

Research Fellowships

Fellow Spotlight – Meet Christianne Corbett

think2perform Research Fellow, 2020-2022



Research Fellow Christianne Corbett presents her research outcomes to think2perform RESEARCH INSTITUTE board members in August 2022

Giving Leaders a Valuable Reason to Improve How They Listen

Christianne Corbett’s research is inspired by a 25-year-old question from her early career. “I became very interested, during my time working as an engineer, why there were so few women in the field,” says Christianne. “I’ve been thinking about it for a long time.”

Now as a Stanford Ph.D. student and think2perform Research Institute Research Fellow, Christianne was interested in discovering a way to interrupt the process that results in women and racial minorities, and especially racial minority women,

remaining vastly underrepresented in many high-status occupations, including engineering and technology fields.

“Another reason I was interested in this topic is because there’s all this research on intergroup contact as a way to reduce prejudice and there's a meta-analysis that shows one way that works is through empathy, by increasing empathy. So, an additional motivator for this study was to kind of capitalize on that and try to develop empathy for people at work,” says Christianne.

Her research, articulated in the paper, *Improving Interpersonal Interactions to Increase Belonging at Work: Evidence from a Field Experiment in a Technology Company*, takes a sociological approach with an intervention to encourage colleagues to change how they interact with coworkers from marginalized groups. “Most belonging interventions to date have been done almost exclusively in psychology, focusing on improving internal resources of individuals of marginalized groups, which shows promise in educational settings but not in the workplace,” says Christianne.

Her field study of 351 workers featured three waves: a baseline survey; an intervention; and a follow-up survey. The intervention featured multiple elements shown to affect behavior change.

Christianne explains her data collection process this way:

First, I showed them real data from their company reinforcing that people in the company care about inclusion and many are working toward it.

Then I gave them a story about the importance of inclusion at a similar company and shared a description of how to help others feel understood. I also had them write about a time when they did not feel understood in a work setting to elicit negative emotions which is shown to change behavior.

There was second writing exercise called “saying is believing” which draws on what people already know — it’s about them sharing what how they make people feel understood, putting them in the position of the expert.

Then I invited people to make a commitment to do something different for the next couple of weeks, another thing that has been shown to help facilitate behavior change.

The goal of the intervention was to improve respondents’ motivation, confidence, and ability to help colleagues feel understood. **“There is a very strong relationship between feeling understood by colleagues and belonging,” says Christianne.** “Belonging is linked to other positive outcomes such as the ability to

tolerate pressures at work, job satisfaction and a desire to stay at a company.” All attributes that support retention, a factor in improving workplace diversity.

Results of the intervention showed that it helped those who felt lowest on belonging regardless of gender or race. Another key insight: “It mattered most how well understood people felt by those that were of higher status than themselves or higher levels than themselves,” says Christianne. “That seems to be the thing that matters the most for feeling a sense of belonging.”

This is important insight for leaders seeking to improve diversity and inclusion efforts in their organizations. **Christianne’s research indicates that when higher status people ensure others at lower levels feel listened to and understood, they can actually improve the culture at work.**

Interested in helping others feel understood? View the description from Christianne’s intervention, [here](#).

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