How to Build a More Inclusive Team

Inclusive teams are characterized by open communication, transparent decision making and creativity. Building an inclusive team is important to creating a productive work climate of trust and respect.

Duke University/Duke University Health System is a diverse community. Our community is comprised of members who represent multiple and different identities. Whether our differences and similarities are based on generation, culture, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic class or personality, many of us recognize that diversity is simply the reality of our community, whereas inclusion is what we hope to do with diversity. Here are some ideas for creating and promoting an atmosphere of inclusion in your department:

**DOs**

- Develop a brief vision statement related to teamwork and inclusion for your department.

  *Example:* “Blue Devil Department celebrates the diversity of the community we serve. We have a responsibility to foster an environment of mutual respect and inclusion for our patients and their families, visitors, volunteers, trainees and board members. Our commitment is to provide a workplace where each person is respected and supported.”

- Link inclusion to specific behavioral expectations that are likely to generate trust, openness and inclusion.

  *Example:* Some of the behaviors that demonstrate inclusion are communicating information consistently, being open—rather than defensive—to feedback, offering criticism in a constructive manner, respecting differences of identity, belief or style.

- Communicate regularly to your staff why an inclusive culture is important: enhance productivity, improve communication, boost problem solving and foster retention.

  *Example:* There are several ways to remind your team that inclusion is an important value in your department: Include in all new hire letters one sentence that states departmental values and vision, quarterly staff meetings devoted to work-culture topics such as teamwork, communication and inclusion, and setting professional development goals for each member of your team related to at least one aspect of communication and inclusion.

**DON’Ts**

- Don’t always rely on the same advice from the same people.

  *Example:* Who you turn to for advice and support should be as varied as your stakeholders, patients and customers. If you find yourself with a homogenous group of advisors who never push back or point out
challenges, your advisor group is not sufficiently inclusive. Seek out the perspectives of colleagues and customers who have different backgrounds and expectations. Projects generally benefit from having such diverse feedback.

- Don’t use all your staff meeting time for “information dump.” Make an effort to occasionally change the meeting format. Try to facilitate staff meetings that invite participation, explore ideas and model dialogue.

Example: There are many tools for increasing participation at meetings: a quick go-around where each person is invited to give an opinion, “straw polls” where staff members are invited to vote on a decision or idea, or breaking up into smaller groups to explore a topic or make recommendations.

- Don’t allow exclusionary or intolerant behavior to go unaddressed. Respond to behaviors that mock, shame, insult or injure staff in an efficient and respectful manner.

One characteristic of an ineffective work culture is one in which negative behavior is ignored. One way of responding to individuals whose behavior negatively affects the team is to focus on and address the impact of their behavior, while recognizing good intentions. We must be able to hold one another accountable for creating more inclusive workplaces.

How can I mentor a supervisor who reports to me on becoming more inclusive in their leadership style?

The best way to mentor supervisors is by modeling the behaviors that you would like for them to adopt. When we demonstrate how to handle challenging situations in an inclusive manner, we are showing our staff some of the tools we would like them to develop.

In addition, you can recommend a book, website or external coach to your supervisory staff and then discuss with them what they have learned. Perhaps you could suggest that they present this information to their peers and staff.

Scenario: Since you became the department director three years ago, Stacy and Mark have been reporting to you. Stacy’s style with her team is very inclusive. She has upbeat staff meeting with lots of participation, often asks for feedback and input, and rarely appears “out of touch” with her staff. Mark’s leadership style is a top-down approach. You have deliberately modeled an inclusive style to both Stacy and Mark, although you have never taken time to talk with them about it.

After reviewing the Managing Diversity Toolkit, you decide to have a staff meeting with Mark and Stacy and open up a discussion of leadership styles. You ask what they think about the term inclusion. They become interested in the idea of self-assessment tools related to leadership and inclusion. You ask them to develop and present to you some recommendations about how to continue their professional development in this area.
Process Points

- The scenario above invites both Mark and Stacy to consider the impact of their leadership style on their teams.

- The Director puts the onus on the supervisors to do the research and bring a proposal regarding next steps.

- The focus of mentoring is on better self-understanding and recognition that style differences can be as important as other elements of diversity.