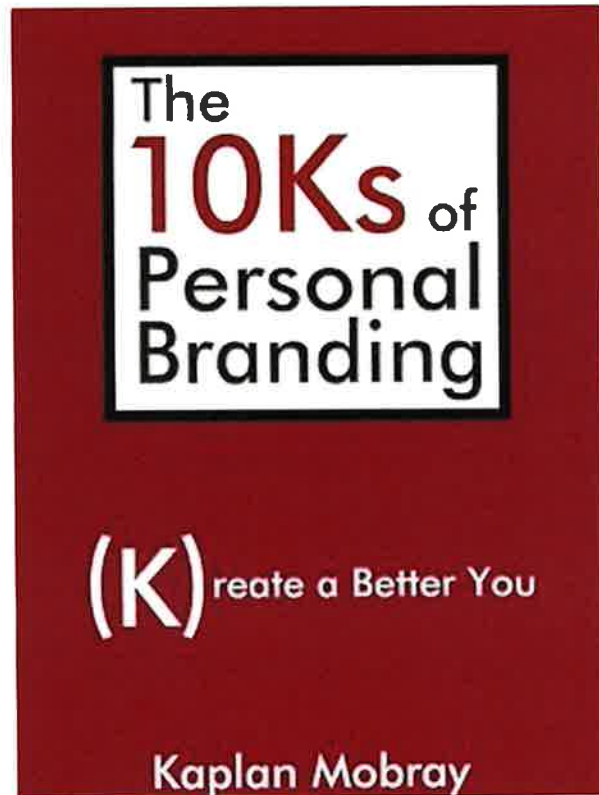
Clarifies a leader's values and sets the tone for inclusion, **signaling commitment to equity, belonging, and transparency**.

3. Networking

Expands access and opportunity across identities and levels, **breaking down silos** and connecting teams to broader ecosystems of inclusion.

Resources to Continue Your Journey

Recommended books for leaders deepening their practice of inclusive leadership, social awareness, and authentic branding — each offering research-backed strategies and compelling storytelling.



Additional resources: [How to Build a Personal Brand \(Eller College\)](#) · [Networking 101 Tips \(UMBC\)](#)

REFLECTION

What Was Your 'A Ha' Moment Today?

Reflect on what shifted for you, whether a story, concept, or conversation that sparked new awareness.

Write it down. Name it. Share it if you're willing.

☐ What is one thing you will do differently starting tomorrow?



Thank You!

Leadership is a practice. Thank you for showing up today with curiosity, courage,
and an open heart.

Keep building. Keep connecting. Keep leading with inclusion.



Inclusive Leadership

August 7, 2026

Large Group Discussion

Rethinking event timing. Shifting after-work events earlier to respect employees' commitments outside of work, from childcare to second jobs to cultural or religious obligations.

Culture versus deadline pressure. Navigating the tension between a team culture that values boundaries and balance, and the real demands of overtime when deadlines require it.

Assuming good intent while sharing control. Recognizing when a leader's desire to be hands-on and present can tip into controlling the process, even when the intention is genuinely good.

Influencing upward. Building the skill and credibility to shape decisions and culture beyond one's direct team, including with senior leadership.

Leading across geography. Adapting communication, scheduling, and team-building practices for teams spread across different locations and time zones.

Bridging generational gaps. Being intentional about inclusion across generational differences in work style, communication preference, and expectations.

Choosing what gets passed down. Being deliberate about which institutional knowledge gets shared, how, and with whom, so engagement and access don't default to informal or exclusive channels.

Applying knowledge to practice

One Thing to Apply in Daily Practice

Read the room. No one gets this perfect every time, so the goal is staying attentive rather than aiming for flawless instinct. This includes coaching newer leaders on how to read different spaces and navigate them with awareness, not just following their own lead.

Assume positive intent. Slow down before reacting, and extend grace in communication. Pay attention to context, tone, and what isn't being said, and lean on emotional intelligence to read what's underneath the words.

Contextualize for the greater good. Frame conversations around team interest rather than singular interest, and use that as a recurring check when priorities or perspectives seem to pull in different directions.

Wrap-up and next steps

Submit survey responses

Schedule monthly coaching meetings with your coaching partner

Look for opportunities to apply principles from today's session in your day-to-day

Connect with your coaching partner and ask about ways they can apply or have applied the session principles

Next session: Friday, September 11, 2026, Managing Organizational Change and Personal Transitions (ES/DM/CG/Fellow)

THANK YOU