How to be an equity-focused leader

Managing your team's identities at work is a modern leader's must for driving strategy and growth, says **Randall S Peterson**

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are key for driving strategy and growth, and managing your team's identities at work is a must for the modern leader.

As founding director of the Leadership Institute, a professor of organisational behaviour with decades of research focused on diversity, a former trustee of UN Women UK and now a member of Leaders as Change Agents (LACA), an expert panel that champions diversity and inclusion across the UK, I'm often asked for advice on how to be an equity-focused leader. Here are five simple recommendations gleaned from my research and work.

❖ Hire diverse teams, but stop making the traditional business case for diversity

The traditional "business case" for diversity is that more of it gets you better outcomes – but the latest firm data suggests that this notion is patently false. More diversity produces more diverse outcomes for companies, but some are better and some are worse. At the same time it's true that, to be a world-class organisation, you must be diverse. There's no way around this. The challenge for leaders now is to diversify in an optimal way, focusing on equity and performance. Ask: How do I make sure that I end up with the best of diversity?

To answer that question, start by pursuing not just diversity, but diversity and inclusion. Because, unless you do the actual inclusion work, diversifying your team won't bring about the results you want. In fact, a more diverse group of people may find it harder to work with one another, undermining team trust.

And building credibility within a diverse team won't happen overnight. Integration and inclusion take time. In some of my research on boards, for example, I've found it may take as long as three to five years. Over this time, leaders must work to foster trusting relationships.

❖ Work to manage your team's identities and don't threaten them

Another factor that can readily undermine the business case for diversity is the tendency to shine a spotlight on a new hire who is different. This can make them feel very defensive.

For example, when a group of men hires the first woman, it may be tantamount to saying to her, "Ok, show me the money. How do you, as a woman, help me?" This may create an identity threat. And, ironically, people may do their worst work when faced with an identity threat.

That's just one reason why it's key to create a sense of belonging, especially for underrepresented and minority groups.

Fostering inclusion is a core leadership responsibility. I've found that this responsibility is best met with training, listening and measuring progress along the way.

❖ Allow team members to stand out while fitting in

Consider the "optimal distinctiveness" theory proposed by psychologist Marilynn Brewer. It's a great explanatory mechanism. On the one hand, everybody wants to fit in and be part of the group, especially when it feels like a safe space with mutual trust. On the other hand, everybody wants to feel acknowledged for making a unique contribution. To strive for "optimal distinctiveness" is to ask: "What's the right level of standing out while fitting in?"

It's essential that managers help their teams achieve their optimal distinctiveness in a productive way. It's a balance. My research suggests that, as a leader, highlighting some of the diversity in the room is beneficial – as long as that diversity is relevant to the work to be done. That is to say, managers do well to point out who has a unique attribute or background that helps a project. No one should be put in the spotlight for simply looking different. In constructing a team, note the diverse strands that are coming together to work on a project while creating a sense of belonging for all.

❖ Help new hires navigate the organisational culture

For new hires, learning scores of organisational rules and procedures need not be the top priority. Help team members to see how they fit into the organisation. Help them feel comfortable with what they do and don't disclose in the office. Ask for their feedback and really listen. Of course, new hires need to know the most basic rules and procedures, but getting comfortable to learn and contribute is fundamental for all.

❖ Confronting bias is essential

Leaders are public figures, even in small organisations. People are watching, so confronting bias as a leader is crucial. If something is wrong, if a comment reveals bias, explain why for all to hear.

Leaders should confront bias with a growth mindset. Believe that people can and do change, and foster that belief in your team. Research by my colleague Aneeta Rattan, funded by the Leadership Institute, has shown that the workplace benefits when learning occurs after a negative incident.

An equity-focused leader must be steadfast in making sure that bias is tackled to instil a more positive outlook for the whole team.

Create the tracks that change can run on. The bottom line is that diversity is key for a world-class organisation, but leaders have to do the inclusion work themselves. Managing identities at work is fundamental. Beyond any business case for diversity, leading with a focus on equity – keeping in mind gender and minority groups – reaps ample rewards. □

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