

# Inclusion: from theory to reality

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# Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are interconnected values used in organizations to reach fair treatment of groups of individuals. Studies have shown that investing in DEI strengthens the organization.

This paper seeks to demystify the topic by answering the questions:

- What are the definitions of diversity, equity and inclusion?
- How can we recognize injustices and inequities and how are they created?
- Why would you invest in diversity, equity and inclusion?
- How do you make your organization more inclusive and equitable?
- What can we, as individuals, do to be more inclusive?

These questions also serve to structure this paper, which is meant as an introduction to DEI and is used as preparatory work for our inclusion workshops. It is by no means complete, as such we will give plenty of suggestions for further study and resources. For questions or suggestions, please feel free to reach out to us.

## What are the definitions of diversity, equity and inclusion?

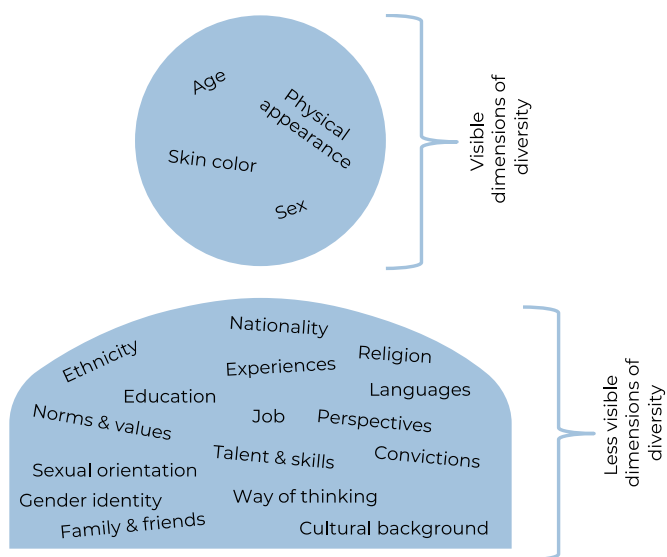


Figure 1: dimensions of diversity

**Diversity** is the recognition that everyone is different in countless visible and less visible dimensions (see figure 1). The goal is to recognize and value these differences.

Some dimensions, such as religion, can be less visible. For example, when a woman wears a hijab (headscarf), it is visible to others that she is Muslim. But in most cases religion is less visible.

Organizations need to make sure that this diversity is appreciated, and that people can be their authentic selves, within the social norms. This implies that people feel a sense of **belonging** and are valued. The

culture and individuals' behaviors need to be **inclusive** to ensure that people are not (unconsciously) excluded or discriminated. Employees that are excluded or discriminated have a higher risk of trauma, demotivation, and stress. This can lead to burn out, sick leave and resignation.

Everyone deserves equal opportunities. Yet, because everyone is different, people have different needs with different levels of support to be successful. Treating

everyone **equitably**, implies giving people different tools and support to adjust inequalities. For instance, a recent graduate gets different support (onboarding and guidance, for instance) than a young parent returning from parental leave (more flexibility, for instance) or someone with a disability. Working towards **justice**, implies fixing the system to offer equal access to tools, support and opportunities.

## Diversity

*Everyone is different*

*Are these differences **appreciated**? Can someone be **authentic** or does someone have to adapt?*

*Usually looks at **representation** in management or an organization compared to society*

## Equity

*Everyone deserves equal opportunities.*

*Do people get **equal opportunities** and **appropriate support**? There is no discrimination. Is not the same as treating everyone equally.*

*Usually looks at the **outcomes** that a **system** creates*

## Inclusion

*Actively look for connection.*

*Are people actively seeking **connection** with each other? Is **conscious and unconscious exclusion** prevented?*

*Usually looks at **behavior** and **culture** in an organization.*

## Belonging

*Do people feel **valued** and **at home**?*

## Justice

*Are the **results** of our system, behaviour and culture fair?*

*Figure 2: key definitions*

When delving further into this topic, you will come across terminology that may be unfamiliar to you. We refer you to the UN DEI glossary with definitions referenced below for more information.

**Want to know more?** The UN DEI glossary can be found [here](#).

## How can we recognize injustices and inequities and how are they created?

Our culture, norms, values, laws, rules, governance, policies, processes, infrastructure, and all other aspects of societies and organizations have evolved over time, forming the structure and system we live in today. However, this structure does not produce equal outcomes for everyone. Instead, it perpetuates inequities, favoring those who have historically had the most influence in shaping it; typically white, heterosexual, cisgender, well-educated, able, men with strong socio-economic standing.

As a result, members of these dominant groups are often **privileged**, meaning they start life with significant advantages and generally have access to better opportunities. This privilege manifests in various forms, such as: greater wealth, better education and job prospects, more freedom, and less social pressure to conform.

It's crucial to understand that this privileged position is not earned but rather a product of the existing societal dynamics. People can't control whether they have privilege, but they can become more aware of it. This awareness is crucial. It is important to know how privilege shapes our experiences. Although, admitting having privilege can be tough and uncomfortable, once people acknowledge their privilege, there is a way to use this to support and advocate for others.

**Recommendation** YouTube video

[What is privilege?](#)

**Recommendation** YouTube video

[Social Inequalities Explained in a \\$100 Race](#)

The other side of privilege is **marginalization**. Marginalization is the notion that some groups or individuals are in a position of less influence, importance or power. Groups that are marginalized include: women, people of color, people of the LGBTQIA+ community<sup>1</sup>, people with physical disabilities, neurodivergent people, people from a minority religious or ethnic background, people with lower socio-economic standing, etc.

Marginalized people mostly encounter a multitude of **systemic and structural barriers** in society, education, health care and the job market. These barriers are deeply rooted in the cultural and historical pervasiveness of discrimination and bias within society. Sexism, ableism, heterosexism, racism, ethnic racism, and classism are forms of discrimination of groups that are so pervasive in society that they warrant their own word.

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<sup>1</sup>'LGBTQIA+' is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual. The '+' refers to the fact that is not an exhaustive list.

**Intersectionality** is a related concept that needs to be taken in to account when we are talking about diversity. Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals possess multiple social identities (such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status, etc.) that intersect and interact to shape their experiences, opportunities, and challenges.

For instance, a black woman may face unique forms of discrimination and marginalization that are distinct from those experienced by a white woman or a black man due to the intersection of her race and gender.

Similarly, an LGBTQIA+ person with a disability may encounter distinct barriers that arise from the intersection of their sexual orientation or gender identity with their disability status.

Understanding intersectionality is crucial for promoting diversity and equity because it allows organizations to recognize and address the complex ways in which power structures and systems of oppression operate. By considering intersecting identities, organizations can better understand the needs and experiences of all individuals within their community and create more inclusive environments where everyone feels valued and supported.

Members of marginalized groups experience **discrimination as a systemic barrier** in society. Discrimination is action based on prejudice and involves treating people differently. Prejudice consists of thoughts and feelings, including stereotypes, attitudes, and generalizations, so it is pre-judgement about another person based on the social groups to which that person belongs. While typically viewed negatively, discrimination can also result in preferential treatment. Most research, however, focuses on the negative aspects, where individuals are unfairly treated due to race, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, disability, or national origin, leading to lost opportunities. These negative aspects include ignoring, exclusion, threats, ridicule, slander and violence.

Discrimination can appear in various forms and in different settings:

- *Biased communication & behavior.* This is reflected in biased language, the use of stereotypes and microaggressions, harassment, as well as humor.
- *Biased decision making.* This systemic disadvantage of marginalized groups. It impacts all domains of life including, but not limited to, discriminatory hiring practices, fewer promotion and career opportunities, unequal pay, and biased decision making in health care, education and policy making.

Discrimination is rooted in behavior, yet it occurs at multiple social levels: individual, organizational, institutional, and cultural. These levels are interconnected and often overlap. Institutional and cultural discrimination can be particularly difficult to recognize and accept, especially for those who are not directly impacted by it.

**Recommendation** read *Invisible Women* by Caroline Criado Perez, a book that explains how the world is designed for men.

**Recommendation** watch how white fragility reinforces racism [here](#). Or read *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* by Gloria Wekker. This book explores the Dutch denial of racism and the legacy of colonialism.

### **Examples of discrimination:**

*Interpersonal discrimination:* A Dutch landlord refuses to rent an apartment to a Moroccan applicant because of negative stereotypes about Moroccans. The landlord might believe that Moroccans are more likely to not pay rent, cause trouble or damage property, leading to an unfair exclusion based on ethnic background.

*Organizational discrimination:* Layoff policies based on seniority might disproportionately affect people of color and women due to historical hiring practices, even though the policy appears neutral. Discrimination in the workplace can be measured by the representation of different groups in various job categories, representation of marginalized groups across managerial versus other roles. The pay gap for women as well as low representation of women in management is an example for that.

*Institutional discrimination:* The Dutch education system has a tracking system that places students in different educational paths (e.g. vocational vs. academic). Research shows that children from parents with migration backgrounds are often disproportionately placed in lower tracks due to biases and lower expectations from teachers, which limits their future educational and career opportunities.

*Cultural discrimination:* The character of Zwarte Piet (Black Pete), who appears in blackface makeup during Sinterklaas parades, has been criticized for perpetuating racist stereotypes. Despite ongoing debates and efforts to change the portrayal of Zwarte Piet, the persistence of this character reflects cultural discrimination, as it marginalizes and may offend people of African descent.

## Why would you invest in diversity, equity and inclusion?

It is well documented that organizations that implement diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives benefit in various ways, such as: increased innovation, better decision-making, higher employee engagement and satisfaction, improved sense of belonging and higher retention. The goal is to foster an inclusive work environment where employees from diverse backgrounds feel seen, heard, valued and supported, resulting in increased productivity and overall organizational performance.

**Want to know more?** read *Why Diversity & Inclusion matters* [here](#), which explains the value of investing in DEI and / or *Diversity, Equity and inclusion at work* by Cunningham [here](#)

However, not all organizations are equally successful in implementing DEI initiatives. Ineffective DEI policies are concerning for the following reasons:

- The fundamental social inequality remains unresolved.
- Time and resources are insufficient or wasted on unproductive efforts.

- Failures may create tensions and even conflicts between groups.

These drawbacks highlight the critical need for proper implementation of these programs. Proper implementation starts with clearly defined and well considered objectives that are easy to understand and supported within all levels of the organization. Broadly speaking, most objectives are either linked to morality & legality or business, as is illustrated in figure 3. When goals are ill defined, not linked to core values or strategic objectives, there is a risk that initiatives are stopped early or goals remain unrealized.

## Morality & legality

- *Create equitable outcomes*
- *Prevent discrimination*
- *Connect with people in society*
- *Strengthen sense of belonging*
- *Improve well-being*
- *Address inappropriate behaviour*

## Business

- *Improve cooperation, communication & creativity*
- *Increase employee satisfaction & retention*
- *Attract (diverse) talent on the labour market*
- *Strengthen reputation*

Figure 3: high level objectives for DEI

**Question** What are your reasons for investing in DEI? And those of your organization?

## How do you make your organization more inclusive and equitable?

There are several key barriers to making organizations more inclusive and equitable. Figure 4 summarizes eight structural barriers that we seek to address. To address these barriers, we look at four levers to make organizations more inclusive and equitable:

1. **Analysis & strategy.** Research indicates that aligning DEI initiatives with organizational needs is critical, which involves identifying DEI gaps through data analysis and employee surveys. Arbitrary DEI efforts, such as mandatory training without addressing specific needs or linked to realistic goals, often face resistance and fail to create inclusive environments. Thus, we start with two questions:
  - What is the current situation?
  - What are the objectives and how do we want to achieve those?
2. **Behavior & culture.** The culture of the organization and the behavior of its employees and leaders determines to a large degree if people feel included and feel that they belong. This differs per organization and team.

- 3. Policies, processes and communication.** Policies, processes and communication should be designed to be inclusive and create equitable outcomes. This implies that organizations think about how to prevent discrimination at all levels and reduce the biased behavior and its impact.
- 4. Individual skills.** Developing individual skills is an important factor for success. These skills include self-awareness & reflection, (inclusive) communication & feedback, and networking skills.

The first three levers are detailed below. The individual skills are covered under the section “how do you become more inclusive?”.

<p><b>Recruitment</b></p> <p><i>Many organizations use recruitment methods that favor certain groups.</i></p> <p><i>For example, relying heavily on employee referrals can perpetuate a lack of diversity since current employees are likely to refer candidates from similar backgrounds.</i></p>	<p><b>Promotion</b></p> <p><i>Promotion criteria and career advancement paths often favor individuals with characteristics or backgrounds like those already in leadership positions, disadvantaging minority groups.</i></p>	<p><b>Feedback &amp; evaluation</b></p> <p><i>Biases in performance evaluations can affect how employees from diverse backgrounds are assessed, often leading to disparities in recognition, rewards, and promotions. Standard evaluation criteria may not account for diverse perspectives and contributions.</i></p>
<p><b>Cultural fit</b></p> <p><i>Hiring and promotion decisions based on "cultural fit" can exclude candidates who do not conform to the dominant organizational culture, which is often shaped by the majority group.</i></p>	<p><b>Networking &amp; mentorship</b></p> <p><i>Access to informal networks and mentorship opportunities is often limited for minority employees. These networks and relationships are crucial for career development and advancement.</i></p>	<p><b>Workplace norms</b></p> <p><i>Workplace norms that are not inclusive of diverse cultures, such as expectations around work hours, dress codes, or communication styles, can alienate employees from diverse backgrounds.</i></p>
<p><b>Historical inequities</b></p> <p><i>Structural barriers often stem from historical inequalities in education and employment. For instance, past discriminatory hiring practices can result in lower seniority for minority employees, which affects decisions related to layoffs and promotions.</i></p>	<p><b>Investigate barriers</b></p> <p><i>These are eight barriers that we encounter often. It is important to investigate which barriers people experience.</i></p>	<p><b>Biased decision making</b></p> <p><i>Biases in decision-making processes, such as groupthink or reliance on stereotypes, can lead to inequitable outcomes. For example, decisions about project assignments, team composition, and leadership roles may be influenced by unconscious biases.</i></p>

Figure 4: Eight structural barriers to more inclusive and equitable organizations

## Analysis & strategy

Knowing, as an organization, what you want to achieve and how you’re going to do that is a key requirement for success. Yet, that also implies that you know where you stand as an organization. Thus, we recommend starting with an **analysis** to understand the situation. There are many types of analysis one could perform and usually there is already quite a bit of information available, such as employee satisfaction surveys.

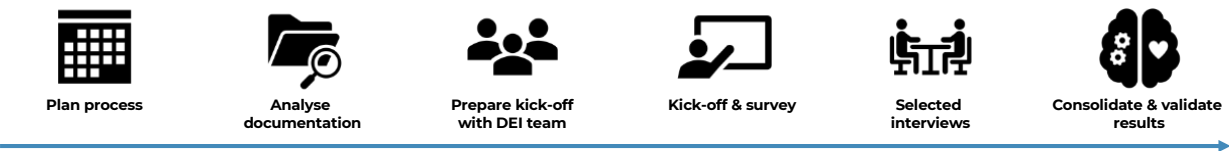
One analysis we tend to start with is a sentiment analysis that looks at how people feel about the organization, how they look at behavior, processes, and what they think is important with regards to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In this analysis phase, we like to combine various methods such as a survey, interactive sessions and in-depth interviews. Benefit of this approach is that you immediately engage the whole organization, team or department on the topic and start creating a common language. We focus on creating a safe environment in this phase, for instance, by working with anonymized reports and confidential interviews.

People's experiences in an organization can differ a lot. Privileged groups often have more chances and less challenges than marginalized groups. This shows up in the sentiment analysis and is usually a new insight for many people in the organization. The analysis reveals insights that surprise or even shock many managers, because they don't get the same signals and information as others due to their position. This analysis is turned into an anonymized report with (potential) areas for improvements. The report forms the basis for the strategy phase.

**Want to know more?** Complete our public version of the survey we use in sentiment analyses: [Link](#)

Devising a **strategy** to achieve your DEI objectives could be a standalone effort, or it could be part of a larger strategic effort. It is important that the strategy is linked to the goals of the organization and realistic in its ambition. That implies that there needs to be a senior executive as a sponsor and sufficient resources to achieve the objectives. We recommend developing the strategy in a co-creative way, where people with various perspectives contribute. This is also important to link the strategy to existing efforts, make sure the plans are realistic and embedded within the strategy of in the organization. Consistent and clear communication within the organization, along with providing sufficient context, is crucial for success. Additionally, responsibly gathering and utilizing data, and establishing a transparent system of accountability, are key factors in achieving success. Figure 5 summarizes our analysis and strategy process, as described above.

## 1. Analysis



## 2. Co-create strategy with DEI team



Figure 5: illustration analysis & strategy process

## Behavior and culture

People are deeply influenced by the culture they live in. Culture shapes our perspectives, often leading to stereotypes and prejudices, as individuals within a culture tend to share common beliefs about behaviors, values, attitudes, and opinions.

A key point is that people operate within their cultural context, often without even realizing it. This unawareness is like a fish's understanding of water: since fish are surrounded by water, they don't recognize its significance for their survival. Similarly, culture drives human actions through cultural expectations and experiences, usually without conscious awareness. Thus, we must look at how culture can shape inclusion, belonging and equity. In this paper we will focus on three key aspects: valuing and respecting differences, psychological safety and inappropriate behavior.

One key aspect of a culture that supports DEI is **valuing and respecting differences** and diversity. This means that people acknowledge and appreciate the various dimensions of diversity, such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, age, or socio-economic status, among others. Valuing and respecting diversity also means that people actively seek to understand different perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds, and leverage them for mutual benefit. Valuing and respecting diversity creates a sense of belonging and empowerment for everyone and enhances the quality and outcomes of work.

One way to value and respect diversity is to practice empathy, compassion and intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is reached through an intercultural sensitive attitude, knowledge and reflection skills. When people are open and ask questions with the right intentions, communication improves. This implies refraining from judgement. The next step is adjusting one's behavior and attitude, while maintaining your own identity, norms and values. By practicing empathy and intercultural communication, people can build trust, understanding, respect, and rapport with others, and avoid misunderstandings, conflicts, and stereotypes.

A second key aspect of a culture that supports DEI is **psychological safety**, which is defined as "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking". Psychological safety means that people feel comfortable to express their authentic selves, share their ideas and opinions, admit their mistakes, and learn from each other without fear of negative consequences. Psychological safety fosters trust, collaboration, innovation, and inclusion in teams and organizations.

Amy Edmondson, a leading scholar on psychological safety, developed a four-by-four matrix to illustrate the relationship between psychological safety and accountability, two dimensions that influence team performance. The matrix consists of four quadrants, each representing a different type of team climate.

To create a learning zone, managers need to balance psychological safety and accountability, and foster a culture of curiosity, candor, and collaboration. They can do this by setting clear and high expectations, providing constructive feedback, encouraging questions and dissent, acknowledging uncertainty and interdependence, and celebrating effort and learning.



Figure 6: Psychological safety quadrant (source: Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization*)

**Want to read more?** Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization*, is a must read. She also has a Ted talk on the subject. [Link](#)

Finally, it is important to discuss **inappropriate behavior**. Inappropriate behaviour is any action or speech that violates the norms and expectations of a respectful and inclusive work environment. Behaviour is inappropriate if someone experiences it as such. Inappropriate behaviour can range from subtle to overt, from intentional to unintentional, and from isolated to systemic. However, regardless of the degree or intent, inappropriate behaviour can create a negative impact on individuals, teams, and organizations, and undermine the values and goals of DEI.

Inappropriate behavior comes in many forms:

- Intimidation: influencing behavior through, for instance, (the threat of) psychological or physical violence, loss of status or exclusion.
- Aggression & violence: insults, threats, harassment, and violence.
- Bullying: having nonsensical tasks performed, ignoring, and excluding, imitating and ridiculing, intimidation and aggression, and gossiping.
- Discrimination: unequal treatment.
- Sexual harassment: any form of sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other sexually tinted behaviors (verbal, nonverbal, or physical) that is perceived as unwanted.

There are also behaviors that may seem more innocent, but still undermine psychological safety and exclude people. Think of:

- Microaggressions: everyday comments, questions, and actions that perpetuate stereotypes about members of marginalized groups and exclude people.
- Judging people for mistakes: This undermines the psychological safety needed for people to speak up.
- Making inappropriate jokes: humor can connect people, but also excludes people very easily.

It is important to intervene when socially inappropriate behavior occurs. Without intervention, there is a risk that such behavior is normalized and becomes more common. There are several ways to intervene. Sometimes this can be done in the moment, but it can also be done after a situation has already occurred.

Intervention could be giving constructive feedback to someone displaying the behavior, check-in with someone experiencing the behavior or talking to a manager, HR or a confidential advisor.

#### **Two examples of behaviors that harm members of marginalized groups**

- *A lack of feedback from peers and superiors.* If you are not part of the in-group and are different then you're less likely to get valuable feedback from peers and superiors. This may limit people's long-term growth.
- *Their own internalized oppression and stress.* Thoughts such as "Do I belong?" "Do I see this correctly?" "Can I say this without being punished?" "Am I good enough?" "Do they trust me?" can prevent people from speaking up and may cause additional stress.

**Recommendation:** watch this animation that illustrates the effect of microaggressions. [Link](#)

## Policies, processes and communication

There are various policies, processes and communication aspects that create inequities in organizations if not designed (or changed) with inclusion and equity in mind. Figure 7 summarizes nine important dimensions to be aware of. Note that changing these processes can be approached in various ways. All of these

should be supported by strategy, (data) analysis, training and onboarding to some extent.

<p><b>Recruitment</b></p> <p><i>Recruitment processes are biased and often discriminatory due to cognitive and social biases, such as similarity bias, affinity bias, gender bias and stereotyping.</i></p> <p><i>Making recruitment more inclusive and objective requires structured thinking and processes.</i></p>	<p><b>Promotion</b></p> <p><i>Promotion processes are often untransparent, biased and reliant on individual relationships, rather than merit.</i></p> <p><i>Making promotion more inclusive and objective requires considering everyone, multiple perspectives, and structured thinking processes.</i></p>	<p><b>Feedback &amp; evaluation</b></p> <p><i>Feedback &amp; evaluation is often given from one's own frame of reference and often not given at all.</i></p> <p><i>It is important to give everyone constructive continuous feedback and to receive evaluations from multiple people to get a more balanced view.</i></p>
<p><b>Inappropriate behavior</b></p> <p><i>Addressing inappropriate behavior is key in fostering inclusivity and belonging.</i></p> <p><i>There should be processes in place to deal with inappropriate behavior.</i></p>	<p><b>Networking, mentorship &amp; activities</b></p> <p><i>Networking, mentorship programs and other activities support members of marginalized groups.</i></p>	<p><b>Decision making &amp; communication</b></p> <p><i>Including various perspectives in decision making and communication, leads to better decisions and more inclusive communication.</i></p>
<p><b>Pay, benefits &amp; flexibility</b></p> <p><i>Pay and benefit packages should work for a wide array of employees in your organization. They should be equitable and have sufficient flexibility.</i></p> <p><i>Data analysis can be used to search for inequity and there are many best practices available.</i></p>	<p><b>Well-being</b></p> <p><i>Employers and employees have a responsibility to care for their well-being.</i></p> <p><i>This implies creating a safe work environment and reducing stress wherever possible.</i></p>	<p><b>Accessibility</b></p> <p><i>Accessibility is about making information, activities, and/or environments sensible, meaningful, and usable for as many people as possible. As such, it is an important key to creating more equitable outcomes.</i></p>

Figure 7: 9 policy, processes and communication areas to look at with regards to DEI

The best approach depends on several factors, including: the type of organization, the type of work, the culture, time and resources available, the size of the organization, (other) priorities and market dimensions. Unfortunately, we cannot list all the best practices to make these processes more equitable and inclusive. Hence, we have listed some additional materials.

**Recommendation:** read *De Inclusiemarathon* by Bouchallikht and Papaikonomou or *Van woorden naar daden* by Denктаş et al. We chose to include materials from the Netherlands here, as they are more relevant to our context. Yet, they are in Dutch.

# What can we, as individuals, do to become more inclusive?

In the previous section we explored what an organization can and should do to become more equitable and inclusive, but what can we, as individuals, do to become more inclusive? First, we will explore some (structural) barriers that people experience. Then we will look at what we can do to overcome these.

There are many factors that determine whether we (unconsciously) exclude someone. Some of those factors are very personal. Do you take the time to interact with someone? Are you interested in someone and are you able to establish and develop a relationship based on trust? Some are more structural. Figure 8 summarizes six structural factors that make it difficult for us to include people.

<p><b>Stress</b></p> <p><i>When we are stressed, we tend to react using a survival instinct (fight, flight, freeze, tend or befriend response). Stress limits our rational thinking and our ability to connect with people. So, when you are stressed, you think less rationally and are less empathetic.</i></p>	<p><b>Group dynamics</b></p> <p><i>We are all part of 'in-groups'. People in our in-group we see as individuals, and we judge them more positively. People who are part of while the members of the 'out-group' are seen as a group and are judged more negatively.</i></p>	<p><b>Language, humor &amp; microaggressions</b></p> <p><i>We all use language, humor and microaggressions that may lead to unconscious exclusion.</i></p> <p><i>Be aware of what you say, and reflect on why you say it and how it comes across...</i></p>
<p><b>Similarity &amp; affinity bias</b></p> <p><i>We connect more easily with people who look like us (similarity bias) and people with whom we have an affinity (affinity bias).</i></p>	<p><b>Stereotypes &amp; prejudice</b></p> <p><i>We oversimplify and generalize our beliefs about groups of people, and apply them to individuals, both positive and negative. (stereotypes)</i></p> <p><i>We hold preconceived opinions and attitudes about individuals based on their membership in a particular group. (stereotypes)</i></p>	<p><b>Fundamental attribution error</b></p> <p><i>We tend to connect behavior to personality, rather than context in others leading to a lack of empathy. We are much more forgiving towards ourselves.</i></p> <p><i>Example: he is late because he is lazy; I'm late because of traffic.</i></p>

Figure 8: Six structural factors that make it difficult to include people

**Reflection:** Which barriers do you recognize from your own life and behavior?

To overcome these barriers, we need to learn how to reflect, manage our stress and emotions, and develop our communication skills. Collectively, we refer to this skillset as inclusive leadership skills. Though, we call them leadership skills, they are for everyone! This skillset starts with a reflective, empathic and curious mindset, as well as a willingness to be wrong. Over time you can build your ability to behave and communicate in a more inclusive manner. You are able to become aware of your own biases, emotions and stress reactions, and will be able to learn language that is more inclusive. Figure 9 summarizes the inclusive leadership skills discussed.



### Self-awareness

1. Realize that others don't necessarily share your worldview, ideas, and feelings.
2. Be aware of your own bias and emotions and how that affects your perception of the world.
3. Be aware of the effects of your own behavior on others.
4. Manage your own stress levels and be aware of those of others.



### Communication & behavior

1. Be curious and empathic
2. Be vulnerable and admit mistakes
3. Have the ability to:
  1. Listen to connect
  2. Ask open-ended questions
  3. Suspend your judgment,
  4. Give constructive feedback
  5. Set boundaries
4. Continue to develop yourself

Figure 9: Inclusive leadership skills

Using inclusive language is an important part of our inclusive leadership skillset. It involves:

- Being mindful of the words we use and how we use them
- Inquiring about how people want to be addressed.
- Avoid certain words
- Limiting our (implicit) assumptions in the language we use.

**Want to learn more?** Read *Je mag ook niets meer zeggen* by Mounir Samuel (Dutch) or the UU inclusive language guide [here](#)

Learning these skills will require recognizing the situations in which they are needed, and the ability to reflect and learn from them. Further, this requires patience and the willingness to engage openly with people who do not share your worldview. This is a continuous learning journey that is never done. We will all make mistakes along the way, it is inevitable. That is okay, if we're willing to admit that we don't have all the answers, apologize to the people we interact with, and have the intention to improve. Training can help speed up our learning.

**Recommendation:** Engage with people with whom you have little in common and try to suspend your judgement.

**Recommendation:** Set goals for yourself to develop your inclusive leadership skills

### **Responsibilities of managers and leaders**

In addition to developing their own inclusive leadership skills, managers and leaders have other responsibilities, particularly with regards to setting the (social) norms within their teams and organisation, as well addressing inappropriate behaviour, and leading by example to create a psychologically safe and inclusive environment. Thus, they have a responsibility to develop the skills required accomplish this.

Managers and leadership should be aware that they are less likely to receive key information (that opposes their position), likely have reduced empathy due to stress, and are more likely to (unjustly) think they are right due to their position. It is their responsibility to manage these effects.

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- *Van woorden naar daden (2023)*, by Denктаş et al.
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## About the authors



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