



The

# EMPATHY GAP

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# Startup **Translator** works with Fortune 500 companies to help employees see the world through different eyes.

BY JULIE ORTEGA

**T**ravis Kalanick's fall from grace has been swift and emphatic. Once seen as the leader of a transportation revolution and the expanding gig economy, this year the co-founder and former CEO of Uber became better known for his company's toxic culture.

It all reached a boiling point after Susan Fowler wrote about her experiences as an Uber employee. Her blog post, published in February, revealed rampant sexism. Executives began exiting the company within a few months, and by June—weeks after the company had fired 20 employees following an investigation of more than 200 claims of sexual harassment—Mr. Kalanick was forced to withdraw under pressure from major shareholders.

As one *New York Times* article put it, “the focus on pushing for the best result has also fueled what current and former Uber employees describe as a Hobbesian environment at the company, in which workers are sometimes pitted against one another and where a blind eye is turned to infractions from top performers.”

In the race for rapid growth and market dominance, Uber's executives seemingly treated culture as an afterthought. That is a huge miscalculation and is out of step with the times, says Natalie Egan, CEO of Translator. Her tech startup helps executives and organizations break down physiological boundaries and focus on inclusion.

“[Marc Andreessen] once wrote an article called ‘Why Software Is Eating the World,’ in which he speaks to the power of engineering to transform industries,” Ms. Egan says. “But the big thing he and Mr. Kalanick, and even

Mark Zuckerberg to a certain extent, have missed is that growth for growth's sake isn't always a positive thing. The world is demanding that companies, tech and otherwise, develop empathy for themselves and exist to serve something more than shareholder value.”

Ms. Egan has made a career of creatively cultivating that empathy. In 2015, she launched Translator, which leverages tech-enabled training—with data and reporting built in. The startup integrates virtual reality (VR) into these trainings to allow users to see situations through someone else's eyes as a way to “develop their empathy muscle,” as she puts it. The company—featured as a *Fortune* “Future of Startup Innovation” organization—uses software with a narrative cinematic formula, meaning the experience is predetermined. A heads-up display that shows information in your line of sight is currently in production; it will include meters that go up or down throughout the scenario as your (or, rather, the storyline protagonist's) levels of sentiments such as confidence and engagement shift.

For instance, you might don a headset and find that you are now a woman of color preparing for a big presentation in the mirror of a corporate restroom. Your confidence level rises as you practice, but then you enter the conference room, where you are mistaken for an executive assistant and asked to fetch coffee. Your positive feelings disappear.

Experiencing situations like this in a virtual environment can help users overcome the inherent limitations in the way they perceive the world, Ms. Egan says. “You need a system that programmatically helps you expose yourself to new perspectives and ideas ... and there is no better technology right now than VR to show you the details of others' experiences.”

Ms. Egan, however, is not simply going for “touchy-feely” improvements with her venture. Her ultimate goal is to “completely disrupt the traditional field of diversity and

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inclusion [D&I]” to build more engaged workforces. Research from Gallup has found that actively disengaged employees cost economies hundreds of billions of dollars each year—up to \$112 billion annually in the United Kingdom, for example, and a whopping \$550 billion in the United States.

“Empathy is key to creating an engaged workforce where people are really showing up committed to their jobs,” she says. “An engaged employee is more likely to refer friends to work there, work longer hours, save a customer and drive innovation through new ideas. Companies increasingly believe that empathy is a competitive advantage and that it needs to be taught and reinforced. But they struggle with ways to implement, scale and measure it.”

### The Three Pillars of Empathy

Innovation is not the norm in the D&I field. In fact, according to Ms. Egan, the space has not seen much modernization in 20 years. “Most organizations simply gather employees once a year to sit through a two-hour PowerPoint presentation or outdated video on diversity,” she says.

“They have no technology besides maybe a biannual employee survey to help them understand whether D&I is actually working. That is such a stark difference between every other single department in the organization,” she says. “So we’re trying to support organizations having a lot of trouble doing D&I initiatives because no one pays attention. Employees show up only because they have to.”

Translator’s strategy is to make D&I trainings part of a holistic, ongoing program at

companies so that diversity, inclusion and empathy become embedded in the corporate culture rather than being seen as boxes to be checked once a year.

The company’s program involves multiple types of content that Ms. Egan says facilitate three pillars, or stages, of empathy development:

- 1. Self-awareness:** The first step toward developing empathy is understanding your own identity, Ms. Egan says. Clients may start the process with Translator by listening to audio-guided meditation and self-reflection exercises. “The goal is to get people thinking about their own identity and becoming aware of their thoughts and emotions objectively before reacting and/or taking a position on issues like gender, race and language in the workplace,” she says. “We are all starting from different places, so exercises help you see where you are beginning.”
- 2. Context:** Employees can also play games from Translator that increase their understanding of different demographic groups. “We’ve found that we need to meet users where they are by using applications they already use in their personal lives,” says Ms. Egan. “Gamification is one way to do that.” The startup also offers speaker series, both in person and via webinars, during which trained participants (known as Translators) share personal stories of positive and negative experiences with bosses, cultures and marginalization that have occurred and may still occur in their daily life.





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**3. Interaction:** The immersive VR comes into play at this stage, building upon what employees have learned thus far. “These three- to four-minute experiences are designed to help people understand a broad range of topics, including marginalization, unconscious bias and cultural messaging,” Ms. Egan says. Scenarios include a transgender woman being called a man loudly and repeatedly at a retail store and either a black or Latino man walking into an elevator with a white woman and the woman asking him when the door closes whether or not he is going to hurt her.

All this content, from podcasts to VR, is delivered in pieces over time, via an app through which employees can track their progress. The company also provides an HR chatbot for difficult conversations around issues that come up during the trainings.

According to Ms. Egan, companies are ready to enact change. “Given the socio-political landscape, most of the Fortune 500 companies we have spoken to urgently want to make sure employees recognize what the expectations for professionalism are,” she says. “And they know they need to actively set guidelines.”

### A Personal Beginning

The idea for Translator’s immersive VR approach was born from Ms. Egan’s personal experiences. A few years ago, Ms. Egan came out as transgender and transitioned from a man to a woman. “I spent the first part of my life as a white man,” she says. “With access, privilege and resources, I very much lived in a bubble—

but I didn’t know it. I truly thought I understood the struggle. I thought I understood diversity.”

After Ms. Egan came out as transgender, however, the bubble quickly burst. “I knew there were going to be challenges and things I didn’t expect,” she says, “but I didn’t realize how isolated I really was from the reality of the rest of the world. Our identity really matters. It affects how others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves.”

Over time, Ms. Egan found that the more she told her story, the more people understood and empathized with her. So she decided to scale up the idea to make change in global organizations.

“I didn’t make the connection to VR at that point, but that’s when I had this realization of, ‘If they only knew,’” she says. “I thought, ‘If people can just walk in my shoes and understand what I’ve been through—why I am who I am and what I did to hide this for 38 years—they would not judge me.’”

Ms. Egan originally created Translator to spread awareness of transgender perspectives. But soon, clients began asking for a broader empathy program. “Our largest clients were calling and saying, ‘We need more. We need to double down,’” Ms. Egan says.

“For a long time, executives and organizations sort of sat on their laurels saying, ‘Well, the status quo is pretty good, right? People are making money. No one seems to be too upset.’ But companies are now starting to realize the war for talent is real. They are thinking [about what happens] 20, 30, 40, 50 years down the line,” Ms. Egan says. “It’s become mission critical.” **IQ**