Inclusive Leadership:
The View From Six Countries
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The Catalyst Research Center for Career Pathways exposes root causes of gender gaps from the classroom to the boardroom, conducting research that sorts myth from fact, identifies the true problems that hold women and other underrepresented groups back from advancement, and provides a solid basis for more effective talent development. The Center’s findings allow businesses, media, governments, and individuals to gauge women’s progress and develop solutions and action plans to advance women into leadership.

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Founded in 1962, Catalyst is the leading nonprofit organization expanding opportunities for women and business. With offices in the United States, Canada, Europe, India, and Australia, and more than 700 members, Catalyst is the trusted resource for research, information, and advice about women at work. Catalyst annually honors exemplary organizational initiatives that promote women’s advancement with the Catalyst Award.
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Inclusive Leadership

Understanding Inclusion Across Cultures

On a recent assignment in India, Julie was facilitating a weeklong course for a group of middle managers at her company’s Mumbai office. She was the only person in the group who wasn’t Indian—and one of very few women. On the first day, when the group broke for lunch, Julie was eager to connect with the managers more informally. Although the course had been well received among American managers, she had doubts about how well it would “go over” in India.

As caterers brought in boxed lunches, Julie began to circulate among the managers. Amitabh, head of the Mumbai office, invited the group to begin eating but paused to recognize Julie and announce that a special lunch had been provided for her. He presented her with a box marked, “Deluxe.” Julie graciously accepted but immediately became uncomfortable at being singled out. When she opened the box, it was hard for Julie to hide her disappointment. While everyone else delved into delicious Indian fare, Julie stared back at a bowl of pasta.

As the others enjoyed their meals, Julie began to eat hers too—not wanting to offend her host who had gone to such great pains to make her feel welcome. But in fact, Amitabh’s well-intentioned gesture had quite the opposite effect. Julie was deeply affected. “How can I connect with these managers, if they don’t even believe I’m open-minded enough to try the local cuisine?” she thought. For Julie, who was already feeling like an “outsider,” eating pasta while every else enjoyed paratha and vegetable curry set her apart even more. Ironically, and perhaps without even knowing it, Amitabh’s attempt to honor Julie made her feel excluded.

For the rest of the day, Julie struggled to connect with the group. Rather than being engaging, Julie grew more and more self-conscious—and it showed. She wasn’t thinking on her feet as she typically did, and she struggled to adapt her approach to the needs and interests of her Indian colleagues.

Julie’s story highlights a real challenge that leaders increasingly face in today’s global business landscape: how to create diverse teams where coworkers of all genders, ethnicities/races, and nationalities, feel included. Small acts, even well-intended ones, can create dividing lines and contribute to a sense of exclusion—with consequences for individual and team performance. To optimize the performance of diverse teams and become more mindful of the small moments that define whether employees feel included or excluded, global leaders must wrestle with some big questions.

For starters, how much do the very definitions of inclusion vary from culture to culture? Are there gender differences in what makes employees feel included? What leadership behaviors can promote inclusion? And how much do these behaviors need to be adapted for different cultural contexts?

The Study at a Glance

To find the answers to these questions, Catalyst surveyed a total of 1,512 employees, approximately 250 from each of six different countries—Australia, China (Shanghai), Germany, India, Mexico, and the United States. All participants were full-time employees, 22 and older, and employed in companies with more than 50 employees. These women and men, both equally represented in the sample, reported on their experiences of inclusion within their workgroups and about the leadership behaviors of their managers.

Survey results revealed striking similarities across most countries in how employees characterize inclusion and the leadership behaviors that help to foster it. Notably, we found a common definition of inclusion that held equally for women and men. What makes women feel included also makes men feel included. We also found that to be inclusive, leaders may not need a different tool set for each country in which they operate. Among most of the countries we studied, there seems to be common language of inclusion.
What Difference Does Inclusion Make?

Julie’s situation was temporary. When the week’s training ended, she left the workgroup, and her struggles may not have had such a great impact overall. But what about those situations where employees have ongoing workgroup experiences where they continue to feel like outsiders and struggle to connect with coworkers—day in and day out? If Julie’s performance was affected, even given the temporary nature of her situation, imagine how employees are affected when they feel excluded from their permanent workgroups on an ongoing basis.

Some prior studies have shown that being excluded can impair performance on cognitive tasks, reduce the ability to problem-solve in the face of difficulty, and may reduce creativity.

Inclusion Linked to Employee Reports of Innovation and Helpfulness

In the six countries we studied (Australia, China, India, Germany, Mexico, and the United States) we found evidence that feeling included does indeed have a real-world impact.

We measured this impact by using leading indicators of critical outcomes that managers care about: product innovation and productivity. Specifically, Catalyst examined whether employees who felt more included were more likely to report innovating on the job—i.e., identifying opportunities for new products and processes and trying out new ideas and approaches to problems. We also investigated whether inclusion was linked to team citizenship, behaviors such as offering help to colleagues with heavy workloads, picking up responsibilities of absent colleagues, and volunteering assistance to one’s manager. Our analyses revealed that inclusion was linked both to employees’ self-reported innovation and team citizenship—behaviors that can have a profound impact on overall team productivity and product innovation.

- In all six countries, the more included employees felt, the more innovative they reported being in their jobs.
- In every country, employee perceptions of inclusion contributed substantively—more than 40% on average—to reports of innovation.
- In Australia, Germany, and the United States, employee perceptions of inclusion accounted for 19% to 22% of innovation.
- In India, employee perceptions of inclusion accounted for 62% of innovation.
Inclusive Leadership

MAKING SENSE OF THE NUMBERS

How much an employee helps fellow colleagues or suggests new product ideas is determined by a great many things. In addition to how included that employee feels, workgroup size and personal values likely affect these behaviors, too.

Our goal in this research is not to identify all of these explanatory factors. Rather, it is to understand inclusion better. Specifically, we want to examine 1) how employees perform—whether they innovate or engage in team citizenship—when they experience inclusion; and 2) the leadership behaviors that contribute to that experience.

When studying experiences and behaviors such as inclusion and employee innovation it is important to keep their complexity in mind. In reality, it would be surprising to identify a single factor that could perfectly predict—i.e., explain 100%—how much inclusion employees experience or the extent to which they engage in innovation. Indeed, identifying a factor that can explain even 20% of any such complex phenomena as these is noteworthy. By that measure, the findings we report here offer significant insights about the precursors and consequences of inclusion.

In China and Mexico, the link between inclusion and employee innovation was strongest. Chinese and Mexican employees’ perceptions of inclusion accounted for 78% and 51% of innovation, respectively.

In all six countries, the more included employees felt, the more they reported engaging in team citizenship behaviors—going above and beyond the “call of duty” to help other team members and meet workgroup objectives.

In India, employee perceptions of inclusion accounted for 43% of team citizenship behavior.

In Australia, Germany and the United States, employee perceptions of inclusion accounted for 29% to 41% of team citizenship.

In China and Mexico, the link between inclusion and team citizenship was strongest. Chinese and Mexican employees’ perceptions of inclusion accounted for 71% and 60% of citizenship, respectively.

FIGURE 2
Inclusion’s Relationship to Employees’ Innovation and Team Citizenship
Belongingness + Uniqueness = Inclusion in Most Countries

Given the impact inclusion can have on individual and team performance, it is important to understand just what makes employees feel included. Our findings suggest that in Australia, China, Germany, Mexico, and the United States, employees felt included when, simultaneously, they perceived they were both similar to and distinct from their coworkers.

- Perceiving similarities with coworkers engendered a feeling of belongingness while perceiving differences led to feelings of uniqueness; together, across countries, these perceptions were strong predictors of inclusion.¹⁴

- Employee feelings of uniqueness and belongingness contributed on average more than 20% to employees’ perceptions of inclusion.

  - Across countries, uniqueness accounted for 18% to 24% of an employee’s perception of inclusion.
  
  - Across countries, belongingness accounted for 27% to 35% of an employee’s perception of inclusion.

### FIGURE 3
Percentage Contribution of Perceived Uniqueness and Belongingness to Inclusion

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Average</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Germany</th>
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<tr>
<td>Belongingness</td>
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<td>29%</td>
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<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Universal Needs: Uniqueness and Belongingness

Although somewhat counterintuitive, these findings are not entirely surprising. In fact, previous studies conducted largely in North America have shown that people have two opposing needs in group settings: the need to belong and the need to be unique. When people feel too similar to group members, they try to set themselves apart, to feel unique. When people feel too different from group members, they feel as if they don’t belong and may try to assimilate and become more similar. Many experts believe these needs for uniqueness and belongingness are in fact universal. Yet previously, most of the relevant research had been done largely in the United States. This study shows that uniqueness and belongingness are important considerations outside of North America, too.

In Most Countries, the Inclusion Formula Was the Same for Women and Men

When it comes to inclusion, we found that the same inclusion formula, uniqueness plus belongingness, held for both women and men.

- Women and men from Australia, China, Germany, Mexico, and the United States all differentiated between feelings of uniqueness and belongingness within their workgroups. And for both genders in each of these countries, uniqueness and belongingness—in combination—created a sense of inclusion.

FIGURE 4
Uniqueness and Belongingness as Components of Employees’ Perceptions of Inclusion
Among Indian Women and Men, Uniqueness and Belongingness Were Not Distinct Contributors to Employee Perceptions of Inclusion

Unlike the pattern observed in other countries, we found that among Indian women and men, uniqueness and belongingness were not distinct contributors to inclusion.

- Indian participants did not differentiate uniqueness and belongingness as distinct workgroup experiences. Those who said they felt unique in their workgroups were equally like to report a sense of belongingness. They seemed to view the concepts of uniqueness and belongingness interchangeably.

If calling attention to a colleague’s unique traits is one way to signal acceptance in an Indian context, then it is easy to see how Amitabh, the manager in our opening story—acted as he did. Perhaps, by ordering Julie a European-style meal, he was attempting to acknowledge Julie’s distinct cultural heritage, and, in so doing, convey that she was a valued member of the workgroup. Yet coming from the United States, a context where being treated or viewed as exceptional does not necessarily signal belonging and group acceptance, Julie did not interpret his actions in the way Amitabh intended. Rather than feeling accepted, she felt excluded. Quite likely, with a little more insight into each other’s cultural frame of reference, Amitabh and Julie might have had a better start to their working relationship.

DEFINING INCLUSION

Practitioners and researchers define inclusion in many different ways. Some definitions focus on valuing differences. Others emphasize finding common ground to promote cohesion. Psychological theory as well as the data we present here give credence to both these points of view.

Our findings suggest that leaders who wish to create inclusive cultures need to value the diversity of talents, experiences, and identities that employees bring. At the same time, they need to find common ground. Focusing too much on the former could lead employees to feel alienated or stereotyped. Focusing primarily on the latter can leave employees reluctant to share views and ideas that might set them apart, increasing the odds of problems like groupthink. When employees feel unique—recognized for their differences—and feel a sense of belonging based on sharing common attributes and goals with their peers, organizations best increase the odds of benefiting from workforce diversity. Our findings suggest that a balanced strategy of meeting employees’ needs for uniqueness and belongingness can be more impactful in increasing employee innovation and engagement than a strategy focusing on only one or the other of these needs.
The Four Leadership Behaviors Linked to Inclusion

What exactly can leaders do to help employees feel included? In Australia, China, Germany, Mexico, and the United States, four leadership behaviors predicted feelings of uniqueness and belongingness—the two key ingredients for inclusion. These were:

- **Empowerment**—Enabling direct reports to develop and excel.

- **Humility**—Admitting mistakes. Learning from criticism and different points of view. Acknowledging and seeking contributions of others to overcome one’s limitations.

- **Courage**—Putting personal interests aside to achieve what needs to be done. Acting on convictions and principles even when it requires personal risk-taking.

- **Accountability**—Demonstrating confidence in direct reports by holding them responsible for performance they can control.

Together, these behaviors are part of an altruistic repertoire of leadership. Rather than being motivated by concerns about self-promotion or protecting her own interests and needs, the leader believes her primary obligation is to support and assist her direct reports. Among both women and men employees from Australia, China, Germany, Mexico, and the United States, those who perceived more altruistic behavior from managers reported a greater sense of uniqueness and belongingness, and consequently, inclusion.

- In China, perceiving altruistic behavior on the part of managers accounted for 71% and 67% of employees’ sense of uniqueness and belongingness, respectively.
• In the United States, Germany, and Australia, perceiving altruistic behavior on the part of managers accounted for 38% to 46% of employees’ sense of uniqueness and 27% to 39% of their sense of belongingness. Although still significant, the relationship between altruistic leadership and employee feelings of uniqueness and belongingness was smaller in these countries than we saw in China.

• In Mexico, perceiving altruistic behavior on the part of managers accounted for 32% of employees’ sense of uniqueness and 24% of their sense of belongingness. In this cultural context, altruistic leadership is still clearly important, but had a weaker relationship with uniqueness and belongingness than observed in all other contexts.

• For Indian women and men employees, perceived altruistic behavior on the part of managers accounted for as much as 42% of inclusion.

Empower Employees to Foster Inclusion

• In all the countries studied, empowerment was the behavior that most reflected altruistic leadership—the leadership style linked to inclusion.

• Humility, courage, and accountability closely followed empowerment as key indicators of altruistic leadership within all six countries.

FIGURE 7
Altruistic Leadership’s Relationship to Employees’ Sense of Uniqueness, Belongingness, and Inclusion

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Think of the most successful leaders in your organization. How highly does humility rank among the attributes these leaders have in common?

Humility was one of the most significant indicators, after empowerment, of altruistic leadership in this study. It is also quite possibly one of the altruistic leadership attributes that is most antithetical to common notions of leadership. Research suggests that we most readily associate leadership competence with attributes like charisma, self-promotion, speaking up first, and speaking longest. Yet these characteristics may not actually be the “stuff” that makes leaders effective in creating inclusive environments. Rather, qualities like “standing back,” humility, and self-sacrifice can go a long way in making leaders more inclusive and effective.

In the current study, we find evidence that empowerment, humility, courage, and accountability—key aspects of altruistic leadership—are important to shaping employee perceptions of inclusion. These behaviors may be especially critical to instill among employees leading global teams.

Key Questions to Consider:

- What can be done to encourage altruistic leadership?
- What practices/norms might inadvertently discourage leaders from demonstrating this style of leadership?
- Are senior leaders in your organization role modeling altruistic behaviors?
- What are the leadership stories that are told in your organization? Do they emphasize humility, courage, accountability, and empowerment?
A Cross-Cultural Model of How Leader Behavior Impacts Employee Perceptions of Inclusion, Innovation, and Team Citizenship

The present research begins to paint a picture of just how much influence leaders can have on whether employees feel included in their workgroups. In most of the countries we studied, four key behaviors—empowerment, humility, courage, and accountability—stood out as most important. As the model below depicts, managers who were perceived to exhibit these altruistic behaviors have direct reports who feel more included by virtue of experiencing a greater sense of belongingness and uniqueness within their respective workgroups. In turn, when these employees experience more inclusion, they become more innovative at their jobs—taking more risks, and suggesting new processes and systems for getting work done. Furthermore, they become better team citizens, going beyond what is required to help team members and achieve workgroup objectives.

In some cultural contexts, leader behaviors may have a particularly strong effect on employee innovation and team citizenship via inclusion. For example, in China, there were relatively strong links between altruistic leadership, inclusion, innovation, and citizenship. These findings suggest that by exhibiting empowerment, humility, courage, and accountability, leaders in China may have a particularly powerful influence on employee innovation and citizenship within workgroups—much more so than in other cultures. Why does China stand out? A likely explanation for the differences we observed is that unlike countries such as Australia, Germany, and the United States, which register higher on individualism and egalitarianism, employee perceptions and behaviors may be relatively more dependent on their managers’ behaviors in more collectivistic, hierarchical cultures like those that we see in China.

FIGURE 8
Altruistic Leadership’s Relationship to Employees’ Perceptions of Inclusion, Innovation, and Team Citizenship in Australia, China, Germany, Mexico, and the United States
The Indian Model

A similar model was observed in India. Altruistic leadership predicted inclusion, which in turn had a direct positive effect on employee innovation and citizenship. Yet, in contrast to most countries we studied, there was no evidence that uniqueness and belongingness were key causal factors affecting whether Indian employees perceived they were included in their workgroups. Although we found evidence for the altruistic leadership-inclusion link, our data did not offer clues as to what underlies this relationship in India.

Why didn’t we crack the inclusion code in India? One reason is that there may not be just one code to decipher. India’s people speak thousands of languages, subscribe to more than nine major religions, and live in 91 different cultural regions. With this high level of cultural diversity, Indian employees may not share a common definition of inclusion. Is there really a pan-Indian view of what inclusion looks like? Or do Indians vary significantly—based on ethnicity and culture—in their definitions of inclusion? In a forthcoming report on India, Catalyst will explore these questions in greater depth.

FIGURE 9
Altruistic Leadership’s Relationship to Employees’ Perceptions of Inclusion, Innovation, and Team Citizenship in India
Gender Matters in India but Not So Much Elsewhere

Across Australia, China, Germany, Mexico, and the United States, the same model linking altruistic leadership to inclusion, employee innovation, and citizenship held equally for women as for men. Further, the relationships between the different parts of this model were similarly strong for both genders. This was not the case in India.

The same links between altruistic leadership, inclusion, and employee innovation were found among Indian men and women. Yet the magnitude of these relationships differed by gender. Notably, in explaining employee innovation and team citizenship, feeling included mattered more among Indian men than women.

- Among Indian men, perceptions of inclusion respectively accounted for 82% and 61% of reported innovation and team citizenship.
- Among Indian women, perceptions of inclusion respectively accounted for 46% and 29% of reported innovation and team citizenship.

Global Organizations: Promote Altruistic Leader Behaviors Increase Inclusion

In all six cultures Catalyst studied, altruistic leader behaviors such as empowerment and humility were an important part of the repertoire among inclusive leaders. Further, Catalyst found that the practice of altruistic leadership is an effective way of helping women and men feel included. Our results suggest that global organizations seeking to create more inclusive work cultures should consider how to develop and reinforce altruistic leadership behaviors among their talent—especially among emerging leaders.

This may be easier said than done. The most popular notions of leadership treat the talents and skills of leaders as the key drivers of their effectiveness. There is little focus on so-called “followers” nor acknowledgement of how their experiences and behaviors impact leader effectiveness and organizational outcomes.

In upcoming reports, Catalyst will explore in-depth, country-specific barriers and opportunities multinational organizations face as they strive to promote altruistic leadership and develop future leaders with the business-critical skills they need to build inclusive work relationships, teams, and organizations.
Endnotes

1. Participant samples are as follows: US: 253 (126 female); Australia: 251 (125 female); India: 253 (128 female); Germany: 253 (125 female); Mexico: 250 (125 female); Shanghai, China: 252 (126 female). All participants with a completed survey were included in the analyses.

2. See tables 1 and 2 in the Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology for means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

3. For a detailed description of analyses conducted, see the Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology.


5. Analysis procedures were conducted using multiple groups structural equation modeling (MGSEM) using robust maximum likelihood estimation methods. In all countries, inclusion significantly predicted team citizenship and innovation (all p’s<.001). Overall model fit for all countries excluding India indicated adequate fit \(X^2(2427, N=1259)=3544.20, p<.001, RMSEA=.04, CFI=.95, SRMR=.08\). Model fit for India indicated adequate fit \(X^2(456, N=253)=627.72, p<.001, RMSEA=.04, CFI=.95, SRMR=.06\).


7. See Table 3 in the Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology.

8. See Table 4 in the Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology.

9. See Table 3 in the Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology.

10. See Table 4 in the Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology.

11. See Table 3 in the Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology.

12. See Table 3 in the Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology.


14. Participant survey responses were submitted to MGSEM where a measurement model for inclusion was examined. First, measurement models for the latent variables for uniqueness and belongingness were examined. Analyses for uniqueness and belongingness both demonstrated adequate fit [Uniqueness: \(X^2(22, N=1238)=31.26, p>.05, RMSEA=.04, CFI=.99, SRMR=.095\); Belongingness: \(X^2(8, N=1238)=9.85, p>.05, RMSEA=.03, CFI=1.00, SRMR=.05\)]. Inclusion was treated as a latent composite comprised of the two latent indicators: uniqueness and belongingness. Model statistics indicated adequate fit of the composite model \(X^2(85, N=1238)=113.82, p<.05, RMSEA=.04 CFI=0.99, SRMR=.08\). MGSEM revealed both belongingness and uniqueness as significant predictors of the composite inclusion in all countries (all p’s<.001). Analyses contained all variables the full model described.


18. Models were compared by examining Bayes Information Criteria (BIC) values, where lower values indicate a better model. BIC values are lower in a model containing the composite model for inclusion \(BIC=87332.24\) than in a model where uniqueness is included and paths to belongingness are set to zero \(BIC=96520.94\) or in a model where belongingness is included and paths to uniqueness are set to zero \(BIC=102064.96\).


22. For a technical depiction of the model, see Figure 1 in the *Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology*.

23. For a technical depiction of the model, see Diagram 2 in the *Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology*.


25. Tests of gender invariance across all countries except India indicate the latent constructs for innovation, team citizenship, and inclusion are all scalar invariant [Innovation: $X^2=(10, N=1259)=6.88$, $p>.05$, RMSEA=.00, CFI=1.0, SRMR=.01; Team Citizenship: $X^2=(18, N=1259)=22.76$, $p>.05$, RMSEA=.02, CFI=1.00, SRMR=.02; Inclusion: $X^2=(36, N=1238)=45.54$, $p>.05$, RMSEA=.02, CFI=1.00, SRMR=.03]. Altruistic leadership is a scalar invariant of the first order constructs and a metric invariant across second order constructs [$X^2=(199, N=1259)=392.30$, $p<.001$, RMSEA=.04, CFI=.98, SRMR=.05].

26. See Table 5 in the *Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology*.

27. See Table 5 in the *Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries—Methodology*.


Acknowledgments

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