

HOW TO BUILD INCLUSIVE TEAMS: PART 2 - FOSTERING AN INCLUSIVE MINDSET

Being a leader of a team is tough. Even those with experience often struggle. I have a background in leadership and teamwork, and my career has been dedicated to helping leaders and teams succeed. But when I was assigned my first real team, all that expertise didn't stop me from making the same mistakes I'd warn others about.

One big mistake stands out: I tried to build the "perfect" team in my image. I wanted people who worked, thought, and performed like me. I was looking for clones of myself, thinking that would be the formula for success.

This might sound arrogant, but it's a common mistake for new leaders. Before promotion, most are high performing individual contributors, and they assume their approach will work just as well for their new team. But this mindset often leads to failure.

At first, my team of "mini-mes" seemed great—we had amazing ideas. But soon, issues emerged. We delivered late, and while we won external awards, our internal clients weren't happy. Looking back, it's now obvious: successful teams thrive on differences, not clones. I failed to see that. I failed to embrace an inclusive mindset.

The Power of Inclusion

Before we can start providing you with the tools you need to be an inclusive leader and build a diverse high performing team, it is important to align on a definition of inclusion. Inclusion has two main components: a sense of belonging and feeling valued for your unique contributions. A sense of belonging means that you and your employees feel accepted and integral to the team and company. When people feel like they are truly part of the team, they are more likely to contribute their best work, collaborate effectively, and stay with the company longer. However, belonging isn't enough if it requires changing who you are to fit in.

True inclusion requires that the team and organization value individuals for their unique contributions. A truly inclusive culture sees differences as strengths, leveraging diverse perspectives, skills, and experiences to enhance team performance. When a sense of belonging and feeling valued for unique contributions are combined, employees feel empowered to be their true selves and share their perspectives without fear of negative consequences. This is the foundation of a truly inclusive culture. Reflecting on my experience, I realized that by trying to build a team of clones, I had stifled the unique strengths each person could bring. It wasn't until years later that I embraced the diverse perspectives of my new team, and we started to thrive.

Part of the mistake I made with that first team was that I didn't think inclusion was something critical to focus on—I thought it was soft. But, in reality, inclusion provides substantial benefits. Research shows that companies with higher levels of inclusion make better strategic decisions (Korn Ferry, 2016), bring products to market faster, and have higher employee engagement, which leads to better business results (Korn Ferry, 2016). This leads to better business results, lower turnover rates, and improved retention and career progression (Cornell University, 2023; Google, 2020). Companies in the top quartile for diversity and inclusion are also significantly more profitable (McKinsey, 2020). These benefits clearly demonstrate how crucial inclusion is to achieving business success.

This realization ignited a new passion within me. Since the beginning of the year, I've been focusing on making companies and teams more inclusive. And over the next 8 to 9 months, I'll share the lessons I've learned and tools to help you foster a truly inclusive workplace. In this article, I will focus on one of the most critical components of being an inclusive leader and building an inclusive team: the right mindset.

What Prevents an Inclusive Mindset

An inclusive mindset is easy to understand in theory—it's simply the belief that everyone should feel valued for who they are. But in practice, it's much harder. Our brains are wired to take mental shortcuts, known as heuristics, to make quick decisions based on past experiences. While these shortcuts are helpful in some cases, they can also lead to biased thinking. To build an inclusive team, we must first recognize and address these biases.

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Here are some of the most common mental shortcuts that can lead to biased thinking:

- **Stereotyping:** Stereotyping involves making assumptions about people based on their group membership. While most are aware of avoiding race or gender stereotypes, subtler forms still slip in. For example, I used to assume that only people with HR degrees would make great HR professionals, limiting my openness to other talented candidates.
- **Affinity Bias:** This bias leads us to prefer people who are similar to ourselves in background, education, or experiences. I fell into this trap with my first team, thinking that hiring people like me would guarantee success. Affinity bias prevents us from appreciating diverse perspectives, which limits true inclusion.
- **In-Group / Out-Group Bias:** Humans evolved to trust people within their group, leading us to favor familiar faces and mistrust outsiders. This bias can create an “us vs. them” mentality in organizations, discouraging new team members from sharing their unique perspectives and reducing collaboration between departments.
- **Fundamental Attribution Error:** This is the tendency to blame others’ behavior on their character rather than external factors. For example, if a colleague is late, we might label them as irresponsible without considering traffic or personal emergencies. This bias leads to unfair judgments and undermines team cohesion.

Critical Components of an Inclusive Mindset

Recognizing and addressing these mental shortcuts is just the first step. To truly foster an inclusive environment, we need to actively cultivate the right mindset. Here are some key focus areas that can help you and your team embrace inclusivity.

- **Accept You Are Biased:** The first step to avoiding biased thinking is admitting that we all have biases. Many people believe they make completely logical decisions, but that’s rarely the case. It’s human nature to be biased, and there’s no shame in it. The problem arises when we think we’re immune. By acknowledging that you have biases and questioning your actions, you can create a more inclusive mindset. This isn’t just about the obvious biases like race or gender, but the subtler ones that are harder to notice.
- **Go Slow to Go Fast:** Mental shortcuts exist because they often work, and it can be tempting to stick with them. But when we rush, we can miss out on critical perspectives. One of the main lessons I teach leaders is to slow down to speed up. By taking the time to fully understand different viewpoints, we avoid costly mistakes and make better decisions, which saves time in the long run.
- **Be Curious:** Curiosity is one of the best tools for overcoming bias. Without it, we tend to stick with our assumptions. I’ll go deeper into this in the next article, but in short, being curious about different perspectives is essential for inclusive leadership. I learned this lesson the hard way when I wasn’t open to diverse backgrounds while building my team. Once I embraced curiosity, my team’s success followed.

How to Build an Inclusive Mindset

Now that we’ve identified key focus areas to build an inclusive mindset in yourself and others, let’s put these concepts into action. Here are four activities that I can recommend. Two of these activities are designed to help build this mindset within your team. The other two activities are designed to help individuals (either yourself or one of your direct reports).

Team Activities

- **Bias Awareness Workshop:** If your team struggles with biased thinking or lacks an inclusive mindset, raising awareness is crucial. One effective approach is running a Bias Awareness Workshop. Focus on biases like stereotyping, affinity bias, in-group/out-group bias, and fundamental attribution error. Use interactive sessions that combine presentations, discussions, and group activities to show how these biases affect decisions and behaviors. The workshop encourages participants to reflect on their own biases and develop strategies to mitigate them. This creates a shared commitment to fostering a more inclusive environment.

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· **Team Bias Mitigation Strategy:** While a workshop is a great starting point, lasting change requires action. In a Team Bias Mitigation Strategy session, the team collaborates to identify key biases and figure out where they're most likely to occur. The team can then create concrete steps to mitigate them, such as updating processes, using bias-reminder tools, or setting guidelines for unbiased decision-making. This strategy helps address systemic issues and moves the team toward a more inclusive culture.

One on One Coaching Activities

· **Personal Bias Reflection Session:** When the issue lies with one person, a Personal Bias Reflection Session can help them reflect on past decisions and identify where biases may have influenced their actions. By acknowledging these biases, the individual becomes more aware and can create a plan to prevent biased decisions in the future. These sessions can be repeated regularly to reinforce self-awareness and ongoing learning.

· **Role-Playing Exercises:** Biases can be hard to overcome, especially when they operate unconsciously. In one-on-one coaching, role-playing exercises are a great way to practice addressing bias. The coach and individual act out real-life workplace scenarios, like managing diverse viewpoints or resolving conflicts. This practice helps the individual recognize biases, enhances empathy, and improves communication, all in a safe environment. Ultimately, role-playing helps foster an inclusive mindset that's ready for real-world situations.

I Built an Inclusive Mindset ... and You Can Too!

I recommended these activities because they were invaluable to me. Working with an external coach, I participated in personal bias reflection sessions and role-playing exercises. These helped me recognize my biases and realize that by favoring my own thinking style, I was creating an echo chamber. Through this reflection, I learned the importance of curiosity and inclusion. I saw that a balanced team, with diverse strengths, would be far more effective. This led me to embrace strength-based leadership, which transformed how I build inclusive teams.

Now, it's your turn. Reflect on your own biases and how they might be affecting your team. Encourage your team members to do the same. Start with personal bias reflection sessions and role-playing exercises to uncover and address these biases. This is the first step toward developing an inclusive mindset, which will serve as the foundation for improving your team's communication, decision-making, and dynamics.

I urge you to begin this journey today. Reflect on your biases, engage with your team, and commit to fostering an inclusive mindset. By doing so, you'll not only become a better leader but also build a stronger, more diverse team that can achieve even greater success. Together, let's ensure our teams benefit from diverse perspectives and create environments where everyone feels valued and included.

Cary Bailey-Findley has spent the past decade building the Human Capital within three Fortune 500 companies and was awarded the ranking of #1 development organization in the world by the Association of Talent Development. He is currently the Talent Manager for SimCorp the world's leading provider of integrated investment management solutions for investment and asset managers. He holds a Master's degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and a Master's degree in Business Administration.

You can follow his blog at www.cavemaninasuit.com or download leadership and team development tools at (<https://highperformanceculture.org/>)