

# ‘What’s Your Story?’

## Building Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion



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### Abstract

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (EDI) are critical issues for leaders, communities, and organisations. Throughout history, telling stories has been a method for people to make sense of their environment, organise experiences and ideas, and communicate with their community to create shared understanding. Heartlines, a South African centre for values promotion, developed ‘What’s Your Story?’ (WYS) – a simple, yet effective initiative to build greater understanding, cohesion, trust, and reconciliation through the sharing of stories. An

external evaluation of the programme used a mix of qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods to assess WYS implementation in church communities and workplaces. The study showed strong evidence that being exposed to WYS results in positive changes at the level of the individual, within churches, workplaces or other organisations, and in the wider community. The findings demonstrated that WYS enhanced empathic skills and suggests that this is a useful approach to enhancing appreciation of diversity and building inclusivity.

## Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (EDI) are critical issues for leaders, communities, and organisations. While diversity and inclusion are often treated as synonymous, they are distinct issues that contribute to the climate of equity within an organisation or community. Diversity is defined as having members from broad ranges of demographic profiles within an organisation or community: people of different ages, races, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, and nationality (Ely and Thomas, 2001). Inclusion refers to whether those who are part of an organisation or community feel that their identities, voices, and ideas are accepted (Mor Barak et al., 2016).

There is a myriad of reasons why organisations and institutions seek to build an appreciation of diversity and increased levels of inclusion. The National Development Plan (2030), 'Our Future – Make it Work', emphasises the importance of living the 'rainbow' through appreciating our diversity and by growing inclusivity (National Planning Commission, no date). This is reinforced in reports that highlight the need for diversity to be viewed as an investment opportunity that aligns economic performance with social progress (Deloitte, 2020).

Seeking greater diversity is an important first step towards change. However, the challenge to the system is to create a space where diverse groups feel supported, respected, welcomed, and willing to contribute (Moore et al., 2020). EDI researchers indicate that the literature does not go far enough to provide theory on *how* progress towards more equitable organisations and communities can be achieved. Throughout history, telling stories has been a method for people to make sense of their environment, organise experiences and ideas, and communicate with their community to create shared understanding (Schank and Abelson, 1995). Stories are an important part of social change because they have the power to shape the way people think and feel about their worlds and how they interact within them. In contexts where there are diverse demographic profiles, the sharing of stories has the potential to create bridging connections and foster bonding between people who are different from one another by facilitating across group information flow and support (Putnam, 2000: 22). In organisational development processes, sharing

stories or experiences can build trust, cultivate norms, transfer tacit knowledge, facilitate unlearning, and generate emotional connections (Prasetyo, 2018).

Heartlines, a South African centre for values promotion, developed 'What's Your Story?' (WYS) as an initiative to build greater understanding, cohesion, trust, and reconciliation through the sharing of stories. The approach is based on the construct that personal storytelling provides a non-threatening foundation from which to have authentic conversations to build better understanding. Participants are required to share stories with each other in an intentional manner, asking others to share their stories and actively listening when stories are shared.

### How Is WYS Implemented?

Heartlines developed a range of user-friendly resources (available online) for using the WYS methodology in different contexts, such as workplaces, churches, and schools. In some instances, Heartlines facilitates workshops with selected organisations and/or communities that have identified an issue pertaining to diversity or inclusion that they wish to address. These workshops engage participants in the WYS methodology and create opportunities for intentional story-sharing and other activities that promote social cohesion. Heartlines also trains community and organisational leaders on the WYS methodology so that they are able to cascade this in their own organisations and communities. The training sessions are experiential and include the opportunity to practise the story-sharing approach. In some cases, these sessions include a viewing of the Heartlines film *Beyond the River*, which was inspired by true events, and is used to demonstrate issues of difference and inclusion as the backdrop for group discussions.

### Does WYS Work?

Singizi Consulting Africa conducted an external evaluation to assess WYS implementation in churches and workplaces. Their mixed method approach to data collection included a retrospective baseline survey that gathered data on perceptions of the programme, activities conducted since exposure to the programme, and perceptions of change as a result

of the programme; qualitative in-depth interviews; and eight qualitative case studies.

A key indicator of success for a programme of this nature is whether or not those exposed to it adopt the methodology, be it in their own lives or as champions who begin to cascade it to others. The data showed that there were very high levels of take-up (up to 84% amongst a large group of church leaders). The findings showed that uptake improved when, in addition to an increased focus on ensuring that participants understood the purpose of intentional story-sharing, there was opportunity to engage in an experiential story-sharing interaction at the point of exposure. The findings demonstrate that the approach is accessible, cost-effective, and easy to adopt – enabling participants to continue to use WYS.

The importance of these findings was reinforced by additional data that showed that once individuals have adopted the WYS methodology, the vast majority repeat it more than once. In the final evaluation, 41% of church respondents reported that they had repeated WYS two to five times, while 38% had repeated it six to 10 times, and 18% 11–15 times. All WYS workplace respondents who adopted the approach indicated that they had repeated WYS more than once, with 41% reporting they had repeated the process more than 15 times. Individuals reported that their motivations for adopting WYS included breaking down barriers, addressing racial schisms, addressing religious differences, and understanding the broader community. In the final evaluation, 82% of respondents reported that they believed that WYS was a powerful tool that could effectively be used to change society.

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The evaluation provided strong evidence of positive changes after being exposed to WYS at the level of the individual, within churches, workplaces or other organisations, and beyond these organisations into the wider community. Respondents uniformly reported positive personal changes against values that are identified as central to empathy. These values include curiosity, the ability to be non-judgmental, appreciation of diversity, ability to take perspective, understanding, feelings of connection with others, trust, communication, and collaboration.

Respondents interviewed for the case studies discussed how the storytelling process had increased their levels of empathy and supported greater levels of understanding, which helped to resolve negative emotions and even improve relationships at work. Church members observed that WYS was an ‘eye-opener’ in changing their perceptions about other people. One respondent commented:

‘when I look in the mirror, I only see myself, but WYS makes you think about others. I feel more curious and have more empathy as it makes you realise [...] to put yourself in others’ shoes. WYS helps one to get some perspective and forces one to focus on the needs of others and to look beyond your own problems.’

Respondents also spoke about positive changes within their congregations and workplaces as a result of WYS. In the WYS case studies in churches, respondents reported the deepening of relationships and suggested that it had assisted them to build an appreciation of diversity and, consequently, contributed to increased attendance at church, as members felt more included. One respondent observed:

‘the WYS experience has produced obvious changes in the [church] group. They are no longer just a group; they have become a team. People communicate openly with each other, share their thoughts, opinions and ideas with members of their team; as well as taking into consideration what others have to say.’

Similarly, workplace respondents reported greater levels of cooperation and connectedness and indicated that this is underpinned by greater levels of communication and trust, which are considered central to strengthening team work, building

new forms of relationships in the workplace, and supporting a culture of trust.

In terms of the wider community, data from the church case studies indicated that both church leaders and church members believe that WYS contributed towards churches having a more outward focus and caring about others. This included churches building relationships with other churches in the community, which sometimes involved bringing churches with parishioners who are primarily from different race groups closer together. There are other examples of churches cooperating more within their immediate surrounds.

### How Does It Work?

The WYS approach intends to build empathy in participants. Empathy means being able to take another's perspective and feel an emotional bond. There is an important cognitive component in having the capacity to understand others' emotions (Brown et al., 2019). Empathy plays a critical interpersonal and societal role, enabling the sharing of experiences, needs, and desires between individuals and providing an emotional bridge that promotes inclusive behaviour (Riess, 2017).

Empathy can be learned through observation and the reinforcement of experiences. However, of equal importance, is the need to create the right conditions for empathy to be exercised. The value of empathy needs to be understood, a psychologically safe environment created, and people taught to observe and listen without judgement. The WYS seeks to enhance cognitive empathy through action-orientated and collaborative strategies.

Research indicates that multiple types of exclusionary dynamics, such as self-segregation, communication apprehension, stereotyping and stigmatising, need to be overcome to facilitate inclusion within organisations (Bernstein et al., 2020). WYS provides a structure for meeting and communicating and an approach for overcoming stereotyping and stigmatising, thus addressing some of the barriers to inclusion. Further, adaptive learning and attitude change depend on individuals' first experiencing stereotype inconsistency—an inconsistency between a stereotype of a culture and the actual experiencing

of particular members of that culture—then working through such inconsistencies by being in conditions that make them willing and able to interact repeatedly with diverse others (Bernstein et al., 2020). Through personal story-sharing, WYS provides the opportunity for people to experience stereotype inconsistency and initiate attitude change, creating a space for unlearning. Unlearning is defined as:

'not about forgetting. It is about the ability to choose an alternative mental model or paradigm. When we learn, we add new skills or knowledge to what we already know. When we unlearn, we step outside the mental model in order to choose a different one.' (Boncheck, 2016)

WYS training provides the foundations for new skills development in intentional story-sharing and active listening, building empathic skills and challenging existing stereotypes through bridging relationships with others.

The evaluation found that one of the key factors that makes WYS successful in building empathy is the simplicity and accessibility of the approach. People of all ages, races, genders, and educational backgrounds can easily use the tool, even without the additional guides and resources that Heartlines has made available. Heartlines refers to the approach as 'Ask. Listen. Tell' – and it appears that this is exactly how participants are using it and, in general, with positive effect. If an organisation adopts the WYS approach with increased opportunity for story-sharing practice during training, they also set up some of the preconditions for facilitating inclusion. These include pursuing an important, shared organizational purpose; mixing diverse members frequently over protracted periods of time and being collaborative; and valuing an individual member's uniqueness and belonging (Bernstein et al., 2020). Implementation of WYS could provide a shared organisational purpose, with multiple trainings and practice sessions creating the opportunity for the frequent mixing of diverse members over protracted time, and the valuing of members' uniqueness through active listening and mutual story-sharing.

However, implementation of WYS is not a magic solution for inclusivity. Research indicates that negative contact, where participants feel threatened

and did not choose to have contact, provides unfavourable conditions for inclusivity (Pettigrew et al., 2011). This was evidenced in the evaluation, which reinforced the importance of ensuring buy-in to enable participants to feel comfortable with using the WYS approach, and highlighted the importance of creating opportunities for participants to have the chance to experience a story-sharing process, in a safe environment, when introduced to WYS.

Findings from the WYS evaluation suggest that WYS is successful in promoting change and that it is a simple and accessible approach. It is an easy-to-use tool that can be implemented without additional guides and resources. The more people share, the easier it gets for others to take the process forward and integrate it into daily conversations and situations in ways that promote increased levels of connectedness and contribute to organisational inclusivity. The WYS approach could be used to address inclusivity on an individual level, to provide impactful voices for equitable change, and to create a basis for understanding diversity practices (Gagnon, Augustin, and Cukier, 2021).

Heartlines encourages people to share their stories. Do you have a story that everyone needs to hear? Are you, or do you know of someone who courageously lives our values such as forgiveness, compassion, acceptance, understanding, or reconciliation? Do you know ordinary people working together in extraordinary ways?

Share your story at [heartlines.org.za/wys/home](https://heartlines.org.za/wys/home)

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