A leader’s guide to inclusive diversity

Unlike many people who unexpectedly find themselves in positions of leadership, elected officials choose to serve. It takes a special type of leader who can stay true to themselves by fueling their personal passion for service — all while still managing the diversity of people, values and positions that emerge within the "machinery" of politics.

Legislative leaders are well served by promoting an inclusive environment where diversity of background and thought can drive your larger agenda. This raises the question: What specific leadership skills are required for legislators to reconcile diversity with the need for party loyalty, bipartisanship and the broad range of constituents’ views?

A cornerstone of my work rests on developing leaders’ potential for promoting inclusion as a tool for harnessing the power of diversity. Whereas diversity is about the differences and similarities among people, inclusion means creating a climate where diversity thrives. Here are five tips for legislators on promoting diversity and inclusion.

1. **Inspire a shared vision of inclusion by knowing and engaging others**

   Articulate clearly what a culture of inclusion looks like in order to enlist others to put in the energy and effort required to manifest and sustain this climate. Paint a picture of the pathway to inclusion with such precision and conviction that others are compelled to take the journey because they understand its importance for your legislative team, community, region, state or country. Not only must you vividly describe the inclusive climate you aspire to build, but do it excessively and redundantly. Be sure to engage with those who share your vision, as well as those who may not. In hearing a range of voices, you learn new information that helps fine-tune and recalibrate your strategy.

2. **Authenticity trumps any skills deficit**

   People want to know that, as a leader, you truly believe in inclusion. This is particularly true in today’s climate of election mudslinging and spin. Therefore, you must align your actions with your rhetoric so that the vision of inclusion does not appear to be simply good "PR."

   You must be willing to tell your story so others know why inclusion matters to you. Authentically share what circumstances, events or relationships help you to understand and appreciate diversity and inclusion at a deeper level. Describe how these situations and life experiences have served as a source of motivation for you, your beliefs and your legislative priorities.

3. **Care about people; celebrate them and their successes**

   If you don’t care about your constituents, staff or colleagues, and they don’t care about you, good luck. At best, you’ll get a series of inclusive messages or programs, but a diverse coalition and a climate of inclusion that brings your vision to fruition will be much harder to create and sustain. The celebration of others and their successes must be both personal and purposeful. Meaningful praise sustains the movement toward your own goals and vision.

4. **Work with people who take you out of your comfort zone**

   The next generation of leaders for your party, community, region or state must reflect the increasingly diverse nature of our communities, nation and world. As an effective leader, you must deliberately choose to develop and learn from people who are different from yourself and each other. Choose to work with and engage with others who are different than you — stretch yourself beyond your comfort zone with the purpose of increasing your understanding of self and others. Seek out unique ways for bipartisan partnerships with legislative colleagues in order to enhance professional relationships and your ability to form important coalitions.

5. **Leadership development is ongoing and lifelong**

   Harvard scholar John Kotter reports that lifelong learning is a trait that distinguishes exemplary leaders from others. As a leader, you must be willing to seek out new challenges and reflect honestly and candidly about both your successes and daring failures. Travel both within and outside of your legislative region. Solicit the opinions and ideas from a broad range of others, especially those who are different from you, and demonstrate a propensity to listen fully and with an open mind.

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**Wisconsin Sen. Jennifer Shilling** (BILLD Class of 2001) has served as minority leader since 2014. The Democrat from La Crosse was first elected to the state Assembly in 2000. In 2011 she successfully ran against a Senate incumbent in a recall election. As a 20-year-old college student, Shilling was elected to her county board. She also worked as a congressional and legislative aide before joining the Legislature. Education finances — both K-12 and higher education — are among Shilling’s legislative priorities.

**Ohio Rep. Emilia Sykes** (BILLD Class of 2018) was elected House minority leader in January. The Democrat from Akron is serving her third term in the Ohio House. Prior to joining the state General Assembly, Sykes worked at a county fiscal office where she helped establish a land bank to repurpose vacant and abandoned properties. She also worked in community legal services and helped educate women and girls about domestic violence. As a legislator, Sykes is committed to policies that expand opportunities for middle- and working-class families and support leadership and mentorship programs for Ohio’s youth.

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