

# How to Be an Inclusive Manager

## How can you, as a manager, help to create a more inclusive work environment?

Most people recognize the importance of diversity at work and the benefits it can bring to an organization and its people. However, diversity is only half of the story. The other half is *inclusion*: building a work environment in which people feel valued for who they are, bring their whole selves to work, and contribute fully. In an inclusive work environment, people with different backgrounds, religious beliefs, sexual orientations, skin colors, and other differences feel like they belong.

How can you, as a manager, help to create a more inclusive work environment? It's a process that involves self-awareness, learning, listening, and an openness to new ways of working. The payoff can be a more engaged team with better ideas and greater productivity, and a more satisfying work experience for everyone.


### Start with yourself.

The journey to becoming a more inclusive manager starts with you:

- **Be humble.** You're probably used to being recognized and rewarded for being smart, being right, and making quick decisions. However, to manage for inclusion, you need to cultivate your humility rather than your ego, your openness to new perspectives rather than your power. Accept that you aren't the expert and that you aren't always right—that you're a learner on this journey and that others have something to teach you. Shift your approach from "solving" the problem of exclusion to "exploring and working on" greater inclusion.
- **Acknowledge your blind spots.** Recognize that your life experience and your views aren't shared by everyone around you. Understand that you have biases in your thinking and reactions to other people, even if you aren't conscious of them. These can affect your actions and decisions and how you relate to people. Accept that your experience of the workplace may be very different from that of someone who doesn't look, speak, or act like you—even from someone who may seem very much like you on the surface.
- **Learn.** Strengthen your understanding of people who are different from you. Learn about different cultures, the history of privilege and discrimination, the many forms of bias, and the wide range of life experiences. How? By reading, watching movies, listening to informative audio, attending training sessions and workshops, and having conversations to understand other perspectives.

### Connect in more inclusive ways.

- **Listen and ask questions.** Don't assume that you know how the people around you think and feel. Ask questions to draw out their honest thoughts and reactions. Then listen to what they say. Make an effort to spend more time listening than speaking in these conversations. Encourage people you



work with to share stories about their life experiences and to explain what's important to them. Ask what you could do better as a manager, and what others could do, to make work feel more inclusive. Consider anonymous ways to get this feedback, too.

- **Connect at a human level.** Get to know the people you work with—at a personal level, not just for the work they do. Learn what motivates them, what their goals and aspirations are, what their lives are like outside of work, and more. Do this respectfully, without pushing the bounds of privacy. Encourage this human connection between team members, too, by making time for it in meetings and through structured, team-building activities.
- **Seek out new perspectives and ideas.** Expand your circle of connections at work to include people who are different from you. That includes people with different areas of expertise, of course, but also people who are different in other ways, such as by race, ethnicity, gender, country of origin, educational background, and sexual orientation. Ask to sit in on meetings of employee resource groups (ERGs)—affinity groups for employees—to gain a better understanding of their goals and activities.
- **Be a mentor (or a mentee).** Look beyond the people who share a similar background and demographic to you to find someone different who might benefit from your mentorship—someone who may not see a likeness of themselves in the organization's leadership. Explore the idea of reverse mentorship, too: a learning partnership where you are the mentee, and a younger and less experienced employee shares their insights and ideas.

### Build an environment of trust and respect.

- **Show that you value people for who they are.** Demonstrate, in the way you interact with people and manage your team, that you respect and appreciate every person, with all of their individuality. Encourage people to be their authentic selves at work, not to hide their true selves to fit in with narrow cultural norms. Make it clear that you expect everyone you manage to behave in this same welcoming way, without snubs or negative judgments based on differences.
- **Make trust your opening position.** Instead of making employees earn your trust, begin by trusting them. Learn their strengths and capabilities by trusting them with stretch assignments. Give people a chance to try new tasks and learn new skills. If they fall short, talk it through to find out what went wrong and what you might change—clearer guidance from you, for example, or more training from coworkers—to help them succeed on the next try or a different assignment.
- **Provide support and coaching.** A sink-or-swim approach is a recipe for exclusion. When someone is struggling, give additional support. You might do that by assigning a peer mentor, providing more one-on-one coaching, or by looking at how the team might work more collaboratively. Think "coaching" before thinking "performance problem."
- **Be generous with praise and appreciation.** Pay attention to who gets recognized for their good work and who tends to be overlooked. Be intentional in offering praise and appreciation more broadly, not just to the people who are most visible to you.
- **Motivate in inclusive ways.** Encourage collaboration while pushing people to be the best they can be. Set high expectations so that people stretch themselves and feel proud of their accomplishments, but do it in a way that balances collaboration and competition. Build a team on which people help and learn from each other, generate ideas together, and make the most of different individual strengths for the good of the team and the organization.
- **Make sure people feel safe.** When a person feels like an outlier in a group, it can feel dangerous to speak up and offer views that might conflict with the majority opinion or the group's accepted truth. Make a point of drawing out the thoughts of people who may be holding back, and show your appreciation for their courage in speaking up. Make it clear that you value the open expression of varying ideas and perspectives. Watch for signs of negative reactions from others in the group, and make it clear that while discussion and productive disagreement are encouraged, negative judgments, incivility, and suppression of opposing views are not.

## Take action where it matters most.

Pay special attention to the parts of your job where inclusivity makes the biggest difference:

- **Meetings**—Demonstrate respect and inclusion in meetings by
  - Distributing an agenda in advance, so people can prepare their thoughts
  - Managing meetings for productive discussion, which requires listening, not just talking, and a conscious effort to avoid interrupting
  - Pausing and asking for other opinions, to give people who have been quiet a chance to speak
- **Hiring**—Examine your organization's and your own recruiting, screening, interviewing, and onboarding practices to improve your ability to bring the best talent onto your team and broaden its diversity. Focus on "culture add" rather than "culture fit."
- **Work assignments and promotions**—Challenge your natural inclinations as you consider whom to choose for new opportunities in the form of work assignments and promotions. Consider whether unconscious bias might be blinding you to the potential of some members of your team.
- **Performance management**—Think about whether you apply the same performance standards to everyone you manage, or whether you favor certain people because you are more comfortable with them. Pay attention, too, to the behavior of team members toward each other as you manage performance. Take immediate action when you notice behavior that is disrespectful and that undermines your efforts to build an inclusive environment

## Be an advocate for inclusion.

Help strengthen your organization by being an advocate for inclusion:

- Connect with others in your organization who are advocates for diversity and inclusion to find out how you might support their efforts.
- As you learn, make mistakes, strengthen your understanding of what it takes to be an inclusive manager, and observe successes in your journey to build a more inclusive work environment, share your experiences and thoughts with other managers and your organization's leaders.
- Work with your organization's human resources (HR) department to consider different approaches to the hiring process—including recruitment, screening, interviewing, and onboarding—to bring in a more diverse group of talented employees.

Source: Morgan, H. (2021, June 18). *How to be an inclusive manager* (C. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

### SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE:

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