



The Inclusion Delusion:

Why leaders aren't as inclusive as they think

The Inclusion **Delusion**

The business case for having an inclusion strategy can be summarized as:

- Improved financial performance
- Better decision-making
- Thriving employees
- Better retention and recruitment
- Supporting social change

If you agree that an inclusion strategy is worth having, how do you make it happen? What's the key to an inclusive culture?

You focus on leaders.

For inclusion to work, it's leaders who need to be accountable and responsible. Leaders shape organizational culture and have a direct impact on the employee experience.

But before you look at how leaders can do that, it's useful to have a general overview of where you are right now.

Inclusion isn't really happening yet

McKinsey & Company has been conducting diversity and inclusion research for a few years now. In their 2020 report, *Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters*, they found that:

- Employees' feelings about inclusion in their organization were 61% negative.
- Employees' feelings about leadership's accountability in diversity and inclusion (D&I) were also strongly negative.

Research from Gartner (2019) shows that only 31% of employees agree there is an inclusion strategy in their organization. However, a staggering 80% of organizations say that whatever strategy they do have is ineffective.

And, in *The Three A's of Inclusion* (awareness, authenticity and accountability), Harvard Business Review cites a Boston Consulting study which found that three-quarters of underrepresented groups – women, minorities, and LGBTQ – don't feel they have benefited from their organizations' D&I policies.

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Why leaders aren't getting it right

Our research found a compelling reason why leaders are getting it wrong in the eyes of employees.

It's because leaders think they're getting inclusion right.

Actually, that's not quite fair. It's because they think they're doing better than they really are.

This is the self-perception trap. In our research, two-thirds of leaders' estimates of their own inclusion efforts were inaccurate. And 33% believed they were more inclusive than others perceived them to be.

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Dr Rachel Cubas-Wilkinson, Senior Consultant at The Myers-Briggs Company, says self-perception is one of the five key challenges leaders face with inclusion.

"Even when leaders want to be inclusive and have the right intentions," she says, "there are blockers that get in the way. Awareness is key because a lot of this is hidden

and difficult to see outright. Because of this, it will take a long time to work on these areas and people need to understand that. Whenever I talk to practitioners and leaders about inclusion, I spend time on these five challenges because I believe they're the starting point for an effective growth plan."

5 challenges of inclusive leadership

1. Blind spots and pre-dispositions. Everyone has biases. They're unconscious and it's impossible to remove them completely. But biases draw people to those who think similarly, especially in pressured situations. Biases push people toward easier processes and working methods. Diversity is more difficult because it brings differences into play.

In addition, in times of change, stress or difficulty, many of us tend to revert back to what we know. And that includes leaders. The problem is that leaders often deal with stress and change, which pulls them further into their preferred ways of working and thinking. It pulls them away from divergent or diverse approaches.

2. Diversity of thought. Diversity of thought is complex, there's no escaping that. Diversity of thought is about recognizing diversity of thinking styles, lived experiences, personality types, and values. These are all elements that are harder to see, and harder to get to know.

Further, harnessing this level of diversity requires a sense of safety and belonging. Understanding how people approach things and how they think takes a long time. Then, seeing how it manifests in a team

at work requires an extra level of understanding. It's not the easiest option, but it has the greater all-round benefits longer term.

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3. Specialist skills required. Inclusive leadership is a sought-after skill set, one that's becoming a critical capability. Not every leader has it and it's far from being a given. But research by Werner shows that only 1 in 3 organizations has a strategy for training leaders to be inclusive.

Training and development is the best way to teach leaders these essential inclusion skills.

4. Self-perception trap. In addition to the statistics shown above, 33% of leaders lack confidence in the area of inclusion. This means they do less than they could to make things more inclusive.

According to Dr. Rachel Cubas-Wilkinson, the perception that they lack inclusive leadership skills robs some leaders of the confidence they need to get started.



This perception also stops leaders when they need to take action to challenge the status quo, to seek out and integrate multiple perspectives, and to model behaviors that drive inclusion and inclusive cultures. And for other leaders, the challenge is different again. Research shows how some leaders rate themselves more highly for inclusion than others do.

This complexity of leader challenges shows that a one-size-fits-all approach to developing inclusive leaders may not work. It would fail to account for the unique perceptual, attitudinal, and behavioral challenges

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leaders face.

5. Organizational constraints. Still another challenge, Dr. Rachel Cubas-Wilkinson states, is that leaders, even when well-intentioned and goal-oriented to being more inclusive, often don't operate in a vacuum. They operate within an organization of systems, processes, and priorities. The culture and processes of an organization (what it rewards and what it neglects) can feel like insurmountable barriers when they don't support inclusion.

Take, for instance, an organization that says it supports inclusion but it's known internally to heavily reward and expect rapid decision making. A leader can feel the pressure to have all of the answers and to make most, if not all, of the decisions. Without the proper tools for helping diverse teams share problem-solving and decision-making more efficiently, a leader may simply choose not to seek out and invite other's input or share decision.

Inclusion: Three ways to get it done and make it work

Invest in training for all leaders

First, make sure that all leaders are trained in inclusion and are responsible for it. It's not just for the leaders at the very top. Front-line leaders have direct contact with employees, reach more people, and have the greatest influence on people's working lives. Our research shows the employee-manager relationship to be the most significant factor in an employee's well-being.

Train for inclusive competencies and behaviors

Second, train leaders in specific competencies for building inclusion. Research shows that skills related to DEI are often missing from leader development efforts.

As you saw above, these skills are not automatically held by leaders and it's a mistake to think otherwise. They need development training. To address this precise point, we've developed the 8 Core Competencies Model for inclusive leadership. It's a key component in our new workshop: Inclusive Leadership: Harnessing Diversity of Thought.

Increase self-awareness

Third, increase leaders' self-awareness. Use a reliable self-assessment tool which reveals the things people don't really know about themselves. As we've already seen, self-perception about inclusion is inaccurate and can lead to a myriad of challenges and false starts. Self-awareness is the starting point.

Only when leaders know themselves (and the specific demonstratable behaviors that support and drive inclusion) can they create a growth plan that takes them toward a more inclusive leadership style. From there, leaders can build a culture where people can be their authentic selves and where an organization can harness diversity and the benefits it brings.

Want to learn more about **training and development for inclusive leadership**? Contact us today.



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