



Advancing the women agenda through inclusive leadership

Recently, we facilitated a client focus group with women in a traditionally male-dominated industry, where a female participant described speaking up about the lack of expressing facilities at work for new moms, only to be met with the response from a male colleague who said, “Well you [women] want to be treated like men, so...”.

In 2021, women don’t want to be treated like men. Women want to be treated like women, and to be valued for what they can bring to the workplace as women, not as women acting like men. As we come to the end of Women’s Month in South Africa, we’ve reflected on the unique strengths that women bring to the workplace and to leadership, and the ways in which inclusion - and inclusive leadership specifically - will catapult women into a more equitable future in these more senior roles.

Women at work

When women joined the workforce, they joined a pre-existing, all-male environment, and a culture built predominantly around masculine traits. Fast forward to today, where women have taken huge strides to become equals in the workplace; a workplace designed by and for men, where women have adapted by exaggerating their more masculine traits (think individualistic, tough, self-reliant, confident, assertive), and oppressing their feminine ones (think empathetic, nurturing, collaborative, creative, intuitive) in order to fit in, to equally compete, and to achieve success.

Nonetheless, progress has been made. However, post-pandemic, we run the risk of this progress regressing based on the higher [impact the pandemic has had on women](#). Additionally, the [‘Great Resignation’](#) currently taking place is seeing a large number of women leaving the

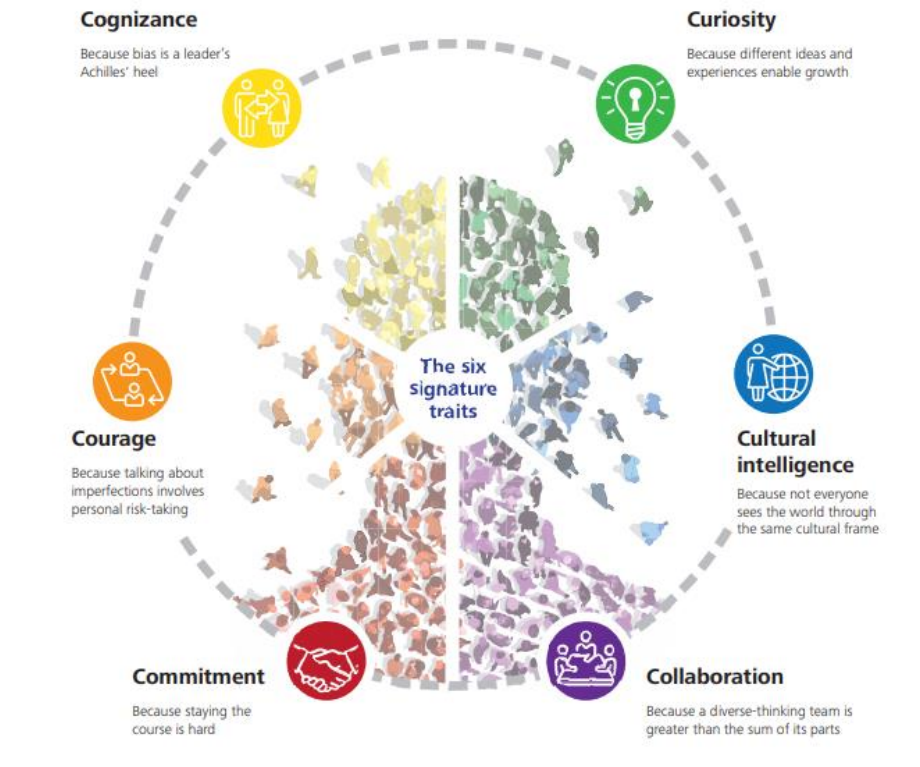
workforce; not changing jobs, but actually opting out of the workforce, due to working environments that are not serving them best as women.

Even without this setback, there's a lot still to be done - pay equity and representation in upper management and leadership positions are just two of the most obvious examples of the obstacles yet to be overcome. In order to advance, or accelerate, the Women Agenda in South African organisations (and the world), inclusive leadership needs to be the top priority.

Inclusive leadership

Many South African organisations are taking the initiative and starting their journey to becoming more mature with regards to Diversity and Inclusion (D&I). Currently, D&I in South Africa still takes the shape of legislated Employment Equity plans and representation targets/quotas; however, these organisations need to move beyond compliance to see real, sustainable transformation. We need to practice inclusivity every day, and to lead inclusively requires intentional action, and behaviour change. Below, we have outlined Deloitte's Six Signature Traits of Inclusive Leadership, including what each trait means within the context of advancing the Women Agenda in the workplace, and questions to ask yourself – no matter your gender – in order to better support the women around you.

The Six Signature Traits of Inclusive Leadership



1. Commitment

Definition: Commitment means you believe in the business case for D&I, your personal values are aligned to it, you prioritise it (dedicating time and energy), and you demonstrate bravery, speaking up and challenging the status quo where required.

Context: In order to advance the women's agenda, commitment needs to be demonstrated from the top - men and women alike. Leaders need to demonstrate commitment to transformation, commitment to equal gender representation, and commitment to holding others accountable for non-inclusive behaviour.

Ask Yourself: What is your level of commitment to diversity and inclusion? To gender equality? To women in leadership? Furthermore, how committed are you to being inclusive of feminine traits amongst the leadership team (present in men and women) e.g. empathy?

2. Courage

Definition: The second inclusive leadership trait is courage – the willingness to accept and be open about your personal limitations while creating space for others to contribute.

Context: We need leaders to role model inclusive behaviours, with the ability to show vulnerability, and to admit mistakes. Have the courage to know your own weaknesses, and shine a light on another's strengths. Have the courage to create a platform for women's voices to be heard as equally to men's in the boardroom.

Ask Yourself: As a woman or a man in leadership, and more importantly if you're part of a male-dominated leadership team, what actions are you taking to provide women with opportunities to step up, speak out and be heard? Are you showing the courage to allow women to show up authentically as women, without having to adapt themselves to the environment?

3. Cognizance of bias

Definition: The Cognizance of bias trait means accepting that bias exists in all of us, continuously seeking out your blind spots, and self-regulating by modifying your behaviours (and your organisational practices) to reduce the impact of your biases, ensuring that you make fair and merit-based decisions.

Context: Here are a few examples of gender biases you might be familiar with: In an interview, assuming that a working mom will be less committed to a role than a working dad. Or, assuming a CMO or CHRO you've never met before, named 'Jordan', is a woman because Marketing and HR are seen to be softer, more creative (and therefore more feminine) roles, whereas the CFO or COO position held by someone named 'Jordan' is assumed to be a man, because Finance and Operations are viewed as more masculine roles. Equal pay is another place where bias creeps in, and the tendency to pay a woman less for an equal role taken up by a man. And lastly, our biases about the roles of women also lead to assumptions that women

are good at things like “prettying up a presentation”, an example of tasks which are then asked of women, but which ultimately hold them back from progressing as fast as their male counterparts.

Ask Yourself: How are you keeping your biases in check? Are you seeking feedback from others regularly, and in the right situations, like recruitment? How do you ensure that your unconscious biases aren’t resulting in a division of roles within your team which might lead to women missing out on opportunities because of their gender?

4. Curiosity

Definition: The fourth inclusive leadership trait, curiosity, means being open to new and different ideas and experiences, having a certain level of comfort with ambiguity, operating effectively in an uncertain environment, and always keeping perspective – understanding how others view and experience the world, and showing empathy towards others.

Context: Similar to the ongoing work of keeping our unconscious biases in check by seeking feedback from others, curiosity also requires handing over the microphone and listening to the views of others, inviting new ideas to the table, as well as disagreement. Of Deloitte’s [Eight Powerful Truths](#) of Diversity and Inclusion, diversity of thought is number 1, also known as “cognitive diversity”. Diversity of thought goes beyond our demographic differences (race, gender etc), and taps into our educational and cultural differences. When leveraged, research has shown that creativity is enhanced and innovation [increases by 20%](#). By tapping into your curiosity as a leader, you have the opportunity to unleash a powerful competitive advantage, while creating a team that feels relevant and part of a shared objective.

Ask Yourself: What efforts are you making to learn about your colleagues and team members (specifically women) and what diversity of thought can you seek out to both learn from and leverage for better decision-making?

5. Cultural Intelligence

Definition: To demonstrate cultural intelligence means having the motivation to understand the cultural backgrounds of others (and the confidence to do so), the awareness and knowledge of cultural similarities and differences, and having the ability to adapt by appropriately changing your style when a cross-cultural encounter requires it.

Context: As with the curiosity trait, cultural intelligence involves seeking out, interacting with and learning about others from a different culture, and being able to act with empathy in unfamiliar situations.

Ask Yourself: Do you take the time to learn about the cultures of your colleagues? How do certain cultures impact the way in which women are perceived and treated in the workplace? Or how they engage with their male colleagues? How can you respect these differences, while

making her feel a sense of belonging to the team? And how can you help others to do the same?

6. Collaboration

Definition: Finally, the sixth trait of an inclusive leader is collaboration. Collaboration means empowering your team, ensuring every member has the freedom and confidence to contribute (has a voice), and creating cohesion between a united and diverse thinking team, ultimately promoting a psychologically safe environment.

Context: Psychological safety is key to inclusion in all its forms. If psychological safety is missing, then trust is lacking, and none of the 6 traits can be effectively enacted without it. To create an environment of collaboration, team members need to feel safe to take risks, to make mistakes and try again, to have a level of autonomy and accountability, and for conflict to be managed appropriately.

Ask Yourself: How do you create an environment for all team members to feel safe to take risks, share ideas and make mistakes? How do you comprise teams of people (men and women) in a way that brings unique perspectives together to solve problems? And how do you resolve conflict in a way that empowers and unites the team?

Conclusion

Leading inclusively requires intentional practice, starting with commitment. Commitment to the business case; commitment to transformation and representation; commitment to gender diversity. Although gender is just one form of demographic diversity, women are not a homogenous group. When you make the choice to be more inclusive of women, you will naturally be including a range of cultures, races, ethnicities, religions and educational backgrounds. As Women's Month in South Africa comes to an end, how can you start to shift your behaviours to become more inclusive of the women around you? How will you be part of driving the women agenda forward?

Key Contacts



Michaella Kissack
Manager: Human Capital
Deloitte Consulting

mkissack@deloitte.co.za

+27(0) 72 444 1197

Michaella is a Manager in Deloitte Consulting's Human Capital practice, based in Cape Town. Michaella's focus is on employee engagement and organisational culture, and plays a leading role in Deloitte's Diversity and Inclusion offerings in South Africa. Her background and experience spans marketing and communications, technology and human capital.



Fortune Gamanya
Associate Director: Diversity and Inclusion Leader
Deloitte Consulting

fgamanya@deloitte.co.za

+27(0) 21 427 5824

Fortune is the Africa Diversity and Inclusion leader at Deloitte Consulting. She is an organisational development strategist with deep experience in leadership development, strategy formulation, executive alignment and culture transformation. She is the Western Cape Human Capital Leader. Fortune is passionate about creating organisations that are fit for human beings.