



Authenticity – The Key to Being an Inclusive Leader

Members of inclusive teams demonstrate transparency and authenticity. This level of teamwork requires team members to make themselves vulnerable to one another without fear that their vulnerabilities (weaknesses, skill deficiencies, mistakes, requests for help) will be used against them. To cultivate an inclusive team, the leader must him/herself demonstrate authenticity and transparency and create an environment that does not retaliate against vulnerability.

Getting Started: Do something! Begin your next team meeting by sharing something from your background. If you are uncomfortable sharing this information, you are probably in the right neighborhood. After you have role-modeled being transparent, please share with the team how it made you feel to make yourself vulnerable. Next, you can follow this up by asking each team member to share something about their childhood (their favorite childhood vacation, most memorable moment, the dream of becoming something that did not materialize, etc.) The conversation will create an energy that fuels awareness and interdependence within the team. Ask team members for suggestions on how to build on that interdependence.

In my book, *Diversity Managers: Angels of Mercy or Barbarians at the Gate*, I discuss a growing body of research which suggests that the most effective way to influence and lead a diverse team is, to begin with, authenticity and transparency. The combination of these two

leadership traits is proving to be the conduit of influence and appears to facilitate trust and the communication and absorption of ideas among team members. Small things such as storytelling send the message that you're comfortable in your leadership ability and are focused on team success. Making authenticity, a priority helps you connect with those on the team and demonstrates that you hear, understand, and can be trusted by them. Maya Angelou understood the power of authenticity and transparency and reminds us that "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Use Mistakes to Connect: Over time, I have come to realize that it is because I make mistakes! The key is what you do when you make a mistake. Authenticity means that while we declare our strengths to others, we also remain aware of our weaknesses and acknowledge them to self and others. This has helped me realize that a lot of how I handle my mistakes when in front of my team helps them to feel closer to me, and therefore pay more attention to what I am saying. Leaders often feel compelled to be so prepared and so polished that it becomes more about "the leader's presence than the team's understanding. When I'm talking to my team in a staff meeting, and I lose my train of thought; rather than just rolling through and playing it off, I use it as a point people can relate too" ("a Shelton senior moment) , and this creates inclusion and engagement.

So put yourself out there and don't be afraid to make to be authentic and transparent. Both show that you are vulnerable, which proves to your team that you are a real person who develops trust. If you are looking to enhance teamwork, inclusion, and productivity, be authentic; in other words, don't be afraid to keep it real.