



MIND THE MICRO-INEQUITY: FOSTERING INCLUSION IN TEAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Three steps managers can take to foster inclusion

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If the benefits of Inclusion are so widely understood, then why are so many teams and organizations still struggling to foster it? Enter the invisible barriers to inclusion.

Whilst Diversity might be referred to as 'in all the ways we defer', Inclusion on the other hand means being 'part of the whole'. An inclusive environment is one that embraces, promotes and capitalizes on the differences that unique individuals bring, and can enable innovation, higher performance, better retention of at-risk groups. However, creating an inclusive culture is easier said than done - it requires cultivating an environment of physical and psychological safety, and addressing not only structural barriers, but also what might be considered 'invisible' barriers, such as persistent micro-inequities.

Micro-inequities are 'small events that are often ephemeral, hard to prove, covert, can be unintentional, often unrecognized by the perpetrator and occur wherever people are perceived to be 'different'.

Underrepresented groups face micro-inequities continuously and sometimes on a daily basis in organizations. Although each micro-inequity is seemingly innocuous - 'light as a feather' and often remain invisible to the in-group, people experiencing them can eventually feel simply worn down by their slowly accumulating weight.

A prominent example of a micro-inequity is being regularly interrupted in meetings. [Research](#) shows that women are interrupted or talked over many more times by men in meetings, and substantially more often than the other way around.

[Complementary research](#) shows that when women complain about this, they can be excluded. This is a persistent micro-inequity which, when unaddressed, impacts women's ability to meaningfully contribute. This has serious consequences - the inability to complete and disseminate one's views and ideas leads to lack of recognition and promotion for women into leadership positions. Other examples are 'jokes' about gender, religion, ethnicity, or even persistent 'inside jokes' that may be evident to the majority (but not the minority).

How do we address micro-inequities?

Rooting out micro-inequities is key to creating an inclusive culture in teams or organizations.

Here are three main ways to do it:

1. **Raise awareness: by giving it a language and acknowledging that micro-inequities exist.** The very first step consists of accepting that people may feel excluded – and may be experiencing micro-inequities – even if you haven't experienced them yourself, or if you aren't bothered by them yourself. It helps to understand that they may impact one group of people more than another. To surface what micro-inequities may pervade your culture, spend time actively listening to what might be considered 'out-group members', those

different from the majority. At a personal level, it helps to be familiar with the impact of micro-inequities and to accept that we may all inadvertently create them. Awareness of what in-groups are and what exclusion consists of and how we contribute at a personal level is a good start to developing an inclusive mindset. Dismissing micro-inequities is all too common, because they are seemingly ‘innocuous’ or even funny. This makes them highly difficult to recognize, understand and address. Their impact however is real, as people who feel excluded are at risk of feeling less engaged compared to those who feel included.

2. **Allow people to bring them up.** This creates psychological safety to highlight what they are. Do your best to listen when someone raises a micro-inequity including about how it affects them and what they propose to eliminate these incidents. Ensure there isn’t a backlash against people who step up. Over time, the best managers address micro-inequities proactively on the spot promoting continuous improvement. This may include identifying language used during performance reviews to describe one group over another (fierce vs. leaderlike; emotional vs. opiated; aggressive vs. determined).

3. **Call out micro-inequities and step up:** This is complex: When, how, and where you interject matters - you don’t want to put the person on the spot. The next step consists of being an advocate of change when you see micro-inequities take place. For example, if you see one group being interrupted more than another in meetings, step in and encourage the person to finish off their views and arguments. Mind the seemingly silly ‘jokes’ being told about gender, culture, or religion. The last step encourages people to offer constructive solutions to eradicate them. For example, offer toolkits and guidelines to educate individuals and managers. For example, DSM, a Dutch health and nutrition company, has put a ‘how to run inclusive meetings’ poster in their meeting rooms. It includes simple and practical tips on how to enhance meetings, whether they are virtual or face-to-face. Lastly, it is good practice to discuss inclusion regularly and assess both your and your team’s capability to foster inclusion.

While these steps are not the only ones needed to create a truly inclusive environment, they are a good start. By proactively working on inclusion and encouraging inclusive behavior, organizations only stand to benefit from higher employee engagement and improved performance.

Do	Don’t
Introduce the focus on inclusion <i>at the same time</i> as the focus on diversity and give it equal, if not more importance	Talk about diversity targets first and foremost without adding inclusion targets

Define inclusion clearly: what it is, what is important in your context, and how to foster it at a personal, team and organizational level	Forget to discuss inclusion and what it means to the organization. Avoid underinvesting
Set clear inclusion analytics and include inclusive questions in the employee engagement survey	Forget to measure inclusion if you measure diversity
Analyze inclusion results properly. Provide data to businesses/functions and act on it	Analyze inclusion results in a simple manner, inadvertently hiding pertinent and actionable data
Ensure hiring, talent, assessment and promotion processes clearly use neutral and inclusive language	Assume that systems and processes can remain the same – they were most likely subconsciously designed for dominant groups
Use storytelling to highlight what inclusion and micro-inequities look like and share widely	Dismiss feedback and comments about inclusion or exclusion
Create moments where inclusion is improved. Support inclusion with easy to use infographics	Keep meeting and conversation culture the same as before your diversity and inclusion initiative
Be courageous and address exclusive behaviors and language on the spot, constructively	Avoid reacting to language and behavior that is perceived as exclusive by some
Above all, create a culture of openness and feedback	Leave the culture as is

For managers: Examples of inclusion vs. exclusion

Do	Don't
Verbally and visibly acknowledging <i>every</i> person in the meeting room (virtual or real)	Stay mostly focused on people you know and feel comfortable with in a meeting room
Ensure that during virtual and face to face meetings <i>all</i> participants are given an opportunity to speak up	Leave the floor to those who are most assertive and extroverted
Give <i>all</i> members of a team an equal opportunity for further development	Provide better development opportunities to people who resemble you in terms of gender, age, ethnicity
Delegate responsibilities and important projects to <i>different</i> people in the team	Always delegate responsibilities and key projects to the same person or people
Highlight a micro-inequity when you see one and ask how to improve on it. Then follow up and sustain the change	Be unaware of or ignore how subtle behaviors/language send different messages to people and their impact