

DIVERSITY

To Build an Inclusive Culture, Start with Inclusive Meetings

by [Kathryn Heath](#) and [Brenda F. Wensil](#)

September 06, 2019



Nicholas Rigg/Getty Images

Chances are you've attended a meeting today. Was it time well spent or a soul-draining exercise in futility? Although no two meetings are the same, their collective impact on the culture of a company is significant. Meetings matter. They are the forum where people come together to discuss ideas, make decisions, and be heard. Meetings are where culture forms, grows, and takes hold.

So it stands to reason that if an organization desires a more inclusive culture — and leaders want to model inclusion — then meetings are the place to start. But, from what we've seen, executives often miss the mark. Like a plate spinner at the circus, leading a meeting requires eyeballing a dozen different details: agenda setting, time management, conflict resolution, decision-making, and more. Inclusion? Who has the bandwidth to keep yet another plate in the air?

But leaders must.

Decades of research show that diverse organizations are more engaged, creative, and financially successful. Diverse hiring can be measured and managed by crunching the numbers, but when we take this best practice out of the lab and apply it to everyday work settings, like meetings, positive results are more elusive.

Our previous study, an examination of 360-degree feedback collected from over 1,000 female executives, gave us insights into why some people feel shut out in meetings. We learned that women are often uncomfortable speaking up and are more than twice as likely to be interrupted in group dialogue — particularly in industries and organizations that are male-dominated. Our more recent coaching experiences reveal that men from minority groups feel similarly. If organizations fail to address this issue, women and minorities will remain on the periphery, and in turn, your creativity and innovation will suffer.

Setting a diverse workforce up for success requires a commitment to the practices of *inclusion*. This means more companies need to create meeting cultures where diverse contributors have equal impact. As a leader, it's your responsibility to actively and intentionally give them opportunities to do so.

The problem is that many leaders don't know where to start. Inclusive behaviors in meetings can be wide ranging, from making sure everyone has a seat at the table to giving each person a chance to speak. To simplify what amounts to a complex equation, we coach leaders to focus on three key areas.

Customs. Priya Parker, author of *The Art of Gathering* emphasizes the importance of setting the stage for inclusion before your meeting even begins. Focus on structural behaviors that make people feel comfortable. This could be as simple as sending a pre-meeting email to attendees, and inviting people to come “ready to share as well as listen.” It may sound like a little thing you can delegate to another employee, but in our everyday work, we hear loud and clear that leaders are in the best position to make people feel safe in this kind of setting.

Priya also suggests leaders demonstrate what she calls “gracious authority”— a polite demeanor that nonetheless leaves little doubt about who is in charge. To set the tone, welcome people by name as they enter the meeting room, and make sure the seating accommodates everyone.

In the meeting itself, customs and expectations should be established upfront. Let people know they can speak openly and offer a dissenting opinions without fear of retribution. If you have introverts in the room, start with a brief round robin activity that includes everyone and helps the attendees get to know one another better. If it is an especially large group, either break people up into smaller teams or rotate the seating halfway through the exercise.

Conduct. The role of the conductor in an orchestra is to manage the tempo of a performance. They listen critically to keep musicians playing in unison and actively control the dynamic to prevent one instrument from overpowering the rest. The same goes for leaders in meetings — you need to manage conduct and give everyone space to play their part.

In many cases, one alpha individual dominates the conversation. In other cases, there is an “in-crowd” or a group of allies who share commonalities, such as gender, personal interests, or job seniority. The in-crowd often takes up more space in the room, supports the same ideas, and speaks up inordinately, drowning out differing viewpoints. Regardless of the specifics, it’s your job to step in when strong personalities over-reach, tamp down offenders, and actively bring all voices into the conversation.

Take advice from a few of our most successful clients:

- Set clear ground rules at the start of the meeting and stick to them. When inclusive meeting conduct is codified, it puts offenders on notice and makes everyone aware of their rights and responsibilities.
- Watch closely for dominators and interrupters. If someone tries to control the dialogue, interject and redirect the conversation back to the broader group.
- If someone is interrupted, step in quickly. You might say, “Wait a minute, I want to hear more of what Janice has to say,” or “Back up. I am intrigued with what Luke was telling us. Luke, can you finish your thought?”

Leaders who actively orchestrate meeting interactions in this way create an inclusive space by leaving room for everyone to contribute, and set a standard for respect across the group.

Commitment. Most organizations have already put a stake in the ground on diversity in hiring practices and creating diverse teams. The same needs to happen for inclusion — we need to insist that it is the standard in meetings and beyond.

If you’re a leader, start with yourself:

- Explicitly define inclusivity.
- Be clear and transparent about what it looks like in meetings.
- Model the behavior you expect to see from others.
- Hold teams accountable for following through every time.

Only then will people feel empowered to offer their best ideas and speak the truth, instead of telling you what they think you want to hear.

It’s also important to remember that leading an inclusive meeting is a skill that you have to develop and refine. Find out what is working and what isn’t by asking your team members for feedback — either at the end of your meetings, or with an email or app that allows

anonymity.

Checklist for leading inclusive meetings:

- Review your list of attendees: are you missing people who represent diverse or dissenting points of view?
- Send the agenda out ahead of time.
- Greet each meeting participant warmly, by name, so everyone feels welcome.
- State ground rules up front and make sure they explicitly foster inclusion.
- Mediate and facilitate: keep track of who's talking — and who's not. Exhibit zero tolerance for interruptions. Prevent anyone from dominating or derailing the discussion.
- Remain engaged in the conversation from beginning to end.
- Follow up after the meeting. Thank participants for attending and ask for their feedback.

Meetings have morphed over the years: we gather virtually, across time zones, and often, with far less face-to-face time. Yet, one thing has not changed. Meetings are still the prime venue to build and foster a fully inclusive culture that engages and equips people to do their very best at work. As a leader, it's your job to make sure they do.



Kathryn Heath is a principal of Flynn Heath Holt Leadership. She is a coauthor of *The Influence Effect: A New Path to Power For Women*.

Brenda F. Wensil is a Partner with Flynn Heath Holt Leadership. Join the conversation on Twitter: @FlynnHeathHolt.

This article is about DIVERSITY

 Follow This Topic

Related Topics: [Meetings](#)

Comments

Leave a Comment

Post Comment





21 COMMENTS

Mark Rickmeier 12 days ago

Agree that inclusive company cultures start with inclusive meetings. However, calling out cultural antipatterns (like interrupting, hepeating, or side chatter) can be very difficult. These comments about someone's personal communication style can feel like a personal attack. So we created a game that allows companies to challenge their culture and make their meetings not only more inclusive, but more effective:

<https://www.meetingsdoneright.co/>

 Reply

 [Join The Conversation](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.