

HOW TO BUILD INCLUSIVE TEAMS: PART 5 - INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION

When I first moved from California to Brussels in 2007, I thought I had everything figured out. I was 25 and confident that my way of communicating—nuanced, articulate, and full of cultural references—would serve me just fine. After all, most of my new colleagues and friends spoke English. What I didn't realize was that they spoke a different English than I did.

My colleagues came from Belgium, France, Germany, and across Europe, and English wasn't their first language. My rugby teammates—Irish, Scottish, French, German, and Belgian—had their own regional quirks and accents. I quickly realized that many of the metaphors, phrases, and cultural references I used didn't land the way I expected. Things that seemed obvious to me growing up in California weren't universal at all. I had assumed my communication style would naturally translate, but it didn't.

At first, I wanted them to adapt to me. I figured they'd just learn to understand my way of speaking. But over time, I realized the problem wasn't them, it was me. If I truly wanted to connect with the people around me, I needed to adapt my language and style, so it made sense to them. I started speaking what I call "international English," simplifying my vocabulary, choosing words more carefully, and shifting my accent. It worked. My colleagues and friends understood me more clearly, and I could engage with them in a way that felt natural for everyone.

This experience taught me a fundamental truth about communication: it's not about what you say, it's about what the other person understands. True communication requires flexibility, awareness of your audience, and a willingness to adapt. It's not about changing who you are, it's about creating connection.

The Power of Inclusive Communication

As we wrap up this series on inclusion, it's important to reflect on how communication serves as the foundation for creating an inclusive environment. Inclusion has two main components: a sense of belonging and feeling valued for your unique contributions. A sense of belonging means that you and your employees feel accepted and integral to the team and organization. When people feel like they are truly part of the team, they are more likely to contribute their best work, collaborate effectively, and stay with the company longer. However, belonging isn't enough if it requires changing who you are to fit in.

True inclusion requires that individuals are valued for their unique contributions. A truly inclusive culture sees differences as strengths, leveraging diverse perspectives, skills, and experiences to enhance team performance. When a sense of belonging and feeling valued for unique contributions are combined, employees feel empowered to be their authentic selves and share their perspectives without fear of negative consequences. Reflecting on my experience, I realized that when I moved to Europe, my initial communication style didn't allow for this. By expecting others to adapt to me, I missed opportunities to connect and truly engage. It wasn't until I adjusted my approach, learning to adapt to others' preferences, that I began fostering better relationships and building trust.

Part of my mistake early on was assuming that communication didn't require flexibility—that others would simply "get it" if I spoke clearly enough. But communication isn't about what you say, it's about what others understand. By tailoring how I communicated, I not only became more effective but also helped create an environment where others felt comfortable contributing to their ideas and perspectives.

This series has focused on the critical components of inclusion, and as we close, it's clear that communication is at the heart of it all. Research continues to show that inclusive practices provide significant benefits: better decision-making, faster innovation, higher engagement, and improved retention (Korn Ferry, 2016; McKinsey, 2020). These results demonstrate that inclusion isn't just a nice-to-have, it's a critical driver of success.

In this final article, we'll explore how communication practices can help you ensure every member of your team feels heard, understood, and valued. By adapting how you communicate, you can create stronger connections and lead with greater impact. Let's dive into the skills and strategies that will help you foster truly inclusive communication.

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Active Understanding: The Foundation of Inclusive Communication

One of the most critical skills in inclusive communication goes beyond listening—it's about understanding. Most of us know the concept of active listening: paying close attention to someone's words and showing that we're engaged. But in practice, that's not enough. Listening alone doesn't ensure we truly grasp someone's perspective. Active understanding takes it a step further. It's about fully comprehending what the other person is saying, what they mean, and where they're coming from. This shift in focus—from simply hearing to fully understanding—makes communication more effective and inclusive.

The key to active understanding is asking the right questions. Questions signal curiosity and a genuine interest in someone's perspective. They also help clarify meaning, prevent misunderstandings, and ensure the conversation stays productive. When you focus on understanding, you're not just waiting for your turn to talk, you're creating a dialogue that values the other person's viewpoint. To achieve this, there are three types of questions you can use: engaging questions, clarifying questions, and confirming understanding questions.

Engaging Questions - Engaging questions are designed to open up conversations and include others in the discussion. They're especially useful for inviting quieter voices or diverse perspectives that may not naturally come forward. For example, you could ask, "What are your thoughts on this?" or "What perspective might we be missing?" These questions show that you value input and create a space where others feel encouraged to contribute. By asking engaging questions, you foster a more inclusive dialogue where everyone feels they can share their ideas.

Clarifying Questions - Even when we think we've understood someone, we often miss key details or nuances. That's where clarifying questions come in. These questions help you dig deeper into what someone is saying, ensuring you grasp their meaning fully. For example, you might ask, "Can you elaborate on that?" or "When you said X, did you mean Y?" By seeking clarification, you reduce the risk of misunderstandings and show the other person that you genuinely care about what they're saying. This builds stronger communication and trust.

Confirming Understanding Questions - The final step in active understanding is to confirm that you've interpreted the other person's message correctly. This involves restating or summarizing what they've said and checking for accuracy. For example: "If I understood correctly, you're saying X—is that right?" or "Let me make sure I've got this—you mean Y?" These questions ensure alignment and demonstrate that you've listened thoughtfully. They also give the speaker confidence that their perspective has been heard and respected.

Active understanding doesn't mean you have to agree with everything the other person says. In fact, it's perfectly normal to understand a perspective without aligning with it. The goal isn't to convince or be convinced—it's to create a foundation for meaningful dialogue. Only by fully understanding someone else's point of view can you collaborate effectively and move discussions forward. By practicing active understanding, you're not just improving communication, you're building trust, fostering respect, and strengthening your team.

Active Communication: Adapting Your Style for Better Understanding

When it comes to communication, one size does not fit all. People have different communication preferences based on their personalities, cultures, and experiences. As a leader, you can't simply say, "This is my style," and expect everyone to adapt to you. Effective communication isn't about what you think you're saying, it's about what the other person understands. To truly connect with others, you need to recognize these differences and tailor your approach, so your message is clear and accessible to everyone.

Dr. Erin Meyer's research in *The Culture Map* highlights a spectrum of communication preferences. On one end is **low-context communication**, where clarity is king. Low-context communicators believe in simple, precise, and straightforward messages. They say what they mean, with minimal nuance or implied meaning, and they'll repeat themselves if needed to ensure the message is understood. On the other end is **high-context communication**, which relies heavily on nuance, shared understanding, and nonverbal cues. High-context communicators believe that much of the meaning comes from what's not said—body language, history, and relationships are as important as the words themselves.

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These preferences show up in everyday behaviors. Low-context communicators often provide detailed instructions, prefer written communication like emails or texts, and summarize key points in writing after meetings to ensure clarity. High-context communicators, by contrast, lean toward in-person or video conversations, where nonverbal cues are more apparent. They may assume a shared understanding of context and skip over details, expecting the listener to fill in the gaps based on previous interactions or relationships. Both styles have their strengths, but they can lead to misunderstandings if mismatched.

As a leader, your role is to bridge this gap. Active communication means tailoring your style to ensure that your message is understood—not just by those who share your preferences, but by everyone on your team. For low-context communicators, that might mean being more explicit and providing detailed follow-ups. For high-context communicators, it might mean focusing on building shared context or adding nuance to your messaging. Active communication isn't about persuading others or forcing them to adapt to your style, it's about meeting them where they are to foster understanding.

This brings us to the essence of inclusive leadership: valuing the other person's understanding over your own preferences. Communication doesn't end when words leave your mouth—it ends when the other person fully understands your message. Active communication ensures that your ideas are accessible and actionable for everyone, regardless of their style or background. So, the next time you're speaking with someone, ask yourself: Am I communicating in a way that ensures they truly understand me?

How to Improve Inclusive Communication In Your Team

Now that we've explored the principles of inclusive communication, let's put these ideas into action. Below are four activities to help you and your team strengthen communication and foster inclusivity. Two activities are designed for one-on-one coaching, while the other two are tailored for team engagement.

One on One Coaching Activities

- **Active Understanding Check-ins** - This activity focuses on practicing the skills of active understanding in one-on-one meetings. Use these check-ins to ask engaging, clarifying, and confirming questions that show genuine interest in the other person's perspective. For example, start with an open-ended question like, "What's been on your mind lately?" Then follow up with clarifying questions such as, "Can you elaborate on that?" Finally, confirm your understanding by saying, "If I heard you correctly, you're saying X—is that right?" These check-ins not only help you build stronger communication but also show the individual that their input is valued and respected.
- **Communication Style Awareness Exercise** - In one-on-one conversations, explore how you and your direct reports prefer to communicate. Start by asking questions like, "Do you feel my communication style makes things clear, or is there something I could do differently?" and "What's the best way for me to share important updates with you?" This activity helps you identify any mismatches in style and adjust accordingly. For example, if they prefer written communication, follow up meetings with a written summary. This shows that you're willing to adapt, which fosters trust and inclusivity.

Team Activities

- **Communication Spectrum Workshop** - This activity introduces the team to the concept of low- and high-context communication styles. Begin by explaining the differences: low-context communicators prioritize clarity and directness, while high-context communicators rely on nuance, relationships, and nonverbal cues. Next, ask team members to reflect on their own style and share where they see themselves on the spectrum. Wrap up by discussing how the team can work together to bridge communication gaps. This workshop helps everyone understand and appreciate diverse styles, leading to more effective collaboration.
- **Inclusive Questioning Practice** - Dedicate time in a team meeting to practice asking engaging, clarifying, and confirming questions. For example, during a discussion, team members can take turns asking questions like, "What other perspectives might we need to consider?" or "Can you elaborate on that point?" Afterward, reflect as a group on how these questions helped clarify and enhance understanding. This activity not only strengthens the team's communication skills but also reinforces the importance of curiosity and inclusivity in discussions.