By
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# A Very Necessary Awakening: Achieving Meaningful Inclusion

**Wake up and listen!**

War and conflict, climate breakdown, mass migration, turbulent markets, the increasing cost of living, the rise of nationalism, and the biggest election year in history[1]… we are living in challenging – indeed polarising – times. The pressure and responsibility on those leading organisations and designing and delivering education is immense.

Although there is much to celebrate in terms of upward progress in key dimensions of the human development index[2], it can at times feel as though we are sleepwalking towards oblivion, or, at the very least, into a deep abyss. In the face of such monumental challenges, optimism is hard, and the energy to rise to each challenge can be elusive. As we look at the year ahead and beyond, we may well wonder, 'When are leaders going to wake up and do something?' But what is the 'something' they must do?

Without being trite or overly simplistic, and bringing things down a few levels from political or religious systems and into the context of organisational leadership, the reality is that leaders must do many things with a fair degree of urgency! But there is an important additional dimension here, as many of us working in or with organisations will attest: 'how' leaders do things is fundamentally important. No matter how small or large an organisation may be, the

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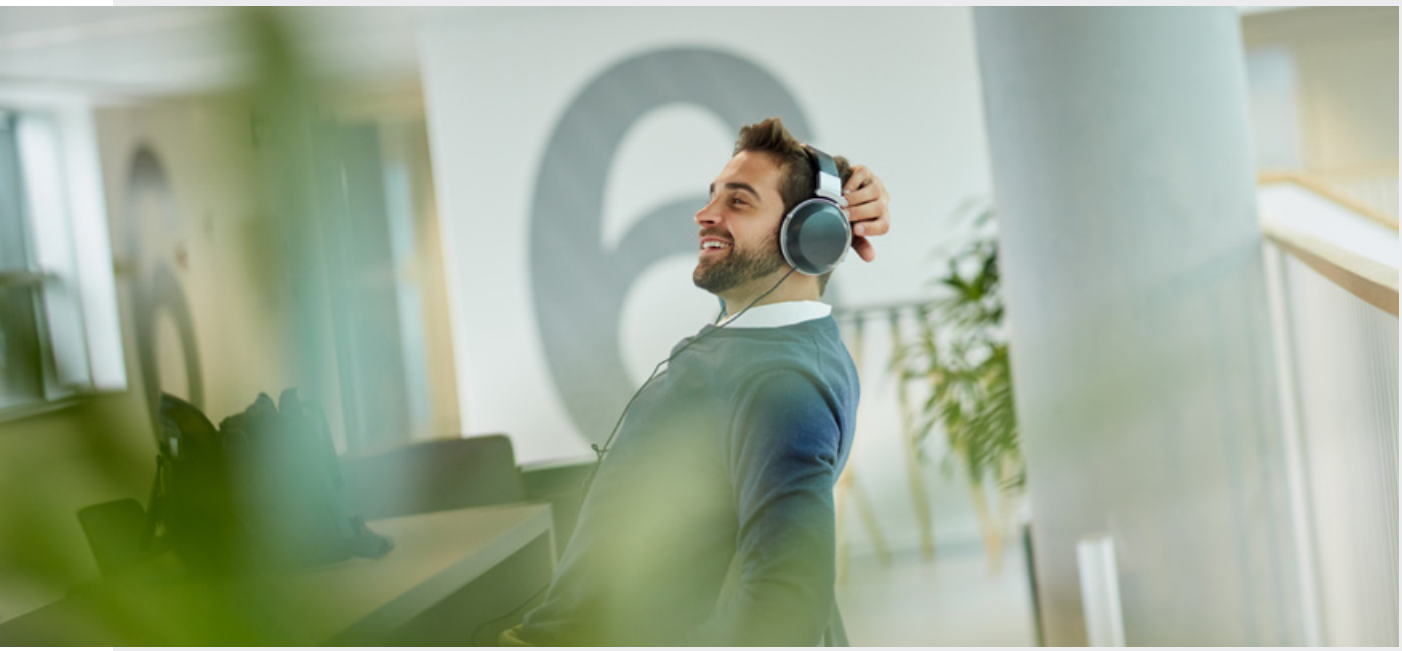

evidence suggests that leaders who actively listen to their staff and volunteers, and consciously include them in organisational affairs, are far more successful at navigating the challenges they face, and much more able to generate the optimism and sustain the energy they need to achieve their goals.

With so much noise it can be hard to listen and even harder to hear what is being said. The reality is that – as the World Bank reports[3] – global inequalities remain considerable and the Covid pandemic further exacerbated wealth and gender inequalities. The World Economic Forum reports[4] that progress on gender equality is stalling, with hard-won gains for women and LGBT+ rights under threat, being eroded or even reversed. It seems that many people are finding themselves marginalised or excluded from opportunities, whether in organisations or society as a whole and without moralising, this does not intuitively feel like progress in the right direction. How can we reset and reverse this trend?

**'What kind of leadership do we need right now?'**

It doesn't seem that complicated… we need leaders who are able to generate social benefit as well as financial profit while caring for the planet. Leaders who are concerned about making a net positive contribution to humanity and society at large. Leaders who include their people and who act in the collective interest, as opposed to favouring a small elite minority. Leaders who actively listen to understand and have the courage and capacity to facilitate dialogue and find common ground. Perhaps it's time to drop the 'of' from our 'what kind of leadership…?' question and think more about 'kind leadership' and what that might entail.

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**Leaders who include people**

For now, though, let's take a step back and look at what 'including people' actually means. In my work around the world with non-profit organisations, academic institutions and businesses, I see plenty of work being done to create more people-centred organisations which foster greater inclusion. But despite new teams, departments, reporting lines and myriad Equity, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, and significant financial investment to promote inclusivity, progress is slow. Moreover, there always seems to be a demographic that remains excluded, for example non-conforming and neuro-divergent people find themselves marginalised or misunderstood, older people missing out on opportunities, those from lower social classes or in historically excluded castes or groups don't even get an opportunity to join in and participate. Including people means consciously considering how we accommodate and integrate diversity, and leaders are well placed to set the tone when it comes to inclusion, as they have the opportunity to model inclusive behaviours and rarely need permission to ask the difficult questions. Leaders who include people are adept at listening, and have excellent feedback skills, both in terms of receiving and giving feedback! Leaders who include people both prioritise and create space for participation, ensuring quieter or marginalised voices have an opportunity to contribute.

**Listening + inviting participation = inclusion**

One very practical way in which leaders can actively listen to their people in a structured, consistent way is through an employee survey. Twenty years ago, I remember working with a large non-profit that for various reasons, had been resisting a global survey: it was too complicated to run globally, there were minimal resources available to action suggestions arising from the responses, leaders were reluctant to have their shortcomings pointed out in black and white, etc. Happily, that organisation overcame the perceived challenges and committed to engaging with its staff. It has since implemented some transformational initiatives that have contributed to improving the culture, resulting in the exponential growth of the organisation. These days it is rare to find an organisation that does not survey its people. But how effective is your survey and does it enable you to truly hear the diverse voices of your people? And how well do you handle the responses and work that comes afterwards?

*There are not many excuses left for organisations who choose not to listen to their staff*

Advances in technology and much-improved connectivity have enabled huge strides forward in terms of employee engagement surveys, and organisations that commit to actively listening and inviting participation report healthier cultures and higher performance. There are not many excuses left for organisations who choose not to listen to their staff. Having partnered for many years with an employee engagement survey firm specialising in the non-profit, social care, and international development sector, I and its many clients can readily attest to the power of an employee engagement exercise done well; actively inviting the participation of staff and volunteers transforms organisational culture and the workplace. Research underlines the fact that leaders who nurture a healthy culture of feedback have higher-performing teams.

**An attitude of mind**

Including people does not generally happen by accident; it is a conscious choice and mindset. And when organisations focus on other things and do not consciously prioritise (and enable) inclusion - as we often see through our consultancy practice at the Conscious Project - it is much more likely that their culture will end up fragmented. Uneven power dynamics and cliques form, and, as people find themselves excluded, important voices or organisational conversations move

onto the sidelines, and things slow down or get stuck. And this shift of the conversation to alternative channels is only exacerbated when many staff work remotely. Of course, not everything can or should be discussed together, but as you reflect on your own organisation and the importance of aligning with the overall strategic direction, what more can you do to demonstrate inclusive leadership, and how might you create more shared spaces that bring people together for meaningful dialogue, and keep you moving in the right direction?

**Meaningful inclusion leads to healthier workplaces and better results**

In some recent work with the Red Cross movement, meaningful inclusion and dialogue were our priority and the resources created were focused on learning to change and shifting the leaders' mindset. The project 'Lead to Change'[5] equipped managers and leaders with the tools and resources to navigate the disruptive times we live in, and to transform the culture of the movement through listening and dialogue. It recognised that individual leaders had a responsibility to focus on and change 'how' they led and that, with support and appropriate technology, they could create powerful moments for connection and growth. In turn, the organisation's health improved, and so did its results.

Dealing with difference through dialogue is a key tenet of leadership and is in stark contrast to the avoidance tactics we see and absolutely in contrast to the toxic 'divide and rule' strategy many of us have experienced. We are inclusive when we listen to understand, when we give space for different perspectives and when we invite new voices, and by doing this, we can usually find a way of accommodating, even accepting, each other. The result, whether we are involved in innovation that improves lives, delivers essential services, or anything else, is that the world becomes a less lonely and much better place. Of course, it can be deeply challenging working with those who see the world very differently from us, or who hold differing values or principles, or who are simply not like us, but the future of our planet and our communities depends on us listening and on our ability to do the work of including. It's time to wake up, turn towards the different voices, and listen to understand, for that is how we will rediscover our common interests and learn to accept that we are in this together.

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**Sources**


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