

# HOW LEADERS CAN SIGNAL INCLUSIVITY THROUGH THEIR ACTIONS

**A friend of ours quit her job this week. She's an investment banker and mother of three in New York City.**

"I JUST COULDN'T HANDLE IT ANYMORE," SHE SAID. "IT'S BEEN TWO YEARS OF MORE TO DO AT HOME AND MORE TO DO AT WORK."

**Another friend, a university professor and mother of two described it this way:**

"FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS, I HAVEN'T HAD A SINGLE DAY OFF OR A SINGLE DAY ON. AND IT'S EXHAUSTING."

Women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. According to the US Census Bureau, when the global health crisis began, about 3.5 million mothers living with school-age children left their jobs to care for their children. Nearly 18 months later, a MetLife survey conducted in September of last year found that nearly half of all women (48%) believe the pandemic has negatively impacted their careers. That same month, the Bureau of Labor Statistics announced that while 309,000 women left the workforce, 182,000 men gained jobs.

Gender inequities are not byproducts of the pandemic. These social fractures have been with us all along, hiding underneath the surface, yet felt by women and other marginalized gender groups.

As leaders look to improve workplace culture and make it more inclusive, it's critical that they recognize that what they signal through their actions, whether consciously or unconsciously, plays a significant role in shaping culture. While virtue signaling is equated with empty promises, there are other signals that do matter. Here are three steps leaders can take to ensure they get it right and create a more equitable, inclusive workplace for all.



## VISIBLE SIGNALING: ROLE MODELING

Our friend Shashi, a manager at a tech company in India, recognized that morale among female employees was low. He learned from some of his female colleagues that they were feeling overloaded by the pandemic. Shashi decided to take a simple step: when he was with his team, he would share photos and stories about his own challenges with cleaning and childcare during the first pandemic lockdown. The women on his team said they finally felt seen and appreciated that their manager understood the additional pressure that the pandemic was putting on them.

By sharing how the pandemic was creating additional challenges for him as a parent, Shashi modeled vulnerability and created comfort and safety for his peers to do the same. This signaling of sharing the responsibilities at home and work is a significant step forward in a time of uncertainty that has impacted women disproportionately. This is especially important in societies like India and the United States, where women do far more unpaid care work at home than men, a disparity that has contributed to many women leaving their jobs.

## TIP:

Be intentional about making your language more gender inclusive. For example, get into the habit of using gender-neutral language (e.g., "team" instead of "guys"; "work hours" instead of "man hours"). And give others the permission to hold you accountable when you don't.



## EMOTIONAL SIGNALING: STORY TELLING

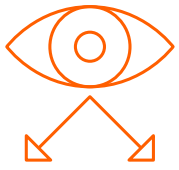
Two years into the global pandemic, we're all tired of being on virtual calls—it can be easy for us to zone out. At recent workshops on inclusive leadership, we decided to change our approach to facilitating. Rather than beginning with job titles and career histories, we introduced ourselves with personal stories about who we were and how we got into leadership development. We have noticed a marked shift in people's interest and willingness to engage in our programs.

Communication is at the very core of leadership, and stories are at the heart of communication. This is even more true these days—between productivity pressure, blurring work-life boundaries, and a lack of social cues to provide direct, non-verbal feedback, sensemaking has become a key business skill.

Stories are connective: they draw people in and create a shared experience for those who embrace them. When a leader truly owns and believes in the narrative, there's a ring of authenticity that goes beyond logical arguments and fosters personal and emotional buy-in. Vulnerable and personal storytelling produces stronger emotions and fosters more trust than stories with an infallible hero. Effective storytellers are also aware of the identities and values of their audiences and are able to tap into those elements to create a shared emotion.

## TIP:

In your next meeting, open with a story that helps people in the room connect on a personal level. Set the tone for honesty and openness by modeling vulnerability at the outset.



## UNCONSCIOUS SIGNALING: GUIDING ATTENTION

Aarti experienced the impact leaders can have by simply guiding others' attention to focus on what's critical. A client commented that "When our CEO introduced you as an expert and referred to you as 'Dr.' Aarti Shyamsunder, he was signaling to us to take you seriously. Otherwise, sadly, in our male-dominated company, my peers and I might have overlooked you and assumed that your [male] colleague was in charge."

One way leaders signal culture is by guiding attention to some things and not others. When leaders indicate what deserves attention, they implicitly signal to their own teams what matters most and what can be overlooked. Ensuring that your comments align with broader priorities and values is critical for healthy culture setting.

### TIP:

Amplify quieter voices. Pass the mic in your next meeting or direct attention to a team member who is often overlooked because they are not vocal or visible enough. But don't put them on the spot! Speak to them in advance to learn how they prefer to participate.

Through these three ways, leaders can leverage 'signals' to model greater inclusion, create personal connections, and guide attention in ways to ensure that gender inequities don't become exacerbated in virtual working. Indeed, with the right signals, leaders can start leveraging these new ways of working to create more equitable and enabling conditions for everyone.

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