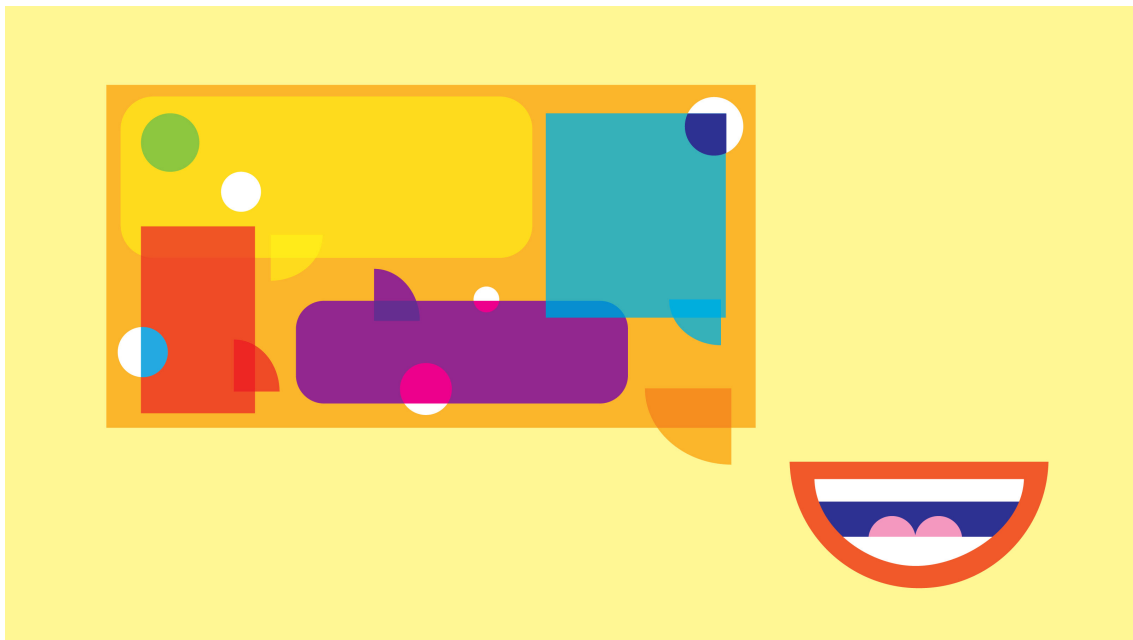


Leadership

What Inclusive Leaders Sound Like

by Noah Zandan and Lisa Shalett

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Summary. Leaders across virtually every industry are pledging to be more inclusive; but if their actions and behaviors don't support those values, the progress stops there. In their recent study, the authors applied a combination of computational linguistics, vocal mapping, and facial micro-expression analysis to... [more](#)

When leaders commit to building an inclusive organization, they tend to start with the company mission, vision, values, and a promise to ensure everyone in the organization has a voice. But if they don't

change the way they communicate every day with their employees, leaders are missing a crucial piece.

In a recent analysis, our team at Quantified Communications examined how inclusive leaders talk. The findings revealed that, despite the stated emphasis on inclusion, very few leaders have actually developed an inclusive communication style.

The Analysis

The research began by asking a diverse panel of 50 communication experts (who specialize in areas such as speech, rhetoric, social influence, and organizational communication) to watch 30 speakers and evaluate whether they were truly inclusive in key moments. The set of 50 experts, all holding advanced degrees (and more than half, PhDs), was 70% white, Hispanic, or Latinx, 20% Black, 8% Asian, and 2% biracial or multiracial. After observing the speakers, they rated each on a one-to-seven Likert scale.

Next, those same 30 speakers' communication behaviors were analyzed using Quantified's proprietary computational linguistics, vocal mapping, and facial micro-expression analysis. What words did they use? What pronouns? What phrases? What did they do with their voices, faces, and body language?

The team then evaluated both sets of results (the analysis of the speakers' behaviors plus the audience's impressions) to determine which leadership behaviors drive audiences to perceive leaders as inclusive. Then, they benchmarked the inclusive leaders' behaviors relative to a large dataset of senior leaders at Fortune 1,000 firms who had been evaluated on the same communication behaviors (word choice, vocal patterns, non-verbal cues). The goal was to ensure the communication behaviors identified as inclusive were unique to the pool of inclusive leaders (and not just behaviors all senior leaders tend to exhibit).

The research was focused on answers to two questions: First, what are the essential behaviors that make an audience feel genuinely included by a leader? And second, how much more frequently do inclusive leaders exhibit these behaviors relative to the average leader in the same position?

The Top Three Communication Behaviors of Inclusive Leaders

Using More Audience-Centered Language

According to the research, inclusive leaders use language that is personalized to their audience 36% more frequently than the average senior leader. In other words, they make an effort to put their audiences first and adapt messages to their needs, values, interests, and demographic makeup of the people who are listening.

To accomplish this, take the time to understand your audience, and adjust your messaging accordingly. What language, anecdotes, references, or examples will they relate to? Think deeply about the underlying themes or values that brought your audience together to identify something they have in common. If they're employees that are part of an ERG group, present company-wide initiatives with a direct reference to how it impacts the group's objectives. If the audience is investors, they'll want to hear about the same initiatives in terms of ROI; if they're sustainably minded consumers, address the environmental impact of the initiatives.

It's also important to remember that your audience's perspective may be different from your own. For example, a corporate leader recently spoke to his employees about resilience and productivity during Covid-19. But his examples were limited to personal anecdotes about escaping to his out-of-state vacation home where he could "get away from it all." Meanwhile, the employees in the audience were largely based in New York City, where they'd converted their home apartments into offices for themselves and schools for their children, where they had no easy escape, and where they were working to the sound of protests outside their windows. This leader didn't stop to

think about his audience’s point of view, and as a result, his message was unrelatable, tone deaf, and likely caused feelings of resentment rather than unity. To avoid this scenario, consider running key presentations past a trusted colleague or advisor who can act as a sounding board and listen specifically for signals of inclusivity (or lack thereof) in your language.

Inclusive leaders also consider the opinions of their audience — not just who they are, but what they have to say. Whether you’re leading a small team or an entire company, provide regular opportunities for people to express their needs and concerns. Ask for feedback, acknowledge it, and then implement what you can. Too often, speakers say they want to hear from the audience but fail to offer a specific opportunity for feedback or questions. And there’s no quicker way to alienate listeners than by preventing them from participating or failing to follow up if you say you will.

Use second-person pronouns (you/your/yours) in lieu of “I” to shift the focus from yourself. This allows you to embed the audience into your message. Be sensitive to gendered phrases like “listen, guys” (in informal settings) or “chairman” and use gender-inclusive alternatives such as, “team,” or “chair.”

Here’s a list of some commonly used non-inclusive language to avoid, and what to use instead:

Non-Inclusive vs. Inclusive Language		
Non-Inclusive Language	How (and Who) It Can Exclude	Inclusive Language
“I am proud of the many great achievements the company made in the last quarter, and I plan to celebrate them.”	By using “I,” the speaker appears to be claiming the credit exclusively.	“Together we made many great achievements in the last quarter; you are a truly incredible team.”
“The <i>manpower</i> in this organization is just astounding.”	The use of the term “manpower” might exclude people who don’t identify as men.	“The talent <i>this group</i> brings to this organization is just astounding.”

“Some of you will be too young to remember this, but ...”	The speaker implies the story won’t be relatable to certain audience members and signals to those people that they aren’t important to the conversation.	“In 1990, we went through a similar organizational change. Though it was challenging, our team persevered, and the leadership team is confident everyone can do the same in 2020.”
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Source: Quantified Communications

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Demonstrating Subject Matter Expertise

The research also showed inclusive leaders use language that demonstrates subject matter expertise 21% more frequently than the average senior leader. They establish themselves as experts, often by citing research, and demonstrating an ability to understand different perspectives and communicate complex topics to diverse audiences. They intentionally include language that demonstrates thorough exploration and a multifaceted understanding of the topic at hand and portrays a willingness and ability to empathetically view the issue from multiple people’s perspectives.

Why is this important? Research has identified three essential elements to interpersonal relationships: *understanding* the other, *validating* their perspective, and *caring* about their well-being. In thoroughly examining other viewpoints — including those that support their key message and those that may contradict it — leaders demonstrate both understanding and validation (and we’d argue they demonstrate caring in their sincere requests for feedback, as recommended above).

The ability of leaders to respectfully address multiple points of view (even if they may not agree) builds trust by indicating that they value and consider more than one perspective in the way they approach business decisions. Employees, in turn, feel their experiences and perspectives are heard and valued and are more likely to respect and value those of their peers and colleagues.

Here are some key behaviors that can help distinguish you as an inclusive leader:

Novice vs. Expert Communication

Novice Communication	Expert Communication	The Difference
Explains “what” with no context	Explains “what” and “why”	Asking (and answering) relevant questions that fully, wholly address a concept includes and educates your audience.
Takes sole credit	Cites sources/credits other experts	Giving credit to your influences is a powerful way to demonstrate that you’re open to other perspectives and don’t think in a vacuum.
Leans on vague language	Digs into hard data and specificity and focuses on creating clarity	Vague quantifiers like “a lot of people” or “significant gains” is ineffective. Instead, get specific. When you can deliver the numbers, you demonstrate that you’ve taken the time to understand the benefits and/or ramifications of the concept for everybody involved.
Recites a script	Prioritizes storytelling	Stories, anecdotes, and metaphors help demonstrate that you know your audience well enough to connect your message to their interests. It also shows that you know how to apply your ideas, rather than reciting information that may or may not resonate.

Demonstrating Authenticity

The analysis found that the most inclusive leaders are perceived as 22% more authentic relative to the average senior leader. What does that mean? Entrepreneur Seth Godin defines authenticity as “consistent emotional labor.”

We call a brand or a person authentic when they're consistent, when they act the same way whether or not someone is looking. Someone is authentic when their actions are in alignment with what they promise.

Authenticity as it relates to communication is a measure of an audience's perception that leaders appear genuine, are speaking naturally, and that their words match their intentions and actions. In the context of inclusive leadership, authenticity refers to a leader's ability to converse *with* audiences rather than speaking *at* them. An inauthentic speaker may adopt a different personality for one audience versus another, such as a CFO who is relational and open in one-on-one conversations but then goes into highly formal performance mode when presenting to an audience, making declarations rather than engaging.

For a positive example, PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi is one of the highest ranked speakers for authenticity in the Quantified database, which contains more than 200,000 communication samples, evaluated by diverse audience panels on 30-plus facets of communication — both conscious and subconscious — that drive audience perception. Nooyi's tone is relaxed and natural — she's using her own voice and not a contrived “stage” voice. Her gestures, too, feel appropriate to the points she is making. While less authentic speakers may appear stiff or overly grandiose in the way they gesture on stage, Nooyi uses her hands freely and organically to underscore her message — just as she might do in a casual conversation with a friend.

A natural communication style, as opposed to one that feels overly curated or rehearsed, conveys that a speaker truly believes in what they are saying. They're engaging and memorable; they can connect deeply with their audiences and simultaneously encourage the group of people listening to be attentive and receptive to the message. Their intention is to promote understanding.

Of course, there are things speakers need to do differently when they're speaking in public versus one-on-one, from projecting more to moving differently to be sure even the people in the back row catch the message. But the opportunity is to do all this without appearing as though it's a performance. Here are some ways to authentically connect with your audience through genuine emotions, mannerisms, and conviction in a message:

Inauthentic vs. Authentic Behavior

Inauthentic Behavior	Authentic Behavior	Why Is it important?
Reading directly from a script	Mastering your subject matter	Reading directly from a script can signal a variety of negative messages: Is the speaker underprepared? Is the speaker nervous? Instead, familiarize yourself with your talking points and subject matter to help you sound more conversational.
Over-memorizing/ choreographing	Speaking and moving naturally/conversationally	Natural body language and nonverbal cues that you might use in casual conversation help include the audience in your message. This brings them into the conversation emotionally rather than just mentally.

Aloofness/stoicism	Showing emotion	Allow your emotions to show in your presentation. If you're excited about your message, let your facial expressions, voice, and gestures show that. Likewise, if you're delivering bad news, allow your audience to see how you feel about it.
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Source: Quantified Communications

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The findings of this study help pinpoint the difference between stated intention and actual leadership outcomes. We're witnessing so many leaders across virtually every industry pledge to be more inclusive, but if their actions and behaviors don't support those values, the progress stops there. The good news is that communication is a behavior that can be analyzed, learned, and mastered, just like any science.

Noah Zandan is the CEO and Co-Founder of Quantified Communications, a firm that combines data and behavioral analytics to help people measure and strengthen the way they communicate. Quantified Communications works globally with leaders of corporations, government organizations, higher education institutions, sales teams, nonprofits, and hundreds of TED speakers.

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