

Embracing Individuality in a Binary World

How Hideko Akashi's Liberating Journey of Identity Development Led to Her Life's Work

By Gina Miller

Identity development is an intricate and lifelong process that shapes one's understanding of who they are, what they value and where they belong in the world. It is a journey of self-discovery, self-definition and self-acceptance. Along the way, individuals are often forced to navigate bumps in the road while working to create a life that aligns with their core values, beliefs and aspirations. In our traditionally binary world, the journey can be especially treacherous for individuals who exist outside societal norms. For Hideko Akashi, founder and lead consultant at Liberation Consulting, the process of identity development, replete with all of its challenges, has fostered self-confidence, resilience and a clear understanding of her purpose in life.

Liberation from social constraints

Drawing upon over 20 years of experience in the educational sector, Hideko has challenged individuals and institutions to think critically about issues of diversity, privilege, social justice, inclusion and equity. But it took a great deal of self-reflection to discover her true self amidst the influence of societal conditioning. From a young age, Hideko was shaped by the norms, expectations and values of society. Becoming aware of and then liberating herself from social conditioning was essential in order to authentically explore her identity, uncover her passions and embrace personal growth.

As Hideko described, "My journey of self-reflection is pretty integral to how I came into this work and how it is that my voice is authentic, genuine and organic. I think back on the early years of my life, all the way through high school ... I was just going along with whatever came at me. I was being socialized by the adults, media, peers and my schools. In subtle, and even not-so-subtle ways, I was picking up on messages about who I was, and I was not being intentional about my identity. I was definitely getting messages that I was either less than or different, that I was not the norm. And it wasn't until college when I began to critically examine that. I dove into learning more about my Japanese heritage. I was proud of it. I learned the language. And, it took me a while, but, as an adult, I came out as gay. I soon had a useful vocabulary, and I was able to ground myself."

Identity development beyond the binary

Identity development in a binary world poses unique challenges for individuals who exist outside the traditional notions of gender, sexuality and societal norms. In a society that often operates within a binary framework, where concepts such as male and female, heterosexual and homosexual and masculine and feminine dominate, individuals who do not fit neatly into these categories face significant hurdles in their journeys of self-discovery. For Hideko, navigating identity development beyond the binary translated into a focus on inclusivity, acceptance and self-expression, all of which led to her work as a DEI consultant at VISIONS.

The mission of VISIONS is to empower the creation of environments where differences are recognized, understood, appreciated and utilized for the benefit of all through both time-tested and innovative training and tools, public advocacy and consulting models addressing the personal, interpersonal, cultural and institutional levels. While at VISIONS, Hideko was encouraged by a mentor to start what ultimately became Liberation Consulting, which is a collaborative chorus of liberated voices, unique and unified, always aspiring to walk their talk, each deeply committed to their own journeys in the work toward collective liberation.

Hideko has drawn upon her own experience, acknowledging her membership in privileged groups as well as her multiple targeted identities to guide individuals into their own self-exploration. She believes in self and social transformation and that institutions can also create positive shifts in organizational culture to help cultivate the environment of truly equitable and inclusive spaces. Hideko also believes that by embracing inclusivity, promoting education and fostering supportive communities, we can create an environment that acknowledges and celebrates the diverse identities and experiences of all individuals. By dismantling the binary framework and embracing individuality, we can pave the way for a more accepting and inclusive society where everyone can thrive authentically. As she described, "Sometimes, people don't know where to start, but what I love about VISIONS and what I found so appealing about their approach is that one's personal experience is often the entry point to this work. And that's where you end up learning the most because it actually resonates and sticks."

Hideko explained: "When I think about my identity as being Japanese and American, I've had to grapple with my love-hate relationship with the United States and my love-hate relationship with Japan and its history. And, in doing so, I actually felt more grounded in myself that I can hold that complexity and those multiple truths at the same time. And the same goes for my gender. I may not fit some perfect box of what feminine, cisgender femaleness looks like or what transgender looks like, but I've learned to go beyond the binary and see various dimensions of the world within and around me. For example, one of my favorite things to do with my students was to take them to Japan right after their junior year of high school. Upon our return, I would have them reflect on their identities as Americans who just traveled to another country that's very homogeneous and a lot more crowded. All of that posed a stark contrast, not only around their identities as Americans in those spaces, but also because the students came from much more suburban areas. Experiencing these new realities gave my students a broad lens with which to view the world and their place in it. So, my personal journey has led to my own growth, and it's also helped me guide others. To me, that's what liberation is all about, and that's what motivated me as a teacher and also gave rise to my business."

The work of Liberation Consulting

At Liberation Consulting, Hideko has a good bit of administrative responsibility, but she especially relishes the consulting aspects of her work. She explained, "If I think about my role as a lead consultant, it's to help create the environment, philosophy and approach. When it comes to the people I've brought in, we come from diverse backgrounds, and we've each had unique experiences, but we hold a lot of the same values. We have a certain common ground

around how we want to approach this work. It's really about the process of supporting each other, in both our personal and professional lives, and I love that.”

Hideko continued, “The organizations we serve, regardless of their size, all have some kind of hand in social justice. That has been what we found to be most aligned with the kind of work that we want to do. And, interestingly, even though these organizations have the most amazing outward-facing missions and even though they're doing tremendous work in their communities, that doesn't always translate to their own company cultures. So, we do a lot of work to address work environments, the ethos, the morale, the interpersonal relationships, the policies and so on.”

The value of a teaching background when it comes to DEI work

Hideko is a skilled and professional facilitator with an extensive teaching background, which allows her to create spaces in which participants engage in a challenging learning process. She enjoys exploring topics around liberation, race/racism, privilege, gender/sexism, sexual orientation, intersectionality, socialization, internalization and systemic cycles of oppression. Beyond group facilitation and training workshops, Hideko engages institutions on strategic plans to make transformational and meaningful changes in their organizational culture. She calls forth a lot of her teaching skills when it comes to her DEI work. As she explained, “I spent a lot of time in classrooms in front of students. And I found that I actually had to shift this idea of ‘the sage on a stage’ to a more student-centered approach. I think about my daughter, who goes to a school where teachers are called ‘guides.’ All of this has many parallels to my role as a facilitator whereby I help guide conversations. I make sure that the group and the atmosphere and the environment are safe; I pay attention to verbal and non verbal cues. Also, the word ‘facilitator’ is rooted in the word ‘facil,’ meaning ‘easy.’ As a facilitator or a guide, I’m trying to make things in the conversation easier for people. I try to make it easier for them to open up and share. I tee up questions that make people think and learn from within versus forcing them to give uncomfortable answers.”

The need to be seen and play a part in the outcome of an organization

Much of Hideko's work revolves around building back trust. She explained, “When we come into an organization, we often find an ‘us versus them’ mentality, meaning that the individual contributors tend to feel ignored and excluded from decision-making. They often view leadership as disconnected, and they're skeptical of surveys and the like. Some employees strongly believe that there have been repercussions for speaking out. So, we have to build back trust amidst a culture of fear. We're trying to create cultures where people enjoy coming to work, where they feel like they have a purpose, where they feel like they have skills and that they're continuing to learn and that they're actually being valued for the way they bring in their perspective and experience.” She added: “Inclusivity is not just about whether people accept people for who they are. It's about feeling like they are being seen and that they play a part in the outcome of the organization. And that means that the organization has to examine who's been left out.”

Staying committed to the journey

According to Hideko, it's essential that leaders recognize that, just like our personal journeys of identity development, the DEI journey is going to be bumpy. It's essential, however, to stay committed. She explained, "DEI work is never going to be linear, nor will it follow a continuously upward trajectory. In our industry, when a dip or a setback happens, people get scared. They lose faith that things are working; they get angry, and sometimes, they give up hope. But the ones who've stuck with it through those hard times have actually seen, overall, an upward trajectory with regard to work culture, productivity, relationships and their bottom line. It's kind of like those graphs for retirement savings. The trend is not a perfectly straight line, and there are dips at times, but the overall tendency is growth. The key is to stick with it."

Hideko's journey of self-discovery has been a profound and transformative experience that ignited her personal growth, her commitment to authenticity and her sense of possibility. There's so much we can learn from her story. By liberating ourselves from social constraints that prohibit the development of our authentic selves and by liberating employees from systems of inequity and marginalization, we can empower individuals and communities to assert their agency and self-determination. Together, we can work toward creating a society where all individuals are free to express their authentic selves, live without fear of discrimination and have equal opportunities to thrive.