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Inclusive Leadership and Communication: Fostering Organizational Culture

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the symbiotic relationship between inclusive leadership, communication strategies, and positive organisational culture development. In an era where diversity and inclusion are pivotal for organisational success, effective leadership in cultivating inclusivity through communication takes centre stage. The literature review lays the groundwork for understanding inclusive leadership, organisational culture's influence, and communication's indispensable role in leadership effectiveness.

The study delves into the fusion of inclusive leadership and communication, elucidating inclusive communication and outlining key strategies such as active listening, transparent communication, and mitigating unconscious bias. Drawing insights from successful organisational case studies, the paper analyses specific communication tactics, distilling lessons from triumphs and challenges.

Additionally, the research explores communication skills that are imperative for leaders promoting diversity and inclusion, spotlighting emotional intelligence and cultural competence. The implications for leadership development stress the necessity of tailored training programs and integrating communication skills into leadership initiatives. The paper concludes by synthesising key findings, proposing future research directions, and issuing a call to action for leaders to prioritise inclusive communication, contributing to the ongoing discourse on creating workplaces that thrive on diversity and inclusion.

Keywords: Inclusive leadership; communication strategies; organisational culture; diversity and inclusion; active listening; transparent communication; unconscious bias; case studies.

Introduction

In the dynamic and ever-changing landscape of contemporary organisations, the concept of inclusive leadership has ascended as a pivotal force driving success (Cox & Blake, 1991). Beyond mere acknowledgement of diversity, fostering an inclusive organisational culture has evolved from a moral imperative to a strategic necessity (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). This transformation is

necessitated by the increasing diversity within workplaces, where harnessing differences is recognised as a pathway to unlocking innovation, enhancing productivity, and fostering the well-being of employees (Carmeli, 2009).

At its core, inclusive leadership transcends passive recognition of diversity; it entails actively engaging and leveraging differences to create a workplace where every individual is not just a part of the team but feels

valued, respected, and heard (Cox & Blake, 1991). This proactive approach aligns seamlessly with cultivating a positive organisational culture that embraces diversity as a fundamental aspect and celebrates it as a potent source of strength and creativity.

The essence of inclusive leadership lies in the deliberate creation of an environment where diversity is not merely tolerated but embraced as an integral part of the organisational fabric (Northouse, 2019). Inclusive leaders understand that a heterogeneous workforce brings diverse perspectives, experiences, and talents. By acknowledging and appreciating these differences, inclusive leaders create a workplace where every individual feels empowered to contribute authentically.

This form of leadership extends beyond surface-level initiatives and quotas, delving into the heart of organisational dynamics. It fosters a culture of openness, respect, and collaboration permeating every level of the organisation. Inclusive leaders prioritise equity, actively dismantling barriers to advancement and ensuring that every team member has equal opportunities to thrive (Cox & Blake, 1991).

The relationship between inclusive leadership and organisational culture is intricate, forming a symbiotic alliance crucial for organisational success (Hofstede, 2011). Inclusive leaders act as architects of culture, shaping an environment where diversity is acknowledged and woven into everyday operations. They understand that a positive culture does not happen by chance; it is cultivated through intentional leadership practices prioritising inclusivity (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

Communication is a linchpin in this interplay (Martin & Meyerson, 1988). It is the conduit through which inclusive leaders articulate their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Effective communication reinforces the values of inclusivity, creating a shared understanding among all organisation members. A positive organisational culture, characterised by collaboration, trust, and a celebration of diversity, becomes a powerful driver of success.

As we navigate the complex landscape of inclusive leadership and organisational culture, it becomes evident that communication is the vital thread weaving these elements together. The subsequent exploration of inclusive leadership and its interconnectedness with communication and organisational culture will unravel the nuanced strategies and principles organisations can

embrace to adapt to the diverse nature of the modern workforce and thrive in it.

Purpose of the Paper

This paper unravels the intricate relationship between inclusive leadership, communication strategies, and cultivating a positive organisational culture. The primary aim is to investigate how specific communication skills wielded by leaders contribute to promoting diversity and inclusion within the organisational framework.

The significance of this exploration lies in its potential to inform leadership practices and organisational policies. By understanding the nuances of communication in the context of inclusive leadership, leaders can hone the skills necessary to create environments that tolerate diversity and actively encourage and thrive on it. Consequently, this paper sheds light on the pivotal role of communication in pursuing inclusive leadership, providing insights that can guide leaders toward building and sustaining a culture of inclusivity within their organisations.

As we delve into the intersection of inclusive leadership and communication, we will examine the theoretical foundations and practical applications through case studies. By doing so, we hope to extract valuable lessons and best practices that can be incorporated into leadership development programs, influencing the trajectory of organisational cultures toward inclusivity.

Through this exploration, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse on leadership effectiveness in the face of diverse and dynamic environments. As the global workforce continues to evolve, understanding and harnessing the power of communication in the service of inclusive leadership becomes paramount for organisations striving to thrive in the 21st century.

Literature Review

Inclusive Leadership

As North Ouse (2019) articulated, inclusive leadership is a multifaceted approach characterised by a steadfast commitment to collaboration, empathy, and a genuine appreciation for diverse perspectives. Leaders embodying inclusive traits display humility, receptivity to feedback, and a dedicated effort to create opportunities for all team members (Cox & Blake, 1991). At its core, inclusive leadership establishes an environment where individual

differences are acknowledged and valued, laying the groundwork for a robust and diverse organisational culture.

The significance of inclusive leadership resonates throughout various organisational outcomes. Extensive research consistently underscores the positive impact of inclusive leadership on employee engagement, innovation, and overall organisational performance (Carmeli, 2009; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Beyond quantitative metrics, studies highlight the pivotal role of inclusive leadership in fostering team cohesion and enhancing individual well-being (Cox et al., 1991). In essence, the inclusive leader sets the tone for an organisational culture that prioritises collaboration and trust and cultivates employees' profound sense of belonging.

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture, defined as the shared values, beliefs, and behaviours shaping interactions within a company (Denison, 1990), plays a decisive role in influencing employee engagement and satisfaction. A positive organisational culture significantly contributes to heightened employee well-being and commitment (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). In the context of inclusive leadership, a positive culture goes beyond mere acceptance; it actively celebrates diversity, aligning seamlessly with the values propagated by inclusive leaders.

The intricate dance between inclusive leadership and organisational culture becomes apparent when exploring studies showcasing how inclusive leadership contributes to developing and sustaining a positive workplace culture (Hofstede, 2011; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Communication is the linchpin in shaping cultural norms and fostering inclusivity within an organisation (Martin & Meyerson, 1988). Open and transparent communication channels emerge as vital components for reinforcing the cultural values of inclusion and ensuring their integration into everyday practices.

Communication in Leadership

The bedrock of leadership effectiveness lies in effective communication—a fundamental tool for articulating vision, building relationships, and aligning teams (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). Communication styles profoundly influence leadership outcomes, with

leaders employing clear and persuasive communication demonstrating tremendous success (Yukl, 2012). Communication is the conduit through which leaders articulate their commitment to inclusive values, shaping the organisational narrative and influencing how employees perceive inclusivity.

Verbal and non-verbal communication skills emerge as critical components for leaders practising inclusive leadership (Catalyst, 2008). Active listening, clarity in communication, and adaptability in diverse settings contribute significantly to effective communication (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). In the digital communication landscape, especially in remote or globalised work environments, leaders must navigate and excel in various platforms and channels to ensure effective communication (Li & Duan, 2014). Leaders with these communication skills create an environment where everyone feels heard and truly understood.

The Intersection of Inclusive Leadership and Communication

Inclusive communication transcends the mere transmission of information—it involves creating an environment where every individual feels heard, understood, and valued (Kreps, 1989). Language choices, tone, and inclusive language are pivotal to effective communication in diverse settings (Byrne, 2019). Inclusive communication goes beyond the surface; it fosters a profound sense of belonging and mutual understanding among all organisation members.

Inclusive communication encompasses many strategies, including active listening techniques, robust feedback mechanisms, and the impactful use of storytelling (Grant et al., 2011). Leaders practising inclusivity adapt their communication styles to resonate with diverse audiences, fostering understanding and collaboration (Gardner et al., 2005). These leaders create a dynamic dialogue that transcends differences, making everyone feel acknowledged, genuinely valued, and included in the organisational narrative.

The Intersection of Inclusive Leadership and Communication

Defining Inclusive Communication

Inclusive communication within leadership involves creating an environment where all individuals feel heard,

understood, and valued (Kreps, 1989). Leaders practising inclusive communication recognise and appreciate the diversity of their team members, acknowledging that each person brings unique perspectives and experiences to the table. Inclusive communication extends beyond merely conveying information; it encompasses a conscious effort to foster a sense of belonging and equity within the organisational setting.

Inclusive leaders leverage communication to break down barriers and bridge gaps among team members, creating a collaborative atmosphere that thrives on diversity. This approach goes hand-in-hand with the principles of inclusive leadership, where leaders actively seek to involve all individuals in decision-making processes and ensure that diverse voices are heard and integrated into the organisational narrative.

Language choices and non-verbal cues are crucial in promoting inclusivity within an organisation. Inclusive leaders are mindful of the impact their words can have and strive to use language that is neutral, respectful, and devoid of bias. This includes avoiding stereotypes and discriminatory language and fostering an environment where all team members feel represented and acknowledged.

Non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, also contribute to inclusive communication. Leaders who are attuned to these cues can better understand the emotions and perspectives of their team members. Creating an atmosphere where non-verbal communication is considered equally important allows for a more nuanced and inclusive exchange of ideas (Byrne, 2019).

Strategies for Inclusive Communication

Inclusive leaders prioritise effective listening as a foundational communication component (Gardner et al., 2005). Actively listening to team members demonstrates respect and validates their contributions. Leaders who practice empathetic listening create an environment where individuals feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and ideas.

Feedback mechanisms are equally crucial. Leaders should establish channels for constructive feedback, ensuring that all team members have an opportunity to provide input. This bidirectional communication fosters a culture of openness and continuous improvement. Leaders strengthen their relationships with team members

through effective listening and feedback and enhance the workplace's overall inclusivity (Grant et al., 2011).

Clear and Transparent Communication Practices.

Clarity and transparency in communication are vital for creating an inclusive work environment. Leaders should communicate clearly, avoiding ambiguity that could lead to misunderstandings. Transparent communication involves openly sharing information about organisational decisions, goals, and challenges. When team members are well-informed, they feel included in the larger narrative of the organisation (Google, 2021).

Inclusive leaders utilise various communication channels, both formal and informal, to ensure that information is disseminated equitably. By embracing transparency, leaders build trust among team members, reinforcing the belief that everyone is privy to the same information and has an equal stake in the organisation's success.

Tailoring Communication to Diverse Audiences.

Recognising and embracing diversity within a team requires leaders to tailor their communication styles to suit diverse audiences (Cox & Blake, 1991). Individuals may respond better to varying communication approaches based on cultural background, language proficiency, and personal preferences.

Inclusive leaders adapt their communication styles to resonate with diverse audiences. This may involve using a mix of communication methods, incorporating visual aids, and being mindful of the language used to ensure accessibility for all team members. Tailoring communication enhances understanding and engagement, fostering an inclusive atmosphere where everyone feels their unique perspectives are valued.

Addressing Unconscious Bias in Communication.

Unconscious bias can subtly influence communication, leading to unintentional exclusion. Inclusive leaders are proactive in addressing and mitigating unconscious bias in their communication. This involves self-awareness to recognise one's biases and a commitment to fostering a bias-conscious culture within the team.

Training programs and workshops on unconscious bias can equip leaders with the tools to identify and challenge biased thinking. Leaders who actively work to minimise unconscious bias in communication contribute to an environment where decisions are made based on merit, fostering a sense of fairness and inclusivity (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

Case Studies

Examples of Inclusive Leadership Success

Google: A Culture of Inclusion

Google stands out as a paragon of inclusive leadership, exemplifying a commitment to creating a diverse and inclusive workplace. Google's leaders actively cultivate an environment that encourages employees from various backgrounds to contribute their unique perspectives (Google, 2021). This commitment is evident through open communication channels and transparency that foster a culture where diversity is acknowledged and celebrated.

Google's leadership practices prioritise inclusivity through communication strategies that ensure all voices are heard. The company utilises digital platforms to facilitate open discussions about diversity and inclusion, reinforcing a sense of belonging among its global workforce. By actively promoting an inclusive culture, Google's leadership sets an example for organisations aspiring to create environments where diversity thrives.

IBM: Championing Diversity and Inclusion

IBM consistently receives recognition for its inclusive leadership initiatives, underscoring its commitment to diversity and inclusion. The company's leaders prioritise open communication, utilising digital platforms to engage employees worldwide in discussions about diversity and inclusion (IBM, 2021). IBM's communication strategies reflect its dedication to fostering an inclusive culture that values the unique contributions of every employee.

IBM's success in championing diversity and inclusion is rooted in communication practices that transcend geographical boundaries. By leveraging digital platforms, the company ensures that employees globally have equal access to information and opportunities to actively participate in shaping an inclusive organisational culture. IBM's leadership provides a compelling example of how effective communication can drive a sense of belonging and engagement.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Communication

The implementation of inclusive communication strategies is not without its challenges. Organisations

may encounter resistance to change, unconscious biases among leaders, and the need for a profound cultural transformation (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Recognising these challenges is the first step toward addressing them effectively.

Resistance to change can manifest when traditional communication patterns are disrupted. Leaders must navigate this resistance by clearly communicating the benefits of inclusivity and fostering an understanding of the positive impact it can have on organisational culture and performance. Additionally, addressing unconscious biases among leaders requires ongoing education and awareness programs to create a foundation for inclusive communication.

Lessons Learned from Inclusive Communication Experiences

Successful and challenging experiences in implementing inclusive communication offer valuable lessons for leaders. Organisations that have effectively navigated challenges emphasise the importance of ongoing education. Continuous learning initiatives, including workshops and training programs, contribute to an organisational culture where leaders and employees have the knowledge and skills to communicate inclusively (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

Leadership commitment is a critical factor in the success of inclusive communication. Leaders who actively champion diversity and inclusion in their words and actions set the tone for the entire organisation. Creating a safe space for dialogue, where employees feel comfortable expressing their perspectives and concerns, fosters an environment where inclusive communication can thrive.

Communication Skills for Leaders in Diversity and Inclusion

Emotional Intelligence

The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Inclusive Leadership

In the complex landscape of inclusive leadership, Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a critical factor influencing effective communication and relationship-building. According to Goleman (1998), emotional intelligence encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and social skills. In the context of inclusive leadership, emotional intelligence allows leaders to

navigate the nuances of diverse interactions with sensitivity and understanding.

Inclusive leaders with high emotional intelligence are adept at recognising and managing their own emotions, fostering a self-awareness that extends to an understanding of the emotional landscapes of others. This heightened emotional awareness contributes to a more inclusive and supportive organisational culture by enabling leaders to respond empathetically to the needs and concerns of team members from diverse backgrounds (Cherniss, 2010).

Training and Development of Emotional Intelligence for Leaders

Recognising the pivotal role of emotional intelligence in fostering inclusivity, organisations can implement targeted training and development programs for leaders. The Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), proposed by Brackett and Salovey (2006), provides a structured framework for assessing and enhancing emotional intelligence competencies.

Training programs may encompass workshops, coaching sessions, and experiential learning opportunities. Workshops can delve into the components of emotional intelligence, emphasising the application of these skills in diverse and inclusive settings. Coaching sessions can provide personalised guidance to leaders, helping them integrate emotional intelligence into their leadership style. Experiential learning opportunities, such as simulations and real-world scenarios, allow leaders to practice and reinforce their emotional intelligence skills in practical situations.

The development of emotional intelligence equips leaders with the tools to engage in empathetic communication, navigate conflicts constructively, and build positive relationships within diverse teams (Goleman et al., 2002). By investing in the emotional intelligence development of leaders, organisations lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and harmonious work environment.

Cultural Competence

Understanding and Respecting Diverse Cultures

Cultural competence is an indispensable communication skill for leaders committed to fostering diversity and inclusion. Cross et al. (1989) define cultural competence

as understanding, appreciating, and effectively interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. In the context of leadership, understanding and respecting diverse cultures go beyond mere acknowledgement of differences; it involves appreciating the unique values, norms, and perspectives each culture brings to the workplace.

Leaders who actively seek to understand and respect diverse cultures create an inclusive environment where individuals feel acknowledged and valued for their unique contributions. This involves cultivating cultural awareness, acknowledging the richness of cultural diversity, and recognising the potential for innovation and creativity that arises from varied perspectives (Bennett, 2008).

Developing Cultural Competence as a Communication Skill

Developing cultural competence is an ongoing process that requires intentional effort and self-reflection. Leaders can engage in cross-cultural training programs to enhance their understanding of cultural frameworks and communication styles. Workshops focused on cultural competence can explore cultural sensitivity, effective cross-cultural communication, and strategies for creating inclusive environments.

Beyond formal training, leaders can actively seek exposure to cultural experiences within and outside the workplace. Engaging in diverse cultural activities, participating in community events, and fostering open dialogues about cultural differences contribute to developing cultural competence as a communication skill.

Leaders prioritising cultural competence in their communication styles can adapt their approaches to different cultural contexts. This adaptability is crucial for effective communication within diverse teams, as it mitigates the risk of misunderstandings and ensures that communication resonates positively with individuals from various cultural backgrounds.

Implications for Leadership Development

Training Programs

The Need for Communication-Focused Training Programs for Leaders

In today's dynamic and diverse workplace, effective leadership extends beyond technical proficiency; it

requires advanced communication skills to navigate the intricacies of inclusivity (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). Communication-focused training programs are indispensable to equip leaders with the tools necessary to lead inclusively. These programs should encompass a spectrum of communication skills, including verbal and non-verbal communication, intercultural competence, and emotional intelligence. By emphasising these skills, training programs can empower leaders to engage effectively with diverse teams, fostering an inclusive environment where every voice is heard and valued.

Recommendations for Incorporating Communication Skills into Leadership Development Initiatives

To seamlessly integrate communication skills into leadership development initiatives, organisations should consider the following recommendations:

Customised Programs. Tailoring training programs to the specific needs and challenges of the organisation is essential. A one-size-fits-all approach may not address the nuanced communication dynamics within different work contexts. Customisation ensures leaders receive targeted guidance on fostering inclusive communication within their unique organisational landscape.

Interactive Workshops. The inclusion of interactive workshops is paramount. These workshops should simulate real-world scenarios, providing leaders with practical experiences. Through hands-on activities and simulations, leaders can apply and refine their communication skills in a safe and controlled environment, preparing them for the complexities of diverse workplace interactions.

Continuous Learning. A culture of continuous learning is crucial. Incorporating ongoing communication training into leadership development ensures leaders stay informed about the latest trends and best practices in inclusive communication. Regular workshops, seminars, and access to resources help leaders refine and expand their communication skills throughout their careers.

Organisational Policies

The Role of Organizational Policies in Supporting Inclusive Communication

Organisational policies serve as the bedrock for shaping the communication culture within a company.

Policies explicitly supporting and encouraging inclusive communication create a foundation for a diverse and collaborative workplace (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). These policies should comprehensively address language use, diversity and inclusion practices, and the consequences of discriminatory communication. Organisations communicate their commitment to fostering an inclusive culture by formalising expectations and consequences.

Suggestions for Creating and Implementing Policies that Foster a Culture of Inclusivity

Creating and implementing policies that foster a culture of inclusivity through communication requires a strategic and comprehensive approach:

Diversity and Inclusion Policy. Develop a robust diversity and inclusion policy that explicitly addresses communication practices. This policy should outline expectations for respectful language, inclusive communication strategies, and consequences for violations. The policy should be communicated to all employees and leaders, emphasising the organisation's commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive culture.

Training Requirements. Make communication and inclusivity training mandatory for all employees, especially those in leadership positions. This ensures leaders understand the importance of inclusive communication and have the necessary skills to implement it effectively. Training sessions should be designed to address real-world scenarios and practical applications in the workplace.

Feedback Mechanisms. Establishing feedback mechanisms for employees to report instances of non-inclusive communication is crucial. This allows organisations to address issues promptly and creates a sense of accountability for leaders to uphold inclusive communication standards. Open lines of communication empower employees to express concerns and contribute to a culture where everyone feels comfortable speaking up.

Recognition and Rewards. Recognise and reward leaders who consistently demonstrate inclusive communication practices. This can be integrated into performance evaluations, where inclusive communication is considered a critical leadership competency. Public acknowledgement, inclusion as a criterion in leadership advancement opportunities, and other forms of recognition reinforce the importance of inclusive communication within the organisational culture.

Conclusion

In this comprehensive exploration of inclusive leadership and communication, the paper has highlighted vital findings centred around the imperative role of effective communication in fostering an inclusive organisational culture. The foundational understanding is that inclusive leadership goes beyond managing diverse teams. It involves creating an environment where everyone feels valued, heard, and appreciated. Specific communication skills crucial for inclusive leadership include active listening, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and cultural competence. The necessity of communication-focused training programs for leaders emphasises customisation, interactivity, and a culture of continuous learning—the pivotal role of organisational policies in supporting and reinforcing inclusive communication. Recommendations include the development of explicit diversity and inclusion policies, mandatory training requirements, and mechanisms for feedback and recognition. Examining successful case studies from companies like Google and IBM showcasing best practices in implementing inclusive leadership training and communication policies.

Future Directions

While significant strides have been made in understanding the nexus between inclusive leadership and communication, several areas warrant further exploration. Investigating the impact of digital communication tools on inclusive leadership, especially in teams with members from diverse cultural backgrounds (Li & Duan, 2014). Assessing the long-term efficacy of communication-focused training programs for leaders, identifying factors contributing to sustained behaviour change, and exploring how factors such as gender, race, and other dimensions of diversity intersect with leadership communication and how leaders can navigate these complexities.

Conclude with a Call to Action for Leaders to Prioritize Inclusive Communication for a Positive Organizational Culture

In conclusion, the transformative power of inclusive communication for positive organisational cultures cannot be overstated. As leaders, it is imperative to recognise that inclusive communication is not just a skill but a mindset—a commitment to fostering an environment where every voice is valued and diversity is embraced.

A call to action resonates for leaders at all levels to prioritise inclusive communication in daily interactions. This involves actively engaging in continuous learning, applying newfound skills, and advocating for policies reinforcing the importance of diversity and inclusion. Through these concerted efforts, leaders contribute to creating workplaces where individuals feel a sense of belonging, are empowered to contribute their unique perspectives, and collectively drive the organisation towards success.

The journey towards inclusive leadership and communication is ongoing, dynamic, and essential. By embracing this journey, leaders pave the way for organisational cultures that not only withstand the challenges of a diverse world but thrive in diversity's richness.

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