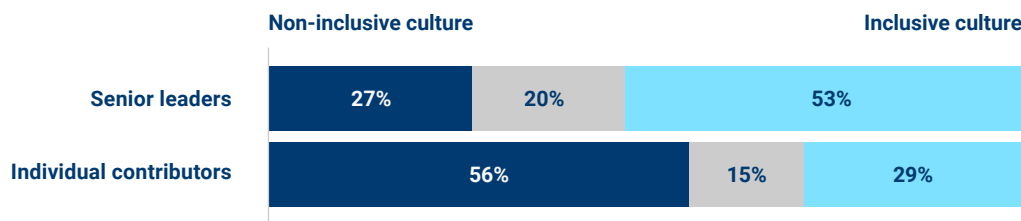


Want to Become a More Inclusive Leader? It Takes Both Inner and Outer Work

Because senior leaders can make or break an inclusive culture, it is critical they have an accurate understanding of the lived experiences of their people and teams. But unfortunately, too many senior leaders are disconnected from employees' experiences. This can create the *illusion* of inclusion for leaders, who may have an overly optimistic view of just how inclusive their organization's culture is. For instance, in [our research](#)* more than half of senior leaders surveyed perceived their organizational culture as inclusive, while less than one-third of individual contributors felt the same.

PERCEPTIONS AROUND INCLUSIVE CULTURE DIFFER



To effectively close this gap, senior leaders need to do things a bit differently. In our work with clients, we guide leaders as they do both the *inner work* and *outer work* needed to become a more [inclusive leader](#). We start by helping leaders discover their strengths, limitations and blind spots when it comes to leading inclusively. Equipped with this insight, we then help leaders dig deeper to explore the origins of their attitudes, biases and behaviors to create a development plan and design coaching to help reach their goals and create a sense of personal accountability at the heart of their efforts. These critical conversations turn into key learning moments for executives, connecting behaviors with outcomes and cultivating new mindsets.

WHAT DOES "DOING INNER AND OUTER WORK" LOOK LIKE?



“Inner work” deeply enhances credibility

Undertaking an examination of our own thoughts, assumptions, perceptions and biases should be an ongoing practice, yet some skip this critical activity. People can overestimate their ability to lead inclusively, and members of the C-suite are no exception. In reality, no one is born culturally agile: it’s only through experience, exposure and a commitment to doing the “inner work” that we can identify our strengths and limitations when it comes to understanding and appropriately responding to cultural differences. Thus, we strongly advocate that leaders start with this inner work, prioritizing **self-analysis** and **unlearning** to make real progress. Skipping this type of inner work is like trying to steer a ship without a compass: you have no idea where you are, where you need to go or how to get there.

Inner work put into practice:

Pause and reflect. After a meeting or interaction with stakeholders of diverse experiences or backgrounds, take a few moments to reflect on how you showed up and communicated.

- Was it as intended?
- How do you think others would describe your style in the meeting?
- How did others seem to respond to your approach?
- Is there anything that could or should be adjusted to create a more open and inclusive environment for the next session?

Write down your thoughts in a place where they can be easily revisited and updated.

Invite tough feedback. Consider asking a close colleague or team member to observe your interactions with diverse stakeholders and provide feedback on your communication style, body language and approach as it relates to creating an inclusive environment. Reflect on their observations to identify areas in which you might make small changes to be more inclusive. Be sure to document these as well.

“Outer work” sets the standard

Outer work begins with role modeling inclusion every day at every level of the organization. As leaders develop new mindsets, they should also work to **create new habits** and **role model** behaviors that foster inclusion. Courage and accountability are key. Leaders who develop new capabilities and competencies around inclusion and role model inclusive behaviors make it clear what inclusion looks like within the organization and what behaviors are expected from everyone.

Outer work put into practice:

Challenge yourself. Identify an area of [inclusive leadership](#) you would like to improve upon — this may be investing the time to practice and reflect, leading change to foster inclusion, developing greater cultural agility or another area. Seek out resources (articles, videos, talks) and commit to consuming one a week over the course of a month. Take notes on your insights and planned actions as you go.

Look for meaningful opportunities to practice.

Identify two or three scenarios in which you can truly serve as a role model for inclusive leadership. These should be specific and meaningful situations. Practice your inclusive leadership behaviors and consider seeking feedback to understand how you are perceived.

A partner can help

Doing this inner and outer work can seem daunting, but it is foundational to achieving your goal of becoming a more inclusive leader. If you want to ensure your words and actions are seen as sincere by your employees; if you want your investments in inclusion to matter and have lasting impact; and if you want to maximize the potential of your people and teams, you will find it is well worth the effort. However, engaging in this inner and outer work can be difficult. It often involves raising sensitive issues and can surface deep or uncomfortable feelings. Therefore, we recommend partnering with certified coaches and skilled facilitators who can help create psychologically safe (and inclusive) spaces for leaders as they undertake this important work. If you would like more information, please [contact us](#).

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If you have any questions, please feel free to [contact us](#). To receive communication and content from us in the future, please [subscribe to our mailing list](#).

We conducted a global study of nearly 5000 employees to better understand elements, outcomes and drivers of inclusion. Leadership and workplace culture were two key drivers of inclusion — here is how they are defined based on our [research](#):

An Inclusive Leader

- Through engaging in inner and outer work, an **Inclusive Leader** is intentional in their efforts to send a clear signal that inclusion is a top priority; culturally agile in creating bridges across differences; open to change and adaptable in addressing complex problems.
- A non-inclusive leader is hesitant or dismissive of inclusion conversations; ignores or minimizes differences; dismisses change and avoids complex or unexpected problems.

A Culture of Inclusion

- A **Culture of Inclusion** exists when organizational norms, values and behaviors ensure fair treatment, equitable opportunities, psychological safety and value in lifting everyone up.
- A non-inclusive culture perpetuates biases and unfair treatment and consists of social norms that reinforce interactions with “people like me”; fear and conformity; and “winning” at the cost of someone “losing”.

* Source: [Inclusion Study Report. Demystifying Inclusion – Rewards and realities of fostering an inclusive culture](#), Kincentric 2023.