NavGati:
igniting minds

Curious Council

The Women in Leadership edition
February 2026

What's a Curious Council?

As the name suggests, this is a group of people curious about a particular topic.

The idea for this came from a comment from an L&D leader who is a regular attendee of our Fraterniteas (our complimentary learning sessions, the TTT of every month – that's the Third Thursday at Three; write back if you'd like to come).

They said "these sessions are great; it would also be lovely if Navgati could create a platform for industry practitioners to learn from each other").

We get very excited about suggestions like these so promptly put together the idea of the Curious Council.

How does it work?
Each time we pick a topic that is of interest to L&D leaders (eg this time was Women in Leadership). We invite a small group of folks to get together virtually for 90 minutes. You could be:

- A Sharer: you've done something creative/effective in this space that you'd like to share
- A Seeker: you've got questions about the topic and would like to learn from the experience of others
- Both

The group is kept small so there's enough space for dialogue but write up the stories that were shared and the responses to the questions for mass consumption.

We hope you enjoy reading this. And if you'd like to be invited to a Curious Council, please write back to sunitha@navgati.in

The lovely folks who came for the very first CC:

- Bhakti Dharod
- Charusmitha Rao
- Deepa Satish
- Ipsita Pal
- Meghna Singhee
- Nanditha Seetharamaiah
- Neetu Sadhwani
- Nidhi Vinod
- Seethalakshmy
- Rohit Shenoy

Stories from Sharers

Engaging the Majority in Gender Inclusion
Shared by: Charusmitha, Akamai

Context
The organization wanted to engage male employees and senior leaders more meaningfully in gender inclusion conversations. Traditional women-focused initiatives were not enough to open authentic dialogue.

Intervention
A week-long initiative called **"Think Equal Nudges."** Employees received one prompt card each day placed on their desks. They reflected on the prompt and posted responses on a board at reception. Prompts were also placed in meeting rooms and whiteboards, sparking conversations

The 100 prompts were organized into four themes:
- **Understand** – awareness of gender issues and history
- **Acknowledge** – recognizing workplace challenges
- **Celebrate** – appreciating contributions
- **Commit** – identifying personal actions

Examples of prompts included:
- Watch a film about women achievers and discuss it with family or friends
- Ask your team: *"When has your gender been an advantage?"*
- Write a note of appreciation to women who influenced your life
- Teach a son to cook or a daughter to use tools

Outcome
- Over 500 reflections were posted on the board
- Approximately 25% of reflections expressed dissent, which indicated that the initiative successfully created space for honest views.
- The program shifted perceptions of gender inclusion from a "women's issue" to a collective responsibility.
- Insights led to about ten organizational actions, including awareness and education interventions; changes in new hire orientation and new manager enablement tools. A longer-term initiative called "Safe Space" was launched: monthly facilitated discussions on inclusion topics, run by different employee resource groups.

Theatre-Based Awareness of Microaggressions
Shared by: Nidhi Vinod

Context
A leader's conversation in a team meeting led to a working group asking for a session on microaggressions. That was sensitive, because even the inclusion committee had divisive opinions—some people said, "This isn't a microaggression; I've been saying this for years."

Intervention
A theatre group staged **short enactments of workplace microaggressions**.
- Format: 90-minute session
- Run **four times across four days**
- Cafeteria converted into an **amphitheatre-style "Nukkad Natak" space**

After each enactment, participants discussed:
- Have you experienced something like this?
- What impact did it have?

Outcome
- Many employees recognized behaviours they had experienced but never named.
- People said, "I've said things like this but I didn't mean anything bad." The conversation helped people understand that intent is not the only thing that matters; impact can still be disruptive or even toxic.
- People were asked to share "What are some affirmative steps you can take to prevent these behaviors?" Though names were optional, many people chose to put their names. They wrote what they were committed to changing.
- We started seeing people self-correct in meetings. Someone would begin a stereotyping comment, then pause and say, "I'm sorry - I've learned to do better." I didn't expect something so small to lead to such a visible shift so quickly, but awareness really did change behavior on the floor

Diversity Dialogues
Shared by: Ipsita Pal

We ran an initiative last year called "Diversity Dialogues." We kept the name to preserve the brand of the event, but we made it more tech-focused than gender-focused. We invited everyone in the company to attend.

For example, we had one panel about innovations in health care technology. The conversation centered on the innovations that women on the panel had initiated and how their being a woman contributed. We saw participation from all genders and generations.

We also created a broader platform called WINGS, which integrated multiple initiatives:
- return-to-work programs
- leadership journeys
- neurodiversity initiatives
- generational diversity programs

Programs reinforced each other. For example: Participants in leadership journeys mentored return-to-work participants, creating an interconnected ecosystem.

Seeker questions & responses

How Should Organizations Address Perceptions of Reverse Discrimination?

A woman selected for a competitive leadership program wondered if she was chosen primarily because she was a woman. How should organizations address perceptions that diversity initiatives compromise merit?

- Acknowledge it's natural to wonder about context. Then help shift the frame from identity alone to the full set of selection criteria - potential, perspective, what value they bring. Invite them to shift the question from "Why me?" to "What do I contribute"

- You could say "*I strongly believe this program is important for everyone. If I had the budget to cover everyone in the organization, I would. But we are constrained, and we're choosing to invest here because we want more women to claim their rightful space.*" Position the investment as "because you're valuable," not "because you need to be uplifted."

- Have transparent development conversations. We don't always explain why someone was selected or what the organization expects them to do with the program. We assume participants should just feel grateful. If the "why" conversation doesn't happen before nomination, the vacuum gets filled with doubt.

- Frame it at the macro level: gender inequity reduces economic growth and prosperity. This isn't about "reservation." If women participate equally, organizations and economies benefit. That's the foundational reason to invest.

- Watch the terminology used, it itself can sting. When leadership is all men, it isn't called a "male leadership program." When it's women, it becomes "women's leadership." That framing matters; being labelled by gender before capability can hurt.

- The other audience to be addressed is men questioning whether merit was compromised (and adding to the self-doubt women face). We need different strategies for this group. Such cynicism could take time to address - in such cases women may need the confidence to continue despite scepticism.

Is There Backlash Against Identity-Specific Programs?

With global debates about DEI, are organizations shifting toward gender-neutral programs or "quiet DEI"?

There is no single answer to this question:

- Content reframing: Some programs originally designed for women are now opened to all genders. Example: a program on imposter phenomenon originally for women was reframed for all employees.

- Subtle embedding of DEI: In some regions organizations continue DEI work but communicate it more carefully due to legal or political pressures.

- Regional differences
    - In parts of Europe programs remain active but are less publicly emphasized.
    - In India, diversity initiatives remain relatively visible, though budgets increasingly prioritize AI training and other technology initiatives.

How Should DEI Evolve in Early-Stage Organizations?

I'm building DEI practices in a relatively young organization. I'm not looking only at gender; I'm also thinking about generational diversity and neurodiversity. For those who've built mature practices, how did you define milestones and evolve over time? What did early stage look like versus maturity?

- In early stages, focus on understanding the current state through initiatives and listening mechanisms, and building awareness

- Stakeholder buy-in is critical
    - Alignment with business goals
    - Increase awareness: *we ran story circles with 100+ people, with 10–12 per circle. We collected stories, analyzed themes, took it back to leaders, and built buy-in. It took about two years before we launched.*

    - *I attended programs as a participant (including one delivered by Navgati) and brought business leaders along, so support wasn't only HR-driven.*

- Implement small internal interventions
Look for things you can move without shaking up the structure. Watch what noise gets created. Once credibility builds and the need is widely accepted, then invest "hard cash" in external programs.

- Run parallel programs for different audiences.
For example, if we ran "I'm Remarkable" for women (about claiming space), we ran a parallel session for men on "How can I be a better advocate to my team members?" That way, the whole organization felt involved in the cause and it gained traction.

How Can Organizations Ensure Real Sponsorship?

What structures or practices have you put in place to ensure sponsorship goes beyond intent? How do you select leaders, track actions, and get long-term buy-in?

- We mandated IDPs for everyone. When individual development plans are in place, development becomes a real conversation, and it's easier to identify the right people for programs and ensure sponsorship is structured.

- We made it part of the leadership cadence. If DEI-related outcomes show up in regular business reviews and leaders are questioned on it, accountability rises. Global organizations often do this better because leaders are evaluated not only on outcomes but also on culture and the bench they build.

- Be careful how metrics are phrased. If leaders are pressured only on "percentage of women," they may hire women without integrating them well. Metrics should be designed thoughtfully to avoid shallow compliance.

- Secure senior women leaders as sponsors, and also identify influential leaders (male or female) who can be visible champions. Use the "calendar test" - they must commit time, not just their name.

- Healthy competition between groups helps ("we accelerated more participants than you").

- In some geographies, use nomination plus opt-in: nominated based on criteria, but participants opt in after a conversation with their manager, aligning expectations.

- Support managers and mentors alongside participants. If women are going through a journey, equip their managers with awareness of what skills they'll return with and how to support them. For example, in a Siemens program, mentors are trained in coaching skills and how to work with IDPs—so sponsorship becomes practical, not symbolic.