

A photograph of a wooden bridge at night, illuminated with warm, glowing lights that create a starburst effect. The bridge spans a calm river, and its reflection is clearly visible in the water. The background shows dark trees and a clear night sky. The overall mood is serene and modern.

# Dow Pioneers a New Inclusion Approach through VR and Human-Powered Simulations

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# A Global Materials Science Company

Dow Inc. is a materials science company committed to delivering innovative and sustainable materials, products, and solutions for customers in packaging, infrastructure, and consumer care. The company's portfolio includes plastics, industrial intermediates, coatings, and silicones. The company is headquartered in Midland, Michigan, and operates in 106 manufacturing sites in 31 countries, employing approximately 35,700 people globally.

## A Need for Virtual, Scalable, and Globally Inclusive Leader Development

In 2019, Dow began an organizational transformation that included implementing a new core HR system with Workday and restructuring its HR function. Then, in 2020, greater external challenges occurred with the onset of the pandemic, major weather events, and a surge in conversations around social justice. The company quickly adjusted and focused on leadership behaviors that would nurture a sense of belonging amid the challenges and enhance the company's ongoing focus on inclusion.

### The Short-Lived Impact of Traditional Bias Training

Predating the massive organizational changes in 2019 and 2020, Dow had launched broad-based training on unconscious bias to all people leaders across the organization, also making it available to employee resource group (ERG) leaders and other work groups. The HR team received feedback that although participants found the learnings insightful, these learnings faded away with time. As a result, a renewed focus on inclusive leadership behaviors that went a step further was now necessary.

### Summary

#### Challenge

- Refreshing a focus on inclusion and belonging amid challenges created by societal events and social justice issues.
- Creating a stronger impact than traditional unconscious bias training, which was short-lived and did not drive behavioral change.

#### Solution

- Elevated traditional in-person training to implement a radically different approach to drive behavioral change.
- Launched a new leadership development program to integrate experiential learning, real-time feedback, and hands-on practice in a psychologically safe environment.
- The new program allowed learners to practice staged scenarios with an avatar and receive real-time insights in a virtual reality environment.

#### Results

- The ability to practice learnings from the program in a simulated virtual environment helps cement the learnings and enable long-term behavioral change.
- Approximately 82% of leaders said the program elevated their commitment to inclusion and made them more inclusive leaders.
- Approximately 90% of leaders feel more engaged, motivated, and better equipped to support their teams.

### Interactive Learning Opportunities to Drive Behavioral Change

With inclusive leadership at the forefront, the company needed to elevate its traditional in-person training and implement a radically different approach to drive behavioral change. "Inclusion and belonging are more important than ever before. We needed to envision the next wave of our traditional unconscious bias training and provide interactive learning opportunities that are real and impactful. We needed something that is scalable, virtual, and ultimately, global," said Jennifer Frame, HR Director, Talent Development at Dow.

# Dow's Inclusive Leadership Learning Program

In 2021, HR and the Office of Inclusion at Dow partnered to develop a new program that integrated experiential learning, real-time feedback, and hands-on practice in a psychologically safe environment. The goal was not only to deliver point-in-time training but also to meet the broader objective of creating the responsibility, ability, and accountability among leaders for role modeling inclusive behaviors. The program uses a blended learning approach to build awareness and supplements it with hands-on practice for leaders through virtual reality simulations to cement the learnings (see Figure 1).

## Elements of the Inclusive Leadership Program

Dow's inclusive leadership program combines self-directed learning, leader-led learning, and experiential learning through the following program elements:

- **Pework:** The HR Strategy and Design Team curated a collection of web-based microlearnings on key inclusion topics such as microaggressions and a self-assessment for leaders. The team also curated other relevant off-the-shelf learning resources through LinkedIn Learning, provided to participant leaders as prework for the program. These quick learnings set the stage for deeper learning on inclusion-related topics.
- **Webinar:** Participant leaders are invited to join a 1.5-hour interactive webinar that dives deeper into these topics. Using a "leaders teaching leaders" approach, the webinar is hosted by leaders from across the organization who demonstrate strong inclusive behaviors and can facilitate impactful discussions on the targeted topics.
- **Simulation:** Finally, leaders are invited to do individual simulations to practice learnings around the topics covered in the first two elements of the program. The simulations stage scenarios such as difficult performance conversations or a team meeting to discuss inclusive behaviors, where learners gain hands-on practice and participate in a guided reflection meant to enable real-time insights in a virtual reality environment.

Figure 1: Dow's Inclusive Leadership Program Elements



Source: Dow Inc., 2022

## The Business Case for Virtual Simulation Practice

Dow provides immersive simulated practice to all leaders through simulations powered by Mursion—a virtual reality platform that stages interactions between learners and avatars to help practice and develop complex interpersonal skills (see Figure 2). One example of a scenario staged through the platform involves a participant leader presenting an employee to a broader team of leaders for a promotion. When microaggressions arise during the discussion, the leader must address them in real time.

“Virtual reality simulations give learners an opportunity and a safe space to practice what they have learned. They help build the confidence to address difficult topics without feeling a sense of judgment or fear of failing, which was an

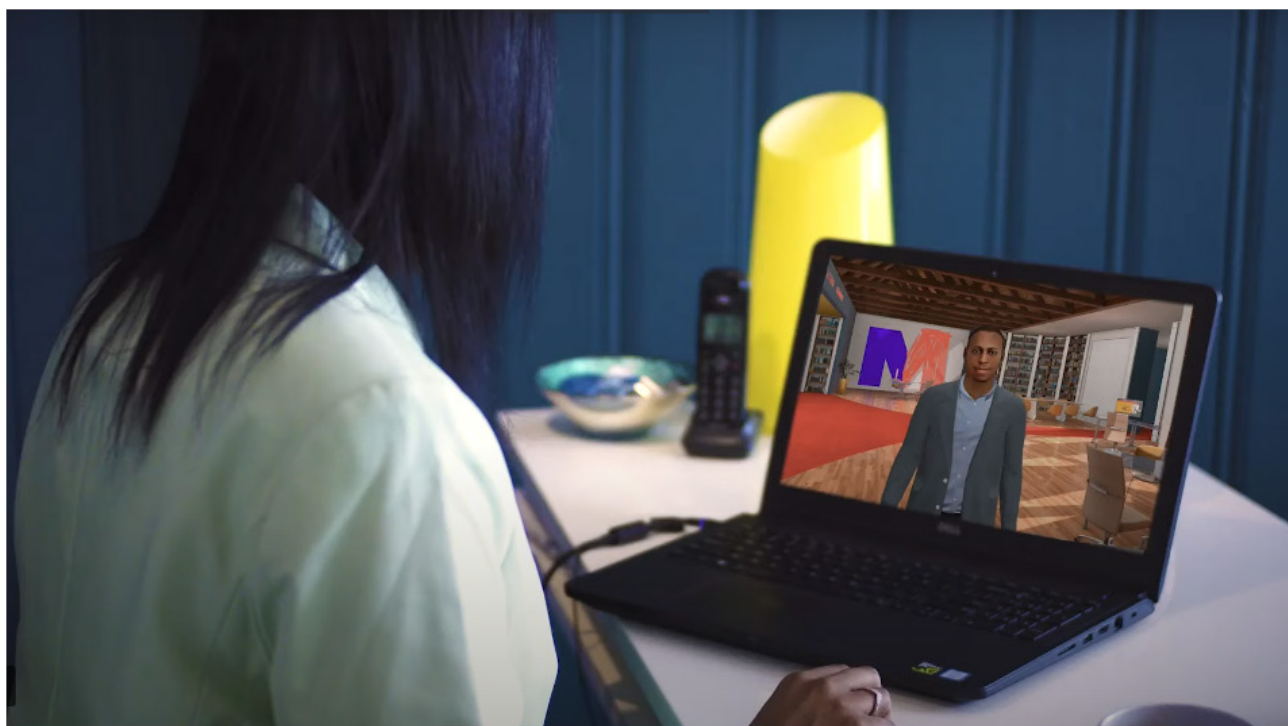
important success metric for us,” said Tina Halphen, Global Performance and Employee Development Leader at Dow.

“We used Mursion to advance difficult inclusion topics, such as microaggressions and biases impacting performance decisions. These are not easy conversations, and often cause leaders to inadvertently shy away from talking about them.”

## Modules of the Inclusive Leadership Program

The program is rolled out in two modules, with the first module focusing on developing inclusive behaviors and the second module focusing on driving equity as an outcome of inclusive leadership (see Figure 3 on the following page). Each module uses the same elements discussed previously, which include microlearnings, webinars, and simulations.

Figure 2: Real-Time Feedback from Avatars in Simulated Scenarios



Source: Mursion, 2022

**Module 1: Within Myself.** The first module reflects on the positive progress the company has made with its inclusion, diversity, and equity objectives while retaining a strong focus on the journey that still lies ahead. It aims to help leaders introspect and assess day-to-day behaviors and cultivate a strong sense of self-awareness. It teaches core inclusive skills such as listening and understanding diverse perspectives without alienating anyone in the conversation, giving space for varying points of view, and understanding the call to action.

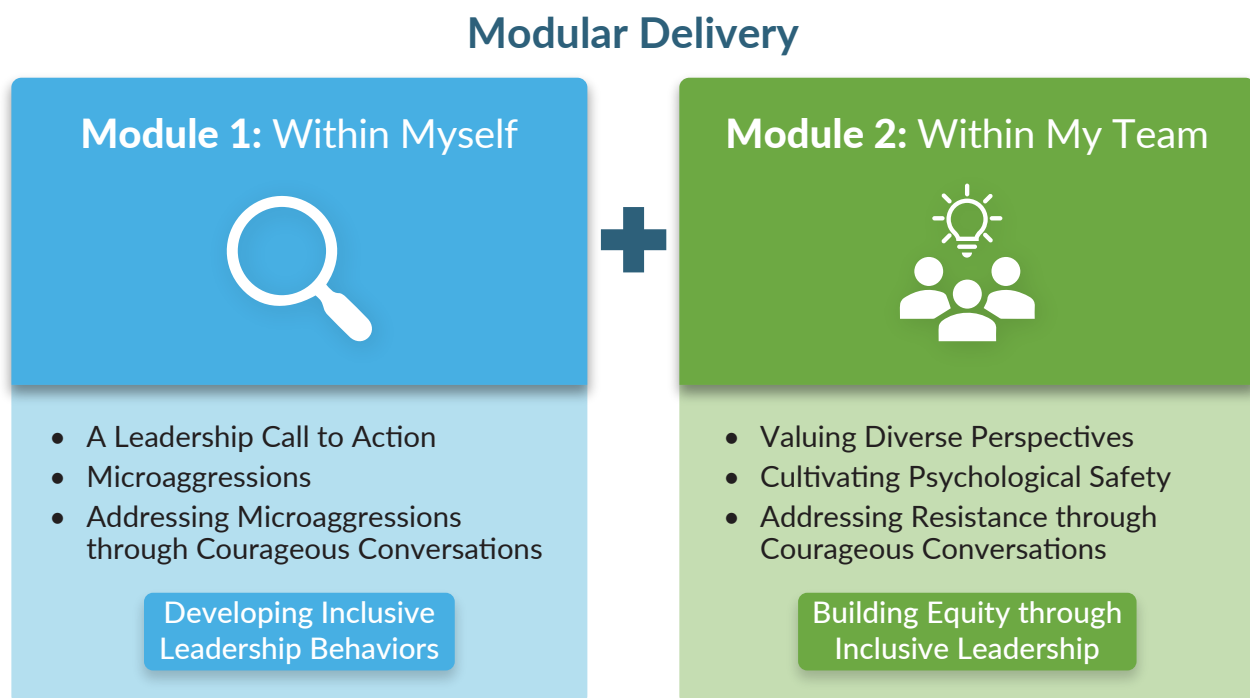
**Module 2: Within My Team.** The second module is geared toward applying these newly acquired insights and inclusive skills to create an equitable, psychologically safe work environment for the company's team members. This module focuses further on the concept of having courageous conversations to uncover and address concerns and ensure alignment of team members to Dow's core values and cultural attributes.

## Creating a Whole Ecosystem Around Inclusion

Treading fast on its inclusion journey, Dow realizes that training is only one of the components of driving inclusion. In parallel to its inclusive leader development efforts, the company is also reviewing and assessing its talent processes to root out bias and ensure fairness and equity. The company is instilling several new practices and policies across all talent touchpoints. Some of these practices include requiring diverse candidate slates and diverse interview panels; introducing technologies to mitigate bias in talent acquisition; holding leaders accountable for inclusion and diversity objectives; and measuring progress on inclusion, diversity, and equity outcomes.

Dow is creating a whole ecosystem around inclusion to attract, retain, and engage employees through an inclusive

Figure 3: Dow's Inclusive Leadership Program Modules



Source: Dow Inc., 2022

culture. The company is advancing these goals using a robust approach, centered around institutionalizing an inclusive culture; focusing on diversity; and ensuring equity in its practices, policies, and processes.

## Results and Next Steps

The tremendous positive feedback from participant leaders validates the real impact Dow had hoped the program would achieve. In fact, the statistics are exponentially higher than the typical success rate of inclusion trainings.

Feedback from surveyed leaders:

~90%

Say they feel more engaged, motivated, and better equipped to support teams

~82%

Say the program elevated their commitment to inclusion and made them more inclusive leaders

In 2022, the company is scaling the program globally across the leadership community. In addition, a series of web-based learning materials is being created to serve as a follow up to the program—both to reinforce the key elements of this program with past participants and to infuse these concepts into the broader organization. Finally, the Dow team is working toward designing additional relevant and timely simulated scenarios, such as flexibility and return-to-work discussions, that will help leaders build a greater sense of belonging and an overall positive employee experience.

“*We can deliver experiences, create practices, and put new standards in place around inclusion, diversity, and equity, but if we don't bring leaders along on the journey, we won't be able to make real progress.*”

Alveda J. Williams, PhD  
Director of Inclusion at Dow

**Schedule a  
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## About the Authors



### Josh Bersin

Josh founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. He expanded the company's coverage to encompass HR, talent management, talent acquisition, and leadership and became a recognized expert in the talent market. Josh sold the company to Deloitte in 2012 and was a partner in Bersin by Deloitte up until 2018.

In 2019, Josh founded the Josh Bersin Academy, a professional development academy that has become the "home for HR." In 2020, he put together a team of analysts and advisors who are now working with him to support and guide HR organizations from around the world under the umbrella of The Josh Bersin Company. He is frequently featured in publications such as *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *HR Executive*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *CLO Magazine*. He is a popular blogger and has more than 800,000 followers on LinkedIn.



### Nehal Nangia

Nehal is the senior manager for research at The Josh Bersin Company. In this role, Nehal drives empirical research on key workforce-related topics and the development of actionable insights and powerful stories for today's talent executives. Nehal has almost 15 years of professional experience in human capital, with a focus on performance management; employment value proposition; workforce transformation; and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Prior to joining The Josh Bersin Company, Nehal was a global advisor for clients at Deloitte and published several studies on pertinent topics such as DEI, performance management, and bias. Nehal lives and works in India and has a master's degree in psychology.

## The Josh Bersin Company Membership

The Josh Bersin Company provides a wide range of research and advisory services to help HR leaders and professionals tackle the ever-evolving challenges and needs of today's workforce. We cover all topics in HR, talent, and L&D. The Josh Bersin Academy—built on our research and powered by Nomadic Learning—helps HR practitioners grow key foundational skills. Our corporate membership program provides HR teams and senior leaders with the skills, strategies, and insights to build cutting-edge HR and people strategies through a combination of research, assessments, professional development, exclusive events, and community. In 2022, The Josh Bersin Company introduced the Global Workforce Intelligence (GWI) Project to guide market-leading businesses and their leaders through the challenges of industry convergence while remaining future-focused.

For more details, contact us at [info@bersinpartners.com](mailto:info@bersinpartners.com).