

Inclusive Leadership

The success of diversity and unconscious bias training, and its direct effect on workplace inclusivity, is regarded with a certain level of cynicism. In my role as a diversity consultant, I have dealt with many senior managers who have claimed to value inclusive leadership as one of their core organisational values, but when I delve a little deeper I inevitably find that they have little understanding of what this actually entails, but realise it is important to acknowledge it in a business setting.

This lack of clarity over the meaning of 'inclusive leadership' is surprisingly widespread, so it's important to establish a definition. When Boris Groysberg and Katherine Connolly (Harvard Business Review Sept 2013)^[1] surveyed 24 reputedly inclusive CEOs from around the world, they identified a three-pronged common theme: inclusivity being a personal mission of the CEO; a business imperative for sourcing innovative and creative talent; a moral imperative linked to personal values and experience.

Central to these values is the inclusive leader who recognises that employee performance is greatly improved when they are made to feel valued, giving a company an edge over competition in terms of reputation – which is worth its weight in gold in business. Research by Opportunity Now^[2] supported this notion, finding that 80% of employees who had worked with an inclusive leader felt more productive, motivated and loyal to their company and more inclined to go the extra mile.

My previous experiences with a particular manager, whom I held in high regard as an inclusive and progressive leader, demonstrated this. He positioned clear standards of what was expected of us: we were not to work past 5pm, and effective time management with regard to childcare and other personal arrangements was well supported. This manager was respected by his employees, whose retention was one of the organisations top achievements. In response to this, we as employees were highly committed to our jobs and collaborated well as a team, willing to go the extra mile and do a bit more when the occasion called for it.

While the business sector widely recognises the benefits of inclusive leadership on paper, many often question how exactly this translates in practical terms. Throughout my career I have given consultancy support to business leaders from many sectors, both

public and corporate, and in keeping with the worldwide research conducted, there are some themes that are essential to developing an inclusive style of leadership. These themes should form a central component of any action plan devised, as should a value statement along the lines of 'no excuses, only excellence'. In the words of Martin Luther King: "If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way."

Leadership agility is key to developing the effective communication skills needed to understand, influence and motivate. This form of agility demonstrates the leader's ability to adapt their own behaviour based on their colleagues' personal experiences and perspectives.

Leaders clearly define what is meant by inclusive culture, embraced within the organisation culture. This was defined by Grosberg and Connolly^[1] as 'one in which employees can contribute to the success of the company as their true selves whilst the organisation respects and leverages

their talents, which gives them a sense of connectedness.'

Leadership agility is key to developing the effective communication skills needed to understand, influence and motivate. This form of agility demonstrates the leader's ability to adapt their own behaviour based on their colleagues' personal experiences and perspectives. One particular senior manager I once worked with conducted regular one-on-one meetings with his employees, and adapted his style of communication to better suit the individual. By doing this, he was in a stronger position to understand their career aspirations and take preventative action in regards to any concerns raised.

It is important for inclusive leaders to gain an awareness of their own preferences and unconscious biases, and take action to correct these patterns in the ways they interact with their employees. Some leaders truly value diverse workforces because they recognise the robust and actionable decisions such teams produce, even if they take longer to come together. But these managers also take responsibility for making certain that staff members are clear of their responsibilities within the inclusive culture of the workplace.

Leaders advocate accountability through diversity metrics. At face value, diversity can come across as abstract and tokenistic, but as it gains momentum in business, more statistics are being published to evidence its value. Organisations have started making detailed examinations of the relationship between sets of metrics over time, such as how the composition of job applicants correlates with successful applicants, and how this correlates with those who make useful contributions during their employment. Another popular set of metrics is that of retention rate tracking between different groups: the rates at which promotions are awarded, how long this progress took, and how many staff members leave the company. Metrics of this sort help companies to monitor their wellbeing, and diagnose any issues that may arise.

Organisations must position inclusive leadership – encouraging initiatives and substantial evidence of results – as a priority. By allotting time to diversity and inclusion efforts such as staff networking and steering groups, leaders take proactive measures. This way, clear expectations are set, objectives are laid out and achieved within certain time frames. Goals correlate with recruitment, promotion, allocation of tasks, opportunities for professional development and customer engagement. Taking these measures can

make significant improvements to staff confidence and engagement.

Leadership role model – a varied array of leaders signal a top down commitment to diversity, which also provides emerging leaders with role models to identify with and model.

A leadership role model will demonstrate a top-down dedication to diversity. Inclusive management is about implementing a change in company attitude, and on average this takes between two and three years to really establish. During this period, it is important to bear in mind that all organisations will experience fluctuations, with the likes of retirements, redundancies and restructures, and these circumstances may temporarily change the sustainability of progressive changes. Leaders who make inclusiveness a priority during these changes must ensure that staff members feel engaged and valued.

Ultimately, inclusiveness must be viewed as a core value of the organisation if it is to withstand any trial period – not as a token gesture or a passing craze. Inclusive leadership means working hard, thinking clearly and teaming up. In the words of Olympian Steve Redgrave: "It's not always a bed of roses, but the blend of characters makes the strength of the team."

References:

[1] [https://hbr.org/2013/09/great-leaders-](https://hbr.org/2013/09/great-leaders-who-make-the-mix-work)

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[2] http://gender.bitc.org.uk/system/files/research/inclusive_leadership_culture_change_for_business_success.pdf

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Inspired by the Gandhi quote "be the change you want to see in the world", Snéha Khilay, founder of Blue Tulip is a specialist diversity and management/leadership consultant working in the UK and internationally. She has advised Board Members, CEO, Executive Directors, and Senior Managers on how to develop a strategic and operational approach to problem solving, particularly in relation to the changing stance on diversity, equality and unconscious bias.

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