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**BUILDING  
INCLUSIVE**

**PEOPLE  
LEADERS**

A Guide for Organizations Ready to Take Action

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## Inclusive Leadership as the Mode and Means

The importance of inclusivity, equity, and diversity in the workplace cannot be overstated. From employee engagement to increased innovation, cultivating a culture of inclusion is a fundamental factor in a business's success. And while DEI initiatives are important on every level, their lasting effectiveness can only be guaranteed if they're applied from the top down through dedicated inclusive leadership.

Today, inclusive leaders value their team's diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. Beginning with the hiring and recruiting processes, they seek out voices across a wide range of identities and then follow through by committing to listening to them once they've joined the team. With inclusive people leaders and diverse teams of engaged employees, businesses can innovate their way through any challenge and ensure a thriving future.

## Meeting the Moment with Inclusion

We live in a fast-moving world. If the past year has taught us anything, it's that the shape of how we do business and what the world needs from us can shift in a blink, fast enough to make our heads spin. And if we aren't prepared to get our heads on straight, we'll fail to meet the moment. Prioritizing inclusive leadership and a strong DEI workplace culture with self-awareness and open-mindedness is an essential part of that preparation.

**The truth is, we all have implicit biases, those subconscious shortcuts and ideas that our brains cling to regardless of conscious thought and intention. Be they stereotypes or assumptions or similarity biases that draw us to those who are most like us, these biases have the power to create blindspots, narrow our perspectives, and hinder our ability to innovate. Your DEI training initiatives and inclusive people leaders can bring your workplace into the light.**

## The Benefits of Inclusion

In its simplest form, being included means being welcomed into an environment as your authentic self. It means feeling valued for your unique talents and as though you belong both because and in spite of your intersecting identities. Considering its importance, creating an inclusive work environment may seem daunting, especially if you're someone who's been able to take their inclusion for granted. But while inclusivity involves a wide set of soft skills, their worth is proven by hard data.

Inclusivity is good for people, progress, and the bottom line because it encourages employees to bring their best selves, and their best ideas, to work each day. And while we know that innovation is vital for all successful businesses, we're learning just how important inclusivity is for your team's creativity, ingenuity, and ability to cooperate on the path toward greater achievements.

At its core, the purpose of innovation is to meet needs. And inclusive workplace cultures and people leaders are how we truly understand what those needs are and how we can solve them, together.

## The Cost of Falling Short

While we focus on the benefits of inclusivity, it's also important to remind ourselves what we stand to lose if we fail to own this moment. Diversity, equity, and inclusion aren't just buzzwords to throw around during complicated times, they're an approach to doing business that helps organizations flourish.

When companies and leaders ignore the importance of inclusivity and inclusive people leaders, they court issues such as low workplace morale, higher turnover rates, poorer employee engagement, and falling behind more progress-minded competitors. So instead of relegating your business to the past, look toward the future by embracing DEI initiatives and building inclusive people leaders.



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## The Importance of People Leaders

We've discussed the importance of DEI as a whole, but without intention, strong leadership, and a plan for education and action, your organization can only take inclusivity so far. This is where your people leaders come in.

### From the Top Down and Bottom Up

Building a truly inclusive workplace requires commitment across the board. From the top to the bottom of the organization, every person should strive to become more inclusive. The trouble, of course, is that you cannot simply tell your teams to “be inclusive.” Instead, you have to show them how to do it within a work environment that's made it essential.

#### **People leaders are, in large part, how this is done.**

Acting as a direct link to your employees, people leaders are the ones who deal with the highs and lows of the workplace every single day. They know what's working and what isn't, where teams have friction and when they're cooperating, who has untapped talent, which individuals and departments need the most work, and what sort of education and implementation will help.

They're also your eyes and ears, a conduit between tiers that are often separate. People leaders work as a bridge between the ideas and ideals of those at the top and the individuals—with all of their intersectional identities and personal complexities—who put them to use on the ground.

Remember, too, that blindspot biases and the Dunning-Kruger Effect—the common yet antithetical tendency of being excessively confident about things we know little about—tend to affect executives the most. Alongside increased power and responsibilities can come blinders, narrowing perspectives and restricting awareness and open-mindedness. Inclusive people leaders are a vital antidote to this as well.



## How to Build Inclusive People Leaders

Becoming an inclusive people leader is a learning process. As all of us have our own unconscious biases to overcome, and as organizations and their leaders must also work to dismantle systemic exclusionary practices, we must work together to become the best leaders we can be.

Thankfully, by using time-tested leadership skills with a strong focus on open-mindedness and growth, we can do just that.

### **Model the company's intentions.**

Simply put, walk the walk. All good leaders know the importance of leading by example. If you want to build successful inclusive people leaders, those at the executive level must also invest in expanding their own perspectives, educating themselves about inclusivity, and putting in the work every day.

Successfully creating an inclusive workplace takes more than a few fleeting ideas and random initiatives. It takes intention and follow-through from the top down.



**Communication is key.**

We know that communication and feedback are essential aspects of prospering businesses, and the same is true for building inclusive people leaders. First, those managers need to know what, exactly, is expected of them. They must understand what the company's fundamental values are regarding inclusivity, the specific expectations for how they'll interact with upper-level management, and how they'll foster inclusivity within their teams.

Beyond communicating the expectations for inclusive people leaders, creating a culture of inclusivity in the workplace as a whole requires respectful open communication across all levels. Arguably the most important early step and continuing process in increasing inclusivity is awareness. And awareness cannot grow without communication. All members of an organization, regardless of their place in the hierarchy, should be encouraged to speak up when they notice exclusionary actions and practices, and as the bridge, people leaders are an essential link in that chain.

**Make sure to strengthen the basics.**

When it comes to awareness about the issues and benefits of inclusivity, different members of your organization will be at different places along the path. While some of your people leaders may be farther along in their education, others may be new to even the basics. Instead of finding fault in those who are further behind, focus on helping them—and your inclusive people leaders—speed their education along.

To do this, make sure to strengthen your company's commitment to the basics. Encourage open dialogues—either with company-provided education opportunities or through your people leaders—about inclusivity, allyship, unconscious bias, empathy, and more. No DEI initiative or inclusive people leader will be successful without intentional discussion and engagement.



### **Never forget the value of empathy.**

“Walk a mile in someone else’s shoes” is a well-tread adage for a reason. Striving to understand and feel compassion for those whose experiences differ from our own is a cornerstone of all DEI skills. So make empathy a priority in the workplace and advise people leaders to do so as well.

### **Educate, educate, educate.**

If you want effective inclusive people leaders, you need to provide them with the right tools to become one. From the basics of what inclusivity is and how it affects each of us to the complex nuances of microaggressions and systemic subjugation, education is the key to change and progress.

Fortunately, there are more resources today than ever before. As our personal and professional conversations expand in response to national events and increased awareness, we can look to learning opportunities for help. The most effective people leaders will make an effort to increase their diversity, equity, and inclusion skills across a wide range of topics including psychological safety, gender and identity inclusion, how to discuss race in the workplace, generational and cultural competence, and implicit, affinity, confirmation, and other unconscious biases.

**Mind your processes.**

Hiring, promotions, high-profile tasks, and more, inclusivity affects each of these processes. Especially when we consider tendencies like the similarity bias, it's clear how important DEI initiatives and follow-through can be. Historically, women and minority groups have been overlooked for recruitment and advancement compared to their white male colleagues while, too often, being relegated to less glamorous tasks such as office housework.

Thankfully, with an eye on understanding and active inclusivity, you can counter these biases. The affinity bias tells us, unconsciously, that those who already look and speak and think like us are the clear best "fit." But once you recognize it, you can work to counter it, expand your perspective and hiring pool, and realize that "fit" is often used as a stand-in for "already like me." Next, remember that mentorships are invaluable for ambitious team members, especially for those with minority identities who may not typically see people who look like them in positions at the top.

**Strive for a culture shift.**

True inclusivity encompasses more than ticking boxes and taking a few first steps. Instead, the goal is to create an effective cultural shift that will improve your business's working environment across the board, in person and for remote workers. The concerns that fall under the DEI umbrella include everything from hiring to performance reviews to promotions to team building and interpersonal relationships. This is because our identities affect how we experience and perceive the world, and how the world perceives us. There is no "outside" or neutrality when it comes to identity and discrimination issues because our identities are inextricable from ourselves and our experiences.

Companies that provide continuing education and guidance for their people leaders, helping them strengthen their skills while providing them with actionable steps for dealing with issues—from ice breaker ideas to FAQ sheets to common talking points for use with employees—will be able to fundamentally improve the inclusivity of their entire organization.



## An Open-Minded Present Leads to a Bright Future

At times, tackling issues such as discrimination and injustice can feel impossible. But the truth is that improving diversity, equity, and inclusivity is not only possible, it's directly achievable. By setting our intentions and taking the steps we need to educate ourselves and our teams, we can create workplace environments that value the talents, experiences, and contributions of individuals across an incredible range of identities and backgrounds.

Doing so will help your people feel valued, empowered, and engaged which will in turn improve creativity, innovation, and the bottom line as they feel welcome to bring their best authentic selves, alongside their best ideas, to work. When we have the courage to face discrimination and our own biases and blindspots head-on, illuminating that dark by committing to inclusivity, we ensure our futures will be bright.

### We are here to help.

Take the next step toward improving diversity, equity, and inclusivity by building inclusive people leaders. At Blue Ocean Brain, we offer engaging, relevant, and research-based educational resources designed to inspire your team to expand their perspectives and create high-performing cultures of inclusion. Learn more at [blueoceanbrain.com](https://blueoceanbrain.com).





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