

THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKPLACE BOOK CLUBS TO START IDEA DISCUSSIONS AND CHANGING WORKPLACE CULTURE. J. Filiberto¹, L. M. Prockter², K. E. Vander Kaaden³, C. Shupla⁴, S. P. Schwenzer⁵, and J.-M. Dudley⁶. ¹ARES Division, X13, NASA Johnson Space Center, Houston, TX, 77058, USA Justin.R.Filiberto@NASA.gov, ²Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, Laurel, MD, USA. ³NASA Headquarters, 300 E Street SW, Washington, DC 20546, USA. ⁴Lunar and Planetary Institute, USRA, Houston, TX 77058, USA. ⁵AstrobiologyOU, EEES, STEM, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK. ⁶Jacobs, NASA-Johnson Space Center, Mail Code XI3, Houston, TX 77058, USA.

Introduction: Many of the ideas presented at this workshop will focus on larger initiatives for addressing IDEA; here we present a more focused effort to start discussions about IDEA, including changing workplace culture – a book club. A book club can be implemented at any size institute, department, or university with minimal resources. While this is not meant to replace any larger initiatives that are desperately needed, this is a way to start discussions within an organization to both change culture, build relationships and camaraderie among the participants, and increase management’s awareness of different direct approaches to addressing diversity and inclusion. It also has the advantage of being detached from the lived day-to-day experience at the organization and therefore provides a more neutral ground to think about and become aware of topics that might raise a plethora of uncomfortable feelings in those discussing them.

There are different approaches to implementing a book club depending on the specific goals or needs of an organization – these can include who participates (such as management versus departments or sections versus colleagues outside your organization), the types of books or journal articles chosen, the schedule, and whether it is optional vs. required, among others. Here we discuss some of the approaches we have implemented at our institutions in setting up diversity-focused book clubs, including some lessons learned. We will specifically use a manager’s book club and an employee driven book club (called UnBinding Bias) as two detailed examples. Finally, we end with lessons learned from our experiences.

Manager's book club: We have previously set up a manager’s book club to start discussions of approaches to creating a more inclusive environment. This was a semi-required book club as it was tied to performance goals for some of the participants. The group read and discussed books focusing on leading, supporting, and promoting a diverse workforce. It consisted of managers and directors within the institute; human resource staff were not included. The goal was to make managers more aware of the struggles of different populations, in order to increase the managers' awareness of strategies to create an

inclusive and supportive work environment. The group met approximately every two to three months to discuss either sections of a book or a book in full (depending on the length and topic). Each meeting lasted approximately 1.5–2 hours. The initial three books were chosen by the director with input from the managers to get started and subsequent books were nominated and selected at each group meeting for future meetings.

Initial discussions started with “Lean In” by Sheryl Sandberg, “Dare to Lead” by Brené Brown, and “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable” by Patrick Lencioni and continued with “The Art of Caring Leadership: How Leading with Heart Uplifts Teams and Organizations” by Heather R. Younger; and “How to Be an Inclusive Leader: Your Role in Creating Cultures of Belonging Where Everyone Can Thrive” by Jennifer Brown. An offshoot of the book club also led to the development of the Braving Diversity seminar series (see abstract by Shupla et al. at this meeting).

UnBinding Bias: Unbinding Bias was the title used for an optional book club created by employees for employees. The group read and discussed materials on a range of social justice and inequality issues and biases on the basis of race, gender, and LGBTQ+ orientation. The ultimate goal of this group was to actively broaden the perspectives of the participants both in and out of the workplace. The book club was intended to create a Brave Space for employees to discuss difficult topics and develop actionable items for change in the workplace and, therefore, members of the management team and human resources were not initially involved. The pilot of this discussion group was open to a single section (~25 employees who work closely together). As the group developed and progressed, it was eventually opened to anyone interested (~170 employees). The group was led by the two organizers who co-created the discussion group and met every other week for one hour. Readings were ultimately selected by the co-leads, but an anonymized google form was provided to all members to contribute input on reading selections. Typical discussion groups contained 15 or less employees, which made for manageable and fruitful discussions.

Initial discussions included “So you want to talk about Race?” by Ijeoma Oluo (over an 8-week period), “Hostile Climates are Barriers to Diversifying the Geosciences” by Marín-Spiotta et al, and “White Fragility” by Robin Diangelo (over a 6-week period). Selections ranged from books read over a month or two, to articles read over two weeks and from specific topics like Clancy et al.’s “Double jeopardy in astronomy and planetary science: Women of color face greater risks of gendered and racial harassment” to broader topics like Karen Catlins’ “Better Allies” book. Documentaries such as “Disclosure” on Netflix, as well as podcasts were incorporated into the rotation of materials, to ensure everyone’s learning style was taken into account. When possible, the timeline of the selections was aligned with heritage months and diversity holidays in their observance, to complement simultaneous celebrations and discussions occurring outside of the workplace. A frequently updated resource list was provided to all members that included additional readings, trainings, and seminars. Prior to each meeting, the co-leads would meet and prepare a list of 10–12 questions. Every set of questions included a variation of “Where do we go from here? Based on the material, do you have any action items that you plan to implement moving forward to address the topic?” Discussion questions were distributed to members prior to the meeting to allow for reflection and thoughtful answers.

Some other potentially useful references for starting a book club:

<https://capta.org/diversity-inclusion-book-club-reading-list/>

<https://shegeeksout.com/recommended-books-to-start-a-dei-book-club-at-your-workplace-2021/>

Diversity holiday and heritage months calendar:

<https://seramount.com/articles/category/heritage-months/>

Lessons Learned:

1) Setting expectations is a must! A first expectation is that all participants fully read the works to be discussed, attend the sessions, participate in discussions, and that all discussions would remain private. The content of many articles can hit close to home for members of the discussion. It is important to clearly lay out expectations prior to the discussion and reiterate them during the discussion. In the virtual settings, we delivered the expectations to participants prior to discussions along with the pre-developed questions, spoke them aloud prior to starting discussions, and also included them in the chat of the meeting.

2) Book club leadership is imperative! In any discussion of this nature, there is always room for

defensiveness and emotions to rise and discussions to quickly spiral out of control. Having strong leadership with the skillset to step in quickly and redirect conversation away from anger and fear to allow for continued productive discussion on the topic is essential for maintaining a Brave Space.

3) Preparation is key! The development and distribution of questions to guide the discussion prior to each meeting was extremely useful in facilitating discussions. It also allowed the organizers to discuss the material together, before leading the group. Where appropriate, books should be reviewed prior to selection to ensure they meet expectations.

4) You can lead from any seat! Ensure that everyone has a turn to lead a discussion even if they are out of their comfort zone. It is also important to ensure all voices are heard throughout the discussions and no single person is monopolizing the conversation.

5) HR can be a great addition! They provide a legal perspective other employees may not have; however, their presence will change the dynamic of the discussion, so care should be given to decisions regarding their participation and the goals of the book club.