

# ALL VOICES ON DECK

## HOW INCLUSIVENESS CAN HELP DEFINE YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE

*by Rebecca Shambaugh*

“*All voices on deck.*” When advising on leadership development for the twenty-first century, this is the rallying cry that I offer to Fortune 500 companies and senior leaders alike. Finding ways to leverage an organization’s full span of thinking styles and problem-solving approaches for both women and men is key to inclusive leadership, which is rapidly growing in importance throughout all corners of corporate America and beyond. The rationale is not because it’s a nice thing to do, but, rather, it’s a smart business thing to do.

What exactly *is* inclusive leadership? Simply put, I like to say that inclusion is the new diversity. Striving for traditional measures of diversity—creating a fairer and more balanced workforce based on equality by gender, and other measures—is of course still critical. But an increasing number of leaders and organizations worldwide have realized that we collectively need to raise the bar on this relatively limited definition. These leaders are aware that diversity can’t be maximally leveraged without also considering how to create greater gender inclusion in the workplace.

It may sound like splitting hairs if you’re unfamiliar with the nuance behind the terminology. But inclusive leadership means focusing on creating diversity initiatives that move *beyond* striving for greater balance in integrating both women and men from different demographic categories into our work environments. When structuring their teams, inclusive leaders consider not only how people are defined by external differences, but also how people think and problem-solve. In short, successful teams of the future will highly value inclusion as well as gender diversity, and will begin to prioritize how to combine each individual’s unique perspective to help companies more effectively solve challenges and reach business goals.

### Why Lead Inclusively?

As compelling as this vision is, there is a Catch-22 of inclusive leadership: namely, that many of the leaders currently controlling corporate boardrooms prefer that the

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## What exactly is inclusive leadership?

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culture—particularly at the leadership level—remain at status quo; this is how they feel safe. Yet it is important to move beyond this type of “Like prefers like” thinking, and there are many compelling reasons to do so.

A few examples may help illuminate why this is so important. I recently met with a CEO of a major technology company—let’s call him Mike. Mike had asked me to meet with him because he was getting pressure from his board and now shareholders regarding the lack of diversity on his executive committee. Based on a recent board meeting, he said several of the members were concerned that the representation of his executive committee and senior leadership team did not reflect their major customers and the demographics of today’s diverse workforce. The board firmly stated to Mike that this needed to be addressed. Reluctantly, Mike also shared with me that he just lost his only female executive, and he was surprised this had happened, because Mike and his leadership team had recently implemented a mentorship program to emphasize the importance of diversity and women in leadership. This is not the first such conversation I’ve had with a top executive, and what I tell them is this: though their previous leadership models aren’t necessarily “broken,” these frameworks alone will no longer move companies in the direction they want to go. In the past decade, the business environment has changed dramatically. “Talking the talk” of diversity is no longer enough; leaders must walk the walk of inclusion.

A number of tangible benefits await leaders, teams, and companies alike when inclusive leadership is made a priority:

- *Business results improve.* We’ve long seen the results of diverse teams on business performance: in short, diversity pays dividends to corporate bottom lines. Many studies have documented better financial performance from diverse teams, including a recent analysis from McKinsey that found ethnically diverse companies were 35 percent more likely to outperform those in the bottom quartile for this measurement. It should come as no surprise, then, that inclusive workplaces also drive better performance, including greater innovation. A global report on inclusive leadership from Catalyst found that when employees felt more included, they were more innovative at their jobs and engaged more in “team citizenship” behaviors, such as going above and beyond to help others.
- *People become more engaged.* One reason that inclusion leads to better results is that it increases engagement. When employees are engaged, they feel a sense of belonging when they’re at work. The wider the net that a leader can cast to help more employees feel valued and included, the greater chance that leader will have at creating engaged teams. Inclusive leaders find ways to include and engage individuals who think differently from themselves: they recognize that insisting on a “work face” or “groupthink” quashes feelings of inclusion and stifles engagement.
- *Greater innovation is fostered.* Inclusive leaders are masters at fostering innovation. Why is this so? Recent research from “Project Aristotle” at Google suggests some answers. The tech giant found that when people feel safe enough to communicate as individuals rather than just as coworkers, their collective talents combine to create teams with greater collective intelligence. When people were encouraged to be themselves and share authentic experiences about their lives, it created bonds that allowed everyone to speak more freely, taking the types of risks needed for innovative ideas to flourish. Google discovered that when people sense that they are in a climate of trust and respect, they are more likely to voice ideas to the group. It follows that inclusive leaders are

in a position to encourage, leverage, and include everyone's diverse strengths, integrating a wider range of creative insights.

- *A trickle-down effect kicks in.* Inclusive leadership is not only about fostering inclusive employee teams; it is also about promoting inclusion at the leadership level. When leadership groups are more inclusive, encouraging a wider mix of behaviors and talents, it leads to well-rounded strategies that trickle down to teams and staff. The goal is for companies to find ways to harness their collective leadership brainpower—not just that of a small, elite group of people who think similarly. When they strive to ensure that their board membership and management teams represent a wide diversity of thinking styles and care about inclusion at the top levels, organizations can gain a leg up in the talent war.

## What Do Inclusive Leaders Do?

Anyone can call himself inclusive, but strategically, there are some key differences between those who favor an inclusive leadership style versus a more traditional leadership style. To reap the multitude of benefits from inclusive leadership, senior leaders must do more than pay lip service to the concept of inclusion. Here are some key strategies that inclusive leaders can use as they strive to build and support cognitively diverse, multifaceted teams that combine everyone's unique traits and perspectives:

- *Consider gender as part of the equation.* To share another example, a male senior executive (let's call him Alan) told me over coffee last month about failing to promote a female candidate on his team to the board. Although she was considered a high-potential in the organization, Alan ruled her out based on her work style, which was more collaborative and expressive than analytical or conceptual. Because the current board members favored the latter thinking style, Alan had an unconscious bias toward choosing only candidates

who shared that style rather than widening the ranks to incorporate a more well-rounded mix of strengths and behaviors. Because women bring different types of leadership talent to the table, it's important for leadership teams to keep gender bias in mind as part of prioritizing inclusive leadership. Failure to do so hurts everyone—not just the high-potential women who miss out on advancement opportunities, but also the boardrooms and cultures that miss out on input from people with different ideas and perspectives that can help them connect with a wider range of global customers. And let's not forget the importance of women supporting other women.

After keynoting at a recent conference, several women came up to me afterward and mentioned separate instances of observing women in senior ranks at their companies who were neither mentoring nor making efforts to pull other women up the ladder. Like men, women should strive to be inclusive advocates for other women to help them advance.

- *Empower diverse, layered teams to succeed.* When considering gender and other types of demographic differences, inclusive leaders must also reach beyond demographics to include people with different thinking styles, experiences, and problem-solving approaches. This is sometimes called “cognitive diversity,” which refers to the range of differences and responses in how employees think and tackle challenges. Our research at SHAMBAUGH has shown that even though senior leaders may initially feel more comfortable working with people who share their approach and style, the results are better when leadership teams support diverse thinking styles and perspectives, which can lead to breakthrough solutions.
- *Watch for bias.* I'll share another story from one of my clients, whom I'll call Susan. An experienced director in finance, Susan is known throughout her organization as a high-potential employee and a high performer. Yet though she has interviewed for several senior-level positions to try to advance, she has not moved up. Because there were no

obvious reasons why Susan was not advancing, it's possible that gender bias was to blame. Leaders, like everyone else, are prone to gender-based bias based on stereotypes of men and women in the workplace (for example, the myth that men are better at strategic decision-making than women and thus make better leaders). If you want to be an inclusive leader, you need to be particularly vigilant of how your unconscious bias manifests in relation to your employee teams and leadership groups. Look around: Are you surrounded by people who primarily share your viewpoint? To broaden your company's thinking, you need to be informed by a diverse web of different perspectives, not a group of yes-men and -women who parrot your own beliefs back to you. Tap on different types of thinkers in your network, and stay on the lookout for how your daily choices influence whose voices are heard around the table and whose are left out. Reexamine and expand your relationships and networks. Break out of going to or working with the same people on your most important problems and issues. At an organizational level, companies should reexamine their hiring processes and competency models, because these are generally designed to support the traditional style and traits of male leadership, not female leadership.

- *Rebalance the scales.* Inclusive leaders should also think about whether a traditional hierarchical corporate structure is keeping some voices “off deck,” silenced by the voices at the top. Inclusion requires creating a feeling of psychological safety for everyone

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in the work environment, from the CEO on down, but this can be tough to achieve when you lead from a strictly hierarchical mind-set. Though you might not need to alter the actual reporting relationships, it helps to create opportunities for those you outrank to express their opinions. Keep in mind that if employees feel they might lose credibility by offering an idea that their boss disagrees with, they might never share their most innovative concepts, which stunts the potential growth of the entire company. Try to stay as open to alternative approaches as you can, which means being willing to change your mind or rethink a position.

- *Take steps to build trust.* An inclusive environment can't thrive in a culture of distrust. But how can inclusive leaders build trust? Although there are no easy answers, some clues come from research. Successful teams are those that provide “psychological safety” to every person on the team, as noted in the Google's Project Aristotle, Google, which Charles Duhigg reported on in *The New York Times Magazine* and in his 2016 book *Smarter Faster Better*. The company found that when individuals are encouraged to be truly themselves, sharing thoughts openly without fear of group rejection, this builds trust, empathy, and mutual respect. Google discovered that when members of their teams—including leaders—revealed something personally meaningful during team meetings, it helped to establish authentic bonds where trust could flourish. Google's research also revealed that the most successful teams valued inclusiveness through tangible actions, honoring group norms like taking turns talking and striving to understand others in the group through intuition.
- *Cultivate corporate accountability.* One of the most important tasks of inclusive leaders is to create a culture of accountability throughout the organization. Not only must leaders themselves walk the talk of inclusion to allow cognitively diverse team members to feel safe, but they must also hold others in the company accountable for valuing inclusion. So starting with the personal, first ensure that your own interactions

and meetings are inclusive. For example, notice whether women around your table are trying to speak up but are not being heard, or are failing to speak up because of lack of encouragement or confidence. If so, take the lead in ensuring all voices around your table are heard. Next, widen your focus to include other managers. Do they have diverse, inclusive teams? If not, ensure that all leaders commit to move forward to specific goals that value and leverage gender-balanced, cognitively diverse teams. Require that managers consider talented diverse candidates for challenging roles so that there will be a diverse slate in the leadership pipeline. To reinforce accountability, management and leadership programs should wrap inclusive leadership competencies into their development and training. Look for programs that cover topics such as understanding and leveraging gender differences, collaborative leadership, emotional intelligence, and engaging diverse teams.

*Ensure that inclusion is not seen as a soft skill.* Part of creating accountability is defining inclusion as part of the company's business case. Diversity and inclusion can no longer be treated as "soft skills" or optional leadership strategies, but rather need to be approached as key business skills. To that end, it's important that inclusion aligns with the key business growth pillars of the company, and the business case should permeate across the organization. To make this happen, it helps to remember that what gets measured is what gets done. Organizations can show that inclusiveness is a hard business skill by providing concrete goals for leaders that will cultivate a more inclusive mind-set. For example, senior leadership should examine and break down traditional practices and ensure they are gender neutral, examining leadership competency models, recruitment, talent reviews, and succession plans under the lens of inclusiveness. HR practices should be nonbiased to encourage a broad spectrum of diverse talents, perspectives, and styles to thrive. If inclusiveness is not viewed as a corporate priority, and leadership fails to offer any measurable actions for leaders to take and be held accountable for, then some managers may not put their hearts into creating an inclusive environment.

- *Move out of your comfort zone.* The traditional leadership comfort zone is often based on stereotypes that hold women and other minorities back at the leadership level and keep organizations from having all voices on deck through cognitive diversity. Men can play an important role in cultivating inclusiveness by recognizing that despite some progress made, major inequities still exist. To cite just one example, recent research from professors at Stanford and Emory universities found that women can suffer consequences when they use direct, assertive actions to achieve leadership success. When men see these gender stereotypes playing out, they can challenge them to disrupt outdated thinking patterns. For example, if you notice that the board approves a male executive's suggestion after a female executive's similar idea—when delivered assertively—was questioned, point this behavior out to the group. Although the findings around assertiveness and gender are just one consideration, they highlight the fact that there is still plenty of work to be done in helping everyone to have an equal chance to become a true, authentic leader. To open the doors for better gender balance—and to create greater inclusiveness in *all* arenas across the organization—leaders need to ensure that everyone's voice is heard at the table and in the boardroom.
- *Share the stage.* Traditional leaders loudly take center stage, dominating the environment rather than encouraging others' voices. Inclusive leaders understand that sharing the stage more altruistically and humbly helps to create the type of workplace environment where cognitive diversity can thrive. Though altruism may not come naturally to every leader, keep in mind that research from Catalyst has shown that more altruistic leaders also are humble, having a toned-down view of their own importance. This may seem surprising, because leadership is usually not associated with humbleness. Yet learning how to share the spotlight can make a significant difference when creating a truly inclusive workplace.



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*Move away from the  
“people like us” mentality.*

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- *Cultivate courage.* Move away from the “people like us” mentality to foster the type of inclusive environment that’s needed for business success. This means organizations and leaders alike must step firmly outside of their comfort zones. Though you may feel more comfortable with those who share your viewpoints, if you surround yourself with “mini-me’s,” you’ll be screening out the diverse range of thinkers that your company needs to succeed. It takes courage to create the type of environment in which people feel safe to take risks and fail, but by doing so, you’ll help all members of your team gain their own sense of courage.

## Conclusion

In an inclusive culture, all participants are able to share their best ideas. When people feel psychologically safe to be themselves, they are more likely to speak up and take the risks needed to succeed. What’s more, inclusive leaders understand that humanity matters, not just efficiency. They encourage people on their teams to store away their “work faces” and be themselves.

Inclusive leadership is really quite a simple concept: it’s about giving everyone a chance to be heard. If you

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can cultivate this type of work environment as a leader, you’ll become part of the change that our organizations need. When we bring *all voices on deck*, we make possible the emergence of leadership teams that can leverage diverse strengths while integrating the group’s full potential of creative insights. That’s what we all need to solve tomorrow’s most challenging problems.



*Rebecca Shambaugh is an internationally recognized gender-balanced leadership expert, author, keynote speaker, blogger for the Huffington Post and contributing editor for Harvard Business Review. She is president of SHAMBAUGH, a global leadership development organization, and founder of Women In Leadership and Learning (WILL), one of the first executive leadership development programs for female leaders.*

*Rebecca has been appeared on CNBC, NPR, and ABC, and is the author of the bestselling books It’s Not a Glass Ceiling, It’s a Sticky Floor, and Make Room for Her: Why Companies Need an Integrated Leadership Model to Achieve Extraordinary Results. For more information visit her website [www.shambaughleadership.com](http://www.shambaughleadership.com).*