How to Develop Inclusive Managers

Make sure managers know how to translate company DE&I policies into practice.

By Lisa Rabasca Roepe
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Many companies have spent countless hours building or refining diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) policies and programs in the two-plus years since protests against racial injustice swept the nation.

However, managers often don’t know how to translate those policies into daily actions, says Tara Jaye Frank, an equity strategist and author of The Waymakers: Clearing the Path to Workplace Equity with Competence and Confidence (https://www.amazon.com/s?k=The+Waymakers:+Clearing+the+Path+to+Workplace+Equity+with+Competence+and+Confidence&i=stripbooks&crid=24MZD95BMXP7A&sprefix=tara+jaye&tiet=4755f8306ac83402). (Amplify, 2022).

“Companies are making big declarations and changing practices, but managers don’t know what to go do,” Frank says.

HR leaders should define and discuss what inclusive behaviors managers need to develop to support the new policies, she says.

Managers are key to the success of DE&I programs. When they demonstrate inclusive behaviors, their team members will adopt similar behaviors, according to research by Coqual, (https://coqual.org/reports/equity-calls-on-everyone/) a nonprofit think tank based in New York City. A more inclusive manager is associated with an 18 percent increase in perceptions of fairness at work, the study found, and inclusive colleagues are associated with a 21 percent increase.

Employees want their employers to demonstrate a serious commitment to DE&I, according to Julia Taylor Kennedy, Coqual executive vice president.

“Having broad statements is an important step, and having conversations about race is another important step,” Kennedy says. “But it can come across as tone-deaf if it’s not backed up in the day to day.”

Model Behavior

According to Frank, every employee needs four things: to be seen, respected, valued and protected. Employees want to be defended when colleagues say offensive and insulting things, and they want to be able to take risks without fear that their reputations will be harmed, she says.

To help create a more inclusive environment, encourage managers to model these four behaviors:

Be curious. Let’s say an employee is frequently late. Instead of assuming that the employee is dropping their kids off at school, the manager should ask what is making the employee late and how the manager can help, says Aiko Bethea, CEO and founder of RARE Coaching & Consulting in Atlanta.

Make amends. If a manager says something that doesn’t sit well with another employee, the manager should apologize, Bethea says. For instance, the manager could say, “I didn’t get that right. I didn’t realize how loaded that word I used is. I’m not going to use it anymore.”

Don’t treat everyone the same. Employees need their managers to be empathetic, but that empathy will look different for everyone on the team. Managers should ask their direct reports what they need to be successful, Bethea says. “Ask everyone, not just women or people of color,” she adds, “and don’t assume everyone needs the same thing.”
Understand employees’ aspirations. It’s important for managers to get to know their employees as people, and that involves learning more than just how many children they have or what breed of dog they own, Frank says. Inclusive managers will ask what their employees aspire to and then coach them toward that aspiration, she explains.

Avoid Common Obstacles

Common mistakes made by managers can hinder attempts to build an inclusive culture. To avoid this, educate managers about potential pitfalls and teach them to:

Focus on the employee. Too often, in an attempt to find common ground, managers will make an incident about themselves rather than focusing on the feelings of the person who was offended by the actions or words of a colleague or client, Frank says. It doesn’t work to say, “I remember one time I was offended in the same way.” Instead, say, “That must be really difficult,” “I can’t imagine how that feels,” “Tell me how that feels” or “How does that affect how you are showing up at work today?” Those sentiments indicate that you care about the person, Frank says, which helps the employee feel more protected.

Additionally, managers must show empathy on an ongoing basis, not just when something bad happens. It doesn’t build trust, Frank notes, to ask a Black employee how she’s doing only after a mass shooting that impacted a Black community, such as the Buffalo, N.Y., supermarket shooting in May.

“Managers need to have regular touch points that aren’t all about the work, because it creates space to show ongoing empathy,” she says.

Understand “intent” versus “impact.” If someone at a coffee shop bumps into you and spills coffee on you, you’d probably expect the person to apologize and hand you a napkin, says Michelle Rodriguez, director of diversity, inclusion and belonging at Sunnyvale, Calif.-based LinkedIn, which employs about 20,000 people.

At work, it’s easy to “bump into each other” by saying or doing something that hurts someone else—even if by accident. While the manager’s intentions might be good, “the impact might not match intent,” Rodriguez says.

“If someone tells you it hurt them or what you said to them didn’t feel right, don’t go into a defense spiral,” she says. “The most powerful leaders take a pause and listen to the impact.”

Allowing employees to say how they feel creates psychological safety and builds trust, she adds.

Avoid lazy language. Be careful about the language you and others on the team use to describe colleagues, says Mitzi Short, an executive coach and an author of You Should Smile More: How to Dismantle Gender Bias in the Workplace (City Point, 2022). For example, just as managers would be unlikely to inquire about “the new boy in accounting,” they should also avoid asking about “the new girl.” Additionally, a manager who hears someone use the phrase “the new girl” could correct the colleague by asking, “Do you mean Sally, the new woman in accounting?”

Be aware of affinity bias. It’s natural for managers to be drawn to employees who remind them of themselves, Kennedy says. But managers need to ensure they aren’t favoring some employees over others.

For example, Rodriguez says, pay attention to who gets the office housework of organizing team events and who gets the high-visibility and stretch projects.

Provide equal feedback. Some managers worry about coming across as biased or harsh when giving feedback to people of color. As a result, they use vague terms that don’t provide enough specifics to help employees improve, Rodriguez says.

Want to take it a step further? Show managers that the company is serious about building an inclusive work environment by rewarding those managers who exhibit inclusive behaviors with increased compensation and promotions, Kennedy says.

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