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## What Does Inclusive Leadership Really Mean?

By Robin Pedrelli

Inclusive leadership has become the current buzzword in diversity and inclusion work – but what exactly do we mean by inclusive leadership. The concept of inclusive leadership is somewhat strange to me. By definition it suggests that leadership on its own is reserved and directed at just some of the people in our workforce - that we actually need to think differently about leading inclusively than just plain leadership. Although strange to some of us, this is in fact the reality in most organizations and attention needs to be dedicated to shifting that mindset.

Is inclusive leadership all that different from traditional leadership? Most leadership competency models include things like strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, communication and negotiation, problem solving, leading teams and business acumen. Don't inclusive leaders need this same set of skills and competencies? When you really boil it down what we are talking about is a leader that possesses all those traditional leadership qualities but who also purposefully seeks out diverse perspectives and ideas. An inclusive leader respects and encourages all points of view and acts fairly and without bias.

I am going to propose that inclusive leadership is not a whole new leadership concept but rather a shift in mindset. I would argue that we don't need an entirely different set of competencies to move toward inclusive leadership. Rather, we need to change the way we define the existing competencies and build on the existing models to include the key competency of cultural awareness.

Proposing a shift in mindset is easy when you are just putting pen to paper or keyboard to screen in our current reality. But the actual process of making the change is far more complicated and challenging. One doesn't wake up one morning and claim, “I am now going to start thinking and acting like an inclusive leader.” In fact, I truly believe most leaders intend to lead inclusively and

believe to some extent that they already behave in an inclusive manner. This kind of shift – or commonly defined as culture change – is a process and requires individual behavior change, organizational commitment and a societal upheaval.

On the individual level, the leader must be hyper aware of her or his biases and attitudes and understand the impact of individual leadership style. Understanding must be followed by an intentional commitment to behavior change – recognizing when bias can influence ones decisions and actions and making a conscious effort to manage those biases in everyday work processes. To lead inclusively one must seek out diverse ideas and perspectives and incorporate those perspectives in leadership style and decision-making processes. Inclusive leaders understand that one leadership style does not work for every employee – that an ability to adjust one’s style to the needs of each employee is a key to leading inclusively and getting the most out of every employee. Inclusive leaders create an environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing opinions and ideas but this does not mean that every idea must be equally weighted in every decision. Inclusive leaders are ultimately responsible for making decisions that positively impact the success for the business.

Organizations must commit to creating a culture that values inclusion. This commitment must be demonstrated in several ways. First and foremost support must come from senior leadership and senior leaders must lead by example, reflecting this commitment in words AND behavior. At the organizational level, a shift in the way leadership competencies are defined to include more inclusive language and concepts is required. Organizations must provide sufficient resources to drive a culture change of this magnitude. This means the office of diversity and inclusion must be sufficiently funded with budget dollars and human resources. Accountability to inclusive behavior must be established and enforced across the entire organization.

As a society we need to alter our iconic definition of a leader – someone who singlehandedly can take on any challenge, confidently laying out decisions with an army of followers in tow. We need to open our minds to a new image – one a bit more understated. Perhaps there is room for a new kind of leader – one who seeks guidance and input, is a bit more worldly and open-minded, and who openly and confidently admits that a diverse set of thinking is paramount to her or his success. We need to celebrate this new leader in our children’s books, news stories, in all major media outlets and in the way we define hero in our forms of entertainment. I am not suggesting that we completely

abandon the image of leader as hero – just make room for a new image – an image of an inclusive leader.

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