A FIELD GUIDE TO
LEADING
INCLUSIVELY

JOHNS HOPKINS
CAREY BUSINESS SCHOOL

**Center for Innovative Leadership *and* Gender and Work Initiative
Johns Hopkins Carey Business School**

About CIL Field Guides

The Center for Innovative Leadership aims to advance knowledge and build capacity for innovative leadership in modern organizations. Housed at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, the Center is a hub for new ideas and insights on leadership, combining faculty-led research, student-facing programming, and community-focused impact. The Center's thought leaders explore a range of topics related to leading modern organizations, from managing effective teams in dynamic environments, to building cultures of learning and resilience, and developing inclusive leadership practices. Learn more about CIL at carey.jhu.edu/CIL

CIL designed this Field Guide to help leaders navigate the increasingly complex world of work, armed with a nuanced understanding of key challenges identified in cutting-edge organizational research. Each Field Guide is designed to illuminate a core challenge facing today's leaders and deliver effective, evidence-based guidance and practices for leaders to deploy in their own work. This Field Guide is intended for use by leaders in all industries and at all levels of an organization, not only as a "how-to" guide for key leadership decisions and actions, but also as a broader resource for personal development, learning, and growth as a leader. This Field Guide was based on the latest evidence from social science research, curated by CIL faculty members Colleen Stuart and David Smith, who also co-direct the Gender & Work Initiative at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School.

Foreword from the Directors

To attract, develop, and retain top talent, organizations must equip their leaders to lead inclusively.

This requires leaders to cultivate critical knowledge, skills, and abilities that foster a culture of empowerment, openness, and trust. Inclusive leadership is essential for unlocking the benefits of DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging) programs, practices, and tools. Inclusive leaders go beyond compliance with HR policies; they actively champion diversity, model desired behaviors, build trust, and nurture a shared sense of purpose among employees.

We're excited to share this guide as a collaboration between Carey Business School's Center for Innovative Leadership and the Gender & Work Initiative. Together, we've curated a comprehensive, evidence-based roadmap to help understand and practice inclusive leadership. This guide is designed to be practical and actionable, exploring the essential traits and skills of inclusive leaders, strategies for overcoming obstacles, and effective interventions to drive lasting impact. We provide scalable tools to help leaders cultivate environments that navigate the complexities of today's diverse workplaces, advancing equity and progress.

We hope this guide inspires you to discover new and effective ways to build and lead an inclusive, equitable workplace – one that challenges us to rethink our old ways of leading and re-envision what success looks like for our people and our organizations. We hope it provides you with resources to foster transparency, accountability, belonging, and purpose. If you find the guide helpful and adopt new approaches to leading inclusively, we'd love to hear about your experiences and share your successes with our community.

Warmly,

Center for Innovative Leadership

Michael Doyle
Executive Director

Christopher Myers
Faculty Director

Gender & Work Initiative

Colleen Stuart
Co-Director

David Smith
Co-Director

Email us at carey_cil@jhu.edu or message us on LinkedIn with your stories and feedback.
Lead on!

About this Field Guide

Rising to the challenge

The value of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) is now widely acknowledged in the world of work, yet making measurable and substantial progress towards DEIB goals remains a persistent challenge for organizations and society at large.

Just as the Civil Rights and Women's Rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s catalyzed shifts in societal attitudes and legal frameworks, compelling businesses to address diversity and inclusion, today's social activism—combined with evolving consumer expectations—is renewing pressure on organizations to expand their DEIB efforts. Importantly, DEIB research and practice have evolved beyond mere awareness to focus more sharply on achieving tangible outcomes.

DEIB continues to be a sensitive and even volatile subject, particularly in the U.S. In an age of hyper-polarization, politicization, and identity-based tribalism, social divisions can feel overwhelming. These same tensions are reflected within organizations, which operate within and draw from the societies they serve. Managers, at an individual level, often encounter entrenched beliefs, anxieties, and defensiveness in response to perceived threats. At a systemic level, they must confront the complexity and persistence of deeply ingrained biases, along with structural and institutional barriers.

Why do DEIB efforts fail?

Due to a historical focus on diversity as a compliance, regulation and equal employment legislation issue, many organizations are DEIB compliant merely 'because we have to be.' This explains why nearly a third of companies today find themselves 'stuck' in the compliant stage, according to a study of more than 10,000 knowledge workers, with three further stages of DEIB maturity ahead of them. [i]

Another historical weakness of DEIB efforts is that training is often focused on 'what not to do,' rather than strength-building and aspirational around 'what can I do?' Nearly three-quarters of companies use negative messages in their training, warning of the dangers of damaging settlements. Research shows these disincentives are not only ineffective but can also be counterproductive. In many cases, diversity training is used as a remedial measure, specifically targeting 'problem' groups or individuals. This approach can lead to diversity training being perceived either as a superficial compliance exercise or a punitive measure. [ii] There is now mounting evidence mandatory DEIB training fairs significantly worse than voluntary programs. [iii]

Unlocking the benefits

Organizations that can overcome these deep-seated challenges stand to unlock a wide array of benefits, promising improved performance across multiple metrics: increased employee engagement, reduced turnover, enhanced innovation, greater creativity, strengthened trust, and better team performance. [iv]

However, simply increasing the number of diverse hires, meeting compliance standards, or training employees in 'what not to do,' won't lead a firm to these organizational advantages and its potential competitive advantage. Achieving these goals requires inclusive leadership—leaders who understand, value, and leverage differences, and who excel at fostering a shared identity and collaboration.

Currently, inclusive leaders are in short supply, with only 5% of leaders being viewed as inclusive by their teams. [v] Fortunately, these skills can be developed, and this Field Guide is designed to support that process.

How this Field Guide can help

The Field Guide to Leading Inclusively, from the Center for Innovative Leadership and the Gender & Work Initiative at Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, provides organizations with evidence-based strategies for developing inclusive leadership skills and practices. This guide serves as a resource to equip leaders with applicable, actionable insights in three sections: what is inclusive leadership; understanding the challenge; and relational practices and structural interventions that work.

Section 1
What is Inclusive Leadership?
Defining inclusive leadership; six signature traits and five concrete behaviors of inclusive leaders; and a new business case for inclusive leadership.

Section 2
Understanding the Challenge
Navigating challenges and unintended consequences; understanding the problem for targeted interventions; and evolving metrics.

Section 3
Relational Practices and Structural Interventions That Work
Sponsorship; closing the allyship gap; empathetic leadership; cross-functional and autonomous teams; supporting work/life integration; and transparency and accountability.

Section 1:
What is Inclusive Leadership?

There is a plethora of data from recruitment consultancies and HR departments alike showing that diverse, equitable, and inclusive organizations are where talented professionals most want to work today. [vi]

🔍 Inclusion

Inclusion in the workplace ensures all individuals are respected, valued, and have equal opportunities to contribute and succeed.

What makes inclusive work practices a 'win-win' for companies today is the growing body of evidence highlighting the wide range of benefits inclusion can unlock. These include many business-critical areas such as decision-making, [vii] innovation, employee engagement, trust, learning, creativity—not to mention the progress toward inclusion's core goals: improving equity, human dignity, and wellbeing of employees and other stakeholders. [viii] With such compelling advantages, the motivation for organizations and individual leaders to actively foster inclusion in the workplace becomes clear.

Defining inclusive leadership
An analysis of the literature published over the past ten to fifteen years offers the following definition of inclusive leadership:

🔍 Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership involves fostering a culture where diverse perspectives are welcomed, valued, and integrated to achieve organizational success.

We can expand on this definition and provide more detail regarding what it means to be an inclusive leader in terms of mindset and behaviors.

Being an inclusive leader involves:

- **Understanding, valuing, and leveraging differences** while encouraging shared identity and collaboration.

- **Practicing relational leadership** by relating to others, showing a genuine interest in them, and building trust.

- **Recognizing diversity**, responding to individual needs and work styles, and actively listening to team members' input.

- **Fostering environments** where team members freely share and build on each other's ideas.

- **Making time and space** for diverse contributions in decision-making, even when those contributions challenge team norms. [ix]

- **Using words and actions** that invite and appreciate others' contributions. [x]

- **Demonstrating openness, accessibility, and availability.**

- **Facilitating a sense of belonging** within the group while maintaining each team member's uniqueness as they contribute fully to processes and outcomes. [xi]

This Field Guide primarily references research related to race and gender differences in communities, workplaces, and social groups. This is due to the prevalence of race and gender studies in academic research; however, it is important to keep in mind that the full scope of inclusion is much broader, encompassing factors like age, disability, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity and nationality, socioeconomic status, language, family and caregiver status, military veteran status, political beliefs, educational background, cognitive diversity, and all other forms of diversity in terms of background and lived experience.

Mapping inclusive leadership traits and behaviors

Given the need for inclusive leadership and the numerous advantages it brings to organizations, it is important to examine the behaviors, attitudes, and practices of successful inclusive leaders. Understanding these qualities can help organizations identify new hires and develop current managers as key allies in DEIB efforts. Below are six signature traits and five key behaviors commonly exhibited by exemplary inclusive leaders.

Six signature traits of inclusive leaders

Inclusive leaders share six signature traits: [xii]

1

Visible commitment

Inclusive leaders express authentic commitment to diversity, challenge the status quo, hold others accountable, and make diversity and inclusion a personal priority.

2

Humility

They are careful about assumptions, approach interactions with a learning perspective, admit mistakes, and create space for others to contribute.

3

Awareness of bias

They acknowledge personal blind spots and systematic flaws, working to ensure a fair and inclusive workplace.

4

Curiosity about others

They have an open mindset, listen without judgment, and seek to understand others with empathy.

5

Cultural intelligence

Inclusive leaders are attentive to different cultures and experiences and adapt as needed.

6

Effective collaboration

They empower others, foster diverse thinking, and prioritize psychological safety and team cohesion.

Five behaviors of inclusive leaders

Based on qualitative interviews with 40 DEIB award–winning or peer-nominated exemplary inclusive leaders from various industries, researchers identified five key behaviors that contribute to creating more inclusive organizations. [xiii]

1

Inclusive leaders prioritize authenticity over leadership presence.

They focus on fostering psychological safety, and model curiosity, humility, and vulnerability.

2

Inclusive leaders redefine the rules rather than unquestioningly following them.

These leaders were not afraid to challenge outdated practices that excluded certain groups or created inequities, replacing them with policies that gave equal access to underrepresented groups.

3

Inclusive leaders embrace active learning and consistent implementation.

They emphasized that inclusivity required active learning and deliberate effort. They recognized the need to constantly examine and challenge biases to pave the way for inclusion.

4

Inclusive leaders ensure equal opportunities and equitable outcomes.

They were committed to providing employees with equal opportunities to succeed. They were especially mindful of the unique challenges faced by underrepresented individuals and took proactive steps to support them.

5

They view inclusive leadership as everyone's responsibility, not just HR's.

These leaders believed that fostering an inclusive environment required everyone's involvement. Inclusivity cannot be the responsibility of a select group of leaders; it must be a shared commitment across the organization.

A new business case for inclusive leadership

The traditional business case for diversity has faced criticism for being outdated and even counterproductive. Demonstrating financial impact and bottom-line performance requires substantial effort on the part of the organization to make structural and often cultural changes. Only then can the wide range of benefits that diversity brings be unlocked and maximized, by integrating evidence-based best practices.

> "
> Increasing the numbers of traditionally underrepresented people in your workforce does not automatically produce benefits. Taking an 'add diversity and stir' approach, while business continues as usual, will not spur leaps in your firm's effectiveness or financial performance.
>
> **Thomas and Ely** [xiv]
> "

Reflecting these nuances, a new business case for diversity has emerged, grounded in empirical research:

1. **A broader vision of success is needed**
   Maximizing shareholder value is no longer the sole focus for today's organizations. Businesses are now more attuned to a diverse set of stakeholders, including current and future employees. A wider range of success metrics should be prioritized in DEIB initiatives, such as learning, innovation, creativity, flexibility, equity, human dignity, alongside more

typical indicators like talent retention, wellbeing, and market perceptions of the brand. [xv]

2. **Conditions are critical**
   Research shows that diverse teams achieve performance benefits under specific conditions. For example, these benefits are realized when status differences among different social groups are minimized; when team members believe that their team supports learning; when they have time to reflect on team functioning; and when they are encouraged to learn from their differences rather than marginalize or ignore them. With these conditions in place, organizations can unlock the advantages of diversity. Without them, team diversity can actually hinder effectiveness. [xvi]

3. **Growing body of research links inclusive leadership with performance metrics**
   Research conducted by Deloitte reported that an increase in individuals' feelings of inclusion translated to a 17% increase in perceived team performance; 20% increase in decision making quality; and 29% increase in team collaboration. [xvii]

   Inclusive leadership and feelings of inclusion are also linked to two critical components of high-performing teams:

   a. **Trust:** Employees associate diversity practices with a trusting climate, resulting in higher employee engagement. This connection between diversity practices and trust is even stronger when employees feel included. [xviii]

b. Engagement: Inclusive leaders help teams from different disciplines work together more effectively. By reducing the negative impact of status differences, these leaders foster collaboration. This sense of psychological safety, in turn, leads to higher engagement in efforts to improve work processes [xix]

A study of 356 employees across 90 teams analyzed how inclusive leadership influences psychological safety and innovative performance. The findings indicate that when employees and teams perceive their leaders as inclusive, they feel psychologically safe, which is associated with both individual and team innovation performance [xx]

Numerous surveys from recruitment and professional services firms consistently highlight the importance of inclusion in attracting and retaining talent. For example, a Deloitte survey [xxi] found that:

- **80% of respondents** said that inclusion is important when choosing an employer;
- **39% reported** that they would leave their current organization for a more inclusive one;
- **23% indicated** they had already left a job for this reason.

Taken together, these three present a compelling new business case for inclusive leadership—one that reflects the complexity of workplace realities, values a broader range of benefits beyond simple financial metrics, and draws on empirical research to demonstrate the advantages of inclusive leadership practices.

Section 2: Understanding the Challenge

Inclusion and DEIB practices can have unintended consequences.

It is no understatement that implementing change within organizations is challenging. Inclusive leaders must balance the creation of equitable and inclusive environments with the risk of backlash and other unintended consequences. Therefore, it is essential to understand the range of implications—both positive and negative—of DEIB initiatives: [xxii]

Backfiring

DEIB initiatives backfire when progress regresses from the intended goal. Common examples include:

- **Resistance –** Groups may react negatively to mandatory training, like implicit bias training, with anger and resistance. In some cases, participants may express more animosity toward other groups afterward. [xxiii]

- **Stigma –** Targeted groups may feel unfairly singled out, resulting in a reluctance to participate in DEIB programs.

- **Reinforcement of stereotypes -** Diversity programs that focus too heavily on differences rather than commonalities can inadvertently make employees more conscious of these differences, potentially increasing biases rather than reducing them.

Negative spillovers

Beyond backfiring, DEIB initiatives may lead to other unintended negative consequences, such as:

Overburdening underrepresented employees.

Underrepresented employees may be disproportionately asked to take on additional DEIB-related responsibilities, such as mentoring or serving on committees, without compensation. This can detract from their primary job duties and lead to burnout.

Positive spillovers

Not all unintended consequences are negative. Some can lead to desirable outcomes, including:

- **Expanded market reach -** Companies that embrace DEIB may find their products and marketing strategies resonate with a broader customer base, with teams and leaders better equipped to serve diverse markets.

- **Cross-department collaboration -** DEIB initiatives often require collaboration across departments, helping to break down silos and foster a more collaborative culture.

A clear understanding of the problem is necessary for targeted intervention.

At the root of DEIB efforts is the identification and correction of instances where outcomes or rewards for organizational members are determined by their social group. For inclusive leaders, identifying if and where these systemic inequities exist is a significant challenge. Many DEIB interventions are applied broadly without a deep understanding of the specific issues at hand. When these interventions inevitably fail, it can breed resistance to future DEIB efforts and hinder long-term change. It is critical for leaders to thoroughly understand the problem they are trying to address. Here are some steps to get started:

Step 1.

Begin by framing your DEIB intervention as an effort to diagnose inequities and fairness within systems, [xxv] rather than focusing on the negative qualities or behaviors of individuals or groups. Addressing processes, policies, and standardized practices can bring people together, reducing the chances that people feel personally targeted. Often these changes lead to positive outcomes for everyone, not just underrepresented and marginalized groups.

Step 2.

Clearly define the specific problem you aim to solve. A good starting point is to assess whether different outcomes (e.g., promotions, hiring, turnover) or rewards (e.g., pay, bonuses) exist for different members of your organization. Are there racial or gender wage gaps? Is there uneven representation in leadership positions? Are there disproportionate hiring and/or turnover rates among certain social groups? Are there disparities in engagement levels across different employee groups? To answer these

questions, analyze HR data, administer surveys, and conduct focus groups. Explore not just 'what' inequities exist, but also 'how' and 'why' they arise.

Step 3.

Once you've identified the primary problem, evaluate the practices and policies that may be contributing to these disparities. These can generally be categorized in two ways: [xxvi]

1. Practices and policies that treat members of different social groups *differently*, leading to different outcomes – for example:

Differential rewards

Employees in the same or similar roles may receive different rewards due to biases — perceptions, stereotypes, or prejudices — about the worth, abilities, or potential of various social groups (known as valuative bias).

Promotion decisions

Biases can lead to the underestimation of the potential of certain groups, such as women and the visibly underrepresented, resulting in fewer promotion opportunities for those individuals (known as allocative bias).

2. Practices and policies that treat members of different social groups *the same*, but still lead to different outcomes – for example:

Parental leave

While parental leave policies undoubtedly improve the wellbeing of parents, they might not reduce gender inequality in the workplace. [xxix] Uniform increases in parental leave can fail to address the workplace norms and rigid gender roles that limit career advancement and income potential for women. [xxx]

Identifying practices and policies that treat social groups differently is often straightforward. However, when practices treat all groups the same but result in different outcomes, such scenarios can be challenging for leaders to identify, especially when there is an appearance of fairness. Nevertheless, revising or eliminating these practices may be essential to reducing inequality.

Uniform mentorship programs

Mentorship programs that fail to consider the unique needs and experiences of different social groups can unintentionally reinforce existing disparities. For instance, women and people of color may gain more from mentors who share their background, as these mentors can provide more relevant advice and support. [xxvii]
Conversely, women who already have a network rich with female contacts might benefit more from being paired with influential male mentors, who can offer access to different networks and opportunities. [xxviii]

Moving from the wrong to the right metrics
It is a positive step that many companies today publicly share data on race/ethnicity, gender, and job categories. However, research shows that many organizations remain stuck in the compliance stage of DEIB, [xxxi] with leaders often equating demographic disclosures with true DEIB success. For instance, a company may tout that 52% of its workforce is now female as evidence of strong DEIB performance. Yet, in isolation, this statistic provides limited insight into the company's overall DEIB impact.

Both internal and external stakeholders are increasingly seeking a deeper understanding of DEIB beyond representational data. They want to know if an organization is actively eliminating discrimination, funding effective initiatives, resolving incidents fairly, and ensuring that their operations do not disproportionately harm underrepresented communities. A simple measure of demographic representation is no longer sufficient. Fortunately, there are numerous outcome-focused metrics that companies can adopt to provide a more comprehensive view of their DEIB impact.

Measuring outcomes beyond demographics: [xxxii]

By focusing on systemic inequities within an organization rather than singling out individuals or groups, and by establishing a broad set of metrics beyond simple representation, leaders can better assess where different outcomes or rewards exist for various members of the organization and its external stakeholders.

Accountability infrastructure
Example: Tracking the percentage of leaders at the VP level and above with DEIB-related responsibilities integrated into their evaluation, promotion, or compensation.

DEIB infrastructure
Example: Measuring the resources (funding or headcount) dedicated to DEIB initiatives.

Progression
Example: Measuring the average time for an employee to be promoted and retention rates at each level.

Misconduct and conflict resolution
Example: Measuring the percentage of formal and informal employee reports that are resolved satisfactorily for the reporter.

Well-being
Example: Measuring the percentage of the workforce that continues working while ill.

Personnel
Example: Tracking the proportion of female employees at each job level.

DEIB initiative evaluation
Example: Net Promoter Scores (NPS) are increasingly used as a tool to evaluate DEIB initiatives, helping organizations track progress towards goals, understand experiences across different social groups, and benchmark against industry standards.

Section 3:
Relational Practices and Structural Interventions that Work

Relational and structural best practice for inclusive leaders

After examining the challenges and unintended consequences that inclusive leaders face today, this final section of the Field Guide highlights strategies, approaches and tactics that have been empirically proven to increase diversity, improve equity, inclusion, and foster belonging in the workplace.

Focusing on best practice supported by empirical evidence has several key benefits: it ensures DEIB efforts are credible, scalable, legally compliant, and more likely to engage employees and earn their buy-in. An evidence-based approach to inclusive leadership maximizes the likelihood of achieving meaningful and sustainable progress toward a DEIB-oriented workplace.

Relational practices that work

Sponsorship

One of the most common recommendations for inclusive leaders is to actively advocate for members of historically underrepresented communities through sponsorship. This concept has gained traction due to the tangible and targeted nature of the 'ask,' which focuses on improving outcomes for specific individuals. However, many leaders believe they are sponsoring someone when, in reality, they are providing mentorship. Here's how the two differ:

- **Mentorship** provides one-to-one support through guidance, advice, feedback, and coaching. **Sponsorship** involves external support such as advocacy, visibility, promotion, and connections.

According to Rosalind Chow, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Theory at Carnegie Mellon University, "Sponsorship can be understood as a form of intermediated impression management, where sponsors act as brand managers and publicists for their protégés." The core of sponsorship is the sponsor's work in shaping others' views of the sponsored employee, rather than just the direct relationship between sponsor and protégé.

Concrete sponsorship behaviors

To help inclusive leaders enhance their mentorship practices with sponsorship behaviors, consider this framework based on impression management research: [xxxiii]

- **Amplify.** Publicize the accomplishments of protégés to enhance their visibility in the organization.

- **Boost.** Lend credibility to a protégé's candidacy for new roles or opportunities, whether through formal recommendations or informal endorsements.

- **Connect.** Leverage your network to introduce protégés to influential figures and opportunities that can advance their careers.

- **Defend.** Stand up for protégés in the face of negative perceptions, even when doing so involves personal or professional risk.

Understanding the distinctions between sponsorship and mentorship, and combining the two, is essential for inclusive leaders. While emotional support through mentorship is critical, leaders must also intentionally seek opportunities for sponsorship, deploying their social capital to help underrepresented individuals gain visibility and advancement in the organization.

Questions for inclusive leaders

Are you and your leadership team clear on the differences between mentorship and sponsorship?

Are you practicing and encouraging the specific sponsorship outlined above?

Can you rebrand your mentorship programs as sponsorship initiatives to better serve underrepresented employees?

Allyship

Allyship, like mentorship and sponsorship, has gained prominence as a key practice for inclusive leadership. In fact, in 2021, Dictionary.com named 'allyship' its word of the year, underscoring its widespread use. Despite its mainstream focus, however, research indicates that women and other underrepresented groups perceive less evidence of true allyship than men believe they are demonstrating. [xxxiv]

The 2022 State of Allyship-In-Action Benchmark Study, [xxxv] surveying over 1,150 participants across various mid-sized Fortune 500 companies, revealed a persistent gap between how men and women perceive men's allyship efforts.

This is how participants replied to two key questions:

⊘ Do you agree with this statement?

Most men within our organization are either 'active allies' or 'public advocates' for gender equity.
(Percentage of respondents agreeing with statement)

	MEN	WOMEN
Executive / C-Suite	77%	45%
Mid to senior management	67%	36%
Lower management	51%	28%*

⊘ Are these statements your experience?

Based on your own experience or what you have seen/heard from others, how often does this happen within your organization?
(Percent reporting "always" or "frequently")

	MEN	WOMEN
Men giving credit to women for their ideas and contributions	71%	40%
Men requiring diverse slates of candidates for open positions	54%	40%
Men advocating for women to be promoted	44%	19%
Men advocating for women, even when women aren't in the room	44%	13%
Men calling out other men who are devaluing women in meetings/other interactions	15%	4%

Closing the allyship gap

While many male leaders view themselves as allies, there is a notable disconnect between their perception and the experiences of women. Here are the best practices for closing the allyship gap that align closely with the traits and behaviors of inclusive leaders mentioned above:

- **Make allyship an organizational priority.** Demonstrate a personal commitment to allyship, and embed it as a strategic value for the organization.

- **Listen and collaborate.** Engage in active listening and take meaningful action on what you learn.

- **Move from awareness to action.** Don't stop at awareness; take concrete steps to, challenge inequities and biased behaviours.

- **Create a community of allies.** Create spaces for communities to share, learn and develop the skills needed to support underrepresented groups.

Questions for inclusive leaders

⑦

Are you fostering a culture of allyship?

How can you address and close the gap between men's and women's experiences of allyship?

Are you moving beyond awareness to action?

The role of empathy [xxxvi]

Empathy in the workplace—from client relations to employees' interactions—has gained increased visibility, particularly as younger generations rise into leadership positions. While this is a positive sign, research shows that many employees feel their leaders' empathy efforts are insincere. According to a survey by EY, 52% of over 1,000 U.S. employees feel their company's attempts to be empathetic are dishonest.

What leaders get wrong about empathy

The challenge in showing authentic empathy often stems from confusion between sympathy and empathy:

- **Sympathy** involves feeling sorrow for someone because you've had similar experiences.

- **Empathy** means understanding someone's emotions without necessarily having shared their experience.

In diverse, multigenerational workplaces, leaders can't always relate to every individual's circumstances. Genuine empathy allows leaders to understand and respond thoughtfully to employees' feelings, even without direct personal experience. Empathy fosters trust and psychological safety, making employees feel valued, respected, and motivated.

Four ways leaders can display authentic empathy

1. Listen actively

Show real interest and respond thoughtfully, helping team members feel understood and valued.

2. Know that you don't have the answers

Instead of trying to solve personal problems, give employees space to express themselves and offer support.

3. Avoid autopilot responses

Listen fully before responding and ask, "How can I support you?" Respect boundaries and adapt to each employee's needs.

4. Make time for your team

Even when busy, follow-up on conversations to show genuine care and build trust.

The critical link between empathy and trust

Building trust is an essential leadership skill, and research reveals that empathy is one of the three key pillars necessary for trust-building. People trust others when they perceive them as:

Authentic
Genuine and sincere

Logical
Sound in their reasoning, judgment, and competence
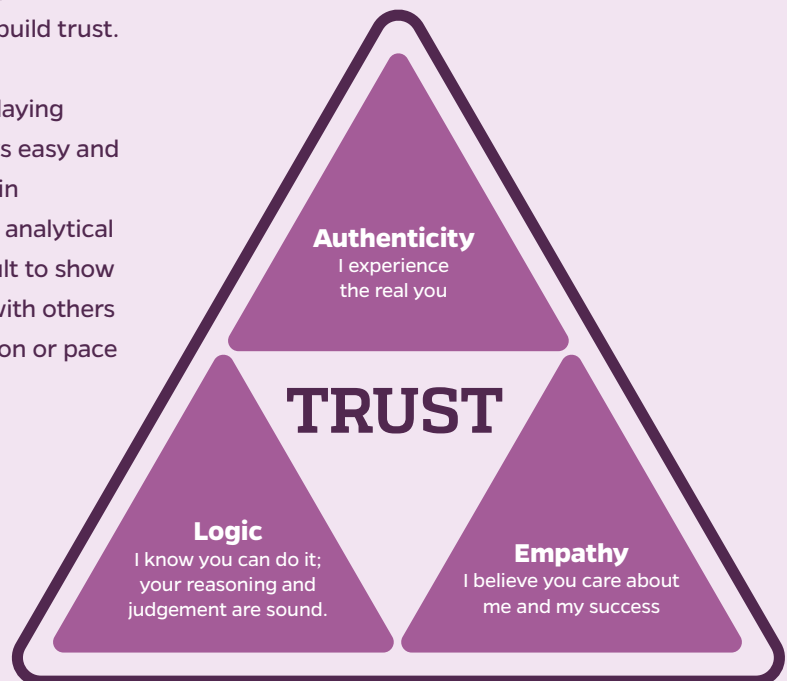
Empathetic
Caring about their well-being

When trust is eroded, it's typically due to one of these pillars breaking down or 'wobbling.' For inclusive leaders looking to strengthen trust within their teams, it's important to recognize which of these pillars might be vulnerable in their leadership approach and take corrective action.

The Trust Triangle

If a leader struggles with or lacks empathy, it can come across as self-centeredness, which ultimately undermines their ability to build trust.

This challenge is not uncommon. Displaying authentic empathy at work isn't always easy and tends to come more naturally to certain personality types. For example, highly analytical or driven individuals may find it difficult to show empathy, often becoming frustrated with others who don't share their level of motivation or pace of understanding.

Authenticity
I experience the real you

TRUST

Logic
I know you can do it; your reasoning and judgement are sound.

Empathy
I believe you care about me and my success

Empathy destroyers

Regardless of personality type, certain common workplace distractions can hinder empathetic behaviors and undermine trust-building. Inclusive leaders can make immediate improvements by addressing these two common 'empathy destroyers':

Passive meeting behavior

Leaders who disengage during meetings after sharing their own ideas signal indifference, which can erode trust. To counter this, leaders can take responsibility for the success of the meeting by actively engaging with ideas and sharing the burden of driving the meeting forward.

Device distractions

Constant device distractions inhibit genuine empathy. By putting away phones during meetings and other interactions, leaders show they are fully present and attentive.

By addressing these two behaviors, leaders demonstrate that they prioritize the needs of others. Actively engaging in meetings, and minimizing distractions are critical steps toward fostering empathy and building trust in leadership.

Questions for inclusive leaders

Are you clear on the distinction between sympathy and empathy in the context of leadership interactions?

How can you demonstrate empathy more authentically to avoid merely 'paying lip service' to the issue?

What concrete steps can you take to prevent or address 'wobbles' in empathy?

Structural interventions that work

As the study of DEIB initiatives has matured, several structural interventions common in past diversity training programs—such as mandatory bias training, negative framing, and punitive measures—have been shown to be ineffective. These approaches often lead to disengagement, resistance, and, at times, even the undermining of DEIB efforts.

Research now indicates that it is more effective to engage managers in solving the problem, increase their on-the-job contact with women and underrepresented workers, and promote social accountability [xxxvii] (leveraging the natural human desire to be seen as fair-minded). As a result, some of the most effective solutions for improving diversity in organizations were not originally designed with that aim in mind.

Cross-functional and autonomous teams [xxxviii]

Research shows that contact between different social groups can reduce bias and promote cohesion. One notable study, conducted during World War II by Harvard sociologist Samuel Stouffer, demonstrated the power of contact in reducing racial animus. Stouffer surveyed U.S. troops and found that Whites serving alongside Black platoons showed significantly lower levels of racial prejudice compared to those in segregated units—essentially seeing those they fought alongside as being soldiers like them first and foremost. This unexpected finding highlighted how working together toward a common goal as equals can transform attitudes and foster mutual respect.

In the context of organizational design, practices like cross-functional and autonomous teams have been shown to increase contact among diverse groups. [xxxix] These interventions are particularly effective in firms where functions are often divided along racial, ethnic, or gender lines. For example, women are more likely to work in sales and customer service roles, whereas men dominate roles in engineering and IT. Self-managed teams, where individuals from different roles and backgrounds collaborate on projects, help break down stereotypes and promote mutual understanding. Companies that implement autonomous teams often see a rise in diversity among management, indicating the long-term positive impact of contact on hiring and promotion.

Supporting work/life integration

Research has also shown that corporate programs that support work-life integration can have a significant, and sometimes unexpected, impact on diversity, by not only boosting gender diversity, but racial diversity too. They are in fact more effective than many racial-equity programs when it comes to increasing diversity among managers. [xl]

A study of over 800 U.S. companies, spanning more than 30 years, found that universal policies for family leave, flexible scheduling, and childcare assistance significantly increased the representation of Black, Hispanic, and Asian men and women in management roles, as well as White women. These groups benefit disproportionately from work-life integration policies because they often face greater caregiving responsibilities. Women and people of color, for instance, are more likely to be single parents than White men.

Corporate work/life integration interventions that boost diversity [xli]

Paid family leave

Paid family leave boosts diversity by retaining women and people of color in management roles, while increasing productivity and reducing turnover. [xlii]

Flextime

Flexible working hours improve the recruitment and retention of women and people of color. Studies show that companies adopting flextime programs see an increase in the representation of women and underrepresented groups in management, even after accounting for other policy or economic changes.

Note: Simply offering flextime is not always enough. Eliminating the stigma associated with using it is just as important. Sociologist Lisa Dodson found that employees seeking flexibility are often unfairly seen as unreliable and uncommitted, resulting in poor evaluations and limited career growth. Organizations can normalize and actively promote flextime, ensuring employees feel comfortable taking advantage of it.

Childcare support

Rising childcare costs disproportionately affect Black, Hispanic, and Asian American parents. The cost of sending two children under age 5 to a childcare center is 29% of the median income for all American families, but it rises to 42% for Hispanic families and 56% for Black families. As a result, Black women are nearly twice as likely as White women to quit or refuse a job due to childcare issues.

Support programs that have proven effective include: referral services (where firms provide contact information for local childcare centers); childcare vouchers (subsidizing childcare costs); and company-sponsored childcare centers.

Childcare voucher schemes, in particular, have shown double-digit increases in the share of Black men and women, as well as Hispanic and Asian American women, in management.

Work/life inclusion and why it matters [xliii]

Work/life inclusion occurs when an organization's culture and structural design is generally perceived by its employees as supporting an individual's ability to thrive authentically in family and personal life roles, while progressing in their career. In such an environment, employees do not feel compelled to sacrifice or conceal non-work identities like mother, spouse, or caregiver to progress professionally.

Women typically bear the majority of child and elder care duty in societies, investing considerable mental and emotional energy in managing family members' wellbeing. Thus, fostering a work/life inclusive workplace is a key way that organizations can unlock the potential of their female workforce. [xliv] This approach equally benefits male employees, particularly as new generations of men, who are typically in dual-earner families and more egalitarian relationships, strive to be equal parents and caregivers.

Work/life inclusion extends beyond family duties. In an inclusive workplace, individuals shouldn't feel obligated to forgo personally fulfilling non-work activities such as regular exercise, volunteering, hobbies, or maintaining social connections.

Transparency and accountability [xlv]

Numerous studies show social accountability is a powerful driver in the success of diversity programs. Tactics that emphasize transparency in DEIB efforts, which encourages social accountability, leverage people's natural desire to look fair-minded and equitable to those around them.

For example, a study by Emilio Castilla of MIT's Sloan School of Management [xlvi] found that one firm was consistently giving Black employees smaller raises than their White colleagues, even where performance ratings and roles were identical. Castilla suggested that the company post each unit's average performance rating and pay raise by race and gender. Once managers realized that their decisions would be visible to employees, peers, and superiors, and that their decisions were favoring White employees, the wage gap disappeared—an excellent demonstration of social accountability in action.

Three additional structural interventions that leverage social accountability are corporate diversity task forces, diversity managers, and targeted recruiting, as explained below.

1 Corporate diversity task forces

Diversity task forces, typically backed by a C-suite level leader, bring together department heads, including members from underrepresented groups, to periodically review diversity data across the company. They identify problem areas—such as recruitment bottlenecks or career progression issues—and devise strategies to address them. Task force members then take these solutions back to their departments to implement. Their presence prompts managers to reflect, asking, "Will this decision look right?" when considering hires or promotions.

Task forces have been shown to be highly effective. On average, companies introducing them see a 9% to 30% increases in the representation of women and ethnic minority groups in management over five years. Despite their proven success, only 20% of medium and large companies have implemented diversity task forces, making it a prime target for action by inclusive leaders. Moreover, task forces often rely on internal resources rather than new hires, making them more cost-effective than many other DEIB initiatives.

Case study

At Deloitte in 1992 half of new hires were women, but few were making it to partner. Then-CEO Mike Cook launched a task force to address high turnover among female employees. By monitoring women's career progress and fostering transparency, Deloitte significantly improved female representation. Over eight years, turnover among women fell to match that of men, and the percentage of female partners rose from 5% to 14%. By 2015, 21% of Deloitte's global partners were women, and Cathy Engelbert, now Commissioner of the WNBA, became Deloitte LLP's CEO—the first woman to lead a major professional services firm.

② Diversity managers

Another tactic that leverages social accountability is the appointment of diversity managers. Studies show that people are less likely to act on bias when they know their decisions may be questioned. Having a diversity manager on staff can prompt managers to consider the full pool of qualified candidates rather than defaulting to those who come to mind first—a process susceptible to unconscious bias.

Organizations that appoint diversity managers experience a 7% to 18% increase in underrepresented groups in management positions over five years (with the exception of Hispanic men). Despite this, only 10% of medium and large employers currently have diversity managers, making it another clear area where improvements can be made.

③ Targeted recruiting [xlvii]

In corporate college recruitment programs, managers are invited to volunteer to help identify and recruit diverse talent early in their careers. Research shows that managers are eager to participate in such programs, driven by the positive messaging and the potential to strengthen their own teams with talented individuals. Over time, these programs build genuine support for diversity as managers witness the benefits firsthand.

The impact is notable. Five years after implementing a college recruitment program targeting women, companies see an average increase of around 10% in the share of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian American women in management positions. Similarly, programs focused on ethnic minority recruitment lead to an 8% increase in Black male managers and a 9% increase in Black female managers. However, only about 15% of companies have specialized college recruitment programs for women and ethnic minorities, making this a clear opportunity for inclusive leaders to drive positive change.

Conclusion:
The Journey Starts Here

As evidenced throughout this Field Guide, developing inclusive leaders is as challenging as it is essential. The path to fostering true diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in organizations requires more than just good intentions. It demands a deep commitment to evidence-based practices, self-awareness, and continuous learning. Inclusive leaders are rare, but they play a crucial role in navigating the complexities of today's workforce, where diversity is both a reality and a necessity for success.

The first section of this guide explored the traits and behaviors that set inclusive leaders apart. It is not enough to simply aspire to be inclusive or to be seen to be inclusive; leaders must actively cultivate the skills and mindsets that drive inclusion in meaningful ways. This includes understanding a new, empirically robust business case for inclusive leadership, where the benefits of a diverse and inclusive workplace are not just moral imperatives, and not accessed simplistically by increasing diversity numbers alone. Rather, as this guide sets out, the promise of DEIB is a nuanced set of strategic advantages that can drive innovation, employee engagement, and overall performance—if effectively unlocked and leveraged.

Section 2 explored the challenges leaders face when embedding inclusive leadership within organizations. DEIB efforts can backfire, lead to unintended consequences, or create superficial progress if not carefully managed. Leaders need to understand these potential pitfalls in order to implement interventions that truly advance DEIB goals. This guide stresses the importance of evolving metrics and a clear analysis of where efforts may fall short—critical for moving beyond mere compliance.

Section 3 offered actionable strategies based on the latest research, covering both relational practices and structural interventions. From sponsorship and allyship to supporting work/life integration and fostering accountability, these strategies are key to unlocking the full benefits of DEIB.

To rise above these challenges leaders and organizations must embrace inclusive leadership as an ongoing journey, one that unlocks the immense potential of a truly diverse and inclusive workforce. By doing so, they can propel their organizations toward the point where inclusion becomes a core driver of success.

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