

The cover features a central dark teal circle containing the title and subtitle. The background is white with various green tropical plants like Monstera and ferns framing the circle. Solid green bars are at the top and bottom.

RAINFOREST CIRCLES

PROGRAM RESULTS
MAY 2023

Background & Summary

The Rainforest Scorecard Assessments in 2021 and 2022 highlighted the demand for a more diverse and inclusive ecosystem, and new ways of leading that match the velocity of change.

To activate leadership and diversity in the ecosystem, Rainforest engaged leadership and organizational behaviour experts to reimagine the characteristics of leadership that would enable the activation of the Rainforest Social Contract in the ecosystem.

This resulted in the Rainforest Leadership Commitment, highlighting the five key leadership behaviours already built into the fabric of the Rainforest Social Contract: 1) inquiring with curiosity, 2) advocating and amplifying others, 3) nurturing and fostering connections, 4) speaking with candor, and 5) leading with generosity and compassion.



Image: The Rainforest Leadership commitment overlaid with the Rainforest social contract demonstrates the key connection points that the Rainforest Circles set out to explore.

To promote dialogue in the ecosystem about the leadership behaviours needed to build trust and amplify the Social Contract, community members were engaged in several Lunch without Lunch (LWOL) workshops and daily breakout activities during Calgary Innovation Week in December of 2022. Engagement and feedback from these conversations indicated a desire and willingness within the community to explore these leadership behaviours further. Thus was born the launch of Rainforest Circles – a 7-week relationship-based learning experience focused on exploring the reimagined characteristics of leadership.

60 ecosystem members engaged in the 2023 Spring pilot of **Rainforest Circles** to deepen their learning about leadership and grow their connections in the ecosystem. Participants ranged in occupation from aspiring founders, founders/entrepreneurs, startup employees, freelancers, educators, students, and unemployed individuals. They came from diverse corners of our ecosystem, from new immigrants to individuals who've been part of the community for 10+ years.

Throughout the program, circle participants built trusting relationships across the tech ecosystem, explored topics to re-shape their leadership mindsets, and developed leadership behaviours to support more equitable and inclusive cultures and communities.

Data gathered from participants tells a story of an engaging experience that helped connect and augment early stage founders with resources and supports to extend their businesses. All of this contributes to strengthening the trust within the YYC tech community and commitment to the Social Contract. The following report highlights the key features of the Rainforest Circle program and the impact this program had on the participants from data gathered before and after the experience.

For further information about this program, please contact Meghan Donohoe at meghan@humaneleadership.ca and Alicia Wight at aliciawight10@gmail.com.



The Rainforest Circle Experience

A circle is a unique learning experience that provides an opportunity to foster trusting relationships with members of our community and explore the skills and mindsets needed to lead and thrive in our #YYC innovation ecosystem. Circles drive focus on learning, connection, and leadership.



How Rainforest Circles Work

The Rainforest Circle experience ran for a total of 7 weeks, beginning with a large group program kick off to set the expectations of the experience and allow circles to plan meeting logistics. At the kick off meeting, participants were split into small Circle cohorts, composed of 4 other diverse members of the community.

Following the kick off meeting, participants were provided with curated pre-work to review asynchronously. Pre-work centered around the five key areas of leadership being explored: 1) inquiring with curiosity, 2) advocating and amplifying others, 3) nurturing and fostering connections, 4) speaking with candor, and 5) leading with generosity and compassion.

Circle discussions guides followed a simple formula, including:

- Warm-up questions to build trust.
- Conversation Starters, related to the pre-work.
- A moment to share gratitude at the end of the meeting.
- Self-reflection questions to deepen learning.
- Suggested further reading.

Circle cohorts met weekly for one hour (either virtually or in person), to connect and share their learnings from the assigned pre-work. Referring to discussion guides to facilitate a conversation. Each participant took turns being the “host” of the meeting, presenting an opportunity to practice the leadership skills they were learning. A private Rainforest Circle LinkedIn group was established to bring the community together and encourage connection across the larger group.

Participants also had the option to attend two group meet ups to hear from leadership experts and gain further perspectives from the larger group. The final week of the program brought the full group together one final time to celebrate learning and wrap up the program.

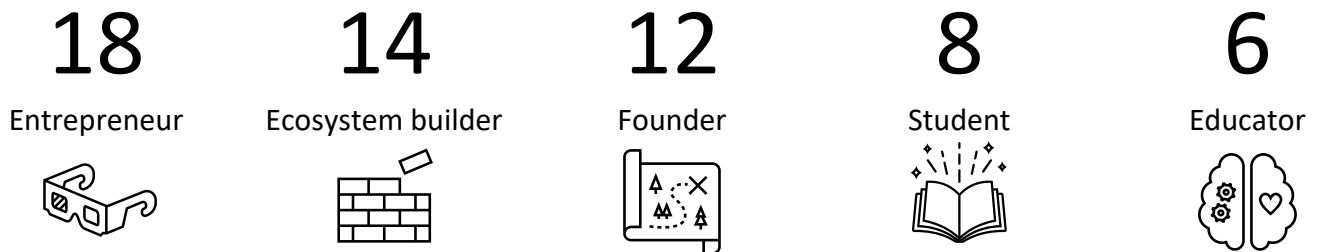
Rainforest Circles - Spring 2023 Participants

The Rainforest Circles experience was advertised to the Rainforest community through social media posts (on LinkedIn and Instagram), the Lunch without Lunch meet ups, and the personal social media accounts of Rainforest Community organizers and the facilitators.

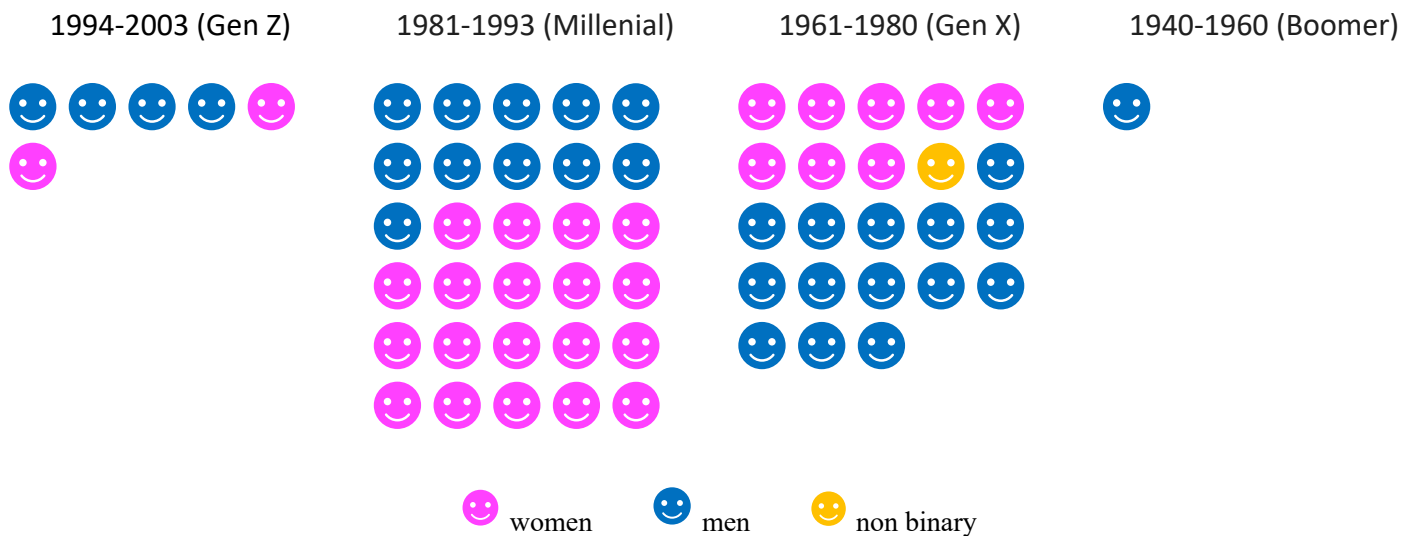
A total of 85 people expressed interest in participating in the circle experience and 60 people confirmed their participation and were assigned to small cohorts of 4 to 5 people, for a total of 13 cohorts.

Demographic data was gathered from the participants to ensure a diverse cohort grouping and meet the program goal focused on increasing diversity within the ecosystem, starting with an individual's personal networks. Half of the participants identified as men, and 83% of participants identified as Gen X or Millennial.

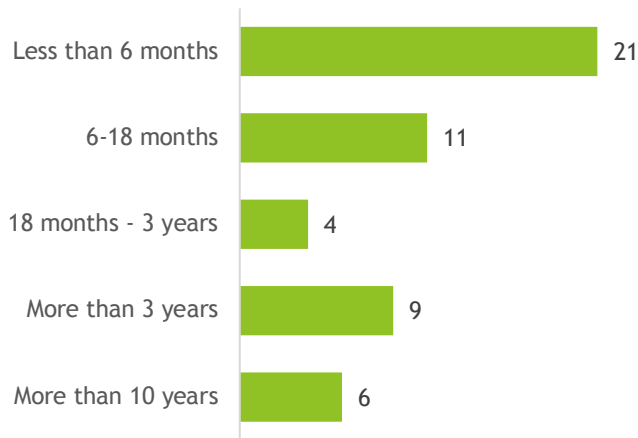
Participants were asked to share their occupation or position, with the opportunity to select more than one. The positions people identified most frequently with included:



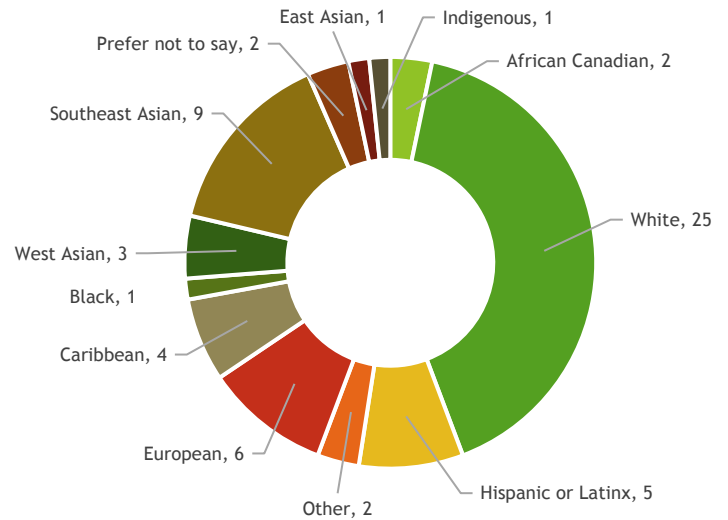
Participants by Generation and Gender



Time in Ecosystem



Ethnicity of Participants



Overall Feedback

Participants found the program to be a great experience overall. They appreciated the efforts of the facilitators and the opportunities provided for learning and connection. Participants enjoyed the content and structure of the program, which allowed them to build on previous weeks' insights.

91%

Of participants rated their experience a 4 or 5 / 5
(*out of 35 respondents)

97%

said they would recommend this experience to others
(*34 out of 35 respondents)

Some participants faced challenges with group commitment (i.e., group members not showing up for meetings) and time management (i.e., selecting times for the circle to meet that worked for everyone). Suggestions for improvement included access to the pre-work earlier (something that can be mitigated with an online learning management system), and support with circle cohort facilitation, including help with setting up the meeting times, and facilitation role modeling within a circle meeting.

Summary Feedback - One Action

We asked participants to share one action they will take after participating in the program. General themes of the actions people would take included:

- **Embracing empathy and compassion:** Participants were committed to leading with compassion, practicing self-compassion, and being more empathetic towards others.
- **Enhancing communication skills:** Many participants mentioned speaking with candor, providing specific feedback, and being more deliberate in their feedback as key takeaways.

“I will speak with candor more often with team members even if it’s uncomfortable.”

“I will always be cognizant of looking for my personal bias and privilege before I speak.”

- **Fostering allyship and advocacy:** Participants expressed a desire to learn more about allyship, amplifying the voices of others, and using their own privileges to support and empower others.
- **Increasing self-awareness and addressing biases:** Participants highlighted working on unconscious biases, recognizing their own privileges, and being more aware of their own reactions and emotions.
- **Active listening and inclusivity:** The importance of listening and making sure everyone feels heard was emphasized, as well as seeking diverse perspectives and understanding the experiences of others.

- **Commitment to continuous learning and growth:** Participants expressed a desire to continue learning and growing.
- **Implementing new concepts and tools:** Several participants mentioned applying the concepts and tools learned in the program in their professional or personal lives.
- **Strengthening relationships and collaboration:** Participants recognized the value of and importance of authentic connections with others for effective teamwork and collaboration.

“Taking the time to ask each person for their contribution, feedback, opinion etc. Don't make assumptions everyone feels heard.”



Summary Feedback - Entering and Exiting the Program

Participants were asked what they came into the program thinking/feeling/hoping and what they left thinking/feeling/hoping. The themes of the evolution from entering and leaving the program met the key objectives of the Rainforest Circle Program, in addition to several more key impacts including:

- **Increased understanding of leadership:** Participants entered the program seeking to learn about leadership, and they left with a greater understanding and appreciation for its complexities.
- **Personal growth and development:** Participants initially hoped for personal growth, and they left the program feeling that they had achieved it and identified areas for further improvement.
- **Building relationships and connections:** Participants entered the program hoping to make connections, and they left with long-term relationships and a desire to maintain those connections.
- **Acquiring new skills and insights:** Participants initially wanted to learn new skills and expand their skillsets. After the program, they reported gaining new skills and techniques to improve their leadership styles.
- **Motivation and inspiration:** Participants entered the program seeking motivation and inspiration, and they left feeling more motivated to make a positive impact in their careers and personal development.
- **Practical application of learnings:** Participants initially hoped to apply their learnings to specific contexts. After the program, they expressed a desire for more opportunities to practice their new skills and leverage connections for a positive impact.
- **Continued learning and growth:** Participants entered the program with a desire to learn and grow. After the program, they expressed a continued commitment to personal development and growth.

I came into the program thinking/feeling...

I'm leaving the program thinking/feeling...

"Opportunities to better understand and support the local innovation ecosystem."



"Leveraging connections and newfound/revised understanding to have a positive impact."

"Increased understanding on leading generously and empathetically."



"Increased understanding on leading generously and empathetically."

"A better understanding of key issues and opportunities in creating a more caring and collaborative ecosystem."



"I loved the connections and new relationships, I also feel that we created new ideas and opportunities for growth in the ecosystem through better understanding of each other."

"Deeper insight about what it means to be a transformative leader, despite not currently formally leading any teams myself at the moment."



"More opportunities to share knowledge, wisdom, and compassionate curiosity in this type of way. I feel more motivated to have a positive impact in my career!"

Learning Outcomes - Pre and Post Assessment

Participants complete a self-assessment to assess the achievement of learning outcomes set for the program. They were asked to complete it before and after participating in the program.

54 people completed the pre-assessment and 35 completed the post-assessment.

On the proceeding pages, we explore the changes in pre and post scores for each of the five leadership behaviours examined throughout the Rainforest Circle experience.

Highest Pre / Post Score Changes

+ 15.1%
Nurtures and Foster Connections
"I actively seek opportunities to build bridges between different groups"

+ 10.3%
Speak with Candor
"I communicate candidly and authentically even in difficult situations"

+ 9.4%
Lead with Generosity and Compassion
"I use compassion to guide my decision making and interactions with others"

Lowest Pre / Post Score Changes

+ 1.1%
Advocate and Amplify Others
"I am comfortable advocating for others, even if it doesn't benefit me"

+ 2.6 %
Lead with Generosity and Compassion
"I challenge assumptions and the status quo"

+ 3.1 %
Advocate for and Amplify Others
"I actively seek opportunities to amplify the voices and perspectives of others"



Inquire with Curiosity

Inquiring with curiosity in leadership involves a continuous journey of self-exploration, openness to new ideas, and appreciation of diversity. The focus of this topic was on developing a curious and open mindset, understanding unconscious bias, practicing mindful self-inquiry, and enhancing conversation skills.

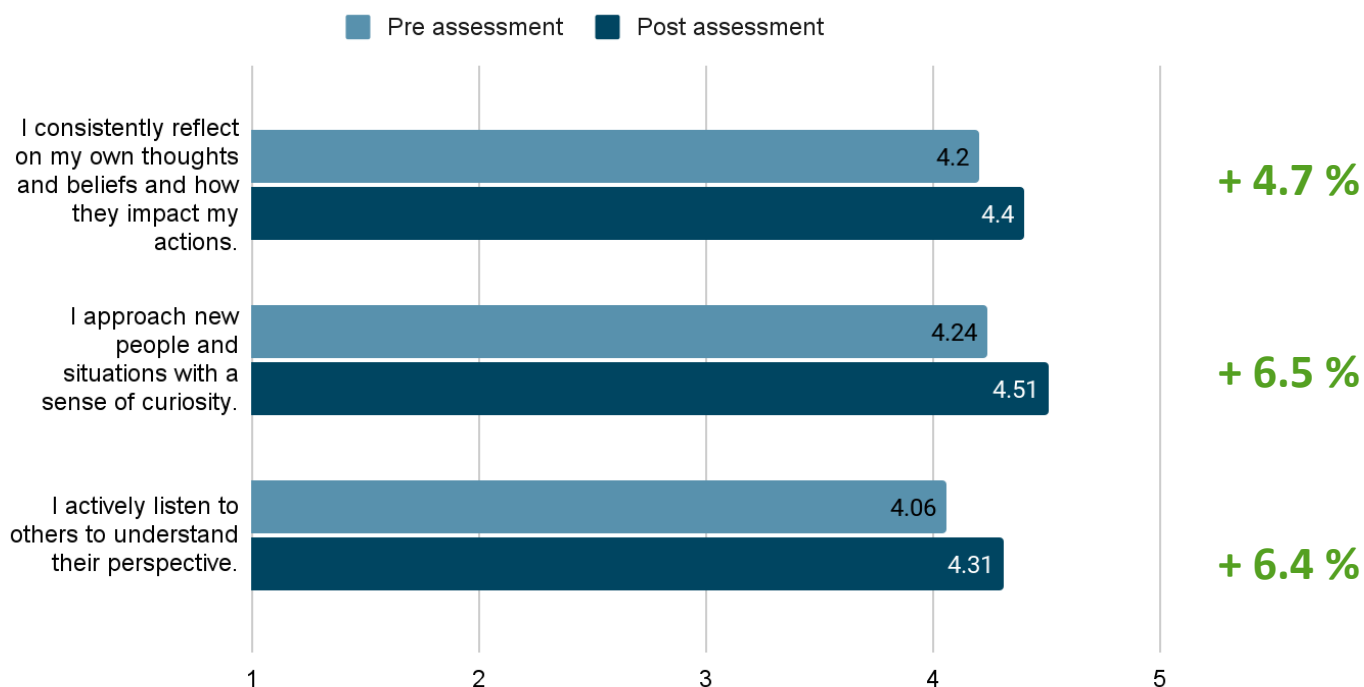
Summary of key learnings

Have you ever taken an unconscious bias assessment? As a first step towards growing their curiosity, participants were invited to gain insight into their biases by completing [the Implicit Association Test](#).

The article "[What is Self-Enquiry? The Practice of Mindfulness Questioning from Radically Open Dialectical Behavior Therapy](#)" offered valuable insights into the benefits of mindfulness and how it can help develop the ability to reflect on and examine thoughts and beliefs.

To enhance communication skills, participants were directed to Celeste Headlee TEDx talk "[How to Have a Good Conversation](#)" to uncover the 10 basic rules for connecting with others on a deeper level and having more meaningful conversations.

Average ratings



From 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Nurture and Foster Connections

Nurturing and fostering connections in leadership is the deliberate practice of building and strengthening trusting relationships. It embodies a people-first mindset, prioritizing interpersonal bonds and fostering a culture of abundance through resource sharing. Leaders foster connections by actively identifying and leveraging opportunities to connect diverse groups.

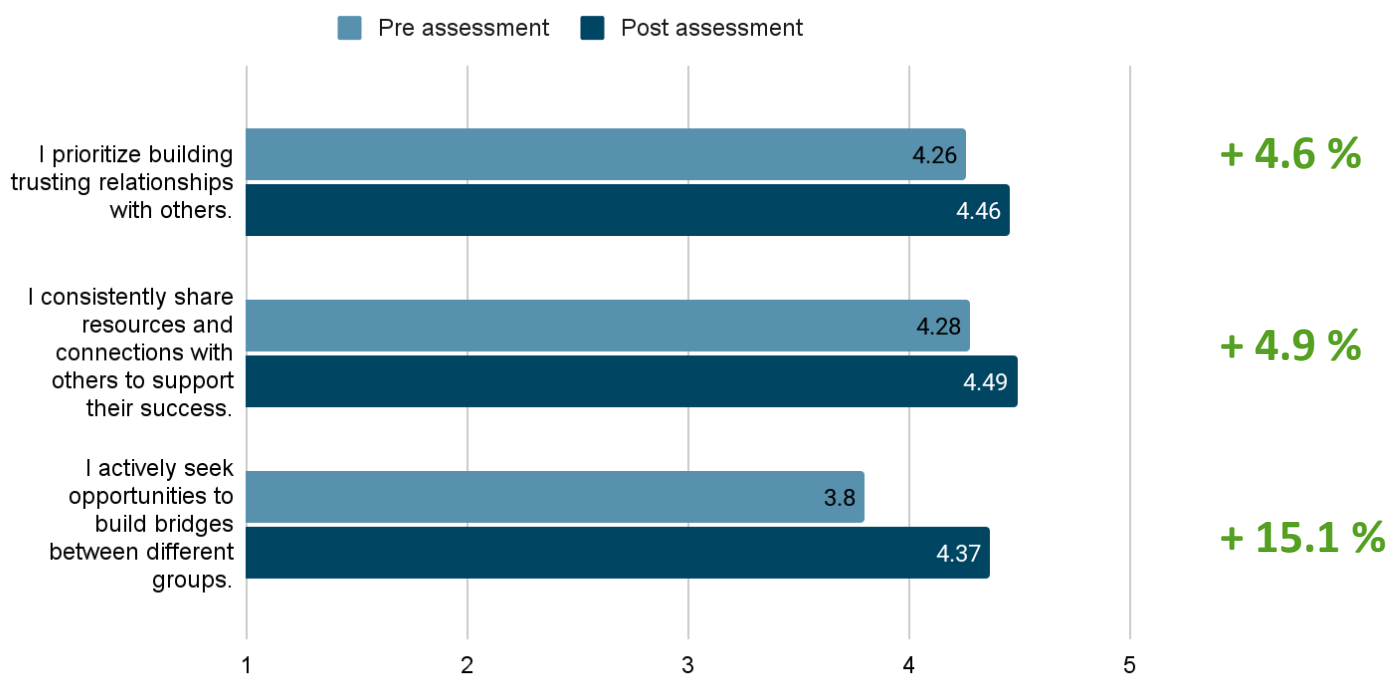
Summary of key learnings

Nurturing connections is all about building trust. Participants learned Frances Frei's simple triangle of empathy, logic, and authenticity to help [build \(and rebuild\) trust](#).

Participants also heard renowned Organizational Psychologist [Adam Grant](#) share his research about three types of people in organizations: givers, takers, and matchers. He offers small ways to give value to other people's lives.

They were introduced to the concept of an abundance mindset - focusing on collaboration, generosity, and trust, rather than competition or scarcity. Caroline Castrillon shares practical tips to develop an abundance mindset in her article on [5 Ways To Go From A Scarcity To Abundance Mindset](#).

Average ratings



From 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Advocate for and Amplify Others

Leading by advocating for and amplifying others refers to the conscious promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion principles. It involves actively supporting others, particularly underrepresented voices, and using available platforms and networks to boost their perspectives.

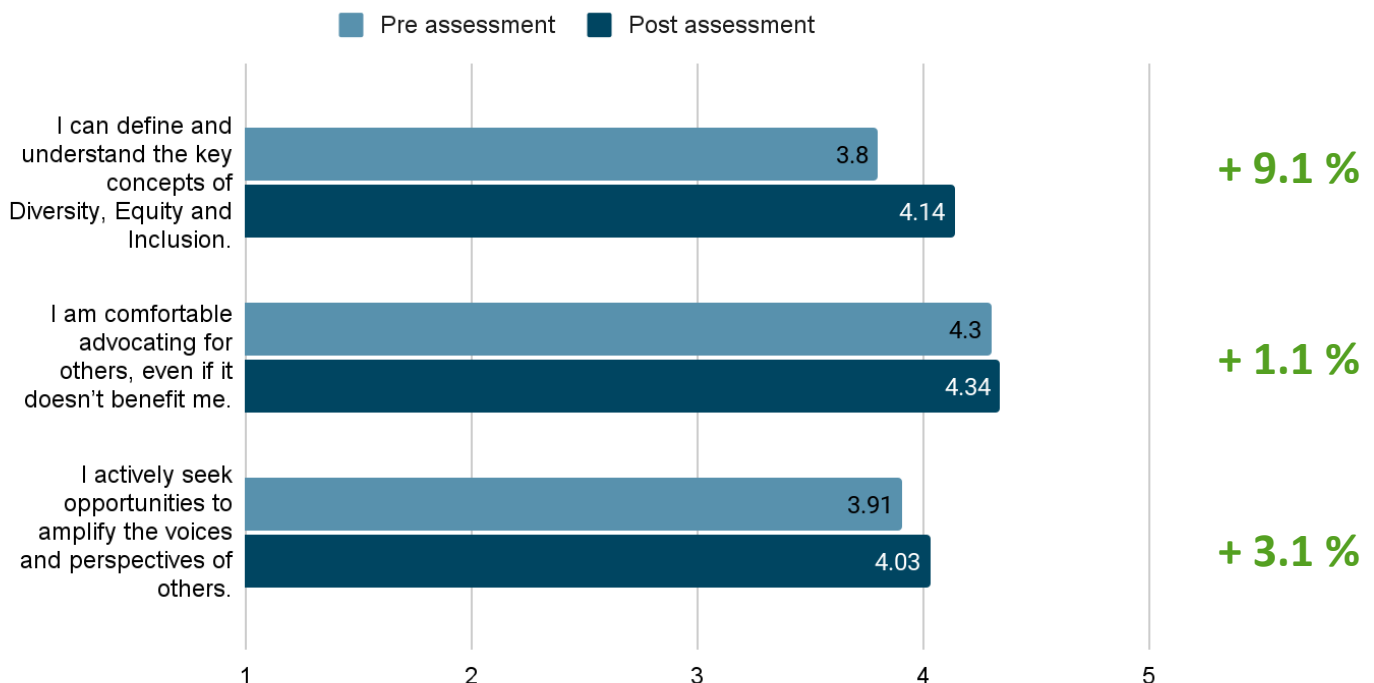
Summary of key learnings

Participants were asked to start off this week by creating a strong foundation for learning by taking the opportunity to self reflect on their own privilege leveraging [the wheel of power and privilege](#).

Participants were asked to choose to either **read** the first two sections in this report on [“What is diversity, equity and inclusion”](#) from McKinsey or listen to the first 10 minutes of [“For the Love of Work Podcast: Leaning into Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging”](#). These primers on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion ensured a shared baseline of knowledge.

Finally, there were two quick articles to further knowledge and understanding in this key area of learning; [Use your Everyday Privilege to Help Others](#) and [Research: Amplifying your Colleagues’ Voices Benefits Everyone](#).

Average ratings



From 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Speak with Candor

Speaking with candor means expressing thoughts and feedback honestly and directly, while maintaining kindness and positive intent. Leading with candor is about clear communication aimed at aiding progress and goal achievement, rather than focusing on past missteps. This approach fosters authenticity, understanding, and productive dialogue.

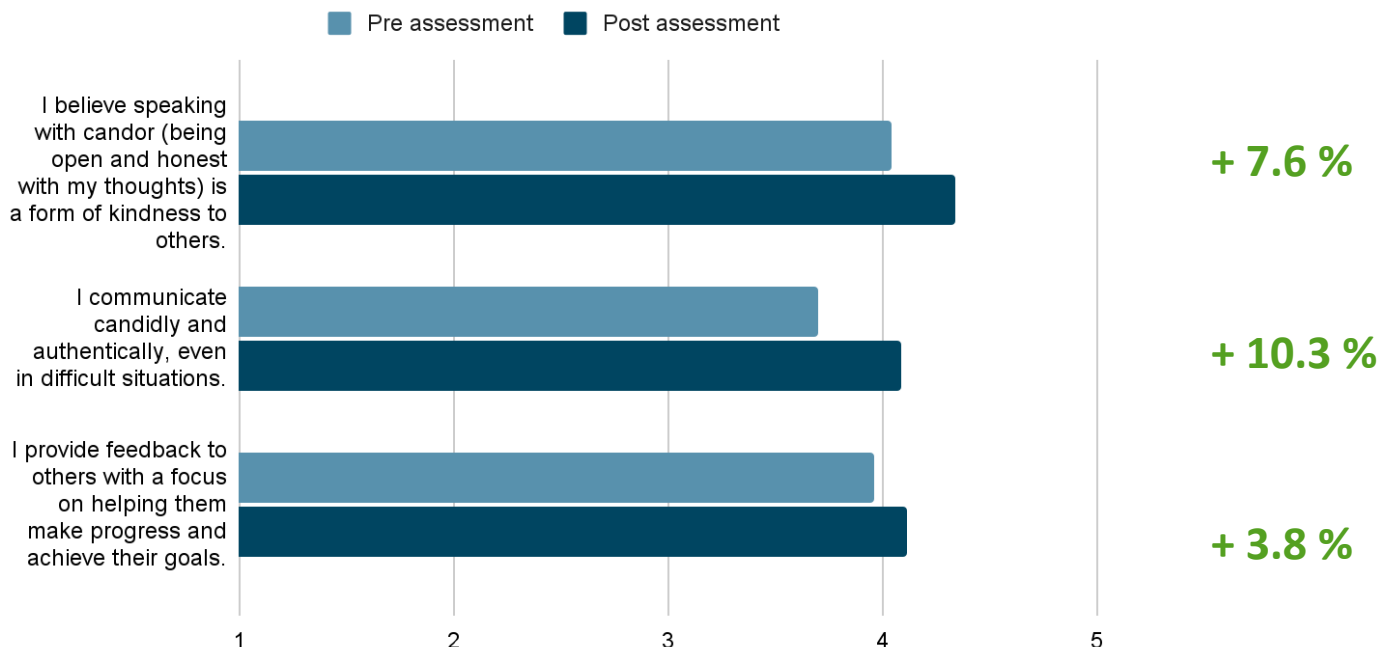
Summary of key learnings

We started this week with two perspectives on feedback, aimed at providing participants new perspectives and reframes on providing feedback: [Women Get “Nicer” Feedback — and It Holds Them Back](#) by Lily Jampol, Aneeta Rattan, and Elizabeth Baily Wolf and [The Feedback Fallacy](#) by Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall (this summary video ([Why Feedback Fails](#)) was provided for those tight on time).

Participants then watched Kim Scott’s simple framework on [Radical Candor In 6 Minutes](#) to learn tangible ways to make speaking with candor work them.

Finally, they heard from vulnerability expert Brene Brown as she shares the key to speaking with vulnerability (hint: it’s boundaries!) - [Taken for Granted Podcast: Brene Brown on what vulnerability isn’t](#) (minutes 28:32 to 39:31 or [read the transcript](#)).

Average ratings



From 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Lead with Generosity and Compassion

Leading with generosity and compassion involves modeling behaviors that foster a culture of generosity, using these values as a compass for decision-making, and setting clear actions and goals to continually progress towards more generous and compassionate leadership.

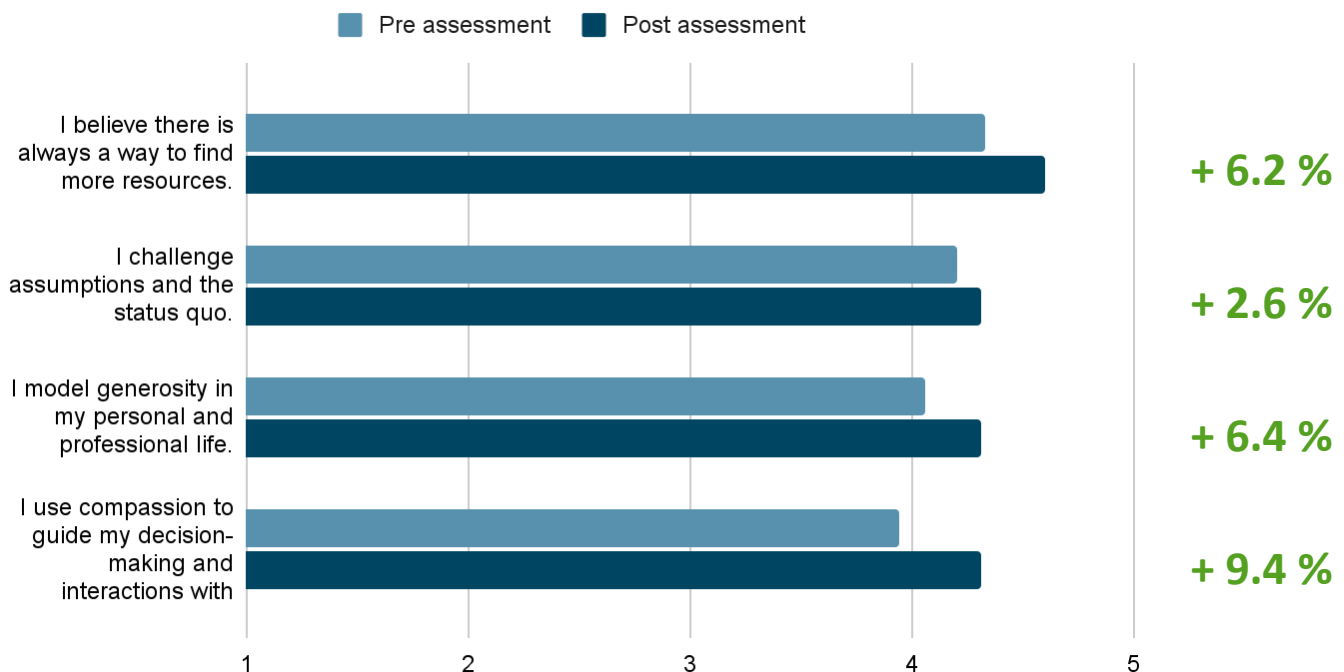
Summary of key learnings

The final week of this learning journey had participants read [The Center for Creative leadership makes a case for compassionate leadership](#), and a video where Dr. Brene Brown summed up generosity and compassion with her [BRAVING](#) acronym.

To round out the learning, we asked participants to take time to look back through the discussion guides from the previous weeks, and critically reflect on the journey they had taken. They were asked to consider:

- What is one key takeaway from each week?
- What is one new behaviours you will put into action next week?
- And where would you like to go next in your learning journey?

Average ratings



From 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Next steps: Looking to the Future

We asked the Rainforest Circles participants if they would like to join the Circles experience again. Resoundingly, 100% of participants who completed the post program survey (n = 35) said they would likely participate in the circle experience again (with six people indicating “maybe”).

“I have learned to listen instead of reacting. Every conversation with my group and the pre-work has made me dig deeper into myself as a person and how I can show up for others, and how I will continue to stay committed to every one of these values and incorporate them into everything I do. Also, I have learned to never stop learning and growing.”

In addition, we asked participants what topics they would be interested in learning next time. The themes included:

Deeper dive into the same topics Many participants enjoyed the current topics and would like to explore them further with a deeper focus.	New leadership topics A desire to explore new and different leadership topics in addition to the current ones.	Motivating others Learn techniques and approaches for motivating team members and fostering engagement.	Organizational Design Learn more about organizational structures and their influence on leadership and team dynamics.	Conflict styles and resolution A deeper exploration of conflict management techniques and understanding different conflict styles.
Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Learn about accessibility and ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities and resources.	Soft skills Expand on soft skills and their importance in leadership roles.	Fostering meaningful relationships Develop skills to build and maintain strong relationships within professional settings.	Mental Health Explore mental health in the context of leadership.	Vulnerability and practicing gratitude A deeper dive into vulnerability and gratitude as essential leadership qualities.