CHAPTER 1

"I Used to Just Be Able to Do My Job—Now I Have to Be Politically Correct"

You've probably heard the line that goes something like, "Work is hard—if it were easy, it wouldn't be called "work!" How true. I don't know anyone who doesn't work hard, who doesn't feel pressure at work, who feels 100 percent secure in their job at all times. Work can be a stressful place these days. Between layoffs, downsizing, "right-sizing," corporate acquisitions and consolidations, wage or salary restrictions, budget tightening and trying to achieve company goals, everyone is doing their best just to get through each week. As an employee or leader, you work hard, do your job and you learn to adapt to change.

But these days, it's not just management or policy or budget changes you have to adapt to. You look around your workplace and your *coworkers* look increasingly different. Different from you. More diverse. You're expected to work with people who aren't like you. Or you're expected to *lead* people who are not like you. (If you're responsible for *leading* a diverse group of people at work, this book will help you with concrete, tested steps and solutions that will provide direction for effectively building trust, resolving conflict and creating a productive team. Part II of this book is specifically for people like you and you can skip straight to Part II to learn how to lead diverse teams.)

Maybe your coworkers are of a different race or ethnicity. Perhaps they hold different religious views. Maybe they're from a generation you don't relate to. They may not speak English well. Perhaps they're from another country or culture that is unfamiliar to you. Or they're the opposite gender and you've never understood the way they think.

Yet you're expected to be a *team player*. In fact, you're expected to *embrace this diverse team*. You're told that your company is progressive and that diversity is good. And, heaven forbid, if you express anything other than *sheer joy* at the prospect of working with diverse groups of people, then you're out of line. Something must be *wrong*

with you: you're racist. Or sexist. Or homophobic. Or intolerant. Or inflexible. Or "behind the times." Or you just "don't get it."

At work, it's not okay or politically correct to say, "I'm uncomfortable with this person." In fact, if you do say something along those lines, your job may be at risk. Your company may terminate you for not being on the "diversity bandwagon." So you keep quiet and you keep your thoughts to yourself. But deep down, *you are uncomfortable*.

If you feel like this, it doesn't mean you're racist or sexist or ageist or homophobic or any other negative label. It means you're *struggling*.

You're struggling to understand people or cultures or values that are unfamiliar to you. You're struggling to do your job with teammates and coworkers who may have very different viewpoints or a different approach to work than you have. You're struggling to overcome differences and pull together with different people to achieve high performance at work. You're also likely suffering from what I call "diversity fatigue."

DIVERSITY FATIGUE—WHY PEOPLE ROLL THEIR EYES WHEN THEY HEAR THE WORD "DIVERSITY"

I do a lot of professional speaking on this topic and I have learned to avoid the word "diversity" because of people's reaction to it. I used to do keynotes on a topic called "Diversity in America" and slowly, over a few years, I saw interest in the topic decline pretty substantially. I suspected the reason, but talking with a client one day confirmed it. She said, "It's a great topic, Kelly, and an important one. But I fear our conference attendees won't come to the session if they see that as the title. People are burned out on diversity. They think it's going to be some HR lecture and they've heard it all before. Can you call it something different?"

I changed the title to "The New Demographics" and *BAM!* I started getting booked for that topic like crazy. It was the exact same content, but with the word "diversity" in the title, it just wasn't generating much interest. My client was right: people who work have been coached and conditioned to accept and embrace diversity on the outside, but inside, they're over it. They've heard the lectures;

they've been through the training; and they're simply tired of the subject, even though it's an important one. They have "diversity fatigue." Because they've heard so much about diversity for so long, they tune out. They're either bored with the topic, or they think it doesn't apply to them. They've been hammered at work (and in society) that we are all one big, happy world and that *people are all the same*. But we're not.

Today's workforce is made up of people who come from different backgrounds, different places, different skills, are of different generations, have different religions, values, and cultural norms—even our approach to work can be different from one another. All of this can seem foreign to you because it *is* foreign to you. The only lens you have to view the world through is *your* lens. You only have your frame of reference—you have no idea what it's like to be somebody else or think like someone else. So when you're confronted with someone whose actions, culture, style of dress, approach, nationality, language, religion, sexual or gender identity, color of skin, gender, or age is "foreign" to you, it's no surprise that you may feel *uncomfortable*.

Yet, if you express that, especially at work, people think there's something wrong with you—the "Diversity Police" make it seem like *you're* the one with a problem. You must be "old school" or racist or sexist or "something-ist" if you express any kind of discomfort or lack of understanding when faced with coworkers who are different from you. You may even get in trouble and be reprimanded, disciplined or put on probation if you speak up about any discomfort you feel. So you keep quiet. But the discomfort doesn't go away.

Even those who aren't the least bit uncomfortable with people from different walks of life have diversity fatigue. One of my dearest friends, Robert Swafford, is incredibly outspoken about everything and he never minces words. He embraces all kinds of people, has a wide group of diverse friends, is inclusive and progressive and everything you'd hope a great employee in today's workforce would be. But he exclaimed to me one day as we were discussing this topic, "For crying out loud, can we please *stop talking* about diversity? Let's just go to work, respect each other, and figure it out as we go along! We get it!"

Even if you're one of the ones who "gets it," the word "diversity" still carries a lot of baggage. It's not that people don't respect different

cultures, races, ethnicities, and norms, it's just that there has been so much focus on diversity that people are simply tired of the subject, even though it's an important one.

That's one of two reasons I don't like the word "diversity." The second reason is because, in my experience, people tend to think too narrowly about the word. They default to thinking about diversity in terms of racial and ethnic differences.

My definition of diversity is "*any way that you can be different from me*." For example, if you have kids and I don't, we're going to be very different: we will have different priorities and face different pressures. The decisions that a parent makes will likely vary significantly from those that a nonparent makes. When you become a parent, your entire focus shifts, because it has to. Parents think about and evaluate everything differently than people who aren't parents. But that difference has nothing to do with race, ethnicity, or even gender. It simply has to do with parenthood versus nonparenthood.

THE NEW DEMOGRAPHICS

I prefer to talk about diversity using the phrase "people not like you." Every day, you are surrounded by people who are not like you. Sometimes the differences are obvious, such as a different skin color, ethnicity, gender, age, or disability. But there are numerous other ways that people are not like you, and some of those ways may not be apparent until you get to know someone.

Here is a list of some of the ways that people can be "not like you"—some are self-explanatory, others require a bit of description. This is by no means a complete list of ways we can be diverse, but I'll bet there are a few here you haven't considered before:

- Different racial and ethnic groups
  - Black, White, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, Middle Eastern, South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, etc.)
- Different religious groups and views
- Men and women
- Different ages and generations
- LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning—"questioning" includes those who may be unsure of their sexual

orientation or preference, such as teens who are still developing and exploring, or those for whom sexuality and/or gender identity is more fluid)

- Introverts and extroverts
- Marital status (single, married, divorced, partnered, widowed)
- Parents and nonparents
  - And within "parents," there is no doubt that single parents have different lives and demands on them than two-parent households
- Different levels of income and affluence
- Differing political views
- Different education levels
- Different cultural backgrounds—this would include different heritage, traditions, and customs, but can also include things that shape culture significantly. Examples of these include:
  - Military versus civilian backgrounds/experience
  - Rural versus metropolitan backgrounds
  - North/South or East Coast/West Coast backgrounds
- White-collar versus blue-collar professions
- Differing physical, emotional and mental abilities
- Full-time versus part-time workers and "gig" workers
- Office workers versus telecommuters
  - In some companies and organizations, the flexibility that some employees have in working from home is fostering resentment among those who can't. We'll tackle this issue, and others like it, in this book.

These are just a few of the ways we can be different from one another at work. I'm certain you could add to this list—it's endless. Recently, I was talking with a guy at a business conference about this subject, and he said, "Here's one for your list: gun owners versus non-gun owners!" He was right! Shooting isn't just a sport or activity for many people; it's a culture. Gun owners collect and trade guns, practice shooting, and can't envision not having guns. Those who don't have guns can't envision having them—they see no reason for them. Another guy overheard us talking and chimed in with, "Here's another one: gamers versus nongamers!" It's so true! People who are

really into video games don't see it as just a pastime or a hobby; they see it as a complete *culture*. It has its own language, rules, hierarchy, and status. These are two great examples of how people can be not like each other, but in both cases, the difference has nothing to do with race, ethnicity, age, or gender. As you think about your coworkers, what other ways can you identify that they can be "not like you"?

And here's something else to consider: if they are "not like you," then they probably see you the same way—*not like them*.

WORKING WITH PEOPLE NOT LIKE YOU IS THE NEW NORMAL

All you want is to do your job and do it well, without conflict or drama. But there is this underlying level of anxiety and stress that stems from feeling like you have to walk on eggshells for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. That's because your workplace today is made up of more people who come from diverse backgrounds than ever before. Diverse backgrounds mean that cultures, experiences, views, habits, and approaches will be different. And when you're faced with people, cultures, values, or approaches that are different and unfamiliar, it's stressful. It's out of your comfort zone. It's *uncomfortable*.

It's important to know three things right now:

1. You're not alone. Everyone feels this way! Yep, *everyone*.
2. The discomfort you feel is completely normal.
3. You're not a bad person if you're struggling to function effectively with diverse coworkers.

This last bullet point is especially important. There is so much attention and focus on the value of diversity, at work and in society, that if you question it or struggle with it, you're made to feel like a bad person.

In my opinion, the very fact that you're reading this book says that *you get it*—you *want* to work more effectively with diverse people and figure out how to overcome differences at work so that you can perform at the highest level. You want to resolve conflict, reduce friction, find common ground, and be the best coworker and team member you can be. You're not a bad person. You're an *honest*

person, and you're doing your best to understand people, behaviors, or attitudes that may baffle you.

You are investing the time to learn because you care. You care enough about yourself, your company, your workplace, and your fellow workers to try to make things better. You don't want to just toil away at work. You want to contribute and succeed and be part of a high-performing team. You want to help make the culture at work more enjoyable, productive, positive, and rewarding—for *yourself and everyone else*. If you didn't care, you wouldn't be reading this right now! You'd just go to work each day and try not to rock the boat. But that's not you—you're *trying* to understand people not like you—and how best to work alongside them. You're making the effort and taking the time to learn about how to be a better employee or leader. You're the kind of associate that companies want: thoughtful, invested, and dedicated to positive outcomes. This book will show you how to achieve those positive outcomes, regardless of how different the people you're working with may be from you and how frustrating that can be at times. But before we get into the steps of "how" to do this, let's talk about why diversity is so important in the workplace now. What's driving it? It wasn't always such a hot topic—why is it now? And will things ever go back to the way they used to be?

WE'RE NOT GOING BACK TO THE WAY THINGS USED TO BE

If you long for the days when you could just go to work, do your job, and not have to worry about saying the "wrong thing" to the "wrong person" or being "culturally sensitive," I have some bad news for you: those days are gone. They're not coming back.

If you're part of a minority group, you may have experienced discrimination or felt marginalization or watched it happen around you in your lifetime. In recent years, you've seen some progress in tolerance, acceptance and inclusivity, so you're relieved that "the old days" are gone and aren't coming back. You don't want to lose the forward momentum that society and business now embrace.

Why has diversity become such an important issue for businesses? Why did we not pay attention to it "before" but we do now? What's changed?

Two things are driving the emphasis on diversity: technology and people moving around, all over the world.

Technology and the advancements that have been made in communication have made it easier to work globally. You can talk to someone on the other side of the world, email them, Skype with them, and work with them. When technology broke down the walls that separated us from people in other cities, states or countries, it created more opportunity for people from all walks of life to work together. Back in the day, you went to work in a local office and, chances are, the people you worked with were local too and probably very much like you. *Because you were all from the same area*. Today, technology makes it easy to work with people who may be hundreds or thousands of miles away. You can work on a project with a team of people in multiple locations. The tie that binds you may be work, but the team of coworkers may be completely unlike you.

On top of that, people move around now. All over the world, people are relocating and moving at a pace that we've never seen before. They move for jobs, for love, for family reunification, for quality of life, for their kids, for better climate—you name it. In decades past, people didn't move much because it was harder to stay in touch with loved ones if they moved away. So you had communities and towns and cities where most people were from there. Then they met and married other people who were from the same area, put down roots, and started families in that same area. Few people left, because it was easier to stay. So, generally speaking, there were entire communities where most everyone was "like you"—sharing the same background, experiences, values, language, customs, and habits. For decades and decades, people didn't change much. They didn't come into contact with people who were different from them because they didn't leave their communities. They weren't exposed to other cultures or ways of thinking. People simply lived in smaller worlds.

But all that has changed and it won't "change back." The shift in how people live today, the openness to moving and relocation, the ease with which that can happen now, has created a workplace where people can be from anywhere. That's what is driving the focus on diversity—we are simply coming into more contact with people not like us than ever before. And if it seems to you like this shift happened fast, you're right. It's happened in a relatively short period

of time, and that's another reason you may feel uncomfortable—you haven't had much time to absorb it or get used to it. Our society has changed—quite swiftly—and people feel they are expected to embrace these changes and be politically correct, especially at work.

If you feel this way, you're not alone. A poll from Fairleigh Dickinson University showed that 68 percent of Americans feel that "political correctness is a big problem in society." The election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States was a powerful indication that many people are drawn to someone who speaks their mind, without regard to "political correctness." Trump voiced what many Americans felt: that globalism and shifting demographics potentially threaten the life that they know. Whether it's economic uncertainty or a sense that "we're losing our culture," Trump tapped into something very real and powerful: a growing fear of "others" and a fear of being marginalized. The way that he talked and the things that he was willing to say (that others weren't) resonated with many Americans, especially White Americans.

For many people who aren't White, the tone and rhetoric of the election was demoralizing, if not downright disturbing. Many minorities, who have worked hard for equal rights and the recognition of their contributions, feel the mood of the country is becoming less welcoming and less accepting of diverse cultures. They feel the tremendous strides that have been made in the last several decades are in danger of being erased. Instead of identifying with the rhetoric of Trump, they fear him. It may have been politics that brought this to everyone's attention, but *the divisive state of the United States wasn't created by an election or a politician. It was already happening, bubbling just under the surface for years.*

And it's not just happening in America. All around the world, we are seeing a trend toward societies becoming more nationalistic and, in some cases, even isolationist, meaning that countries and societies are tending to focus more on protecting their national culture and becoming less receptive to immigrants, different cultures, and other ways of life. Brexit—the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union—was largely driven by concerns that waves of immigrants were hurting the economy, taking jobs, and changing British culture. Australia is eyeing tough new anti-immigration laws for the same reasons. Many people feel that an increasingly diverse culture

leads to a loss of national identity and religious unity, an increase in economic competition for jobs and a decrease in national security. Much of this is driven by fear of terrorist activities. But much is driven by a general mistrust and fear of "others"—people of different and unfamiliar religions, backgrounds, and cultures—in other words, people not like you.

The unfamiliar is uncomfortable. We crave the familiar. It feels "normal" and "safe" to us because we understand it. Unfamiliar people, things, customs, and experiences can be scary, overwhelming and anxiety-producing. They can make you feel uncertain, like you don't know what's coming next. They can make you feel fear, because you don't know what to expect and things are changing, but you don't know what they're changing to or what impact those changes will have on you. They can make you feel marginalized, like you don't matter very much. None of those emotions are very pleasant to feel. They're all stressful.

It's at this point that people behave in one of two fashions: they either seek to understand their emotions and work to channel those feelings into something positive, or they feel resentment.

Feeling resentment is understandable. Perhaps you feel some anxiety at the way the world is going and how fast the culture you've known seems to be slipping away. You're coming into contact with people and values you don't understand, and you're expected to adapt—but you're asking yourself, "Shouldn't they be adapting to *us*? Why do I have to sit through a diversity training session at work? Why do we have to make special accommodations for *them*? Why do I have to work with people who don't even speak the language or speak it very well? Why do I have to monitor my every thought and sentence so I don't offend someone?" You may be thinking, "I just want to do my job, and these people and all these expectations and rules are making it harder."

Or if you are the minority worker in a company or organization where everyone else is "not like you," you may sense the emotions or thoughts mentioned above. Maybe no one says anything directly to you, but you feel their frustration, dislike or resentment and it feels like it's directed at you. The result is that you resent being put in the position of representing "diversity" or being the focus of others' negative emotions.

In either case, whether you're the majority worker who is adapting to working with people not like you, or whether you're the minority worker who is surrounded at work by people not like you, feeling resentful sucks. It's not healthy. And it's not productive to your work.

RESENTMENT IS A CHOICE

Emotions are natural. You can't help feeling whatever it is you feel: fear, anxiety, discomfort, worry. But resentment is a *choice*. You don't have to choose it. Resentment is destructive. It eats away at your insides and makes you bitter and angry. You grit your teeth, go to work, and silently resent that our differences exist in the first place. It's not uncommon to feel resentment. It's understandable. But it *is* a choice.

The fact that you're reading this book means that you've made a *different* choice. *You have chosen to try to understand and work with people not like you.* I won't promise that it's easy. I won't tell you that you won't experience frustration and bewilderment. I won't promise you that it's all rainbows and unicorns. But I will promise that when you learn how to work together with people not like you, *despite our differences*, you will achieve greater job satisfaction, better quality work, better outcomes and solutions, and higher performance for you and your team. You'll feel energized, not resentment.

You've made a choice. You're investing time to learn how to work with and lead people not like you. In the next chapter, we'll dive into how you can break the ice and build trust and respect with someone who is different from you. Our differences in the workplace often prevent teams and individuals from getting their work done. The differences get in the way because they can be sources of conflict and mistrust.

This book will help you focus on building trust and respect with people who are not like you, who may rub you the wrong way. In many cases, you'll find that the ways in which your coworkers are different from you turn out to be invaluable assets for getting work done. Let's get started.