



Supervisor NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
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Why Inclusive Leadership Needs To Be Top Learning Priority For 2024

Adapted from Julie Kratz

According to a recent report titled “The State of L&D in 2024,” employers see a \$7 ROI for every \$1 spent on leadership programs, citing that traditional “soft” skills such as emotional intelligence and effective communication are not just nice-to-have, but rather must-have skills for leaders of the future.

In addition, the report found:

- Sixty percent of learning leaders pinpointed leadership as the most significant gap in current employee development.
- Sixty-six percent of learning and development (L & D) professionals identified leadership development as their primary learning focus, with diversity & inclusion and technical skills being second and third, respectively.
- Leadership development is the most prioritized topic of learning-and-development focus.

Furthermore, inclusive leadership training specifically emphasizes these human skills that people are looking for and that leaders need. Inclusive leadership is about the ability to bridge different perspectives, promote psychological safety and facilitate a workplace where all people feel seen, heard and belonging. To develop an inclusive-leadership competence, learning and development needs to focus on human skills rather than

soft skills, make learning content sustainable and measure the return on investment.

Stop Calling Human Skills “Soft” Skills

Emotional intelligence and effective communication are not soft skills; they are human skills. These skills are necessary in hybrid work environments that are subject to rapid change from technology and competition. It is expected that future leaders will be able to regulate their emotions and communicate their messages effectively.

Common human skills such as emotional agility, trust, cultural intelligence, allyship, growth mindset, vulnerability and empathy have been proven to be highly correlated with business performance and, thus, should be part of an inclusive-leadership development program.

Make Learning Content Sustainable

On average, leadership-development courses last a year or less. This creates issues with cascading training to all levels of the organization or having capacity to revise content with new data and trends. Rather than perpetually creating new content, learning leaders need to create sustainable content that is easy to update. For example, rather than create a new course, look for opportunities for a current course to be mapped to the new learning objectives. Perhaps it is a combination of previous courses that fits a new set of learning objectives.

Another way to make learning content sustainable is to have placeholders for new reports. For example, if an annual report comes out on diversity and inclusion, make a placeholder where that report is updated each year to remind yourself to get the latest information. This makes the content more likely to be utilized year to year.

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Measure the Return on Investment

Nearly two-thirds of leaders agree that learning and development has a positive impact on revenue. Traditionally, sales training has been seen as more valuable than training in other parts of the organization because of the perceived instant impact on the top line. Often, other business units that contribute overall to the organization's purpose and business results may not be as clearly mapped and/or are less likely to be funded.

However, when you flip this paradigm and look at leadership development holistically as a cultural shift to which all employees should align, you start to see even better results. It is critical for organizations to have the same expectations of inclusive-leadership behavior and build the competencies necessary to foster those skills. Then, the learning objectives become clear and the organization can create content to achieve that level of competence.

To measure the ROI of inclusive-leadership programming, consider measuring competency shifts over the course of a program, before and after knowledge checks or after employee engagement surveys for the leaders involved. This data is highly correlated with business results.

It is clear there is value in inclusive leadership, and there is a need to invest in human skills. To do so, learning content needs to be sustainable and measurable.

What Makes an Inclusive Leader?

Excerpts from Wei Zheng, Jennifer Kim, Ronit Kark, and Lisa Mascolo

Leaders play a particularly critical role: They account for a difference of up to 70 percentage points in employees' experience of belongingness and psychological safety, and inclusive leaders see a 17% increase in team performance, a 20% increase in decision-making quality, and a 29% increase in team collaboration. Inclusive leaders also cut down employee attrition risk by 76%.

Five key behaviors that help leaders make their organizations more inclusive.

Shedding responsibilities might free up time on your calendar and can boost someone else's career. Consider recommending someone else to take your spot. Agree to train them so that they can quickly get up to speed.

Inclusive leaders strive for authenticity rather than leadership presence.

[Inclusive] leaders prioritize authenticity and psychological safety, viewing the two as essential building blocks for creating an environment where people can express themselves freely and air dissenting opinions without fear of retribution. They do this by modeling curiosity, humility, and vulnerability.

Inclusive leaders redefine the rules rather than unquestioningly following them.

The exemplars of inclusive leadership are not afraid to challenge well-established practices that have outlived their relevance. By constantly revising entrenched practices, inclusive leaders are able to recruit and support a more diverse group of employees who contribute new ideas and add complementary value to their organizations.

Inclusive leaders embrace active learning and consistent implementation.

The effort to be inclusive is actively learned, rather than passively acquired. They believed that our natural habits or inclinations usually contain biases and need to be constantly examined, challenged, and changed in a planned and consistent manner to pave the way for inclusion. As a leader in a financial services firm put it, we cannot just hope to recruit more women and underrepresented employees — we need to deploy intentional, systematic processes to recruit them.

These intentional efforts take many forms; however, the ones that are especially useful are those that embed DEI practices into the existing processes and systems to ensure consistency and accountability. Examples include mandating diverse candidate pools in recruitment, embedding inclusion efforts into performance metrics, coaching managers to facilitate feedback-giving among their direct reports, and holding managers accountable for their direct reports' career development.

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Inclusive leaders ensure equal opportunity and equitable outcomes.

By providing support that considers people's differing needs based on their backgrounds, leaders provide a more level playing field for all team members. When the majority members who perceived some practices as unfair pushed back, the leaders took the time to help them understand why there was a need for differentiated support, related their personal experience, generated empathy, and explained the benefits this support can engender for the whole team and organization.

They view inclusive leadership as everyone's responsibility, not just HR's.

In order to create an inclusive environment, everyone needs to be invested in it. A common challenge many leaders encounter is the expectation that DEI initiatives are owned and driven primarily by HR. In reality, the most successful DEI initiatives are those that are integrated into organizational core values, because core values serve to rally people around the effort and act as a powerful force against pushback and skepticism. They also allow inclusive efforts in an organization to transcend individual leaders who may come and go, sustaining the commitment to inclusion by solidifying it into the organization's DNA.

In some organizations, this holistic approach to inclusion is demonstrated in the embedding of DEI into all aspects of the employee life cycle: recruitment, selection, development, and retention. In others, it's built into the way people carry out their everyday work responsibilities, rather than into specific DEI programs. Various practices bolster this whole-organization approach, such as building inclusion into organizational strategy; communicating to employees that inclusion is not an aspiration, but an expectation; building inclusion criteria into all hiring, compensation, training, promotion, and retention considerations; conveying messages of inclusion on a regular basis; having visible and consistent support for inclusion from top leaders; and developing inclusion ambassadors who represent all areas.

The power of inclusive leadership

All of these inclusive practices encourage all individuals in their organizations to thrive.

A diverse and inclusive workplace is a better workplace for all, because it challenges people to come up with new ways to work with those who are different from them; allows people to collaborate in creative ways to build better products and services; generates different methods of getting things done; makes unexpected breakthroughs; instills pride in people; and supports well-being.

Exemplary leaders of inclusion conscientiously leverage information, mindsets, daily practices, and organizational systems to foster inclusion. When practiced intentionally and adaptively, these efforts can elevate both employee well-being and measurable business outcomes.

References:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/juliekratz/2023/12/27/why-inclusive-leadership-needs-to-be-top-learning-priority-for-2024/?sh=3d836b584a73>

<https://hbr.org/2023/09/what-makes-an-inclusive-leader>