The Day-To-Day Experiences of Workplace Inclusion and Exclusion

CATALYST

About the Catalyst Research Centers

The Catalyst Research Center for Equity in Business Leadership examines and documents workforce demographics and their impact on employees, companies, communities, and society. In particular, the Center identifies how women's underrepresentation affects corporate governance and executive teams, and it explores how diverse leadership contributes to business success. By verifying gaps in representation and creating results-oriented solutions, the Center's findings and recommendations help organizations diversify leadership.

The Catalyst Research Center for Career Pathways exposes root causes of gender gaps from the classroom to the boardroom, conducting research that sorts myth from fact, identifies the true problems that hold women and other underrepresented groups back from advancement, and provides a solid basis for more effective talent development. The Center's findings allow businesses, media, governments, and individuals to gauge women's progress and develop solutions and action plans to advance women into leadership.

The Catalyst Research Center for Advancing Leader Effectiveness explores a central challenge facing today's business leaders: how to leverage employee diversity to achieve success through inclusive decision-making and talent management. The Center's research examines the nature, impact, and practice of inclusive leadership. It helps committed leaders learn how to become individual change agents, shaping the workplace culture by role modeling effective interpersonal interactions and capitalizing on opportunities to build inclusive talent management systems.

The Catalyst Research Center for Corporate Practice conducts research distinguishing sound talent management strategies from programmatic fads and documents best practices. These findings enable organizations to strategically create and support inclusive cultures for both women and men. The Center's partnership with its Expert Community, a consortium of business leaders who contribute to and act on the Center's work, informs organizational policy and practices, leading to actionable solutions and systemic change.

About Catalyst

Founded in 1962, Catalyst is the leading nonprofit organization accelerating progress for women through workplace inclusion. With operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, India, Australia, and Japan, and more than 800 supporting organizations, Catalyst is the trusted resource for research, information, and advice about women at work. Catalyst annually honors exemplary organizational initiatives that promote women's advancement with the Catalyst Award.

The Day-To-Day Experiences of Workplace Inclusion and Exclusion

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Day-to-Day Inclusion and Exclusion: Employee Experiences Matter

How do you define inclusion? Can you recall particular experiences at work when you felt included? Based on those, can you now describe what inclusion looks and feels like to you?

Now think about instances when you felt excluded. How would you describe those experiences? Perhaps you're able to recall a specific story, image, or interaction that signaled exclusion.

Chances are you'll remember feelings of exclusion more vividly than those of inclusion. For many people, negative events are more memorable or stand out more than positive events.[1] This means that efforts to facilitate inclusion can be hidden and overshadowed by the power of exclusion.

Yet, on a day-to-day basis, employees' experiences of inclusion and exclusion often coexist. Inclusion and exclusion do not occur in isolation and are not absolutes. For example, you can be on a conference call where colleagues actively listen to and give full consideration to one another's viewpoints. Then, soon after, you can walk into a team meeting and sit in silence because you feel like your contributions won't matter. One does not negate the other; they exist together.

Employees reported feeling *included* when they experienced both:[2]

- A sense of **uniqueness**—that they are recognized and valued for their specific attributes and contributions.

- A sense of **belonging**—that they are welcomed and valued as part of their workgroups and among their colleagues.

Employees experience a sense of *exclusion* when they feel: [3]

- Devalued, dismissed, or ignored for the unique qualities they bring to the table.

- Like outsiders because of their differences (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, age, religion, sexual orientation, and, in some cases, job role or formal position of power).

THE RETURNS ON INCLUSION AND COSTS OF EXCLUSION

By effectively managing the coexistence of inclusion and exclusion, leaders ensure that their organizations and their employees both reap the **return on inclusion** and mitigate the **cost of exclusion**.

But just what are those returns and costs?

- Catalyst research shows, for example, that when employees feel valued for their uniqueness and have a sense of belonging, they report feeling more team-oriented and innovative.[4]

- Other researchers have found that exclusion comes at great cost to organizations in the form of compromised job satisfaction,[5] lower sense of well-being,[6] reduced work effort,[7] diminished employee voice,[8] and greater intention to leave.[9]

> This report explores inclusion and exclusion in more concrete terms by examining employees' daily workplace experiences.

Based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with employees at 42 organizations based in Canada, China, India, Mexico, and the United States, we found:

- **Invisibility:** Experiences of inclusion are often invisible—challenging to describe, difficult to pinpoint, and, yet, in many workplaces, the expected norm.

- **Salience:** Experiences of exclusion are more salient, immediately recognizable, and are more readily recalled.

- **Coexistence:** Experiences of inclusion and exclusion often coexist in day-to-day interactions, reflecting both the complex and seemingly nebulous nature of inclusion and vivid experiences of exclusion.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The *Culture Matters* series is a global study focused on how organizations can build inclusive cultures. Previous reports include *Culture Matters: Unpacking Change and Achieving Inclusion* and *Think People, Not Just Programs, to Build Inclusive Workplaces*.

By exploring the voices of employees across 42 organizations in five countries (Canada, China, India, Mexico, and the United States), we build on this series by examining the day-to-day experiences of workplace inclusion and exclusion.[10] Through actionable recommendations, we share strategies and implications for leaders looking to amplify experiences of inclusion in their own workplace cultures.

What You Will Learn From This Report

The invisibility of inclusion, salience of exclusion, and coexistence of inclusion and exclusion pose a challenge to leaders. A lot of time, attention, and resources go into preventing or addressing exclusionary behaviors and practices. While those steps are essential, leaders must also proactively create solutions to make inclusion visible. To achieve this, leaders must be equipped with the skills and resources required to effectively manage employees' day-to-day reality: the coexistence of inclusion and exclusion.

By illustrating some of these experiences in *employees' own voices* and sharing strategies to cultivate inclusion, this report will show leaders how to:

- Make inclusion visible by:

  ✓ Creating a shared understanding of and vision for inclusion.

  ✓ Rewarding mindsets and behaviors that enable such transformation.

- Interrupt exclusionary behaviors by:

  ✓ Promoting and engaging in authentic dialogue.

  ✓ Ensuring the connection between what you say and what you do is crystal clear to employees.

- Manage inclusion's and exclusion's coexistence by:

  ✓ Paying attention to human elements, rather than relying on programs to drive change.

  ✓ Monitoring progress, challenges, and setbacks.

Inclusion: Employees Want It Yet Struggle to "See" It

Inclusion is like air: all around but ungraspable, intangible, invisible. Those we interviewed found it difficult to describe just what inclusion means to them. When asked to define inclusion, participants' responses either lacked a clear focus or seemed disconnected from other initiatives or elements of the organization's culture.

Some interviewees described inclusion as a workplace expectation, a starting point. Simply put, individuals expect to be treated with respect, dignity, collegiality, and kindness—in other words, inclusively. Interviewees did not view such behaviors as extraordinary or exceptionally inclusive, but rather, a part of the day-to-day experience: the assumption that human decency is a universal expectation.[11]

> *We should have an expectation of how we are going to interact with and treat one another irrespective of differences….It is almost like, well, you have proven that you can be open-minded and inclusive or whatever you want to say about different cultures, different genders, and different points of view. So, great, let's give you a medal for that. As opposed to you are a decent human being.*
>
> *—Woman, United States*

> *Teamwork, collegiality, respect, enthusiasm, energy, building relationships based on doing what's right….We're so focused on helping each other because that's how we all succeed and how our clients succeed. It's just a key part of [the work experience] from the moment you walk in the door.*
>
> *—Woman, Canada*

Other interviewees were able to describe the concept of inclusion intellectually, recognizing the factors that contribute to inclusion at a more abstract level. This included generalizations about feelings, such as references to broad concepts like "comfort" and "normalcy," associated with an overall sense of "the way things are." The more tangible aspects of an inclusive environment, such as distinct experiences, particular types of interactions, or specific emotions that arise in response to identified elements of the organizational culture or the behavior of colleagues, as well as how inclusion is achieved, were not as easily described.

For example, one interviewee described a feeling of normalcy and relates the culture of inclusion as something that occurs spontaneously, glossing over what exactly happens to create that feeling or how it comes about:

> *Here, you also feel very normal….Before, when foreigners come into the office or join, we feel very strange. There is something [that] happens. But now you will think this is a very normal work environment for you. So you get familiar with this part; you gradually get comfortable with all the things [that] happen here.*
>
> *—Man, China*

The difficulty in describing inclusion has implications beyond the basic challenge of not being able to find the right words to capture the feeling it imparts. Our findings suggest an inability to fully grasp not only what the outcome of inclusion feels like, but also *the ways in which inclusion is realized*. As a result, inclusion can easily be taken for granted or overlooked.

Workplace Diversity *Is* Visible—But It's Not the Same as Inclusion

To further complicate matters, some interviewees spoke primarily about representational diversity— that is, the perceived or actual presence of individuals from different backgrounds. This may be indicative of the fact that, while inclusion is often invisible and difficult to define, the presence of individuals from different backgrounds is visible and describable. For example, when asked how inclusive their organization is, some interviewees remarked on having more teammates of different racial and ethnic groups, seeing increases in colleagues from different nationalities, the growing presence of women across levels, or a noted uptick in the number of out LGBT employees.

Again, this indicates that perhaps it was easier for interviewees to point to workforce diversity as a barometer of whether or not the environment is inclusive. But diversity and inclusion are different. While diversity refers to the composition of a work group—namely, whether different demographic groups are represented—inclusion speaks to a person's ability to contribute to and fully participate in the workplace.[12] Inclusion is also realized through the combined recognition of employees' sense of uniqueness and belongingness.[13] The problem is that observable growth in diversity was often mistakenly conflated with or considered a definition of inclusion, which it is not. Observing progress on representational diversity within their organizations, some interviewees then equated that to inclusion, questioning whether their organizations should even prioritize inclusion further.

Maybe we need a bit more stability. We've gone [through] a period of a lot of changes. Maybe the inclusion is just another diversity— is just another topic, another target, another objective. And maybe we need to slow down the pace of the changes. Maybe live a period of more stability. Then we can focus back on diversity. I don't know.

—Man, Canada

Others, such as this woman from India, understood the value of diversity but questioned whether her organization's efforts would lead to real change.

I was listening to people talk about diversity and gender diversity, and I think there is…the need to have more balance of gender at the workplace… but whether that really impacts attitudes of people, what kind of change in attitudes is happening is in my mind a question mark.

—Woman, India

Still others questioned their organization's prioritization of inclusion, expressing doubts about the value of continuing to push for change.

I certainly wouldn't hesitate to bring [up inclusion, but]…when that was discussed it was like, "OK….let's be careful how much we focus on that…." Whether I feel empowered to champion change or not, that doesn't necessarily equate with how likely I think it is that something will be followed through on.

—Woman, United States

Mistaking representational diversity for inclusion poses a distinct challenge to leaders seeking to gain buy-in for their organization's inclusion efforts.

Personal Connections Were the Most-Often Cited Example of Inclusion

While interviewees struggled to define inclusion or confused it with representational diversity, one specific facet of inclusion was most often cited: personal connection, such as feelings of being comfortable with or connected to team members or other colleagues. Such responses included descriptions of incidents that speak to strong relationships and respectful, collaborative, or transparent interpersonal communication.

There is lots of respect. People won't shy away from saying something but there is no nastiness. [It's] more polished, kind, gentle.

—Woman, India

I hear a bunch of things about [my company's] culture, many of which, I think, are conducive to women feeling comfortable in an organization. So I hear, for example, it's a very nice culture…no yelling…There's a real focus on collaboration…there's an expression "threw him under the bus" or "threw her." This is an organization where if somebody does that, if somebody tells you they're going to support you and they don't or, [they] step back and let you take the hit, that's noted. It's not just the way things happen. It's like, "OK, that person threw that person under the bus." I'm not saying that that never happens. It's just it's not aligned with [our] culture.

—Woman, Canada

We are a people-first organization and [putting] people first is what we do….We do people-pulse surveys, which is really almost like upward feedback…it's geared toward understanding people…it's more about their growth, about their relationship[s].

—Man, Canada

Similarly, when asked about inclusion and company culture, others described opportunities to make a contribution as a way to connect with colleagues and their work.

You're part of something that helps to lead or create a positive impact on people's lives. For example, our leadership development programs…I can see that what we talked about has created something very positive in that person [who participated in the program]….I can see that I'm helping people to think and to act differently….I cannot think of another job…that can be that meaningful.

—Woman, China

Bringing Inclusion Into View: Solutions for Leaders

To facilitate workplace inclusion, organizations must build on current progress and successes.[14] When individuals are unable to make links to their personal experiences and stories in relation to inclusive experiences, this reinforces inclusion's invisibility. So if employees can't "see" or describe inclusion, how can leaders continue to advance or refine what is or is not working? And how can leaders move beyond representational diversity to true cultural inclusion if employees fail to understand the distinction between them?

There is a clear opportunity for leaders to help employees become more attuned to inclusive behaviors. Making behaviors, programs, and policies visible and engaging employees in the change process are essential. The suggested solutions included here are not contingent on specific programs or policies but, rather, speak to how day-to-day, people-focused interactions can bring inclusion to life[15] and into view.

Two ways leaders can take action now are by:

1. **Developing a Shared Understanding and Language:** Develop—and use—a shared understanding and language of inclusion that distinguishes it from diversity.

   ✓ Start by asking employees to share examples of two distinct experiences: a time when they were in a group (e.g., a work team) in which people felt valued, heard, and included; and then a time when they felt singled out or dismissed.

   ✓ Discuss the difference and validate your employees' experiences. Listen carefully for words, feelings, and experiences that capture inclusion. Leverage these expressions and viewpoints to craft a shared vision and common language of inclusion.[16]

   ✓ Use this vision to set the tone for how to make team meetings, feedback sessions, and one-on-one exchanges more effective, creating opportunities for deliberate and concrete steps that will personalize inclusion and make it more visible and relatable. Actively role model desired behaviors to help humanize the inclusion experience for your employees and encourage sustained progress.

   • **Visibly and Explicitly Rewarding Inclusive Behavior:** Hold yourself and others on your team accountable for creating and broadcasting a shared vision of inclusion. Develop a system of visible rewards for employees who demonstrate inclusive behaviors. Give these examples "air-time" to reinforce inclusive behaviors and set the precedent that inclusion is part of the day-to-day, not just something that occurs privately or only during particular activities.

The Cumulative Effect of Repeated Exclusionary Experiences

If inclusion is the air we breathe, exclusion is suffocating. Experiences of workplace exclusion are powerful and, unlike inclusion, keenly visible. Interviewees much more readily recalled and related stories of workplace exclusion than they did inclusion.

Our analysis showed that, for certain employee groups, women in particular, it is the accumulation of these experiences that can be most painful, most difficult to overcome, and overshadow feelings of workplace inclusion. Other research similarly finds negative emotions or experiences to be quite powerful.[17]

Several key exclusionary events or forms of treatment emerged as among the deepest cuts experienced by interviewees: tokenism, bias and stereotyping, and mixed messages related to flexible work arrangements (FWAs) and work-life effectiveness. Over time, these experiences— when employees feel singled out, undervalued, or unheard, perhaps based on their membership in a particular social group (e.g., gender, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion)—corrode the work environment.

Tokenism Is Exclusionary, and Employees Resent It

Being or perceiving oneself as the "only" or the "other" [18] in the workgroup was not considered a positive experience. Interviewees described feelings of isolation, particularly when asked about how colleagues who represent non-dominant groups are perceived in their organizations. For example:

People try to behave in a way that sometimes doesn't feel natural. They try to be extremely happy or extremely friendly to Hispanics or extremely friendly to Black people….It feels that they are doing [this] because they are aware you are Hispanic, and they want to make sure that you don't think they are racist or that they are discriminating [against] you because of that….. It makes me feel sometimes that I am part of a minority and not part of the whole [work] group….What I would really like to feel inside is just to be seen as normal and not to be seen as an Hispanic every time I step into a room. People know [I'm] different. They talk about diversity, and they immediately say "Oh my God, this is such a diverse group." That's such a cliché, and I don't want to be the one building diversity. I just want to be another person maybe with a diversity of thought, a person with different experiences that could bring something different, but not a person that is just diverse because I look different.

—Woman, United States

Biases and Stereotyping Are Insidious

Biases—implicit associations or attitudes that inform our perceptions of other people or groups[19]— are often masked as cultural norms, excused as the result of poor communication rather than malintent, or explained away as simple ignorance. Nevertheless, biases are exclusionary. In fact, subtle forms of bias and stereotyping can be particularly harmful as they can feel harder to identify and combat.[20] While these subtle biases can be more easily dismissed in the moment, their effects are no less acutely felt and can linger and accumulate.

Other experiences of stereotypes are masked by so-called humor, either in the form of "jokes" or harsh comments followed by laughter, as if to offset what was said. Some interviewees talked about how jokes were used to talk about stereotypes about women's and men's competency at work. These offhand remarks are harmful, not humorous.

There is still no appreciation of the differences [or] an appreciation for a woman's vision. There is no appreciation for the contribution of different demographic groups can provide…. Stereotypes about men and women are hidden by humor. Things like: "Yeah, yeah, that team is having trouble because there are too many women there," or "That's because men are not good multi-taskers."

—Woman, Mexico

Certain experiences of exclusion are more blatant. Regardless of antidiscrimination laws and policies, these overt behaviors are still commonplace all over the world.[21] In particular, women interviewees across all regions reported feeling excluded and undervalued because of their gender. This is largely due to gender stereotypes and cultural norms that our interviewees experienced.

Things have evolved, but there is a machista idiosyncrasy [a traditional Mexican cultural norm of male dominance]. Although it is no longer done openly, [men] judge [women] harshly. If you fail, they reprimand you more harshly. If they give you an achievement, they say to you, "Good, but it was your responsibility anyway."

—Woman, Mexico

The basic attitude toward a woman in the workplace is that a woman is there because she's looking for a hobby. This is not really her main thing. Whereas, a man is working because that is what he has to do. A woman is working because she's kind of indulging herself.

—Woman, India

I think that people make the effort to not make [exclusion]…noticed. But you can feel that in the end there's something…telling you they are making a differentiation because you are a woman…In the way they make decisions, in the way they hear you and accept your point of view…They try not to show it, but you kind of feel that deep in there, there is something.

—Woman, United States

If a woman is so strong, is very capable, in [the] China workplace….we will probably not be well accepted by the society. They say, "Oh, this woman is not like a woman [should be]."

—Woman, China

[Sometimes] other women in the office say, "I [have] to go pick up my kids, and the husband, or some guy here in the office says, "I [have] to go pick up my kids," and somebody always makes the comment, "Don't you have your wife do that for you?"

—Woman, Canada

Employees Hear Mixed Messages on Work-Life Effectiveness Loud and Clear

Women and men alike repeatedly recounted experiencing exclusionary behavior related to flexible work arrangements and managing work-life effectiveness. While the human resources and diversity and inclusion practitioners we interviewed could point to seemingly inclusive policies, employees' day-to-day experiences painted a different picture of the lived reality.

I have a new boss, and…I find that I'm struggling to understand [his approach to flexibility] because…he [says], "I want to know when you are working from home. I want to know when, where you are. I want to know what you're having for lunch." That was just how detailed he wanted, and we were all kind of taken aback, thinking "Wait a minute. Is it because he doesn't trust us?"

—Woman, Canada

[There are] people that are in the inner leadership or the senior management positions who have the authority or it's at their discretion as to whether or not to let their staff telecommute or flex their time. I find the men to be more resistant to that idea than the women. I hear stuff like, "No, you have to be here," or "What if something happens?"….I have heard from a couple of people that readily admit that they are not comfortable with that. "I'm more old school in that way. I need to see the people. I need to know what they are doing." Of the folks that don't have the same kind of flexibility, those departments…seem to have men at the helm.

—Woman, United States

Healing Exclusionary Experiences: Solutions for Leaders

When an employee has repeated experiences of exclusion, it can result in a reduction in productivity,[22] engagement,[23] and even in the employee's own sense of self-worth.[24] This can have costs at the individual, team, and organizational levels.[25]

Relying on expressions such as "we value diversity" and "everybody counts" backfires when some employees feel undervalued, uncounted, and excluded. A disconnect between an organization's espoused values and its actual practices can leave employees feeling underestimated and demoralized.

To interrupt exclusionary behaviors and avoid this disconnect, leaders must:

1. Promote authentic action and dialogue.

2. Make sure the connection between what you say and what you do is crystal clear to employees.

Day-to-day ways in which leaders can achieve this include:

- Instead of just saying, "People matter," take the time to set up one-on-one meetings, not only with your direct reports but also with employees two to three levels down just to get to know them.

- Pay attention to whose voices are being heard, whose opinions are being validated, and who is being ignored or dismissed during meetings, then interrupt these behaviors by:

  ✓ Actively seeking feedback from people who don't usually contribute.

  ✓ Role modeling the inclusive behavior that diverse opinions have value by repeating them and building on them as the discussion evolves.

  ✓ Giving credit—and visibility—where credit is due by clarifying when someone is recognized for contributing an idea that was, in fact, raised by someone else earlier during the meeting.

- Don't just gather metrics—go behind the numbers to explore what's really going on! For instance, after collecting metrics on the use of FWAs:

  ✓ Ask employees who use FWAs and their supervisors how the use of those programs and policies impacts their work relationships and their perceptions of the work culture.

✓ Ask employees who don't use FWAs why they don't and how their colleagues' use of FWAs affects them and their perception of the work culture.

• Review, revisit, and revamp existing practices to uncover exclusionary norms.

• Lead efforts to upgrade existing systems (e.g., employee surveys, team meeting guidebooks) to help root out hidden exclusionary norms, expectations, and practices as necessary. Uncovering exclusion in your organization is not a sign of failure but, rather, an opportunity for growth.

Employees' Day-to-Day Reality: Inclusion and Exclusion Coexist

Treating inclusion and exclusion as all-or-nothing, one separate and distinct from the other, fails to reflect employees' day-to-day workplace reality: inclusion and exclusion coexist. On any given day, employees experience both inclusive and exclusionary interactions.

For example, an employee may feel grateful for her company's leadership development program, but at the same time dread interactions with team members because she feels her ideas are constantly dismissed in meetings. Both of these experiences can exist simultaneously. Yet, the inclusive experience can be hidden or invisible, while the exclusionary experience overshadows the employee's excitement related to the new leadership program.

Our findings show one striking way that inclusion and exclusion coexist: when employees experience a disconnect between the presence of formal programs or policies and the day-to-day reality of informal norms that allow exclusion to arise.

As formal efforts to increase inclusion expand, the persistence of exclusionary experiences can be frustrating and disillusioning to employees who fail to see the dots being connected between what the organization says it is doing and what they feel they are experiencing. This does not mean formal approaches aren't working or shouldn't be implemented. It does mean, however, that those formal approaches do not represent the whole story for employees.

In the bigger picture, interviewees acknowledged exclusionary behaviors persisting within inclusive environments when asked about their organizational climate:

I think there is an element of both. I think there is support… But, I also think that to some extent…I think for the female leaders we have experienced [not being supported] and have felt it and feel that it is being done to us at least at various different points.

—Woman, Canada

I will tell you that here one of the things that I have really enjoyed is the fact that there doesn't seem to be that differentiation between male and female within our company. Everyone gets an equal seat. It's really a non-issue. [...And yet at the same time,] I think women…they don't automatically get the respect and credibility that might come to others more naturally. I think women have to work harder to build that credibility and respect, and authority as well. I see a difference just here at our company, especially with the older generation, where the reaction to a male in a management position—it's like an instant respect whereas with women it needs to be earned.

—Woman, United States

Leaders who are unequipped to address this reality as a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" will fall short. If inclusion is to take root within an organization, leaders must be able to simultaneously acknowledge and manage the good, the bad, and the ugly of their employees' day-to-day experiences—the positive strides, the difficult times, and everything in between.

Companies often institute formal practices and policies to promote inclusion, but these formal practices aren't always operationalized into informal norms. While expressing appreciation for their organizations' effort to promote formal inclusive workplace policies and practices, interviewees repeatedly described observing a gap between those formal approaches and the organizations' informal norms. In short, they felt their organizations could do better.

There are posters that say [how] our culture and our organization should be….The first step is telling people that it is important….It's great to say that's what we are going to do. But, if you never put that in action and don't hire a diverse and inclusive workforce…then what you said before was useless, and people don't take you seriously.

—Man, Canada

Having a practice or a policy is one part…but actually implementing it is a different story. So I think organizations today are moving towards creating policies but whether that really impacts attitudes of people, what kinds of change in attitudes [are] happening is, in my mind, a question mark.

—Woman, India

Other interviewees highlighted examples of formal inclusive practices opening the door to changes in informal norms, but questioned whether their organizations would in fact be successful at making those connections.

[At this conference] every table had a "Bullshit" sign, a "BS" sign, and if you didn't agree or you wanted to go deeper into something being discussed by a keynote or a leader, you just held up your BS sign to challenge it. I remember being there when the question got asked [of a leader], "Do you believe that our competencies are inclusive?" His response was, "Yes, because they were developed by the [company] globally, so of course they are inclusive." And up goes the BS sign at every table. He was quite taken aback, because in his heart, he truly believed [the competencies] were….We determined that over 90% of the people in the room felt that [the competencies] were not as inclusive as they could be….So here's this gift, right? What do you do with that? Is it just a data point, or do you actually jump on it?

—Woman, Canada

Closing the Gap: Everyday Solutions for Leaders

Leaders (e.g., senior executives, managers, HR or inclusion teams) are often responsible for crafting programs, policies, and practices that promote inclusion as well as developing employees to engage in inclusive behaviors. The work itself is often invisible across the organization and may seem disconnected from core business practices to many employees.

To close this gap, leaders must humanize their efforts to a broader cross-section of employees, creating visible, personal examples of what inclusion looks like in day-to-day interactions. This involves finding ways for employees to take ownership of inclusion efforts. For instance, employees could act as inclusion ambassadors who work collectively to drive and role model change. Involved and committed employees can amplify the impact of formal approaches and accelerate the integration of those approaches into the fabric of the organization's informal norms.

Ways leaders can align their intentions, words, and actions include:

- **Pay Attention to the Human Side of Change, Not Just Programs and Policies:**[26] Programs and policies only go so far if they do not address people's values, mindsets, and behaviors. To strengthen experiences of inclusion, help employees connect the dots between programs and policies and day-to-day human behaviors by:

  - ✓ **Role modeling desired inclusive behaviors:** For example, pick a different value each week, and start every meeting with a short story illustrating how you as a leader have put that value into practice. Or recognize a fellow team-member for doing the same. This helps shift the focus from impersonal, often abstract ideals to actual behaviors that show, rather than tell, the true impact of inclusion.

- **Monitor Progress and Setbacks:** Change is an iterative process that entails both successes and challenges.[27] To ensure continued progress, it is critical to constantly:

  - ✓ Engage in two-way conversation with employees.

  - ✓ Seek feedback.

  - ✓ Role model desired behaviors to make the destination clear.[28]

  - ✓ Highlight and amplify inclusion in ways that reflect what people want to see, not only in formal ways, but in informal ones, too. For instance, write a blog for the company intranet to share a success story or share an update on an initiative during a staff meeting.

  - ✓ Validate employees' experiences of exclusion by transparently acknowledging barriers and setbacks faced by the organization.

  - ✓ Share plans that illustrate an awareness of both remaining challenges and the continued progress that is possible.

To drive inclusive work cultures, leaders must help employees feel supported, heard, and valued—both in acknowledging and overcoming the negative and in celebrating and amplifying the positive. This requires shining light on and rewarding inclusive behaviors while simultaneously and proactively addressing and mitigating exclusionary behaviors that single out, overlook, and devalue individuals' unique contributions and sense of belonging. Smart leaders will embrace this challenge with courage, accountability, humility, and a commitment to creating an empowering work environment. In doing so, employees can navigate their day-to-day experiences in an authentic way and learn by the example leaders set.

Endnotes

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