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# 5 Solutions to Fight the Fear of Inclusive Leadership

#CompleteInclusion

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*In this guide, we have distilled all insights into 5 key fears of inclusive leadership, and offer you the solutions to overcome each of them.*

We regularly hear the frustrations of internal DEI professionals who just can't get buy-in from leaders in the organisation to lead inclusively. In our workshops, leaders display a range of emotions which are typically fuelled by a type of fear. They act as barriers to inclusion. The fears act as reasons why not to, shields to protect, and ultimately prevent change both for the leader and for the organisation.

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# Fear One

## The unknown



We all know the traditional archetype of a good leader. They're strong, decisive and always the one in control. They also rarely defer to the judgement of others and are always sure their way is best. We've all seen examples of this stereotypical leader numerous times in our life, whether in real life as our bosses and teachers, or in film and television as the army drill sergeant or the police inspector.

Leaders therefore have an entrenched view that they must emulate this stereotype as much as they can in order to be good at their job. So when we suggest leadership isn't about having all the answers but instead showing vulnerability and sharing that they don't know it all, it can be hard for people to imagine what it's like.

Many leaders are also wary of inclusive leadership as they believe it to be impossible to know the most inclusive action to take in every situation. What do they need to do to ensure everyone feels that their voice is valued and heard? How can they know that everyone in their team feels free to bring their true self to work?



## Avenir's solution

**There is no one way to be an inclusive leader**, just like there is no way to exhaustively teach a leader about the most inclusive action to take in every scenario. People are complex, as is the world of work.

Employees can be of an almost infinite combination of background, characteristics and personalities, and no one scenario will be the same as another.

Instead, at Avenir, we approach inclusive leadership as **empowering leaders and giving them the toolkit of how to be an inclusive leader so they can approach scenarios** with an inclusive mindset, work out the answers for themselves and continuously grow as a leader. **Inclusive leadership is not what to do, but how to be.**

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# Fear Two

## Acknowledging Privilege

It's a simple fact that most leaders belong to a majority group (one or more), such as male, heterosexual or White. These groups often come with privileges attached due to the inherent way that society is structured. What we're not saying is that these types of people have had easier lives, but simply that **our social structure was designed for the majority**, by the majority. Therefore these types of people have a greater toolkit for success than minority groups.

There is a **hesitance amongst leaders to acknowledge their privilege**. It has become a bit of a 'dirty word' that people assume is trying to make them feel guilty or invalidate their hard work. However, you cannot help who you were born as and how you were raised - you had no control over that, very few do.

In our workshops, we hear a number of pushbacks on privilege, which primarily stem from a fear of letting go of the concept of meritocracy. People like to think they got their job because they were the best person and so it is a hard pill to swallow to consider that there may have been other influences at play.



## Avenir's solution

We acknowledge that discussions about privilege can be uncomfortable for many leaders, as it can feel like an attempt to invalidate their successes, so we create a safe and open environment where people can feel comfortable to voice their concerns and have an open and honest discussion.

Throughout our Inclusive Leadership Programme, we continuously **reinforce that their privilege isn't something to feel guilty about**, but about acknowledging the toolkit they were given in life and how it may differ from other peoples' toolkits. People still have to work hard and use the tools they were given to be able to succeed, but if you have higher quality tools, due to having parents with the income to invest in your education for example, you'll likely get the job done quicker.

The first step is self-awareness and **moving into a space of acceptance**. We support leaders in recognising how their privileges have affected our lives. And then we encourage them to reflect on how to use these tools to elevate and amplify others.

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# Fear Three

## Saying the wrong thing

We hear these words all too often in our workshops. Leaders are scared to say the wrong thing and **risk offending their colleagues and facing negative consequences** for accidental phrasing, so they would rather stay quiet and say nothing at all. This is especially true recently with renewed discussions around 'cancel culture', where there are numerous examples of the media condemning public figures and the pressure on organisations to cut ties.

Leaders feel that they are navigating through a minefield, and one mistaken word will put them in danger of being 'cancelled'.

However, there is also a large amount of dialogue about how being a bystander and not actively standing alongside people when they have been excluded (either overtly or subtly) can be just as bad as enacting it yourself. This puts leaders in an uncomfortable position of not wanting to offend anyone, but also demonstrating allyship, which can be quite stressful.



## Avenir's solution

Deeply embedded in the foundation of our Inclusive Leadership Programme, is getting leaders to be **comfortable with discomfort**. We encourage leaders to enter conversations through a lens of curiosity rather than anticipating or assuming another person's experience. As you can imagine, this mindset shift is incredibly freeing.

Seeking to learn is always better than staying in ignorance, and many people agree. People can be very forgiving of someone inadvertently using poor phrasing when the question was asked respectfully and in the pursuit of learning more about somebody's culture or experiences.

Our Inclusive Leadership Programme can be considered a 'top down' approach to inclusive organisations. Whilst it is an absolute necessity, **culture change is accelerated when a 'bottom up' approach is also adopted**. This sets the leaders up for success, priming their teams and staff at all levels to expect something different from their leaders and to show kindness and care as leaders step into this uncomfortable space.

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# Fear Four



## Opening up a can of worms

We often hear this fear play out through the questions leaders ask.

**For example, one leader asked:**

*"Should we really put in so much effort to change things if it's only going to make a difference to 1% of our organisation?"*

**A client CEO said:**

*"If we offer flexible working to one the it sets a precedence for everyone and we just can't do it".*

This fear is about acknowledging and addressing one inequity in their organisation, which will lead to more voices, more evidence of inequities for others. They fear that they have no sight of how big the mountain to climb is until they have embarked on the journey. In many ways they are right. We deliberately give space for leaders to look at how power plays a role in their organisational system and to own the multiple inequalities linked to it.



## Avenir's solution

It is true that often DEI can seem messy and endless, and we often hear leaders asking us, *"Where do I start and where do I stop?"*. Whilst it is a bit of a cliché: **inclusive leadership is a journey, not a destination**. Throughout our Inclusive Leadership Programme, we promote a mindset of curiosity and continuous learning, both in terms of self-insight and the organisational system.

We reinforce that identifying an inequity (or worm if you like) is a huge first step and it does not have to be solved immediately, but rather incorporated into a DEI strategy. Most of the time, new policies or processes can solve or alleviate multiple issues at once. We promise it is a lot more manageable than it may seem at first.

# Fear Five

## The change that comes with inclusion

This fear is arguably the most universal and understandable of the 5 fears. Most people are scared of change in some capacity. At its very core change it is about moving away from what we know and inevitably letting go of something we have relied upon in the past. It is common to worry that change will leave us in a worse position than we are in right now, which is why many people, leaders included, try to avoid or delay change.

Before a leader becomes truly inclusive leader, they must go through the acknowledgement of privilege and introspection that we discussed in Fear Two. Often this then throws up a series of follow-on questions, for example,

*"If we offer flexible working to one the it sets a precedence for everyone and we just can't do it".*

The short answer is no (although active allyship can include this). Inclusive leadership is about ensuring future leaders have a fair chance of success, and using their positional power to create change.

Many leaders also fear what change could mean for their organisation as a whole. Changes to organisational structure and policies will have ripple effects across the organisation no doubt, and sometimes these effects can be unpredictable. One client CEO said,

*"We definitely want to be inclusive of perspective and championing of minorities. But, not at any cost.....ultimately our leaders are successful because of our intellect, drive and intense pursuit of excellence and improvement".*

This fear that cultivating inclusive practices will be at the sacrifice of business success is very real for many leaders.



## Avenir's solution

This fear is arguably the most challenging to overcome and **requires a level of openmindedness and belief that the current state could be better**. Sometimes this can be difficult for leaders to understand when the organisation has a successful track record.

Often, leaders need a sense of urgency, a burning platform so to speak, in order to put energy and effort into leading inclusively. And there is no better way to do this than hearing stories of exclusion from close colleagues, those they share their working lives with each day. Leaders can be taken aback, suddenly realising what they were completely unaware of. Our Inclusive Leadership Programme is highly experiential and practical, **creating a safe space where open discussion can take place**. And we have seen the power of this space in overcoming the fear of change.

# Inclusive Leadership Programme

## CORE COMPONENTS

**1**

### PRIVILEGE, BIAS OR MERIT?

- Learn what privilege is and how it has played out in their own life and for others
- Consider the role of privilege and power in the organisational systems and structures
- Participate in and experience the debate of merit and bias
- Co-design ways to break the organisational systems of privilege

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*I now look at all points of view and am trying hard not to be judgemental just because it's not my view.*

**2**

### SKILLS OF AN INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

- Discuss what it means to be an inclusive leader and the key skills
- Experience the power of humility and vulnerability as a leader
- Practice deep listening and truly seeing others
- Commit to taking ownership and action

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*Be open to having more conversations with people across the office. Listen more rather than trying to fix a problem.*

**3**

### ACTION & ADVOCACY

- Learn techniques for interrupting bias in self and others
- Discuss barriers and develop core principles to being an inclusive leader
- Create their individual advocacy plan and commit as a group

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*Use the tools learned to support my listening, discussions with others and interrupting bias in myself and others.*

**4**

### SELF-FACILITATED LEARNING PODS

- Practice sharing, listening to different views and collaborating with peers.
- Leadership cohesion and understanding of each other.
- Collective learning and accountability
- Collation of inclusion nudges that can be circulated across all programme participants.

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*I learnt so much from my pod members – things we wouldn't have shared with each other before.*



**Growth + Success**  
**via**  
**Inclusion + Diversity**



**AVENIR**

Please get in touch to speak to one of our consultants to find out how we can support you on your diversity, equity and inclusion journey: [hello@avenirconsultingservices.com](mailto:hello@avenirconsultingservices.com)

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