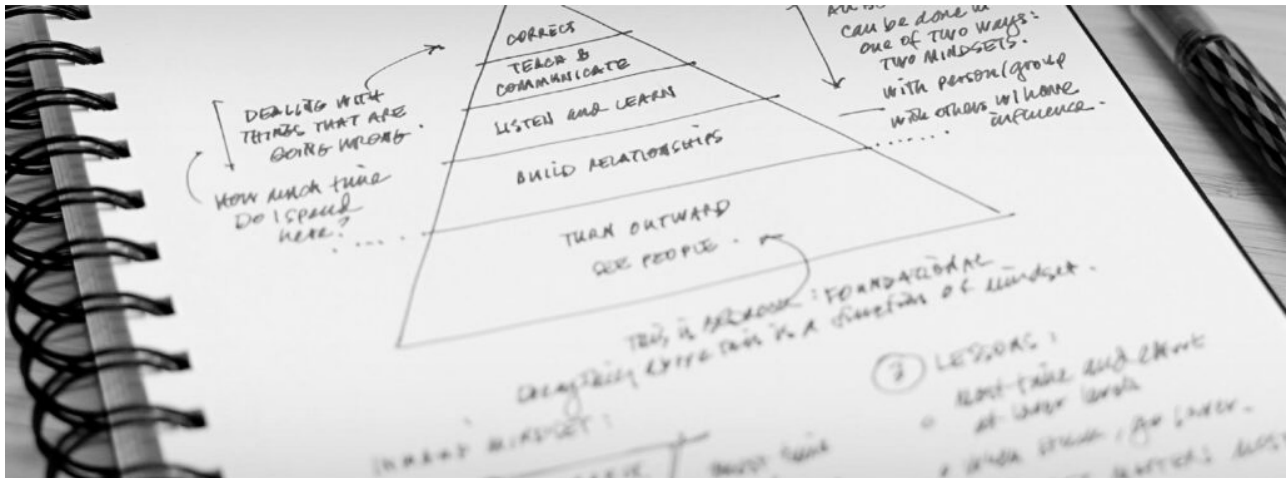# A Blueprint for Outward Change

Is there discrimination in your organization? To what degree might bias—implicit or explicit—influence decision-making both at the level of policy and in the day-to-day, moment-to-moment interactions between people? As a leader in your organization, how can you inclusively create a plan that will invite real and sustainable change?

In recent weeks, many organizations have reached out for help to identify their blind spots and for guidance in understanding what actions they can take right now to ensure racism and discrimination toward any group is actively rooted out and guarded against in the future.

It is heartening to see that the awareness of widespread discrimination is prompting deep and careful introspection within organizations of all kinds—from government and law enforcement agencies, to corporations and non-profits. There is always a need to take a careful look at ourselves and the prejudices that may be driving our decisions—not once, but as an ongoing practice. Perhaps most importantly, we need to develop a culture where honestly speaking up about where we might be falling short individually, or as an organization, is not simply allowed but embraced—where it is both safe and encouraged to call out inequity, bias, or discrimination of

any kind.

At Arbinger we feel a deep commitment to do this same thing ourselves. Our ability to help others depends on the degree to which we are willing to see our own blind spots and improve. As an organization, we regularly find new ways that we have not seen others. We are not immune. Becoming outward and seeing others is not a moment, it's a journey, with ups and downs, moments of triumph and failure, but we get up and keep moving forward because we cannot afford not to. This is the perpetual responsibility of every organization that is committed to seeing people as people.

As we have engaged arm-in-arm in this work with you, we have discovered a predictable and problematic pattern in the response of many organizations who are stepping forward to correct themselves where needed. We see it in most efforts to correct problematic behavior in individuals and in organizations. No matter how well-intentioned our responses to the deficiencies in our organizations, they can lead to unhelpful action if we are not careful. In an effort to correct policies and practices quickly, we can make the mistake of perpetuating the very problems we are trying to solve.

One corporate director of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging recently shared that her organization moved forward to institute a new practice that they believed would signal a commitment to greater inclusivity. However, the organization's leadership did this without the input of those most affected by the initiative. "Despite the fact our leadership acted from good intentions, they failed to understand what this initiative would mean for the people that were impacted most," she said. "The mistaken assumptions that influenced some of our misguided actions in the past are the same assumptions we are operating from now as we are devising and implementing our 'solutions' to those very problems. Those who have been marginalized feel no more listened to or involved in decisions

that impact them than they were before."

In this case, the action taken by the organization's leadership to become more inclusive was, in her view, less helpful than doing nothing at all. It reinforced the belief across the organization that real inclusivity—participation of those affected by decisions—was not likely to change despite the new-found conviction from leadership to do so.

Now, we must change. We must be willing to discover our own blind spots. Urgent correction of ourselves and our organizations is necessary. But the desire to be different than we have been, and even a commitment to improve, is not enough. To ensure that we go about these efforts in a way that truly overcomes the problems we may have perpetuated in the past, consider the following.

Where to Start? Not Where Most Think

Think of correction of policies and structures as the very top of a pyramid. We call this the Arbinger Influence Pyramid. While our 'solutions' at the "Correction" level might be precisely what is needed, and our communication to our employees regarding these changes might alleviate our felt need to do something quickly, these efforts must be informed by something more foundational that must come first: real listening and learning.

What do we know? What do we not know? How curious have we become about the people who are impacted by our policies and structures? What are their needs and challenges and objectives? Of course, the needs and challenges and objectives of others should never be generalized. These are as unique as

there are individuals in our organizations.

So, we must invite leaders across the organization to become deeply curious to the needs of the people they lead. Do leaders in your organization understand the aspirations of those they lead? As leaders, do we understand how we have made things more difficult for the people we lead? If someone identifies as a minority in our organization because of the color of their skin, their physical abilities, their religious convictions, their sexual orientation, their gender, or any other reasons, do we really know what it is like for them to work in our team and our organization? How much have we listened? Have we listened and learned about what we might not know, but need to know, that would inform the kinds of decisions we should make to correct ourselves as an organization? If not, why not? Have we included a diversity of views in the conversations that must inform the changes we make?

And who is the "we" making these decisions? Is there diversity at the decision-making table? And have we recognized that "representation" can never substitute for understanding the needs and objectives and challenges of every person represented? If not, any changes we make will be well intentioned but may ultimately be uninformed impositions. You can see why this step, listening and learning, must come before any action at the top levels of the pyramid.

Something Deeper

Of course, not all of our efforts to listen and learn will be met with a willingness on the part of others to really share the truth about their experience and views. The degree to which others feel safe sharing this with us will be a function of the strength and depth of the relationship we have. Without a relationship, we shouldn't expect that others would share their experience or share their views about how we may need to

improve and how the organization might need to change. Even more foundational is the relationship we have with others who influence this person or group of people.

In thinking about what this pyramid suggests, it is important to remember that each of the levels of the pyramid we have discussed are behaviors and, as behaviors, their effectiveness is a function of the mindset of those who enact them. This is the most foundational level of the pyramid. In addition to what I do, how I see and regard others determines my influence and effectiveness. People can tell how they are being seen, and it is our regard for others as people that determines the degree to which we can build relationships with them. It also determines their willingness to share their own views and experiences, and ultimately the degree to which they might listen to anything we might share and communicate.

So, What to Do?

Here is a possible approach. Begin by considering the relationships you have with the people on your team—the people in closest proximity to you in the organization. Ask yourself:

> *"Do my relationships with people who look like me (in skin color, gender, sexual orientation, age, religious views, or physical ability) seem different in their quality than with people that don't "look" like me in any of these ways?"*

This is an important question. It provides an important gauge—a way to help us see the degree to which we see others as people. If I have a different level of relationship with those who "look" like me versus those who don't despite the fact that they are on my team— that we share the same

proximity to each other within the organization—I should ask myself "why?" Thinking about how the pyramid provides more clarity regarding how I see those on my team may prompt me to ask:

> *"Do I have stronger relationships with those who have influence with the people who look like me vs. those who don't? For example, do I know the names of the family members of those who have influence with people who look like me versus those who don't?"*

If you have broad influence in your organization, you might invite leaders at every level of the organization to consider these questions in relation to the people who directly report to them. Then have them ask themselves where they may need to build relationships. Once we have evaluated our relationships with others, ask: "Do we see people with whom we have not invested time to build relationships as people…really?"

We can only build relationships to the degree that we are willing to share our hopes, goals, needs, challenges, objectives, and headaches with others. This is perhaps the most important distinction between the "building relationships" level of the pyramid and the "listening and learning" level. We can listen and learn and get curious about others' hopes, goals, needs, challenges, objectives, and headaches but only to the degree that we have shared the same with them. This is the basis of any relationship.

Relationships are built on trust, and we invite others to trust us when we trust others enough to really share ourselves with them—to trust others with our experiences, views, worries, and challenges. We should never expect anyone to share anything deeper or more honestly with us than we have shared with them.

So, start here. And then get really curious.

Part of this endeavor may include recognizing power dynamics at play within your organization. Where do you find yourself in the chain of decision-making? If you are not in a position to make decisions that would institute broader change in your organization but want to have influence, consider the strength of your relationships with those who can institute these changes. Find those who you trust in the organization and with whom you feel safe to share your thoughts. Perhaps you are a decision-maker and wonder why no one has spoken out before now? What do you need to change in order to create a space of safety and inclusion for those who report to you?

Being disciplined enough to correct ourselves at these lower levels of the pyramid is the key to real impact in the upper levels of the pyramid. Investing time at the lower levels of the pyramid ensures that we are more inclusive in this important project of determining how to create productive work environments that see each individual in the organization. Acting quickly to change policy or structure and immediately communicating it throughout the organization might make us feel better, but it will not be helpful if it is not preceded and informed by the work we must do at the lower levels of the pyramid.

It is sometimes helpful to think about it in this way: diagnosing and correcting our policies and structures as an organization must be preceded by the more foundational work of diagnosing and correcting ourselves as individuals who make up the organization—how we see others, our relationships, and the degree to which we listen and learn. This is where we must start. Only then are we prepared to correct what we need to correct as an organization to achieve greater diversity, equity, and inclusion, together.

Perhaps most importantly, disciplining ourselves to really invest time at the lower levels of the pyramid will ensure that we do not simply overlay non-discriminatory policies on an organization of people who have not worked to eradicate

discrimination or prejudice from their own hearts. An outward organization is an organization committed to adopting structures, practices, and policies promoting diversity, ensuring equal opportunity, and combating bias. It is filled with individuals at every level who are operating from an outward mindset—who are striving to see every person as a person and are contributing to a sense of belonging and inclusion.