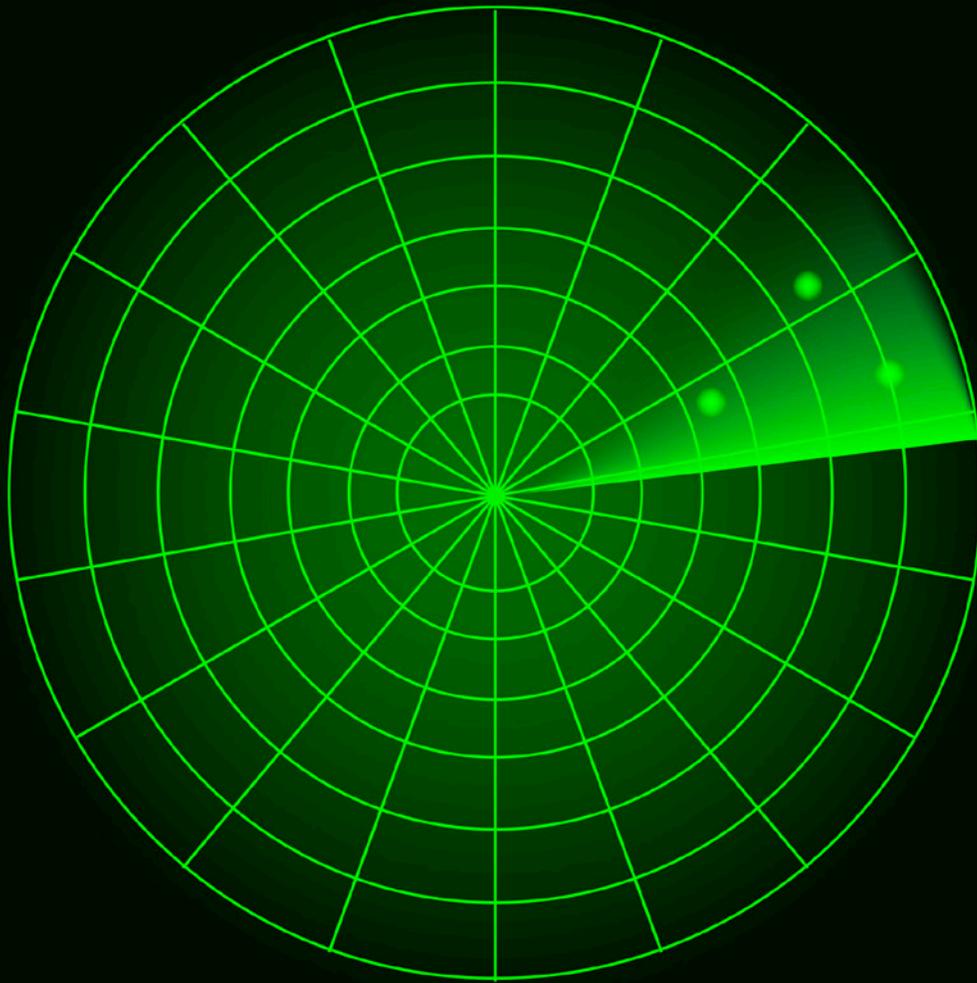


# Social Pinging—the Next Stage in Achieving Meaningful Inclusion



## Silence is Golden, unless You're PINGING!

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**E**go, combined with good intentions, causes people to relax the reins in their quest to achieve Diversity Champion status. Good intentions are often substituted for truly effective inclusive behavior. They may think, “If my intentions are good, then my actions must reflect my well-meaning vision, right?” Unfortunately, this is frequently not the case.

To be clear, good intentions are just that—good. But using good intentions as the measure of one’s

impact is not terribly different from a child taught by a caring, well-intentioned teacher whose knowledge transfer skills are less than stellar. In managing unconscious bias, one’s good intentions may generate a feeling of comfort in others, but fail to achieve the elusive equity D&I must achieve to have a meaningful impact.

### Parroting the Platitudes

When speaking with leaders at companies doing business across the

globe, I often ask what they personally do that makes them diversity champions. Although the faces, titles, and companies change, the responses are often indistinguishable. A dozen or so responses generally describe what they do in terms of their out-bound actions.

They elaborate on specific behaviors that believe make them effective. They can map out well-honed techniques that demonstrate evidence of the champion behaviors learned. It’s all quite nice, but it’s

primarily focused on *outbound* aspects of communication.

The platitudes we learn to deliver are *perfect*—and frankly, we’ve heard them all before:

- Let’s see, they told me to greet everyone pleasantly. Done!
- Ask people’s opinions in meetings. Done!
- Occasionally, go to lunch with those not in my inner circle. Done!
- Divvy up projects to ensure an equitable balance of responsibilities. Done!

And the list of outbound actions goes on. Once completed, we say to ourselves, “I did what they told me to do, so put me on that Diversity Champions list!”

Diversity training has taught us

What are the origins of ping-pong? This concept is metaphorically rooted in the sonar used in submarines. A sonar ping is sent out and the operator listens for the echo-return response. The single sonic ping at 20 kHz radiates out, bounces off surrounding objects and returns to identify where the submarine is positioned in relation to surrounding objects.

These behemoths, otherwise operating virtually blind underwater, know exactly where they are based on the pinged response received. Notably, the outbound ping is easily audible. Yet, the bounce-back echo-location response is inaudible to the human ear. It is, however, the essential component for identifying where they stand. So too do social pings tell us where we stand.

was not simply heard but respected and appreciated. These messages of affirmation (pings) said, “I not only hear you but want to affirm there was value in your message and it moved me,” thus closing the loop.

At sporting events, fans call out in the thousands their cheers and support of a team, not unlike the congregation’s Call & Response, say, “I see you, I appreciate you, and I’m moved by your message,” or, in this case, “your actions.”

Stage performers receive rounds of applause, bravos, and standing ovations in appreciation of a job well done. Even when the outbound performance falls flat, the audience offers a response acknowledging the effort.

One of the most extreme examples of Call & Response, or ping-pong, is clearly present in the dynamics of the State of the Union address delivered

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how to be inclusive, sending all the prescribed messages. Yet, focusing only on the outbound messages does little for the response side of the communications loop, causing an unintentional short circuit in the process.

Breaking that communication loop by omitting the response side all but guarantees a failure to achieve equity. A more effective approach is to complete the loop, stepping beyond platitudes and prescribed outbound statements, and moving into a new arena that masters *social ping-pong*.

### **Social Ping-pong Closes the Communication Loop**

In pursuit of inclusion, social ping-pong is the conduit that completes the loop and enables D&I to rise to a new level of impact.

### **It’s Said that Silence is Golden—but not When it Comes to Social Ping-pong**

In fact, forms of social ping-pong are pervasive throughout history. The African American church has a well-established Call & Response exchange. This emerged from a critical psychological need for respect. The roots of the practice grew out of the need for this culture to be recognized and heard.

In the post-slavery era, the opinions of black leaders were not acknowledged or respected by the white power structure. Since they did not receive messages of respect from the white community, these congregations felt motivated to let their spiritual leaders know that their guidance and religious direction

by any U.S. President. Newscasters’ recaps of these events always tally and report the number of times the President was interrupted by applause, as well as the number of standing ovations received. Remarkably, this adulation is not necessarily based on the content of the message, but rather, whether the respondents share the same political affiliation.

There can be virtually no conversation or expression of an idea, feeling, observation, or any outbound message for which a response ping isn’t valued. The responsibility falls on *both* parties—the sender *and* the receiver—to complete the communication loop.

In the workplace, as with every human communication, our outbound messages require a similar ping response to close the loop

and identify where we stand. Like the sonar ping, the social ping response is virtually undetectable without the right cipher to read our relative positions.

Remarkably, we instinctively send pings in response to outbound messages only when it is clear that the sender will receive it. Even the mediocre performer gets a ping of applause to acknowledge a somewhat obligatory expression of appreciation. However, in a movie theater, a powerful, on-screen performance would rarely receive that ping of applause and certainly would not receive a standing ovation.

Our response pings tend to be instinctive. We don't consciously turn the corners of our mouths upward to smile or furrow our brows when confused. We tend not to focus on nodding in agreement or sighing when bored. But we send these and an endless variety of other pings

- “Ok, I understand, that’s a good point.”
- “It would have been more effective if I had done it that way.”
- “Thanks for letting me know. Any other thoughts?”

The first social pings convey a feeling of being offended and criticized, as well as the desire to put the episode aside and move forward. They lack an expression of value and true absorption of the feedback. The second social pings convey a feeling of acknowledgment and appreciation of the feedback far more effectively. This doesn't mean that one has to agree with the feedback. Social ping-ing may also express a challenge to or disagreement with what was said, but is delivered in a way that suggests a willingness to engage constructively.

The world of social media is fueled by the need for pings. People post messages, memes, or photos, and

valuable, when delivered with substance, reason, logic, and respect.

On social media platforms, awaiting the ping response is a conscious effort. In the workplace, there are no *Likes*—just empty fields for comments. Failure to fill in those comment fields leaves the speaker suspended in a void of uncertainty—feeling out of the communication loop and not knowing exactly why.

As social ping-ing is so inextricably aligned with unconscious bias and micro-inequities, we reached out to Mary Rowe, adjunct professor at MIT and the originator of the concept of micro-inequities. She recognized social ping-ing as an effective fine-tuning of unconscious bias management. Dr. Rowe noted an interesting alignment with child psychology. Children who have been ignored over time may act out in destructive or violent ways in an unconscious attempt to receive atten-

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every day.

The powerful relationship this has to Diversity & Inclusion involves how different pings are sent and returned, based on our beliefs about someone's value. It's where the new fork in the D&I road now splits and true diversity champions emerge, leaving the platitudes behind.

During a typical exchange in which one colleague may be offering constructive feedback to another, it wouldn't be unusual for the recipient to respond with a cursory or defensive response such as one of the following:

- “Fine, Ok.”
- “I got it.”
- “Maybe, I suppose so.”

Or, with a higher-level ping response, such as one of these:

derive a great sense of satisfaction from the *Likes* (pings) their posts generate. Conversely, there is great disappointment when a post goes un-pinged. These responses are at the very core of what makes social media so appealing to so many. In fact, simple *Likes* are no longer enough. Now, seven reaction options are available to express an even more finely tuned range of ping responses, stretching from love to fury.

These emoticons are the social pings that speak volumes, conveying respect or disapproval in their silence. Social media platforms would likely fall by the wayside without these mechanisms that express acknowledgment of one's outbound messages.

Notably, the responses do not need to *be* positive—they just need to be. Although sometimes deflating, even the negative messages can prove

tion. Sadly, it may not matter that the attention received is a scolding or an expression of anger. It is still better than receiving no attention at all.

In the workplace, invisibility is masked by platitudes of obligatory acknowledgment. Effective ping-ing is a process that must be monitored and infused into all our workplace communications. It should not occur by happenstance—it should be done by design.

We need more than an obligatory, “I heard you.” We need to also hear what you think about what you hear. A simple *Like*, or its equivalent, just doesn't cut it when you're striving to be a diversity champion and make others feel engaged and respected. Such obligatory responses can be just a stone's throw away from invisibility.

Let's break it down. Social ping-ing falls into four general categories of

response: Distain, Passivity, Neutrality, and Engagement.

## Distain

These social pings devalue another's contribution. They tend to be brief and convey distain or unworthiness, and are conveyed by expressions or remarks, such as these:

- Smirk
- Sigh
- Absence of eye contact
- Vacant looks
- Head shaking
- Slow eye blink
- "I don't get it"

## Passivity

These social pings, perhaps the most damaging, represent the lack of any response at all. This lack of response actually falls below zero-level, as it often does more damage than sending messages of outright disdain. When one is met with a passive response, there is nothing one can say.

## Neutrality

These are social pings that convey indifference. Neutrality conveys a sense of obligation and cursory acknowledgment. This category is where much of the self-deception of diversity championship resides. It's easy to feel as though acknowledgment is adequate. The respondent feels good about his or her polite response and the contributor has nothing substantive to complain about when a contribution is met with one of the following:

- "Fine"
- "OK"
- "I see"
- "Thank you"
- "If you say so"
- "All right"

## Engagement

These are the Social Pings that inspire engagement and demonstrate respect. Engagement pings do not necessarily agree with or support the sender's position. They tend to express appreciation coupled with a detailed acknowledgment of a message received.

A key characteristic for pings of engagement is the incorporation of inquiry. When the respondent poses a question, it is eminently clear that they are fully engaged in the exchange with responses and questions that clarify understanding, such as these:

- "How can we make that work?"
- "What alternatives have you considered?"
- "I think you're on to something"
- "Can you explain how that wouldn't conflict with our master plan?"

These pings of engagement incorporate the concepts of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and mirroring. NLP teaches us that language and behaviors are structures that can be modeled or copied into a reproducible form that draws in the other party. Mirroring is the process of parroting back the last few words of what a person says to demonstrate that the listener has been engaged and understands one's message.

Although somewhat effective, these two processes are weak substitutes for a more comprehensive approach to social pinging. Rather than isolating or repeating a word, or in NLP-style, modeling the other party's speaking and gesturing, social pinging requires that the respondent carefully filter the central theme of the received message and then offer a comprehensive response, series of analytical details, or expressions of agreement or disagreement.

An easy method to meter your ping is to ask yourself if this is how you would respond to a comment expressed by your teacher, doctor,

religious leader, or anyone with whom you would be more conscious of respectfully communicating. Ask yourself, "Did my ping do that?" This filtering process makes the social ping the most sustainable and active tool we can use to alter behavior for everyone in the workplace.

It is vital that we bring more focus to the response, or in-bound, side of message management. In other words, merely asking someone his or her opinion, although good, is not good enough. The diversity champion actively processes the response the recipient offers.

## Non-Confrontational Disagreement

More often than not, people lean toward avoiding conflict, unless they have strong opinions about an issue. It is more uncomfortable to challenge, debate, or offend someone, than it is to simply nod and move on. Unfortunately, along with that unspoken compliance comes a mild sense of resentment. There is a sense of being muzzled and not expressing what one truly thinks. This is manifested as some version of, "Ok, that's another way of thinking about it," and then politely moving on.

The pinging master never allows this to happen. Whether, as the sender of a message or the observer of the behaviors of others, he or she has the ability to recognize the elephant in the room and bring that uncomfortable issue into focus for discussion. Great leadership is never achieved through indifference, compliance, or conflict avoidance. It is always better to seek and uncover an uncomfortable truth than to keep feathers unruffled.

Social pinging recognizes and gets to the authenticity of how respect is demonstrated. Not by cursory platitudes, but by full engagement in closing the communication loop. Most important, it does not occur by happenstance, but instead, is done by conscious design. **PDJ**