

## Inclusive leadership and what you need to know about it

Author: Tatenda Sayenda . January 2021

We operate in a global and diverse world, and now with the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of change has taken place economically across the world. These changes are certainly becoming the ‘new normal’ for businesses, and this requires leaders to be diverse and inclusive. *"Stresses from COVID-19 and extended isolation are driving a range of negative emotions in employees, [and] ... during times of crisis, the focus on inclusion becomes even more critical,"* said Diana Ellsworth, a partner at McKinsey & Company. Many organizations today are increasingly relying on diverse and multidisciplinary teams to perform. But for such teams to function optimally and guarantee high performance, they require an [\*inclusive leader\*](#).

### What is Inclusive Leadership?

Have you ever wondered what makes people feel included in organizations, feel that they are treated fairly and respectfully, are valued, and belong? This can be attributed to many things, including an organization’s mission, policies, and practices, as well as co-worker behaviors. But mostly it comes down to leaders. According to the Harvard Business Review, what leaders say and do makes up to a 70% difference as to whether an individual reports feeling included. This is important because the more people feel included, the more they are likely to speak up, go the extra mile, and collaborate, all of which ultimately lift [organizational performance](#).

*Inclusive leadership* is also defined as leadership that assures that all team members feel they are treated respectfully and fairly, are valued and sense that they belong, and are confident and inspired. Psychologist Edwin Hollander writes that *‘Inclusive leadership* is about relationships that can accomplish things for mutual benefit. Reaching leadership at this level means doing things with people, rather than commanding. U.K.’s Employer’s Network for Equality & Inclusion (ENEI) mentions that inclusive leaders are “aware of their own biases and preferences” and “actively seek out and consider different views and perspectives to inform better decision-making.”

### The importance of inclusive leadership

[Inclusiveness in organizations](#) is important as stated by McKinsey & Co *“In the COVID-19 crisis, inclusion and diversity matter more than ever”*. In research conducted by Harvard Business Review, it was discovered that inclusiveness enhances performance. Teams with inclusive leaders are 17% more likely to report that they are high performing, 20% more likely to say they make high-quality decisions,

and 29% more likely to report behaving collaboratively. Furthermore, the researchers discovered that inclusion to some extent increases work attendance by almost 1 day per year per employee, reducing the cost of absenteeism. In 2019, Catalyst.org surveyed 2,164 employees in eight countries to understand the correlation between workplace experiences and leadership style. The study found that 45% of experiences in an inclusive workplace could be explained by “managerial inclusive leadership.” Inclusion—which develops from psychological safety, trust, and belonging—is a critical driver of outcomes like productivity and engagement, which are being sorely tested during this time of a pandemic (Maurer, 2020). *Inclusive leadership* is a critical capability to leverage diverse thinking in a workforce with increasingly diverse markets, customers, and talent.

## How to become an Inclusive Leader

Harvard Business Review (2020) outlines the following six (6) traits as being common traits that inclusive leaders should possess:

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

Morris (2020) in her article ‘*We Need Inclusive Leaders Right Now More Than Ever*’ also outlines the following as key behaviors that inclusive leaders should portray:

- **Self-Aware.** Inclusive leaders are aware of their conduct and its impact. They are willing to work on themselves and course-correct when they make mistakes.
- **Honest.** Inclusive leaders model open communication. They strive to take higher moral ground.
- **Courageous.** Inclusive leaders know that the inclusion journey will not always be comfortable. They will experience constant discomfort but persevere despite that understanding.
- **Support.** Inclusive leaders use their platforms to provide support for what they believe. This support is demonstrated through consistent action (financial contributions, partnerships, etc.).

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## Examples of Inclusive Leadership

Some of the top leading organizations have been able to succeed due to *inclusive leadership*. In a blog by an HR technologist, the following are examples of top leading companies that practice inclusive leadership:

1. **Deloitte approaches inclusive leadership as a skill that can be learned**-Deloitte is known for its radical moves for ensuring inclusion in the workplace. In 2017, the company created a framework for inclusive leadership among male employees, aiming to position them as allies to female employees and leaders. At that time, the company disbanded its women's network and other affinity groups. In 2018, Deloitte took another progressive step by concretizing inclusive leadership as a skill that can be learned.
2. **Google delivers key Diversity & Inclusion data to its senior leaders for more inclusive decisions**-To and makes genuinely inclusive decisions, company leaders need comprehensive, accurate, and bias-free employee data. That's precisely what Google is looking to achieve with its annual diversity report, published every year since 2014. In 2019's report, Melonie Parker global director, of employee engagement at Google, said, "We believe that data is an important catalyst for change and indicator of progress. To provide greater insight into hiring, progression, and retention trends within teams, we share departmental representation data with our most senior leaders. In 2019 we've expanded the data and will share it with our entire leadership team."
3. **Facebook's male leaders step up as allies and D&I advocates**-Given that a significant number of senior leaders are men, male leaders need to practice inclusivity and encourage a culture of diversity. Benjamin J., regional director of Southeast Asia at Facebook, believes that this is the cumulative effect of micro-interactions every day. Facebook's Ken H, HR business partner, in emerging markets, tries to be a mindful leader. "Before I joined Facebook, I didn't know how I could be as effective as a change agent. At Facebook, we acknowledge everyone carries bias, and we have to be honest and aware of how we're operating to manage this," he said.
4. **Leaders at McDonald's publicly share their support for workplace inclusion**-In 2019, McDonald's launched a new strategy for gender diversity called "BETTER TOGETHER: Gender Balance & Diversity Strategy." This included several on-ground initiatives like a "women in tech" program for upskilling in data science, cybersecurity, AI, etc. To mark the launch, McDonald's CEO Steve Easterbrook, along with other senior leaders, changed their profile pictures on LinkedIn with one that depicted the signature McDonald's arches turned upside down. This reflects how the company's leaders are committed to overturning the gender status quo by staying aware of unconscious bias. McDonald's has reached over 10,000 employees with bias awareness training and continues its global rollout roadmap.

Another prominent example of inclusive leadership is Tim Cook, CEO of Apple. Tim Cook stands behind modeling an inclusive culture. His message is consistent. At a recent developer's conference, he spoke passionately about his beliefs and commitment to racism. Melinda Gates (co-chair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) is another example of an inclusive leader. She leverages her influence to promote gender equality globally.

Leaders must truly commit to transforming themselves into *inclusive leaders*. That means they must be willing to do the work to ensure such transformation occurs. This task will be a lifelong journey. Leaders should be prepared to invest in continual training in all aspects of inclusive leadership.

*Tatenda Sayenda-Havire is a Consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd, a management and human resources consulting firm. Phone +263 (242) 481946-48/481950 or email: tatenda@ipcconsultants.com or visit our website at www.ipcconsultants.com*

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