# THE SIX STAGES FRAMEWORK PROVIDES A TOOL FOR REFLECTION, DIALOGUE AND GROWTH?

This is a revised description of the Stages of the **Six Stages Framework** that applies to **all protected characteristics**—including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and gender identity- it retains the developmental logic and tone of Dr Shungu M'gadzah's original model:

## What is the Six Stages Framework?

The Six Stages Framework (SSF) is a developmental model designed to support individuals and organisations in understanding and navigating their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours in relation to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) across all protected characteristics. These include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and gender identity.
The framework is structured along a spectrum that ranges from –6 to +6. The positive axis (+1 to +6) represents increasing awareness, understanding, and inclusive behaviours, while the negative axis (–1 to –6) reflects increasing resistance, misunderstanding, and exclusionary or harmful attitudes. The stages are cumulative and developmental, meaning that progression (in either direction) builds upon the attitudes and behaviours of the preceding stages.

At the lower end of the positive axis (+1, +2), individuals may have limited awareness of the systemic nature of discrimination and bias but may demonstrate openness to learning. These stages mirror –1 and –2 on the negative axis, where individuals may also have limited awareness but may begin to display defensiveness, denial, or subtle forms of bias. As individuals progress up the positive axis, they become more conscious, inclusive, and actively engaged in addressing inequity. Conversely, movement down the negative axis indicates increasingly entrenched discriminatory views or behaviours, often accompanied by a growing resistance to change.
While the current emphasis of the SSF is on supporting upward movement along the positive axis, the inclusion of the negative axis acknowledges the spectrum of beliefs and experiences people hold. It also highlights the importance of recognising both progression and regression in attitudes towards difference.

The SSF can be used with individuals of any background to explore their current position and potential growth in relation to diversity and inclusion. It is not limited to one group or identity and is relevant for people with both lived experiences of discrimination and those seeking to become allies or more inclusive leaders. For example, someone from a marginalised group may start at an early positive stage and move upwards, gaining confidence and understanding. Others may find

themselves on the negative axis, where internalised bias or trauma may limit their ability to recognise or respond to discrimination.
Those on the higher end of the positive axis (+6) are better equipped to challenge discrimination and advocate for equity, drawing on deep understanding and developed resilience. In contrast, individuals at the lower end of the negative axis (–6) may experience greater disconnection, defensiveness, or even hostility towards difference, and often have limited capacity to manage or engage with diverse experiences in a healthy way.

Ultimately, the framework provides a tool for reflection, dialogue, and growth. It enables individuals, teams, and organisations to locate themselves on a continuum, understand the factors influencing their position, and identify actions that support a move toward greater inclusion and justice for all.

## What are the stages of the Six Stages Framework?

### The Six Stages Framework: Negative Axis (–1 to –6)

The negative axis of the Six Stages Framework represents a regressive continuum of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that demonstrate increasing levels of resistance, hostility, and exclusion towards people who are perceived as different or who hold protected characteristics. As individuals move further down this axis, their views and behaviours become more entrenched, potentially causing harm to others and posing wider societal risks.

**Stage –6: Extremist Leadership**
Individuals at this stage exhibit extreme and hostile views toward one or more protected groups. They actively seek to promote and recruit others into these views, often creating and spreading harmful narratives. Their actions may align with radical ideologies and pose a risk of extremism or violence. They frame social progress as a threat and attempt to incite division and fear.

**Stage –5: Deeply Entrenched Views and Behaviours**
People here openly hold and share discriminatory views. They promote harmful stereotypes and may display verbally aggressive or threatening behaviour. They seek validation from like-minded individuals and try to persuade others to adopt similar exclusionary perspectives. Their language and conduct often marginalise, dehumanise or scapegoat others based on identity differences.

**Stage –4: Blaming and Deflecting**
At this stage, individuals begin to shift blame for their personal or societal challenges onto those who are different. They may use gaslighting, mockery, or manipulation to invalidate others' experiences of discrimination. These individuals are vulnerable to

adopting conspiracy theories or false narratives about inclusion and may feel threatened by changes promoting equity. Their frustration can fuel divisive "us vs. them" mentalities.

**Stage –3: Hostility and Rejection**
People at this level are overtly resistant to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts. They may actively attack those who advocate for fairness or raise concerns about discrimination, often accusing them of being overly sensitive, having a victim mindset, or making things up. They reject concepts like privilege, microaggressions, or unconscious bias, and may display outrage when called to reflect on their behaviours.

**Stage –2: Dismissive and Avoidant**
At this stage, individuals are aware of diversity-related issues but dismiss their importance. They may acknowledge inequity but regard it as exaggerated, outdated, or less urgent than other social concerns. They often deflect attention to more "comfortable" topics (e.g., economic issues) and avoid conversations about specific forms of discrimination. Their discomfort may lead to passive resistance and subtle invalidation of others' experiences.

**Stage –1: Unaware and Inactive**
This stage is characterised by a general lack of awareness or exposure to issues of equity and inclusion. Individuals may not recognise that discrimination exists or may assume that society is already fair and equal. Their language may reflect stereotypes, and they may engage in conversations without realising their comments are insensitive or uninformed. While not overtly hostile, their inaction and silence contribute to maintaining the status quo.

**The Six Stages Framework: Positive Axis (+1 to +6)**
The positive axis represents a developmental journey toward greater awareness, understanding, empathy, and action in support of equity, inclusion, and justice for all. Movement up this axis reflects increasing openness, commitment, and leadership in challenging discrimination and promoting inclusive environments.

**Stage +1: Emerging Awareness**
Individuals at this early positive stage may have limited understanding of EDI issues but show signs of curiosity or openness. They are beginning to recognise that not everyone experiences the world in the same way. While their understanding is minimal, they may start to question long-held assumptions or respond with genuine interest when presented with new perspectives.

**Stage +2: Discomfort and Awakening**

People here are more aware of social inequities but feel uncomfortable engaging with them. They may struggle with guilt, confusion, or fear of "getting it wrong." They may still deny or minimise some issues but are starting to feel unease with this stance. Avoidance is still present, but so is a quiet internal conflict that signals the potential for growth.

**Stage +3: Developing Understanding**
At this stage, individuals actively seek to learn about others' experiences and challenge their own biases. They may begin to understand systems of power and discrimination and how these affect different groups. They ask questions, reflect, and start taking steps to educate themselves—through reading, listening, or discussing. They are more willing to acknowledge their privilege and recognise their role in creating inclusive environments.

**Stage +4: Engaged and Reflective**
These individuals are confident engaging in complex conversations about inclusion. They show genuine interest in addressing systemic inequalities and work to identify their own contributions to exclusion, including unintentional biases. They seek to understand how different identities intersect and may advocate for more inclusive practices in their personal and professional spaces.

**Stage +5: Systems Thinker and Advocate**
Here, individuals demonstrate a deeper understanding of social systems and the root causes of inequality. They take on the role of active allies or change agents, recognising how their power or influence can be used to create more equitable spaces. They speak out against discrimination, even when it's difficult or unpopular, and mentor others in developing inclusive awareness and practices.

**Stage +6: Transformational Leader**
At this highest stage, individuals model inclusive leadership and are deeply committed to social justice across all protected characteristics. They drive systemic change, foster collaboration, and empower others to act. Their focus shifts from individual action to collective transformation, and they understand the interconnectedness of different forms of discrimination. Their leadership is grounded in empathy, humility, courage, and a vision for an inclusive society.

Book a call to discuss or to find out more about the Six Stages Framework Toolkits.
https://calendly.com/shungu/introduction-to-the-six-stages-inclusive-framework
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