



Gray Area Thinking®

Presentation Description: All humans habitually categorize and group others who are “different” from “us,” which often lends to black and white thinking, as in “good” versus “bad” or “native” versus “immigrant” and a host of other isolating labels. With this inclusivity presentation, Ellen (Ellie) Krug offers an innovative toolset—Gray Area Thinking®—for interacting with diverse humans in a mindful and compassionate way. Attendees will appreciate and value how it’s necessary to consciously engage in Gray Area Thinking® in their daily activities. Doing so will lead to a more inclusive life!

Gray Area Thinking® is a simple three-part toolset for interacting with diverse humans: (1) awareness of another human’s vulnerability or suffering; (2) risk-taking to alleviate or lesson that vulnerability or suffering; and (3) compassion and kindness both for others and for one’s self.

Why this Presentation Works: Most diversity and inclusion trainings address unconscious bias by educating audience members about neurobiology and the human tendency to deny being biased. However, audience members often aren’t given easy-to-understand “tools” to employ in their day-to-day interactions with diverse humans. Moreover, by using the word “bias” in standard D&I trainings, there’s the risk of the audience member feeling judged.

With Gray Area Thinking®, Ellie utilizes the phrase “grouping and labeling” to avoid any judging connotations; indeed, she readily concedes that humans are wired to “group” and “label” other humans—it’s part of our evolutionary DNA and how we’ve been able to get to where we are today as a species. At the same time, Ellie tells audiences it’s what we do with that grouping and labeling that can set the table for much broader inclusivity. Further, citing examples, Ellie also reminds that humans are hard-wired for empathy; it’s just that most of us don’t know how to employ that empathy due to fear, inattention or habituation.

By utilizing memorable training tools (the “Identity Game,” a dramatic video of a bus driver who saves a woman from taking her life, “The Four Commonalities,” Ellie’s voice-appearance incongruity, and demonstrations of practical steps for inclusivity and allyship, etc.—see below for all of this), this presentation “sticks” particularly well with audience members. Gray Area Thinking® also provides an easily understood/remembered toolset that can be utilized by audience members as soon as they walk out of the training room.

Finally, there has one recurring reaction to Gray Area Thinking® in all sectors across North America: renewed *hope* for humans and greater *faith* in one’s ability to make a positive difference. For proof, see this December 2018 article that Ellie penned relative to how Gray Area Thinking® impacted an audience member at a legal professionals conference: (<https://www.lavendermagazine.com/featured-home-page/skirting-the-issues-hope-2-2/>) This fits with Ellie’s philosophy that we need to “inspire” rather than “order” human inclusivity.

Learning Objectives:

1. The value of human inclusivity based on an understanding that we must consciously work to not allow our internal categorizing or labelling of people to marginalize humans who are “Other.” Instead, we must consciously work to view everyone as “human” with a need for dignity and a desire to be “seen.”

2. Developing self-awareness that we group and label ourselves (and judge ourselves—often harshly), while reminding that everyone shares this commonality, as well as other key commonalities (which Ellie describes as “The Four Commonalities”).
3. Understanding that fear of the unknown (including a fear of interacting with persons who are “different”) is core to the Human Condition and strategies for addressing that fear (e.g. risk-taking and compassion).
4. Increased appreciation for the challenges that all humans face when interacting with various systems (law enforcement, social services, educational, health, legal, etc.) where one’s uniqueness isn’t easily recognized.
5. Understanding that we’re each struggling to survive the Human Condition and being reminded that no one can judge another’s struggle simply by how “they” appear or present.

Mechanics: Candidly, the presentation begins merely with Ellie saying “Hello.” Audience members immediately understand that her voice (masculine) doesn’t match her appearance (feminine). This learning moment demonstrates how humans are “wired” to categorize others and transitions to discussing the bumpiness that results when we encounter humans who can’t be easily categorized or who are “different” from “us.” Additionally, this introduces the concept that humans can adapt to “Other” via familiarity—simply getting to know another person. (By the end of the training, Ellie will return to the issue of her voice; if audience members have adapted to the incongruity between her appearance and voice, she reminds, “That’s the power of human familiarity at work in real time!”)

Specifically, Gray Area Thinking® consists of four separate modules:

Module 1: How humans are hard-wired to group and label other humans and how we are a tribal society, which tends to create “insiders” and “outsiders” making it easier to exclude/not include people who are “different” or “Other.” The training then pivots to the “Two Saving Graces” that overcome grouping and labeling/tribalism: how humans are hard-wired for empathy and how we share certain key commonalities (“The Four Commonalities”) which make it easier to find/create familiarity with “different” or “Other” people.

Module 2: The “Identity Game” where audience members are invited to learn how we group and label ourselves. This voluntary exercise involves using 19 signs/labels that are affixed to the training room walls with blue painter’s tape (“Gender” “Age” “Race” “Socioeconomic Status” “GLBTQ Status” “Not Good Enough/Failure” “Alone” etc.). Ellie has everyone stand and then reads various prompts (“The identity that my parents stressed for me as I was growing up was...” “The part of my identity that garners me the most privilege is...” “The part of my identity that I struggle with the most on a day to day basis is...” etc.). She then instructs, “Go stand by a sign that’s responsive to the prompt for you.” As the game progresses, we will see audience members move from sign to sign in a powerful demonstration of human commonalities—reminding that we’re all struggling to survive the Human Condition regardless of skin color, LGBTQ status, socioeconomic standing or the hundred other things we use to make people “Other.” It will also remind that you can’t tell one’s struggles simply by looking at “them.”

Module 3: The toolset of Gray Area Thinking® (GAT) which can be utilized by anyone to better interact with/accept any human who is “different” from “us.” This toolset consists of (1) awareness of human vulnerability and suffering; (2) risk-taking to lessen or alleviate that vulnerability/suffering; and (3) acting with compassion and kindness. To demonstrate the “platinum level” of GAT, Ellie shows a video of a bus driver who saves a woman who threatened suicide by jumping from a bridge. Ellie then uses examples of “bronze level” GAT

that anyone in the audience can employ to be inclusive toward an outsider or someone who's "different" or "Other."

Module 4: Discussion and demonstration of the three levels of human inclusivity (Tolerance, Acceptance and "Party Host") and how workplace mentoring and sponsorship are critical to creating and preserving a welcoming and inclusive workplace. Ellie uses real-life examples to inject humor while also making the point that true inclusivity and allyship require action and getting out of one's routines and comfort zones.

Handout: All Gray Area Thinking® attendees are presented with a handout. (Unless otherwise arranged, the Sponsor will bear the cost of copying/distributing the handout.) Ellie does not utilize a power point.

Technical Needs: This presentation requires AV equipment for the bus driver video (Ellie can supply the actual video via email or by connecting to her laptop) and space for Ellie to "roam" as she speaks. (Ellie doesn't utilize a podium during any of her presentations.) If we engage in the "Identity Game," we need flat walls on which to hang signs using blue painter's tape. (The tape affixes to most surfaces; we have done the exercise in hallways if the meeting room is too small or if the walls are not susceptible to hanging signs.) Optimally, audience seating is with tabletops but the training can occur with any seating configuration.

Duration: 90 minutes at a minimum to do all four modules; optimally 120 minutes to get the full effect of the "Identity Game." Up to 180+ minutes depending on the Sponsor's goals. If only 60 minutes exists, the training can be done with the first, third and fourth modules. Also, this training can easily be expanded into a half-day or full-day workshop by incorporating more detailed training on inclusivity, allyship, and courageous conversations.

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