

THE SEVEN CORE TRAITS OF INCLUSIVE LEADERS

WHY INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP
IS KEY IN A CRISIS

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Introduction



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The world is in crisis. COVID-19 presents the biggest global challenge to our economy and way of life since World War Two.

In exceptional circumstances like these, organisations need exceptional leaders.

In a recently published article in the Harvard Business Review (HBR April 2020), researchers identified four key behaviours that help leaders to navigate a crisis:

Behaviour 1: Decide with speed over precision

In times like these, the best leaders act with speed. Exceptional leaders scrap the traditional rule book of decision-making and focus on speed over perfection.

Behaviour 2: Adapt boldly

Exceptional leaders try to get ahead of the rapidly changing circumstances by seeking input and information from a wide range of diverse sources. They are not afraid to admit what they do not know. Instead, they seek to bring in outside expertise when needed.

Behaviour 3: Reliably deliver

The best leaders take personal ownership in a crisis, even though many challenges and factors lie outside their control. They align team focus, establish new metrics to monitor performance, and create a culture of accountability.

Behaviour 4: Engage for impact

In times of crisis, no job is more important than taking care of your team. Effective leaders are understanding of their team's circumstances and distractions, but they find ways to engage and motivate, clearly and thoroughly communicating important new goals and information.

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Measuring inclusive leadership

There are many crossover points between how leaders act in a crisis and the principles of inclusive leadership, as highlighted by our research. At VERCIDA Consulting, we have been mapping the competencies and behaviours of inclusive leadership over a two-year study.

Our work has identified seven core traits of the inclusive leader. These are:

- 1. Fairness and respect** – competencies include understanding bias and belonging.
- 2. Collaboration** – competencies include teaming, courage, and promoting social bonds.
- 3. EQ and Cultural Intelligence (CQ)** – competencies include empathy, curiosity, and open-mindedness.
- 4. Empowerment and growth** – competencies include stewardship, sponsorship, and adaptability.
- 5. Insight** – competencies include awareness of self and others through curiosity, and perspective-taking.
- 6. Promoting psychological safety** – competencies include humility and courage.
- 7. Trust building** – competencies include honesty, openness, transparency, and integrity.

1. Fairness and respect

“ The way you see people is the way you treat them, and the way you treat them is what they become. ”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Human beings are social creators. We like to hang out in groups. It makes us feel good. But leaders, like all humans see things and people from their own subjective – biased – viewpoint. The thoughts and feelings that leaders carry in their heads about people who are similar to them and people who are difference from them affects three basics drives:

- A leaders' **attitude** towards diverse groups
- A leaders' **behaviour** towards diverse groups
- How leaders make **decisions** that impact positively on in-group members and yet negatively on out- group members.

Understanding the psychology of difference helps leaders to pause and reflect on the biases that they carry around with them and how these cultural mind-bugs create a set of unconscious behaviour patterns. Being aware of personal biases and the impact these have on organisational fairness and perceived levels of respect is one of the foundation stones of inclusive leadership.

Perceptions of workplace fairness and respect are closely associated with perceptions of belonging.

Research by BetterUp defines belonging as being associated with mattering, identification, and social connection. As they state: **The unifying thread across these themes is that they all revolve around the sense of being accepted and included by those around you.**

Their research found the following:

- High belonging was linked to a 56% increase in job performance
- A 50% drop in turnover risk
- A 75% reduction in sick days

Our research on inclusive leadership identified a number of ways in which leaders can promote fairness, respect and a sense of belonging. Here are five tips:

- **Value contributions equally:** Ask yourself a question – if you want to share a thought or gather some views on a project you are working on, do you value the responses from colleagues equally, or are you more likely to value the contribution of some team members over others? The inclusive leader puts into place mechanisms to mitigate personal biases to ensure all voices are equally valued and respected.
- **Treat all team members fairly:** This ranges from decision-making that may include work opportunities to everyday micro-behaviours. Who do leaders spend their time with? Whose voice gets amplified in team meetings?
- **Speaking up to challenge inappropriate behaviour:** Unlike Zombie leaders (see page 7) the inclusive leader lives by their personal values by speaking up when colleagues are being treated badly. They call out exclusionary behaviours in their peer group and in others.
- **Allow people to be authentic:** Inclusive leaders do not judge others for how they live their lives. Instead they create a sense of belonging and respect by not asking colleagues to compromise who they are through conversations about sameness disguised as strategies about 'fit'.
- **Fairness in decision-making:** Inclusive leaders recognise that bias results in organisational patterns. They seek to promote fairness by forensically questioning trends in decision blind-spots, such as hiring, work opportunities, and performance reviews.

2. Collaboration

“Alone we can do so little;
together we can do so much.”

Helen Keller

Global businesses are increasingly moving towards highly networked cultures, linked together by cross-team and cross-border working. This means collaborative styles of leadership will become an essential part of maintaining competitive advantage and promoting high-performance team cultures.

Scott E. Page, Professor of Complexity, Social Science and Management at the University of Michigan, has, through many years of research, demonstrated how the power of collective wisdom leads to more informative and intelligent decision-making. By drawing on the collective wisdom of diverse groups, businesses can learn to mitigate human mind-bugs and the associated business risks, and instead, foster greater creativity innovation and problem-solving.

In a 2016 white paper from Oxford Leadership, researchers identified a number of key dimensions of collaborative leadership. These include:

- **Leadership from the inside out:** For leaders to foster an environment in which they promote collective innovation and accomplishments, they must first, learn to lead themselves.
- **Authentic relationships:** Leaders need to let go of the invisible mind and body armour that many of them carry around as protective shields whenever they enter the corporate world. Inclusive leaders replace inauthenticity with empowerment through open and human relationships.
- **Commitment to the whole:** In many businesses a culture of looking out for and promoting the individual as star performer dominates. These cultures are often defined by their internal competitiveness, which can lead to negative power plays, and some-times overt toxic behaviours. A commitment to the whole means finding a shared purpose that inspires minority and majority groups. It replaces a focus on individual voices with mutual respect for ideas from all team members.

Here are five inclusive leadership behaviours that foster collaboration:

- **Amplification of different voices:** Inclusive leaders foster workplace collaboration and innovation by championing the views of diverse colleagues. They involve different viewpoints at project inception. They ensure these voices have equal weight around the decision-making table.
- **Don't get hung up on organisational hierarchy:** Inclusive leaders seek to promote authentic social bonds by letting go of ego driven leadership, which is focused on the collection of grand titles and positions of power. They see these as barriers to business innovation and high performance. They seek to remove these barriers through first name term practices and genuine open-doors policies.
- **Create opportunities for cross-team collaboration:** Leaders who seek to promote true team collaboration do so by actively looking for opportunities that promote cross-team and cross-cultural collaboration. Diverse and inclusive decision-making is central to team dynamics.
- **Involvement in decision-making:** Far too often important decisions that impact employees are made behind closed doors, often supported by superficial consultation processes. Inclusive leaders are not interested in fake engagement. Instead they have a genuine interest in involving colleagues in important decisions that affect them as employees.
- **Celebrate team success over individual success:** Inclusive leaders seek to move away from an over focus on individual reward. They build reward and recognition policies and practices based on collective team effort and performance. For instance, team-based bonus schemes.

3. EQ and Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

“ Emotions are contagious. We’ve all known it experientially. You know after you have a really fun coffee with a friend, you feel good. When you have a rude clerk in a store, you walk away feeling bad. ”

Daniel Goleman

Many of today’s leaders have traditionally been taught that showing emotions is a sign of weakness. Instead, so they are taught, we need ‘tough guys’ (and they are usually guys), who can make tough decisions.

This style of leadership results in what we call Zombie Leaders. That is, leaders who lack authenticity, compassion, and empathy as well as curiosity and openness to difference. These Zombie Leaders cover their emotions for fear of being seen as too human, which in many corporate environments is seen as a sign of weakness and vulnerability. These Zombie Leaders:

- Are influenced by dead ideas on what motivates employees.
- Hire for diversity but have a real preference for sameness.
- Have zero-limited insight of how out-group members experience work.
- Put pressure on diverse colleagues to conform to Zombie norms.
- Turn a blind eye to or collude with behaviours that do not align to stated values.

Zombie leadership results in a decline in employee motivation, engagement, and performance. Feelings of dis-empowerment from diverse colleagues and that there is a need to cover key aspects of who they are for fear of being seen as different and therefore, not one of the team, grow. Innovation and creativity decline.

Here are five ways in which inclusive leaders reject these Zombie norms through behaviours that promote EQ and CQ:

- **Practice empathy:** Inclusive leaders recognise that they experience and feel the world from their own frames of reference. They seek to move beyond their own feelings by recognising the moods and emotions of those around them. These emotions are embraced through active listening practices.
- **Share with others:** Inclusive leaders do not hide behind an invisible body armour like traditional leaders. They view sharing, not as vulnerability, but as a practice of fostering human connectivity. They share stories about their private life as well as business successes and challenges.
- **Adapt their work style:** Inclusive leaders flex their style depending on the setting they are in. They find it easy to switch from the formality of the Boardroom to the informality of team drinks with frontline employees. They are comfortable in different cultural settings.
- **Practice authenticity:** Inclusive leaders are simply authentic. They are broadly the same person at work as they are outside of work. They also encourage all team members to be themselves at work.
- **Practice curiosity:** Inclusive leaders have a natural curiosity for difference. They are open-minded, which leads to behaviours that promote inter-cultural connectivity. They go out of their way to talk to diverse colleagues at team meetings and in Town-hall events. They attend events that are designed to promote awareness of diversity, such as LGBT+ History Month and International Women’s day.

4. Empowerment and growth

“ An empowered organisation is one in which individuals have the knowledge, skills, desire, and opportunity to personally succeed in a way that leads to collective organisational success. ”

Stephen Covey

Why do so many of today's workers feel dis-empowered? What is it that leaders do to their people that drains their energy and passion? What are the consequences of dis-empowered employees to business innovation and performance?

These are just a few of the questions that any leader interested in high performance and inclusion might want to reflect on. To help, here are a few responses.

Leaders disempower their people by:

- **Not listening to everyone's ideas with the same levels of respect:** Leaders have their favourites, which plays out in micro-behaviours – inviting some colleagues to the meeting and not others; selecting the same old corporate clones to share their ideas and to speak first; or simply ignoring viewpoints that don't align with the leaders' own ideas and thoughts.
- **Giving the wrong type of feedback:** Feedback is important as a growth tool, but too many leaders offer little constructive feedback. Instead they constantly nit-pick which leads to dis-engagement.
- **It's my way or the highway:** Many leaders are governed by a fixed mindset. They have their approach to work and expect their 'followers' (they don't see others as co-workers) to step in-line with their current mode of working. This inflexibility creates little room for difference to shine and as a result dis-empowers colleagues.

From our research here are five inclusive leadership behaviours that foster empowerment and employee growth:

- **Praise for motivation:** Getting into a habit of offering praise for a well performed task or when an employee offers a new insight into a particular company challenge is something that leads to higher levels of motivation and stakeholder engagement in business decision-making and ideas formation.
- **Invest time in all team members, not just the stars:** Inclusive leaders see the value of collective development to business outcomes. Investing in the collective employee population promotes a group identity. This leads to collective empowerment, which, in turn, leads to a narrowing of bias thinking.
- **Provide work opportunities fairly:** Inclusive leaders who seek to empower and grow their colleagues do so through conscious work allocation. They are mindful of which colleagues are assigned the high-value projects and work with conscious intent to ensure that over the performance cycle work opportunities are allocated fairly.
- **Manage personal relationships professionally:** In many work settings, the boundaries between professional relationships and personal bonds can become blurred. Inclusive leaders manage these boundaries by not letting personal relationship influence professional decision-making.
- **Role modelling:** Inclusive leaders role model corporate values. For instance, they practice work-life balance behaviours that signal to the workforce that policy and intention are aligned. These behaviours signal, **“It's OK to be different in your work style and work patterns. We love you for it. I as a leader am also different.”**

5. Insight

“ I think self-awareness is probably the most important thing towards being a champion. ”

Billie Jean King

“ Awareness of others is a beautiful thing. Learning how to support and encourage, and stopping long enough to pay attention to someone other than yourself, is a truly beautiful quality. There are a thousand beautiful things we can find about ourselves. ”

India de Beaufort

Having true insight into one's own motivators, drives, and ways of working is a key leadership competency. However, insight into oneself alone is not enough to create meaningful and inclusive insight. It is simply one side of a two-sided coin. Inclusive leaders are also required to gain insight into difference – that is, the thoughts, feelings, life experiences, and ambitions of individuals and groups who are unlike them.

It is only through this level of dual perspective-taking can a leader truly lead inclusively.

As stressed by Gillian Ku, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School (LBS) perspective-taking is: “the active cognitive process of imagining the world from another's vantage point.”

Perspective-taking, stresses Dr Ku, should not be confused with empathy. Whereas empathy is about connecting with another person's moods, perspective-taking is a cognitive – thinking – process.

From our research here are five behaviours that build inclusive leadership through insight:

- **Awareness of personal biases:** Inclusive leaders dig deep into their neuro-networks. They investigate unconscious pattern matching processes that lead to social and cultural biases. They build awareness by using insight tools, such as the implicit association test to investigate their own mind-bugs and blind-spots.

- **Seek feedback:** Inclusive leaders actively seek feedback on their own behaviours and interactions with others. They use techniques such as 360-degree loops, reverse mentoring and coaching.
- **Curious about difference:** Inclusive leaders often have a natural curiosity for things that sit outside of their immediate cultural hemisphere. They take a genuine interest in other people's personal circumstances and seek to get to know colleagues on a personal level through informal conversations over coffee or lunch and at networking events.
- **Notice and call out unwritten rules:** Inclusive leaders have a natural antenna that enables them to tune into the unspoken and unwritten rules of corporate life. Critically, inclusive leaders often name these unspoken rules in leadership meetings to raise awareness of how they advantage and disadvantage colleagues differently.
- **Ask questions and act:** Inclusive leaders are questioning leaders. They attend employee network group meetings and diversity events in order to connect with diverse colleagues. They ask questions about respect, belonging, and psychological safety with conscious intent – their curiosity is not idle. They use this knowledge to build inclusive workplace practices and policies.

6. Psychological Safety

“ Low levels of psychological safety can create a culture of silence. They can also create a Cassandra culture – an environment in which speaking up is belittled and warnings go unheeded. ”

Amy C Edmondson

Understanding psychological safety

As stated by Amy C Edmondson - Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School - psychological safety is the belief that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking. People feel able to speak up when needed — with relevant ideas, questions, or concerns — without being shut down in a gratuitous way. Psychological safety is present when colleagues trust and respect each other and feel able, even obligated, to be candid.

As the global economy shifts ever more towards a VUCA environment, the need for employees to speak up and speak out, to challenge and question existing world views will grow.

And yet, so many employees, even when they feel the need to speak up, stay silent. Why is this? In one word: Fear.

Reviewing the results from employee engagement surveys from numerous global companies, together with focus group data, we have spotted a repetitive trend:

- Many groups of employees – particularly minority ethnic communities and disabled groups - often do not feel that their voice is heard or respected.
- Employees do not challenge leadership decisions for fear of career-limiting repercussions.
- Employees do not trust their leaders to hear all voices equally. There is a perceived bias towards certain populations of employees.

In short, many employees do not experience psychological safety or feel psychologically safe. In this context, the psychological contract, as defined by Denise Rousseau from Carnegie Mellon University, is broken. This is one of the biggest leadership challenges of the modern era.

Helpfully, Amy C Edmondson offers a tool kit for leaders to build psychological safety. This includes three key steps:

1. **Setting the stage:** Leadership tasks includes setting expectations about failure, uncertainty, and interdependence to clarify the need for voice.
2. **Inviting participation:** Leadership tasks include acknowledging skills gaps, asking insightful questions, and practicing intense listening. They also create forums for input and provide guidelines for discussion.
3. **Responding productively:** Leadership tasks include listening, acknowledging, and thanking colleagues, as well as offering help to others.

From our research, we have identified a number of inclusive leadership behaviours that build and strengthen psychological safety:

- Owns and admits mistake to others.
- Never deliberately acts in a way that undermines the efforts of colleagues.
- Encouraging all team members to offer alternative perspectives to a leaders' own views.
- Forgiving of others making mistakes.
- Responding professionally when team members bring up problems and tough issues.

7. Trust building

“ Over time, I have come to this simple definition of leadership: Leadership is getting results in a way that inspires trust. ”

Stephen M.R. Covery

Think of a leader that you fundamentally mistrust. What is it about his or her behaviours that have led to your perceptions of such a leader? My guess – based on research, would be something like this: They say one thing and yet they do something contrary, they lie, they talk down to people or have little respect for people who are less like them.

Now think of a leader that you trust. What values do they hold? What behaviours do they demonstrate?

According to David M. Long, assistant professor of Organizational Behaviour at the Mason School of Business at the College of William & Mary, there are three pillars that create bonds of trust between leaders and followers – one of them is integrity.

Other research studies have identified integrity as a key leadership competency. In our own research, integrity was seen as a trust generator, which in turn facilitates strong emotional bonds between diverse colleagues and their leaders.

As stressed by Paul J. Zak, Professor of Economic Sciences, Psychology & Management at the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies and author of **Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High Performance Companies**, employees in high-trust organisations are more productive, have more energy at work, collaborate better, and stay with their employers longer than people working at low-trust companies.

However, as stated in a HBR article (January–February 2017 Issue), in its 2016 global CEO survey, PwC reported that 55% of CEOs think that a lack of trust is a threat to their organisation’s growth.

The stakes for leaders have never been higher.

Five inclusive leadership behaviours that build trust include:

- **Speaking up:** Inclusive leaders who build trust are driven by a sense of fairness. They do not stand by or turn a blind eye to bias or inappropriate

behaviour. Instead, they speak up loudly and challenge individual and organisational bias.

- **Align values with behaviours:** Inclusive leaders work with the principle of congruence. They understand the power of role modelling everyday macro and micro behaviours that align with stated organisational values – even under times of stress. This alignment generates trust building through integrity.
- **Don’t bad talk others:** Leaders who inspire trust don’t play office politics. They do not bad talk others or disrespect them either when they are out of earshot or in front of others. Instead, leaders who seek to inspire trust in others challenge this kind of bad talk as they know without doing so it can spiral towards toxicity and send a message of acceptability.
- **Admit mistakes:** Inclusive leaders do not hide behind the classic ‘tough guy’ macho image. Instead they show their humanness and perceived vulnerability by admitting mistakes when they happen and thus signal to others that mistakes are OK, it’s part of the learning process. This also aligns to the principle of building psychological safety.
- **Always tell the truth:** The corporate world, globally, is full of deceit and cover-up. This includes industry-wide bad practice from the UK’s banking PPI scandal to cross-industry cover ups on issues such as sexual harassment. Bad leaders facilitate this practice through either overt participation in these practices or through turning a blind eye – a form of collusion. Inclusive leaders on the other hand, always tell the truth; they are radically open and transparent in their communications to all employees.

Acknowledgements



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Dan specialises in the science and application of unconscious bias, leadership decision-making, and behavioural science. He spends his days supporting executives to turn diversity theory into meaningful actions.

He is acknowledged as an inspirational conference speaker and an expert facilitator working across a wide range of global business sectors.

In 2019 Hive Learning named Dan as one of the top 50 Most influential D&I leaders globally.

Dan is Chair of the Lord Mayor of London's Power of Inclusion programme (London) and an advisor to

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Publications: **The Long Road to Inclusivity**: Published in Beyond 2015, Shaping the Future of Equality, Human Rights and Social Justice. A Collection of Essays: Equality & Diversity Research Network. 2015.

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