

How to be an inclusive leader

Many of our intentions, thoughts and feelings are less obvious than we think they are, and this illusion of transparency means people misread behaviour, especially when they feel uncertain or threatened. You may not do anything to make people feel excluded, but because the brain's bias is towards perceiving threats rather than reassurance, you are probably sending messages of exclusion unless you make positive efforts otherwise.

WHAT TO DO to ensure you're being inclusive

Use the CORE neuroscience model as a simple way to check on your behaviours:

Certainty: is about ensuring people are in the loop. Make sure everyone is on the email list and gets invited to the meeting. Ask for contributions from the most reticent people, and the people who have dissenting ideas.

Options: ask people how they want to proceed, and give them choices in how they do their job. Being micro-managed makes people feel they are *not* included: they feel they're not trusted.

Reputation: let people know they're valued and respected. Address them by name, acknowledge their input, praise different approaches.

Equity: be fair about equal distribution of resources, and access to you as leader. Clearly articulate your purpose, your "why," to make decisions more transparent.

3 key behaviours for inclusive leadership

You'll find advocates for a variety of leadership styles (transformational, servant, authentic...) but there are elements of inclusive leadership in all these models. Focusing on understanding how the brain responds to inclusion will help you select the most useful behaviours from the long lists of "key characteristics" for inspiring leadership.

1 Pay attention to micro-behaviours

These are the minute gestures, postures and behaviours which subtly signal inclusion or exclusion: a tone of irritation or of welcome in the voice when someone speaks up; a blank expression rather than a nod of welcome. It's easy to dismiss any perception of them as a lack of robustness, and "being over-sensitive". And because they are subtle and often unconscious they can be difficult for a leader to challenge and change ("What? I didn't say anything!" is the easy come-back).

An aware leader can redress the negativity in subtle but equally powerful ways.

WHAT TO DO to role-model positive gestures

- Pull out the chair next to you when a team member you want to acknowledge comes into the room.
- "Welcome" someone into a social setting by stepping back to create space for them in a conversation group.
- Confer trust and status by walking over and leaning against a colleague's desk while you ask for their opinion.

2 Respond to people mindfully

Our ability to "read" other people (known as the Theory of Mind or mentalizing) is a special feature of humans which allows us to understand each other and work collaboratively to create things that no single individual could achieve.

Inclusive leaders can foster this kind of understanding and engagement by nudging people to focus on how other people feel, ensuring there is time for everyone to have a say.

WHAT TO DO TO model listening and attention

- Hold back on your views and listen to others first.
- Ask for people's ideas, especially the quietest team members.
- Manage meetings so everyone gets a say.
- Ask questions.
- Challenge untested assumptions by asking things like, "How do we know that's true?"

3 Build self-awareness

This is an attribute which has gone from a nice-to-have to a vital skill for inclusive leaders. We need to be open to people who are younger or different to us, and whose beliefs and behaviours which will be the "new normal" of the future. This is especially important in the early days of leadership when feedback from other people is helping us form our own awareness.

WHAT TO DO to practise self-awareness

- Instead of examining your innermost thoughts, you may find it more useful to pay attention to what other people tell you about yourself, both directly and non-verbally.
- Model this for your team by asking for feedback: "Has this been a useful discussion?" "Have I given you the help you need?" "Are we clearer about our priorities now?"
- Practise being more open to your emotions (not always easy): accept them, or resolve to change or manage them if they're counterproductive.
- Notice how your body feels in different circumstances: it's a source of information about your emotions.
- Make a meditative practice like mindfulness part of your daily life.