



Diversity And Inclusion



3 Small Ways to Be a More Inclusive Colleague

New research shows that little gestures can make a big difference.

by **Juliet Bourke**

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Illustration by Joi Fulton

Already a hot topic, creating an inclusive workplace has become even more critical for organizations seeking to attract and retain talent, and enhance productivity. Historically, companies have focused on putting in place organizational diversity policies. More recently the focus has shifted to [inclusive leadership](#) and the powerful role played by leaders in setting the tone, modeling inclusive behaviors, and calling people to account. Both of these strategies are critical, but they overlook the significance of peer relationships.

There's a good reason for that. In [academic literature](#) as well as industry practice, inclusion has been conceptualized as a psycho-social experience between an individual and a group. In other words, *only* a group (or a leader as representative of a group) has the power to make an individual feel fairly treated, valued, respected and connected. But is that really right?

Over the last three years I've been investigating the impact of peer relationships on an individual's experience of inclusion. My first study involved deep-dive interviews with 21 diverse employees working in different project teams in a global firm. In a second ethnographic study, I observed the regular meetings of a project team (comprising people of different nationalities, technical capabilities and gender) over a period of two months to see if (and how) inclusive behaviors between peers manifested themselves in practice. In other words, I took out a microscope to explore people's granular experiences, and then zoomed back out to make sense of the relationship between small acts of inclusion/exclusion, an individual's job performance, and team effectiveness more broadly. Here's what I learned.

Interpersonal inclusion is manifested by and developed through three sets of behaviors.

The interviewees from my first study told me in no uncertain terms that peers absolutely have the power to include or exclude, and the exercise of that power makes a meaningful difference to work performance. Further, both studies identified that peer inclusion is demonstrated through three different types of behaviors:

1. Helping each other out

These behaviors, which I call "instrumental assistance," are those which help a peer to perform their work tasks, such as by providing information, making introductions to contacts, giving endorsements in meetings, and offering advice.

What's significant about these actions is that they are discretionary and fall outside the strict ambit of one's job description. For example, one senior manager told me of a peer who came out of a meeting and quickly gave him a heads-up on what was covered rather than waiting until the end of the week and the formal project status report.

During my observations, I often saw peers subtly endorse and amplify each other (eg "As Pedro said..."), thus helping to underscore a peer's point and increasing their potential influence over proceedings. This particular behavior is reminiscent of a technique reportedly used by President Obama's female staffers to reinforce and amplify points made by their female peers.

2. Taking emotional care of others

This refers to the care, support and personal interest people demonstrate towards their peers, which helps to develop emotional bonds. Interviewees spoke about socializing with their peers, joking and banter, as well as providing space for venting and showing an authentic interest in a peer's personal life (e.g. children, pets, or sport). One junior employee told me about how he and his peer started each day with "some kind of little joke," while many others talked about taking a quick break from the office environment to have a coffee together. Of course, with the advent of lockdown, socializing occurred less frequently, but that was countered by an observable increase in the practice of checking in with peers at a more personal level at the beginning or end of online meetings.

3. Making physical connections

The third behavior, which I call "embodied connection," refers to the ways in which team members use their physical beings to create and communicate a closer connection through body language and the sharing of space. For example, interviewees talked about walking together to meetings, deliberately sitting next to each other, or if a

meeting was virtual, sharing their personal backgrounds rather than using an impersonal corporate photo, and exaggerating positive non-verbal cues such as smiling and nodding.

What's clear about these examples, is that each involved a pint-sized effort. Nevertheless, the impact was profound psycho-socially in terms of feeling included, especially when these micro acts of interpersonal inclusion were accumulated over time.

Interpersonal inclusion is a reciprocal process and is highly beneficial to individual job performance and team effectiveness.

The benefit of interpersonal inclusion between peers is not just psychological, it also has very practical consequences in terms of boosting individual job performance and improving team effectiveness, according to all of the interviewees. Why? Because each act of interpersonal inclusion is essentially a trade of valuable resources. It might be a direct trade (i.e. I give you an act of instrumental assistance and you give me one back) or a diffuse trade (i.e. If I give you the space to vent, I'm building a more supportive culture that will be there for me should I need it). This makes interpersonal inclusion sound a bit calculating, and interviewees were at pains to play down that connotation. They preferred to think of interpersonal inclusion in terms of helping a peer rather than "cashing in favors." Nevertheless, the reality was that each trade strengthened a peer's sense of inclusivity (i.e. my peer cares about me) and provided the practical instrumental and emotional resources needed to do a job.

Importantly, given that interpersonal inclusion is a reciprocal process, it can be kick-started by anyone. This challenges the traditional conceptualization of inclusion as, by nature, a passive experience, with a person waiting for an act of inclusion to be extended towards them by the dominant group or the leader. It turns out that inclusion can

be either a passive *or* active experience, with half of the interviewees saying that they actively included others as a strategy to make themselves feel more included. Further, they did this by using one or more of the three behaviors of interpersonal inclusion to trigger a reciprocal response. Of course it didn't always work, but it did tip the odds in their favor. This is a very empowering message.

So what does this all add up to? Interviewees told me that these small behaviors have an outsized impact on motivation and energy (“If you feel included you want to come to work every day, you feel more motivated,” as one told me) as well as psychological safety and thus the flow of information and speed of problem solving (thereby reducing the duplication of effort). Such acts also facilitate deeper insight into a peer's skills and thus better job-matching, as well as helping employees to grow and develop on the job. In sum, interpersonal inclusion between peers helps with retention and growing the quality of employees' human capital, thus contributing to team effectiveness more broadly.

On the flip-side: Interpersonal exclusion is damaging and usually subtle.

But it's not all roses. Interviewees described interpersonal exclusion to me as the antithesis of interpersonal inclusion, albeit that it was more likely to be manifested as an omission than commission. In other words, interpersonal exclusion was often experienced through a failure to provide instrumental assistance, emotional bond, or embodied connection rather than via an overt act, such as a snide comment.

For example, I observed people consistently give endorsements to some peers but not others (and this was not driven by the peer's deservedness). I heard about overtures to lunch which were ignored, and I saw people respond impassively to ideas presented by some but

animatedly to those presented by others (once again, irrespective of the quality of the idea).

Given these acts were omissions and small in scale, they were difficult for the excluded peer to put their finger on and name for what they were. Nevertheless, the effects were profound in terms of diminishing motivation and energy, constricting channels of communication and causing people to hold back their discretionary effort.

Disappointingly, in both phases of my research I saw that those who identified themselves as more different to the group than similar were three times as likely to report, and experience, acts of interpersonal exclusion than those who were similar. Some of these acts seemed deliberate, but many more of them appeared to be unconscious. People seemed unaware of the differences in their behavior towards different peers, and they also underestimated the impact of their small acts of interpersonal exclusion on their peer, both in terms of job performance as well as their own team's effectiveness. In essence, they failed to recognize or give weight to the fact that interpersonal exclusion is a self-defeating behavior, because it restricts access to a larger pool of resources and creates a more transactional workplace culture.

If an organization's objective is to create an inclusive culture, and thus attract and retain talent, this research reveals the significance of focussing on (horizontal) peer relationships. As such, it complements organizational diversity policies and (vertical) inclusive leadership practices. Moreover, it offers practical insights about how to do this by identifying the nature of interpersonal inclusion, thus making it easier for people to consciously and equitably demonstrate these behaviors with their peers.

In sum, paying much more attention to these small acts of instrumental assistance, emotional bond, and embodied connection can make a world of difference especially given that in increasingly flat hierarchies “co-workers are not only a vital part of the social environment at work; they can literally define it,” as Dab Chiaburu and David Harrison [have written](#). In other words, it is peers who help define what it means to work in an inclusive workplace, and thus, in concert with organizational policies and inclusive leaders, encouraging more inclusive relationships between peers can help teams to be more effective and organizations to achieve their aspirations.

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