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The Key to Inclusive Leadership

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What makes people feel included in organizations? Feel that they are treated fairly and respectfully, are valued and belong? Many things of course, including an organization's mission, policies, and practices, as well as co-worker behaviors.

But mostly it comes down to leaders. We find that what leaders say and do makes up to a 70% difference as to whether an individual reports feeling included. And this really matters because the more people feel included, the more they speak up, go the extra mile, and collaborate — all of which ultimately lifts organizational performance.

Given this formula, inclusive leadership is emerging as a unique and critical capability helping organizations adapt to diverse customers, markets, ideas and talent. Our previous research found that inclusive leaders share a cluster of six signature traits:

1. **Visible commitment:** They articulate authentic commitment to diversity, challenge the status quo, hold others accountable, and make diversity and inclusion a personal priority.
2. **Humility:** They are modest about capabilities, admit mistakes, and create the space for others to contribute.
3. **Awareness of bias:** They show awareness of personal blind spots, as well as flaws in the system, and work hard to ensure a meritocracy.
4. **Curiosity about others:** They demonstrate an open mindset and deep curiosity about others, listen without judgment, and seek with empathy to understand those around them.
5. **Cultural intelligence:** They are attentive to others' cultures and adapt as required.
6. **Effective collaboration:** They empower others, pay attention to diversity of thinking and psychological safety, and focus on team cohesion.

This sounds like a laundry list, so it's not surprising that we are regularly asked which is *the* most important trait. The answer depends on who is asking. If it's the leader, commitment is the most critical, because without it, the other five attributes can't be fully developed.

For those working around a leader, such as a manager, direct report or peer, the single most important trait generating a sense of inclusiveness is a leader's visible awareness of bias. To underscore this insight: Our analysis of the 360-degree Inclusive Leadership Assessments (ILA) of more than 400 leaders made by almost 4,000 raters reveals that while all six traits are important and operate as a cluster, a leader's awareness of personal and organizational biases is the number one factor that raters care most about.

Comments from raters on the ILA tell us that they particularly notice, for example, when a leader "constantly challenges (their) own bias and encourages others to be aware of their pre-conceived leanings" or when a leader seeks insight into their biases by, for example, "[Asking] others to test whether their thought process is biased in any way."

But this is not all. Raters are not looking for a simple acknowledgment of bias, tinged with a fatalistic sense that little can be done about it. They care about awareness of bias *coupled with* two additional behaviors:

- ***Humility:*** Raters want to see that their leaders are determined to address their biases. Fatalism looks like "Hey, I know I have this prejudice, but whatever, I am what I am." In contrast, leaders who are humble acknowledge their vulnerability to bias and ask for feedback on their blind spots and habits.For example, one direct report told us that their leader "is very open and vulnerable about her weaknesses, which she mentions when we undergo team development workshops. She shares her leadership assessments openly with the team and often asks for feedback and help to improve." Our research shows that when cognizance of bias is combined with high levels of humility it can increase raters' feelings of inclusion by up to 25%.
- ***Empathy and perspective taking:*** Raters aren't looking for their leaders to try to understand their viewpoint and experience as a dry intellectual exercise, but empathically. That means understanding others deeply and leaving them feeling heard. For example, one rater commented "[The leader's] empathy in interacting with others, makes [the leader] approachable, trustworthy and shows [their] eagerness to work with and/or support peers, colleagues and superiors." When cognizance of bias is combined with high levels of empathy/perspective-taking, it can increase raters' feelings of inclusion by up to 33%.

Why are humility and empathy so important in this context? Humility encourages others to share their feedback (e.g., that a leader might have favorites or have a tendency to interrupt people or regularly ignore a class of information). Empathy and perspective taking gives people hope that a leader cares about them and takes their views into account, rather than barreling on with preconceptions or a narrow set of ideas about their perspectives. Moreover, it creates a sense of personal connection between leaders and a diverse set of stakeholders, making it easier to make and implement shared decisions.

Putting the traits to work

How can leaders put these insights into practice? One tactic is to establish a diverse personal advisory board (PAD) — a group of people, often peers, who have regular contact with the leader and whom the leader trusts to talk straight. These trusted advisers can give leaders granular feedback on everyday interpersonal behaviors that support or inhibit inclusion, for example: Does the leader give equal time to all meeting participants, or favor those who are co-located over those who have dialed in? Does the leader always refer to one gender when giving examples or both? Does the leader use a broad spectrum of imagery when addressing a diverse audience, or imagery (such as sport metaphors or all male iconography) that represents only one group of people? Because a PAD is ongoing, leaders can receive feedback on whether the changes they make are hitting the mark.

A second tactic is for leaders to share their learning journey about recognizing and addressing biases. We have seen leaders do this by discussing their 360 assessment results with their manager, speaking at a town hall about their growth or creating a standing item in weekly team meetings ("inclusion moments"), during which they or a team member identifies what they have learned that week about diversity and inclusion. These actions express humility, help leaders to test and build on their insights and role model the importance of humility in addressing biases.

A third tactic is for leaders to immerse themselves in uncomfortable or new situations which expose them to diverse stakeholders, for example by attending an Employee Resource Group meeting, or sitting in different parts of the workplace each week. Exposure, combined with open-ended questions, helps to expand horizons and disrupt pre-conceived ideas.

Inclusive leadership is a critical capability to leverage diverse thinking in a workforce with increasingly diverse markets, customers, and talent. We have previously observed that only one in three leaders holds an accurate view about their inclusive leadership capabilities. A third believe they are more inclusive than they are actually perceived by those around them to be, while a third lack confidence in their inclusive leadership capability and so do less than they could to actively guide others and challenge the status quo.

Becoming more aware is critical to self-development, but awareness in isolation is not sufficient. Without humility and empathy/perspective taking, it's difficult for leaders to gain deep insights into the nature of their blind spots or remedial strategies and, therefore, to grow. This requires effort, but fortunately the circle of learning is virtuous. Leaders who are humble and empathetic will be open to criticism about their personal biases, and greater self-insight into personal limitations prompts greater humility, empathy and perspective-taking. Not only are these behaviors critical for leaders' personal development, they also serve to make others feel more included along the way. And that is, of course, the objective.

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