

Diversity without inclusivity is just skin deep

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If diversity is the face of transformation, inclusivity is its voice. As communicators and leaders, if we want to change the corporate narrative and drive a more inclusive company culture, it starts with enabling inclusive communication.



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Heritage Month is that one month a year when all South Africans celebrate how diverse we are as a culture and question how much of this diversity is reflected in our industries, companies, leadership and society at large. Often that is where the conversation ends. With diversity – instead of focusing on inclusion, where transformation really starts.

The reason this matters is simple: diversity without inclusivity is just skin deep. Diversity is more concerned with who delivers the message and how. Inclusivity cares about what the narrative is, why it is and whether other narratives are being discounted or disregarded.

Inclusivity cares about giving voice to diverse narratives

When it comes to transformation, we often mistake diversity for inclusion. And they are not the same thing. Diversity is about recognising that our workplaces need the right mix of genders, races, ages and the like to understand, connect and communicate with an equally diverse audience. That's good business, as much as good policy and practice. Inclusion is about making sure that a company's policies, as much as its culture, treats all individuals fairly and respectfully, which includes making sure all voices and opinions are equally heard, regardless of race, gender and even position in the company. For example, if we take the recent Clicks advert debacle as an example, an inclusivity lens would have quickly identified that a singular narrative continues to dominate the beauty industry and colour our perception of beauty on a whole. An inclusivity lens would have taken steps to ensure that, at the very least, it didn't perpetuate this narrative and, hopefully, even put forward a new or alternative viewpoint.

Personality versus character

In the cultural beauty competition, you could say diversity and inclusion are like 'personality' and 'character'. They are both important but only one stands you in good stead during tough times, such that Covid-19 is and economic pressures always are. Inclusivity speaks to our character or, as career coach [Rachel Montanez](#) puts it: "Personality is what's on the surface. Character are those deep-seated traits that show up under challenging or difficult circumstances. Character is based on our beliefs and values which then leads to behaviours." So if we want our companies to have good character and not just a good personality that smiles for the camera, we need to give more time and attention to inclusivity, starting with its most basic and fundamental building block – inclusive communication.

Fives principles of inclusive communication

1. Confront your own biases

We all have biases. The key is to be aware of how they influence our decisions. You need to be able to identify and own your 'blind spots'. This will help you to think and reach beyond mere race and gender when considering what 'voices' to include in your communication. A team manager will offer a very different perspective on a client issue, for example, than a call centre agent. Start to be more mindful of the diversity of voices you choose to feature and how you can actively push for more inclusivity in your messaging.

2. Make language count

We spend so much time creating style and language guides, but how much time do we spend creating or even defining 'inclusive language' in the workplace? Inclusive language values the importance of words and the impact they have on what we view and value. At the very least, inclusive communication should be free from language that perpetuates stereotypes, negative expectations or limitations. By simply adapting your workplace style and language guides, you can involve your entire audience more fully and inspire them to contribute more readily to your workplace culture.

3. Make empathy a daily practice

Inclusive communication is a continuous process that encourages you to connect empathetically in a way that recognises that people have very different experiences and readings of the world. A good example would be around a company's naming policy. Some policies insist that employees only use the name that is on their legal documents. But what about trans people or even people who have a trauma around their birth or legal name? Enabling a flexible names policy can be a way to acknowledge that one's personal identity is more valued than a legal identity on paper, in the eyes of the company at least.

4. All input is valued and valuable

Inclusive communication believes all input is equally important. This is not the same as believing that all input has equal value. No. The emphasis here is more on making all employees understand that their input is valued and valuable to the company. This message should be clear but also the mechanisms provided for all employees to have their voices and opinions heard. This should also influence how communicators prioritise what opinions to amplify. Different groups and levels provide a different lens on a company's culture and are thus equally important. A truly inclusive and progressive workplace culture will support and value the opinions of senior and junior employees alike, creating a sense of belonging for all.

5. Empowering through tools and resources

Communication, like culture, is a continuous process that blurs the boundaries between sender and receiver, influencer and follower. Everyone in a company is contributing to culture and communication every day in many ways. So instead of just focusing on getting your side of the message right, empower employees with the right tools to help them have more inclusive conversations and contribute to a more inclusive culture. This could include inclusive language guides, books and other resources to help people build skills and awareness. You could even start an inclusivity podcast club for employees to

come together and discuss relevant podcasts.

Leaders are a vital component of this new narrative. As role models, they set the tone and create the environment for inclusive conversations and cultures to grow. As such, they too need to be equipped with vital tools like inclusivity training, coaching and strategic communication support.

Diversity without inclusivity does not a transformed company make. It's time to have better conversations around transformation, ones that start with a strategy to enable diversity and continue with a plan to enhance inclusivity.

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