

Creating an inclusive environment

Rachael Ross looks at the role of leaders in ensuring everyone can give their best

In today's global economy and multi-cultural society, diversity is not a choice: it is not a question of to be or not to be diverse. Organisations are diverse, and they are learning that success, in part, comes from being alert to, and really understanding, employees' and consumers' needs in markets as geographically and culturally diverse as, for example, the United States and India – or Brixton, Brighton and Belfast.

So, diversity is a reality in most modern business environments. The question is how well organisations cope with it and are able to leverage it. How good are they at creating an inclusive environment, and does that matter?

We find that in teams and organisations where diversity is not valued, misunderstandings about different viewpoints lead to unhelpful conflict and poor decision-making. People who are different feel that they have to adapt to 'fit the norm'. Motivation spirals down. Inspiration leaches away.

In an inclusive environment, alternative perspectives lead to breakthrough thinking and high-performing teams.

As with so much else, of course, this often comes down to leadership. The challenge for today's leaders is to realise that the way each of us looks at the world is just one way of seeing things. It is natural to feel more comfortable with people who share our beliefs – about leadership, how we relate to our colleagues, the way time should be managed, or our communication styles – so, when people come with different preferences and perspectives, we feel discomfort and tend to dismiss them or seek to convert them to our way of doing things.

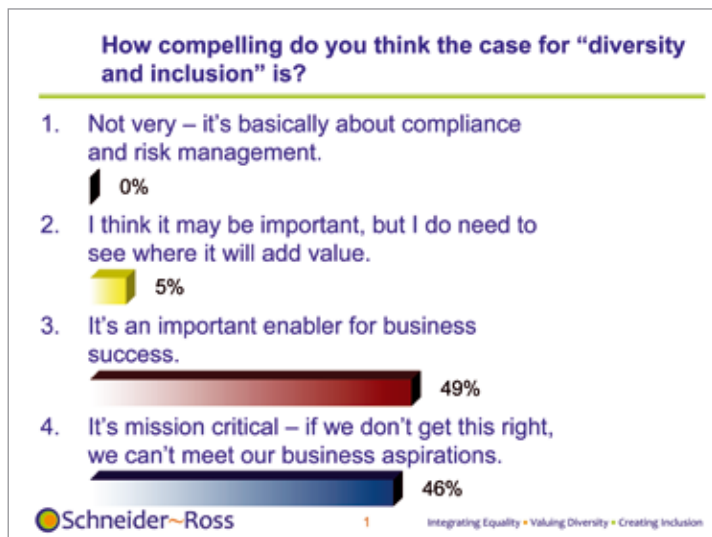
Inclusive leadership turns this discomfort on its head. It is about understanding those differences so that the team can get productive contributions from everyone. It is about developing a culture at work in which, whatever your background, gender or race, you will feel pretty much at home and able to give of your best. People are able to be their 'authentic selves' rather than spending a lot of energy on adapting to fit.

At the *Training Journal* conference on inclusive leadership to which we contributed in March, it was clear that the L&D and diversity specialists who had come along 'got' the importance of this – 95 per cent believed that diversity and inclusion was "an important enabler for business success" or 'mission critical' (see the graph left). However, 57 per cent felt that only half, at most, of their leaders understood its importance (see the graph on p30).

This article aims to address key challenges that L&D professionals will face in getting their leaders started on exploring inclusive leadership and offers some practical things they can do to support and encourage leaders on that journey.

What does inclusive leadership mean?

Let's start out with trying to define it. It is a term in much more use now, but rarely pinned down. It



has existed as a concept for a few years, featuring in work done on social inclusion by a number of writers and practitioners including Andrew Wilson at Ashridge, James Ryan and Helen Brown¹.

More recently, as organisations have started to see the importance of developing an inclusive culture, the business world has started to talk about the need for 'inclusive leadership'.

To try to pin down how inclusive leadership works in practice, Schneider-Ross has 'modelled' a number of leaders who we felt were very practised at working in global settings across different cultures and who had a track record of growing talented women and minorities through their organisations. 'Modelling' is a way of mapping out in great detail exactly *how* someone excels at, say, being an inclusive leader, exploring their behaviour and capabilities as well as the underpinning beliefs and values that may drive the behaviour.

The findings distilled down into six clusters of competencies. We would suggest that a vital underlying belief supporting these is maintaining a 'curiosity about others' – that natural, slightly playful stance of being intrigued about people, how they tick and how and why they are different from you.

The six competency cluster headings are:

- 1 listening and observation
- 2 open-minded and engaging
- 3 rapport-building
- 4 collaborative innovation
- 5 feedback exchange
- 6 flexible leadership style.

If this all seems a bit theoretical, here's an example of what it means in practice. Working with a large financial services company, we came across one leader who described how he went about getting the best out of his multi-cultural team.

He had a team of 20. They had a great national diversity – some Thais, Taiwanese, Hong Kong Chinese, and US and UK colleagues – also some senior and others more junior. He was concerned that, in brainstorming meetings, it was the senior, white colleagues who seemed to offer most ideas. So trying something new, he set up separate mixed tables and asked everyone, at first, to Mind Map ideas individually. They then discussed these as a table – working with a flipchart (helping with language issues and providing visual as well as verbal communication) – and came up with a collective set of ideas. They then prioritised three or four things as a table. The whole group then voted on the top three ideas.

This approach makes sure that the creativity of the entire group is tapped into, not just those most

How inclusive are your leaders?

At the *TJ* conference in March, none of the attendees felt that their leaders "consistently" or even "most of the time" walked the talk. Fifty three per cent felt some of their leaders did some of the time, and 15 per cent felt that hardly any of them did at all.

How about the leaders in your organisation? Here are some examples of what we notice inclusive leaders do, with a bit more detail about the first three clusters of competencies:

1 Listening and observation

Has highly sensitive listening and observation skills, noticing emotions as well as behaviour; often does more listening than talking

2 Open-minded and engaging

Is approachable, curious and open to learning about other people and their cultures and norms

Will seek feedback to expand understanding of others' points of view, and underlying causes

Has empathy: can step into others' shoes and see things from their point of view

3 Rapport-building

Is at ease socially with people who are different to him

Finds it easy to develop great working relationships with people who are different.

assertive. It gets over the problems of some cultures having a strong sense that the boss is always right (and who might well wait for the US boss to speak first) and that some bosses just can't stop themselves from being in 'tell' mode because they feel they need to prove that they 'have all the answers'.

Why is inclusive leadership important?

Leaders may not all have as diverse a team as our financial services leader here, but they are working with, and needing to bring people together from, a wider range of backgrounds than in the past.

Leaders who are able to engage with, inspire and motivate their people will succeed where others who work purely at the strategic and intellectual level will not. (Research by the Hay Group has shown that productivity increases by 43 per cent for engaged employees and that people who are more able to be themselves are more motivated².)

Developing awareness and getting leaders 'on the journey'

The first thing we need to recognise is that this is indeed an individual journey and that people move along at different paces. It starts with increasing awareness, moves into building understanding and then gets leaders to the point where they are





committed to trying something differently. That's when they start to develop their inclusive leadership skills.

First of all, then, we need to awaken leaders' curiosity. Some people get this from presentations and *data*. Indeed, for some top leadership teams, unless you have *data* you simply won't be able to get a foot in the door. Ideally, there is a mix of internal and external *data* – employee and customer-related; qualitative as well as quantitative. Quizzes and e-learning have a role to play in this phase too.

For many, however, this remains a rather intellectual engagement.

Our experience has taught us that presenting 'real' behaviours and workplace situations is the best way to build real engagement on this subject. We have worked with Steps Drama Learning Development, using drama alongside our consultancy inputs, to help clients build a picture of *inclusive leadership* in context. The scenarios actors play out are based on the stories we elicit from our early diagnostics, so that they always 'ring true'.

The fundamental strength of this approach is that heads and hearts are equally engaged, resulting in immediate high engagement, getting people to really challenge their thinking and behaviours.

Using drama brings into the room issues that need to be talked about (eg prejudice, unconscious bias, subtle put-downs) without apportioning blame and it enables people to see (and often initially laugh at) the sort of limiting behaviours that are actually happening in their own organisation. Finally, and most importantly, it packs an emotional 'punch' – people see the way that they can and do exclude people and the impact this has. They get those sudden flashes of insight that signal a real shift in awareness.

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Case Study: Vodafone

In Qatar, Vodafone has recruited 20 women to sell phones to Qatari women. They visit the women in their homes and so reach a group of customers who would not be able to shop in their retail stores. They are exceeding their sales targets and the company is displaying a sensitivity to, and awareness of, the country's culture and values.

All this comes about because their leaders have placed inclusion at the heart of the culture they want to create and have the willingness to experiment and do things differently.

Drama also enables leaders to try out ideas in safety. They can give characters advice and then see what happens. Fortunately, if things go wrong – unlike in real life – they can rewind and start again. 'Calling' inappropriate behaviour is never easy and yet, unless leaders start doing it, the unconscious bias and prevailing norms in their organisations will never change.

Yet, however much our awareness has increased, we still have blind spots. We need colleagues to help us see things that we miss. That is why creating a culture of open feedback is so important.

Working with their teams and other contacts, often supported by a coach, leaders can get profound insights into how inclusive they actually are. This feedback becomes the fuel for the continued journey – without it, we come to a spluttering stop. We think we have reached the end, whereas it is just one milestone along the way.

Like any skill development, if you are prepared to put in the practise and are open to learning through feedback from others, anyone can make rapid change and become much more aware and inclusive in their leadership style, more confident at managing difference, and willing to challenge poor behaviour in others and themselves.

It won't happen overnight, but 'if we have the will, we can develop the skill'.

(My grateful thanks go to Jennie O' Reilly of Steps, who contributed to this article.) **TJ**

References

- 1 Wilson A, Sir Christopher Harding Leadership Programme, Ashridge Business School; Ryan J *Inclusive Leadership* (Jossey Bass Library); Brown H, OPM Leadership and Development
- 2 <http://bit.ly/6bflG>