# Listen Up:

## A Guide to Building an Inclusive Feedback Culture



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Feedback has always been an essential component of a functioning workplace. It is a vital aspect of communication, encompassing how leaders share what is or is not working with their employees. More than checking their team's pulse, feedback helps leaders identify issues, encourage positive behavior, and deliver constructive criticism while reflecting on their efficacy.

Leaders convey this information utilizing the primary feedback types; appreciation, coaching, and evaluation. **Appreciation** recognizes the value and contributions of your team members, **coaching** helps employees hone existing skills while developing new ones for the future, and **evaluation** examines performance and clarifies expectations, essential pieces for growth.

But while the fundamentals of feedback have stayed the same, the modern workplace often requires a more nuanced approach. Whether building an inclusive company culture, recognizing individual experiences, or dismantling our biases, **focusing on inclusive feedback strengthens you, your employees, and your organization.**

# How Bias Affects Feedback

The perception of bias varies across individuals and identities, but one thing is clear: Bias is bad for business. According to Gallup, the percentage of engaged workers in the U.S. dropped in 2021 for the first time in ten years. And, according to HBR, employee disengagement costs U.S. corporations $450 billion to $550 billion per year. Thankfully, honest, reciprocal communication can be an important tool for stopping bias. However, first, we need to understand how it impacts feedback itself. Consider these common bias types and how they influence performance reviews:

**Halo/Horns Effect:** The halo/horns effect is the tendency to allow one good or bad trait to overshadow others. This bias happens when we let pet peeves matter more than valuable work or charm mask poor performance. When it comes to hindering inclusivity, our unconscious biases can color our perception of those different from us, stopping us from viewing them objectively.

**Leniency Bias:** Managers who give higher ratings to specific employees, even knowing they have clear room for improvement, often fall prey to the leniency bias. This could end with leaders showing a clear preference for those within their in-group while judging others more harshly.

**Similarity Bias:** The similarity bias is the inclination to give a higher rating to people with similar interests, skills, and backgrounds as the person doing the rating. As with the leniency bias, similarity bias creates an immediate imbalance between those who share identities with their leaders and those who do not.

**Confirmation Bias:** When we seek or reshape information that confirms what we already believe, we get stuck in confirmation bias. This mindset makes it easier to listen to people who align with you and is why you are more likely to be skeptical of people who disagree with you. When managing people who are different from us, confirmation bias can cause us to discredit unfamiliar experiences and perspectives.

**Gender Bias:** A bias with clear, identity-defined divisions is gender bias, which describes the phenomenon that while giving feedback, individuals tend to focus more on the personality and attitudes of women and feminine-presenting individuals. Contrarily, they focus more on the behaviors and accomplishments of men and masculine-presenting individuals.

Whether we are aware of it or not, bias has far-reaching effects on our teams and organizations. For individuals, encountering bias can lead to disengagement, feelings of alienation, and higher turnover rates. And more, recurring instances of bias often result in systemic discrimination, which will impact company culture overall. **When people are not accepted, they feel less loyal and more likely to feel burned out, leaving all that talent you have worked to recruit and retain liable to keep one foot out the door.**

## Training for Inclusivity

Inclusivity starts with "I," and learning how to be an inclusive leader and provide equally comprehensive feedback begins with individual leaders. From strengthening soft skills—such as empathy, compassion, active listening, and others—to adopting a growth mindset and improving your allyship, dismantling bias requires individual effort and self-awareness. It's important to provide all leaders, from the C-suite to frontline managers, ongoing learning opportunities to help them become aware of and learn to mitigate their biases.

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**and liable to keep one foot out the door.**

# Checking For Biases

Acknowledging our biases is the first step, and part of that is a willingness to look at ourselves in the mirror and do a self-assessment. Help your leaders get started identifying their unconscious biases by having them ask themselves these questions as inspired by Carmen Acton, writing for HBR:
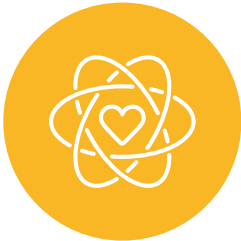
**Consider your core beliefs.** How might these impact you or your colleagues at work?

**What is your initial reaction when encountering people with different identities and backgrounds?** Do you ever catch yourself jumping to conclusions based on assumptions or stereotypes?

**Think about the perception of your leadership style.** How would your team describe it to others? Would team members with different identities describe your style in the same way?

**Intentionality is an essential aspect of inclusivity.** Do your actions and intentions align?

**You cannot have true inclusivity without empathy and compassion.** Do you often put yourself in other people's shoes and consider differing perspectives?

## Seeking Out Different Perspectives

When we discuss inclusivity, we often discuss seeing people as their entire selves, beyond any assumptions or stereotypes that box people in based on their identities. One surefire way to get this picture is through storytelling.
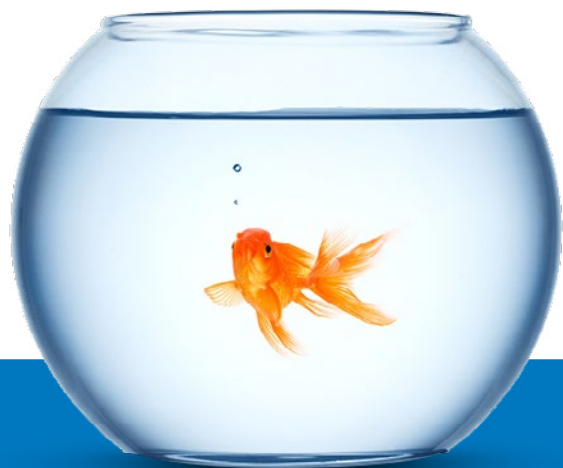
For many of us, it is easy to feel stuck in our echo chambers. We find ourselves surrounded by people who look and think like us. We have our favorite news sources, our go-to avenues for entertainment, and other set preferences that, together, form our comfort zone. But as VP of Inclusion Strategy at Netflix, Vernā Myers, says, "If you have a very narrow set of people that you work with, live with, hang out with, chances are you won't notice your biases for and against groups. You need exposure to a large enough group to learn that many of your biases, presumptions, and conclusions are incorrect."

To step out of this bubble, encourage your leaders to seek new stories from people who differ from them. These stories could be in person, from their personal or professional life, or through entertainment. Through movies, books, documentaries, podcasts, blogs, and more, people are constantly sharing their stories and experiences. Just as travel expands the mind, so does taking in the experiences of others who aren't like us.

Seek new stories from people **who differ from you.**

As your leaders develop, it is essential to remember that learning is an ongoing process and committing to inclusivity is never a one-and-done scenario. Instead, it is an area where we must consistently grow. Part of this means being willing to be vulnerable, to mess up, and recognizing when correcting a wrong. When this happens, Myers tells us to follow three simple steps:

**1** Provide an apology.

**2** Continue to engage.

**3** View as learning opportunities.

"With everything available to read and watch, there is no excuse not to learn," said Myers. "You can also turn to someone like you, but who may have more experience with a situation or a group of people."

## Creating an Inclusive Feedback Framework

Employees crave feedback. Just as we cannot solve a problem we refuse to acknowledge, neither can a team member progress and grow without gaining insight into their performance. This mindset is valid for all constructive feedback, but where non-inclusive feedback might end up vague or unhelpful, inclusive feedback considers each person as a unique whole. Create a framework for delivering inclusive feedback by having your leaders follow these checkpoints from the chief of staff for U. S. Programs at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, June Yoshinari Davis:

**Who:** Focus on the person you are giving feedback to by ensuring that you consider their identities, perspective, and individual experiences. Meanwhile, check yourself for assumptions and avoid snap judgments based on stereotypes.

**What:** Consider the context and intention of your feedback as you prepare it, remembering that the goal is always to encourage your employee to improve.

**How, When, Where:** Be deliberate and considerate about your feedback delivery, including determining the right time and place to provide it.

**Why:** Inclusivity considerations are critical when we examine the *why*. Be mindful of which type of feedback you are delivering and your reason for giving it. And check in with yourself to ensure you are not letting unconscious bias color your criticism.

## Learning How to Deliver Feedback Through an Inclusive Lens

Beyond the awareness of how feedback is delivered, providing inclusive feedback requires your leaders to examine themselves, their organization, and their team through a unique lens. Ultimately, inclusivity affects almost all aspects of the workplace, from hiring to promotions to the day-to-day interactions between leaders and their people.

Before sitting down for a performance or feedback conversation, your leaders should take some time to learn these elements of inclusivity, as inspired by executive coach Hanna Hart.

### Mind the Dynamics

During any feedback session, it is good to remember that power creates an imbalance. This power gets compounded by the brain typically interpreting criticism as a threat. And while these factors are always present, we must also recognize the impacts when we add in differences in identity, in-groups and out-groups, and concerns about biases and assumptions.

So, leaders can create a counterweight to this imbalance by **practicing empathy, self-awareness, curiosity, active listening, and welcoming feedback about their own leadership.**

## Avoid Assumptions

Assumptions are easy to make. We add our perception of two and two together and, presumably, get four. **But when we fall prey to preconceived notions about others, their experiences, and circumstances, we ruin our ability to see them and any situation objectively.**

Instead of making preemptive judgments about people or events, be curious. Share your observations, then ask questions about their experience and perceptions.

## Consider the Context

None of us live in a vacuum. We are all impacted by our experiences, upbringings, identities, and interactions with the world. And each of us, leaders and employees, brings this context into our feedback sessions.

Giving productive, inclusive feedback means striking a balance between acknowledging this reality and continuing to offer constructive criticism and helpful advice.



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# Inclusivity in the Moment

Whether it's an annual performance review, or informal 1:1 chat, every feedback conversation is an opportunity for your leaders to embrace and deploy inclusion. Every feedback session should adhere to the following guidelines:

## Tackle the Problem, Not the Person

The truth is that stereotypes and unconscious biases affect the way we view those who are different from us without our knowing. For example, research has shown that people perceive women as speaking far more often than they do.

Because of assumptions like this, you must separate the person and their identities from the actual issue at hand. Not only will this help you avoid tripping up on unhelpful and incorrect assumptions, but it also turns problem-solving into a collaboration rather than a one-sided criticism.

## Understand Someone Else's Perspective

Miscommunication happens, especially when we factor in differing cultures, identities, and perspectives. For instance, someone may speak less in meetings because they are neurodiverse and process information differently. Or, an employee from a different culture may not interpret social cues exactly like their colleagues. Cultural differences in cues and style can impact how feedback is received; inclusive leaders will try to shape their communication accordingly.

**These differences make it even more critical for leaders to consider perspective when delivering feedback.** So, be willing to ask questions when things are unclear and be open to the possibility that you might be missing something or misinterpreting events.

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## Feedback within a Culture of Inclusion

Finally, like the foundation beneath a well-built house, inclusive feedback requires an overall culture of inclusion. For today's workplace, that means creating environments that value psychological safety, encourage authenticity, have a strong awareness of cultural context, and welcome open communication.

Within workplaces that embody these traits, employees feel comfortable bringing their entire selves to work and do not feel compelled to hide aspects of their identity for fear of discrimination. And when issues do occur, they feel safe to speak up. The result is an environment in which everyone feels appreciated and included.

**When we discuss feedback, we must remember that at its core, constructive criticism is just that: constructive.** The goal is not to chastise or assign blame but to understand, improve communication, generate solutions, and, ultimately, create a better-functioning workplace. Where generalized feedback still aims to solve problems, inclusive feedback takes individual strengths, weaknesses, experiences, and circumstances into account. The result of this approach is not only an ability to view our employees as well-rounded and fully authentic people but to create a workplace that values diversity from the foundation through fruition. And when we do that, our capacity to retain talent, improve engagement, and pursue innovation knows no bounds.

### At Blue Ocean Brain, we engage your leaders with learning moments that inspire and help build cultures of belonging.

Take the next step toward improving diversity, equity, and inclusion by building an inclusive feedback culture. At Blue Ocean Brain, DEI and people development are at the heart of our content. With our in-depth library of over 1,500 lessons and more published daily, we can support your people with modern, engaging microlearning. If you are ready to engage your leaders on an inclusive feedback journey and want to learn more about how Blue Ocean Brain can help, schedule a consultation with one of our learning experts or visit blueoceanbrain.com.