

Inclusive Leadership

Excerpts from: “The Six Signature Traits of Inclusive Leadership.” by Juliet Bourke, Bernadette Dillon
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The six signature traits of an inclusive leader

Whether you are an individual leader in the group or you are sharing the leadership role, developing an inclusive team will make you more effective. Bourke and Dillon have researched the practices of inclusive leadership and they present six key traits of inclusive leaders.

Trait 1: Commitment. Highly inclusive leaders are committed to diversity and inclusion because these objectives align with their personal values and because they believe in the business case. Many of the leaders interviewed in our research cited the extrinsic reward of enhanced performance as a secondary motivator. Their primary motivation for pursuing diversity and inclusion was alignment with their own personal values and a deep-seated sense of fairness. “To me, it’s all about fairness and equality of opportunity,” says Belinda Hutchinson, chancellor of the University of Sydney. “It’s about giving people the opportunity to achieve what they should be able to achieve. It doesn’t just relate to gender. It relates to race, religion, sexual preference—whatever else it may be.”

Trait 2: Courage. Highly inclusive leaders speak up and challenge the status quo, and they are humble about their strengths and weaknesses.

For leaders, they need to make a decision as to whether they dig in and entrench as they are, or recognize the world as it will become, and be part of the change.” The courage to speak up—to challenge others and the status quo—is a central behavior of an inclusive leader, and it occurs at three levels: with others, with the system, and with themselves.

Inclusive leaders have the courage to speak out about themselves and to reveal, in a very personal way, their own limitations. Instead of shying away from the challenge of imperfection, highly inclusive leaders adopt an attitude of humility...It is difficult for leaders in the public spotlight to admit they don’t have all the answers. Courage and humility therefore go hand in hand.

Trait 3: Cognizance of bias. Highly inclusive leaders are mindful of personal and organizational blind spots, and self-regulate to help ensure “fair play.”

“The leaders that are inclusive do a couple of things,” says Sodexo’s Anand. “At the individual level, they are very self-aware, and they act on that self-awareness. And they acknowledge that their organizations, despite best intentions, have unconscious bias, and they put in place policies, processes, and structures in order to mitigate the unconscious bias that exists.”

Biases are a leader’s Achilles’ heel, potentially resulting in decisions that are unfair and irrational. Inclusive leaders are deeply aware that biases can narrow their field of vision and prevent them from making objective decisions. In particular, inclusive leaders are highly sensitized to two fundamental phenomena: personal biases, such as homophily and implicit stereotypes and attitudes; and process biases, such as confirmation bias and groupthink.³²

Figure 1. The six signature traits of an inclusive leader



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Trait 4: Curiosity. Highly inclusive leaders have an open mindset, a desire to understand how others view and experience the world, and a tolerance for ambiguity. Inclusive leaders accept their limitations and hunger for the views of others to complete the picture. This thirst for continual learning helps drive attributes associated with curiosity—open-mindedness, inquiry, and empathy. Such behaviors do not come easily. Time and effort are required to engage with diverse others, as is the skill of synthesizing a broader range of perspectives. But the result is loyalty from others who feel valued, along with access to a richer set of information that enables better decision making.

Trait 5: Culturally intelligent.

Highly inclusive leaders are confident and effective in cross-cultural interactions.

For inclusive leaders, the ability to function effectively in different cultural settings is about more than just having a mental map of different cultural frameworks (for example, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory). While an understanding of cultural similarities and differences is important, inclusive leaders also recognize how their own culture impacts their personal worldview, as well as how cultural stereotypes—including the misuse of cultural models—can influence their expectations of others.

At a deeper level, inclusive leaders’ thirst for learning means that they are also motivated to deepen their cultural understanding and to learn from the experience of working in an unfamiliar environment. This curiosity leads them to value cultural differences, defying ethnocentric tendencies that cause people to judge other cultures as inferior to their own, and enabling them to build stronger connections with people from different backgrounds.

Trait 6: Collaborative. Highly inclusive leaders empower individuals as well as create and leverage the thinking of diverse groups.

“The new IQ is based more on group intelligence,” says Bruce Stewart, acting director, strategic initiatives, US Office of Personnel Management. “The old IQ is about how smart you are; the new IQ is about how smart you make your team. If you take it to heart, it will change the way you lead. Instead of the leader leading from top of the pyramid, they lead from the middle of the circle.”

At its core, collaboration is about individuals working together, building on each other’s ideas to produce something new or solve something complex. But while collaboration among similar people is comfortable and easy, the challenge and opportunity thrown up by the foundational shifts is collaboration with diverse others: employees, customers, or other stakeholders.