CATALYST

Allyship and Curiosity Drive Inclusion for People of Color at Work

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Curiosity Powers Allyship to Create Change

Research from a wide variety of disciplines shows that people of color experience bias, discrimination, and unfair treatment in all parts of their lives—including at work—with far-reaching impact.[1] In addition, Catalyst research has found that many employees of color in the US[2] and Canada[3] experience an Emotional Tax at work—the combination of being on guard to protect against bias because of race, ethnicity, and gender and experiencing the associated effects on health, well-being, and ability to thrive at work.

What can leaders do to combat the need for employees of color to be on guard against bias, and how do leaders create workplaces where employees of color can thrive? To answer these questions, we analyzed the experiences of 274 people of color in the United States.

We found that inclusive leaders[4] boost experiences of acceptance and inclusion at work for people of color and that these experiences ultimately predict intent to stay. Most importantly, we found that **allyship** and **curiosity** should be at the heart of a manager's leadership mindset in order to create a more inclusive, welcoming workplace.

- **Allyship** means actively supporting people from marginalized groups.[5] It's about using as much institutional, social, and/or cultural privilege or power as you have to advocate for people who face oppression. Allies amplify unheard voices, call out barriers and biases that can inhibit progress, and act as role models in their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- **Curiosity** is about proactively seeking out different points of view,[6] listening to others, learning, and reflecting on what you've heard. People who are curious are open to new perspectives, welcome respectful exchanges of ideas, and channel their learning into action. They recognize that each of us is exposed to just a fraction of the world, and they value the insights that diversity and difference bring.

Through curiosity and allyship, champions of equity and inclusion at work can start to unearth the deep roots of racial and ethnic inequities and take meaningful action to destroy them and, in their place, sow seeds of equity and understanding.

> **I would rather have a straight White man lean into a conversation about diversity and inclusion with the right intention [even if he] may say the wrong things, because the right things to say can be learned. But the intention can't be taught.**
>
> – Sid, South Asian Man, Senior Director[7]

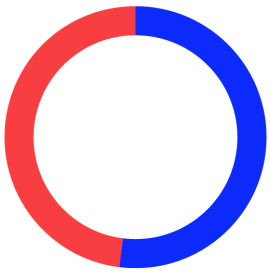
All Employees Can Lead Inclusively

Leadership isn't limited to those with official titles or status. No matter your background, experiences, identities, or where you are in your organization, you can lead inclusively. Start by actively supporting people from marginalized groups and seeking to understand diversity and difference. Change lies in all of us—so go be a leader.

About This Study

We analyzed quantitative survey data collected through the[Catalyst Inclusion Accelerator](), a diagnostic tool designed to capture how employees and teams experience inclusion. This study reports results from 274 people of color[8] working in the United States. Respondents ranged in age from 20-72 years, with an average of 41.

GENDER[9]

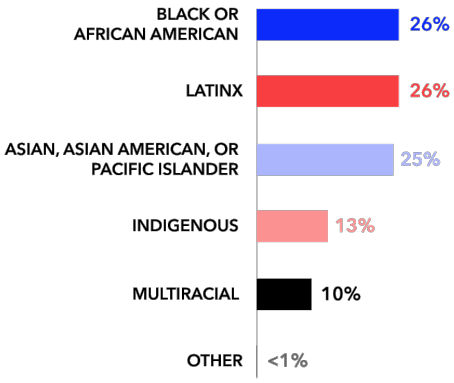


0% TRANS OR NON-BINARY

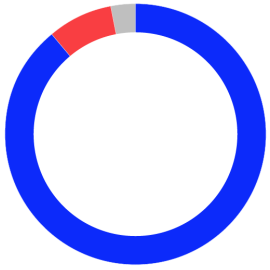
48% MEN

52% WOMEN

RACE OR ETHNICITY[10]



IDENTIFY AS LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, QUEER, OR ASEXUAL

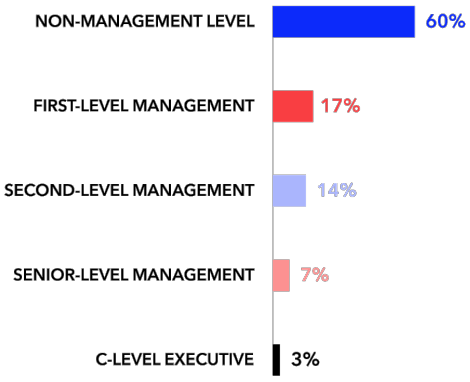


3% PREFER NOT TO SAY

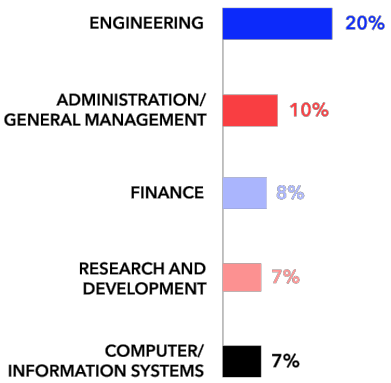
8% YES

89% NO

JOB LEVEL[11]



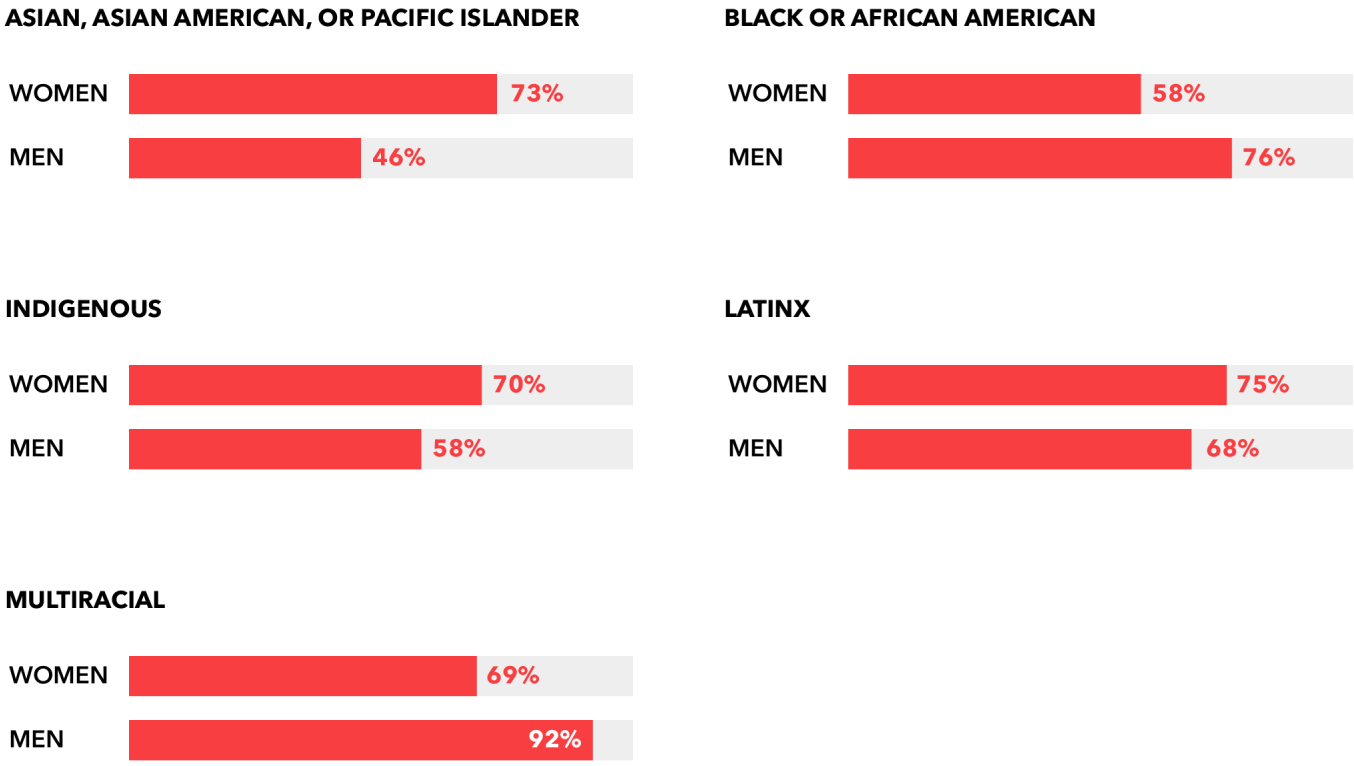
TOP FIVE INDUSTRIES



Most People of Color Are On Guard to Bias at Work

We found that **68%** of people of color are on guard[12] to protect against bias and unfair treatment within their work teams. Of that group, 70% report that they are on guard specifically because of their race or ethnicity.

Percentage of Employees Reporting Being On Guard at Work



Note. The intersections of race and gender yielded very small sample sizes for certain groups (e.g., $n = 12$ Indigenous men) and thus, results should be interpreted as directional only (i.e., group differences have not been tested for statistical significance). Additionally, an extremely small portion of respondents (<1%) identified as another marginalized racial or ethnic group and, for this reason, we are unable to provide percentages for them.

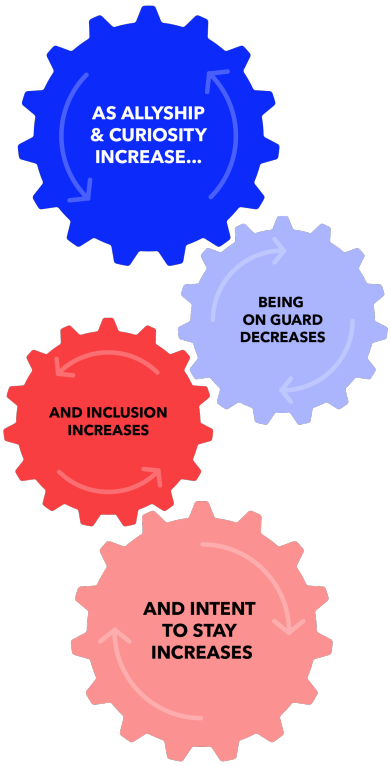
These findings are striking, revealing that even among colleagues with whom they work closely—their team members—two-thirds of employees of color have needed to guard themselves against bias within the past six months. They brace themselves for insults, avoid certain places or social situations, change the way they look, and protect against being stereotyped by their team members—simply because of who they are.

But our data also show that creating an environment where people of color don't need to be on guard is linked to both improved employee outcomes and benefits to the organization. In particular, when people of color are less on guard to racial bias at work, they report that their organizations are more invested in diversity and inclusion,[13] their organizations are more fair,[14] their coworkers are more supportive,[15] they are more included,[16] and they have greater intentions to stay at their organization.[17]

Corporate leaders, team managers, and all of us as colleagues need to do a better job of creating the kind of work environments where everyone is valued for their diverse skills, expertise, and background—and inclusive leaders do just this.

Fueling Allyship With Curiosity Accelerates Workplace Inclusion

Our survey results tell us that, through allyship and curiosity, leaders are responsible for nearly 40% of the experience of inclusion for people of color.[18] We also found that when their leaders demonstrate allyship[19] and curiosity,[20] people of color are less on guard to racial bias at work. This reduced burden links, in turn, to increased inclusion and ultimately intentions to stay at their organization. Take a look:



Curiosity complements allyship to boost inclusion.**It is a *skill* that must be cultivated—one that enables you to access the specific information about diversity, difference, and your colleagues that you need to be a better ally.** All of us, regardless of our individual racial and ethnic backgrounds, can take active steps to build our curiosity and allyship skills to create more inclusive workplaces for people from marginalized groups. Curiosity powers allyship in two important ways:

Curiosity opens your mind

- Being curious is deeper than asking an employee of color general questions about their well-being—it's ongoing and persistent learning about dimensions of difference and marginalization within and outside of work, and about yourself in relation to them.
- When you talk to your employees with genuine interest, you show that you care about who they are as individuals and the value they bring to your organization. You learn more about their ideas, goals, strengths, and experiences. And, by questioning your own assumptions and where you might be getting things wrong, you learn more about your strengths and challenges in advocating for them as an ally.
- Curiosity also involves asking yourself tough questions about how your own biases might be influencing your actions and seeking additional growth opportunities such as trainings, self-reflection, and/or coaching. You take responsibility for your growth edges and recognize that you are the driver of your diversity and inclusion journey. You actively listen to the perspectives of people of color but recognize that *you* are responsible for your own learning and growth in this domain.

Curiosity makes you a more effective change agent

- Once you get a clearer picture of people's strengths and unique contributions to your organization, you will have the facts you need to better support them.
- For example, you can: sponsor them for a new role that matches their skillset; dispel other people's assumptions about their lives, personalities, or aspirations; and speak up for organizational changes that could remove barriers they and other people of color might face.
- When you combine a big-picture understanding of the structural underpinnings of racism with specific knowledge about individual colleagues of color, you unlock powerful opportunities for enacting change within your workplace.

> **The women that I've worked for, for the most part have been very receptive and supportive….They recognized that I had something to offer, something of value, and if they were in the way, they would quickly get out of the way and help me out….It's gotten me opportunities, experiences that I would otherwise not have had.**
>
> –Darnell, Black Man, Director[21]

> **Sometimes in meetings [my manager would] ask the question, people would jump in, sharing their thoughts….And then after that he'd be like, 'Do you have something to say?'….He always said '[You have] good thoughts, so say them.' In a positive way, not like telling me to speak. But he encouraged me on multiple occasions, and now I'm at that place where I feel very comfortable doing so.**
>
> –Kira, South Asian Woman, Manager[22]

What to Avoid: Performative Allyship

Performative allyship—saying you're against a certain type of injustice without doing the hard work of changing your behavior or the structures that uphold it[23]—is detrimental to both the people and causes you support.[24] Examples of performative allyship include:

- Posting an article about racial injustice on social media without any further action to press for change, such as starting a conversation about the topic at work, making different spending decisions, or advocating for change in your community.
- Calling for more diversity in the media, but rarely watching, reading, or listening to work by people of color.
- Stating that you're shocked and angry about the latest example of social injustice without following up to learn more about how our society has nurtured this injustice for generations.

At work, it might look like:

- A company that commemorates Equal Pay Day but does not actually audit its own salaries by gender and race to assess the extent to which there are pay gaps within the organization.
- An executive saying in a meeting that Black Lives Matter but continuing to work with vendors and suppliers with a history of marginalizing Black employees and communities.
- Team leaders who say they value different perspectives and experiences but don't acknowledge affinity bias[25] and hire and promote only people who are very similar to themselves.

Performative allyship hurts the people it purports to promote because it gives the impression of "doing something" when nothing of substance has occurred. Thus, it maintains the status quo by appearing to support change without making change—which is inequitable and demoralizing.

To go beyond performative allyship, true allies use their power, influence, expertise, resources, skills, and relationships to advocate for individual and structural change. Doing so requires pushing back against long-standing social and cultural norms, habits, expectations, and traditions. It's not easy, but change seldom is.

Start Your Allyship Journey

Ultimately, we need to celebrate *both* our differences and our points of connection. You can honor diversity and difference and, at the same time, find common ground, connect, and build alliances. Through curiosity, you might discover the ways that you'll personally benefit from inclusion in the workplace. Allyship requires work—but when supercharged with curiosity, its outcomes can be powerful.

Tune In

Build awareness. Take stock. Learn as much as you can.

What Can I Do?
Start by asking questions, such as: What do I know about systemic inequality? Where did I learn it? Even more, **what don't I know?**

- **Commit to learning**, get curious, and embrace being uncomfortable.
- **Immerse yourself.** Actively pursue opportunities to learn from experiences that differ from your own.

What Can We Do?
Your organization **cannot** chart a path to inclusion without knowing where you're starting from. Evidence, transparency, and clear, consistent communication are key. Ask:

- How are we contributing to systemic inequities?
- Do we have the right approach, metrics, and tools to assess patterns along intersections of identity?
- Do we have resources and tools to support employee learning?

Pitfalls to Avoid

Staying in your comfort zone.

- Resolve to push yourself beyond what's familiar.

Opting out.

- You must do the work in order to be part of the solution. Ignoring differences means you are maintaining the status quo and its inequities.

Step Up

Develop a meaningful vision and plan. Prepare to be challenged. Get to work.

What Can I Do?
Remember that allyship is about the work you do, not just the ideals you hold.

- Push through your insecurities. Focus on being capable—any discomfort or fears you face are part of the process.
- Build empathy skills.
- Ask: What supports and accountability systems can I put in place for this work?

What Can We Do?

- Build systems of accountability to ensure equity is at the heart of how business gets done.
- Create a space for people to share their perspectives and stories if they volunteer to do so, but do not put the burden on people from marginalized groups to create change when everyone should be held responsible.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Taking short-cuts.

- Take responsibility and hold yourself accountable for making yourself and your workplace more inclusive.
- Don't get discouraged; change seldom happens in a day.

Lift Up

Vocally support marginalized groups.

What Can I Do?
Your voice is your privilege—use it.

- Observe whose voices are heard, whose opinions are validated, and who is ignored or dismissed. Then, interrupt these behaviors in the moment or follow up.
- Proactively promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in your workplace by vocally, actively, and visibly supporting these initiatives and people from marginalized groups.

What Can We Do?

- Ask: How are we holding ourselves and employees accountable for inclusion goals? Do we evaluate leaders on inclusive leadership metrics?
- Create formal and informal mechanisms to amplify marginalized voices, ensuring that their ideas, thoughts, and contributions are known and valued in your organization.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Practicing performative allyship.

- Allyship is not about getting accolades, credit, or personal rewards. Seek to promote the voices and contributions of people from marginalized groups—even if they don't know you are doing it.

Practice. Reflect. Refine.

We all have personal biases and unhealthy norms in our organizations. Do you know yours? Are you accounting for them?

- Own your impact. Critically reflect on the power that you have to tune in, step up, and lift up marginalized groups.
- Remember that you can be both a kind and compassionate person (or organization) and still succumb to unconscious bias and exclusionary practices. These aren't mutually exclusive. Pick yourself up when you fall, **apologize (and mean it)**, and keep doing this work. Allies address their own behavior, too.
- Take risks and practice allyship behaviors every day. You will learn, grow, and have opportunities to course-correct. **Keep going.**

Contributor

Dr. Terrence Underwood contributed significant leadership and expertise to the development of the "Start Your Allyship Journey" model.

Acknowledgments

We thank our donors for their generous support of our work in this area:

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Endnotes

1. Travis, D. J. & Thorpe-Moscon, J. (2018). *Day-to-day experiences of emotional tax among women and men of color in the workplace*. Catalyst; Goff, P. A., Haviland, A. M., Lloyd, T., Meyer, M., & Warren, R. (2020, October 6). How racism amplified Covid-19 risk for everyone. Vox; Banks, K. H., Kohn-Wood, L. P., & Spencer, M. (2006). An examination of the African American experience of everyday discrimination and symptoms of psychological distress. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 42(6), 555–570; Jones, K. P., Sabat, I. E., King, E. B., Ahmad, A., McCausland, T. C., & Chen, T. (2017). Isms and schisms: A meta-analysis of the prejudice-discrimination relationship across racism, sexism, and ageism. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 38(7), 1076–1110; Steele, C. M. & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 797-811.
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3. Thorpe-Moscon, J., Pollack, A., & Olu-Lafe, O. (2019). *Empowering workplaces combat emotional tax for people of colour in Canada*. Catalyst.
4. Travis, D., Shaffer, E., & Thorpe-Moscon, J. (2019). *Getting real about inclusive leadership: Why change starts with you*. Catalyst. The six core behaviors of inclusive leadership comprise two dimensions: allyship, ownership, and accountability reflect leading outward; curiosity, humility, and courage reflect leading inward.
5. Travis et al. (2019, p. 8).
6. Travis et al. (2019, p. 9).
7. Men advocating real change interview series (2020, January). [Unpublished data]. *Catalyst.*
8. For the purposes of this report, we define people of color as individuals who face oppression in the United States on the basis of their race and/or ethnicity, such as individuals who identify as Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx, who comprised our sample. Multiracial participants identified with two or more of these groups.
9. Our measure of participants' gender identity included non-binary, genderfluid, third gender, and trans spectrum representation; however, no participants indicated a gender identity other than woman or man.
10. Total exceeds 100% due to rounding. Of the sample, 26% (n=71) identified as Black or African American. Among Latinx respondents (26%; n=71), 39% identified as Mexican, 10% as Puerto Rican, 4% as Cuban, and 48% as another Hispanic, Latina/o, or Spanish group. Among Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander respondents (25%; n=68), 41% identified as Chinese, 21% identified as Indian, 10% as Filipino, 6% as Japanese, 6% as Korean, 6% as Vietnamese, and 12% identified as another Asian or Pacific Islander racial or ethnic group. Furthermore, 13% (n=35) identified as Native American or Alaska Native. Less than 1% of the sample identified with another marginalized racial or ethnic group. People who identified with only one of the following broad racial and ethnic groups are included in the above breakdown: Black or African American; Latinx; Asian, Asian American, and/or Pacific Islander; Native American or Alaska Native. An additional 10% (n=27) of the sample identified with two or more marginalized racial or ethnic groups.
11. Total exceeds 100% due to rounding.
12. Participants were asked to indicate how often they were on guard to bias in their work teams in terms of 10 different aspects of their identity (e.g., race/ethnicity, nationality, gender) within the past six months on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, 4 = always. Being on guard was coded as whether or not they had ever been on guard to bias (i.e., scores of rarely or higher) about any aspect of their identity within their work teams in the past six months.
13. Correlation between experiences of being on guard against racial bias at work and perceptions of organizational investment in diversity and inclusion: $r = -.14$, $p < .04$.
14. Correlation between experiences of being on guard against racial bias at work and perceptions of organizational fairness: $r = -.19$, $p < .002$.
15. Correlation between experiences of being on guard against racial bias at work and perceptions that coworkers are supportive: $r = -.25$, $p < .001$.
16. Correlation between experiences of being on guard against racial bias at work and experiences of inclusion: $r = -.31$, $p < .001$.
17. Correlation between experiences of being on guard against racial bias at work and intentions to stay at their organization: $r = -.26$, $p < .001$.
18. To examine the associations between leader allyship and curiosity with inclusion, we conducted a hierarchical linear regression. Participants' age as well as dummy codes for participants' gender, specific racial identity, and management level were entered in Step 1. The Step 1 model was not significant, $R^2 = .016$, $F(8, 241) = 0.48$, $p > .86$. At Step 2, allyship and curiosity were entered. Entering allyship and curiosity into the Step 2 model made the model significant, $\Delta R^2 = .39$, $\Delta F(2, 239) = 78.38$, $p < .001$. Allyship was a significant predictor of inclusion, $b = .20$, $t(239) = 3.73$, $p < .001$; curiosity was also a significant predictor of inclusion, $b = .25$, $t(239) = 4.26$, $p < .001$.
19. We conducted a serial mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro. The association between leader allyship and employees of color's intentions to stay at the organization was mediated by decreased experiences of being on guard against racial bias (the first mediating variable) and increased experiences of inclusion (the second mediating variable). Respondents' specific racial identity, gender, age, and management were accounted for as covariates. The total effect of allyship on increased intentions to stay was significant ($b = .30$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), and the direct effect of allyship on intentions to stay was not significant ($b = .05$, $SE = .07$, $p > .473$), indicating a complete mediation through the serial indirect effect ($b = .02$ [LLCI = .01, ULCI = .04]). The association between allyship and decreased experiences of being on guard was significant ($b = -.31$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$); the association between decreased experiences of being on guard and increased experiences of inclusion was also significant ($b = -.10$, $SE = .03$, $p = .003$); finally, the association between increased experiences of inclusion and intentions to stay was significant as well ($b = .60$, $SE = .11$, $p < .001$).
20. We conducted a serial mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro. The association between leader curiosity and employees of color's intentions to stay at the organization was mediated by decreased experiences of being on guard against racial bias (the first mediating variable) and increased experiences of inclusion (the second mediating variable). Respondents' specific racial or ethnic identity, gender, age, and management level were accounted for as covariates. The total effect of curiosity on increased intentions to stay was significant ($b = .35$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), and the direct effect of curiosity on intentions to stay was not significant ($b = .06$, $SE = .08$, $p > .40$), indicating a complete mediation through the serial indirect effect ($b = .02$ [LLCI < .01, ULCI = .04]). The association between curiosity and decreased experiences of being on guard was significant ($b = -.35$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$); the association between decreased experiences of being on guard and increased experiences of inclusion was also significant ($b = -.09$, $SE = .03$, $p < .01$); finally, the association between increased experiences of inclusion and intentions to stay was significant as well ($b = .59$, $SE = .11$, $p < .001$).
21. Thorpe-Moscon et al. (2019, p. 30).
22. Thorpe-Moscon et al. (2019, p. 8).
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25. 11 harmful types of unconscious bias and how to interrupt them. (2020, January 2). Catalyst. "Affinity bias," refers to people's tendency to gravitate toward similar others.