Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Network

Blog

26 September 2023

Opinion: Inclusive leadership
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I once had an EDI champion who was PA to a member of the top team. They had a very good relationship; she is a very articulate woman and was often able to challenge him around gender issues which he found very helpful. As part of that relationship, he sometimes complimented her on the way she dressed, and that was OK with her. Then one day they were out in the main open plan office, and he complimented her on her dress – and she was mortified.

I think there's so much in this little story about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). The first thing it shows is that EDI is complex, and context is everything. Actions and words aren't generally inappropriate of and in themselves, but their effect and impact depend on the situation, the relationship between the people involved, and how things are said, amongst other things.

Another conclusion I draw is how personal it is as to whether things are appropriate or not – many women would not be comfortable with being complimented on their dress by their bosses or colleagues at all, at any time. For other women it's OK.

I also believe the story reveals many things about what it takes to be an inclusive leader. There's much talk these days about the necessity for 'inclusive leadership', for organisations to move forward in their EDI practice. However, in my experience there's much less understanding about what this means and putting the ideas of inclusive leadership into action. To finish this story, when they were back in the privacy of his office, a long conversation ensued about the difference between such a compliment between the two of them in his office and a compliment in front of others. He struggled somewhat to understand ("you said it was OK for me to compliment you on your dress") and tried to grasp the difference for her. At least he was open to that conversation, open to being challenged and prepared to listen. He showed certain traits of being an inclusive leader.

The first thing to say is that I do not think it's easy to be or to become an inclusive leader. The second thing is that much of what I set out below applies to all leadership. Being an inclusive leader in many ways doesn't require different skills from those required to be an excellent leader in other ways too.

In particular, I would highlight three things:

1 **Self-awareness**: Being aware of your strengths and weaknesses, your biases and preferences; to be prepared to do things differently and experiment with different behaviours, that may well require different skills; be prepared to own up to mistakes

2 **Emotional intelligence**: So much of how we act around EDI requires emotional intelligence. It's complex and requires adapting behaviour to different situations and different people. It requires self-awareness and managing your own emotions. All these are aspects of emotional intelligence

3 And what follows from this is **intentional leadership**: in other words, to think about how you're acting, being intentional in what you do, not just doing what comes naturally and modelling EDI at all times.

So, these are some of the principles around being an inclusive leader, but what do inclusive leaders actually do? Here's a selection of a few key behaviours (there's actually a list of around 30 behaviours that I use when working with leaders on these issues) of inclusive leaders:

- They role model valuing diversity in their actions, not just their words

- They challenge (constructively) and are open to being challenged by people who work for them

- They are confident enough to get it wrong sometimes and then recognise that and own up to it

- They understand the complexity of these issues, that often there aren't simple answers

- They confront EDI issues when they arise

- They allocate resources to EDI work and initiatives – money and time

- They include EDI as part of their assessment of performance

- They make an effort to recruit, select and promote non-traditional employees who are different from them.

You may notice that the last three are more 'practical', concrete, external behaviours. Like any work on EDI, there are internal and external aspects. The internal and external are connected, in my view, and equally important. But in the final analysis it's the deeds, not the words, that change lives for people from underprivileged groups.

So, being aware of your biases is one thing – but not only saying 'EDI is important' but allocating time and money to improve it is another. Again, including EDI in your assessment of performance not only enables discussion of what people working for you can do to improve EDI in their work and in the organisation, it also sends the message about how important EDI is to the organisation.

Lastly, when I say "make an effort to recruit, select and promote non-traditional employees", I'm not talking about positive discrimination, but about positive action; to look at recruitment procedures and examine ways in which they are unconsciously putting barriers in the way of people from disadvantaged groups, including how they are selecting people like themselves because of their own biases or even as the route of least resistance.

I do think that inclusive leadership is crucial to moving organisations forward in terms of their EDI practice (though support from all levels of the organisation is important too). Unfortunately, even the organisations that recognise this don't always actually define what that means or support their leaders to change in this way. It's important that organisations do this work and develop their leaders' ability to be inclusive leaders if they wish to move forward on these issues.