



**SKILLS FOR CONSCIOUS CHANGE:
HOW TO NAVIGATE DIFFERENCES AND FOSTER
INCLUSION IN EVERYDAY RELATIONSHIPS**

Jean Kantambu Latting

Looking for techniques to guide leaders through the thicket of work-related conflicts?

Clear guidelines for methods to make diverse teams more collaborative?

In our new book, *Conscious Change: How to Navigate Differences and Foster Inclusion in Everyday Relationships*, my co-author V. Jean Ramsey and I describe six principles covering thirty-six skills for maximizing talent and minimizing stress in today's inclusive workplaces. But, practicing what we preach, the book is not about us or a result of our efforts alone.

The culmination of years of research and practice, it includes a conceptual overview of the principles and skills of Conscious Change, followed by nineteen chapters contributed by former students, consulting clients, and colleagues. Each contributor presents a compelling narrative about how they harnessed the skills to solve workplace issues. These stories reveal vulnerability but are offered without apology, complete with an awareness of how hard it can be to break old habits. They demonstrate that the rewards are worth it.

How does it all work? Here is a window into the six principles and narratives.

PRINCIPLE #1: TEST NEGATIVE ASSUMPTIONS

Assumptions are not facts. They are only hypotheses about what we believe to be true. Yet real or not, assumptions—especially those we make about others and the meaning of their words and behaviors—can create a great deal of havoc in our interpersonal relationships and interactions. Conscious leaders test negative assumptions as a regular habit.

In Chapter 13, Orfelinda Coronado tells the story of working in what felt like a very hostile work environment:

I was having a conversation in Spanish with a group of Latina coworkers. Meanwhile, the assistant to the department director, Celine ... a White woman, heard us speaking Spanish and yelled, "Speak English, this is the United States!"

... [T]his was just the latest version of Celine's abuse I felt certain Celine was totally inflexible and incapable of change. With this latest incident, I'd had it! It was time for me to think about leaving the agency.

What did she do? Orfelinda tested her assumption that Celine was irredeemable; she began to see and praise Celine's strengths. Orfelinda gave up being right about Celine, and instead chose to be more effective in her response to her.

The result? Over time, Celine became more cooperative and helpful, and she and Orfelinda developed a good working relationship.

PRINCIPLE #2: CLEAR EMOTIONS

Emotions are complex physiological responses. They are automatic, unconscious reactions, rather than products of conscious thought. Because we feel our emotions before we form conscious thoughts, our emotions influence our thinking.

If we can learn to transition out of a state of stress and into a neutral or even positive emotional state, we are better able to think clearly, develop creative solutions to problems, and work effectively with others. The more skilled we are at regulating our emotions, the more resilient we become when stressors arise.

In Chapter 16, Treshina Smith tells of the time she was told by her first team leader: Just do your job.

I was asking a simple question about direction, and the next thing I knew she was telling me she was going to have me reassigned. She seemed triggered, and I definitely was. She didn't appear to want an explanation or to work through the problem She apparently felt threatened "Why do you ask so many questions? Don't make waves. Just continue doing what you're doing."

... As if the stress of the new job wasn't enough, I was also going through nerve-wracking transitions in my personal life.... I admit I didn't deal with all of this very effectively

What did she do? Treshina was moved to a different team and came to trust the new team leader enough to divulge part of her personal situation.

[The team leader's] reaction was, "I thought there was something going on with you. You're ordinarily such a high performer, and we appreciate what you've done. Why not step away for a few days and take some time off? That might be all you need to help you see things more clearly. We want you at your best."

I gratefully accepted her suggestion and soon learned she was right! I badly needed to believe in myself again, to believe in my own strength and my own power. I used those days to engage in activities that never fail to renew my spirit—some yoga, quiet reading and reflection, time outside in nature. I even occasionally cranked up the music and just danced until I broke out in a sweat.

The result? As Treshina explained, "The positive feedback and support encouraged me to take myself in hand and reengage in activities that I knew from past experience would help me get a handle on my emotions."

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PRINCIPLE #3: BUILD EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Little gets accomplished within organizations by individuals operating solo. It is in and through relationships that work gets done. Effective relationships are characterized by regularly occurring open and honest communications. It takes more than good intentions, however, to have such relationships. It requires skill and practice.

In Chapter 14, Nadia Maynard shares the deep conflicts she faced working among immigrants, nonprofits formed to assist them, and US Customs and Border Protection.

... [T]here were multiple challenges and points of view. I had to use quite a bit of cultural humility and inquiry to assuage fears and navigate politically sticky situations

What did she do?

Eventually, I developed sound relationships with the local groups. An example is the partnership we were able to develop over time with ... a small local humanitarian aid organization. From this partnership, we learned that immigrants had no way to reach loved ones at home Being out of contact with family members made them more vulnerable to extortion or trafficking. We were able to provide them with satellite phones to be used by individuals in camps that had been set up for them in the desert.

The result? Nadia's ability to develop positive relationships—"walking that fine line between distrustful and conflictual parties"—paid off in multiple benefits to the immigrants she was serving.

PRINCIPLE #4: BRIDGE DIFFERENCES

Learning how to live and work with people who differ from you has become imperative. Study after study has shown that diverse groups are more creative and innovative and produce better decisions.

At the same time, diverse groups experience more conflict and tension than homogeneous groups.

To be effective in culturally diverse settings, we must become more sophisticated about cultural differences, master skills to bridge differences, and foster inclusive and equitable work environments.

In Chapter 21, Sylvia Epps writes of the challenge of remaining culturally sensitive in a majority-POC organization.

... Most of our studies involve at-risk, minority, underserved, and hard-to-reach populations, typically evaluating social policy issues related to poverty, housing, and work [I]t takes deliberate work to develop skills of racially sensitive awareness and dialogue, and my goal is to lead by example and create space for others to join.

Because our organization is 70 percent minority, I think there's been an assumption that it is a safe space, that we've got this figured out, and that we're automatically doing culturally responsive work. But that's not true at all. We still have a lot of work to do. There are still a lot of undiscussables.

What did she do? Sylvia and her leadership team have taken several steps to “create a space for there to be conversations about issues previously seen as undiscussable.”

Instead of expecting people to find the right words and the right time to address an elephant in the room, we ... start with trust between us and then help each other raise the topic and push through a discussion

Result? Sylvia continues to learn how to bridge differences where different perspectives amplify tensions.

Ultimately, my goal is to lead a firm of employees doing their own personal work around racial and social justice issues while engaging in culturally responsive work at the organizational level. Culturally responsive external work requires building an organizational environment where culturally responsive inner work is being done.

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PRINCIPLE #5: CONSCIOUS USE OF SELF

The essence of conscious use of self is being aware of and intentional in your interactions with others—mindful of your assumptions and feelings, and how others perceive you. This requires being aware of and taking responsibility for how you show up in your interactions with others and your attempts to impact them while staying in integrity according to your values.

As a Black man, Larry Hill has had challenges in de-escalating tense and dangerous situations. In Chapter 11, he explained in an interview:

I was sitting under a tree at a nearby lake, reading a book on arguments against the death penalty, when I heard a vehicle approaching.

I looked up to see the local constable getting out of her vehicle and approaching. Here we go again, I thought to myself. I've been through this before I saw her hand ready on her weapon as she walked silently in my direction.

What did he do?

I recognized a disparity of power and authority, and my goal was to respectfully show I also had status worthy of respect, that I could engage at a level familiar and comfortable to her. I referred to my status as a research professor with a PhD and an expert in the criminal justice system. I was signaling to her that we could have an intelligent conversation, right the imbalance between us. As we kept talking, I noticed our conversation shifted toward more amicable career talk. Her energy began to shift, and eventually, so did her hand.

Result? Understanding how others perceive or react to you is a prerequisite to conscious use of self. Through his open, non-defensive demeanor, Larry tacitly encouraged the officer to question her assumptions about who he was and the legitimacy of his presence in the area. He was successful in de-escalating the situation.

PRINCIPLE #6: INITIATE CHANGE

Trying to force change is rarely effective. People do not resist change; they resist change being imposed upon them.

Change is a process, not an event. Conscious change agents develop patience, knowing that change will not happen overnight; they learn to savor small wins along the way.

In Chapter 19, Melissa Simon, a nonprofit consultant, asks, how do you get employees who have been with an organization for a very long time to think outside the box?

[Elizabeth was] the new CEO of a nonprofit organization I found the culture of the organization to be risk-averse, one in which mistakes were usually seen as negatives rather than as learning opportunities.

What did she do? In her role as consultant, Melissa helped Elizabeth draft a lengthy email to the leadership explaining changes she was making. The staff were shocked, yet appreciative of Elizabeth's transparency and glad to have inside information about decisions and new processes for the first time.

Next, Elizabeth formed a planning group from a core group of leaders in different sectors of the organization. As Melissa explained:

The intent was to include a diversity of viewpoints and to be sure everyone was aware of how a change in one organizational area affected others. ...

Not everyone was enthusiastic about being part of this planning group. There was some resistance

... [A]fter two-and-a-half hours of active discussion, during which Elizabeth and Sara encouraged the participants to test their assumptions and ask questions designed to understand each other's perspectives, they agreed on a purpose statement.

Creating [the purpose statement] ... seem[ed] like an easy task when they began, but the process was not linear. There were many twists and turns, and it took a second meeting to reach agreement on all the underlying definitions.

Understanding how others perceive or react to you is a prerequisite to conscious use of self.

Result: The change effort within the organization is ongoing, but the early steps were successful.

THIS IS A LOT OF WORK. WHAT'S THE PAYOFF?

Brené Brown, the renowned scholar practitioner, writes in her foreword to *Conscious Change*:

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” [author unknown]

... .

Conscious Change is the playbook for prying open the space between stimulus and response

This is not easy work, but it's essential. The way the authors are able to slow down time and take us behind the scenes of our brains and hearts is teaching at its finest

... .

The space between stimulus and response is not a comfortable space, but one thing I know for certain is that being brave and living into our values is not supposed to be comfortable.

Conscious Change provides a window into that often uncomfortable, yet highly productive space for all of us willing to embark on the journey.

As Myrtle Bell, eminent diversity scholar, explained in her foreword:

We can all practice and strengthen our ability to make conscious decisions—at home, at work, in school board meetings, on crowded planes, and elsewhere. In return, we can expect better outcomes and responses from others as we control what only we can control and what we only can control—our own behaviors and reactions to others.

The principles and skills are available to anyone who wants to learn them.

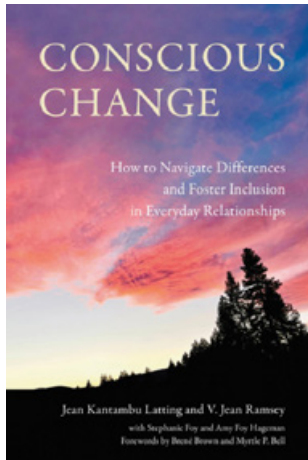
One of the chapter authors called me up recently to tell me that I should promote conscious change as a template for effecting change under conditions of high resistance. He had an important meeting scheduled with a more highly ranked manager. Prior to that meeting, as he planned his strategy, he decided to review the principles of conscious change.

“The approach fell right out of the book’s pages,” he explained. “I went to the meeting and everything I asked for was approved. I knew what to say.”

My co-author V. Jean Ramsey and I hear these stories repeatedly. **We wish the same positive results for you. 🙏**



Info



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V. Jean Ramsey, PhD, was a professor of management at Texas Southern University, an HBCU in Houston, Texas, for nineteen years before retiring in 2009. She has published three previous books: Reframing Change (Praeger), Teaching Diversity (Jossey Bass), and Preparing Professional Women for the Future (Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Michigan).



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