Check the Box or Check the Behaviors?

Simple Actions and Habits that Create Feelings of Belonging

Results from Avion's Workplace Today Survey
December 10, 2020
Michelle DiTondo
Principal, Avion Consulting
(Former) Chief Human Resources Officer MGM Resorts International

From the perspective of a former Chief Human Resources Officer, the expense of diversity training hasn't paid off. After decades of diversity training and billions of dollars, corporate America had to take a step back in 2020 and reconcile that the training hasn't significantly impacted feelings of inclusion and value for diverse employees. The tensions that surfaced this year and the continued discomfort with having real conversations about race at work emphasize the need to do something different. The feedback from over 400 participants in our Workplace Today survey shows that making simple behavior changes and creating habits of certain behaviors can go a long way in creating a culture of inclusion.

The investment in diversity training isn't paying off.

In Avion's recent Workplace Today survey, which had over 400 participants across industries, roles, leadership levels, and types of organizations, **only 46%** of respondents across all demographic groups believe that their diversity training has had a positive impact on the workplace, meaning that less than half see any positive effect! Further, in our Workplace Today survey, people of color continue to report challenges in the workplace when it comes to discrimination and inclusion:

·   Only 66% of People of Color (combined Black, Asian, Hispanic, Indigenous, Two or More Races) agree their workplace is **free of harassment** and discrimination compared to 85% of Caucasians.

·   Only 67% of People of Color agree their organization creates a workplace environment where everyone is **treated fairly** compared to 82% of Caucasians.

·   Only 63% of People of Color feel like **they "belong"** in their organization compared to 76% of Caucasians, with only 50% of *Women* of Color feeling like they belong in their organization.

It is even more discouraging to see how women of color continue to feel less valued and included than men and Caucasian women in organizations. Results from our Workplace Today survey show that:

·   Only 43% of women of color **feel valued,** while 76% of Caucasian women feel valued and 75% of all men feel valued by the organization.

·   An astonishingly low of 50% of women of color feel like **they belong** in their organization compared to 77% of Caucasian women and 76% of all men.

A 2017 article by McKinsey & Company noted that companies were spending $8 Billion a year on diversity training. [i] Why isn't such a significant investment reaping results?

Much of the lack of progress can be attributed to "checking the box" when it comes to Diversity and Inclusion efforts or going through the motions of providing training, but without meaningful change in how diverse employees feel about being valued and belonging at work. For example, several companies, including Starbucks and Sephora, made public commitments to train staff on bias after very public gaffes with customers. These companies should be given credit for making significant commitments by closing all operations to provide the training; however, a 2-hour or half-day training cannot be the only action if the expectation is to have a lasting impact on how employees behave. A **"one and done"** training is merely an action to "check the box" to say that training was provided.

While training is a very effective intervention for several different issues that organizations face, it is only *one* step toward creating a culture of inclusion. As a first step, bias training can be enlightening and thought-provoking and can help begin conversations around diversity, but alone is not a solution. Organizations need to look at how programs beyond the "one-and-done" training *can* lead to **sustainable behavior change** across the organization.

Why does bias training lack impact?

Everyone is biased to some degree. Our brains naturally organize information to enable us to make fast decisions based on past experience or beliefs. Sometimes, these shortcuts can be helpful, for example, knowing after years of experience to take a particular highway exit when you hear there is an accident ahead that may slow traffic, based on years of experience with taking different routes to work.

However, cognitive shortcuts can also lead to mistakes, especially when it comes to people. The biases or stereotypes have of people are developed over a lifetime and influenced by everything from religion, school, family background, socio-economic status, and personal experience. The beliefs we develop over time can affect our decision-making and can have a significant negative impact on others. The core problem is that **a *lifetime* of beliefs cannot be changed with one training** session on bias. We might become a bit more aware of what we believe about people different from us, but most programs do not instruct how to change the way we act based on those beliefs. Anyone who has tried to change a long-standing belief knows how difficult it can be. For example, changing a fear of heights takes intentional practice, repeated actions, and exposure over some time to change the belief that heights are dangerous. Simply *recognizing and acknowledging* you have a fear of heights, even with a desire to change, likely won't lead to change without the repeated action steps to change the belief. This is much like bias training. In most programs, you become aware of and acknowledge your biases without the explicit direction on actions needed to change your beliefs.

Unfortunately, this is where most diversity programs are focused. Although these workshops on personal bias can be highly emotional and cathartic, they fall short of long-term behavior and culture change. It is not to say that bias awareness doesn't have any impact. The increased awareness can have *some* positive influence. Still, without focusing on repeated, intentional practice of desired behaviors, these training sessions often lack the staying power and fall short of the goal to advance diversity and inclusion within the organization. More simply put, sponsors can "check the box" that employees attended the training, but one or two weeks after, attendees are, at best, wondering what they should be doing to improve the culture, and at worst, are back to their old behaviors and biases.

What drives a culture of inclusion?

First, we know that **creating a culture of inclusion is multi-faceted and complex.** Before we talk about near-term solutions, we need to acknowledge that we all have been raised in a culture where systematic issues like access to education, opportunity, and the ability to meet basic needs of health and safety are impacted by one's race. The result of decades of systematic racism is seen at work in the lack of diversity in senior leadership roles in corporate America. A longer-term but necessary strategy to creating cultures of inclusion is to ensure that every employee can **see themselves** in their organization's leaders. Seeing people like you in leadership roles drives a feeling that you belong and that people like you are valued. This is an active strategy and top of mind for many organizations. However, it is another area where perceptions of the effectiveness of actions vary across groups. Based on the Workplace Today survey:

- 37% of Black participants in the survey, 45% of women of color, and 50% of all people of color believe their organizations **actively look for candidates** from diverse backgrounds compared to 69% of Caucasians.

Assuming that organizations *must* also focus on strategic plans that include actions to build a diverse pipeline of talent, we will focus on actions that can **improve the organization's culture near term**, which is needed to ensure **retention** of diverse employees recently hired or promoted. Without the focus on culture, the work to recruit and promote will be an **endless cycle** that never results in improved representation. A result reflected in our research:

- 50% of Black participants in the survey, 48% of women of color, and 55% of all people of color believe their organizations **effectively retain** highly qualified people with diverse backgrounds compared to 69% of Caucasians.

How *can* training and coaching drive immediate change?

Contrary to providing training focused on changing beliefs and increasing awareness of one's bias, Avion believes a culture of inclusion is more **achievable in the near term** if the focus is on *specific behaviors* and practices leaders can deploy.

Our research shows leaders can learn **new behaviors to implement** that drive feelings of value and belonging and that the culture can be transformed when the new behaviors and habits are reinforced with systems like ongoing training, coaching, and accountability.

The irony is that our recommended behaviors aren't demanding or difficult to develop into habits. Much like research dating back to 1972 conducted by Professor Mary Rowe at MIT, we found that small actions have a huge impact (positive or negative) on how people *feel* about their organization and whether or not they feel valued or like they "belong." [ii]

Based on our Workplace Today survey findings, we were able to identify perceptions consistent across demographics that drove feelings of value and belonging.

We launched the survey wondering about feelings of value and belonging, especially during a year that included moving to remote work environments while dealing with challenging issues around race and inclusion. When using the data to look at the relationship between responses to the item *"I feel valued by my organization"* and all the other items in the survey, the perceptions identified as the strongest predictors of feeling valued include:

- My opinion is valued in my organization.

- I am given a fair opportunity to succeed in my organization.
- I am rewarded for doing great work.
- We respect cultural differences in our organization.
- Different opinions are valued and encouraged in my organization.
- Promotions in my organization are based on how you perform.

In addition, when using the same data to identify predictors of the item *"I feel like I belong in my organization,"* similar items surface as drivers of belonging:

- Leaders (managers and direct supervisors) make sure that everyone feels welcome in our organization.
- Different opinions are valued and encouraged in my organization.
- My opinion is valued in my organization.
- Leaders in my organization build high-performance teams that leverage diversity of thought.
- I am given a fair opportunity to succeed in my organization.
- My organization effectively retains highly qualified people with diverse backgrounds (race, gender, sexual orientation, disability).
- In my organization, it is safe to express what's really on our minds.

These findings would suggest that making it a practice or habit to ask employees for their point of view and *listening* to their input would go a long way when building an inclusive culture, as would "catching" people in the act of being successful or value-added.

The written comments in the survey support our findings that **behaviors to make routine habits** to create a culture of inclusion include:

- Asking employees for their point of view or input on topics.
- Listening, thanking, and taking action when appropriate when issues are surfaced.
- Making it a practice to recognize and thank employees for doing great work.
- Implementing practices that "welcome" employees into the organization.
- Discussing career aspirations and providing feedback on how to achieve their goals.
- Asking employees about, and expressing interest in, their perceptions of their experience in the organization.

If we know these **simple behaviors can significantly impact** creating a culture of inclusion, how do we make these behaviors routine in a culture, and who has what responsibility?

Whose job is it to create a culture of inclusion?

Many organizations have been making very public hiring announcements of senior Diversity and Inclusion leaders. However, changing culture cannot rest with any individual leader or department, like Human Resources or a Chief Diversity Officer. Nor can companies solely expect diverse employees (sometimes within an employee network or affinity groups) to identify issues and surface solutions.

Surfacing issues or areas to improve always carries some perceived or actual risk. Employees often feel that pointing out flaws or problems will result in being labeled a complainer or troublemaker in an organization. Since it carries perceived risk, driving *any* change within most organizations can only be led by those who feel *safe* and *empowered* to surface issues and identify areas for improvement. Based on the Workplace Today survey, **some groups feel *safer* in their organizations than others**.

When it comes to an overall feeling of safety within their organization:

· Of our survey participants, only 56% of women of color, 58% of Black, and 66% of all people of color **feel safe** in their organization, while 79% of all Caucasians (80% of Caucasian men) feel safe in their organization.

Further, when asked more specifically if it is safe in their organization to express what's really on their minds:

· Only 46% of women of color, 52% of Black, and 56% of all people of color agree that they **feel safe to express what's on their mind**, while 71% of all Caucasians (72% of Caucasian men) feel safe to express what's on their minds.

Based on these results, the **responsibility to drive culture change** needs to be taken on by those who feel safe enough to identify areas to improve and empowered enough to make suggestions to drive needed change. Based on our research, those who feel the safest are Caucasian men in organizations.

This is why it is a mistake to put the responsibility to change a culture on the diversity leader, who is often new to the organization, and establishing credibility with colleagues, the human resources department, or diverse employee groups. While it makes sense to get the perspective of diverse employee groups, leaders should acknowledge that diverse employees do not feel safe sharing what's on their minds, as our survey results reflect.

If we understand who feels safe within organizations, the next question would be who is *empowered* to drive change?

Who has the power to change culture?

Power in an organization comes mainly in three forms:

Expertise Power: This is the power held by experts in an organization and can apply to the head of Diversity and Inclusion or Human Resources in an organization. Although these individuals are valued for their experience and have room to make recommendations, they need others to execute change effectively. This is echoed in the voices of Diversity and Inclusion leaders often hired to drive change. Often, these leaders find themselves without C-level support, which creates frustration that can lead to them leaving the organization. A recent article in the Wall Street Journal reflected this sentiment from many CDOs (Chief Diversity Officers). It affirmed that *"the role has long been marked by high turnover, with many in the position leaving over a lack of resources, unrealistic expectations and inadequate support from senior executives."* [iii]

Relational Power: This power comes from relationships and credibility within the organization. Those who have strong reputations within an organization also have confidence and safety to express their point of view. Relational power can be tied to a position but can also come from informal leaders respected in an organization.

Positional Power: This power comes from the title or scope held and is also the most transparent of all types of power. Everyone knows "the boss," the power they hold, and the hierarchy above and below them in the organization. Typically, the power one has is made clear in their job title. Those in positions of power have a magnified impact on others in the organization because others in the organization model their behavior, AND they have the power and ability to hold others in the organization accountable for their behavior and actions. Regardless of whether they buy entirely into the beliefs or not, most employees in an organization perform what is expected of them, if anything, just to keep their job and advance their careers.

When it comes to creating a culture of inclusion, the combination of being a role model in the organization with the ability to hold others accountable makes those in positions of power THE most essential individuals to actively enlist with very specific responsibilities and behaviors.

Caucasian men play an essential role in changing culture.

Statistically, Caucasian men account for almost 70% of senior leadership roles in corporate America. [iv] In addition to having formalized **positional power** through the roles they hold, our research shows that Caucasian men also *feel* more *empowered* than women, people of color, and women of color, to take action when they see unfair acts:

· Only 68% of women, 61% of people of color, 56% of women of color **feel empowered to take action** when they see or experience unfairness compared to a surprisingly high 81% of Caucasian men.

Unfortunately, traditional diversity programs and training have led to some Caucasians, especially men, feeling like they are the problem, leaving **them left out of the solution** and either not welcome or uncomfortable to have the conversation around race or gender. Comments from our Workplace Today survey include:

· *"As a white male…I feel people like me are disposable."*

· *"Speaking with a senior HR leader…I was told that I would not be considered for leadership advancement because the company was looking for diversity to fill those roles. I was encouraged to leave the company if leadership was the path I wanted."*

· *"Having to be careful how I approach situations due to sensitivity to diversity especially as I do not fall into enough protected class demographics."*

Feeling left out of the solution isn't helpful for this group. Based on the sheer number of Caucasian men in leadership roles, combined with the confidence and safety they feel to address issues at work, **Caucasian men need to be actively engaged as critical allies and advocates** in creating a culture of inclusion by:

· **Training and Coaching** on behaviors that can have a positive impact.

· **Setting expectations** for specific behaviors to create more inclusive habits and routines.

· **Holding leaders accountable** for role modeling desired behaviors and driving change.

· **Reward** those who achieved desired results.

How do behaviors define a culture?

Throughout any given day, employees interact with each other within an organization by communicating decisions, asking for input, facilitating discussions, providing feedback, etc. Leaders of people also have these same interactions, but because of the power they have in the organization, their actions can have a more **emotional and memorable impact** on a follower. For example, when asked about times when they felt devalued, participants in our survey recalled stories of an everyday interaction gone wrong, resulting in a painful, long-standing, very clear memory. Stories also tended to be in much greater detail. Our survey asked for both stories of when one felt valued and devalued. The stories of when one felt devalued or minimized used over 70% more characters to describe what happened. The stories were longer and more detailed in describing what happened and how it made them feel, reflecting its impact on their psyche and memories.

Similarly, when asked about when they felt valued, participants also told very detailed stories about when someone stood up for them or helped them get ahead. These vivid memories were equally emotional and enduring.

Actions that leaders take, while seemingly inconsequential to the leader, can create an emotion and a memory for individuals in the organization that surface time and time again over years when describing their workplace. We call these emotional memories *defining moments* because these memories create a strong belief about the culture that defines it for the individual.

Defining moments can be negative and positive and can undermine or intensify the desired culture.

The Defining Moments Model

Defining Moments are the memorable moments that matter in an employee's journey. Whether having a positive or negative impact, these moments are memorable because they are personally impactful and highly emotional. Defining moments are small actions that have a huge impact.
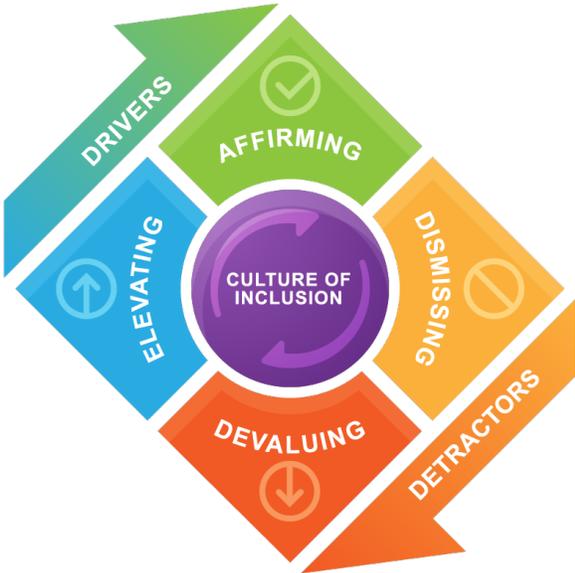
The idea that small actions can have a huge impact is supported by long-standing research on the impact that micro behaviors and actions can have on what one believes about an organization's culture.

Consistent with Avion's philosophy on the impact of leader behaviors and how behaviors can change, the model describes specific behaviors that everyone in the organization can take to create a culture that welcomes and values all. Most importantly, the model also provides actions for senior leaders, allies, and those in a position of power to play a significant role in being part of the solution.

Behaviors that Undermine Your Culture

Behaviors that *detract* from a culture of inclusion, or emotional and memorable moments in an employee's journey that *undermine* the desired culture, are usually not organization-wide, systematic problems. Much like Mary Rowe's research in 1972 on micro-inequities [v], these actions are often subtle and unintentional but with a significant impact. They have big impact because, for the targets of these behaviors, the intense emotions sear the moment into our memory and create a belief about how we feel about our organization. In our Workplace Today survey, when asked to recall a time where you felt devalued or minimized, the stories were lengthy with great detail, even though many noted they happened years ago. These behaviors that detract from a culture can be categorized as either dismissing or devaluing behaviors, differentiated by how intentional and conscious the actions are toward an individual.

Dismissing-Dismissing behaviors are *subtle, often unconscious, and unintentional* actions that make one feel insignificant. Dismissing behaviors can be categorized into leaders excluding, being indifferent to, or underappreciating those who are on their team.

Excluding-These are actions we take that exclude others from the decision-making process. It's not surprising that based on the data, being asked for your point of view is the strongest predictor of feeling included because being *excluded* from a decision or having your point of view discounted was by far the most mentioned action that made individuals feel unimportant. Stories of being excluded include:

"I've never been asked for my opinion or thoughts on improving my department. Decisions are made without my input and when I provide feedback it falls on deaf ears."

"A meeting was scheduled that I was supposed to be part of but not informed. I was called to the meeting as it began with no way to prepare for it. I had to punch out for lunch and missed the entire meeting by the time I returned. I apologized to one of the organizers and was told "don't worry about it, you were an afterthought"."

"I am not located in physical proximity to our corporate headquarters. There are multiple times where I believe my opinion and experience would be a valuable asset to our company and future decisions that they make, but no effort was made to solicit that perspective."

Being Indifferent- These actions make others feel like you don't care enough about them. Everyone wants to feel cared for, especially during times of crisis. Leaders, especially when stretched or overwhelmed, may find it difficult to put themselves in the shoes of those on their team. This lack of empathy leads to ineffective communication and interactions that are too impersonal and result in employees feeling like their leader or company doesn't care about them. Stories that described a lack of effective communication include:

"I want to understand why we do the things we do. If a response is 'Why do you think that is important?' or that it does not matter, it does make you feel devalued and less likely to step up and contribute thoughts, ideas, solutions."

"There was no onboarding, no sense of welcoming or that my joining the organization meant anything to anyone."

"Too much time went by before he asked how I was coping with the pandemic…and so my subordinate and I were there for each other and took leadership into our own hands to check on the rest of the team."

Underappreciating-These are actions that overlook good work or performance. All leaders should know the importance of recognition for good work; however, many fail to recognize enough. Recognition can come in many forms, such as giving credit for great work, compensation, promotion opportunity, added responsibility, empowerment and autonomy, and a simple thank you. When underappreciated, employees feel like the work they do doesn't matter. Stories of being underappreciated include:

"I had a leader who would consistently take credit for work I had completed or just not acknowledge who had put the effort to complete tasks, both in private and publicly. This made it very hard to stay motivated and drive forward."

"I wasn't considered for a higher-level role when I was qualified for it. My manager told me he was going to advocate for me and expect a conversation. There was no conversation and an external candidate was hired."

"I had a leader/manager that never acknowledged anything good or bad. It is not reassuring when you do not know where you stand - good or bad."

Devaluing-Devaluing behaviors are much more damaging because they *are more conscious and intentiona*l and meant to minimize or diminish. Although they aren't as common as dismissing behaviors, they are more damaging to the culture because they are searingly memorable stories that end up being shared for years. Devaluing behaviors can be categorized into offending and abandoning.

Offending-These are direct comments to an individual meant to make them feel insignificant. Surprisingly, despite training on diversity, fairness, and emotional intelligence (along with safeguards put in by human resources that are common in most organizations), offensive comments still occur in the workplace. Often, they result from a loss of composure from a leader when stressed or angered. And, sometimes, a leader isn't aware that their comment has a highly negative impact. Regardless, these moments are shocking to the targets and often those who witness them. Stories include:

"At my previous employer nothing was ever good enough, she always highlighted our mistakes publicly. My boss reprimanded me in front of my peers, and I felt awful."

"I expressed a desire to seek more leadership responsibility and my leader told me that I could just leave the team if I really didn't want to be there - that caring about the company is fine, but if I didn't want to be on the team, fine, just go."

"... the GC asked about something he saw during the walk, I answered but I guess he did not want me to respond and stated, 'I am not asking you, and you don't know what you're talking about' in front of the others."

"Being yelled at by a supervisor at a meeting for a point I tried to explain about our program needs. The meeting was with another team."

Abandoning- These are actions or words that make employees feel like you are intentionally avoiding them or leaving them to deal with challenging issues on their own. Employees want to know their leader has their back and supports them, especially if things go wrong. When leaders don't step up to support or advocate for their employees, they feel abandoned and unimportant. Further, when issues are surfaced with a leader, there is an obligation to respond. By not responding to a surfaced issue, a problem worsens along with employees' feelings of being devalued. Stories of being abandoned include:

"I have been having difficulty with a particular leader who was recently promoted. She excluded me from things I should have been involved in and asked me to do work that was outside of my job. When I asked to meet with her to discuss my role, she rejected meeting requests and sent me an email telling me that she would not meet with me, but instead would discuss what she wanted from my department with my manager."

"After being incredibly concerned about the direction in which a specific project was going and the behavior of a peer, I confided in my leader, sharing those observations and was told that "name" is just being "name" and we can't be sensitive about it."

"I have been asked numerous times to "fix" issues or challenges that come up in other departments; I have never hesitated to assist. One time, my direct supervisor called me out in front of a team member who disagreed with a decision I made even when the strategy was previously discussed with him. I later found out that he had undermined decisions on numerous occasions without respecting me enough to have a conversation about it."

"I was bullied by our Director for 5 years in significant ways, negatively impacting my physical and emotional health. I went to the owner as serious events happened and nothing was done. Other Corporate staff also shared their similar situations with the same individual. Nothing was done until a senior leader quit."

These behaviors that detract from a culture of inclusion work to undermine the desired culture. While typically not enterprise-wide actions or intentions, these small actions from leaders, if commonplace and accepted, chip away at the perception that a workplace is safe, welcoming, and inclusive.

How can certain behaviors detract from a culture of inclusion?

Everyone can recall a time where you felt dismissed or devalued at work, and based on our research, these memories are long-lasting and painful. While these behaviors can happen to anyone in an organization, research shows they are **more negatively impactful to women and minorities** because:

· Women and people of color aren't as confident in addressing the issues either through direct feedback or other channels. Our research shows that women and people of color feel *significantly less* empowered and confident when addressing issues of fairness at work.

· Women and minorities tend to have fewer advocates and mentors in organizations with whom they can discuss actions that are perceived as unfair or attacking.

Our Culture of Inclusion model raises awareness of the specific types of behaviors that detract or undermine a culture so that we can all assess our own actions. More importantly, the model provides a common language to empower others to give direct feedback and call out the behavior when it is observed.

## Can you overcome making mistakes that undermine the culture?

Since these behaviors may often be unintentional or blind spots for leaders, it should be expected that all leaders will make mistakes. The opportunity to create a more positive memory or belief rests in how the mistake is handled. For example, if one team member interrupts or talks over another in a meeting and, through feedback, finds out that they made a colleague feel dismissed, the right thing to do would be to apologize for the behavior and the impact it had. Openly apologizing when a mistake is made can help build credibility for a leader and can lead to a positive defining moment, as long as the behavior was a mistake and isn't frequent.

While it is impossible to avoid behaviors like this altogether, especially in large organizations, **holding others accountable** for undermining a culture of inclusion can also lead to a positive defining moment. If individuals in the organization know that behaviors that undermine the culture are not tolerated and clear consequences for actions that fall into this category, employees will feel safer and more valued by their leaders.

Appropriate reactions to behaviors that undermine the culture are essential in reinforcing expectations. However, it is much more impactful to *enlist everyone* to take positive actions and behaviors that *intensify* and strengthen the desired culture.

What behaviors *can* make a difference in creating a culture of inclusion?

Behaviors that *drive* a culture of inclusion create emotional and memorable moments in an employee's journey that *intensify* and reinforce the desired culture. Our research shows that these behaviors develop feelings of being welcome, valued, and safe within an organization and fall into two categories, *affirming* and *elevating behaviors* differentiated by how much effort and personal risk to take action.
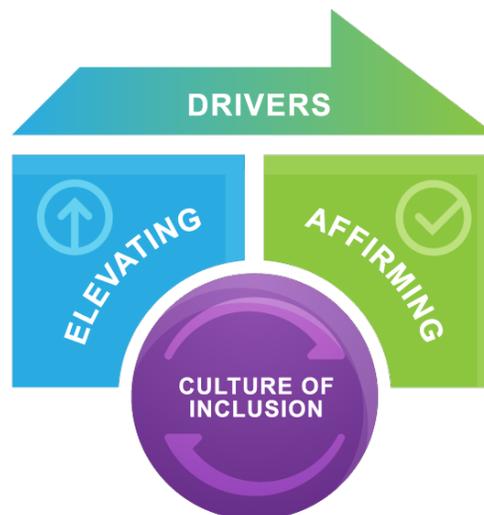
Affirming-Affirming behaviors are more *subtle, day-to-day actions* that recognize one's existence and contribution to an organization. These behaviors are categories into Expressing Interest, Appreciating, and Inquiring.

> **Expressing Interest**- These actions show you are interested in someone beyond just the work they do. Everyone in an organization appreciates being acknowledged and understood. Leaders who spend time greeting and getting to know those on their team drive more engagement. Getting to know individuals who work with and for you gives leaders greater insight into how others perceive working for the organization and how it can be improved. Acts that express interest and care in others are

often small actions that have a big impact. Stories that described the impact of simply expressing authentic interest in someone include:

"Direct manager took the time to find out what we liked and bought us cupcakes unexpectedly for doing such a great job during month end. Very unexpected and the small gesture meant a lot."

"I worked for a leader who checked on his staff at all levels to make sure that they were ok and to see what they needed. It is rare to see individuals who truly care about the greater good. You had career chats annually and he pushed you to expose your potential."

"…the co-leader of North America just wanted to catch-up - see how I was handling the working conditions, asked about my family, specifically by name (and recalled individual details about their lives) and told me that she values me and the contributions I bring. It was a 30-minute call that ran over long because she was sharing a story about her family!"

Appreciating-These are actions that express gratitude for outstanding work or performance. It won't be surprising to hear that recognition and expressing appreciation for one's work goes a long way to creating a feeling of inclusion and value. Our survey shows that private and public recognition has a big impact as long as it is authentic and personalized. Stories included in our survey:

"One of my leaders gave me a handwritten thank you letter for the completion of a significant project I was leading. It was really special as handwritten communications in general are few and far between. It was short, but very heartfelt and made me feel how much they valued my work."

"A few weeks ago, my leader unexpectedly sent me a package that contained a thank you note along with a small plant and double walled mug with my name on it. While the appreciation message was great, the fact that she took the time to customize a gift was a lovely touch. Personal, thoughtful and paired with a note thanking me for all of my hard work so far this year. Lovely!"

"One time I was praised during a team meeting for handling a system failure without interruption of business by our GM. It made me feel special."

Inquiring-These are actions that solicit the point of view of others in a way that makes them feel valued. As our research shows, the strongest driver of a feeling of inclusion is being asked for your input. If leaders simply began their decision-making process by asking others for their point of view, they would make those on their team feel more valued. Being included in decisions is the most frequently mentioned action in both stories of being valued and devalued in organizations. Example stories include:

"I felt valued when my leader reached out to me individually and sought my opinion for issues the company was facing that did not concern my department. That he was soliciting my opinion on serious decisions that he and other executives needed to make on behalf of the entire company made me feel valued."

"My boss, COO, supports me in my decisions, asks for my opinions and allows me to talk decisions out with him. Having him listen and support me is everything to me. He also will say and email me compliments that make me feel good in my job."

"I was sought out specifically for my perspective on how we should approach a new client opportunity. I felt heard and every effort was made to incorporate specific suggestions that I had into our future action with this significant client."

Elevating-Elevating behaviors are more *intentional actions where the leader takes some personal risk* or meaningful investment when advocating, advancing, or empowering another to lift them to a higher place. Personal risk can be considered putting their time, credibility, or reputation at stake for the benefit of another. Elevating behaviors can be categorized into Empowering, Advancing, and Advocating.

Empowering-These are actions that make others feel you trust them. Individuals greatly appreciate when leaders trust them to do the right thing and perform their jobs effectively. While empowering can also be viewed as a form of recognition, this goes a step further because the freedom to act independently puts the leader's credibility at risk if the individual does not meet expectations. Empowering is most impactful when enacted during times of personal crisis, and employees are given room to deal with issues without regard to work objectives or rules. These stories carry lots of emotion and garner significant loyalty from employees, examples include:

"Even though I'm new to the organization, my manager demonstrates that she trusts my judgment and expertise by allowing me to run my team and get the work done with minimal oversight. I feel both valued and empowered by this approach."

"Frequent interaction with our CEO who has entrusted me with building out the Media & Entertainment vertical for the company. A daunting challenge - especially in today's environment - but I feel fully empowered and supported to be successful."

"My mother fell ill with a serious health crisis 6 months into my new position; I thought I would have to quit my job to care for my mother as she needed constant care. At the time, the woman I reported to made sure that I knew that my mother came first and that she would help cover my responsibilities until my mother recovered."

"…my wife and child were in a car accident. I was very hesitant to take time off from work since I had just started. The owner and GM personally called me and told me to take whatever time I needed and checked back in with me. A gesture like that will stay with me forever. You won't find that in the handbook, but that's how we roll around here.'

Advancing- These are actions leaders take where they *personally* invest time or energy to help others develop and grow in the organization. Leaders who take a genuine interest in advancing the career of an individual garner their loyalty and drive engagement. Actions like having an individual take an assignment that stretches them, discussing personal aspirations, and investing resources in their development, make employees feel valued and appreciated. Example stories include:

"I had a different manager that was both focused on feedback and development. The leader encouraged my success as a platform for a promotion, I did not take it but the way he positioned his words I felt like I was a valued part of the business."

"My leader allowed me to assist him in his work one day that allowed me to grow in my understanding. I really appreciated the trust and felt valued as a team member that he would go out of his way to help me grow further in my role for my career. He was an amazing leader!"

"…direct manager wrote the leader of my org and spoke about specific positive behavioral changes he had witnessed as a direct result of the 3-day training. My big boss wrote me and followed up with my direct supervisor as a result of the email. "

Advocating- These are actions where leaders put their reputations on the line to support, defend, or advance another. The most intentional of all elevating actions is to advocate for another in the organization. Even more so than advancing behaviors, advocating takes personal risk. The leaders who advocate typically are standing up for employees and ensuring they have a voice and are successful. Example stories include:

"My boss was promoted to COO of the company. We had a new GM come in where we did not see eye-to-eye. The COO flew in 3 times to help us get on the right track and ensure we are both successful. We have a great relationship now and performing well."

"My manager is amazing. …The entire team was unhappy with the pending changes. Our manager collected the feedback and went back to leadership with concerns. Our feedback and comments were received well, and leadership made some adjustments. My manager supports the team."

"I had an idea on how the organization could save money. I talked to my boss about it. My boss followed the chain of command. My idea was not implemented. My boss, however, explained how valuable my insights were and how much the idea was appreciated. That one person made me feel like I could bring ideas forward in the future."

After surfacing issues on diversity "…The president responded to me that same day, and asked many, many questions about my experience as a partner (employee), … She engaged in several more emails with me, and I got a call from my Regional VP and was added to a work group by our SVP. This made me feel that the people in power, though they don't always get it right, are committed to hearing the voices of those in middle management and making our organization better."

How can organizations ensure women of color feel valued?

These behaviors that we recommend would benefit *all* employees and would go a long way in creating a culture where *everyone* feels included.

However, given our research, **special attention should be paid** to actions that create a feeling of belonging and value for women of color. For example, even in companies that espouse inclusion and, by all accounts, take diversity initiatives seriously, stories of women of color being left in the office while the "group" go out to a social lunch or for drinks are all too familiar. It could be because, out of all diverse populations, women of color make up the smallest group when it comes to leadership roles, with Latinas comprising 4.3%; Black women 4% and Asian women just 2.5% of all management roles in the United States, while Caucasian women make up slightly over 30%. [vi] **When you are one of few** people like you in an office environment, feelings of exclusion and marginalization are hard to overlook. And unfortunately, colleagues may *assume* you don't have much in common with them.

The good news is that, like other behavior changes, identifying the ideal behaviors isn't the hard part. Our research has helped describe target behaviors, and they are relatively easy to do. Developing a habit or routine of the behaviors will take intention, practice, and commitment. Here are a **few routines to implement** that align with our research to create a culture of inclusion for all, but especially for women of color:

- Ensuring each employee is welcomed into the organization with a formalized plan to introduce them to their colleagues and assign an engaged onboarding mentor who will introduce them to others in the organization and onboard them to cultural norms.

- Ending meetings by asking *each* team member to comment on the main topic in a round-robin format to ensure all employees get a voice. Those who feel safer in an organization tend to be the most vocal with their ideas and input. Our research shows that women of color have lower levels of confidence and feelings of safety, which may lead to hesitation when offering their point of view.

- For the same reason listed above, before making a decision, being intentional about ensuring you are soliciting and hearing from everyone on your team by reaching out and asking *each* person their point of view and how they perceive the decision will impact them.

- Investing time in getting to understand the perspective and perceptions of diverse employees on your team, especially women of color, by having one-on-ones or lunch specifically focused on getting to know them better and understanding their aspirations.

- Understanding the career objectives of those on your team, especially women of color, and actively supporting their development and growth by giving appropriate assignments to stretch them and publicly acknowledging their work. Thankfully, much of the work focused on the growth and development of women at work has some positive results. 75% of the Caucasian women in our survey agree that they have someone at work who advocates for them. Unfortunately, only 65% of women of color feel the same. Leaders should be more intentional about mentoring and advocating for women of color.

The key to jumpstart transforming into a culture of inclusion.

The key to any successful transformation or change is to be clear on outcomes, roles, and expectations.

When it comes to culture and culture change, organizations should be able to describe their desired culture in great detail using examples and stories to create a vision for the future. Further, organizations need to be clear that everyone in the organization has a role in creating the desired culture. Culture isn't the role of Human Resources or any other department. Employees at all levels, especially the top, need to understand their role. Finally, being very clear on behavior expectations, training on those behaviors, and supporting leaders to develop new routines and habits will drive a feeling of inclusion.

As leaders begin to practice the behaviors that drive a culture of inclusion, stories of defining moments that are created will start to surface. As the defining moments more closely align with the ideal culture, beliefs will be reinforced that the culture welcomes and values everyone.

Make no mistake that transforming into a culture of inclusion is a long-term commitment, especially given multi-year strategies that focus on developing diverse talent pipelines and recruiting and retaining diverse candidates. However, a **key to jumpstarting the transformation** is identifying and developing **new behaviors and habits** and ensuring that leaders are accountable for acting as role models for those behaviors. By focusing *first* on desired behaviors, organizations will ensure they start with foundational work on which the complex work can be built. Most importantly, they will be starting with **checking behaviors and not *just* checking a box**.

Michelle DiTondo is a Principal with Avion Consulting. She has 30 years of experience in Human Resources leadership. Prior to joining Avion Consulting, Michelle was the Chief Human Resources Officer for MGM Resorts, leading human resources and culture strategy for nearly a decade. Michelle and the Avion team have developed training content around the Defining Moments model, leveraging her experiences within MGM Resorts International, where her thinking behind defining moments and their impact on culture was inspired. She can be reached at mditondo@avionconsulting.com. You can learn more about Avion Consulting at www.avionconsulting.com.

[i] (Kirkland & Bohnet, 2017)
[ii] (Rowe, 1990)
[iii] (Cutter & Weber, 2020)
[iv] (Catalyst, 2020)
[v] (Rowe, 1990)
[vi] (Catalyst, 2020)