



Inclusive Leadership

Three keys to build an authentic, high-trust organisational culture

FranklinCovey

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is the new workplace mantra, and for good reason—organisations that lead in DEI are 25%–36% more profitable, have innovation rates up to 20% higher, and enjoy better employee engagement and retention, according to the [World Economic Forum](#). And the more diverse the team, the higher the likelihood of outperforming industry benchmarks, according to [McKinsey](#).

But profit isn't the only reason to make your workplace more inclusive. It's also the right thing to do, and it creates a better experience for everyone who works there.

“Inclusive leaders create conditions in which each person on the team feels respected, valued, and understood,” says Amy Parkin, director of learning solutions at FranklinCovey. “They feel comfortable being themselves as a whole authentic person, not as somebody who has to put on a work mask. On an inclusive

team, each person has a chance to contribute and is recognized for contributing, and there's room for people from different backgrounds and experiences.”

However, there's more to DEI than rolling out formal programmes to bolster inclusivity. Leaders need to adapt their styles, methods, and skills to build inclusion into their daily behaviours and decisions. Implementing the principles of inclusive leadership on the ground empowers them to become DEI catalysts within their own organisations. And this new approach to leadership profoundly impacts their collective culture and teams' engagement, sense of belonging, and results.

This guide outlines practical steps leaders can take to lead more inclusively and create a high-trust environment where everyone can contribute their best effort and ideas.

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1. Activate Change

Knowing people's individual strengths and putting them into action is the first step to recognizing and validating diversity. Leaders who prioritise inclusion take time to understand and guide each person on their team, increasing overall engagement and performance.

Adopt a growth mindset about each team member.

It's easy for leaders to spend time with certain team members, such as high performers or those with whom they click personally. Inclusive leaders must be deliberate about where they spend their time and build personal connections with all their team members.

“We're talking about real, authentic human connection as a key to creating an inclusive culture and an inclusive team. But to get there, you've got to be a little bit deliberate and tactical,” says Parkin. “Who have I not connected with recently? When am I going to put

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—Amy Parkin, Director of Learning Solutions, FranklinCovey



time into my schedule to make sure I connect with that person? What questions am I going to ask?”

When leaders make that genuine connection, they're able to see people as more than their work product and envision how they could grow and contribute in new ways.

Engage with curiosity to build intentional connections.

The purpose of relationships with team members is not just to make people feel good but to achieve a level of insight that empowers leaders to support team members. And that level of connection is possible, even for leaders of large teams who are strapped for time.

“It’s about quality of time, not quantity of time,” says Daniel Martin, senior solution architect and inclusion expert. “If I’m intentional about it, I can achieve that level of understanding, even if I can only talk to someone for 30 minutes every week.”

Leaders should take time with each team member to be curious about who they are, what motivates them, and how they want to grow. Insightful questions and thoughtful listening can lay the groundwork for strong relationships with everyone on their team. And once leaders understand what makes team members tick, they're positioned to offer individualized opportunities for growth.





Raise team members' visibility through recognition and advocacy.

Some leaders think recognition should be earned only through heroic effort or outstanding performance. Truly inclusive leaders, however, understand the power of giving credit for a job well done in the course of daily work. They also create systems for people to publicly recognize one another's accomplishments or thank colleagues for helping solve a problem, baking visibility and validation into the organisational culture. In addition to department and team meetings, these spaces can include dedicated instant messaging groups, intranet features, or human resource feedback channels.

Leaders can also raise a team member's visibility by telling others in the organisation about the great work they're doing, positioning their team members as experts, and suggesting others consult them with questions. "That creates networks and connections, boosts visibility, and sends that signal that they're seen, and their contributions are valued," says Martin.

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2. Build Belonging

Diverse teams can only live up to their innovation and performance potential if people feel valued as their authentic selves. Leaders who [shape a culture focused on belonging](#) help people bring their best selves—and their best work—to the table.

organise inclusive team meetings and celebrations.

For meetings to be inclusive, everyone must feel safe sharing their perspectives. To set the tone, leaders should draw out each person's unique insights by asking for input from everyone and highlighting the diverse contributions of team members, encouraging all opinions to be voiced—even ones they may not agree with at first.

Celebrations are also an opportunity to create a culture where everyone feels a sense of belonging. "It's important not to dictate how the team is going to celebrate," says Parkin. "Have a conversation about what the team wants to celebrate and what feels like



a meaningful way to do it.” It’s unlikely everyone will want to celebrate in the same way all the time, so inclusive leaders often vary the ways they recognize and reward team members. For example, they might have an in-person or virtual happy hour to celebrate one achievement and then send everyone a gift card or give them a half-day off the next time.

Challenge practices and attitudes that are not inclusive.

One of the hardest—but most important—things a leader can do to shape a culture of belonging is calling out inappropriate behaviours or comments **rooted in unconscious bias**. It’s a delicate process that requires directness, empathy, and immediacy.

“Non-inclusive behaviour occurs across a spectrum. It can be uncomfortable and dismissive, or it can be offensive and inappropriate, so based on the severity of the behaviour, there are different ways a leader might respond,” says Martin. They might simply express that they don’t appreciate a comment because it diminishes inclusivity and note they don’t think the person meant it that way. Or if the behaviour is more extreme, they might state more strongly that those kinds of comments are not part of the team culture and have a conversation later with the person who crossed the line.

It’s important for leaders to have empathy for everyone, which means being attuned to how people

might experience non-inclusive behaviours differently based on their history and background—as well as empathizing with those who act in a non-inclusive way. By demonstrating respect, helping people feel safe, and assuming positive intent while also helping team members understand why certain behaviours are inappropriate, leaders show that inclusivity is not reserved only for those who never make mistakes—it’s for everyone, and it’s a constant work in progress.



Facilitate honest team conversations.

Leaders don't need to wait for an uncomfortable incident to talk about inclusivity—and they shouldn't. Instead, they should be upfront about why inclusivity is important and work with team members to define the actions that create an inclusive culture. “If you talk about it first and make a commitment, and folks are bought into that commitment, then when you need to have a redirecting conversation with someone, you can tie it back to your collective commitment to inclusivity,” says Parkin.

Agreeing on team values and boundaries ahead of time makes it easier to challenge non-inclusive behaviour because it's less of a personal callout and more of an accountability practice. “It also means that redirecting is not just the leader's job,” says Parkin. “In the moment that somebody behaves in a way that is not inclusive, anyone on the team can feel empowered to speak up and say, ‘You know, I'm not really comfortable with that language. How about using a different word that might be a little more inclusive?’”

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3. Improve Hiring and Advancement

Inclusive leaders know they're not immune from unconscious bias. [Common bias traps](#) can affect key leadership decisions across the talent lifecycle, but understanding how to rewire decision-making paves the way for inclusive practices that revolutionize the way organisations select candidates and advance their people.

Reframe “Who’s right for this role” in hiring and succession planning.

When selecting the right person for a position, it can be tempting to focus on qualities that aren't necessarily important to the job. For example, if a leader is looking for someone to perform detail-oriented tasks, getting hung up on whether their personality is outgoing enough can obscure the fact that the person is extremely qualified—and may have little to do with their day-to-day responsibilities.

It's normal to look for someone who will easily slot into an existing culture, but that might not foster the diversity that will boost a team's performance.



“We say we’re looking for people who can innovate, challenge old systems, and bring new ideas, but we often end up hiring in a way that seeks assimilation,” says Martin. “We need to recognize the people who bring something new to the table instead of hiring to match what we already have.”

Another common bias trap is overconfidence. Leaders who have a track record of results have likely hired great people in the past, and they can come to believe they’re skilled at quickly spotting talent. “The reality is that our gut reaction is just one



data point among many that help us make a good decision,” says Martin. “But a lot of leaders trust that gut instinct out of proportion to how valid it actually is, and it can stop them from doing their due diligence to make an objective hiring decision.”

Invest in inclusive performance management, career development, and advancement processes. When there isn't structure in place for professional development, it's often left to leaders to make case-by-case decisions and proactively advocate for their team members' advancement—something they are more naturally inclined to do for people they already have an affinity with because they share a similar background or culture.

The first step to increasing equity and inclusivity in personnel development is to get crystal clear about which performance measures are important and how advancement works. Leaders should standardize benchmarks and processes in writing and share them broadly across the organisation. Then, in situations where leaders are evaluating performance or making personnel decisions, they can refer back to those commitments and hold themselves—and each other—accountable.

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Achieve breakthrough results by prioritising inclusivity.

Inclusive leadership doesn't happen by accident. It involves deliberate work to integrate DEI principles into daily behaviours and decisions—where organisational culture transforms a set of statements into a lived truth everyone experiences.

Leaders can make inclusivity more than a buzzword by connecting with and championing individual team members, intentionally building and maintaining a culture of belonging, and committing to inclusive hiring and advancement processes. They can reap the benefits of higher engagement, retention, and performance—and most of all, the satisfaction of creating a great place to work where each individual is valued, respected, and empowered to give their best effort.



Foster Inclusivity and Address Unconscious Bias With FranklinCovey.

Every day, your people are faced with countless bits of information while making decisions that range from the pragmatic to the strategic. Unconscious biases are how our brains compensate for overload, which can inhibit performance and lead to poor decision-making.

FranklinCovey's Inclusive Leadership module is designed to help leaders and team members address bias so every person can thrive and increase performance across your entire organisation.

To learn more, email solutions@franklincovey.co.uk or call us at 01295 274100

