

# Inclusion: It's Not What You Think

It may seem like everyone is *talking* about diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace these days, but it's a lot less clear what leaders are *doing* about it.

Myriad reasons are behind that gap, but at least part of the inaction stems from misunderstanding what these terms even mean — much less how to use these concepts to drive meaningful business impact. And inclusion may be the most misunderstood of all.

Establishing definitions isn't just a matter of semantics. Driving meaningful change requires a shared vision and commitment from everyone in the organization, from executives and board members to front-line managers, to individual contributors. Without that shared understanding, organizations will struggle to take the collective actions necessary to drive progress and meaningful business outcomes.

Let's look at some of the most common myths about inclusion, how they may be holding you back, and what you and your fellow senior leaders can do to change the narrative and transform your workforce.



## Myth No. 1: Inclusion Is Just a Feeling



### **Reality:** It's about being valued and able to contribute your best

Often, people equate achieving inclusion with creating *feelings* of inclusion. While that's a crucial element of inclusion, focusing on feelings alone runs the risk of limiting your efforts to a superficial level.<sup>1</sup> In reality, inclusion is about valuing employees for who they are and enabling them to contribute their best. That requires action to change attitudes, behaviors and outcomes.

A truly inclusive work environment is one where everyone:

- Can contribute their ideas, knowing their voice matters.
- Has a voice and decision-making influence, regardless of job level.
- Is valued for their contributions.

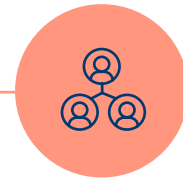
People need to be heard. Leaders must create processes that invite everyone to contribute ideas, fully listen to what people share, and transparently share back why and how ideas are considered – even those that are not ultimately adopted. Absent an authentic feedback loop, your employees may not see you as sincere in your inclusion efforts.

You need all of these elements to be present to achieve inclusion, but even great leaders with the best intentions may need help bringing these elements to life in the workforce. For example, you may devote a lot of time and resources to developing a top-tier inclusion strategy. But if you tolerate actions that aren't inclusive, those behaviors can undermine your commitment and fuel a non-inclusive culture.

Instead, focus on creating a cultural climate that outlines what inclusive behaviors are, rewards those behaviors and delivers consequences for behaviors that perpetuate exclusion.



## Myth No. 2: Inclusion Is a Zero-Sum Game



### **Reality:** An inclusive work environment benefits everyone

Achieving inclusion doesn't mean taking power from some people or groups and giving it to groups who have been historically marginalized. In reality, an inclusive work environment benefits all employees by making it possible for everyone to contribute their best work, have a voice and decision-making influence, and be valued for their contributions.

On an individual level, people experience inclusion and exclusion simultaneously every day.<sup>2</sup> But when you take a bird's-eye view of these experiences at the organizational level, that's where you see the most significant impact. All too often research shows that certain groups experience exclusion more often than others, leading to members of those groups feeling devalued, dismissed or ignored.<sup>3</sup> That reinforces a sense of separation and division that can create a corrosive work environment and reduce engagement, productivity and other key factors driving business outcomes. Shifting the definition of inclusion to one that emphasizes positive outcomes for everyone can significantly accelerate progress toward not only your DE&I goals but also your larger business goals.

Inclusion should be our goal. The question is often around what differences matter. Are there exclusions around our differences that hinder our effectiveness? Are there inclusions of our differences that could increase our ability to be successful? It's easy to over-rotate on diversity without inclusion or inclusion without diversity. Those two need to work together. For example, [Kincentric's 2023 Global Trends in Employee Engagement report](#) shows that inclusion has a marked impact on employee engagement across the board. When people experience an inclusive environment, levels of engagement climb 8.4 times higher.

At the organizational level, inclusion is the outcome of successfully leveraging diversity to generate innovative ideas, improve performance and productivity, and produce outcomes that drive business growth. By this definition, inclusion benefits everyone, not just certain groups.

## Myth No. 3: Inclusion Is HR's Responsibility



### Reality: It's every leader's responsibility to lead inclusively

Inclusion affects every single person in your business, which makes it every leader's strategic responsibility. CHROs and their teams can't be expected to carry this load alone — and hiring a chief diversity officer doesn't absolve anyone from responsibility either. HR and DE&I teams can create structures and processes to enable inclusion, but the initial commitment has to come from the top first.

Without a robust public commitment by the CEO and other top executives, making progress on inclusion will be challenging for even the most dedicated HR and DE&I teams. You, as a leader, set the tone and direction that the rest of the organization must follow to achieve progress.

DE&I program outcomes need to be measured and evaluated like any other business goal, with expectations — and consequences — for performance spelled out from the very top of the org chart. This is frequently not the case, and a lack of clear accountability from the top can have a big impact on whether or not an organization can move the needle on inclusion.

Without accountability, it's virtually impossible to align leadership, HR, middle managers and front-line employees around a unified goal. However, when expectations around inclusive behaviors are clearly defined, managers can support and reinforce them by integrating them

into daily policies, processes and workflows.

Provide resources and training to help every person in an organization, regardless of their position, learn how to become an inclusive leader. People must do inner and outer work to make sure they can create space for team members to be valued and contribute their best.

Foundational to all of this is a culture of openness, where everyone in your organization can talk candidly about the path to inclusion, the roadblocks along the way and how to overcome them as a team. Your leaders must model these behaviors, having open conversations about what inclusion is and how to drive inclusive outcomes in your business. These conversations are challenging — and often uncomfortable — to have, but when people see you authentically engaging in them, they'll realize how serious you are about achieving inclusion.

#### CONTACTS

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1. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paologaudiano/2022/03/02/inclusion-and-belonging-are-about-what-people-do-not-how-people-feel>  
2. <https://www.catalyst.org/research/the-day-to-day-experiences-of-workplace-inclusion-and-exclusion>  
3. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297610602\\_The\\_Promise\\_of\\_Diversity\\_Management\\_for\\_Cli-mate\\_of\\_Inclusion\\_A\\_State-of-the-Art\\_Review\\_and\\_Meta-Analysis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297610602_The_Promise_of_Diversity_Management_for_Cli-mate_of_Inclusion_A_State-of-the-Art_Review_and_Meta-Analysis)