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A graphic of several teal line-art hands reaching upwards, framing the main title text.

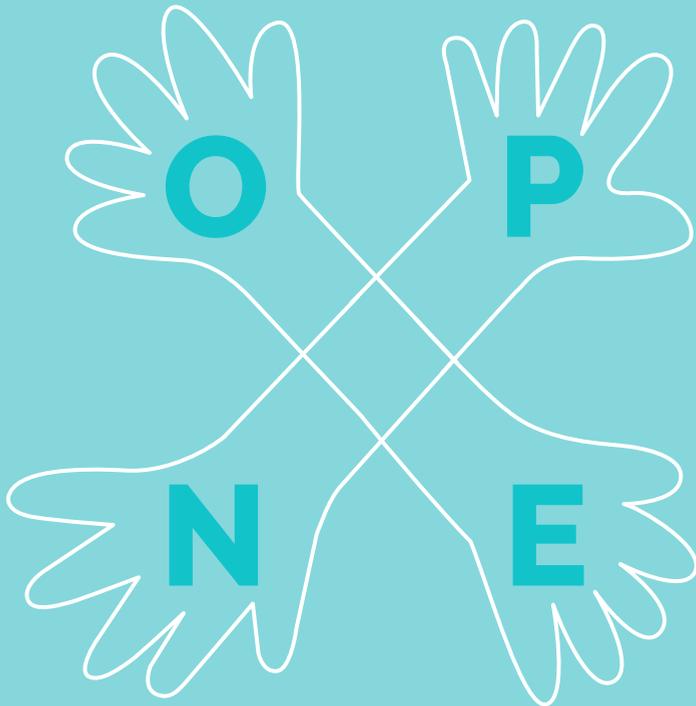
OPEN UP YOUR ORGANI- SATION

**Fully Embrace
Diversity with Profiles
Inclusiveness**

**Lannoo
Campus**

OPENNESS

PATIENCE



NATURAL

EMPATHY

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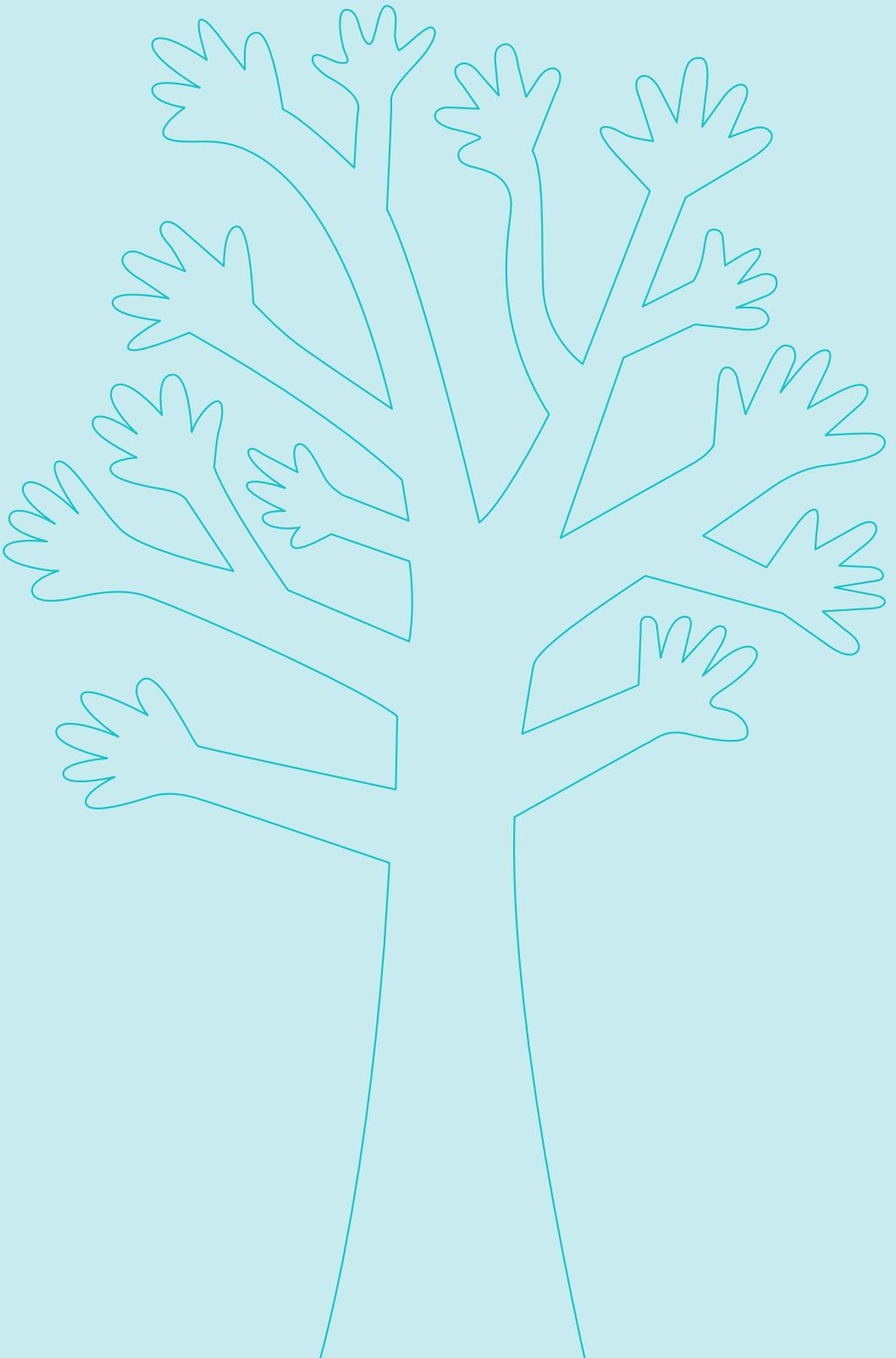
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**OPEN
UP
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SATION**



Introduction



No does not mean no

I grew up in a family where debates are normal. When I wanted to do something new, my father generally answered “No”. It’s not that he did not listen or pay attention to my desires. On the contrary, my dad was present and attentive, much more than men of his generation. It’s just that if in doubt, refusing is safer than accepting. My father is a man of prudence; he rarely pronounces words to be regretted. My mother is the opposite; she is a woman of action. If she is wrong, that’s not a problem – she will never admit it. She has a way of changing the subject with such audacity that few can challenge. She insisted that we ask her permission before asking my father. She said: “I need to prepare him. You know your father. I will deal with him.” That was not the only reason: she wanted to feel that she had more influence, and she knew that information is power. Whenever I turned to my mum to ask for something new, she stared at me with her suspicious look and started questioning me. In another life, she could have been a cop: you are guilty until proven otherwise. If you asked to hang out with a friend, she suspected the presence of another fellow, who was a less suitable date.

Generally, she was right. Her sixth sense is lie detection. In my case, it’s omission detection. As a matter of principle, I have always hated lying, but I’m also terrible at it. So my strategy was to reveal as few things as possible: technically, if you don’t give a piece of information, you are not lying – you “forgot”. For this tactic to work, you cannot be asked the question, and you could rarely avoid my mother’s cross-examination. Only if I was able to convince her, could I go to my father. Of course, he could not know that I had spoken to her before. He was the head of the family, he was the one making the decision; at least, it had to appear this way. My mother had to look as if she had heard the story for the first time. As she was also not a good liar (proof that it does not take one to know one), she often occupied

herself during the conversation. My father took his time to give the two-letter answer. He listened, waited a few seconds while he looked me in the eyes and I stared at the floor (watch out for the cultural trap: in Arab culture, you don't look into the eyes of a person in authority), then, my hope for an easy three-letter answer was ravaged by... "No". The next words I uttered were of consequence: they determined whether a discussion would follow or not. If my nerves were not contained, for instance if my tone rose, the "no" would become definitive. Surprisingly, in most cases, the "no" flipped into a "we will see", increasing the probability of a "yes". It is like when it's raining and suddenly there is a ray of light. "Catch the sun before it's gone," sang Doves¹.

My parents taught me that **openness** to other viewpoints is natural, and these three basic lessons have been ingrained in me:

1. Getting something requires that it is deserved
2. Never take no for an answer.
3. Words are powerful.

With us, against them

When I was sent to Hungary to develop a cutting-edge business control system, the assignment seemed daunting: framing and implementing a project with the ambition to use the same tool across all European subsidiaries. The roll-out in Brussels had already been a difficult experience. Before leaving, I received a full briefing on the technical and business aspects. Although useful, it was not the most helpful. Three legal entities coexisted: each one had its own culture. The number of expatriates from France and Belgium was proportionally too high. Stereotypes were well entrenched in labour relations: French culture was perceived as too imposing; the Belgian way, more pragmatic except when community conflicts were imported. This separated one visible group into three: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. The project was due in six months: the deadline was tight. The first four weeks were a complete waste of time. The straightforward nature of my management style hit three walls until I realised that I had completely ignored the human factor. I needed a period to get to know them, show an interest

in their culture, gain their trust, and move out of the professional framework. Caring about your colleagues is not only a positive act but also an investment.

Change management requires **patience**. You can start slowly and then accelerate to catch up on the plan only if there is trust and agreement on a common goal. I did not take the time to step back and ask valuable questions. Why should they accept a management tool enabling someone from afar to control their finances, and therefore make decisions while not understanding their business as well as they do? Of course they did not want it. They were doing everything in their power to block any advancements and stop me if I was interfering.

I made many mistakes. The first one was to assume that because top management makes decisions, people follow orders. I had to convince them that the project would benefit them with or without the head office. The second one was to consider them as one group. Three companies were merging, and none of them wanted the others. How could they embrace a common tool if they did not mean to be together? I needed to show them the advantages of merging. The third one was to stick to deadlines set by headquarters: milestones should be discussed and agreed on with the local teams. The fourth one was to try to be too quick. I had to be much more patient, to work for long-term results rather than checking some boxes. At the end of the project, I was asked to stay in Budapest. “You are with us and know how to talk to them,” the locals said. “You know how to work with them while being one of us,” the headquarters complimented me. In their minds, there was an “us” versus “them”. There always is...

Hearing is not feeling

Openness and patience are needed in order to understand people and put yourself in their shoes. It was when I wrote and performed in a theatre play that I realised how necessary empathy was.

During my studies at Solvay Business School, I had long hours of discussions with some students who couldn't understand some of my personal choices. I am talking about people of good faith who respect you for whatever decision you

make for yourself. They were just not familiar with the diversity of origins. I specifically mention their sincere intentions because, for me, it makes all the difference. It is not about convincing, but about understanding, which makes the exchange more valuable for everyone involved. For a dialogue to be true, you need to feel entitled to be yourself. Whenever you feel you are being judged, you will think twice before talking, you will hide some facts, you will speak cautiously, or even stop the conversation prematurely. Those comrades came to my theatre play², where this specific subject was addressed. The scene lasted four and a half minutes. In those 275 seconds, spectators laughed and cried, sometimes simultaneously. This was enough to make my friends understand me, better than hours of debates. One came to me, disoriented, and said:

- Ihsane, I understand now. I'm sorry. I did not realise.
- Thank you, it means a lot. But why are you sorry?
- Because we hurt you. Society hurts you. And I'm sorry on behalf of all of us. I did not know.
- But I told you...
- Yes, I heard you, but I did not understand it. Now I do.

Later, another acquaintance revealed that he had shed a tear. This is **empathy**. With a theatre play, the public listens, sees, and mostly feels your emotions. My comic skills aren't great; nevertheless, I was able to perform that scene very well because I felt every word and every action of Mounia, my heroine. She was pure fiction, but she was me, my sister-in-law, my friend, my student, and, thanks to empathy, every person in that room (now, don't ask me why I named her Mounia, I have no clue...).

Self-pressure to not be

Once I entered professional life, I felt that I needed to work harder and couldn't fail. I perceived a lot of pressure to deliver perfect, excellent work. When completing my first evaluation, I asked what caused the missing 0.5: 4.5 on 5 implies something was not well done, what was it? My managers explained that it was impossible to obtain 5, that 4.5 was the maximum they could give, and that I should be happy. I was not. This lacking 0.5 frightened me. I was under such stress that

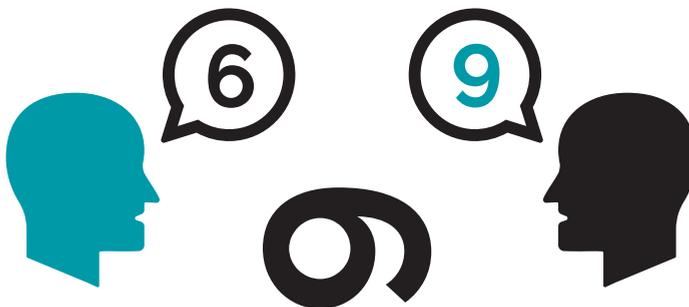
when team building was organised during Ramadan, I did not speak up. I knew that having a full day of sports activities in the summer was going to be hard. I was in good physical condition; at that time, I was jogging and going to the gym twice or three times a week (unfortunately, that is not the case any more...). For the entire day, I participated more than my colleagues. I had to prove that fasting had no impact on my work performance, even in cohesion activities. I had to show that having a Muslim on the team was not a handicap. I remember walking on a wire several metres above sea level, climbing a wall without hooks, running like crazy... My colleague, Stephane, and I were the two best performers. During the afternoon, I felt dizzy. I went to the restroom and locked myself in there for fifteen minutes. You might think it's normal: intense cardio sport without water or sugar for hours. When I went out, Stephane asked me if all was well: "How are you feeling? If you need to rest, no worries, I can replace you for an exercise." "No thank you," I answered. He insisted, "Nobody will blame you; you are fast..." Without letting him finish his sentence, I called my colleagues, who were on a break: "Come on, you lazy guys! We need to continue!" The day closed with a barbecue. My director, Gwen, noticed that I was not eating, and asked me why. I said that I was fasting. She was sorry. She blamed herself for not knowing; she blamed me for not speaking up. "The team building could have been scheduled next week; it would not have been an issue." Then she asked her assistant to consider Ramadan on the list of events for next year. She prepared my dish and asked the trainer to keep it warm for me. Gwen was embarrassed. She knew me. She understood the efforts I made to be "normal". What if, instead of being normal, I was **natural**?

After that experience, I realised that it is in the common interest for everyone to be themselves. In my denial of difference, I pushed myself in a physically dangerous way, I embarrassed Gwen (who later became my mentor) and I did not reach the goal of the day, which was to have fun in an integrated team. Today, I admit without shame that it feels so empowering to be just... natural!

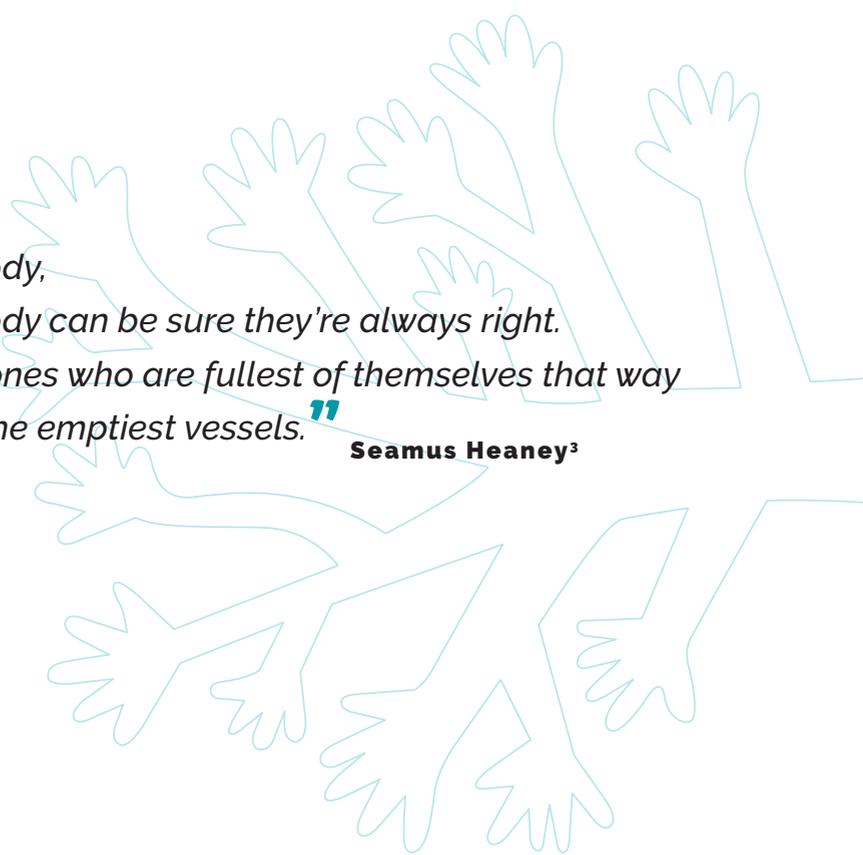
Difference is the new normal

One morning I was styling the hair of my daughter, and I asked her whether she wanted a high or low chignon. She answered "normal". I understood what she

meant. Then I asked myself: “What is normal?” How can a four-year-old child have a conception of what is *normal* or what is not? A simple rule of thumb is to consider what is seen most often as *normal*. We are used to seeing a board of directors of white men above fifty years old. It’s *normal* but not necessarily good, or bad. It will be determined by their actions, which are derived from their thoughts, which arise from their experiences, which are shaped by their personalities and their biases. It is possible to have a room full of white men who are extremely diverse, as well as a room with men and women of different skin tones sharing a similar opinion. The nomination of Joe Biden is a suitable example. One can say: “Once again, an old white man in the White House”, or “The first Ivy League-degree-free president in 36 years”.



Of course, any selection criteria should be examined: was there any direct or indirect discrimination? Do the candidates represent the diversity within society in all its aspects, visible and not? More broadly: are education, employment, and housing access in the society equal, as this will generally determine the chance of success? Observing a person’s physical characteristics alone is useful but not enough. Beyond appearances, each of us has a personality and a bias formed by our socio-economic and cultural background, our education, our community, our religious and non-religious beliefs, our generation, our ambitions ... Our sensory organs and filters operate without us even realising it. One should accept that there is no absolute reality. Reality is subjective. Truth is subjective. Most of us are familiar with the famous image of one person showing a nine and the other showing a six. Both argue that the other is wrong. Essentially, they are both right, but wrong in disputing the other’s point of view. How can they be right if the reality is different? Because it’s *their* reality, not *the* reality.



*“ Nobody,
Nobody can be sure they’re always right.
The ones who are fullest of themselves that way
Are the emptiest vessels.”*

Seamus Heaney³

Dear reader,

Through this introduction, you see where I am heading. This book presents the OPEN way, a novel perspective based on the profile inclusiveness. The concept of diversity, equity, inclusion, and inclusiveness goes beyond appearances. It encompasses everything that makes us unique among the eight billion people living on this planet. The “OPEN way” I modelled is not drastically different, yet disruptive.

Before going further, I would like to make a pact with you. If you are holding this book in your hand, it means that you are ready to embark on a journey with me. Let's make the most of it. Please be:

- **Open to my viewpoint:** My thoughts are based on my personal and professional experiences, my personality, and my vision. They can evolve, they can remain. It is perfectly fine to agree and disagree with some of my statements, to like or dislike some principles and, certainly, I encourage you to question everything you read. Disagreeing does not make us enemies; agreeing does not make us friends.

“ *Look at situations from all angles, and you will become more open.* ”
Dalai Lama

- **Patient with my explanations:** Openness needs patience. I might tell you a lot of stories, but all of it has a purpose. Do not close the book until you have read the last word. It may take time for an idea to fully sink in. Reading takes time. Yet, what do we have left if we don't devote the necessary time to learning?

“ *Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.* ”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

- **Empathic with the anecdotes:** Put yourself in another person's shoes, whether it is mine or one of my interviewees. Let your emotions guide you through the stories, and feel free to absorb another person's experiences. Your mind can only be opened to other possibilities when you release control.

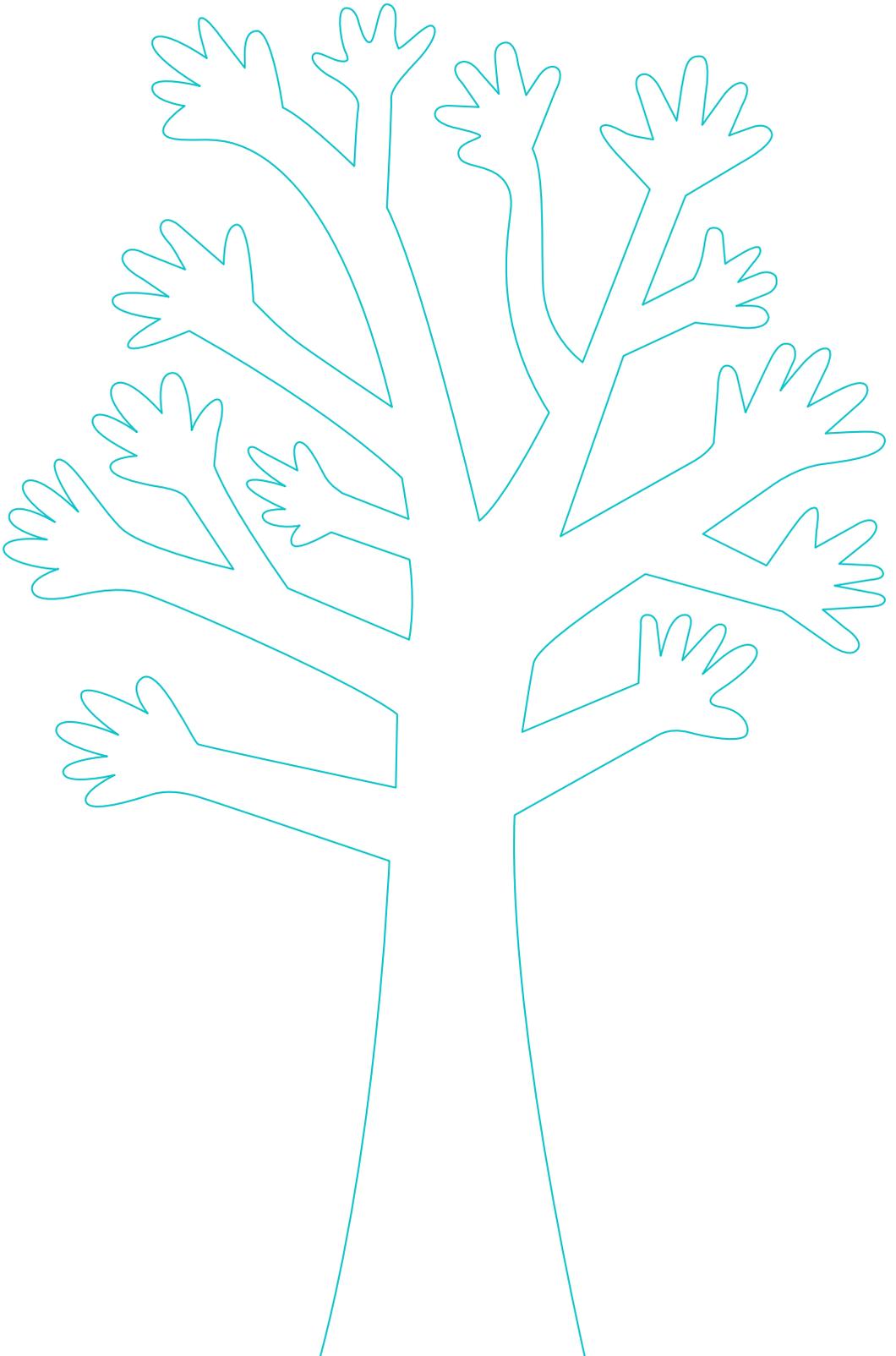
“ *I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it.* ”

Maya Angelou

- **(Be) Natural:** Find the space in which you are yourself. The more aware you are of yourself, the more likely you are to listen to other perspectives. To trust others, you need to trust yourself. To listen to others, you need to listen to yourself. You are not me or any of the people I have interviewed. You may recognise yourself or someone you know in the stories, you may not. It's okay, as long as you're open, patient, empathic, and natural, you will not miss the point.

“ *To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.* ”

Ralph Waldo Emerson



Presentations

Diversity and inclusion are topics that people often discuss with me. Until last year, my answer was the same:

“I am not here to talk about diversity. I’m tired of discussing it. Why are you putting me in that box? My expertise is in change management and knowledge transmission. Of course, I talk about diversity, of course, it is important for any project, specifically for change. But not in the way it is discussed in the mainstream today. Diversity in society is not the same as diversity in a company. So, treating it the same way does not make sense.”

That’s how the adventure of this book started. I was discussing my career with Thierry Geerts, CEO of Google Belgium. He thought that my views on diversity should be shared, and even more so when I explained why I don’t want to talk about them. Francis Blake, chairman of Derbigum, was very supportive of this idea: “It makes complete sense! You are *the* person who should write about diversity!”

I was intrigued by their advice, yet I was already busy with another writing project, so I parked the suggestion somewhere below my left brain. After closing it, the idea popped up, as if it was waiting for the button “free space” in my mind. Does my view deserve a book? Is it unique? Who am I to write a management book? I shared my questions with Thibaut Georgin, who presented me to Alexandre Pycke, who introduced me to Isabel Verstraete, writer of the CARE principles. After a wonderful evening sharing our stories, I decided that the idea was worth investigating. Isabel was so enthusiastic that she even introduced me to my current editor, LannooCampus.

I was still not convinced. All my life, I’ve done things because *I have to*. I am in a phase where I only answer to *I want to*. My mind created the model OPEN during a non-productive afternoon, completely unannounced. I wanted to verify the mar-

ket value of the concept before going forward. Therefore, I shared this ambitious plan with other leaders, such as Ilham Kadri, Pierre Gurdjian, Audrey Hanard, Hanan Challouki, Mikaël Wornoo and Ibrahim Ouassari.

“Wonderful idea.”

“Of course, you should.”

“You are the one to talk about it! You have so much experience to share!”

“Can I write a preface?”

Then, I asked them, “Would you like to contribute?”

Unanimously, the answer was yes. They all trusted me with their stories, and for that I am extremely grateful.

The twelve individuals in this book were not selected at random. Initially, I considered their character, their experiences, and the environment in which they evolved. After completing my list, I performed a basic calculation based on gender, age range, native language, and type of employment (private, public, entrepreneur, employee, social). Prior to any apparent distinction, the first criterion was the diversity of profiles. Following this, I checked key criteria and, as the mix was objectively acceptable, I took no further action. Certainly, there are many more people who would have been interesting to include. Even so, twelve is a considerable number and it is important to remain focused. To venture a bit beyond the corporate world, I spoke to Isabelle Ferreras and Satish Kumar, and also read the work of international experts such as Michael J. Sandel, Vernā Myers, Ryan Holiday, Kay Formanek and Daniel Kahneman.

I realised I still suffered from impostor syndrome: thinking that I’m not good enough. Don’t be mistaken: I know my worth, I have self-esteem. It’s just that my unconscious bias is stronger than my self-confidence. It’s a continuous battle, in which I admit no defeat. I told my mental parasite to go away and established that my voice was worth being heard – well, read.

It is my pleasure to present to you the twelve leaders who have partnered their voices with mine.



“ The OPEN model is great. My first reaction was: it actually makes sense. ”

Audrey Hanard



Audrey Hanard shares with authenticity her international management experience across the public, private, and civil society spaces.

Audrey Hanard is chair of the board of directors of bpost (Belgian postal services), board member of Proximus and partner at Dalberg Global Advisors. At Dalberg, she works with her clients – who are most often international organisations, philanthropic foundations and impact investors, and governments – to improve education, employment, and health outcomes globally through designing impactful strategies in support of inclusive development. Prior to joining Dalberg, Hanard worked at the venture philanthropy firm Telos Impact, and as an engagement manager at McKinsey & Company. She is the former chair of the Friday Group, a youth think tank inspiring the Belgian public debate with innovative ideas generated through the diversity of its members.



“I'm a big fan of your concept, because everything that you're saying is about accepting the others.”

Francis Blake



Francis Blake is an example of a highly effective and humble leader who had a personal change that influenced his view on inclusion.

Married, with four children, **Francis Blake** served as the CEO and then chairman of the board of the Belgian family company Derbigum (€95 million in revenue – 350 employees). Derbigum is the leader in circular economy for the roofing industry. Derbigum is now part of the Kingspan Group. Blake is passionate about the pursuit of “Higher Purpose” as well as inspired and inspiring leadership, and new forms of organisations using the full power of collective intelligence. He is also a passionate advocate for people with disabilities, and works with his wife to change perceptions about their care and integration into the city and in life.