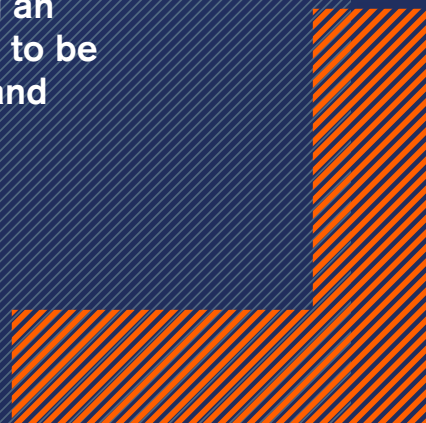# EXPANDING INCLUSION WITH SENSITIVITY, FLEXIBILITY AND HUMILITY

Leaders have been sharing a challenge they face in creating an inclusive workplace - even for those who are making efforts to be inclusive, it feels like the goal posts are constantly shifting and there is always more to do.

We have noticed an interesting phenomenon among clients over the past months. Many leaders are expressing frustration with having to continually update their policies to account for new groups and identities. Even open-minded leaders who are supportive of the DEI agenda can sometimes seem to be disenchanted by current discussions on 'identity politics' and discouraged by the pressures they feel to always be inclusive. As one client put it, "It feels like a never-ending stream of complaints where the goal posts keep moving."

We see where these leaders are coming from and understand their frustrations. It's not easy to stay on top of every issue, and it's not possible to account for every aspect of human diversity. Additionally, inclusion, diversity and equity are topics where there is constant evolution and discovery, and leaders find that they need to keep updating their learning. It's also unrealistic to think that we can solve these issues by simply addressing the diversity of identities in our workplaces—people are complex and ever-evolving. Even if we could take stock of every individual's preference, our teams are constantly changing, which means people's wants and needs change too.

An inclusive leader understands that we don't need to know everything about what sets us apart from one another, and that creating a psychologically safe workplace requires sincere humility and openness.

Being inclusive is hard, and creating and sustaining an inclusive organization is even harder. But it doesn't have to be as difficult as we make it. A shift in thinking can help us to meet the pressing needs of our teams in ways that feel generous and appropriate, that maximize workplace performance, and that help us feel empowered about inclusion rather than burned out by it.

DESIGN WITH SENSITIVITY

When it comes to creating structures, we tend to work based on what we know. This is intuitive and natural.

What other information do we have besides what we've learned through our education and experiences?

What we often fail to realize, though, is that our knowledge is deeply personal and what we build is shaped by our point of view with its inherent biases. This is especially true of biases rooted in cultural norms, which are all around us yet so difficult to perceive. It's critical that leaders make consistent effort to recognize these biases and commit to considering perspectives that are different from their own.

Humans tend to design systems on the basis of cultural norms, and cultural norms tend to cater to dominant groups. We favor and account for dominant group preferences and needs: physical accessibility, religious

holidays, parental needs, and more. What happens, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is that we exclude so many people around us. We can address this challenge by committing to designing teams, infrastructure, and policies with the most unlikely users in mind.

One great example of designing with sensitivity is the famous shift Mary Barra made when she led HR at General Motors (long before she became CEO). Mary did away with the pages-long dress code policy with two simple words: Dress Appropriately.

This approach has an added advantage: Instead of increasing complexities and exceptions, leaders can focus on simplicity and inclusion.

EVOLVE WITH FLEXIBILITY

Some leaders think that once they have designed inclusively, any feelings of exclusion are misguided and out of place. This can result in leaders being unwilling to receive constructive feedback. It can also lead them to place blame on individuals from marginalized groups for not figuring out how to fit in. However, leaders must consider another possibility: no design is perfect and there's always room for improvement.

We recently designed a survey platform for a client. In our efforts to design with sensitivity, we incorporated gender-inclusive language, such as 'they' for a gender-neutral pronoun. But when it came time to translate the tool from English to other languages, we ran into a challenge:

How do we retain the spirit of gender-inclusivity in languages that don't have the same linguistic options as English?

The solution we developed reflected the principle of evolving with flexibility. We looked at what the most challenging languages require and created a framework for that, while also retaining the original option for gender-neutral verbs and adjectives like the ones we find in English. This enabled us to design functionality that enabled users to select what fits their language and preferences best.

Leaders must recognize, with full humility, that even when well-intentioned, our biases and limited experiences still preclude us from including everyone who would use that policy or work arrangement we tried so hard

to craft inclusively. This awareness enables a more progressive, albeit incremental, approach rather than a constant expectation for perfection. If we enter this journey with the mindset that being inclusive is a continual process, then we are more likely to embrace our evolution and adapt nimbly rather than remaining frustrated by change and resistant to it.

SUSTAIN WITH HUMILITY

As policies are normalized over time, it can be difficult to revisit them.

"Why fix something that's not broken?"

The challenge with this perspective is that it may not feel broken for those in power who benefit from those norms, but they might be creating real pain for others who are harmed by a broken system.

It is often the case that those who have the power to change those norms are often benefiting from them. This makes it doubly difficult to address. It can be hard for leaders to identify this bias, and when they do, making change to benefit others can require leaders relinquishing some of their power. The easiest default in these situations is to continue overlooking the harm.

Another approach is to practice honest self-reflection, with the intention to identify and address the pain points within the larger organizational body. Self-reflection takes humility. It also requires commitment and regular practice. For instance, a healthy organization will undergo regular checkups to protect itself from calcified ideas and policies. It will have a process in place to update designs as necessary. This might include activities like stress testing new and existing policies or work arrangements with different ERGs, using pulse surveys or open suggestion forums to identify what needs improvement, checking in with new and exiting employees about their experiences, and re-applying inclusive design principles regularly, even on established practices.

IN A NUTSHELL

These three steps — design with sensitivity, evolve with flexibility, and sustain with humility — are intuitive, sensible, and practical. The framework is a small shift from how most leaders think about inclusion and the payoff is significant. It can help reduce the pressure and burnout leaders feel around inclusion and it can help leaders ensure their workplace is inclusive and welcoming to all.

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