1 Inclusive Leadership
The Fulcrum of Inclusion

Bernardo M. Ferdman

The ability to be inclusive and to foster and sustain an inclusive culture in groups, workplaces, and communities is a critical component of 21st-century leadership. Successful and effective leadership in today’s organizations and societies and in those of the future requires strong understanding of and skills for creating and catalyzing opportunities to benefit from all types of diversity and to enhance these capacities in oneself and others. Thus, inclusive leadership goes well beyond cultural competence or managing diversity to incorporate creating and fostering the conditions that allow everyone—across and with their differences and without having to subsume or hide valued identities—to be at and to do their best, to see the value in doing so, and to belong and participate in ways that are safe, engaging, appreciated, and fair. In short, inclusive leadership means bringing inclusion to life, whether in an interpersonal relationship, a work group, an organizational system, or a community. Beyond facilitating participation, voice, and belonging without requiring assimilation, inclusive leadership also involves fostering equity and fairness across multiple identities.

In recent years, as the focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion around the world and especially in organizations has expanded, the number of articles, books, blogs, speeches, and other material addressing aspects of inclusive leadership has also grown. These perspectives on inclusive leadership tend to vary in at least three major ways. The first relates to how much explicit and focal attention is given to diversity, intergroup dynamics, and equity. The second has to do with the levels of system that are addressed: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, organizational, and/or societal. A third aspect of variation—often cross-cutting the other two—Involves the degree to which traditional hierarchical structures are assumed, such that leadership is seen as the responsibility of and primarily emanating from those holding particular positions (e.g., executive, manager, supervisor, etc.)—in other words, as being based on a particular role—versus viewing leadership as a social process constructed collectively and relationally and constituted by a set of functions
and processes that produce direction, alignment, and commitment (Drath et al., 2008) and that also serve to catalyze adaptive work (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997) by individuals and groups.

In my own work on inclusion and inclusive leadership over the years, both on my own and with colleagues (e.g., Ferdman, 2014b, 2017; Ferdman & Brody, 1996; Gallegos et al., 2020; Holvino et al., 2004; Wasserman et al., 2008), I have sought to integrate these perspectives, proposing a multi-level systemic view of the practice of inclusion (Ferdman, 2014b) and its goals, and highlighting the importance of addressing multiple social identities and cultures as core to inclusion (e.g., Ferdman, 1995). In this chapter, I apply this approach to lay out elements of a broad and integrative framework for inclusive leadership that considers individual and collective effectiveness as well the importance of participation, engagement, safety, voice, and equity in the context of the complexity and intersectionality of multiple social identities, intergroup relations, and their multifaceted organizational and societal manifestations.

I do so in the context of a view of leadership that acknowledges the particular responsibilities of those with authority in a group, organization, or community, but that also recognizes the ways in which anyone in these systems can display acts of leadership—acts that in some way move that system toward adaptive work, greater inclusion, and mutually beneficial processes and outcomes. In particular, I ground this aspect of my approach to inclusive leadership in the work of Heifetz and colleagues (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), who describe leadership as an activity, not a set of personality characteristics; for them the core activity of leadership is mobilizing groups and individuals to address adaptive challenges, and helping to create the conditions that make this adaptive work possible.

The central questions that inclusive leadership—and inclusive leaders—address, in this conceptualization, include the following:

1. How can people work and live together, interact, and engage in positive and mutually enhancing ways—productively, effectively, and authentically—in diverse groups, organizations, and communities while maintaining valued identities and cultures and fostering equity and fairness? How can collectives use their differences as a source of benefit for both individual members and the whole?

2. What behavior, mindsets, values, interactions, norms, policies, processes, and systems encourage, support, and incentivize people to work together and interact positively while maintaining their multiple identities, their cultures, and their sense of authenticity? How does the practice of inclusion manifest in a particular group, organization, or community? What do equity and fairness mean in that same collective (and in the larger systems of which it is a part)?
How can these goals and the factors that bring them about be clarified, articulated, and implemented so as to catalyze sustainable changes on the part of individuals and collectives?

What are the individual qualities, behaviors, and interactions that support finding answers to these questions and implementing them?

The key to inclusive leadership is the way in which it helps people, groups, organizations, and societies find answers to these questions that work, that are sustainable, and that maximize experiences of inclusion, across a range of identities and social positions (Ferdman, 2014b). I refer to inclusive leadership as the fulcrum of inclusion because it plays a key role in magnifying inclusion within levels of analysis and transmuting inclusion across levels of analysis—from micro to macro and vice versa. Although specific answers to the questions can and do vary across contexts, depending for example on the particular diversity dimensions and their dynamics relevant in a specific collective, inclusive leadership involves mobilizing people to jointly co-construct the best and most sustainable approaches.

The first question has to do with inclusion—defining and clarifying it, and giving it a prominent role in social collectives—whether a group, an organization, or a whole society. Inclusive leadership both makes this question and the need to address it prominent and also supports the adaptive work needed to address it. The second and third questions have to do with individual and collective change and even transformation, so as to help foster and instill new ways of thinking, behaving, interacting, and engaging across differences in these social collectives. This can often require reassessing and redefining previously held practices, ideas, or values that serve as barriers to inclusion and equity. And the final question has to do with noting and raising up the perspectives, voices, and influence of those most likely to support changes needed to drive and sustain inclusion and equity.

In the rest of this chapter, I provide a frame to help think about these processes that constitute inclusive leadership. First, I define inclusive leadership through the lens of diversity, inclusion, and equity in a multilevel systems perspective. Then I expand on this definition to discuss how inclusive leadership serves a pivotal role as a fulcrum or force multiplier to foster and magnify inclusion at micro and macro levels and to connect micro and macro aspects of inclusion. I conclude by discussing key elements of inclusive leadership and a set of behaviors that leaders can use to increase and facilitate inclusion and that are likely to foster this within- and cross-level reverberation of inclusion.

**Leadership through the Lens of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity**

Inclusion is fundamental for the success of diverse groups, organizations, and societies (Ferdman, 2014b). It supports equity, encourages people’s
multi-faceted talents and contributions and permits reaping their benefits, and also supports individual development, growth, engagement, and self-determination (Ferdman, 2014b, 2017). In sum, it is the short answer to the first question posed earlier. So, how does each of these concepts—diversity, equity, inclusion—matter for leadership?

**Diversity and Inclusive Leadership**

*Diversity* is essentially the “representation of multiple identity groups and their cultures in a particular organization or workgroup” (Ferdman, 2014b, p. 3) or in a larger system, such as a community or society. (It is important to highlight that diversity is always an attribute of a collective, and never of a specific individual. There is no such thing as a “diverse person,” in spite of frequent use of that term to denote someone different than the dominant group.) Diversity is both simple and complex, which I have previously explained as follows:

At its most basic level, diversity is simply about difference; people vary in many ways, some based on individual differences and others grounded in the range of social identities and groups that we belong to. At the same time, diversity can be multilayered and complex, because these identities and characteristics combine within each of us, and because there are histories of relationships between groups that also come into play.

When we first hear about diversity, we tend to focus on demographic or identity dimensions, especially the most visible ones (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, culture, age, national background, sexual orientation, physical ability/disability). At the same time, diversity also involves less visible and more individual dimensions (e.g., personality, abilities, thinking style, values, experiences). In short, diversity involves the differences and similarities among people across many dimensions represented in a particular group or organization. These dimensions combine within individuals, influencing how we approach and experience work and life as well as how we perceive and treat each other.

(Ferdman, 2018, paras 3–4)

Diversity and its dynamics at different levels of system—whether in a group, an organization, or a community—present both challenges and opportunities for leaders. As has become clearer from a growing body of theory, research, and practice, diverse collectives can derive great benefit from their differences, but can also experience tensions related to those same differences. Phillips (2014), for example, compellingly summarized how racial, gender, and other types of diversity in groups can lead to availability of more information, more creativity, greater innovation,
and deeper processing. But truly gaining these benefits requires more attention to process and to creating opportunities for the differences to emerge in the service of collective goals (see, e.g., Creary et al., 2019). This also means removing invidious biases, discrimination, and other barriers to diversity in the first place.

Given that diversity is a reality in most human collectives—whether workgroups, organizations, or the larger society—it is also a critical leadership issue. A key aspect of inclusive leadership, then, involves awareness of, attitudes about, and approaches to diversity:

At both societal and organizational levels, leaders must in some way address diversity and intergroup relations. Doing this requires addressing questions about the proper role of differences in culture and identity at both individual and group levels and about appropriate ways to structure relationships across these differences. It also requires clarifying which differences matter, in what ways, and to whom. Answers to these questions are often grounded in widely divergent values and ideologies regarding diversity.

(Ferdman, 2017, p. 238)

Inclusive leadership requires mindsets and skills for noticing, engaging with, and creating space for multiple dimensions of diversity, as well as the varying ways in which people deal with this diversity. It requires being able to explain how diversity matters, and to help people close the gap between the tendency to avoid, reject, or minimize differences in identities or cultures and the need to move toward approaches that highlight the value of diversity and other positive diversity mindsets (van Knippenberg et al., 2013) that allow for, encourage, and support deriving the mutual benefits of diversity (e.g., Bennett, 2014; Hannum et al., 2010; Miller & Katz, 2007). Thus, inclusive leadership involves noting the identities and associated differences that matter, and providing space and perspectives to help people recognize, appreciate, address, and work with these differences in a positive way (see, e.g., Creary, this volume; Ferdman, 2017; Plaut et al., 2009; Rock et al., 2016), as well as challenging invidious biases and discriminatory beliefs and practices.

A key element for making this happen is inclusion, another core foundation for inclusive leadership and essential for deriving the benefits of diversity (Ferdman & Deane, 2014), which I address in the next section.

**Inclusion and Inclusive Leadership**

*Inclusion* is a system of “creating and embedding organizational, leadership, and interpersonal practices that result in a sense of safety, full belonging, participation, and voice across the range of diversity...
dimensions, without requiring assimilation or loss of valued identities” (Ferdman, 2016, para. 4). Inclusion is a fundamental practice—at the individual, group, and organizational levels—for gaining the benefits of diversity and for making it possible for all people to flourish and to contribute at their best and is thus a foundational element of organizational success. At the societal level, it is similar, but perhaps even more complex, given the range of social institutions and settings involved.

The essence of inclusion has to do with how much people feel appreciated, valued, safe, respected, engaged, able to be authentic, and therefore able and willing to provide their full contributions to the collective, whether in work or other settings—both as individuals and as members of multiple identity groups (Ferdman, 2014b); people feel included when they can fully belong without having to subsume their uniqueness or their differences from others (Ferdman, 2010, 2017; Shore et al., 2011). Inclusion—engaging in ways that value and respect human diversity and provide mutually beneficial opportunities for all to contribute and matter—requires shifting individual, group, and societal interactions to leverage, appreciate, and integrate human differences and to disrupt patterns of social inequality and their effects.

Interpersonally and at the group, organizational, and societal levels, inclusion involves behaviors, practices, and policies that result in such experiences of inclusion individually as well as collectively (Ferdman, 2014b), that eliminate invidious discrimination and promote fairness, and that foster climates for inclusion (Nishii & Rich, 2014). Inclusion is therefore a set of related practices and their outcomes that “involve each and all of the following: an individual or group experience; a set of behaviors; an approach to leadership; a set of collective norms and practices; and personal, group, organizational, or social values” (Ferdman, 2014b, p. 4). This is how I have previously defined inclusion:

Inclusion is an active process in which individuals, groups, organizations, and societies—rather than seeking to foster homogeneity—view and approach diversity as a valued resource. In an inclusive system, we value ourselves and others because of and not despite our differences (or similarities); everyone—across multiple types of differences—should be empowered as a full participant and contributor who feels and is connected to the larger collective without having to give up individual uniqueness, cherished identities, or vital qualities.

On its face, inclusion can be simple and straightforward: it is about presence, participation, safety, voice, authenticity, equity, and equality for more people across multiple identity groups. Yet, at the same time, inclusion is complex and multifaceted. Inclusive systems—through a combination of individual behavior and attitudes, group norms, leadership approaches, and organizational policies and practices [Ferdman, 2014b]—enable each person to flourish and develop,
providing opportunities to fully connect and engage in ways that are beneficial for both the individual and the collective. Like multiculturalism, inclusion values the coexistence of multiple values, perspectives, styles, and means of accomplishing goals within the same social system. However, it broadens the focal dimensions of difference and more fully addresses their intersectionality. Inclusion provides a lens that reorganizes how we look at and experience identity, interpersonal interactions, group dynamics, intercultural interactions, intergroup relations, and even work itself.

(Ferdman, 2017, pp. 238–239)

Thus, inclusion is a multi-layered construct and process that can and needs to be created at multiple levels of system. Figure 1.1 shows a graphic representation of my multilevel systemic framework for inclusion (Ferdman, 2014b). The idea is that the fundamental criterion as to whether inclusion exists is at the individual level, the experience of inclusion (Davidson & Ferdman, 2002; Ferdman, 2014b), and that this can vary from person to person, often in relation to social identities and other factors:

![Diagram of systems of inclusion](image)

*Figure 1.1* Systems of inclusion: a multi-level analytic framework. Source: adapted from Figure 1.2 in B. M. Ferdman (2014b, p. 17).
Without the experience of inclusion, people who are different in notable ways from the traditionally represented groups may not feel quite as safe, accepted, or valued and may therefore be less likely to fully engage, participate, and contribute. If their sense of identity is threatened or they do not feel that they can be their authentic self, their talents and full contribution may be diminished or lost. In inclusive workplaces, people can be fully themselves, striving to be their best, without fear or without a sense that they must hide or become someone else.

(Ferdman, 2018, para. 6)

In this model, inclusion is viewed as a practice with manifestations and elements at various levels of system, from micro to macro. It is “an interacting set of structures, values, norms, group and organizational climates, and individual and collective behaviors, all connected with inclusion experiences in a mutually reinforcing and dynamic system” (Ferdman, 2014b, p. 16).

This means that inclusion can be created, strengthened, and sustained at each and all of these levels. And this is why leadership has such a critical role in this process:

In many ways, inclusive leadership is the linchpin for inclusion at other levels of the multilevel framework; it can facilitate (and perhaps even be considered a key part of) inclusion in groups, organizations, and societies, as well as help translate and spread inclusion across these levels.

(Ferdman, 2014b, p. 19)

Thus, inclusive leadership is leadership for inclusion: the mindsets, practices, and ways of influencing other people and the systems in which we work and live, so as to clarify and support learning about what inclusion is (and can be), to foster inclusion on an ongoing basis (including expecting and rewarding inclusive behavior), to embed inclusive values and processes in how work is done, and to make inclusion sustainable. In other words, inclusive leadership involves helping collectives find meaningful and appropriate answers to the questions I posed earlier, especially that of how to use differences as a source of benefit for both individual members and the whole, and how the practice of inclusion will specifically manifest in the behavior, norms, interactions, and processes of that collective.

A complete view of inclusive leadership needs to consider how change happens at each level of analysis—individual, interpersonal, group, organizational, and societal—and the influence processes, competencies, and interventions that foster more inclusion, both within and across
levels. Booysen (2014) combines these elements to define inclusive leadership as

>a respectful relational practice that enables individuals and collectives to be fully part of the whole, such that they are directed, aligned and committed toward shared outcomes, for the common good of all, while retaining a sense of authenticity and uniqueness.

(p. 322; see also Booysen, this volume)

A key element of inclusive leadership then, involves inspiring and challenging individuals and collectives to develop a vision of inclusion for themselves and each other and to find ways to close the gap between that vision and current reality. Because inclusion is not the same for different people or groups, and because it incorporates a range of paradoxical elements—for example, between belonging/absorption and distinctiveness/uniqueness; between stable, well-defined norms and shifting and open norms; and between comfort and discomfort (see Ferdman, 2017 for details)—inclusive leadership requires the capacity to understand, engage with, and manage these tensions, while challenging self and others to move toward better processes and outcomes.

**Equity and Inclusive Leadership**

A third and essential construct needed for inclusive leadership is equity. Equity is a way of assessing fairness and justice, whether of outcomes (distributive justice) or processes (procedural justice).

A common view of equity in social science focuses on exchanges (Cook & Hegtveld, 1983) and the appropriate or most fair way of allocating resources or other outcomes (for example pay) as a function of contributions (for example, amount or value of the work). More generally, this has to do with deservingness: who is considered to deserve what or how much, relatively speaking. Essentially, on this view equity is perceived and experienced when outcomes are proportional to relevant inputs or contributions in the same measure across the people or groups we are comparing, and people therefore get what they are thought to deserve.

At a societal level (at this point in history), we would not expect or claim, for example, that only White people should get paid for their work, while people of color should work for free. Nonetheless, we know from much research that there continue to be great racial disparities in earnings in the United States and other societies (see, e.g., https://inequality.org/facts/racial-inequality)—even when comparing within the same type of work; this is one example of a prominent type of inequity. There are also great disparities in wealth in the United States as a function of race. This is cited by many as another example of racial
inequity, one that should be addressed with reparations or other ways of making up for the practice of slavery and subsequent oppression that created that wealth gap. Yet, at the same time, others do not necessarily see this gap as inequitable, because they may be thinking about deservingness not in a historical context, but purely in individual terms—with regard to the work or inputs on the part of the specific person or family (see, for more discussion on this, Ferdman, 1997). This also applies to the workplace, for example in assessing fairness or equity in pay. Even though few people would claim that everyone should be paid the same, regardless of the type and amount of work they do, there is no agreement on what degree of inequality or disparity is fair, for example, between a CEO and the other employees in an organization. So, in spite of the general principle, there is no general consensus on what equity or fairness would look like.

A similar view can be applied to processes: processes—for example, those in hiring or promotions, or in how people are treated when they apply for social services, seek health care, or must go to court—are viewed as equitable when how someone is treated, and their experiences in going through the process, are commensurate with general rules or principles for that process. In other words, factors perceived to be irrelevant do not affect those experiences. This is also true at the group level, when comparing across groups. For example, there is ample evidence that people’s race can make a great difference in how they experience and are treated by the criminal justice system in the U.S. (see, e.g., https://eji.org). While many people might agree that this is not fair—in other words, that justice should be “blind”—the same people might disagree as to whether the differences in the experience within the justice system of those who can afford to pay for a lawyer versus those who cannot is inequitable.

As illustrated by the examples, a key challenge in determining equity has to do with different views of what constitutes a relevant contribution or factor in assessing fairness (Ferdman, 1997). In the context of diversity and inclusion, it is evident that when factors such as intergroup bias or discrimination determine or affect important outcomes (such as access to particular types of jobs, education, or health care; who gets paid how much; access to housing and other social benefits; who speaks in a meeting, etc.), this is not equitable. Instead, equity involves providing both access to opportunity and to outcomes without invidious bias—whether overt or covert—and making sure that irrelevant factors do not hinder or help particular groups of people.

Indeed, many see equity as a focal goal or result of inclusion. David A. Thomas (2017), in his comments at the conclusion of the 25th Annual Kravis-deRoulet Conference that led to this book, framed it this way:
What is the result of inclusion? What is it that we see, regardless of what we call it? Some of the things that were said today helped me to start to move toward my own answer. One is this notion that we will know when we have actually made an inclusive society or organization, when there is no correlation between identity group membership and life chances. At a societal level that’s about not being able to predict, if you are born Black or born into a particular social class, what the outcomes are that you can achieve in a society, breaking that correlation. Or inside organizations: that is no longer a predictor of how far you can go, how far you are likely to go, and where we will find you working. That means that inclusion doesn’t leave behind some of the work that used to fall under other labels, like affirmative action or equal opportunity.

In this sense, then, equity is also about power and access to power. When access to roles with more power—for example membership on corporate boards, or executive positions in corporations, or election to legislative bodies—is associated with membership in identity groups that are societally more dominant—for example, being a White man—then we could say that this is not equitable, especially to the extent that this cannot be explained in other ways.

Inclusive leadership, then, involves noting, calling out, and addressing inequities. It also means challenging groups, organizations, and societies to foster more equitable processes, systems, and outcomes. Inclusive leadership involves noticing and voicing issues of equity and power and addressing them.

To do this, inclusive leadership requires challenging all-too-widely accepted ideas of what is “normal” with regard to access to resources and to their allocation, and holding up a mirror to self and others about our unspoken or taken-for-granted assumptions about both outcomes and processes. Is it fair and equitable that women are paid, on average, only a fraction of what men earn? Is it fair and equitable that these disparities are even greater when race and ethnicity are considered? Is it fair and equitable that people with disabilities have a much harder time finding suitable employment? Is it fair and equitable that new fathers are much less likely to take parental leave, even if offered, or that people who are transgender are much less likely to get the health care they need, or to feel safe when they go to work or even walk down the street? Is it fair and equitable that there are very few women leading major corporations or serving as chief of state around the world?

These are but a few of the most visible examples of the types of distributive and procedural justice issues that inclusive leadership must address. At a more micro level, other issues come up: is someone using up all the airtime in a meeting? Does everyone ignore the person in the wheelchair? Are women paid less than men in the organization? Is the
organization only looking for new hires from certain universities and in majors? What are the effects of the organization’s policies and practices (and products) in the larger society on different groups of people, when diversity is considered?

Inclusive leadership involves seeing and disrupting patterns of inequality and inequity by raising these types of questions; challenging groups, organizations, communities, and societies to work through the tensions and dilemmas involved to address, mitigate, and ideally eliminate inequities; and to find ways to collaborate to remove barriers to equity and fairness. Simultaneously attention to equity and fairness creates better working conditions, promotes social responsibility and engagement, and fosters more sustainability for organizations and the communities and world around them.

**Inclusive Leadership as the Fulcrum for the Practice of Inclusion**

As discussed throughout the prior section, inclusive leadership plays a key role in highlighting diversity in groups, organizations, and communities; in catalyzing inclusive behavior, norms, and values, on the part of members of those collectives; in driving and sustaining inclusive organizational practices and systems; in promoting, fostering, and sustaining inclusive values, perspectives, policies, and systems in communities and societies; and in working to ensure that equity is a focal goal and result. Inclusive leaders help to create a compelling vision of diversity, inclusion, and equity, and challenge themselves and others to work to do what is needed to make that vision a reality (Gallegos, 2014; Gallegos et al., 2020). Inclusive leaders must be stewards and facilitators of an inclusive culture, as they attend to themselves and their effect on others, the groups in which they participate and lead, and the systems in which they play influential roles.

In the context of the systems model described earlier (and depicted in Figure 1.1), inclusive leadership can be seen as the essential fulcrum for the development of an inclusive group, organization, or larger system. In the most general sense, a fulcrum is something that plays a pivotal role in a given activity or situation. More concretely, a fulcrum is the pivot around which a lever turns; by resting on the fulcrum, a lever is able to convert force pushing down at one end into equivalent force pushing up at the other end. In the case of a seesaw, the fulcrum is usually in the middle, at the center of gravity, helping to balance the two sides and create equilibrium. In the case of a lever, the fulcrum can be moved closer to the weight that needs to be raised, so that less force pushing down is needed at the longer end.

Paralleling a physical fulcrum, leadership plays a pivotal role in inclusion in at least two important ways. On the one hand, inclusive leadership gives meaning to and helps to translate societal and/or
organizational-level processes, practices, policies, and values into everyday behaviors and relationships, thus fostering inclusive practices and behavior in groups and in interpersonal interactions, and the experience of inclusion at the individual level. In this sense, inclusive leadership translates macro-level inclusion to the micro-level. On the other hand, inclusive leadership can combine what would otherwise be isolated or disparate individual behavior and experiences, interpersonal interactions, and group dynamics, and gives them meaning and visibility that translates them into patterns with larger organizational or societal significance. Inclusive leadership thus also translates micro-level aspects of inclusion to the macro level. In addition to transmuting inclusion across levels of analysis, leadership plays an important role in highlighting and strengthening inclusive practices at each level of analysis. I expand on these three aspects of inclusive leadership in the following sections.

**From Macro to Micro**

Leadership plays a key role in helping to bring societal and organizational goals, values, and policies related to inclusion to life in everyday behavior and interactions. Nishii and Paluch (2018) described the key implementation behaviors that leaders engage in to create strong HR systems. Fundamentally, these behaviors, including explaining and modeling what is expected of followers, serve to create collective meaning and translate aspects of the organizational system so that they make sense and can be implemented in specific situations. Buengeler et al. (2018) described various ways in which leaders in organizations can respond to human resources diversity practices in particular, and how these responses can affect employees’ experiences of inclusion.

In many workplaces, the everyday experience of workers is grounded in the way they are treated by supervisors and managers, and can also be affected by the tone set at higher levels by executives. Organizations may have policies and systems in place designed to foster inclusion, but, ultimately, it is most likely how these are interpreted and implemented, in combination with leader and supervisor behavior, that affects whether or not the organization’s members will experience inclusion.

In a related study, for example, Chen (2011) found that respondents who perceived their leaders as displaying more authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) were also more likely to report affective commitment to their organization (r=.59); this relationship was partially and significantly mediated by the experience of inclusion. In my own work (Ferdman, 2014a) with a consulting client on their Global Inclusion Survey, I found that employee ratings of their supervisors’ inclusive behavior were highly correlated (r=.64) with how included the
employees felt in the company. The overall experience of inclusion was also positively correlated with ratings on items quite connected to leadership, assessing respondents’ perception that they were given similar opportunities to others to develop their skills and careers, the degree of comfort they felt expressing their ideas, concerns, and opinions, and their belief that their supervisor made promotion and placement decisions based on performance, skills, and abilities. Buen-geler and Den Hartog (2015) found that teams in a multinational company that were diverse in nationality performed better to the extent that the supervisor was perceived as treating the team members fairly, and that this perception was shared among the team. This result highlights the importance not only of how the supervisor behaves, but of how consistently this is experienced across the group. And Travis et al. (2019) reported that, in a multinational sample of 2,164 from 15 companies, 45% of the variance in employee experience of inclusion—how valued, trusted, authentic, and psychologically safe they felt—was predicted by the degree to which their supervisors behaved inclusively.

Beyond modeling and explaining desired behavior, inclusive leaders play an important role in reminding those around them about core values and imperatives at the organizational and societal level. Many organizations have strong value statements, often including diversity and inclusion. But unless these are taken into account in making decisions, in interactions, and in conducting business, they will not have much implication for everyday experience and behavior. Similarly, societies can have policies and values, such as democracy or multiculturalism, that only become real when they affect what happens in specific situations. Inclusive leadership, then, involves serving as the conduit for this macro to micro influence.

**From Micro to Macro**

Leadership also plays a key role in noting and highlighting micro-level experiences and behavior, recognizing patterns, and giving them life at the organizational and societal levels. People in an organization may very well be individually kind to each other, may collaborate effectively, and may generally be open to differences. However, it is only when these and other manifestations of inclusive behavior become normative and institutionalized, based on the meaning and importance that leaders give to such behavior and on the norms and expectations that they systematically promote and communicate and that they embed into the organization’s standard practices, that we can begin to speak of a truly inclusive organization.

As Wasserman et al. (2008) point out, a key responsibility of inclusive leaders is to create a “meta-narrative” that can create and foster a vision
of what an inclusive culture is and needs to be. This is more likely to happen when leaders build on values, behaviors, needs, and aspirations that are already present in the organization, at least in some form, and then “connect the dots” among these (see also Wasserman, Chapter 6, this volume, and Cruz Teller, Chapter 27, this volume). Inclusive leaders can weave together various disparate components of inclusion (e.g., O’Mara, 2014) so that the combination can become a notable and persistent feature of the organization as a whole.

In sum, inclusive leaders can tell the story, make meaning, and help to give life to the views, needs, and aspirations of members of the organization, especially those who may have less access to power or visibility. By using the lenses of diversity, equity, and inclusion, inclusive leaders can make it more possible for relevant dynamics to be addressed in systemic ways.

**Strengthening Within-Level Inclusion**

Inclusive leadership also involves designing, implementing, and sustaining inclusive practices at each level of analysis. To foster inclusion in groups, for example, it is important to co-construct suitable norms, to allow for dialogue about process, to facilitate sometimes difficult conversations that bring differences to light and help to make them work for collective benefit, and to call out and address inequities—whether in participation, treatment, or experience. At the organizational level, inclusive leadership involves keeping issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront, and catalyzing systematic and effective ways to address them (see, e.g., O’Mara & Richter, 2017). At the community and societal levels, inclusive leaders must do the same, with the additional challenges of navigating political tensions and, often, strong intergroup conflicts.

**Manifestations of Inclusive Leadership: Qualities and Behaviors**

Various authors (e.g., Booysen, 2014; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2013; Gallegos et al., 2020; Wasserman et al., 2008) have listed key components of inclusive leadership, generally speaking, and of its behavioral expressions and features (Gallegos, 2014; Travis et al., 2019), and I provide such a list in this section. But what characterizes leaders who are particularly likely to foster the translation or transmutation between micro and macro levels and are effective in doing so? I believe that such leadership includes, at a minimum, the following key elements:

1. **Self-awareness and authenticity.** Inclusive leaders must not only understand themselves as individuals and as members of multiple identity groups, but they must also be clear about how their role and function serves to magnify or dampen inclusive behavior by
followers on the one hand and to serve as catalysts for organiza-
tional change on the other. Inclusive leaders must encourage others
to be authentic, must be authentic themselves, and must help create
the conditions that permit both of these to happen.

2 Conceptual and operational clarity and vision. Inclusive leaders
must be clear not only about what inclusion is but also how it
operates in an everyday fashion in their organization and among its
particular people. At the same time, they must have the capacity to
see beyond what currently exists and to hold themselves and the
organization’s people accountable for new and more far-reaching
possibilities.

3 Capacity for complexity and paradoxical thinking and behavior. To
serve effectively as the fulcrum for inclusion across micro and macro
levels, leaders must often simultaneously hold and balance seemingly
disparate and even conflicting perspectives and views, as well as
behave in ways that can appear to be conflicting. For example, they
must be accepting of the organization’s people and their styles and
behavior, while at the same time catalyzing learning and openness to
new possibilities and ways of doing things. They must push the
organization to higher standards of fairness and transparency while
making sure that existing norms and values are acted on. They must
help create a climate in which the organization’s people feel valued
and included for who they are, yet simultaneously create suitable
discomfort with the status quo, thus encouraging and pushing
members of the organization to expand their range of behavior and
acceptance. The ability to understand, hold, and manage the ten-
sions and paradoxes of inclusion (Ferdman, 2017) is a vital element
of inclusive leadership.

In addition to these broad characteristics, inclusive leaders need to
display and model inclusive behavior, and encourage it in others.
A number of the chapters in this book describe some of these practices.
The following is a list of ways in which leaders can build more inclusion
at work:

1 Acknowledge and appreciate differences of all types in the group
and in the organization.

2 Learn about and be mindful of personal biases; examine and address
assumptions about power, voice, competence, and effectiveness,
especially how these relate to our different identities.

3 Seek to notice and remove systematic bias and discrimination—
whether conscious or inadvertent—and to replace these with more
productive and fair ways to work with difference.

4 Model and encourage authenticity.
### Table 1.1 Inclusive behaviors.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>For Everyone</strong></th>
<th><strong>For Leaders</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Behaviors that everyone can exhibit to foster inclusion for themselves and others)</td>
<td>(Behaviors that leaders, especially those in positions of authority, can exhibit, in addition to those for everyone, to foster inclusion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong> Acknowledge, connect, and engage with others. Greet them (in culturally appropriate ways). Get to know them.</td>
<td><strong>1</strong> Hold yourself and others accountable for creating an inclusive culture. Use your power and position to challenge inequities at the individual, group, and system levels. Create safety for self and others. Question traditional assumptions regarding what performance and performers look like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong> Listen deeply and carefully, as an ally not a critic. Check for understanding. Develop and use cultural understanding.</td>
<td><strong>2</strong> Invite engagement and dialogue. Take the time for authentic conversation. Acknowledge and learn from mistakes. Explicitly consider and ask who else needs to be included—continually ask who is missing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong> Engage a broad range of perspectives. Invite new voices. Provide space for dissent. Have the courage to say what needs to be said. Check whether people feel included.</td>
<td><strong>3</strong> Model bringing one’s whole self to work and give permission for and encourage others to do so. Show up authentically. Be vulnerable. Honor the full range of who people are. Be intentional about where you show up and where you are visible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong> Openly share information; seek clarity and openness. Share your intent and process.</td>
<td><strong>4</strong> Foster transparent decision-making. Make it safe for others to express different perspectives. Model not having all the answers. Share data and information to the fullest extent possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5</strong> Be curious. Learn how other people and groups may see and experience the world differently than you and your groups. Identify and share your assumptions.</td>
<td><strong>5</strong> Understand and engage with resistance. Engage many people in your efforts, especially those who have different views or ideas. Fully hear and respond to people’s concerns and ideas. Have a goal of creating the best possible option rather than influencing others to agree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6</strong> Become comfortable with discomfort. Find and use your voice (even if different from others). Use discomfort as an opportunity for learning. Openly address disagreements—engage differences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7</strong> Increase your self-awareness. Understand your biases, assumptions, cultural background, and areas of privilege. Be aware of how your verbal and nonverbal behavior communicate to others. Recognize that all of us have complex identities; learn more about yours.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8</strong> Be willing to learn and be influenced by others. Ask others about what they know, think, and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Create opportunities tailored to individuals’ special qualities and strengths, seek out unique voices, and highlight both individual uniqueness and collective identity. Give all stakeholders the opportunity to engage in constructing norms and processes for inclusion while holding each other accountable.

Learn to be comfortable with discomfort and seek out situations that will result in learning, growing, and collective mutual benefits.

In Table 1.1, I provide a detailed list, adapted from a list initially created by Ferdman, et al. (2009); the list is divided into those behaviors that everyone can do, regardless of role and degree of authority, and those that are particularly the responsibility of designated leaders—those holding roles that require overseeing, supervising, or managing others.

**Conclusion**

Inclusive leadership can sometimes feel elusive and particularly challenging. In part because of the tensions inherent in inclusion, the seeming lack of clear guideposts or parameters, and the controversial and often polarizing as well as hierarchical aspects of intergroup relations, leaders
need to develop this capacity in ways that foster ongoing learning and growth, build on their strengths, and provide safe and helpful ways to experiment, make mistakes, ask difficult questions, and practice new or different ways to engage across differences. Our collective future depends on it!

References


Thomas, D. A. (2017, March 4). The way forward: Next steps on the path to inclusion [Presentation]. Inclusive leadership: Transforming diverse lives, workplaces and societies, 25th Annual Kravis-deRoulet Conference, Kravis Leadership Institute, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA.
