



## **What Are the Habits of Inclusive Leaders Who Create and Sustain an Environment That Supports Diversity?**

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Think of a leader in your life who really motivated you to be the best you could be. What attributes or characteristics describe him or her? What habits did he or she have that worked for you? Over the past several years, I have asked hundreds of leaders that question. Here is a sampling of the most frequent answers.

He or she:

- Was fair and respectful toward others.
- Had high personal standards.
- Believed in my abilities and potential.
- Helped me believe in myself.
- Encouraged and stretched me.
- Led by example.
- Mentored and coached.
- Asked for and appreciated different points of view.
- Listened to my ideas and others.
- Criticized objectively.
- Had integrity; was honorable.
- Helped me solve my own problems.
- Had a vision.
- Developed a trusting environment.

The specific word, *diversity*, was rarely used when people described their best, favorite, or most effective leader. However, *fairness*, *respect*, *objectiveness*, and *listening* recurred frequently.

These attributes describe an effective leader. The key within a diverse environment is to be able to practice these behaviors with *all* workers, rather than only employees with whom you are most comfortable.

Developing inclusive leadership skills requires a commitment to demonstrate the following behaviors on a regular basis:

- **Learn each individual's professional aspirations and support their efforts to reach them.** Many organizations have some type of career development or succession planning process. To make these programs more effective within a diverse environment, be sure that you are talking to all of your staff about their career aspirations. Even if your organization does not have many opportunities for individuals looking for upward mobility, your interest in their career and your assistance in their development will be greatly appreciated and usually motivates people to do their best work. If there are no opportunities currently available and the employee ultimately leaves the company, your firm then has a positive ambassador in the overall community.
- **Create opportunities for highly talented employees to be exposed to leaders who may not otherwise interact with them.** Create opportunities where they present a report, attend a meeting in your place, or do various other tasks whereby they can interact with leaders in the organization who, if impressed, can impact their career in a positive way. Mentoring is a key responsibility of leaders, so your ability to mentor in this way will be a plus for you and the employee.
- **Create cross-functional teams.** As organizations have downsized, right-sized, and re-engineered their businesses, many management positions have been eliminated, thus requiring groups to work together as teams to complete the necessary tasks. When you create cross-functional teams, ideas flourish. Diverse people are exposed to each other and discover that people in different departments have different viewpoints. This is beneficial to the overall innovation potential of the organization. When creating these teams, remember that putting people together does not automatically make them a team. Attention does need to be given to developing that group of people into an effective, trusting team.
- **Volunteer for community projects that teach inclusion and respect for diversity, both directly and indirectly.** By doing this, you set the example that you are continually enhancing your understanding and appreciation of people different than you. That behavior can encourage others within the organization to do the same. For example, you may choose to become a mentor within the Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization. This can enable you to better understand young people, especially those from a different background than you. The experience can enhance your understanding and patience, and it certainly will

help you appreciate what is important to people whose backgrounds may be different than yours. These learnings have great application at work when interacting with your staff day to day.

- **Delegate fairly.** Sometimes we tend to delegate to the same people all the time because they do good work, and we know things will be done well. However, if we are going to truly develop each staff member regardless of their packaging, we need to identify projects, tasks, and responsibilities that could further develop their skills. Once the task is delegated do not abdicate responsibility. Be sure to coach, counsel, and be clear regarding your expectations and outcomes.
- **Communicate and support intolerance of inappropriate and disrespectful behavior.** This must be an ongoing activity, one where you are constantly looking for opportunities to teach respect within the workplace. This requires that you speak up and act, including dismissing individuals whose behavior is egregious toward under-represented groups. Employees will notice and those who may have felt marginalized will know your organization values them.
- **Evaluate performance objectively.** Employees really want to do a good job. The problem is often they don't know what a good job is, because the clues from management and leadership are unclear. As soon as a person joins an organization, she or he should be given a clear job description, and the specific goals and objectives for that individual should be developed. The criteria for measurement should be clarified. Throughout the evaluation period, feedback should be given so that when the evaluation review is conducted; neither the manager nor the employee is surprised by the results. It is not easy being totally objective all the time because our biases get in the way. However, if the skills and expectations for the job are clear, the measurement criteria is clear, and the feedback is continuous, then it becomes easier for you to be fair with each employee. Often managers are reluctant to provide constructive feedback to “diverse” employees for fear of a lawsuit. Based on my research and others, it is this lack of feedback that is among the top reasons “diverse” employees leave companies. No feedback causes them to feel excluded. The sense of belonging diminishes.
- **Consider individual needs when enforcing company policies and guidelines.** The idea is to be fair. However, "fair" does not necessarily mean "the same." There are times when you must decide how to implement policies without showing favoritism while recognizing differences. This is equity. An example might be with work schedules. Although within a department, and within the same job category, everyone is probably expected to arrive at the same time and leave at the same time, it would be appropriate, when necessary, to allow flex-time as long as it is clear that the total amount of time required for work is covered. The COVID-19 work environment had forced everyone into a different way of working. If employees have child-related

- issues or elder-care challenges, effective leaders consider those issues and determine whether exceptions are necessary while balancing the effect of making those exceptions and their impact on the overall department. Rather than trying to come up with the best idea alone, solicit input from the employees involved and from other leaders to determine what the most appropriate action is.

You may have noticed that nowhere in this article have I mentioned doing things based on ethnicity, gender, disability, age, and the like. It is critical that inclusive leaders realize that everyone in the organization contributes to its diversity. The more you recognize people as individuals, the more you will be able to create an environment that causes them to produce at their highest level, regardless of their packaging.

## **(Sidebar) Making a Difference**

- 1. Make time to talk privately with each of your employees on a regular basis.** For example, if you have 10 employees, provide each with 30 minutes every two weeks where they can share with you whatever they wish. They can ask any questions, give you ideas, and you can get to know them personally and coach and counsel them as necessary.
- 2. Ask your staff, individually, how they would prefer to be managed and how they would prefer to be rewarded.** Often, we assume money is what everyone wants. This is not necessarily true. Using learning assessments such as the DISC Profile, Strength Finder, Myer-Briggs or other tools to better understand communications styles and ingredients for the most motivating environments for different styles can be very helpful for both you and the employee. When you ask an employee how he or she wishes to be rewarded, you may discover personal interests, and professional aspirations that you can be supportive of. For example, perhaps one employee might be most motivated by having the company pay part of his child's tuition. A child-free person may be most appreciative if the company provided additional vacation time so that she could visit a favorite place or an aging parent.



- 3. Take your staff to lunch every now and then, just to chat. ( You can do this digitally too!)** The more actions you take to demonstrate sincere interest in the individual, the more likely your staff will want to "go the extra mile." The challenge is to make the time. However, once you do, you will be more likely to see the real person, instead of just their "packaging." Their differences will then be an asset instead of a barrier.

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