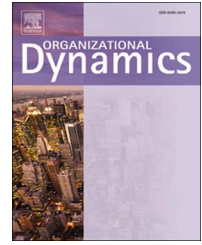


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How to be an inclusive leader for gender-diverse teams

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Abstract

Gender inequity is globally present in the labor force and advocating for gender equality is not merely a fairness issue, but a benefit for organizations. In this paper, we identify common challenges for gender-diverse teams (i.e., turnover, discrimination, communication issues, conflict between team members, and low team cohesion). We also discuss the importance of inclusive leadership to overcome these challenges. Correspondingly, we provide practical actions for inclusive leaders to implement on their teams to address issues regarding diversity, and subsequently leverage its benefits.

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Introduction

Gender inequity is globally present in the labor force. For instance, in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, women only make up 29% of the workforce. The underrepresentation stems from a myriad of reasons including discrimination, bias, and lack of career opportunities. Advocating for gender equality is not merely a fairness issue, but a benefit for organizations. Gender-diverse teams create a rich workplace environment by providing varying perspectives that help address complex problems,

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enhance the decision-making process, and subsequently lead to innovation and improved company performance. McKinsey's 2020 *Diversity Wins* report shows that diverse organizations are 25% percent more likely to outperform financially than non-diverse organizations.

Driven by these wide ranges of motivators, organizations have become interested in understanding how to facilitate effectiveness in demographically diverse teams. Diverse teams are not necessarily inclusive. Diversity merely describes a collection of different people, while inclusion requires transforming the work environment so that team members feel secure and valued for being their authentic selves. Thus, the absence of inclusion in gender-diverse teams can create various challenges, including member turnover, discrimination, communication issues, conflicts, and low team cohesion. McKinsey's 2020 *Diversity Wins* report reveals that 61% of employees did not perceive their work environment as inclusive in demographically diverse organizations.

Considering the importance of this subject, we performed a literature review to identify gender-diverse teams' challenges and then effective, practical actions to overcome them. We applied two review steps composed of a (1) systematic review that we limited to recent empirical studies to reflect the current culture and practices in the workplace, and (2) a snowballing research process to ensure that seminal papers were being considered in our research. As a result, we provide a practical guide for leaders to address gender-diverse team challenges and foster inclusion in their teams. See [Figure 1](#) for an overview of these challenges and their respective recommendations.

Inclusive leadership

Given that research suggests diversity enhances performance and increases creativity and innovation, organizations have begun to promote diversity. Companies have been creating policies and procedures to ensure diversity in their work teams; while noble, these practices do not ensure positive diversity outcomes. Inclusion is necessary to facilitate the effectiveness of diversity. We can associate inclusion as the vehicle's fuel and diversity as the car's engine. We need both to produce positive team outcomes. Diversity represents the differences among team members, such as differences in age, gender, and race. Inclusion relates to promoting and embracing uniqueness and belongingness among team members. Consequently, inclusive teams embrace diversity, respect one another, and create a culture where members feel they belong.

Knowing inclusion is vital to leveraging diversity, organizations rely on leadership to cultivate inclusive work teams. Leaders are in a strategic position because one of their responsibilities is to apply the organization's values regarding diversity into practice within their teams. Further, leaders are role models whose principles, values, and behaviors influence team members to follow the same steps. Considering that leaders are empowered to create inclusion in their teams, we summarized core inclusive leadership behaviors that studies have shown to be effective.

Ultimately, leaders should ensure all team members feel that they belong to their teams while also maintaining a sense of uniqueness (i.e., that they bring value to the team

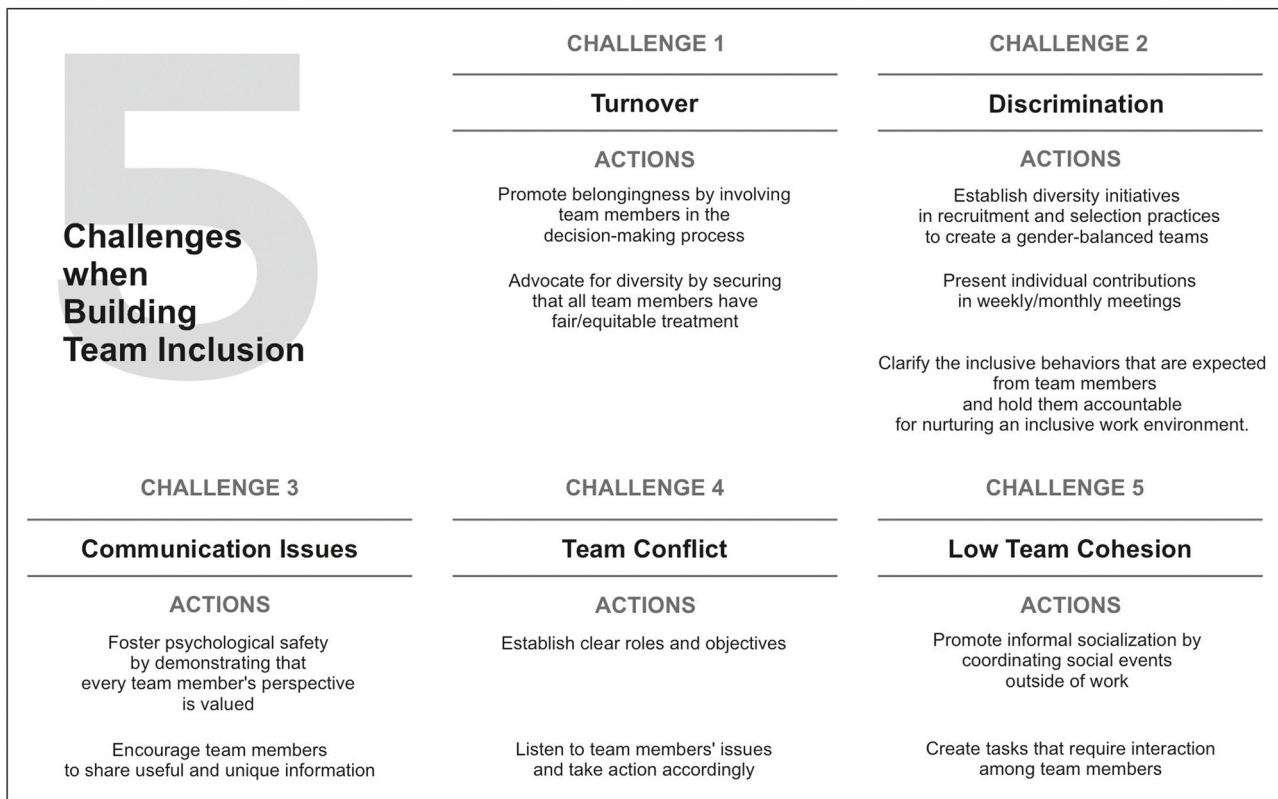


Figure 1. Challenges when building team inclusion.

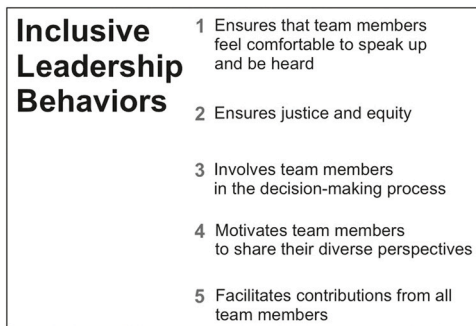


Figure 2. Inclusive leadership behaviors.

that is unique to them). According to theory on inclusive leadership, individuals perceive inclusion in their teams when there is a high degree of *belonging* and *uniqueness*. To facilitate the achievement of these two principles, we summarized five core behaviors that leaders should focus on (see Figure 2). The first three behaviors refer to promoting *belongingness*, and the other two behaviors are focused on *uniqueness*.

Ensures that team members feel comfortable to speak up and be heard

Leaders have to create a work environment where team members are welcome to share their ideas. For instance, leaders can give space to team members to share their concerns in daily check-in and follow-ups. In addition, leaders that are authentic and friendly catalyze a safe work environment for all members.

Ensures justice and equity

Leaders should advocate for justice and equity for their work members, hinder discrimination, and expand diversity in the team. For instance, sometimes female members do not receive the same treatment to advance their careers as their males' counterparts when working in male-dominant jobs. To mitigate this, in one-on-one meetings, leaders can discuss whether team members have been receiving the same advancement opportunities. In addition, leaders can engage in the hiring process and seek to ensure that diverse candidates are included.

Involves team members in the decision-making process

Involving team members in the decision process will create engagement and make team members feel valued. For example, leaders can hold a meeting involving all team members at the beginning of a new project and encourage members to generate ideas to facilitate the project's goal.

Motivates team members to share their diverse perspectives

Leaders should make team members feel that they are valued for their uniqueness. Thus, leaders can create

opportunities for team members to share their perspectives during working activities. For instance, leaders can ask new members to share their past experiences during the onboarding process.

Facilitates contributions from all team members

Leaders have to be attentive to all team members and, if necessary, elicit the participation of all team members by setting different avenues for communication (e.g., texting, emails). In addition, when one vocal member has dominated a meeting, leaders should ask for the participation of other team members.

Leaders embedded in a non-inclusive organizational culture can face an extra challenge. For instance, they can face change resistance from their team members. However, leaders can still initiate change to promote inclusiveness in their teams. First, leaders can identify and seek support from their colleagues and motivate them to advocate for inclusive actions. Essentially, they should surround themselves with individuals within the organization who do support inclusiveness to help promote buy-in from team members. Second, they can use this article as a starting guide and adopt the suggested actions in their teams regardless of the organizational culture, proactively seek more guidance in the literature, and enroll in equity-inclusion training. The behaviors presented above are a step toward a culture change. However, incorporating inclusion can be a daunting goal. Teams can experience challenges when trying to embrace *belongingness* and *uniqueness*. Considering this, in the following section, we present common challenges and actions that leaders can take to overcome them.

Challenge 1: Turnover

People typically seek collaborations with coworkers who are similar to themselves. Thus, when there is an absence of identification among team members, this can cause high turnover rates. This lower identification among team members is often higher in male-dominated fields. Within male-dominated firms, the masculine workplace (and some social activities, such as happy hours occurring in non-female friendly environments) makes the integration of women harder to accomplish. Moreover, gender-role stereotyping can lower self-esteem and team identification. For instance, women can feel undervalued if they are solely given administrative tasks such as delegating organizational office tasks such as coordinating organized events and being removed from tasks that are viewed as a "man's job" even if they are equally qualified. The absence of team identification is one reason why women's turnover rate in the engineering field is higher than male members. Turnover is an expensive issue leading to counterproductive outcomes for the team. It can be costly to replace an employee, time-intensive to train a new member, and unsettling for the existing team members who eventually have to adapt their work to cover the absent team member. Therefore, addressing this issue is imperative.

To curb turnover, leaders should promote belongingness and advocate for diversity during their daily work activities. To promote belonging, the leader can involve team members in the decision-making process. They can create avenues where all team members can share their opinions and ensure that all suggestions will be considered before reaching a decision. Involving team members in the decision-making process creates a feeling that their uniqueness is valued. As a result, it enhances the team member's perception of inclusion and decreases turnover intentions.

In addition, to reduce turnover, leaders have to advocate for diversity by applying the same treatment to all team members, recognizing the team members' differences, and being aware of their own gender-related biases to inhibit inequitable behaviors. To increase self-awareness, leaders can participate in unconscious bias training and then ask for honest feedback from direct colleagues about their behavior. Furthermore, leaders should ensure that the hiring process is free of ambiguities and gender bias. For instance, leaders can: (a) apply structured interviews with a standardized list of questions and performance rubric, (b) choose multiple people to participate on interview panels rather than conducting interviews by themselves, (c) select diverse candidates to participate in the hiring process, and (d) anonymize details about job candidates during the initial stages of the hiring process (a process known as blinding). These actions reinforce perceptions of a just and fair environment and operation process. Additionally, it signals to team members that the leader is committed to fostering diversity and practicing fair procedures. Consequently, team members will feel committed to being a part of the team, subsequently inhibiting turnover.

Action 1: Promote belonging by involving team members in the decision-making process.

Action 2: Advocate for diversity by ensuring that all team members have fair/equitable treatment.

Challenge 2: discrimination

Gender discrimination occurs when a person receives unequal treatment based on their gender. Gender discrimination is displayed in various forms, including differences in day-to-day treatment, wages, and performance evaluations. The most common forms of discrimination that women have experienced are: (a) earning less than men in the same position, (b) being judged as less competent and capable than their male counterparts, (c) receiving less support from leaders than their male colleagues, and (d) receiving fewer opportunities to advance their careers. Recent research on the workforce in male-dominated fields reported that 78% of women had experienced discrimination in their workplace. Thus, gender stereotypes have to be addressed by the leader to overturn this pattern in the field.

Gender stereotypes can negatively shape the way that male colleagues perceive women, which, in turn, can lead to gender discrimination in the workplace that undermines women and team performance. In this situation, an inclusive leader should apply strategies to prevent or hamper ongoing discrimination in the team. Addressing discrimination is the only way to reach an inclusion. Since studies have

shown that gender-diversity increases the team members' openness to diversity, we suggest leaders aim to have gender-balanced teams. Increasing female representation can minimize the gender stereotype effect and the risk of tokenism. Likewise, it may increase interaction among team members. Some studies suggest that the proportion of women needed on a team to reap the full benefits can vary from 40% to 60%. In more male-dominated fields, it is helpful to establish diversity initiatives in recruitment and selection practices. For example, recruiters from the organization can attend student recruitment fairs with a high number of female attendees.

Yet, only increasing the presence of women in the team is not enough to hinder discrimination. Leaders should publicly show that they value diverse teams and that each team member is equally important to the team's performance. One way to accomplish this is by presenting individual contributions to all team members at weekly or monthly meetings. It is essential to show the contributions that helped to achieve a collective outcome because it impacts the team members' perspectives of each individual's value to the team. Consequently, it will hopefully overturn gender stereotypes and diminish discrimination on the team.

Accountability in teams also contributes to hampering discrimination issues. First, leaders should clarify which inclusive behaviors are expected of all team members. Leaders should also give examples of forbidden discriminatory behaviors or deflections against the set expectation. Leaders should recognize stereotypes such as when female team members are labeled by peers using negative stereotypes (e.g., "bossy", "soft for the job"). Making team members accountable and confronting team members when expectations have not been met is essential to maintaining an inclusive and respectful work environment. More specifically, accountability can be carried out through one-on-one meetings with employees who are constantly stereotyping women. During these meetings, the leader can communicate repercussions if the behavior continues and explain why these transgressions are inappropriate. Furthermore, leaders can require diversity training for individuals who are behaving disrespectfully or are uneducated about inclusive environments. In addition, leaders need to make sure the team members are open to asking questions about the new expectations. If they are unsure of what qualifies as inappropriate behavior at any point, they should feel welcome to communicate that to their leader and receive clarification.

Lastly, leaders can promote mentorship relations to ensure that female members receive opportunities to advance their careers. Mentors will guide their mentees, offering insights into their career vision, teaching necessary skills, and sharing experiences to advance their careers. Promoting these relationships will facilitate female members' career advancement. Leaders can proactively find these connections for their team members across the organization. Moreover, leaders can introduce advanced tasks or projects to provide them the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for promotion. These actions help to unleash women's career progression, decrease stereotype threats for women in competitive work settings, and increase social connections that attract more diverse talent to the team.

Action 3: Establish diversity initiatives in recruitment and selection practices to create a gender-balanced team.

Action 4: Present individual contributions in weekly/monthly meetings.

Action 5: Clarify the inclusive behaviors that are expected from team members and hold them accountable for nurturing an inclusive work environment.

Challenge 3: communication issues

Communication facilitates information sharing between team members and is essential for team success. According to research, heterogeneous teams have better performance than homogeneous teams due to the unique contribution of each team member. To leverage the unique contributions of gender-diverse teams, leaders should ensure that team members are not retaining important information and knowledge. Therefore, we suggest two recommendations for leaders to promote communication among team members.

First, leaders have to foster psychological safety in their teams, which is the team's belief that it is acceptable to speak up. A psychologically safe environment helps team members feel comfortable to engage and share their experiences and viewpoints. Particularly, female members may feel intimidated to share their opinions in teams where male members are the majority. For example, patronizing actions (i.e., when female team members are constantly being questioned or receiving unsolicited explanations by male peers, usually in a condescending way) can discourage female team members from speaking up. When this occurs, the leader is responsible for addressing both employees immediately. The leader must respectfully stop the patronizing commentary by firmly addressing why this form of communication is not beneficial. The leader also needs to ensure the female team member is comfortable sharing her feedback and feels secure in addressing similar issues in the future. Therefore, leaders have to demonstrate that distinct team members' perspectives are valued. This creates a congenial work atmosphere where team members feel free to share knowledge and ask questions. Consequently, it increases the likelihood of creativity and novel solutions.

Second, leaders should encourage team members to share useful and unique information among their teammates. Specifically, leaders have to prioritize quality over quantity. One common challenge in diverse teams is when team members convey a fragmented message and assume that their colleagues will understand, but they do not. For this reason, leaders should engage team members to speak understandably without jargon. In brief, by promoting and expressing the value of unique information, leaders can improve dialog and performance within diverse teams.

Action 6: Foster psychological safety by demonstrating that every team member's perspective is valued.

Action 7: Encourage team members to share useful and unique information.

Challenge 4: team conflict

Teams will inevitably experience conflict along their journeys. Thus, it is imperative for leaders to know how to handle

conflict and try to prevent negative forms of conflict from occurring. Generally, two forms of conflict take place in teams: task and relationship conflict. Task conflict is often related to differences in knowledge, background, perspectives, and heuristics. Accordingly, this difference may create tension during workgroup tasks. However, this conflict can generate positive outcomes for the team due to the distinct perspectives that enrich the work process, leading to innovation. On the other hand, relationship conflict elicits adverse outcomes for the team because it stems from interpersonal disagreements that are often related to personality or physical differences among team members. Gender diversity is an overt type of diversity, which makes it susceptible to relationship conflict. This conflict is an antipathy toward a teammate that usually manifests from a first impression. It elicits a misgiving feeling among team members which can lead to behaviors that derail the team dynamics, such as defensiveness or anger. To resolve this form of conflict, we suggest two actions. First, leaders should establish the roles and objectives of each team member. Doing so will decrease uncertainty and increase the awareness of all teammates. Moreover, this transparency facilitates team members' team coordination and accountability.

Second, leaders should be open to listening to the issues and expectations of team members. To do so, leaders can implement feedback sessions, such as on a monthly or weekly basis, or more frequently as needed. Specifically, we suggest one-to-one meetings with each team member. In these meetings, leaders should create an environment where members feel comfortable sharing information and disclosing emotions. Additionally, leaders have to listen to and address issues readily after the feedback. This means not stalling to address issues and being flexible about how to resolve them. Sometimes it will be necessary to involve more than one team member. Leaders can make use of meetings to orient and mentor team members. Subsequently, it strengthens inclusion perception among teammates and enhances team satisfaction.

Action 8: Establish clear roles and objectives.

Action 9: Listen to team members' issues and take action accordingly.

Challenge 5: low team cohesion

One of the key aspects of a successful team is team cohesion which reflects the degree to which individual members identify with the team, are committed to the team's vision, and are influenced by their team members. In essence, it can be thought of as team unity. Unified teams valorize their teammates' dissimilarities and have the ability to work in a group to achieve a goal. Further, team cohesion matters to teams because it facilitates effective communication among team members. Because gender-diverse teams are more susceptible to developing subgroups as well as fault lines, team cohesion can be a challenge. To assist with the development of team cohesion, leaders can promote informal socialization and create shared tasks among team members to enhance commitment. Informal socialization helps teammates create a social connection with their team members. As a result, it decreases the use of stereotypes and minimizes perceived dissimilarities. Informal socialization also provides members

with the opportunity to acquaint themselves with their colleagues beyond the work environment. Seeing their team members from a different perspective can potentially uncover similarities. Leaders can promote team lunches, celebrations, or other team building events to foster connections between team members,

Another action to increase cohesion is to create tasks that require contribution from multiple team members. This action leads and encourages individuals to shift from the “me” perspective toward the collaborative “we.” It is a way to cultivate the teamwork spirit of achieving a shared goal and will assist with helping team members to realize the significance and contribution of each team member. Also, it will encourage communication among team members since they will have to engage and commit themselves toward the shared goal.

Action 10: Promote informal socialization by coordinating social events outside of work.

Action 11: Create tasks that require interaction among team members.

Conclusion

The underlying purpose of this work was to uncover best practices for leaders and team members to foster inclusivity in gender-diverse teams. Diversity presents challenges that may go unseen at first, but can create harm in the long run. When leaders put in significant effort to promote belonging and uniqueness and advocate for all members involved regardless of gender (or other social identities), team effectiveness improves. As teams continue to evolve and become more diverse, leaders and team members must adjust and create environments where all team members can contribute. With the tips provided, leaders and team members can better generate a prosperous environment for everyone.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Manuela Santos: is responsible for carrying out the literature review and writing a large portion of the manuscript. **Miguel Luna:** is responsible for carrying out the literature review and writing a large portion of the manuscript. **Denise L. Reyes:** is responsible for idea generation and helping establish the 5 themes, as well as overseeing the first two authors meetings for the manuscript, and making edits to the manuscript. **Allison Traylor:** provided ideas and made edits and suggestions for the manuscript. **Christina N. Lacerenza:** provided ideas and made edits and suggestions for the manuscript. **Eduardo Salas:** Eduardo Salas provided ideas and made edits and suggestions for the manuscript.

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