



DR. TIFFANY POWELL

# DIFFERENCE + SAMENESS

*Whole Leader Development and  
Diversity, Equity, + Inclusion*



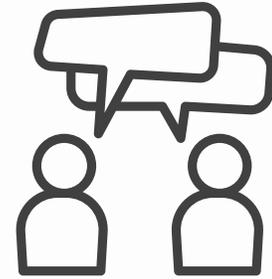
& DR. ROB MCKENNA

## DR. TIFFANY POWELL

The conversation around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has taken on different shapes over the years. The language associated with navigating differences includes but is not limited to:



- **MULTICULTURALISM**
- **CULTURAL COMPETENCE**
- **CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS**
- **CULTURAL SENSITIVITY**
- **& EVEN TOLERANCE**



Regardless of the terminology and its attempt to be more progressive and inclusive of perspectives, there is an underlying pull toward creating spaces where people can safely unpack and dialogue around the reality of differences.

SOME ARE DRAWN TO THE SPACE BECAUSE THEY ARE HOPEFUL THAT WITH JUST SOME DIALOGUE WE MIGHT REACH COMMON GROUND, WHILE OTHERS ARE PERPLEXED BECAUSE THE TASK OF UNPACKING DIFFERENCES SEEMS DAUNTING, LACKING A WINDOW OF HOPE FOR IMPROVEMENT.

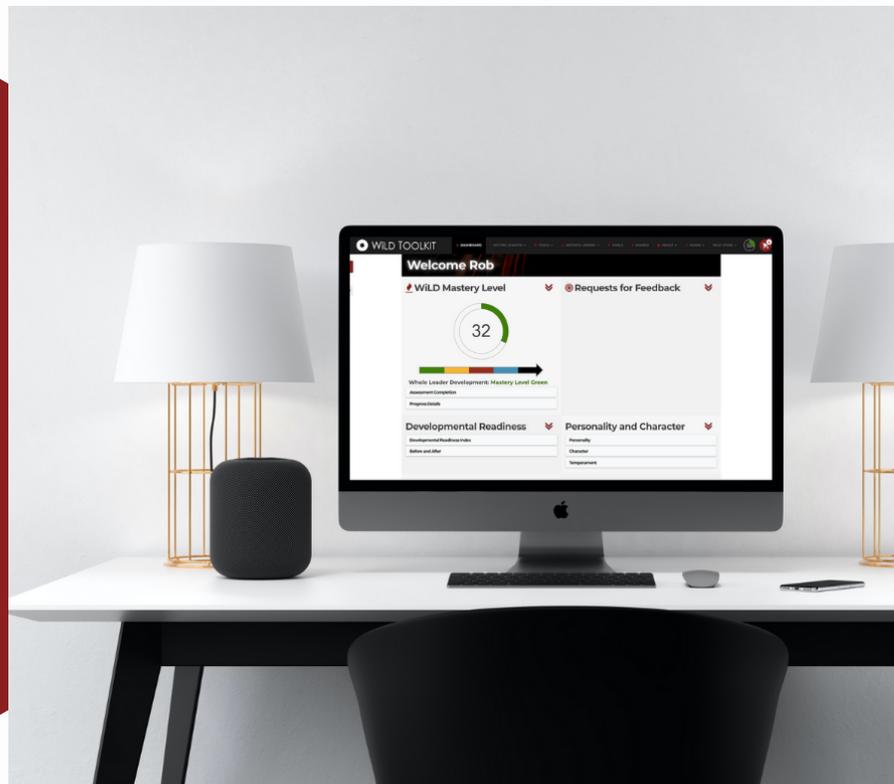
As a professional woman who has worked in the DEI space for more than a decade, I have seen my share of ebbs and flows through terminology and programming attempting to bridge the “diversity” gaps. As an African American woman, I have had to bite my tongue and grit my teeth while politely pushing against microaggressions and marginalizations directed toward me personally and/or those whom I champion. Even as a champion, I have also found myself victimized - needing or desiring to both hug the person who is unaware of their jab, while also nursing my own wound from the blow.

This paradoxical experience has been both emotionally and psychologically exhausting.

A little over a year ago I was invited to begin using a tool called the WiLD Toolkit that was developed by Dr. Rob McKenna and his team at WiLD Leaders, Inc. as part of our work with students and in our efforts to develop their capacity as leaders.

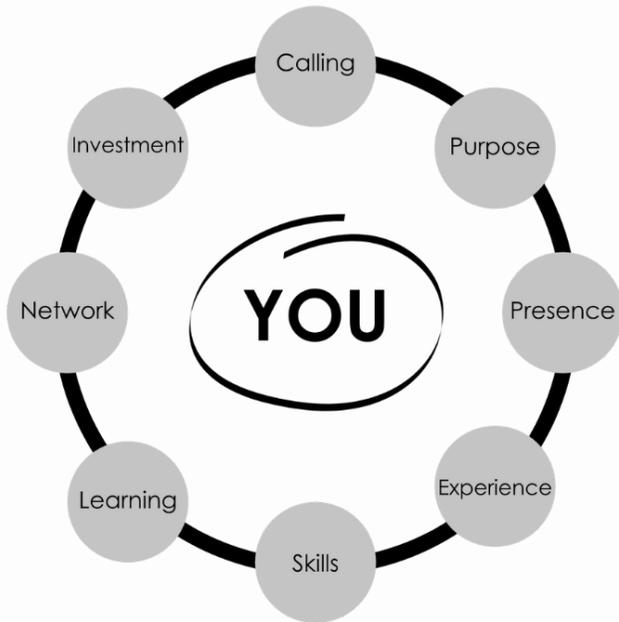
WiLD stands for whole and intentional leader development and the WiLD Toolkit is designed to take decades of research on the developmental journey of leaders and use that base to provide developmental scaffolding for a leader's journey that increases intention, purpose, effectiveness, and even openness to change.

As I got to know Rob and the rest of the WiLD Leaders team and began to more deeply invest in my own development as a leader in order to understand the impact of these tools, something else occurred to me.



While these whole leader development tools provide intentional scaffolding for the leaders journey, **they also provided an invitation to something more broad within the scope of my work in diversity, equity and inclusion.**

**Diving into the specifics of the WiLD Toolkit provided a ray of light that I have yet to experience in traditional leader development tools or systems.**



From a personal perspective, I felt this was a system and community that understood and invited my intricacies and idiosyncrasies while celebrating the dynamics of the roles in which I serve. The sophistication of the questions and the intentionality of their focus deeply impacted me. Not only is the content and validity of the toolkit quantitatively sound, but it spoke to my personal journey in a way no other “psychological” tool has ever done.

With each tool in the process, I found myself making a plethora of connections to my personal and professional realities. I wondered if the toolkit itself was intended to highlight and break barriers, and I wondered what it would mean for organizations to dive into these tools through the lens of DEI as a way to bridge gaps and break down those long standing barriers between and within each of us.



**Over the past months, Rob and I have become friends and have learned so much from one another. So, as we sought to write something together regarding the relevance of whole leader development, we decided to write it as a dialogue - a conversation between us designed to explain the intentions behind the toolkit in reference to our own personal journey of inclusion and exclusion, and as a way to project where the conversation regarding differences and similarities across our contexts may be going next.**

## DR. ROB MCKENNA

*We just recorded a Podcast together on the paradox of difference and it was so inspiring for me Tiffany. As a thought leader in the conversation surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion and someone responsible for leading others, what is the common narrative in our experience as human beings that is fundamental to your assumptions about the future?*

## DR. TIFFANY POWELL

That podcast was great Rob, and grateful for this question. There are several common narratives that I have witnessed over the years which continue to be perpetuated in our current climate. One such paradigm is that hiring a person to lead DEI efforts is the solution. While there is much value in creating a position for someone to lead organizational efforts,

**ONE PERSON CAN NOT FAIRLY ADDRESS ALL SYSTEMIC ISSUES.**

On the contrary, organizational change **requires** multiple evaluative checkpoints. One person at the helm can be instrumental for leading and oversight, but if that individual does not have the organizational commitment backing their efforts, all can be for naught. The complexities of systemic issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion have deep roots and it requires broad paradigm shifts to identify the need for changes as well as the grit to facilitate such movement.

Another narrative is, "It is hard to talk about racism and other discriminatory practices because it breeds deep discomfort." There's been a movement encouraging people do their own work by unpacking the complexities of facing their fears that may evoke guilt, anger and even silence. This is a bold move that many shy away from, however, those who are courageous enough to delve into this work come to understand the degree of victimization that oppressive systems have forced marginalized communities to suffer at extenuating lengths. This awakening provides hope for change beyond surface level acknowledgements.

So, when you ask about some common narratives, there are indeed several circulating.

**THE REALITY IS THAT THE PARADOX OF DIFFERENCE  
PRESENTS US WITH MULTIPLE COMPETING TENSIONS -  
EACH WITH ITS OWN DYNAMICS AND WORTH UNPACKING.**

There are inroads that potentially facilitate discussion but not without unearthing many deeply embedded perspectives from those on either side of "different."

DR. TIFFANY POWELL

*Rob, when you developed the WiLD Toolkit, was there ever the thought that it might be used as an invitation to bridge the gap between people who are culturally and ethnically different from one another?*

DR. ROB MCKENNA

It was absolutely my hope. And, my aspiration was to approach that task of providing an intentional development system to people who may be very different from one another as humbly as possible. Whether it was leaders in India, the Middle East, in Europe, South America, in the suburbs, or inner cities, and from whatever ethnic or cultural background, my hope was to provide a common developmental scaffolding for our journey together.

**I'M NOT SAYING I DEVELOPED A TOOL FOR EVERYONE, BUT MY HOPE IS THAT IT WOULD TAKE THE SEEMINGLY MISFIT INDIVIDUALS IN THEIR WORLD WHO MAY FEEL LIKE ME, AND PROVIDE A WAY TO INTENTIONALLY DEVELOP THEIR LEADER CAPACITY TOGETHER.**

As I've studied the journey of leaders over the years, most leaders from across different contexts or backgrounds share one thing in common - a desire for wholeness despite the fragmentation that is also a reality of their lives. I actually received pressure at times to create different versions of the tools for leaders from different backgrounds or contexts. While I understand that it could be valuable at some point, my dream was that leaders from across all kinds of different racial, political, ethnic, geographic, cultural, and national boundaries would come together to learn.

My hope was that the WiLD Toolkit would be as timeless and as broadly culturally relevant as possible. **The risk was that you could lose any one group by trying to serve everyone.** The risk we took was that someone who was in India would say to themselves, "This may work with an executive in the US, but maybe not for me." What has been interesting is that some executives in the US have asked themselves the same thing. "This may be relevant in India, but will it be relevant here?" The invitation into growth in a more general sense is awkward for people and outside of convention, and sometimes the easiest response is that those hard questions are probably only relevant to someone with a different experience.

## DR. ROB MCKENNA

*Tiffany, you said something after working through the WiLD Toolkit that deeply impacted me and opened up my eyes regarding the purpose of the tools in the conversation regarding diversity, equity and inclusion. You said,*

**“I was able to be myself, using the tools, doing my own editing, looking at my goals. That ability to do that for me - it’s grace in action. Wholistically, regarding the WiLD Toolkit - If I could take an organization or a school through the toolkit and have them connect that back to the way they interact with their black or brown students, it would change the way they breathe - how they interact with every family, every kid, every parent - You cannot get there without intentionality. It is likened to a cultural proficiency - we can be inclusive of people with different perspectives even if they may not be our own.”**

*What was it about the process of going through the WiLD Toolkit and the WiLD community that caused you to say that?*

## DR. TIFFANY POWELL

**I have taken many assessments over the years** and the results typically indicate some level of proficiency or competency based on predetermined rubrics or scales.

**While traditional instruments and tools held value, the options would leave me with a set of feedback that may or may not have provided the next level for development. In other words, the results were static.**

I gained insight into “me” but no direction on how to improve “me.” I looked for consistency across the other feedback reports and then concluded that I was “this” or “that” but not much more.

### **THE WiLD TOOLKIT IS DIFFERENT.**

This invitational tool digs deep from the onset. I was (am) challenged to really think about my own experiences and their impact on my development. I am invited to reflect on my past, present and future aspirations. I consider my networks and who I have in place as well as those whom I’d like to add. I even have the option to go back and update my responses. The tool itself represents a level of engagement with myself and any other with whom I select to share. **Wow! This has been groundbreaking. I have not had this type of professional experience through a written tool. The richness of the WiLD Toolkit struck a deep chord within me.**

DR. TIFFANY POWELL

**What I appreciate the most is that the assessments are not tests at all (despite the connotation of assessment),**

**BUT RATHER OPEN DOORS TO LOOK DEEPER INTO WHO I AM AS A PERSON, A PARENT, A FRIEND, A PROFESSIONAL, AND AS A LEADER.**

This is such a different approach to introspection and developmental growth. As I journeyed through the first round of the WiLD Toolkit, I asked myself what it would mean for others to take this same journey. I wondered what it would look like for professionals or leaders to apply it to their work and consider their interactions with students of color and employees or colleagues from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. I envisioned this invitation facilitating transformative perspectives that would positively impact their internal processing and external behaviors. All in all, I see hope in the WiLD Toolkit to make a difference with those who are courageous and desiring change.

**AND LET'S FACE IT, WORK IN THE DEI SPACE REQUIRES COURAGE TO DO DEEP WORK - INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY.**

DR. TIFFANY POWELL

*Rob, you mentioned earlier that your hope was to provide a process to “scaffold” an intentional conversation for people who are different from you and different from each other. What were some of the fundamental assumptions behind the development of the WiLD Toolkit that were important in creating the kind of experience I had?*

You know how much I value the deeper purpose behind someone's intentions. A few years back before I created the first version of the tools, I spent a day with a close friend in a public library board room where we wrestled over whether or not we were going to build something like this together. If you've ever had one of those highly creative and open space conversations where you and a close colleague or friend intentionally book that time to explore going into business together, you know how tough they can be. At the end of a very long day wrestling through possibilities, he asked me a question that was the foundation of everything I built. As we were walking out, he pointed to a young woman sitting at a table on the other side of the library and asked me, "What do you want for her Rob?" Without missing a beat I said, "I want her to be able to have the conversation she wants to have that she may not know she wants to have yet." What I meant was that **I believe that every one of us has a long list of things that we whisper out loud, that scream out inside of us.** The challenge is that many of those things are yet to be discovered, but we know there is something to explore. And, conversations regarding our differences are a key part of that.

**In developing the WiLD Toolkit, there were some fundamental guidelines I followed that I believe have helped people navigate the tension represented in cultural, group and individual differences.**

- 1** First off, I knew it had to be appreciative because I intended for the tools to be accessible to individuals without the guarantee that a coach, mentor, teacher, or facilitator would be present. Because of that, all the questions in the toolkit had to leave a person better off than before they asked themselves those questions. For that reason, questions that risked leaving a person feeling less agency or power over their situation were avoided.
- 2** Second, it was based on the assumption that questions are the gateway to understanding, and not answers. While answers have their place, questions are the key component of the recipe for deeper learning, and growth. While answers are necessary for progress, questions are the gateway to that deeper development.
- 3** Third, the WiLD Toolkit was based on the fundamental assumption that we aspire to wholeness, but live our lives in a somewhat fragmented reality between what is and what could be. Progress toward wholeness is possible with just a little bit of grace offered to others.

And finally, **the WiLD Toolkit is based on the unfortunately radical idea that other people matter.** In a world where many voices are telling us to live our truth and courageously be ourselves, I wanted to build a toolkit that puts value on the life and experience of every other human being, including my own. For that reason, the WiLD Toolkit asks the hard questions through an invitational filter, and **my hope is that people who feel different will feel invited, and those who do not know how to see others who are different, will feel invited as well.**

## DR. ROB MCKENNA

*Tiffany, I would love to ask you a personal question. You know my older son Aidan and nothing makes me smile more than knowing that as a college student he is being influenced by my leader friends like you! He is a white male with his own culturally diverse ethnicity that isn't immediately apparent when you look at him. What do you hope for him as you think about his own beauty and brokenness and his desire to make a difference in the lives of those who have been or feel marginalized in his sphere of influence for the rest of his life?*

## DR. TIFFANY POWELL

Wow, what a beautiful question. When I think of your son Aidan and all that is on the horizon for him, my hope is that he would always remain open. I would hope for his heart, mind and hands to be receptive to new ways of thinking, feeling and responding. There will be things that will occur which are contrary to his own value system - I hope that he would think about those encounters and make a note of them. I would want him to ask hard questions and be willing to sit back, ponder and then make bold moves in radical directions that embody what it means to actively love and accept others who may be different from himself. I would hope that Aidan would be willing to listen to the voices of others and learn from them. I would hope that he understands that everyone may not be afforded the same opportunities for a variety of reasons. I would hope that he would refrain from stereotypical assumptions that may hinder his own ability to grow from broadened experiences.

Finally, I would want Aidan and others like him to realize that everyone he encounters has degrees of "beauty and brokenness" that make them unique and valuable.

### **EVERYONE, REGARDLESS OF THEIR LIFE POSITION, HOLDS VALUE.**

I would challenge him to ask questions about things that appear to be "status quo" and be bold enough to move toward intentional wholeness in his thinking and responsiveness.

**Aidan is a gift to the world. I would challenge him to always use his voice and giftings to uplift others and strive to be one who makes space for others who may not have been told that they too are a gift.**

DR. TIFFANY POWELL

*Rob, what do you hope to inspire in the leaders around us who have felt or are feeling excluded in some way, or feel a sense that they are underqualified for the challenges ahead?*

DR. ROB MCKENNA

First off, I truly believe that launching leaders on an ideological platform without a whole perspective is irresponsible to them and to those in their influence. As an example, developing leadership competence will always be important, so if we ignore the reality that developing a leader means seeing their unique strengths and areas for development, we will leave them high and dry. A job description that requires operational savvy will always require a person who brings or can develop operational savvy. We are launching so many leaders who come from a different background than the leaders of the past. While they may be different, many of the challenges are not.

**MY DEEP CONVICTION IS THAT WE MUST SURROUND AND SUPPORT THESE LEADERS IN THEIR DEVELOPMENT AS FAST OR FASTER THAN WE ARE LAUNCHING THEM OUT THERE.**

The feelings of being underqualified, stretched, tested, and isolated as a leader are things most leaders share on some level. So, I hope we spend as much time investing in their development as we do selecting them and launching them into leadership.

Second, I think we must continue to Invite all of us into what I describe as constructive dissonance. Constructive dissonance, as you've highlighted with me so often, is a move from similarity or difference as defaults to seeing that similarity draws us near so that we can see the nuance and difference. Without intention we will all default to what we know and ways we are similar, or to an assumption that we are the only ones who feel a certain way - making us irreparably different. **I hope we continue to invite all leaders to the possibility that they could change and become better versions of themselves, for their sake, and for the sake of all those within their influence.**

And finally, I have seen the danger in our external and most visible differences offering us the most vivid example of our feeling of isolation. **When we begin to "see" one another, we get in touch with the reality that we are not alone.** My hope is that the WiLD Toolkit and the WiLD Community serve as invitations to see just how similar we are when we get one scratch below the surface.

## DR. ROB MCKENNA

*Tiffany. I am so grateful we became friends. You are one of those friends who lets me ask the hard questions, and you always respond with grace, care and truth. It is rare, and I hope leaders like you with that kind of thoughtfulness, conviction and care show up all over our world. I always want to be that for you as well. What encouragement do you have for me or for other leaders responsible for developing the next generation of leaders who will hopefully be as diverse as ever?*

## DR. TIFFANY POWELL

Rob, our connection is refreshing. I value the space to openly dialogue. Our talks cross topics related to higher education teaching, parenting, our faith and values, and life-long development. I thank God for you and our connection. Its richness challenges me to grow and I am so grateful.

I want to thank you for your dedication to whole and intentional leadership development in a time when many are building their own platforms without attention to their own intricacies. I want to encourage you to continue to ask yourself the tough questions. I know you are committed to the editing process, and I encourage you to continue to do so. This intersection of DEI and the WiLD Toolkit requires multiple levels of editing because by the nature of the process, we will come to new levels of awakening each time we dig a bit deeper.

I encourage you to identify new opportunities to invite others on the journey. As you continue to share your story of the impact this intersection is having on your personal and professional development, be intentional with your invitations. I am confident that they will relish in this space.

**ROB, WE ARE ON THE PRECIPICE OF A HUGE BREAKTHROUGH.**

**I am hopeful for what will unfold. Thank you for your open heart and hands - knowing you and walking with you makes this journey all the more enlightening.**

## DR. TIFFANY POWELL

Dr. Tiffany Powell is currently the Director of The Arch Academic Programs at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. A native New Yorker, Dr. Powell is an educator with deep roots in K-12 education. She was a Diversity Coordinator in Manhattan, Kansas. Dr. Powell was a Professor in the School of Education at Russell Sage College in Troy, New York. She is an active author and keynote speaker, and Founder & CEO of DrTiffSpeaks. She holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, an MS in Math Education and a BA in Psychology and Elementary Education. Dr. Powell is a WiLD Executive Fellow and author of *The Day My Soul Danced*, her latest book where she invites readers on a journey to honestly bring their hearts and challenges to the forefront.



## DR. ROB MCKENNA

Recently named among the top 30 most influential I-O Psychologists and featured in Forbes, Dr. Rob McKenna is the founder of WiLD Leaders, Inc. and The WiLD Foundation, and creator of the WiLD Toolkit. His research and coaching with leaders across corporate, not-for-profit and university settings has given him insight into the real and gritty experience of leaders. His clients have included the Boeing Company, Microsoft, Heineken, Foster Farms, the United Way, Alaska Airlines and Children's Hospital. He is the author of numerous articles and chapters on leadership character, calling, effectiveness, and leadership under pressure. He served as the Chair of Industrial-Organizational Psychology at Seattle Pacific University up until 2020, with a total time at SPU of 25 years. His latest book, *Composed: The Heart and Science of Leading Under Pressure*, focuses on the specific strategies leaders can use to stay true to themselves and connected to others when it matters most. Rob lives in Kirkland with his wife, Jackie, and their two sons.

