

Six tips for engaging people who don't already believe in the benefits of EDI





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Perceptions of “wokeness” are harming inclusion efforts. So how do leaders, tasked with fostering inclusive cultures, respond to this growing and apparently socially acceptable criticism of inclusion culture? Gareth Buchanan offers some tips.

In recent years, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) has faced a major identity crisis.

Reports that businesses are putting the needs of underrepresented populations above the majority are harming EDI's reputation as a tool for positive change, and are making it harder for leaders to foster inclusive cultures.

As EDI efforts have become commonplace, so too has discourse around the topic. Increasingly prevalent criticisms portray EDI efforts as creating and magnifying division where really there is no meaningful problem.

Some feel that EDI efforts have gone too far, and that majority populations are now suffering inequality as a direct result of the drive to provide equity for historically under-served groups. Many believe that equality already exists for most people, and that EDI initiatives actually encourage and create inequality.

Unfortunately, those misconceptions lead to people who are key to the progress of inclusive cultures actively discouraging and undermining such advances.

Why are people concerned about inclusion?

Recently we have seen a proliferation of “anti-woke” sentiment, in social, print and broadcast media.

The term “woke” was originally coined in the 1960s, during the civil rights movement, to mean being “socially aware, or attentive to societal issues such as racial and social prejudice”. Its usage became more prevalent again in the early days of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Recently, it has been adopted by those who don't support inclusion, acting as a catch-all term of disapproval to describe any EDI initiative, or to suggest that those who support inclusion are overly sensitive to social issues, and are seeking to divide.

Initially deployed by outspoken commentators, its use in this way has gradually crept into common vocabulary. In doing so, it has become almost trendy for people who haven't or won't experience discrimination to use it to criticise inclusion initiatives, or perspectives or identities that they don't support.

Many feel that the term, once used largely by the discriminated-against, has now been appropriated and weaponised, in a display of privilege, by those who benefit most from the status quo.

As debate on the merits of inclusion has accelerated, clickbait headlines have fuelled the fire, providing often misrepresentative, lacking-in-context or simply untrue examples of inclusion which lead to many becoming uneasy about the direction that society is apparently heading in.

Why is it important to engage with people who don't actively support EDI?

Like any business strategy, your success in fostering inclusion will be dependent on your team supporting change, pulling in the same direction and working together to achieve common goals.

If your people don't endorse your strategy and the drivers behind it, efforts may be openly or covertly undermined, or opposed. Addressing concerns and

providing clarity on aims, the drivers for change and anticipated benefits, are important steps in informing people about what inclusion strategy truly seeks to achieve.

By inviting and addressing alternative perspectives and specific concerns, we can seek to better understand and respond to uncertainty that may or may not be rooted in reality.

The following tips are designed to help leaders and line managers engage people who don't already believe in the benefits of EDI.

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1 Create a truly inclusive inclusion strategy

Typically, challenges arise when people feel that they haven't been given due or fair consideration, that they stand to lose something or that their concerns are not being addressed.

When developing your inclusion strategy, those concerns can be allayed by actively engaging populations who wouldn't normally expect to benefit, or those who may not typically support change.

Naturally, underrepresented communities will be the main focus of any inclusion plan, but there is clear value in demonstrating that many inclusion initiatives benefit everyone - even when they're driven by a desire to improve opportunities for certain groups.

For example, when organisations introduce more structured processes and guidance in relation to recruitment or performance management, the ultimate

aim is to achieve better, more objective and fact-based decision-making.

Diversity and fairness should happen naturally when people make assessments devoid of bias, favouritism and nepotism, but under-served populations aren't the only people to benefit. All of your people will likely profit from leaders making more objective, evidence-based decisions on appointments and recognition - and providing clarity around this can help to combat misunderstanding and alleviate concerns.

Many EDI initiatives aim to help organisations to make better decisions. Conversations around inclusion should therefore aim to bring that to life for everyone. By sharing data, plans and insights, and by considering all populations, leaders can turn individuals with concerns into supporters rather than opponents.

2 Provide real examples of improvements you're making and avoid talking in general terms

There is no shortage of inaccurate, and misleading, information on EDI. In the absence of indisputable evidence proving otherwise, it's easy for people to misunderstand what inclusion aims to achieve, and to believe what they hear or read.

By sharing real examples of the changes you're proposing, and by explaining how and why you have arrived at them, you can disprove assumptions and concerns that people may have.

Start by sharing data-driven examples of where inequality occurs in your business, and outline your proposed responses. Position changes by linking back to that data.

For example, if you have identified that people with visible disabilities tend to fare poorly in your recruitment process when compared to other candidates, justify how you came to that conclusion. Explain how you

investigated further and what data you considered. Clarify any assumptions you made. Outline your proposed response(s), and why you have chosen that strategy and discounted others.

[Pay gaps](#) are a topic that most people can relate to, but that many don't fully understand. Why not share them, and explain how you've identified the causes behind them, and how your organisation is planning to respond?

By taking people on the journey that you've been through, you can share evidence that drives the need for change, alongside insights that people may not be aware of otherwise. Doing so can help to build understanding and empathy, and demonstrates transparency.

3 Prepare and equip leaders and line managers for difficult conversations

As the day-to-day representatives of organisational strategy, leaders play an important role in helping others to understand, navigate and process change. If leaders don't grasp the drivers for change, aren't prepared or don't buy in to the changes, they will be less adept at educating and supporting others.

Enabling leaders to bring change to life at a local level is key. By coaching leaders to present the business case behind change, and to accurately demonstrate how change will benefit certain populations and your business, you can prepare them for success.

Allowing leaders to critique proposals, and to share their own concerns in a safe environment, will allow you to respond to any doubts, and will better empower you to deal with any scrutiny that arises.

Training, briefing sessions and papers, coaching and mentoring are all useful tools in upskilling leaders on what is proposed, and in how to approach potentially difficult situations.



Key resources

- [Webinar: Diversity and inclusion - closing the gap between rhetoric and action](#)
- [Equality, diversity and inclusion \(1\): What does it mean?](#)
- [Podcast: Diversity and inclusion questions we shy away from asking](#)

4 Share personal stories

Sharing real examples and insights from real people helps to build empathy and understanding. By encouraging people to share their own experiences of difference, you can establish more emotional and empathetic connections, demonstrating real-life impact and value.

Individuals may want to share their own experiences of:

- being treated differently;
- suffering discrimination or bias;
- how inclusion has enriched their lives/careers, and those of customers and colleagues; and
- how they have overcome misgivings about inclusion, or discomfort with difference.

Leaders who act as role models, sharing personal experiences of difference and of learning to be more inclusive, can effectively demonstrate how others can add value. They can also encourage others to share their own experiences, promoting a more open and transparent culture where harnessing and valuing difference is the norm.

5 Choose your words carefully, but not too carefully

The language we use is constantly evolving and growing. As our ability to cultivate greater empathy and understanding through better communication increases, so too does our vocabulary.

Conversely, as we become more aware of the experiences of minority and under-served communities, language that was once acceptable may not be appropriate today.

How we categorise ourselves and others, or how we identify individually, are complicated and very personal issues that can be difficult to define. It can therefore be hard for some people to understand what language to use, and what language to avoid.

One common complaint directed at inclusion culture is that it aims to prescribe how we should all talk. Some feel that this represents "political correctness gone too far", and that by encouraging people to avoid certain language, inclusion is actually harming freedom of speech.

As businesses work to adopt language that is accessible, representative and inoffensive, some are confused because they don't have a deep understanding of the complexities of inclusive language and why it is so vital.

Whilst it is important to encourage the use of language that reflects and respects diversity, helping others to revise their vocabularies has to be done sensitively. By admonishing people for using exclusive language, you risk them becoming defensive where they feel that they're being lectured to, but don't fully understand or appreciate why. Ultimately, this doesn't help to build empathy, and is more likely to discourage and disengage.

Providing greater clarity on the real impact that language has is an effective starting point. By providing examples of how language has harmed real people, and how language has evolved, businesses can build greater empathy and understanding. By exploring specific examples, and how they can be perceived depending on different perspectives, individuals may be more open to feedback. Creating safe spaces where people can query and learn in an open and honest manner is more effective in encouraging people to buy in.

Likewise, providing examples of inclusive language is vital in giving people access to the tools they need to change.

6 Learn as a team, and promote the value that alternative experiences and insights can give

In the digital age, it's easy to surround ourselves with opinions that echo our own. Taking time to seek and listen to alternative perspectives, experiences and insights can be invaluable in helping us to be more empathetic, and to deliver greater value for our colleagues and customers.

Challenge your team to increase its capability in relation to inclusion, and to think about how your processes,

services, ways of working or language could be altered to improve accessibility and engagement for people with different characteristics.

Seek out and listen to customers, suppliers, leaders and colleagues who can provide unique perspectives into working with and for your team; all with a view to expanding your knowledge, capability and empathy for the benefit of your colleagues and customers.

The need to engage

Equality, diversity and inclusion are important values in today's society and in maximising business performance, but not everyone is convinced - for a number of reasons, as outlined above.

A growing population believe that equality, diversity and inclusion efforts are harmful to society, and to them. Many of those concerns are born of a real desire for fairness, some from fear, and some from a lack of

understanding and empathy. If those perceptions exist in your organisation, ignoring them or attempting to force change without context and consideration may create problems and undermine your efforts.

As a leader, it's important to engage with individuals who have different perspectives in a planned and considered manner that promotes constructive dialogue, mutual understanding, empathy and respect.

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