

Moving DEI from Intention to Impact

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In many conversations today, I notice that there's less listening, more one-way talking, and more distractions, myself included. This already makes it hard to communicate well with your peers, but not being able to be an active and effective listener has another, lesser talked about, side effect. It can hamper your intentions to create a truly inclusive workplace. First, I want to reiterate that there's a deep benefit of understanding different perspectives and feelings without judgment or defensiveness. Then, let's talk about what active listening really means, especially as it relates to inclusive leadership. It means that you listen to your peer's words without interrupting them. You pay careful attention to their verbal, facial, and body language cues, so you're picking up how they really feel too. When you're having a conversation with any peer, but especially one from a different background, silence devices, close laptop screens, and put away all distractions to really make eye contact. This will help you pick up cues you may otherwise miss. This is really important when talking with peers where there's a power differential and you may not get the real story. Working to empathize with how they feel can help you overcome defensiveness, or focusing too much on your responses back to them rather than actively listening. Also, moderate your own facial expressions. Ensure you're not communicating disbelief or disgust, particularly if you're hearing a perspective you disagree with. And then try hard not to prepare a mental rebuttal while they're speaking, but rather, seek to validate their feelings. If a woman of color is sitting in front of you saying that it was a microaggression when you told her she was articulate, your role as a manager is to hear her out. Thank her for sharing her experience with you candidly. Difficult conversations are hard as it is. For people who are underrepresented in our workplaces, it's even more risky to surface issues of bias. Knowing we can trust a leader to actively listen, builds trust and safety. Lastly, I also recommend repeating back what you've heard them say, and clarify that you've understood their perspectives correctly. Active listening is a key skill for any inclusive leader to cultivate. We all can identify times where we really felt listened to without distractions, and walked away from a conversation feeling valued and understood. What if more of us paid it forward by practicing active listening in all our conversations, with all our peers?