
CHEAT SHEET

Inclusion

Build an inclusive culture to unlock employees' full potential

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Key takeaways

- Diversity and inclusion are important elements of successful organizations' workforce strategies. While diversity is about demographic representation, an inclusive culture ensures all individuals feel they belong, are valued, and are treated fairly—regardless of their backgrounds or needs.
- Organizations tend to focus more on diversity because it's easier to measure. But inclusion should not be overlooked. An inclusive culture has positive impacts on employee engagement, retention, collaboration, and decision-making.
- To build an inclusive culture, promote inclusive leadership, provide staff with opportunities to share personal experiences, ensure equal access to professional growth opportunities, act on employee feedback, and measure progress over time.

What is it?

Diversity means having different identities represented. Diversity initiatives became widespread across American workplaces in response to the civil rights movement and the creation of federal equal employment opportunity guidelines in the 1960s. But it soon became clear that simply hiring workers of different backgrounds didn't guarantee they would stay.

In response, progressive organizations began focusing on inclusion as a distinct but related strategy. Thus, the field of "diversity and inclusion" (D&I) was born. Inclusion is the movement to make everyone feel welcome—focusing on the work environment beyond hiring practices. This means making employees feel they are valued, treated fairly, and empowered to grow, regardless of their backgrounds or needs.

An inclusive culture fosters psychological safety, a concept coined by Harvard Professor Amy Edmondson. According to Edmonson, "Team psychological safety describes an interpersonal climate characterized by trust and respect, in which people are comfortable being themselves."

While diversity is relatively easy to break down into metrics like hiring numbers or demographics, inclusion can be difficult to measure. At a basic level, inclusion is a measure of whether employees feel like they belong and are valued at the organization. While this can seem subjective, there are key sentiments organizations can track, such as whether people feel like their opinions are valued, differences are celebrated, and promotions and policies are fair.

Organizations can foster inclusion by encouraging different perspectives, recognizing employees' unique talents, and ensuring equal access to opportunities. Ultimately, an inclusive workplace increases engagement and unlocks employees' full potential.

Source: Cantieri B, ["How to measure Diversity and Inclusion for a stronger workplace."](#) SurveyMonkey; "6 Steps for Building an Inclusive Workplace," SHRM, March 19, 2018; Gurchiek K; Bourke J and Espedido A, ["Why Inclusive Leaders Are Good for Organizations, and How to Become One."](#) HBR, March 29, 2019; ["When did diversity become a bad word?"](#) Executive Diversity Services; Vaughn B, ["The History of Diversity Training & Its Pioneers."](#) Diversity Officer Magazine; Advisory Board interviews and analysis.

Why does it matter?

A recent [survey](#) of over 9,500 employed Americans found that a quarter of workers feel like they don't belong at their company. In another [survey](#) of nearly 20,000 employees globally, 54% reported that they don't regularly get respect from leaders. When employees feel they don't belong or aren't respected, they may avoid sharing ideas, lose enthusiasm for their work, and feel disengaged.

The problem is pervasive in health care. In one [survey](#), 49% of health care employees said diversity is a barrier to progression, and only 24% of health care organizations provide training on how to embed inclusive behaviors.

In an inclusive workplace, people are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and feel comfortable sharing their perspectives. This, in turn, increases employee recruitment and retention. It also allows organizations to fully benefit from employees' ideas, skills, and engagement. For example:

2x	19%	29%
Employees satisfied with their organization's commitment to D&I are 2x as engaged as dissatisfied employees.	Employees who feel they work at diverse and inclusive organizations are 19% more likely to stay longer.	Teams with inclusive leaders are 20% more likely to say they make high-quality decisions.

In health care, better engagement, retention, and decision-making can have a major impact on patient care and experience.

Further, it's important to hire and retain a workforce as diverse as the patients you care for. Building a diverse and inclusive workforce culture can help increase demographic representation, strengthen connections between staff and the community, and deliver a better patient experience.

Source: Cantieri B, ["How to measure Diversity and Inclusion for a stronger workplace."](#) SurveyMonkey; Porath C, ["Half of Employees Don't Feel Respected by Their Bosses."](#) Harvard Business Review, November 19, 2014; Bourke J and Espedido A, ["Why Inclusive Leaders Are Good for Organizations, and How to Become One."](#) Harvard Business Review, March 29, 2019; ["Diversity & Inclusion Benchmarking Survey."](#) PwC, 2019; ["Top health industry issues of 2020: Equity and inclusion, not just diversity, as a business imperative."](#) PwC, 2020; Fullilove C, ["Improving the Employee Experience Through Diversity."](#) ADP, Advisory Board interviews and analysis.

How does it work?

Staff should feel safe, celebrated for sharing their differences, and encouraged to honor their shared experiences with colleagues. Building an inclusive culture requires a multipronged approach across an organization. Here are a few key places to start.

1. Teach leaders what inclusive leadership looks like.

Executives and managers interact with employees every day and set the tone for their team culture. Inclusive leaders ensure all team members feel they are treated respectfully and fairly, are valued, and feel that they belong. Inclusive leadership is not about occasional grand gestures but rather practicing a clear commitment to inclusion every day.

Implement training to ensure leaders understand what inclusion means, why it's important, and how to be more inclusive. For example, leaders need to know how to engage in active listening, create space for others to contribute, and encourage different points of view. Then, hold leaders accountable.

2. Create opportunities for staff to share their personal experiences.

In meetings or daily huddles, for example, foster an environment where contributions from everyone are encouraged and valued.

Beyond work-focused meetings, elevate internal communities and dedicate space and time for discussions about identity, such as employee resource groups (ERGs). Leaders should promote the process to establish an ERG and the resources available to support them (such as funding and meeting spaces).

Finally, create social events that allow staff from different backgrounds to have fun with each other. This allows all staff to participate in team bonding and feel comfortable bringing their "full selves" to work.

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How does it work? (cont.)

3. Ensure all employees have access to resources for professional growth.

Objectivity and fairness are important to an inclusive culture. Provide equitable access to professional development resources, such as through facilitated mentorship programs and dedicated time for career development activities.

In addition, make sure promotions, raises, and other growth opportunities are fair and transparent. Create and enforce the use of clear and objective criteria for promotions that don't bias toward a certain personality type or cultural norm.

4. Listen to employees—and act on their feedback.

Regularly take time to hear and understand employees' experiences. Create safe and open forums where people feel comfortable voicing their concerns without negative implications. Consider using a combination of surveys, town halls, and one-on-one meetings to create an ongoing dialogue with employees. Then, recognize and value that input by acting on it.

5. Establish clear goals and measure progress.

As with any strategic initiative, it's important to establish and communicate measurable and time-bound goals. Start with an employee survey to get a benchmark measure of inclusion and help shape initial efforts.

Over time, use ongoing feedback and data to revisit your goals, and combine inclusion data with employee engagement and retention numbers to look for correlations. Finally, regularly share data and progress to strengthen support for inclusion initiatives among senior leaders and show employees that the organization is committed to developing a more inclusive culture.

Source: Cantieri B, "How to measure Diversity and Inclusion for a stronger workplace." SurveyMonkey; Gurchiek K, "6 Steps for Building an Inclusive Workplace." SHRM, March 19, 2018; Bourke J and Espedido A, "Why Inclusive Leaders Are Good for Organizations, and How to Become One." HBR, March 29, 2019; Advisory Board interviews and analysis.

Conversations you should be having

01

Ensure senior leaders recognize the importance of inclusion in addition to diversity and understand the value of investing in an inclusive culture.

02

Collect data and input from employees to obtain a baseline measure of inclusion within your organization.

03

Train executive and frontline leaders on what inclusion is, why it's important, and how to be more inclusive.

04

Commit to seeking regular and honest feedback on employees' sense of belonging and value within the organization so you can target your efforts to create a more inclusive culture.

Revisit these conversations over time—and ask new questions—to continuously evolve your efforts at inclusion. Remember that building an inclusive culture requires constant commitment over time. 

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