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## From Language Barriers to Guiding Principles

*The absence of discrimination does not indicate the presence of inclusion. Leaders need to be advocates and active players.*

Tiernan Brady,  
Global Director of Inclusion,  
Clifford Chance

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The appropriate use of language is one of the greatest tools we have to bring people together, but it can also be weaponized and destructive. One moment, you are proud to be referred to as “woke,” the next moment, it has been misappropriated and is being used against you like a slur. Language can be tricky and complex, meaning changed by tone or intent.

Yet, when people take a step back, most of us realize this: there is language we use in our professional spheres that is not readily accessible to others. So too, there are individuals whose expertise allows them access to the nuanced language that supports and advances Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB), while others must work to gain fluency. The lexicon of DEIB can seem daunting to its new speakers, in part, because of the perceived reputational cost of misusing or being unfamiliar with its words.

In reality, it is an amalgam of terms, concepts, and practices which you may have never encountered. It’s easy to reject its language as unnecessary or criticize it for being too quick to change. Instead, we invite you to consider staying open to DEIB language and explore its ability to provide a shared language to unlock new understanding of people and their experiences. For example, the term “BIPOC”—to specifically name Black and Indigenous in addition to people of color (PoC)—may seem unnecessary. However, reading *The BIPOC Project*<sup>1</sup> and asking questions of trusted people can help us understand that the term was adopted mostly by younger generations to not only increase solidarity among people of color but also call out the ways in which Indigenous and Black people were uniquely impacted by systemic racial injustice that shaped the future experience of all people of color, specifically, in the United States (US).<sup>2</sup>

Though originally focused on the US context, the language of BIPOC has come to have global resonance, including in the United Kingdom (UK) where the term “BAME” (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) was used until it very recently encountered the same critique and is now a faux pas, where other designations of historically, racially marginalized people are preferred.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note we use the term “marginalized” instead of “minority”, and “dominant” instead of “majority”, because we find them more accurate. Marginalized groups are minimized, disenfranchised, and often subject to historical injustices, while dominant groups exert power and influence regardless of either group’s size. Returning to the above example, “PoC” and “BAME” are terms historically used to accurately center Whiteness as the racial “majority” and diminish people of all other races as a “minority” in the US and UK, when in actuality they are the “Global Majority,” a term coined by Rosemary Campbell-Stephens, as about 80% of the world population is “Black, African, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and/or, have been racialized as ‘ethnic minorities.’”<sup>4</sup> We concur with Campbell-Stephens that language is deeply impactful; so, it should be used intentionally at a minimum while striving for empowering usage.

Understanding the evolution of DEIB language and developing a shared understanding of the meaning of words can reduce the friction points between people and begin to build individuals’ confidence in their ability to have conversations. We will unpack some common terms, but remember that DEIB language is continually evolving and the best way to learn new terms is to look them up and then ask trusted colleagues.

## Dev—We All Begin Our Inclusion Journey Somewhere

When I first began to explore my interest in the DEIB space, my friend, an expert in this area, tried to simplify things for me. She shared a range of useful phrases, such as “diversity is a fact, inclusion is a choice” and “diversity is counting your people, inclusion is making your people count.” Just when I thought you couldn’t get more simplistic than this, she said, “diversity is being invited to the party, and inclusion is being asked to dance.” I later stumbled on an article from LinkedIn by Daniel Juday where he postulates a series of builds to evolve the statements to reflect our maturing understanding of the topic: “Diversity is being invited to the party, inclusion is dancing” or better “diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is choosing the music” or at its best “diversity is going to the party; inclusion is being a member of the party planning committee.”<sup>5</sup>

So, armed with these basic layperson definitions, I began my journey into the DEIB space—barely equipped, but confident in my desire and ability to learn and make a positive impact on the agenda and upon the minds of leaders.

## Let's Start by Building a Shared Language—Our Definitions

To help overcome the barriers—from the fear of being misunderstood to the fear of retaliation for challenging systems—to engaging in DEIB dialogue and action, it is important for you to have a well-established baseline knowledge.<sup>6</sup> You don’t need to be an expert, but you do need to be comfortable with core concepts, key terms, and best practices and willing to engage in continuous learning.

**Diversity** refers to the comprehensive range of identities that make up the spectrum of human difference.

These range from identities that are visible to another person to those that are less visible, and those invisible unless you choose to share them. While it is impossible to create a comprehensive list of all identities, some major groups include: race, color, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, disability, neurotype, age, religion, political affiliation, country of origin, veteran status, socioeconomic status, relationship status, education, and personality. Some of these differences are important and core to who we are, and others are tangential. Individuals' identities should not be assumed, but rather left to the discretion of the individual to define and reveal them.

People are complex beings, each with multiple identities that make up who we are and our unique experience of the world. The term “intersectionality” was coined in 1989 by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender, and other identities intersect with one another, overlap, and cannot be isolated from one another.<sup>7</sup> The intersection of identities impacts the way people are perceived and treated, and in turn, influences the way people engage with the world around them. For example, the experience of a gay, cis (gender assigned at birth matches gender identity) Muslim woman entails a very different lived experience (the first-hand experiences one has in life) than a disabled White man because each identity element impacts the others. Your awareness of intersectionality will enable you to have a more meaningful understanding of diversity. Start by considering your own identities and the way they impact each other, with this understanding enhancing your ability to connect on a deeper level to yourself and others.

It is important for leaders to know what identities are legally protected in the countries in which they operate. For example, in the UK, the Equality Act 2010 legally protects

people from discrimination based on age, disability, gender, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and gender reassignment.<sup>8</sup> While in the US, the equivalent is the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)'s enforcement of federal laws prohibiting discrimination of an applicant or employee based on a “person’s race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, transgender status, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information.”<sup>9</sup> Also, veterans who served in active duty are also protected from employment discrimination by Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA).<sup>10</sup>

**Equity** refers to the systems, structure, and policies that enable inclusive behavior by creating opportunity for all. It is important to distinguish equity from equality. *Equality* is giving everyone the same opportunities, but *equity* is acting with an awareness that not everyone can access the same opportunities due to some form of marginalization beyond their control and therefore adjustments are required. For example, equality is having the same entrance into an office for everyone, while equity is ensuring there is a ramp and automatic door for those who use mobility aids, people caring for infants in strollers, delivery personnel with carts, and many more. In an equitable system, resources are distributed according to need rather than evenly divided.

**Inclusion** is the active practice of inviting a wide array of individuals to participate in activities central to an organization. Inclusion centers on the activities and orientations of those who have historically been represented as they invite others to engage with them. It doesn't necessarily focus on the quality of the experience of those invited and typically encourages newcomers to fit into an existing structure or cultural set of norms without regard to their lived experience, cultural norms, or identities. Imagine all members of

a team are invited and encouraged to meet up at a steak restaurant for dinner and drinks after a company retreat. The manager extends personal invitations to each team member and indicates she is paying. This is an act of inclusion that may not consider the vegans and non-drinkers on the team and the experience they will have.

**Belonging** has become a concept in its own right separate from the term “inclusion.” Belonging refers to the degree to which one feels valued, respected and able to make a meaningful contribution and indicates a situation where one has been linked to performance<sup>11</sup> and with intentions to remain at an organization. Belonging is necessary for individuals to thrive.

There has been an enhanced focus on belonging in recent years, particularly in the US. The US is renowned for its individualistic culture and for encouraging people to differentiate and stand out. However, the cost is loneliness, isolation, and a sense of not having support when you need it most. In his book *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*, Dr. Vivek Murthy explains the impact of isolation, particularly on health and well-being. He emphasizes the dire need for belonging in society and consequently in organizations as a remedy to social and mental health challenges.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these basic definitions for helping to prepare you if you’re just beginning your Inclusive Leadership journey, we’ve included a glossary at the end of this book and we also recommend the fuller list of definitions you will find in the *Inclusive Language Guidebook* by the County of San Luis Obispo Behavior Health Department.<sup>13</sup>

Equity isn’t about removing opportunity for one group and giving it to another but about providing opportunity for all

by removing the barriers under presented groups come up against. Leadership has to be able to speak fluently about this because they need to be the ambassadors of change themselves.

*Nina Goswami, Head of Inclusion, Clifford Chance UK*

## The Inclusion Multiplier

An “Inclusive Leader” is anyone who creates the conditions for DEIB to flourish. When you intentionally put into practice “Inclusive Leadership,” you go beyond becoming a role model to others by taking the actions required to ensure you yourself, teams, culture, and brand support DEIB progress.

We will not be the first to tell you being an Inclusive Leader is hard, difficult, and challenging work. But we also want to inspire you, so to risk being cliched, we ask “Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?” This is not the actual question of the mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz’s famous butterfly effect, but the title of his acclaimed work.<sup>14</sup> The theory is that a minor change in circumstances can cause a large change in the outcome of weather, and a profound metaphor for the impact of leadership too. A single leader’s commitment to Inclusive Leadership can multiply the impact of DEIB across an entire organization.

From team lead, to manager, director, VP, and C-Suite executive, all the way to CEO, owner, or chairman, you as a leader have a role that comes with both the responsibility and privilege to invest in your leadership skills, so that you can best unlock the potential of your team and organization. Look at your organizational chart; everyone is connected. How many people do you influence within the organization: 5, 15, 100, 1000, all of them? When we consider

change, it tends to start off with a small group of committed individuals willing to challenge problematic behaviors and structures. It is powerful when leaders with influence, resources, and followership choose to create a more just, equitable, and thriving world for as many people as possible.

Another key factor in beginning your journey and being an Inclusive Leader is releasing the fear of making mistakes and accepting that it is a natural, healthy part of DEIB work and human interaction. Humility—a willingness to listen, learn, admit when you’ve misunderstood or misused a term, and then change usage accordingly—is the attitude that will keep you learning and keep the conversation alive.

### **Melissa—InclusAbility**

In the 2018–2019 academic year, my team in the Office of Inclusive Excellence at Vanderbilt University led a campaign to accelerate the university’s approach to disability and accessibility. Our North Star was to embrace the disability community and increase accessibility through the lens of inclusion and belonging. We termed our initiative “InclusAbility.” Through engaging a wide array of stakeholders to understand the university’s processes and procedures, we were able to invite students, staff, and faculty to examine practices and apply a disability and accessibility inclusion lens and contemplate progress.

As part of the initiative, my team educated me on the value of changing language to make it more inclusive. I embraced this idea and suggested that our campaign include education about words and phrases that erode the inclusion of the disability community. When I proposed making language a central component of the campaign, my team paused and gently, but firmly, one of the project leaders counseled, “We need to begin with our own language,” and emphasized with a raised eyebrow and eye contact with everyone around the table. I responded, “Oh me! I have work to do first.”

While embarking on its external work, the team initiated a campaign within the office, through posters, to create awareness of harmful

language that erodes inclusion and to present alternative phrases. Whenever a team member unintentionally used harmful language, another team member would verbally correct, without judgement, and educate the speaker about the origin and impact of the language. When the posters first went up, mistakes happened multiple times a day, including those made by myself, but by the end of the year mistakes were rare.

This elucidation both recognizes the respect Melissa had for her team and the positive team dynamic because of their high comfort level giving their leader's feedback. It demonstrates that Inclusive Leadership is a journey which requires introspection and practice before turning it toward others. The learning never stops. Central to DEIB is the importance of being descriptive and naming people's lived experiences, identities, and characteristics. The research of Professors Apfelbaum, Norton, and Sommers exposed that consciously ignoring differences, with tactics such as "color blindness," reinforces the status quo of inequities.<sup>15</sup> They suggest that the most productive methods for advancing equality for marginalized groups, while also dismantling White and other dominant groups' fears of becoming marginalized and thus harmed as well, is an approach that invites everyone to participate and benefit while preserving the uniqueness of each person—the fundamental principles of Inclusive Leadership at work. We advocate honoring everyone's identities, as well as acknowledging that certain groups have endured specific historical societal injustices. Embracing difference with humility and an eagerness to continually learn about the wonderfully unique people in this world brings people together.

Please note the term "color blindness" was promoted and used by White people in the 1990s and early 2000s as "a well-intentioned desire to avoid bias (or at least a desire to appear

unbiased)”,<sup>15</sup> but is a problematic phrase. First, it is a racist term. It is used by White people in the USA to reinforce systemic racism, in both a policy and language, through conscious denial of the unique experience of Black people in the USA, which erases the impact of race. Second, it is an ableist term. It is deliberately inaccurate language, using disability as an adjective to describe non-disabled people and misappropriating disabled people’s identity. Such weaponization perpetuates the prejudices against the disability community.

DEIB cannot be forced. It cannot be something that you’re doing to check a box. It cannot be some philosophical idea. I would love for one day it becomes part of our DNA, who we are organically, but we’re not there yet. In this work you have to stay focused and determined, expect more. That’s the only way we can continue to stay relevant as an organisation.

*Bettina Deynes, CPO, Carnival Group*

## So Now That You Have Some Shared Language, What Are the Risks to Using It?

In a recent executive team session for a global technology provider, Dev asked the question, “What do we risk by talking about DEIB? What do we risk if we don’t?” This enabled the group to surface the fears they have of saying the wrong thing or offending someone. One senior White leader said they frequently worry, “If I say something I will offend someone, and if I don’t say anything I will offend someone.” This often leads them to not saying anything or over-thinking; so, what they do say sounds inauthentic. Dev has asked these questions in leadership sessions over the years and Table 1.1 provides the frequent responses he has heard in response.

**Table 1.1** The risks of talking about DEIB and the risks if we don't.

<b>The risk if we talk about DEIB?</b>	<b>The risk if we don't talk about DEIB?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ We will offend someone.</li> <li>▪ This is a distraction from commercial focus.</li> <li>▪ Too political, better to not sow discord.</li> <li>▪ If it ain't broke, why fix it?</li> <li>▪ This takes away from our meritocratic culture.</li> <li>▪ Some people will feel uncomfortable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Our silence will be viewed as “we don't care.”</li> <li>▪ Members of our company will feel invisible and disengaged.</li> <li>▪ Biases, inequality, exclusion, and isolation continue to harm our people and us.</li> <li>▪ We can't improve policies, processes, and lives if we don't talk.</li> <li>▪ The harmful status quo continues, and the system doesn't change.</li> <li>▪ Peak culture, team, and individual performance can't be achieved because people are not thriving.</li> <li>▪ We will get left behind.</li> </ul>

An often shared concern is “I don't want to speak up because I don't want to make anyone feel uncomfortable.” On these occasions, ask what people think their silence means to those who were harmed by the comments or actions. Typically, participants haven't considered the implications of not speaking up. Even when participants hold significant power, they fear the social risk and, perhaps, ostracism that might come from “calling out” a dominant group member.

If you have ever remained silent, you are not alone. It's common for people to avoid issues that are challenging and sometimes emotionally charged too, choosing to stick to their comfort zone. However, the leadership of yesterday will not meet the needs of today, or succeed with the challenges of the future.

## Defeating Myths and Building Principles

What can stop leaders from taking action to improve inclusion are false myths that perpetuate and get reinforced. These incorrect assumptions sometimes are so ingrained and unquestioned, they become the accepted truth. There are six myths we come across frequently (shown in the Table 1.2) that must be challenged for Inclusive Leaders to succeed.

**Table 1.2** Busting the myths of DEIB.

Myth	Truth
DEIB is a stand-alone activity.	DEIB uplifts all aspects of the organization, such as the purpose and vision, business operations, research and development (R&D), people strategy, human resource (HR), sales, finance, and product. No business strategy or people strategy is complete without it.
DEIB is HR's responsibility.	It is upheld by everyone, but the CEO, the Board, and the executive team, have a specific responsibility because of their outsized influence. Middle managers have a critical role in change, given they are key players in executing the strategy.
Inclusive Leadership is a new concept.	Inclusive Leadership = great leadership. While the label is new, the elements are not. Recently an emphasis has been put on inclusion in recognition of the lack of progress and the need to speed up.
I have to be from a marginalized or minority group to have a point of view and right to speak.	Surprisingly, this often goes unchallenged. <i>Inclusion</i> , by definition, engages, respects, and creates a positive outcome for all people, regardless of their identity(ies). However, participation does not mean the same activities and responsibilities for everyone but means that which is modulated by the closeness of the individuals involved to the issues at hand.

**Table 1.2** (Continued)

<b>Myth</b>	<b>Truth</b>
Better to be silent than offend someone.	It is essential for an Inclusive Leader to speak up for what is right, and take risks on behalf of those most impacted by exclusion. If leaders don't speak up, who will?
Full representation of diversity at all levels in the organization is the main goal.	Increasing diversity is one element in a larger strategy. When diversifying talent is the sole overarching ambition, it can become counterproductive by artificially, unsustainably increasing diversity rather than crafting long-term, systemic change and building an inclusive company.

Once these myths are challenged, they need to be replaced by principles that provide a true north to the organization and the leaders within it. Creating an inclusion charter will provide guidance on how people should behave. It is critical that leaders be involved in the co-creation of this true north with input from a range of perspectives, such as junior colleagues and marginalized groups. Once finalized, it is ideal if both leaders and individual contributors sign up to living these principles, so that over time through reinforcement they become incorporated into the culture of the organization.

*I worked really hard with the D&I team to turn the narrative around to focus on inclusion. How else can we be that place where everyone feels welcome bringing their full selves to work, ready to succeed and thrive?*

*Heidi Robertson, Chief Diversity Officer, ABB*

## Activity: Create an Inclusion Charter

Set aside some protected time to consider how you would go about creating an inclusion charter. You may want to create this for the team you lead, or depending on your role and aspirations, you may be inspired to do this for the organization at large. Who are the key people in your network you would invite to be a part of the brainstorming, refining of principles, and then sharing? To take a first step in making this a reality, who do you need to speak to over the coming days to take a step forward? To help you along the journey, we have included a sample inclusion charter based on our experiences with other companies.

### Sample Inclusion Charter: Our Principles

1. We are consciously and actively inclusive.
2. Inclusion is everyone's responsibility.
3. We believe every one of us has a voice and a right to share it.
4. Leadership is a mindset; everyone can be a role model.
5. We speak out in the face of exclusion or unfairness without fear of judgment.
6. We acknowledge our privileges and utilize them to help those who are disadvantaged.
7. We honestly investigate our policies and practices to see who is excluded and how we can take accountability and correct this.
8. Together, we are building a culture where we all feel we belong and are proud to work.
9. We don't have to agree with each other to respect each other.
10. We create space and time for diversity to thrive.

What would you add, delete, and/or amend from the above, so that it resonates better with your people? Who could you share this with in your team or wider organization to evolve it further?

If there already exists a set of norms that guide you as a leader, team, and organization, are they intentional and explicit, or not yet fully articulated or codified? No matter where you are in your Inclusive Leadership journey, now is a great time to take audit and create your guiding principles.