



### Ways to become more inclusive

1. While it may seem strange, an important element of including others is being more self-aware. What makes you feel happy, and which situations cause you hurt?
2. Help others to feel they are making a valued contribution. This may mean giving them a chance to contribute in the first place. Then, make sure you give due feedback and recognition.
3. Audit your personal meeting behaviours every now and again. If you spend a lot of time in meetings, it's likely that you've developed ways of operating that you often use without a thought. Are any of those 'automatic behaviours' potentially hurtful to others? Remember, social pain is real pain. People in pain aren't in a position to do their best work.
4. Do an occasional 'fairness scan' on regular policies, procedures and everyday ways of working. Remind people (and celebrate) that your workplace is fair (and be sure that it is!). Make suitable changes when it's not. Fairness is a powerful motivator (or de-motivator) – ensure it's working in your favour.

## WIRED FOR INCLUSION

### *Missed opportunities*

Rob is a team leader at a technology company. At least weekly, he participates in a meeting of his manager's team. Rather than just speaking off the cuff, Rob prefers to allow conversations to unfold and then add his thoughts when he believes the time is right. However, since he is respectful of colleagues' opinions, Rob often finds he is unable to get a chance to share his thoughts before the conversation moves on.

This scenario no doubt plays out many times over in businesses around Australia. Most people in those meetings, except perhaps the 'Robs', will give it scarcely a second thought, if they even notice at all. Even the Robs may soon just come to accept the practise as 'just the way it is'.

Yet, as Rob outlined during an opportunity to reflect on such a meeting, this comes at a cost. *"It feels like you didn't contribute to the meeting, when you really did have things to contribute. And, I guess, you go out a little disappointed that you haven't been able to make a significant contribution to the meeting."*

Although he hadn't taken any steps to specifically include Rob, his manager no doubt also reflected further on Rob's comments. While he hadn't intentionally excluded Rob, he also wasn't using any procedures to ensure everyone in his team felt comfortable and able to contribute fully. He must also have wondered what opportunities the team and the business might have missed as a result of Rob regularly not sharing his potentially significant contributions.

Perhaps even more important is the fact that Rob's lack of ability to contribute fully is likely to have impacted his overall sense of belonging, both to Rob's team and the business more generally. Since it wasn't a major factor in Rob's working life, it may not have been noticeable on a day-to-day basis. But there's every chance that, if the business context deteriorated, Rob would show less resilience than he may otherwise might have if he was able to contribute more frequently. Without even realising it, he might think to himself, "Why bother with this" instead of "Let's give this a red hot go"!

### *Wired for inclusion*

One reason for Rob's sense of diminished belonging is likely to be the pain he feels (whether consciously or at an unconscious level) each time he is unable to contribute as he would like. The "disappointment" he spoke of refers to his lack of feeling fully included. Neuroscientist, Prof Matthew Lieberman of UCLA, would likely suggest that Rob's brain circuitry processes each such experience as an instance of social rejection. Interestingly, Lieberman and his various research collaborators would also

note that the 'social pain' Rob experienced each time he felt the rejection is not a lot different to pain from a physical source, for example, a cut or a burn. Lieberman's research found a significant neural overlap between social and physical pain and this led him to question why.

### *Social connection as a vital evolutionary differentiator*

There appears to be growing evidence that humans have come to be the dominant species because of an ability to think socially. Lieberman points out that teamwork of some form is almost always associated with the greatest ideas. Social reasoning plays an enabling role in building and maintaining "the social relationships and infrastructure needed for teams to thrive".

At the turn of the century, neuroscientists found that the brain engages an alternative 'default mode network' when it's not actively involved in cognitive, motor or visual tasks. Of particular interest to the social connections hypothesis is the nature of this default network. It turns out that the default network looks, with only one small difference, very much like the network that shows up when researchers are doing social cognition studies. In other words, when the brain is not actively engaged in a task it is continuously involved in helping us make sense of other people and ourselves.

### *What might this mean for businesses?*

There's a lot that might be done to help people feel more included at work. Building an inclusive culture is something all businesses can do. Here are a few different ideas to use as a starting point.

First, while it may surprise some, focusing on organisational health (people-related matters) alone delivers much better bottom-line outcomes when compared with focusing only on performance. Super-charge your results by focusing on both!

Organisations are, by their very nature, places where people interact socially. Sadly, not all social interactions are positive and pleasant. In fact, the average person would experience their fair share of social hurt at work. While social pain may not be identical to physical pain, both are nevertheless experienced as real pain. Since this is a recent neuroscience discovery, organisations ought to be reassessing how they can minimise social pain at work. After all, even minor physical injury at work isn't acceptable!

Fairness is one of the indicators people use to assess the quality of social connections. Research shows that experiencing fairness activates the brain's reward system in positive ways. This holds true even in cases when others involved are complete strangers. An inclusive culture would necessarily have fairness as an important, basic principle.