

Empathy Isn't Enough. Why Inclusive Design Principles Unlock What Leaders Need

Fast Company | Katie Schlott | August 24, 2022

As an advisor to Fortune 100 companies, I've witnessed first-hand how inclusive design leads to products, services, and innovations that better serve our customers and clients. When it comes to leadership, empathy isn't the magic bullet for creating a better workplace. Yes, we can strive to relate to our colleagues, but it's still impossible to fully grasp others' lived experiences. There will always be a chasm that prevents us from fully relating to each other, whether it's race, age, gender, socioeconomic background, or even traumatic experiences.



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Research backs this up. Empathy ratings for organizations and CEOs have dropped to a near all-time low, reports the 2022 State of Workplace Empathy Study. Considering our collective chronic stress, it's understandable why we feel unseen or misunderstood at work.

And yet, there is a way leaders can create a workplace that works for everyone, not just a select few. I call it inclusive design leadership.

As an innovation and design thinking advisor to Fortune 100 companies, I've witnessed first-hand how inclusive design leads to products, services, and innovations that better serve our customers and clients. That's because inclusive design is a process in which something is intentionally designed to be as usable for as many people as possible, particularly groups traditionally excluded in the design process.

When inclusive design is applied to leadership, it can change how people feel about and experience the workplace. This can lead to stronger employee morale and better retention rates. Inclusive design leadership can also lead to new revenue opportunities and more efficiencies because people who feel safe at work are more likely to suggest new ideas and approaches.

So, how do you actually make this happen in your management style? Here are several ways to start.

CHALLENGE UNINTENTIONAL EXCLUSION

As a leader, letting your team know that you care deeply about them matters. The most important way to do this is to challenge unintentional exclusion.

This means considering when historically marginalized voices are left out of the conversation at work. Look at who isn't at the table. Or perhaps they are at the table, but don't feel like they can be part of the conversation. Understanding your biases, especially exclusion, is critical.

A specific way to challenge exclusion is by creating an intentional space for inclusion. At IA Collaborative, we created Design for Women, a capability to design with and for women to benefit all, which was honored by Fast Company World Changing Ideas 2022. We already know women need a seat at the table, but sometimes we must create our own tables. As part of that work, we created private roundtables giving leaders space to discuss topics that affect how we show up and lead in our companies; subjects ranged from democratizing gender equity studies to creating micro-sprint prototypes to test new programs.

Challenging exclusion also means considering all areas of intersectionality. To support leaders, DEI consultancies like Paradigm and experts like Reshma Saujani, founder of Girls Who Code and Marshall Plan for Moms, and author of Pay Up, excel at creating spaces and opportunities that champion intersectionality in the workplace. Companies also might partner with initiatives like Gender Equality in Tech (GET) Cities, which is working to accelerate the representation and leadership of women in tech by starting at the city level in Chicago, Washington D.C., and Miami.

To start challenging unintentional exclusion at work, ask yourself questions like:

- Who have I not included? Who have I intentionally or unintentionally marginalized through my leadership actions?
- Are there programs we might intentionally create or invest in to create space for intentional inclusion?
- What thoughts, patterns, or biases do I need to be more aware of, and what have I learned from the process?

PUT PEOPLE AT THE CENTER OF THE EXPERIENCE

The empathy-minded concept of "put yourself in that person's shoes" is problematic. You simply cannot simulate a person's actual life experience. As a leader, you need to put them in the center of the experience you're creating.

In inclusive design, we call this a human-centered observational approach to fact-finding. You can apply it at work by observing and listening with your colleagues serving as the experts. This approach allows you to better understand their day-to-day realities and challenges they need help solving.

For example, perhaps you're helping employees navigate a safe return to the workplace as the pandemic continues. Spend time observing how people move around in your workspace. Is the design of space and technology supporting a hybrid-work style? Does it properly support employees with varying needs and abilities? What might a 4-day workweek do for parents, caretakers, or people with unique needs?

This approach can also extend to workplace hiring practices and experiences. The Neurodiversity @ Work Roundtable is a coalition of leaders from companies like Ford, Microsoft, and Fidelity committed to neurodiversity hiring initiatives. To ensure success, they put people at the center of hiring experience by considering alternative hiring practices.

As you focus on centering your teams' and colleagues' experiences, here are additional questions to ask yourself:

- Have I observed my team members' unique needs while at work?
- Do I listen and observe more than I talk in order to learn about a person's needs?
- Have I created a space where people feel safe to speak about their needs and experiences?
- What have I assumed about someone or someone's situation that I should reconsider?

SOLVE FOR ONE, EXPAND TO MANY

A key facet of inclusive design is creating solutions for people with consideration of differing abilities. By designing within temporary or permanent abilities or conditions, you'll find applications for many people and circumstances. OXO kitchen products are a famous example of this. Founder Sam Farber sought to design better kitchen utensils for his wife suffering from arthritis; everyone benefited from their products which are easier to handle.

Extending this concept to the workplace can bear just as much potential. For example, perhaps you have a highly regarded employee nearing retirement age who has expressed that he needs a lighter workload.

Perhaps you can use this person's needs as inspiration to create a company-wide solution where retired people work at your company on a hybrid work schedule or a project basis. This could lead to a new work model or benefit that can be applied to even more employees, such as new parents, people with chronic illnesses, or even burnt-out colleagues.

Companies are already starting to take action to consider life transitions and aging in their workforce. The Age-Friendly Institute's Certified Age Friendly Employer (CAFE) program identifies organizations committed to being the best places to work for employees ages 50 and older. Employers on that list include AT&T, Macy's, Wells Fargo, and CVS. And AARP's AgeTech Collaborative is creating a coalition that connects investors, AgeTech start-ups, and shop locations to design new products, services, and experiences that could eventually apply to broader audiences.

Here are more questions to ask yourself while seeking to solve for one and extend to many:

- How can I focus on differently-abled team members in order to challenge how we support them today?
- Is there a temporary or more permanent employee situation I might consider designing for (i.e., new parents, transitioning employees, temporary or permanent disabilities, caregivers, etc.)?

Inclusive design has become a buzzword in recent years. Aaron Chu even argued that the phrase is so overused it's now meaningless.

But the fact is, empathy alone will never be enough to achieve equity and inclusion. Inclusive design applied to leadership is essential for designing solutions and creating workplaces that affirm everyone on our team.

Extending the possible uses and needs of products and environments to the widest variety of people is not only the right thing to do; it's the only way we'll create a fair, just, and ethical world. It's also the best way to uncover new opportunities for growth innovation.

By building a culture rooted in inclusive design principles, we'll challenge systems that disadvantage others and prioritize solutions for everyone. As leaders, this is the most impactful work we can do—and we must.