



INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP – IT’S ALL IN THE DOING!

What can inclusive leaders do?

Sometimes good intentions fail to deliver because people get stuck. Here are a few more ideas for being more inclusive.

1. Use short, impromptu style meetings to include all of the team in information exchange, on-the-spot problem-solving relating to a particular matter, or perhaps getting through a particular (short) period of time. Even though you keep it brief, encourage participation. To share the leadership – and keep things on time – you may even want to rotate the role of ‘leader’.
2. Formally allocate time for reflection and conversation about the work and how it’s done. This can be useful in checking that everyone understands what’s being done and why. It’s also a chance to see if things can be done differently (better), including ways in which the team relates and work together.
3. Encourage people to learn something about others’ roles. In addition to broadening perspectives on the work of the team, it may be useful in providing a stop-gap solution when someone is temporarily unavailable.

Inclusive organisations

Simply put, inclusive organisations have two essential characteristics. First, there is an intentional effort to get everyone to contribute, according to their skills and abilities. Second, there is the vital aspect of acknowledging and appreciating those contributions and sustaining a healthy sense of belonging.

We’ve highlighted these behaviours in previous UGM Consulting briefings. We shared our ‘contributing-belonging cycle’ concept, which emerged from our original research on how leadership could be shared. Being inclusive was always a primary intention.

To recap briefly, one of the reasons people join organisations is to derive a sense of belonging. To achieve this, they contribute to the organisation. Having those contributions accepted, acknowledged and valued fosters the sense of belonging.

Virtuous contributing-belonging cycles

Ideally, organisations will stimulate virtuous contributing-belonging cycles. When people perceive their contributions are valued, they feel an increased sense of belonging. This, in turn, motivates an increase in contribution, which then leads to even stronger belonging.

Virtuous contributing-belonging cycles are at the very core of inclusive organisations, and inclusive leadership aims to foster this kind of environment.

Vicious contributing-belonging cycles

However, many organisational cultures and the leaders within them are not anywhere near as inclusive as they might be. For example, organisations may not use the skills and abilities that individuals within the organisation have to offer. In many cases, it’s simply due to less effective, non-inclusive leadership-management. In other instances, people are intentionally ignored or even actively prevented from using their skills and abilities.

Non-inclusive organisations risk unleashing damaging vicious contributing-belonging cycles. When people find their contributions aren’t valued, their sense of belonging diminishes. Next, they reduce the level of their contribution which, in turn, further reduces their sense of belonging. Eventually, people either leave or, perhaps worse, they stay, unmotivated and doing the bare minimum.

Inclusion and inclusive leadership

The contribution-belonging cycle concept provides a high-level perspective of inclusion. UGM has found it a useful starting point, especially for executives and senior management who haven’t previously given the matter much thought. It’s also fairly easy

to use the model to guide actions in-situ. They can check that there is sufficient opportunity to contribute and adequate acknowledgement and valuing of contributions to foster belonging.

Digging a little deeper, diversity expert, Professor Micháelle Mor Barak, provides a useful definition of individual-level perceived inclusion. She describes it as “the degree to which individuals feel a part of the critical organisational processes, such as access to information, connectedness to co-workers and ability to participate in and influence the decision-making process”. Clearly, people value being regarded as more than simply a ‘human resource’.

Social science research confirms that perceptions of inclusion-exclusion impact aspects of individual psychology, for example self-esteem, depression, satisfaction and motivation. Recently, OD researchers Drs. Cottrill, Lopez and Hoffman found that including employees resulted in a sense of being important, valued and trusted.

There are also a solid range of benefits derived by inclusive organisations. Staff are more likely to help co-workers manage and prevent problems. They are also more likely to show initiative, arrive on time, accommodate inconveniences and care about the organisation’s reputation in the market.

What can leaders do to be more inclusive?

Mor Barak’s definition of individual-level perceived inclusion provides useful and quite specific pointers for inclusive leader behaviours. First, ensure that people feel that they have appropriate levels of access to information. Encourage collaboration and check that everyone feels connected to their co-workers. Vitality, focus on making people part of decision making processes. This includes allowing them to exercise some (as much as possible) level of influence over outcomes.

OD expert Dr Ilene Wasserman and her research collaborators provide additional insights into leadership in an inclusive culture. Inclusive leaders view and treat others as unique and different. Inclusive leaders engage individuals and groups in genuine dialogue. Inclusive leaders step up and model appropriate behaviours. Finally, inclusive leaders also actively address resistance to diversity efforts.

Taking an inclusive approach to culture and leadership

Although the inclusive leadership research focuses mainly on formally appointed leaders, UGM believes that is not inclusive enough! Anyone influencing others towards a common goal is leading so, in an inclusive culture, they’d want to use the inclusive leadership behaviours mentioned above. And that’s entirely congruent because everyone is responsible for co-creating and sustaining an inclusive culture.