

Introduction

Everyone wants to belong to something or to someone. Everyone wants to have a place where people know who you are and want you there because of, not in spite of, who you are. This book is about learning to manage self and others when they don't belong to the groups they are in.

Fish Out of Water are people who have not learned to discern and respond appropriately to the cultural expectations—the cultural codes—of their environment and consequently are targeted and marginalized by members of the dominant group. This book is for three groups of people who seek to learn or teach the cultural expectations of an organization:

- People with a life pattern of not fitting in
- People who manage people who don't fit in
- Adults who work with kids who are targeted and bullied because they are different

We, Kikanza and Lewis, are Fish Out of Water who are accepted by and relatively comfortable in most ponds that are not of our choosing. We have learned the cultural codes of our environments and have learned to code switch effectively. We have spent our professional lives (approximately forty years each) helping people to decipher organizational cultures and to enhance their personal power by learning

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to code switch. As organizational development consultants, much of our work is spent advocating for children who are Fish Out of Water and coaching adults who are Fish Out of Water or who manage them.

Most books in the diversity and inclusion genre address members of the dominant culture and provide information on how to change dysfunctional, oppressive, inequitable systems or otherwise unhealthy organization cultures. They discuss how important it is for the dominant culture to be responsive to the needs of minority cultures in their organizations and communities. They also address the need for members of the dominant culture to change values and behaviors as they move along the continuum of cultural competence toward cultural proficiency. Titles using these approaches include *A Peacock in the Land of Penguins* (Gallagher Hateley), *Courageous Conversations About Race* (Singleton), *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (Gay), and the many titles in Corwin's *Cultural Proficiency* collection.

This book is different. In this book, we speak to members of non-dominant cultures and provide them with tools for functioning effectively—or even thriving—in environments that are not yet ready or able to embrace them. Some books focus on changing the environment so that it is welcoming and inclusive to all people. This book focuses on helping those who are oppressed by their environments, because even the best of organizations will not be a comfortable fit for everyone. There will always be people who are marginalized or excluded because of who they are or the groups they belong to.

There are also people who perform the skills needed to do their job but do not fit well into the culture of their organization. This book will help them too. People who are systematically marginalized must learn strategies for fitting into where they are and protecting themselves from those who would target them. The goal, of course, is for everyone to change—to move from code switching by the non-dominant group, to code sharing by all members in the group, so that a mutually shared set of cultural expectations are cocreated.

There are many leaders who supervise people who don't quite fit into the organizational culture or who work with young people who don't fit, because they have not learned to code switch in an environment that is ill prepared to welcome them. This book provides strategies for helping marginalized people and those who work with them. This book also provides support for leaders who are working to transform the organization so it is a healthier place for all. This book will help people to

- Discern whether they are Fish Out of Water
- Recognize Fish Out of Water in their organizations
- Develop techniques for thriving in organizational cultures that don't quite fit
- Design strategies for creating and sustaining a healthy, inclusive organizational culture

THE POWER OF STORY

Storytelling is a powerful learning strategy. Through storytelling, people relate to, reflect upon, and learn from their lives and those who share their stories with them. Storytelling provides opportunities to bond and create community; it is also a powerful tool for creating empathy, facilitating healing, and inspiring action. The American idiom "like a Fish Out of Water" creates a colorful image of one who is an outsider or does not fit in. In all organizations or ponds or sophisticated indoor aquaria, there are those who are in the center of power and have great influence on the environment, and there are those who are marginalized and have very little influence. Throughout this book, we use the phrase *Fish Out of Water* as a shorthand description of the groups of people who do not fit into their environments. Those environments may be home, family, school, or a working environment. We tell stories about the many Fish Out of Water we have met and invite you to reflect on the Fish Out of Water you know or upon your own stories as someone who does not fit in.

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Many people are Fish Out of Water because of their race, ethnicity, gender orientation, or because of their cognitive style, social style, or temperament. Others are Fish Out of Water because they have not learned, as a member of a non-dominant group, the codes or rules of the dominant culture. We lean heavily on the metaphor of finding a pond that fits or cleaning up the toxic waters so that the pond is safe for everyone, because our clients have found that this is a gentle way to enter into a tough conversation. Fish Out of Water symbolize the many people who are marginalized by or excluded from cultures—communities, systems, social groups—that are not large enough, diverse enough, or inclusive enough to welcome them to and keep them in the group.

Chimamandah Adichie reminds her audience in a 2009 TED talk that there is great danger in a single story. Holding a single story about self or others limits the nature of the relationships one might have. Throughout this book, we share our stories, the stories of our clients, and the stories of the many children who have crossed our paths. The stories are poignant, daunting, encouraging, and inspiring. We hope that you find wisdom in the stories we share and that you add your own as you explore what it means to be a Fish Out of Water.

One prevalent story about Fish Out of Water is that they need to be fixed—so they can be normal. We don't think so. Fish Out of Water need to be seen and heard—recognized for the diversity they add to whatever ponds they are swimming in. Those in the mainstream need to learn how to engage with these unique characters in ways that say, *I see you and I care*. And they need to clean up the ponds that are toxic for diverse schools of fish.

KIKANZA'S STORY

I was a Fish Out of Water in school. I was smart and got good grades. All the teachers liked me because I made them look good. Being a geek didn't make me a Fish Out

of Water; because we were tracked in my high school, all of my classmates were geeks. However, that was not the case in gym. As comfortable as I was in the world of words and numbers, I was uncomfortable in gym class, because I was not a natural in sports. This was unfortunate, because my classmates and my teachers expected me to be.

I would watch the other Black girls fearlessly attack the balls in play. I would wring my hands anxiously as I watched the ball—as I was told to do. I would watch the ball . . . fall . . . roll past me . . . hit me in the stomach. But I never managed to catch it, throw it, or kick it anywhere it was supposed to go. So that meant when it was time to choose teams, I was the one who was chosen last. The team that didn't get me would laugh, and the team that did would groan. I was so bad with balls that for some games, like basketball, not even the coach wanted me to play because I spoiled the game for everyone else. "You be the referee," she would say. "You know all the rules." It is painful to remember being a Fish Out of Water in gym class.

It is easy to tell the stories of being smart and unathletic. It is harder to tell the stories of being excluded because I was a girl or because I was Black or because I wasn't Black enough. Later in life, I learned that I was a Fish Out of Water in more ways than I could have imagined—never quite being what was expected . . .

LEWIS' STORY

The early part of my educational journey was in segregated public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, and I was a Fish Out of Water in my neighborhoods. My older sister attended Catholic school. She did so well that she was the type of student selected to be one of the high school kids who integrated Central High School in 1957. I was smart like my sister, but I couldn't risk acting smart among the neighborhood kids. Everyone on my street was cool; some were gang members (or wanna-bes). They expected me to be a poor

student and to act like I was tough and dumb. To my sister's great displeasure, I acted like I was one of the street toughs, so I wouldn't get beat up by them or alienated from them. I excelled in school and eluded the tough kids, except for my fight with James Bones in sixth grade.

At the end of junior high school, my family moved to California. There, no one, particularly college counselors, expected the Black boy from the southern, segregated schools to do well. The disciplined home environment my sister had created for me and my siblings paid off. I enrolled in school just in time to take the national standard exams, called the Sputnik tests. I did so well, I was sent to special science and summer programs at Yale and Stanford, which totally ruined my reputation as a streetwise thug. However, neither of these personas were really me. I wasn't a geek; I wasn't a thug. I was a Fish Out of Water trying to fit in.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Having been Fish Out of Water most of our lives, we use our stories and those of our clients to illustrate the concepts we present. By telling their stories, people create places where previously invisible truths become visible (Coupland, 2014). As you read about what it means to be a Fish Out of Water, we invite you to think about your life and the stories you might tell about it. It is through the sharing of stories that people connect to one another, and it is through those connections that the foundation is laid for differences being understood, if not accepted, and for more people working to create safer, healthier environments in their communities and workplaces.

Each chapter includes stories about our clients and the work we do with them. There are stories about children and stories about adults, because Fish Out of Water come in all ages and a variety of settings. Some chapters focus on the people who don't fit in and other chapters focus on the people

who manage, teach, or mentor them. At the end of the chapters are questions for reflection and storytelling in groups or personal journals and an informal assessment designed to deepen understanding of the concepts presented in the chapter. In the Resources section of the book are guidelines for a Book Study, and lists of videos, literature, and other materials that can be used for deepening your understanding of *Fish Out of Water* and the code sharing that makes the environmental ponds healthier for everyone.

GOING DEEPER

Reflect

- Tell of a time when you enjoyed someone telling you a story. How old were you?
- When and how have you used storytelling in your personal or professional life?
- Tell of a time when you used the process of storytelling to better understand a colleague or situation in the workplace.

