

HOW TO DEVELOP YOURSELF AS AN INCLUSIVE LEADER COACH

Rebecca Jones argues that inclusive leadership and coaching leadership are complementary and when combined can achieve lasting systemic change – with an important caveat.

As a Professor of Coaching and Behaviour Change and founder of a company specialising in Inclusive Leadership, it is perhaps not surprising that I have spent some time contemplating the alignment of the concepts of inclusive leadership and coaching leadership. Many leadership theories have been offered over the years and often, a new theory is positioned as superior or as a replacement to all previous leadership theories. However, I prefer to consider these theories as lenses through which we can view leadership. In some contexts, it might be helpful to view the challenge through one lens over another, while sometimes it is helpful to look through both lenses. And sometimes, the one lens helps us to understand the limitations of another.

Here I present the concepts of inclusive leadership and coaching leadership, outline how they might complement one another and highlight an important complication, that, as coaches and leaders who coach, we must pay attention to.

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

When we feel included, we feel that we are a valued member of the team and organisation. These feelings of inclusion stem from feeling seen and appreciated by others for what makes us unique and that we belong as an important member of the group.

Inclusive leaders hold the mindset, have the knowledge, and engage in behaviours that satisfy team members' needs for belonging, uniqueness and psychological safety.

At Inclusive Leadership Company, we identify seven inclusive leadership behaviours. These behaviours describe our actions: the things that we do. Often, our behaviours are outside of our awareness and are driven by our autopilot: therefore, to reset behaviours, we need to shift our intentions and habits consciously.

- 1. Bringing people together:** Inclusive leaders are collaborative; they remove obstacles to enable others to work collaboratively and they support feelings of belonging across identities and cultures.
- 2. Being culturally intelligent and open:** Inclusive leaders are aware and appreciative of other cultures and life experiences and adapt behaviour accordingly. They behave in a non-judgemental and tolerant manner, particularly when feeling uncomfortable.
- 3. Focusing on fairness and equity:** Inclusive leaders ensure that everyone has a fair opportunity; they focus on distributing power, ensuring equitable treatment; they listen attentively, focusing on employee needs.
- 4. Being an ally:** Inclusive leaders understand that leadership is a privilege that should be used to support and voice the needs of minoritised groups, while dismantling inequity, unfairness, and discrimination.

5. Promoting uniqueness: Inclusive leaders have a concern for others' interests; they consider differences among team members; they facilitate, motivate, and appreciate team members contributions; they value distinctiveness and advocate for diversity.

6. Reflecting on biases: Inclusive leaders recognise that leading inclusively is fluid, not static and therefore engage in regular reflective learning to continually identify and mitigate biases.

7. Being emotionally agile: Inclusive leaders can identify, express and where appropriate regulate their own emotions, particularly when working in unknown or unfamiliar contexts, and are able to tolerate ambiguity. They have a high awareness of their own and others' emotions and can adapt behaviour accordingly.

COACHING LEADERSHIP

When leaders use coaching skills with their team members, they hold purposeful conversations, resulting in greater collaboration, increased awareness and increased responsibility. Leaders achieve this by adopting a coaching mindset, for example: being open and curious, adopting a non-judgemental attitude (they ask rather than assume) and having a growth mindset (they believe people can learn and change). However, it is not just how leaders as coaches think that makes a difference. The things they do are key as well. There are two key skills that leaders who coach bring into their conversations with others:

1. Listening

When someone listens to us, we feel truly heard. It sends the message that we have something worth listening to, something of value. Leaders as coaches truly listen and pay attention to others while suspending their own assumptions and judgment.

2. Asking questions

When we are asked a question, our thinking is challenged in a new way. As leaders, we are used to being asked for our advice: making decisions and telling people what needs to happen next. However, when we take a coaching approach to leadership, we shift away from telling and shift towards asking. When we are asked a question, it forces us to take responsibility to come to our own resolutions and therefore provides increased accountability for our actions.

ALIGNING INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND COACHING LEADERSHIP

I position these two approaches to leadership as complementary. Table 1 provides examples for each of the inclusive leader behaviours and how coaching skills might support these behaviours.

LEADERSHIP COACHING SKILLS			
	listening	answering questions	
Inclusive Leader Behaviours	Bringing people together: i.e., when chairing meetings.	Listen to who is speaking in the meeting and listen for whose voice hasn't been heard.	Ask 'what is your view on this?' to seek contributions from quieter participants during the meeting.
	Being culturally intelligent and open: i.e., when dealing with conflict.	Listen to all sides of the argument to ensure that everyone's perspective is considered.	Ask open questions to encourage and facilitate team members to understand each others' perspectives.
	Focusing on fairness and equity: i.e., when allocating work.	Listen to the motivations, interests and needs of your team members.	Ask questions to deepen insight to fully understand their strengths and aspirations and use this information in work allocation decisions.
	Being an ally: i.e., when discussing pay rises.	Listen to understand systemic barriers to career progression that may impact team members.	Ask challenging questions to stakeholders and decision-makers to explore how the organisation is tackling systemic pay gaps.
	Promoting uniqueness: i.e., when addressing performance.	Listen to understand each team member's unique, preferred way of working.	Ask open questions to challenge assumptions about 'how things should be done'.
	Reflecting on biases: i.e., when faced with stereotypes.	Listen for stereotypes, biases or snap judgements within yourself and others.	Ask open questions to check for evidence behind stereotypes and to nudge for curiosity rather than closed thinking.
	Being emotionally agile: i.e., when responding to a negative emotional trigger.	Listen to your own emotional responses and physical reactions.	Ask yourself questions to enable the response to be labelled and provide insight to enable you to communicate constructively your emotions to others.

THE COMPLICATION

While coaching leadership is on the whole complementary to inclusive leadership, there is one very important complication. Coaching leadership is based on the core assertion that individuals must take responsibility for their own performance.¹ As Whitmore argues 'when you truly accept, choose, or take responsibility for your thoughts and your actions, your commitment to them rises and so does your performance'. While I do not dispute the importance of responsibility and accountability in achieving our goals and improving performance, a narrow view of power dynamics and their impact on individual responsibility, without acknowledging structures and systems that disadvantage minoritised groups, can only seek to perpetuate inequality and unfairness. Individual responsibility and accountability are not enough to dismantle the barriers and prejudice that exist within a given ecosystem.

While inclusive leaders support individuals to take responsibility and be accountable for their own actions, they also recognise that minoritised groups are subject to a variety of barriers to access and progression, which are, in many cases hidden and result from implicit biases and systematic prejudice. Inclusive leaders acknowledge the role of privilege, where a special advantage or power is granted to a particular person or group. They appreciate that privilege is systemic in society and can only be addressed once representation is balanced in all areas. Inclusive leaders understand that in our society, power dynamics play a key role in success, with power operating through the possession of valuable attributes or resources, often critical to career success.

Therefore, an overreliance on the coaching principle of responsibility and accountability does not acknowledge the reality for many individuals who have experienced systemic discrimination, disadvantage or a lack of power or privilege. Inclusive leaders use their coaching skills to work with individuals, referring to data to identify

where barriers are present and using their own privilege as leaders to remove them. Inclusive leaders constantly seek insights from minoritised groups to learn about their lived experiences and how to support their career decisions and advancement.

Therefore, as coaches, whether we are leaders who coach or independent coaching practitioners, we must be aware of striking the balance between individual responsibility and awareness of the environment and systemic barriers, in the context of striving for inclusive, fair and equitable workplaces.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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1 Whitmore, J. (2017). Coaching for Performance: The Principles and Practice of Coaching and Leadership. Hachette UK.