

Top 4 ways leaders hurt team inclusion (without realizing it)

According to our survey of 500 direct reports, the most common things that make people feel excluded are more subtle than the obvious jokes or public criticism. These four everyday behaviors — which people from traditionally marginalized groups tend to experience more often — can unintentionally make people feel unimportant and unheard. Which ones could you improve on?



1. Ignoring and quickly moving on when people share their perspectives.

When you've got a lot to cover in a meeting, it's understandable that you wouldn't spend time discussing what you consider to be bad ideas, irrelevant comments, or redundant observations. But when you breeze past what was said, direct reports notice.

One of our survey respondents said, "It shows that you don't respect my opinion or respect me." Do it often enough, and some people might give up on ever trying to contribute.

That would be a huge loss. Maybe that clumsy first thought a direct report blurted out could be refined into a great idea with more discussion. Or maybe a silent team member is full of good ideas they're afraid to share. Ultimately, everyone wants to be heard.

What to do instead:

- **If someone's comment seems not well thought out, ask them to elaborate.**
Try: *"Can you say more?"* or
"You might be onto something interesting. Can you think more about it and raise it the next time we meet?"
- **Periodically [paraphrase what people say](#) and then thank them for their input.** You can't do this for everything everyone says. But doing it once a meeting per person, for instance, makes it clear you're listening.

2. Offering generic praise at the end of big projects rather than consistent, detailed recognition for everyday achievements.

Giving positive, reinforcing feedback is one of the most powerful ways to help your direct reports feel a sense of belonging. While there's nothing wrong with saying, "Great job closing that sale," such general praise for an accomplishment can leave the amount of effort it took unrecognized.

"Take the time to recognize my specific contributions — the actual work," one survey respondent told us. "That's what makes me feel appreciated and a greater part of the team — as opposed to just a cog in the machine." People with marginalized identities in particular report receiving less recognition that is consistent and detailed.

What to do instead:

- **Provide feedback that includes one specific thing a person did and its impact.** For example, *"You did great facilitating that workshop. Nice work coming back to Grishma's point. We needed to focus there, and I'm sure she appreciated it, too."*
- **Give generous recognition for meeting everyday challenges and reaching incremental milestones.** When someone figures out a tricky spreadsheet or calmly helps an aggravated customer, you might think they're just doing their job. But acknowledging their accomplishment in the moment boosts your direct report's sense of belonging and makes it more likely they'll repeat the behavior you praise. To start building the habit, focus on the direct report you currently recognize the least and look for [three opportunities to recognize them this week](#).

3. Not giving people flexibility to work around their unique schedules and needs.

As a manager with a heavy workload and company policies to worry about, you may not have the power to be flexible with scheduling. But each of your direct reports has a life beyond work. Acknowledging that and accommodating their needs when possible can help them feel like they're part of a team and an organization that values them as whole people.

What to do instead:

- **Be flexible when you can — and listen compassionately when you can't.**

Can someone work from home for a couple of hours after an appointment so they don't have to come back to work? Or can you adjust someone's shifts to make it easier for them to take a relative to a monthly doctor visit? Even if you can't give your direct report exactly what they want, you can offer a sympathetic ear, which could help you learn about their issues and find other ways to support them. And it's especially important to seek to understand the life circumstances of direct reports from marginalized communities, who report getting less flexibility than their peers.

- **Cross-train your direct reports so they can fill in for each other.** When more than one person can fulfill your team's essential duties, it's easier to offer your direct reports the flexibility they seek.

- **Keep your manager informed around workload and personal challenges your team faces.** Your manager doesn't need to know every detail of your team's lives, but it's part of your job to make your boss aware of how your team is handling their workload and their responsibilities outside of work. If your manager generally knows your team's circumstances, they may be more likely to have realistic expectations and to prioritize, assign, and schedule work with your team's needs in mind.

4. Relying on the same people for decision-making.

For advice on some decisions, you may turn to certain direct reports and not to others. And some team members may routinely offer advice — regardless of whether you asked for it. Behaviors like these can give the impression that you listen to some voices more than others, sending a message to the rest of your team that you don't value their views.

What to do instead:

- **Ask the whole team for input on issues that affect them.** Not every member of your team may have the expertise to weigh in on your budget or your strategic plan. But what about how you shape team culture? or run meetings? A simple, *“How do you think that meeting went?”* can show that you want to hear from everyone. If certain team members don’t speak up, don’t settle for silence — ask them for their perspective during their 1-on-1s.
- **When outspoken team members offer their unsolicited perspectives, consider opening the topic to everyone.** Those proactive viewpoints could be a signal that the entire team has something to say. To invite everyone’s thoughts without being deluged with input, put constraints on what you’re looking for and set a time limit. For example, you might ask the team to offer their three best ideas about the topic on a shared document by a certain date or in an upcoming team meeting. And be sure to thank everyone for their contribution.