

# FACTSHEET

## INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

### Introduction

Those in leadership positions throughout an organisation are pivotal to creating an inclusive workplace culture. One way they can do this is by becoming inclusive leaders. Inclusive leaders are collaborative and versatile, treat all team members equally, develop personal relationships with each of them and value everyone's contribution. This inclusive leadership can in turn create a more inclusive culture. For instance, one study shows that when employees rated their managers as more ethical, there were lower rates of workplace bullying.<sup>i</sup> Another study showed that when there is a strong relationship between a manager and an employee, this can lead to increased levels of inclusion and job satisfaction.<sup>ii</sup> Leaders can also contribute by making their organisation's communications more inclusive, as well as by setting goals and targets for inclusion.

### Leader-Member Exchange

If you are a leader or a line manager, one way you can contribute to boosting inclusion is through high quality Leader-Member Exchange (LMX).<sup>iii</sup> 'High-quality' LMX entails mutual trust and respect, whereas 'low-quality' LMX is characterised by a lack of trust or respect between managers and employees. Emerging research shows that high-quality LMX is not only mutually beneficial to those involved, but also has knock-on effects that can increase levels of inclusion in the team as a whole. Leaders and managers should therefore make an active attempt to get to know each of their employees personally, and use inclusive language when communicating with teams<sup>iv</sup> for example, not making assumptions about team members' personal characteristics such as age, gender, race and sexuality.

 THE GLOBAL  
INSTITUTE  
FOR WOMEN'S  
LEADERSHIP KING'S  
College  
LONDON Santander

### Creating the Space

As well as developing individual relationships with employees and using inclusive language, leaders and managers need to think more broadly about how their day-to-day behaviour creates the space for an inclusive workplace. A genuine commitment to collaboration, a willingness to be versatile and being empathetic are all traits which contribute to leaders being perceived as more supportive of diversity and inclusion by team members.<sup>v</sup>

The actions of individuals within a leadership team are also important. A recent study found that when leadership teams were diverse, socialised together, and actively discussed their different experiences, they were more effective.<sup>vi</sup> Inventive ways of building these connections may need to be developed due to the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions and the anticipated move away from 9-5 office work.

### Demonstrate Fair Processes

Links between fairness and inclusion in the workplace are complex. Despite employer efforts to ensure fair employment practices, this has not been shown to facilitate inclusive behaviour in the workplace in all instances. Nevertheless, there is evidence that when an organisation does have fair decision-making processes, this is an important factor in determining whether employees feel a sense of safety and security at work, particularly for women and employees from a Black, Asian and other ethnic minority background.<sup>vii</sup> Yet, other studies have shown that fairness and inclusion are

further apart than we may expect. For instance, employees can feel HR decisions are based on merit but at the same time they may not feel their social identity is valued in their organisation.<sup>viii</sup> This suggests that fairness is important, but does not guarantee inclusion.

## Use Communications to Foster Inclusion

Beyond their day-to-day actions and relationships, how leaders seek to define their organisation through language and imagery has a great deal of power when it comes to creating an inclusive workplace culture. In addition, more subtle ‘diversity cues’ within the workplace environment have been shown, particularly in relation to race, to cumulatively contribute to employees’ sense of inclusion or exclusion.<sup>ix</sup> For example, a study in the US<sup>xi</sup> found that when a company had little ethnic minority representation in their communication materials, feelings of trust and comfort were low among African American employees. Conversely the highest feelings of comfort and trust were found when the company combined high ethnic minority representation in materials and explicitly referenced issues relating to race in the workplace (this is an example of an ‘identity conscious approach – explored further below). Such cues contribute to employees’ perception of what behaviours and identities are valued and supported in the organisation.<sup>xii</sup>

## Create and Sustain Inclusive Social Norms

Recent research suggests organisations can use an array of communication strategies to create and sustain social norms around diversity and inclusion. In one study in a university setting, participants were shown videos and posters of their peers displaying pro-diversity attitudes and inclusive behaviours (pro-diversity social norms). Participants who were shown these materials were less likely to endorse racist beliefs than those who were not shown the materials.<sup>xiii</sup> Similar strategies could be used in relation to a variety of characteristics such as age, gender and sexuality in a workplace setting to communicate organisational norms and expectations around inclusive behaviour, for example when training leaders and line managers.

## An ‘Identity Conscious’ Approach

Research shows that it is beneficial to adopt an ‘identity conscious’ approach to communications<sup>xiv</sup>. For instance, explicitly stating that your organisation values diversity within its workforce is likely to be more effective at promoting inclusion than ignoring the issue. Moreover, leaders can go further, by conveying that they appreciate the differing concerns that certain minority groups face, as this is likely to be more effective than blanket statements about diversity.

## Make Leaders and Managers Accountable for Inclusion

Leaders can demonstrate their commitment to inclusion by setting goals and targets for the demographic composition of a workforce, monitoring these goals and including these measurements in line managers’ performance assessments. Using measures such as these can be associated with greater feelings of inclusion from minority colleagues.<sup>xv</sup> This greater feeling of inclusion is due to organisations being seen to be putting their values into action.

## Recommendations

- Leaders and line managers are pivotal to enabling inclusive cultures to thrive.
- Include Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) targets in performance objectives to ensure that this a focus for leaders and assess effectiveness through employee survey data and 360-degree feedback mechanisms.
- Stress the importance of collaborative and empathetic leadership styles and cultivating mutual trust and respect with employees, whilst role modelling leaders who exhibit these behaviours
- Review internal processes for potential biases and ensure identity conscious diversity communications underpin your efforts to develop inclusive leaders.

## Links to further resources

- What works: Ensuring Inclusive Cultures [Report](#), [Factsheet](#) and [Briefing Paper](#)
- Everyday Inclusion case studies ([BFI](#), [Capgemini](#), [EY](#))
- [Employee experiences of non-inclusive behaviours at work Factsheet](#)
- [Leading with empathy, compassion and inclusion Factsheet](#)

## ENJOYED THIS CONTENT?

You might also like:

- [Find out more about our employment work](#)
- [Find out more about our advisory services](#)
- [Join us for one of our upcoming events](#)



Talk to one of our expert team today to learn how membership of BITC can help you take your responsible business journey further, and drive lasting global change.

## REFERENCES

<sup>i</sup> Stouten, J. et al. Discouraging Bullying: The Role of Ethical Leadership and its Effects on the Work Environment. *J. Bus. Ethics* **95**, 17–27 (2010).

<sup>ii</sup> Brimhall, K. C., Lizano, E. L. & Mor Barak, M. E. The mediating role of inclusion: A longitudinal study of the effects of leader-member exchange and diversity climate on job satisfaction and intention to leave among child welfare workers. *Child. Youth Serv. Rev.* **40**, 79–88 (2014).

<sup>iii</sup> For further information see Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995). Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: Applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6(2), 219–247. [https://doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843\(95\)90036-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843(95)90036-5)

<sup>iv</sup> Chrobot-Mason, D. Managing Racial Differences: The Role of Majority Managers' Ethnic Identity Development on Minority Employee Perceptions of Support. *Group and Organization Management* **29**, 5–31 (2004).

<sup>v</sup> Mulqueen, C., Kahn, A. & Kirkpatrick, J. S. Managers' Interpersonal Skills and Their Role in Achieving Organizational Diversity and Inclusiveness. *J. Psychol. Issues Organ. Cult.* **3**, 48–58 (2012).

<sup>vi</sup> Fulton, B. R. Engaging Differences: How Socially Diverse Organizations Can Mobilize Their Resources More Effectively. *Soc. Forces* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soaa088>

<sup>vii</sup> Oberfield, Z. W. Why are Some Agencies Perceived as more Committed to Diversity than Others? An analysis of public-sector diversity climates. *Public Manag. Rev.* **18**, 763–790 (2016).

<sup>viii</sup> Dwertmann, D. J. G., Nishii, L. H. & van Knippenberg, D. Disentangling the Fairness: Discrimination and Synergy Perspectives on Diversity Climate. *J. Manage.* **42**, 1136–1168 (2016).

<sup>ix</sup> Chrobot-Mason, D. & Thomas, K. M. Minority Employees in Majority Organizations: The Intersection of Individual and Organizational Racial Identity in the Workplace. *Hum. Resour. Dev. Rev.* **1**, 323–344 (2002).

<sup>x</sup> Purdie-Vaughns, V., Steele, C. M., Davies, P. G., Dittmann, R. & Crosby, J. R. Social Identity Contingencies: How Diversity Cues Signal Threat or Safety for African Americans in Mainstream Institutions. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* **94**, 615–630 (2008).

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid

<sup>xii</sup> Li, Y., Perera, S., Kulik, C. T. & Metz, I. Inclusion climate: A multilevel investigation of its antecedents and consequences. *Hum. Resour. Manage.* **58**, 353–369 (2019).

<sup>xiii</sup> Murrar, S., Campbell, M. R. & Brauer, M. Exposure to peers' pro-diversity attitudes increases inclusion and reduces the achievement gap. *Nat. Hum. Behav.* 1–42 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0899-5>

<sup>xiv</sup> Purdie-Vaughns, V., Steele, C. M., Davies, P. G., Dittmann, R. & Crosby, J. R. Social Identity Contingencies: How Diversity Cues Signal Threat or Safety for African Americans in Mainstream Institutions. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* **94**, 615–630 (2008).

<sup>xv</sup> Li, Y., Perera, S., Kulik, C. T. & Metz, I. Inclusion climate: A multilevel investigation of its antecedents and consequences. *Hum. Resour. Manage.* **58**, 353–369 (2019).