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# *Beyond Visibility:* How Inclusive Leadership Makes Every Contribution Count

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***Problem of practice***

*Is it enough to attract and retain diverse talent? Organisations are increasingly recognising that they also need to invest in creating workplace inclusivity. However, many struggle to realise the full potential of their diverse talents. Managers often rely on visible behaviours such as speaking up in meetings, networking, and maintaining a constant presence in meetings as evidence of participation and contribution. And while these are important, they are not the only ways of showing contribution. Many employees differ in how they communicate and contribute, and therefore, in how they demonstrate their value add. Hence, visibility is mistaken for contribution and those who can't demonstrate it, despite being capable, end up overlooked or misrepresented. This may lead to these employees feeling disengaged or left out. This is both a talent management challenge and a missed opportunity to enhance organisational performance. Recent research by Qaisar Iqbal, Sabrina D. Volpone, and Katarzyna Piwowar-Sulej shows how inclusive leadership helps senior and middle managers recognise, enable and leverage different forms of contribution by reducing barriers to participation.[1] Our essay addresses biases about visibility and participation, and how an organisation can create pathways for employees to add value that aligns with its goals*

[1]The article 'Workforce neurodiversity and workplace avoidance behavior: The role of inclusive leadership, relational energy, and self-control demands' by Qaisar Iqbal, Sabrina D. Volpone, and Katarzyna Piwowar-Sulej, featured in Volume 64, Issue 1 of *Human Resource Management*, talks about how inclusive leaders mitigate workplace avoidance behaviour

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## Visibility is not contribution

Global employee engagement had dropped to 20% in 2025, its lowest level since 2020, as reported by an annual Gallup survey.[2] This decline was estimated to have cost US$10 trillion in lost productivity. What could be the reasons for this drop? To understand the reason, imagine a scenario: Employee A spends the day in back-to-back meetings, is quite outspoken, responds instantly to work emails, and is well known in the organisation. Employee B works quietly, speaks only when they have something meaningful to add and prefers written communication. In this scenario, when managers are asked who appears to contribute more, many managers may instinctively choose Employee A.

In a workplace, where collaboration and communication are critical, managers often rely on visible behaviours or employees as evidence of capability and contribution

Now consider an alternate profession. A firefighter spends days waiting to be called for duty, waiting at the station with no emergency to respond to. This may look like inactivity. Yet, the fewer times they are called, the better. Their value lies in not being visible the whole time, but in their expertise, preparedness, and ability to respond effectively when it matters.

While 'not being visible' seems reasonable for such alternative professions, managers and leaders may overlook it when evaluating knowledge workers. In a workplace, where collaboration and communication are critical, managers often rely on visible behaviours or employees as evidence of capability and contribution. While these signals reflect performance, they are not the only way in which employees create value. As the workforce becomes more diverse, inclusivity lies in realising that contribution may take different forms. The challenge for managers is to recognise and provide an inclusive, safe space for alternative forms of contribution, rather than requiring everyone to conform to a standard form of contribution.

## Vocal contribution can be costly

If visible participation is not a reliable indicator of contribution, why do managers rely on it? Sometimes, managers assume that those who don't speak up, network much, engage in informal networks or volunteer for high-profile assignments are disengaged. But research by Iqbal and team found that many neurodivergent employees hesitate to participate in workplace interactions, such as small talk or interpreting social cues, that require significant psychological effort. Managers need to understand this withdrawal does not reflect low engagement or commitment; it is a response to the increased costs of



participation and expectations of visibility.

While the research focused on neurodivergent employees, the insights extend to all employees who are not visible. Even neurotypical employees differ in how effortless or demanding they may find common workplace interactions — some find it invigorating to voice their thoughts as they process them, while others speak up only when asked. Employees who frequently speak up, display higher levels of enthusiasm or are high self monitors generally receive more opportunities and are perceived as high performers. Yet, as the research suggests, these expectations can make participation taxing for some employees, leading to withdrawal from opportunities where their capabilities can add value. While organisational policies and culture may set certain norms, relying on a particular set of norms may unintentionally discourage some employees whose values are expressed differently.

## Leading for contribution

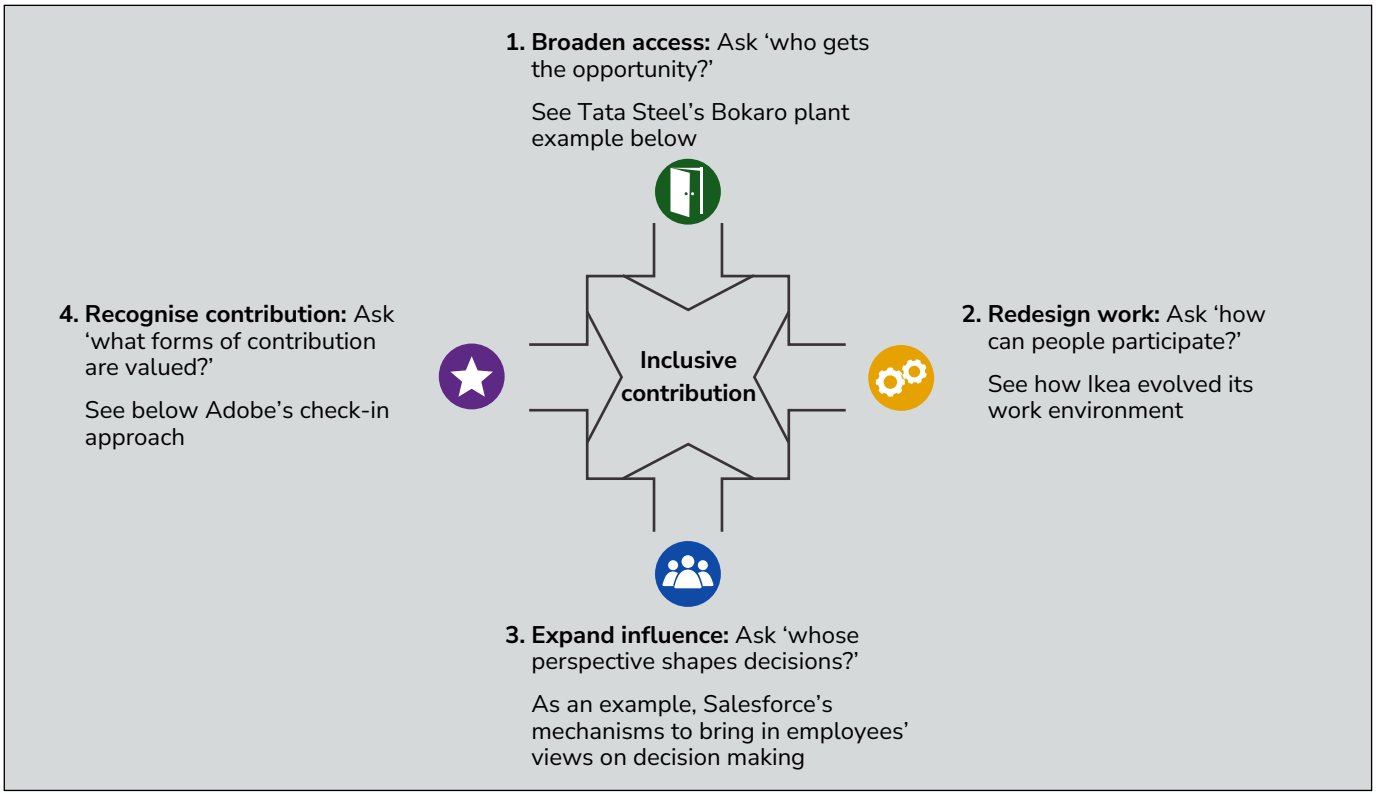
So how can an organisation ensure that employee participation is safe and inclusive? The answer is cultivating a culture of inclusive leadership and inclusive leaders. Research defines an inclusive leader as an individual who demonstrates openness, accessibility and support, while inclusive leadership is a culture that creates ecosystems in which employees can contribute and add value without conforming to a single style of participation.[3]

Inclusive leadership helps in shifting the focus from how employees contribute to what they contribute. Suppose a manager has to assemble a cross-functional task force for a high-stakes project. Most choose those who are vocal and quick to volunteer, and may inadvertently miss out on those who are good at synthesising information, doing sound analysis, and providing a more informed view. Most managers choose a certain set of preferred behaviours rather than the competencies required to make the project successful. Inclusive leaders interrupt this pattern by broadening how potential is identified and how employees are given opportunities to contribute and add value.

## Broadening participation

To crack the code for leveraging diverse talent, organisations need to redesign the processes by which their people can contribute using four managerial levers (see **Figure 1**). These levers enable organisations to engage a wider range of employees and ensure their contributions are recognised.

**Figure 1: Four levers for inclusive contribution**




*Source: Created by authors based on Iqbal, Qaisar, Sabrina D. Volpone, and Katarzyna Piwowar-Sulej. "Workforce Neurodiversity and Workplace Avoidance Behavior: The Role of Inclusive Leadership, Relational Energy, and Self-Control Demands." Human Resource Management 64, no. 1 (2025): 37–57. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22249.*




- **Broaden access:** The first question is to determine who gets the opportunity. Employees are, at times, excluded from roles or assignments because of inherent assumptions about who would be suitable. Inclusive leadership examines merit-based opportunity allocation and ensures that systems supporting it are institutionalised, as Tata Steel did. The Indian steel manufacturing company's Bokaro plant is an example of when they went beyond norms to hire transgender employees as machine operators.[4] By opening a 'male-dominated' work area to transgender employees and investing in their training and socialisation, Tata Steel challenged assumptions about who could perform the work successfully.
- **Redesign work:** The second question is to gauge how people can participate? Take the case of global home furnishing brand IKEA; its efforts to adapt jobs, schedules and work arrangements for employees with different abilities and life circumstances demonstrate how work design can expand participation.[5] Rather than expecting every employee to conform to a preset model of work, IKEA sought to create conditions in which a broader range of people could perform effectively. Managers often overlook the value of flexible work arrangements, alternative forms of work design, broader job definitions, and open meeting conventions that can create contributions that actually matter.
- **Expand influence:** The third question is whose perspective influences the decisions? Once the organisation decides that, it becomes more mindful of inclusive participation. US-based enterprise software company Salesforce has created mechanisms such as resource groups, accessibility initiatives, and inclusive practices that allow employees to bring in their perspective about organisational decisions.[6] Inclusive leaders do not assume that ideas will surface naturally but create channels for different perspectives to be heard and translated into action.
- **Recognise contribution:** The last question is what forms of contribution are valued? Employees learn quickly that what gets measured and rewarded is what they should do. American software company Adobe has replaced annual performance ratings with a check-in approach that shifted conversations from ranking employees to understanding their contributions and strengths while collaborating on their future development.[7] The broader lesson is that organisations must reinforce inclusion not only through hiring and work design but also through behaviours that reinforce, recognise, and reward inclusion.

While implementing this framework, keep in mind that broadening participation and being more inclusive requires sustained effort, leadership commitment, and systems that reinforce inclusive behaviour.

## From principles to practice

Many organisations have sensitivity training programs, mentoring systems, employee resource groups, and

feedback mechanisms in place to foster better inclusivity and equity. But they must leverage these mechanisms properly to make inclusive leadership more accessible to everyone. Implementation requires investment. Investing in employee self-paced programs can cost approximately US$50-US$300 per participant, while comprehensive instructor-led executive programs may be priced at US$1500-US$5000 per participant; these numbers vary by region and degree of customisation.[8] Estimates suggest that employee turnover may cost organisations anywhere from 50% to 200% of an employee's annual salary, highlighting the potential costs of failing to recognise, develop, and retain talent.[9] The costs associated with such initiatives need to be weighed against the costs of inaction, disengagement, and missed opportunities. Uber's cultural crisis shows how an organisation that rewarded aggressive, high-visibility behaviour paid a steep price.[10] The US-based multinational transportation company suffered reputational damage, leadership upheaval, and loss of employees who did not or could not thrive under its norms. The lesson is blunt: when a culture favours a single interaction style, it systematically sidelines other ways of contributing and invites costly blind spots.

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## Redefining recognition

As organisations pursue innovation and diversity, the question is no longer whether they can afford to accommodate different minds but whether they can afford not to. It is time to shift from recognition based solely on visibility to a model that values balance, psychological readiness and depth. Inclusive leadership is not merely a moral imperative, but a performance enabler that balances visibility with substance. When organisations look beyond visibility and recognise contribution in its many forms, they unlock talent that was always present but overlooked.



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