The Hidden Code Behind Polarisation

How Othering Is Undermining Culture, Corrupting Children and Compromising Corporate DNA

Written by Dr Roze Phillips

At Abundance At Work, our mission is to rewire default mindsets and workplace cultures for good. And that work increasingly begins with asking a difficult question: What happens when our culture—inside and outside the workplace—is shaped by the logic of division?

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"Your culture already has an algorithm—it's called how you promote. If you want to change the culture, change that code."

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In boardrooms and classrooms, on factory floors and social feeds, something subtle but deeply corrosive is at play. It's not a new concept, yet it remains largely unspoken in mainstream leadership discourse—*Othering*. And it is fast becoming the silent code rewiring our cultures, our children, and our companies.

We've spent the past decade focused on *Inclusion*, and rightly so. But what we haven't done nearly enough is confront its opposite. Not just exclusion—but Othering. A deeper, more insidious form of separation that renders people "less than," "them," "those people." In psychological terms, Othering is the cognitive and emotional mechanism that dehumanises difference and hardens hierarchy.

What Is Othering—and Why Should Leaders Care?

Othering is the act of constructing someone as fundamentally different, deficient, or even dangerous. It is the fuel behind the "us vs. them" mentality. Whether based on race, class, gender, ideology, or job title, Othering reduces people to labels and strips them of their full humanity.

We see it in global politics, in online hate campaigns, in youth violence—and yes, in the workplace too. We see it when hiring panels default to the "safe" candidate. When leadership teams lack demographic or cognitive diversity. When boardroom banter subtly devalues alternative perspectives. When empathy is labelled "soft," and difference is coded as "risk."

Othering, left unchecked, becomes cultural malware. It infiltrates systems, infects language, and rewires decision-making.

From TikTok to the Boardroom: The Algorithms of Division

This isn't just about social cohesion. It's about neuroscience, digital design, and institutional leadership.

Our youth, often dismissed as passive consumers of culture, are in fact mirrors—reflecting back the fractures in the adult world. Adolescents today are neurologically primed for social validation and emotionally vulnerable to exclusion. Their brains are still developing executive function (the prefrontal cortex), while their emotional processing (the amygdala) is in overdrive. Social media platforms exploit this mismatch, delivering dopamine hits through outrage, tribalism, and hyper-polarised content.

The result? A generation learning to mistake attention for belonging, and outrage for power.

But here's the wake-up call: no generation is immune. Adults are modelling division everywhere—from political stages to staff meetings. And when leaders publicly Other their opponents, it legitimises the behaviour across every rung of society.

From Label to Violence: The Dangerous Escalation

Othering is not just a linguistic slight—it is a psychological precursor to violence. As Erving Goffman's *Stigma* theory reminds us, once a group is labelled as deficient, exclusion and even aggression become justifiable. For teens in identity formation, these labels stick hard—and often form the basis of belonging in extremist digital subcultures.

Historian Niall Ferguson's work shows that identity polarisation + unchecked media = a perfect storm for collective violence. In 2024, a UK survey revealed 70% of teenagers had viewed real-life violent content online—often for shock value, clout, or viral potential. In this environment, our children are not just *watching* culture. They're *downloading* it into their identity.

Not Just a Parenting Problem—A Cultural One

It's easy to blame youth, bad parenting, or tech addiction. But let's be honest. Our children are absorbing the culture we create. When we celebrate outrage, reward conformity, and devalue care, we build social architectures that normalise dehumanisation.

Inclusion is not simply a school curriculum. It is a cultural code. And it must start with leadership.

What Can Leaders Do? Introducing the Cognitive Firewalls

As leaders, we must build organisations that actively *interrupt* the Othering cycle. Here are three powerful tools you can deploy immediately:

- *The 5-Second Pattern Interrupt*
  What it is: A conscious pause to disrupt automatic bias and dehumanising language.
  Try it: When you hear or say, "They always..." or "Those people...", stop and ask: "Who is *they*, specifically? What's the behaviour, not the identity?"
  Why it works: It breaks the brain's habit of conflating stereotypes with facts.

- *The Empathy Nudge*
  What it is: A filter for conversations and content that rewires engagement around understanding.
  Try it: Before reacting or reposting something polarising, ask: "Does this create clarity or confusion? Connection or contempt?"
  Why it works: MIT studies show this simple pause reduces online polarisation by up to 37%.

- *The Power Audit*
  What it is: A diagnostic check for exclusion hiding in plain sight.
  Try it: At three decision points (e.g. hiring, project resourcing, promotions), ask: "Who's missing here? Whose reality isn't being represented?"
  Why it works: Most systemic exclusion is rationalised as "normal"—unless deliberately interrogated.

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What About Tech? Design for Empathy, Not Just Engagement

The tech industry must be held accountable for the digital environments it creates—especially for young users. An Empathy Audit is one way forward. This involves:

- Neuro-Informed Algorithm Transparency: Just as we demand nutritional labels on food, we should demand 'neuro-nutrition' labels that reveal how much divisive vs. bridge-building content our children are fed.

- Mandatory Othering Literacy: If we train children before letting them drive a car, why don't we prepare them before they wield the viral loudspeaker of social media?

In short: If platforms can shape attention, they can shape compassion too.

The Future We Choose: Bridge-Builders or Bulldozers

If we fail to interrupt Othering now, we risk emotional bankruptcy, widespread fragmentation, and escalating violence—not just politically, but personally, generationally, and institutionally.

But if we act? We can raise a generation of bridge-builders. We can design cultures—at work and in society—that centre dignity as a performance driver. We can future-proof our organisations not just with innovation, but with *humanity.*

Because here's the truth:
You cannot build the future by tearing people down.

It's time to rewire the narrative.
Choose care—not as an afterthought, but as a strategy for performance, resilience, and abundance.