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Inclusive Leadership for a 21st Century Hospitality Workplace

Lindsey Lee, Assistant Professor at Temple University's School of Sport, Tourism, and Hospitality Management

Phillip Jolly, Professor at the School of Hospitality Management at Pennsylvania State University

Heyao Yu, Assistant Professor at the School of Hospitality Management at Pennsylvania State University

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Few, if any, industries were harder hit by the COVID-19 pandemic than hospitality. Thousands of hospitality establishments have closed, and tens of thousands more have reduced staffing through decreased hours, furloughs, or layoffs. These closures and staffing reductions have resulted in millions of unemployed former hospitality workers, many of whom have sought employment in other industries and may never return to hospitality jobs. While this talent loss is heartbreaking for both employees and employers, the industry will come back. With the roll out of COVID-19 vaccines, existing businesses are gearing up to fully reopen and restaff, and new businesses are planned to replace those that did not survive the pandemic (Yu et al., 2021).

With the resurgence of hospitality businesses, many observers have pointed out the opportunity that exists for organizations to diversify their teams. Recent discussions have advocated for the implementation of diversity-promoting recruitment and hiring practices to create opportunities for more equitable gender, racial/ethnic and LGBTQ representation in the workforce, and we applaud and encourage these efforts. However, our focus lies on what comes after a diverse workforce is hired. Indeed, recruitment and hiring is just the first step, as managers and leaders are also faced with the challenge of managing a diverse workforce. For

instance, research suggests that as workgroups become more diverse in terms of age, education, ethnicity, and gender, minority or underrepresented, employees may still find themselves inadvertently on the periphery of workgroups (Colquitt, Lepine, & Wesson, 2014). Therefore, while the post-pandemic work climate allows for organizations to diversify their teams, these efforts should be matched with proactive and inclusive efforts of equipping managers with the tools to successfully lead a diverse workforce.

Research suggests that even when managers and leaders make efforts to recruit, hire, and promote from underrepresented groups, these efforts do not always mean the abilities, voices, and perspectives of underrepresented employees are fully integrated and utilized. Although increasing diversity promotes economic equality and employment outcomes, employees identifying with a specific racial/ethnic group, gender, sexual-orientation, generation, or religious minority group still experience exclusion from work groups or decision-making processes on topics such as human resource benefits and investments (Randel et al., 2018). While the hospitality industry is highly diverse overall, it is also highly stratified, meaning departments and positions can experience overrepresentation in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity (e.g., male chefs, female front desk agents, housekeepers of immigrant descent). This means that hiring and promoting from within departments can perpetuate the cycle of overrepresentation in periphery departments and underrepresentation in core departments (Hornsby & Scott-Halsell, 2015). This is a problem since the group and organizational benefits of diversity come largely from the ability to draw on the varied knowledge and viewpoints of diverse employees. Therefore, the long-term goal of retaining and sustaining a diverse workforce depends on leaders to go beyond extinguishing discrimination or biases and hinges on how leaders connect and interact with employees and encourage their contributions (Randel et al., 2018). Fortunately, a growing body of research shows that this can be achieved with a strategic application of inclusive leadership.

Before we talk about what inclusive leadership is, it is important to clarify what we mean by inclusion. While research and practice once focused attention primarily on diversity in the hospitality workforce, inclusion, representing the degree to which employees perceive they are valued by other members of their work group yet remain unique and differentiated as an individual, has gained more attention and traction (Shore et al., 2011). All humans have basic needs that must be met for psychological functioning (just like food, water, and shelter are basic needs for physical functioning). Two important psychological needs are the need for belongingness and the need for uniqueness. Belongingness is associated with the human need for connection and validation within important relationships while uniqueness is the need to be distinctive and differentiated as an individual. In practice, employees often experience a sense of inclusion when they perceive they belong to a group yet maintain a sense of individuality and uniqueness.

Inclusive leadership, then, is focused on providing employees opportunities and experiences that emphasize that they are valued members of the workgroup (belongingness) who

have individual qualities that are seen as important to the groups' success (uniqueness). Many popular leadership philosophies approach leadership as task-focused, creating a more transactional exchange where employees work in exchange for some reward or absence of punishment, while others focus on leader charisma and role-modeling, arguing that leaders should inspire employees so that they are motivated to perform. However, neither of these approaches focus specifically on the relationship between leaders and followers or address employees' basic needs of belonging and uniqueness.

Inclusive leadership, however, places its attention on relationships between leaders and followers, an important focus for an industry like hospitality that is built primarily on the relationships between employees and customers that define the service experience. Inclusive leadership recognizes that employees are both individuals and valued members of a group or team. Inclusive leadership focuses on welcoming each employee while also respecting each employees' individuality. Inclusive leadership eschews assimilation and top-down management styles and instead facilitates participation, engagement, and feelings of empowerment in employees. Importantly, for an industry plagued with gendered, racial, or ethnicity overrepresentation in departments or positions, a focus on building belonging and recognizing uniqueness has the effect of disrupting the exclusion and marginalization of underrepresented employees (Booyesen, 2014).

In simpler terms, inclusive leadership is really about leaders exhibiting openness to communication, availability, and accessibility to followers; when leaders demonstrate that their doors are always open for employees to ask questions, make suggestions, or speak their minds, employees recognize they have the ability to add value to the group, team, or organization. But more than just opening the door, inclusive leaders invite employees in and proactively seek feedback while also demonstrating to employees that they are valued members of the larger workgroup. When leaders engage in these types of behaviors, employees are more likely to experience belonging and can have a positive impact on the workgroup (Jolly & Lee, 2020).

While diversification of the workforce seeks to dispel discrimination, biases, and tokenism by integrating diverse employees within an organization and its teams, inclusive environments and leadership seeks to promote a sense of belonging and to value each individuals' unique characteristics and traits. So if recruiting, hiring, and promoting underrepresented groups does not ensure their abilities, values, and voices are effectively incorporated, then managers and leaders must be trained on inclusive leadership. Several behaviors that can be highlighted, taught, and rewarded to develop more inclusive leaders in the hospitality industry are: 1) visible commitment, 2) humility, 3) awareness of bias, 4) curiosity about others, 5) cultural intelligence, and 6) effective collaboration (Bourke & Espedido, 2019).

First, inclusive leaders can demonstrate visible commitment by not only making diversity and inclusion a priority but by also keeping others accountable on their commitment to diversity.

For example, challenging traditional diversity status quos or communicating their personal commitment to diversity and inclusion can differentiate an inclusive leader. Second, leaders who are modest about their abilities and are willing to acknowledge their mistakes are seen as humble, consequently promoting inclusion among followers. For instance, sharing personal mistakes can demonstrate the humble work manner of a leader and make the leader seem more approachable, thus enabling employees to voice their opinions. Third, inclusive leaders acknowledge their personal biases and flaws and admit that these can lead to potential blind spots. This can be especially helpful for hospitality leaders who manage both diverse employees and diverse customers and must always be open to learning and considering the appropriate way to interact with individuals of different backgrounds (see #5 below). Fourth, inclusive leaders cultivate a sense of belonging by expressing an authentic curiosity about others by trying to listen to and understand others without judgement. Employees tend to perceive that they are valued and appreciated when a leader takes time to learn about their life, interests, aspirations, and background and inclusive leaders can do so through one-on-one meetings or unstructured conversations with employees. Fifth, inclusive leaders are aware of cultural differences and highlight the uniqueness of different cultural backgrounds by adapting to and appreciating these differences. For instance, leaders can tangibly make efforts in learning cultural customs, values, or idioms. Lastly, inclusive leaders strive to empower others and encourage collaboration and cooperation among followers. By soliciting and acting on input from followers, as well as recognizing team members as the source of valuable feedback and ideas, leaders create norms of helpfulness and teamwork that encourage all team members to treat one another with respect and support.

There is still a lot we do not know about how to become an inclusive leader and create an inclusive culture within an organization. However, one thing is crystal clear - according to research and case studies - consistently practicing inclusive leadership behaviors and developing inclusive culture can contribute to superior performance of diverse teams in the hospitality industry. While COVID-19 has created many challenges for the hospitality industry, we believe that recovery from the pandemic provides a number of opportunities for organizations to rethink how they staff and manage their operations by leveraging inclusive leadership and more diverse teams.

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Authors



Dr. Lindsey Lee is an assistant professor at Temple University's School of Sport, Tourism, and Hospitality Management and focuses on maximizing service performance while supporting employee wellbeing. Dr. Lee's research interests include identifying management and organizational practices to support employees, implementing emotional labor to manage difficult guests, and employee management training and development. [LinkedIn](#)



Phillip Jolly is the Elizabeth M. King Early Career Professor in the School of Hospitality Management at Pennsylvania State University. His areas of expertise are organizational behavior and human resource management. Phil's research focuses on inclusion and diversity, leadership, and stress and social support in the hospitality workforce. Phil earned his Ph.D. in Management from the University of Houston. [LinkedIn](#)



Heyao Yu is an assistant professor at the School of Hospitality Management, Pennsylvania State University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Houston. His research focuses on food safety management in the food industry. [LinkedIn](#)