Gray Area Thinking®: How to Welcome and Accept Diverse Humans

Everyone habitually categorizes and groups humans who appear "different" from "us," which often lends to black and white thinking, as in "we" versus "them" or "good" versus "bad" or "American" versus "immigrant" and a host of other isolating labels. With this presentation, Human Inspiration Works, LLC founder and president Ellie Krug reminds that regardless of skin color, religion, LGBTQ status, or gender, we are each working to survive the Human Condition.

Because Ellie has experienced what it means to move from one of "us" (as an ostensibly heterosexual Christian white male) to one of "them" (as a Buddhist transgender female who looks feminine but sounds like a man—we know, holy cow!), she has a far better idea of what discrimination and "otherness" feel like compared to when she lived as a high-earning white male trial lawyer. She also better understands what it's like to be part of a community that society often marginalizes or even shuns.

Finally, Ellie believes that 98 percent of all humans want to do the right thing; it's just that many of us don't know what the right thing is or we're afraid to take risks that involve interacting with people who are "different" from "us." With this talk, Ellie offers a way—a toolset called Gray Area Thinking®—for getting past our fears to interact with diverse humans in a mindful and compassionate way. Doing so can be quite wonderful!

1. How we Group and Label Others/"GIP" Behavior: Challenges to Inclusivity Countered by Two Saving Graces

- "Inclusivity": The extent to which a person feels that they "matter" or are of value to an organization or a group of people.
- The power of Human Familiarity—acclimating to Ellie's voice.
- Making people "Other" via grouping and labeling.
- Neurobiology at work: Humans are wired for grouping and labeling/being mindful that you do it/don't allow yourself to marginalize others whom you group or label.
- The concept of "GIP" (Group Identifying People)—insider vs. outsider.
- GIPism provides security and identity but also inhibits group members from interacting with humans who constitute "Other."
- Saving Grace No. 1: Humans have good empathetic hearts and want to do the right thing—hardwiring for **empathy** and **compassion**.
- Saving Grace No. 2: Buttressing empathy by remembering the **Four Commonalities**: (1) wanting a child in our life to succeed; (2) the need to be free of physical or emotional violence; (3) wanting 20 minutes of personal peace; and (4) the need to love and be loved.
- How the Four Commonalities can radically change our fear-driven society to be more inclusive and accepting of all.

- Remembering the person who pours water for you at the restaurant tonight.
- The power of normalization; good and bad.
- A powerful simple statement: Telling someone, "I care about you."

2. How We Group and Label Ourselves—The Identity Game

- The Identity Game—how self-labeling/categorizing drives and isolates humans.
- Knowing that no one is alone in trying to survive the Human Condition.
- The power of finding others who are struggling just like "me."
- We can't understand another's story simply by how they appear or present.
- Human vulnerability pulls us into each other; labeling vulnerability and valuing it.
- Our core identity: Compassion for others.

3. Engaging in Gray Area Thinking®: A Toolset for How to Exercise Our Empathetic Hearts

- Societal/cultural biases for black-and-white thinking: Good vs. bad; gay vs. straight; success vs. failure; rich vs. poor.
- In reality, many persons "live in the gray" relative to gender, sexuality, race, religion, careers, relationships, etc.
- **Hallmarks of Gray Area Thinking®**:
  (a) **A**wareness of human vulnerability (or suffering);
  (b) **R**isk-taking to soften or lessen another's vulnerability (or suffering);
  (c) Acting with **C**ompassion/kindness.
- Three key takeaways: Stopping for another human; ensuring for human dignity; and "seeing" other humans.
- A sobbing stranger on a park bench: The Platinum Level of Gray Area Thinking®.
- Bronze Level Gray Area Thinking® involves day-to-day awareness and risk-taking.
- A pitch for self-help and other groovy stuff: Gray Area Thinking® works inward as well as outward!
- Remember **ARC** (Awareness, Risk-taking, Compassion/Kindness).

4. Three Levels of Human Inclusivity—Tolerance, Acceptance and "Rock Star"

- Mentoring: Helping a team member succeed in the job they're assigned.
- Sponsorship: Mentoring on steroids—thinking imaginatively (and sometimes using political capital) to enrich a team member, who in turn will enrich the organization.
- **Tolerance:** Not valuing a team member's personal story/limiting familiarity. Doing the bare minimum. No imagination for positive interaction.

- **Acceptance:** Becoming familiar with another; still, "acceptance" often means that we artificially draw lines on how inclusive we will be/limit imagination or curiosity about another. Refusing to sponsor someone.
- **"Rock Star":** The inclusivity goal for every organization! Thinking imaginatively/with curiosity about empowering team members via some form of sponsorship. Recognizing human potential and working to unleash it. Asking yourself, "What new person should I invite to this meeting (or lunch or dinner or party)?" Can take using political capital to help position someone as a future leader. Consciously ignoring your tendency to group and label.
- We can't sponsor every team member, but certainly we can do better than what's happening now. Use your imagination; simply giving someone a note, "You did great today!" can make a huge difference.
- Tips:
    - Create space for persons who live in the margins; don't allow for a thin margin for failure.
    - No apples-to-apples treatment—SAT or ACT test scores don't tell the complete story; persons with privilege haven't learned poverty or marginalized life skillsets.
    - Don't be afraid to speak up for a person: "Hey, what you just said isn't at all cool!"
    - Understand that society easily utilizes double standards and ask why that is.
    - The difference between "opinion" and "experience." We all have opinions but often lack the experience to create informed opinions.
    - Don't assume that you know what everyone's experience is; it's true that society treats "different" persons "differently"; you can't get blisters unless you walk in another person's shoes (or vice versa).
    - Awareness that explicit bias, implicit bias, micro-inequities, micro-aggressions, and cultural incompetency/arrogance all exist.
    - The difference between arrogance and curiosity.
    - A truly inclusive organization is filled with Rock Stars!
    - Inclusivity must be a constant value; it requires a positive, visible workplace culture and won't occur unless there's culture leader buy-in, leadership, and modeling. Otherwise, the organization will only waste time, money and people.
- The dark side of familiarity—humans can tolerate almost anything if they hear/experience it long enough.
- What's happening at your "front counter" relative to customer service and colleague interactions? Are team members treating the white woman wearing pearls differently than the black woman wearing a hijab? What have you done to answer that question?
- Host conversations in your organization or community, with the intent to get to know anyone who is "Other" by virtue of skin color, religion, LGBTQ status, disability status, or anything else that we use to separate us. Here

are some prompts (several are courtesy of Michael Fosberg, author of *Incognito: An American Odyssey of Race and Self Discovery)*:

- Tell us two hobbies you engage in.
- Who had a great influence on you or in your life?
- Tell us about a turning point in your life.
- Name something that you are grateful for.
- What is your earliest race-related memory?
- Name an "ah ha" moment in your life.

Quick Resources

- Brene Brown on understanding and valuing the power of human vulnerability: https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en
- Tony Hoagland, "The Cure for Racism is Cancer," *The Sun Magazine* (September 2018) https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/513/the-cure-for-racism-is-cancer
- Rebecca Muller, "14 People on the Moment of Kindness that Changed Their Lives," *Shine* (December 4, 2018) https://advice.shinetext.com/articles/14-people-on-the-moment-of-kindness-that-changed-their-lives/?utm_campaign=SMS&utm_medium=BroadcastPopCulture&utm_source=Shine
- National Public Radio, "Study: Poor Are More Charitable Than The Wealthy" (2010): https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129068241
- Sheryl WuDunn and Nicholas Kristof, *Half the Sky* (New York: Vintage, 2010) (a groundbreaking book about the second-class status of women in the world and how women and girls have overcome crushing adversity).

Personal Contact/Standing Offer

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My standing offer: any human can contact me relative to gender or sexual identity issues or anything else related to surviving the Human Condition. I'm a good listener and willing to meet with anyone in a public place or speak on the telephone for up to an hour. This is a real offer. Email: elliejkrug@gmail.com

Please have compassion for yourself and for others and remember the need for Gray Area Thinking®!

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