

4 Ways Leaders can Foster Inclusion in Diverse Groups and Organizations

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You may very well already understand how diversity is important and useful to your work groups and to your organization. After all, research indicates that we can derive many benefits from social diversity, including [more creativity](#), [more diligence](#), and [harder work](#), among others. But how can you actually make this



happen? How can we truly put diversity to work on our collective behalf, in ways that are productive, healthy, and empowering? These are often the questions that leaders find challenging.

The key to deriving benefits from diversity is the [practice of inclusion](#). At its core is the [experience of inclusion](#), which requires people to feel safe, trusted, respected, and supported; to believe that they can work with others and contribute without having to hide or give up important aspects of who they are; to be proud of their identities and particular strengths and able to bring them to work in ways that lead to growth and productivity; and to see that others who are similar to them are also valued and engaged. The experience of inclusion is fostered by inclusive behavior, together with inclusive policies and practices in our workgroups and organizations.



Figure 1. **Inclusion is a Systemic and Dynamic Process.** (Note. Adapted from “The Practice of Inclusion in Diverse Organizations,” p. 15, by Bernardo M. Ferdman, in *Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion*, B. M. Ferdman & B. R. Deane, eds., 2014, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass)

What can you do, as a leader, to increase experiences of inclusion in your organization and its work groups? Leaders have a special role to play in fostering inclusion. Leaders make sense of organizational-level values and processes and help to translate them into everyday behavior. And they also take everyday behavior and experiences and give them meaning and visibility in the larger context of the organization. So leaders can take what people do to include each other and support these behaviors in a way that makes them both more likely and more meaningful in the organization.

These are a few key ways to make this happen:

1. **Talk about inclusion, diversity, and their benefits.** As a leader, you need to explain how diversity matters in your particular group or organization. What benefits might it bring to the members, if everyone were to behave more inclusively and begin to experience more inclusion, across multiple differences, including those based on culture, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, age, physical ability, and many others? What might inclusion look like in your group or organization? What do the members believe they need to help them experience more inclusion? What can they do to foster more inclusion for others?
2. **Be curious about and appreciate difference; encourage its expression.** You are more likely to foster inclusion when you help create a climate in which differences are explored and valued. Encourage the expression of differences in constructive ways. Even when it is uncomfortable, help your group to process its differences and avoid shying away from difficult conversations, including those that might touch on topics related to race, culture, gender, and other typically hard-to-discuss issues. But do this in a way that is mutually supportive and encourages learning. Build your own skill for dialogue, and help others build theirs.
3. **Support others in being themselves and not have to hide valued identities (and model this yourself).** Be as authentic as you can, in a way that empowers others to do the same. Note and highlight strengths in others, and hold everyone to

appropriately high standards, while encouraging collaboration and mutual support.

4. **Help create inclusive policies and practices, and apply them fairly and consistently.** Do your part to create an inclusive climate and inclusive norms for your groups and for the organization as a whole. Speak up when necessary to prevent exclusion, and create positive and ongoing ways for inclusive behavior to become the norm.

Inclusion requires attention, intention, effort, and ongoing learning - individually and collectively. Leaders have a critical role in making this happen, and therefore in making sure that diversity achieves its promise.

For more details on inclusion, see my recent book, [*Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion*](#), which I edited with Barbara Deane and which includes 23 chapters by 34 authors from over 10 countries. For more information about me, see <http://ferdmanconsulting.com>.

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