

Beyond a Checkbox

A Practical Guide to Implementing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Strategies

Tâmara Andrade



Beyond a checkbox: A practical guide to implementing diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging strategies

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Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
DEIB	diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging
IDOS	German Institute of Development and Sustainability
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual and more
MGG	Managing Global Governance
NGO	non-governmental organisations

“Um rio não deixa de ser um rio porque conflui com outro rio, ao contrário, ele passa a ser ele mesmo e outros rios, ele se fortalece. Quando a gente confluência, a gente não deixa de ser a gente, a gente passa a ser a gente e outra gente, a gente rende.”

“A river does not cease to be a river when it merges with another. On the contrary, it becomes itself and the other rivers, it grows stronger. When we merge, we don’t stop being ourselves; we become ourselves and others, we become more.”



Nêgo Bispo (Antônio Bispo dos Santos)
Brazilian poet, writer, political activist
and quilombola leader

1 Introduction: start with purpose

This guide is designed to support non-governmental organisations (NGOs), think tanks, public sector entities and other institutions in strengthening diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) within their leadership programmes. It is important to emphasise that this guide addresses both leadership programmes and the organisations that run them. Since this is a matter of structural change, it is essential to also look at the internal practices and cultures of these institutions as part of the transformation.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the pursuit of DEIB is not without challenges. Ongoing debates and, at times, significant backlash against initiatives related to this agenda have emerged across various sectors. This is evidenced by a number of companies renaming their DEIB teams and adopting new terminology, as well as eliminating dedicated DEIB roles and even entire DEIB offices. Furthermore, numerous organisations are ending or altering diversity hiring goals and supplier diversity quotas, ceasing participation in external DEIB surveys and benchmarks, and revising or discontinuing DEIB training programmes (Murray & Bohannon, 2025).

In addition, political pressure has grown, particularly in the US, where initiatives aimed at DEIB have come under increasing attack. This reaction has reached academic institutions, where DEIB-related concepts are sometimes portrayed as incompatible with “meritocracy” and “freedom of thought”. As a result, funding has been restricted, policy frameworks revised and interference in international academic cooperation has become more visible. The US National Research Foundation, for example, has reportedly started reevaluating grant proposals that directly reference DEIB themes. A list of “banned terms” has also circulated, discouraging the use of words like “women”, “disability”, “bias”, “trauma”, “socioeconomic”, “Black”, “ethnicity” and even “systemic”, effectively making it more difficult for researchers to engage with structural inequalities. Such limitations constrain the ability to critically address complex social dynamics and international challenges, reinforcing a trend that threatens the independence and quality control mechanisms of scientific research (Grimm & Hornidge, 2025).

While the intensity of this backlash varies across contexts, similar conservative reactions can be observed in other countries. In Germany, for instance, the Christian Democratic Party has voiced criticism of gender-related quotas. Although the current government has appointed a nearly gender-balanced cabinet, some prominent party members continue to resist efforts to increase female representation in leadership positions, despite growing demands for parity in public institutions (Maier & Schmid, 2025). Additionally, the German state of Bavaria has recently imposed a ban on gender-sensitive language in official documents, reinforcing a broader conservative pushback against inclusive practices in public administration (Deutsche Welle, 2024).

This resistance may arise from how some dominant groups perceive these efforts as obstacles to “progress”, leading to actions such as the elimination of DEIB departments. However, it is also a reflection of how some organisations, despite their commitments, have failed to integrate DEIB into a deep and strategic change process, instead adopting superficial diversity efforts, such as symbolic campaigns, isolated training sessions or “diverse” hiring without retention or power-sharing strategies, that do not address systemic power structures. This pattern of resistance can also be interpreted within the broader framework of the so-called “culture wars”, a term popularised by Hunter (1991) to describe conflicts over moral authority and social values between progressive and conservative worldviews. From this perspective, DEIB initiatives are often framed not as matters of human rights or organisational improvement, but as ideological threats to dominant cultural narratives and institutional power. This framing may also help explain the political mobilisation against DEIB, especially when equity-driven reforms challenge entrenched norms and unsettle existing hierarchies (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

At the same time, this moment presents an opportunity to critically reflect on how DEIB initiatives have been implemented thus far, to reassess narratives, choices and policies, and to refine strategies that enable more systemic and collective change.

A McKinsey and Company (2023) report revealed that while 61 per cent of organisations point to DEIB as a top manager capability, only 28 per cent of managers say their company recognises DEIB in performance reviews. This disconnect between discourse and structural change is at the root of growing resistance, underscoring the importance of engaging in DEIB work with intentionality, conceptual clarity and a long-term commitment to transforming institutional cultures, governance models and power dynamics. Structural change is a continuous and dynamic process; each step contributes to broader transformation. When one element of a system shifts, the structure as a whole is impacted.

These efforts must be understood not as a checklist, but as part of an evolving, collective journey. They require a shift away from symbolic or fragmented actions toward strategies that are fully integrated into the organisation’s vision, operational practices and mechanisms of accountability.

This publication invites you to begin this process with individual commitment. Each person has the potential to initiate meaningful change by acting within their sphere of influence, using the role and resources available to them. However, lasting and structural transformation requires more than isolated efforts. It demands the active engagement of stakeholders, teams and actors across sectors. It is through collective mobilisation that meaningful, sustainable and systemic impact can be achieved. The following pages offer a practical framework and resources to help organisations deepen their understanding of DEIB concepts, analyse existing power dynamics, develop inclusive leadership programmes and embed DEIB principles into organisational cultures and systems. By using this guide, your organisation can take meaningful steps toward building leadership programmes where everyone feels valued, heard and empowered to contribute their unique talents and perspectives.

1.1 Why this guide?

Many organisations recognise the importance of DEIB, but translating good intentions into meaningful action and systemic change in leadership development can be challenging. This guide addresses the need for a structured and accessible approach to embedding DEIB in leadership programmes. It moves beyond surface-level representation to focus on creating truly inclusive environments where diverse voices can thrive. This guide invites critical reflection, collective engagement and intentional redesign of leadership programmes and organisational cultures. Drawing on global good practices, social movements and leaders, this guide helps you:

- reflect on your own privileges and biases as a foundation for fostering inclusion;
- access practical concepts, tools and strategies to implement DEIB in leadership programmes;
- deepen your understanding of systemic power, structural inequalities and representation in leadership;
- move from intention to meaningful, sustainable and strategic action;
- apply a decolonial lens to leadership by challenging dominant paradigms and centring marginalised perspectives;
- redesign leadership programme structures, including selection criteria, curriculum and facilitation, to foster access, representation and belonging;
- drive institutional transformation through inclusive structures, cultures and accountability mechanisms;
- engage in continuous individual and collective reflection to support long-term change; and
- adapt and contextualise DEIB strategies for your organisation's unique realities.

This guide aims to empower you to move from awareness to action, ultimately leading to more diverse, equitable, inclusive and impactful leadership within your organisation and the wider sector.

1.2 What this guide aims to be (and what it doesn't)

This guide is a practical resource offering definitions, frameworks, assessment tools and actionable suggestions for enhancing DEIB in leadership programmes. It is designed to be accessible to individuals and organisations at various stages of their DEIB journey. It emphasises the importance of understanding systemic power, challenging dominant norms and centring marginalised knowledge and perspectives. This guide also highlights the crucial role of inclusive leadership in fostering environments where all individuals feel a sense of belonging and can contribute authentically.

This guide is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It provides a foundation and a range of options that should be adapted and contextualised to the specific needs and circumstances of your organisation. It is also not intended to be a superficial “add and stir” approach – where diversity is merely inserted without structural change. Instead, it encourages a fundamental shift in mindset and organisational culture towards genuinely valuing and integrating diverse perspectives and experiences. Furthermore, while recognising the importance of addressing historical injustices and systemic inequalities, this guide aims to provide practical steps for organisational change and may not delve deeply into the theory of decolonisation, representation, inequality, power dynamics and other concepts that are related to this agenda. It encourages critical engagement

with these broader concepts while focussing on actionable strategies for DEIB within leadership development contexts.

1.3 Acknowledging the journey

As introduced earlier, Nêgo Bispo's powerful words capture the essence of this journey toward DEIB:

A river does not cease to be a river when it merges with another; on the contrary, it becomes itself and other rivers, it grows stronger. When we come together, we do not lose ourselves; we become ourselves and others, we expand.

His words resonate deeply with me, as my own perspectives, experiences and encounters with different identities and life stories have shaped the way I see the world. This is the invitation I extend to you through this document: open your mind, embrace new perspectives, allow yourself to merge with others and engage in a lifelong learning journey in DEIB.

This guide is the result of the collective knowledge, lived experiences and dedicated work of many individuals, organisations and social movements committed to advancing DEIB. I am deeply grateful to everyone who generously shared their insights, stories and experiences. Your voices were essential in shaping the heart of this guide. A sincere thank you to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for supporting this research and believing in my potential through the German Chancellor Fellowship. I am especially thankful to the Managing Global Governance (MGG) Academy and my host organisation, the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), for their partnership, openness and institutional support. The MGG team played a vital role in this process, offering thoughtful reflections, meaningful dialogue and consistent support that helped shape the ideas and approaches shared here.

This guide also represents a personal and professional milestone in my journey. I, Tâmara Andrade, have dedicated over 15 years to people management, diversity and inclusion, working across sectors to promote more equitable and people-centred leadership. With a background in psychology, a specialisation in people management, and a master's degree in public policy management, I have led initiatives in organisational transformation and equity in the private sector, civil society and philanthropy. I have directed civil society organisations and held leadership positions in philanthropic institutions where I developed and implemented strategies to promote Black and Indigenous professionals in leadership roles. I am currently a guest researcher at the MGG Academy at IDOS, where I am implementing a project to promote diversity, equity and inclusion in leadership programmes as part of my German Chancellor Fellowship, supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. This guide is one of the outcomes of this fellowship.

Finally, a special thanks to many organisations, networks, social movements, and professionals who, every day, commit themselves to building more inclusive leadership and driving systemic change. Your work challenges injustice, breaks down barriers and continues to inspire meaningful progress. I also want to honour those who came before us, the pioneers who laid the groundwork, opened doors and fought for a more just and inclusive world. To protect the privacy of those interviewed during this project, their names and affiliations will remain confidential. Nonetheless, their insights and experiences are deeply woven into this document and have left a lasting impact on this journey. This guide is for all of you. Thank you for lighting the path toward a more equitable and inclusive society.

“It is not our differences that divide us.
It is our inability to recognise, accept
and celebrate those differences.”



Audre Lorde
Black American writer,
poet and activist

2 The DEIB shift: understanding its roots and directions

2.1 Pushback and opportunities: the future of DEIB

The landscape of DEIB is currently undergoing a profound shift. Over the past decade, DEIB has moved from the periphery to the core of leadership discussions, fuelled by data-driven evidence and global movements advocating for systemic change. Yet recent socio-political shifts have placed DEIB initiatives under heightened attention, resulting in significant backlash that threatens progress. For organisations with leadership programmes, this moment demands more than just acknowledging DEIB; it requires a deep dive into DEIB’s urgent necessity and a clear understanding of the significant stakes involved if these principles are not embraced and embedded within the very core of organisations.

The expansion of DEIB initiatives has been fuelled by multiple forces, including demographic changes, social justice movements and the proven business case for diversity. A 2020 report by McKinsey and Company underscores that diverse teams drive better performance, innovation and financial outcomes. The study found that organisations in the top quartile for gender diversity were 25 per cent more likely to achieve above-average profitability, while those in the top quartile for ethnic diversity were 36 per cent more likely to outperform their peers in the same sector.

Movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, as well as increasing advocacy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual and more (LGBTQIA+) rights, have forced organisations to reassess their commitment to equity and representation. Governments have also taken action. In Brazil, for instance, affirmative action policies have been implemented in higher education and public sector employment to promote racial diversity.

Despite these advancements, DEIB efforts are currently facing backlash in several countries. In the US, legislative actions have been introduced to limit DEIB-related initiatives in both the education and corporate sectors, with some states going as far as banning such programmes entirely in public institutions. In Latin America, although affirmative action policies have been adopted, ongoing debates about their effectiveness, combined with opposition from conservative political groups, continue to hinder lasting progress (Freitas et al., 2022). In Europe, the absence of demographic data collection in countries that follow so-called “colour-blind” policies makes it difficult to assess and address workplace discrimination (EY, 2023). However, it’s

important to highlight that in countries like Germany, this lack of data is closely tied to historical experiences in which state-led categorisation of individuals by race or ethnicity served as a mechanism of exclusion and persecution. This legacy has led to a sustained societal and institutional caution around collecting such information. In these contexts, it is crucial to explore alternative methods to access disaggregated data, monitor inequality and ensure accountability in efforts to advance equity and inclusion.

This backlash is not just ideological; it reflects broader socio-economic and political shifts. The rise of populist movements, economic downturns and growing scepticism about organisations' commitments to social issues have led some leaders to deprioritise DEIB initiatives. A 2024 survey of managers and employees across nine European countries, including Germany, revealed that only 7 per cent of workplaces were actively cultivating a diverse and inclusive culture (EY, 2024). This regression threatens to undo years of progress, reinforcing systemic inequities in leadership pipelines.

For leadership programmes, this is a decisive moment. Integrating DEIB principles into leadership development is key to fostering innovation, attracting top talent and ensuring long-term organisational success. People, particularly from underrepresented groups, are increasingly vocal about their expectations for inclusive workplaces. A failure to address these demands can result in talent drain, disengagement and a loss of credibility in the eyes of stakeholders and society. By embedding DEIB into decision-making processes, equitable policies and accountability measures at all levels, leadership programmes can play a key role in shaping a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Navigating this complex landscape requires a clear grounding in the core principles of DEIB. The next section will delve into the fundamental concepts of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, exploring their distinct roles and interconnected impact on leadership and organisational empowerment.

2.2 Beyond buzzwords: unpacking the meaning of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging

Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging are often grouped together because they are interconnected, and it is only in combination that their true impact emerges. Some organisations use different terms or emphasise specific aspects, but it is essential to understand each of these concepts individually, as well as how they intersect. A key element in DEIB discussions is intersectionality, a framework that helps us grasp the overlapping systems of privilege and oppression that shape people's experiences.

Today, the richest 1 per cent of the world's population controls nearly half of global wealth, while the bottom 50 per cent owns less than 2 per cent collectively (Oxfam, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic further deepened these disparities, disproportionately impacting marginalised communities and pushing millions into extreme poverty (World Bank, 2020). Moreover, those who hold the greatest concentration of wealth are predominantly cisgender white men (Peterson-Withorn, 2025), reflecting historical patterns of exclusion and privilege. Yet, even if the composition of the wealthiest 1 per cent were more diverse, the structural challenges associated with extreme wealth concentration would likely persist. Representation alone may not be sufficient to address systemic inequities if the underlying economic structures that perpetuate exclusion and inequality are not significantly changed. These realities highlight the urgency of implementing intentional DEIB strategies that not only broaden representation but also aim to transform the systems of power that sustain inequality.

Creating inclusive spaces requires understanding the diverse identities that shape people's experiences. One useful tool for this is the "diversity wheel" (see Figure 1), which was developed by Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener in the 1990s.

Figure 1: Diversity wheel



Source: Adapted from Loden and Rosener (1991)

This framework illustrates how different identity dimensions, such as race, gender identity, age and ability, intersect with social and organisational factors to influence an individual's access to opportunities. The model has evolved to include four layers.

- The core dimension (internal circle) consists of aspects of identity that are often unchangeable, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation and physical or mental abilities.
- The secondary dimension (external circle) encompasses characteristics that may change over time, including education, marital status, parental status, work experience, religion, geographic location, income and language.
- The organisational dimension (outer circle) focusses on factors affecting workplace experiences, such as management status, work location, seniority and functional level.
- Some variations of the framework also include a cultural dimension that considers societal influences like values, norms and beliefs. Recognising that these identities overlap is essential for understanding how discrimination operates, which brings us to the concept of intersectionality.

2.2.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is a framework that examines how multiple aspects of identity interact to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression. It acknowledges that individuals do not experience discrimination in a singular way. For instance, a black woman does not only face racism or sexism separately; rather, these forms of discrimination intersect, shaping her experience differently from that of a white woman or a

black man. This approach also highlights how systemic inequalities function in different contexts. For example, a working-class gay man living in a rural area may face different challenges than a working-class gay man in an urban setting. Similarly, when organisations claim they have achieved gender equality, they may only be referring to white women, overlooking the experiences of women of colour, trans women or women with disabilities.

The application of intersectionality is a practical tool for designing inclusive policies and practices. It helps organisations analyse how laws, workplace structures and social norms create or reinforce inequalities. Many leadership programmes operate on a selection process that favours candidates with extensive work experience, elite education or strong professional networks. However, this approach can exclude individuals from marginalised backgrounds, particularly women of colour, people with disabilities and individuals from low-income communities who may not have had the same access to prestigious institutions or career-building opportunities. Applying an intersectional lens means recognising these structural barriers and implementing outreach strategies, scholarships and different selection criteria to ensure diverse representation.

2.2.2 Diversity

Understanding the role of intersectionality in leadership development naturally leads us to the broader conversation about diversity. Diversity is related to multiple dimensions of identities represented in a workplace, group, organisation and leadership programme. Those dimensions of identity can include race, ethnicity, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, disability, socio-economic background and more. It also encompasses diverse ways of thinking, experiences and perspectives (Page, 2007).

Historical and structural inequalities have long determined who has access to opportunities and leadership positions. Certain groups have benefited from systemic privileges that continue to influence social and professional landscapes today. In this context, promoting the proportional representation of historically marginalised groups is not only a matter of fairness but also an act of historical reparation. Organisations and leadership programmes should not only seek to include individuals from diverse backgrounds but also ensure that these individuals are proportionally represented, considering the demographic composition of the populations they aim to serve. For example, in Brazil, 56 per cent of the population is Black and 52 per cent are women (IBGE, 2022); therefore, leadership programmes targeting Brazilian professionals should strive for representation that mirrors these demographics. Some may argue that leadership programmes should focus solely on selecting the “most talented” individuals based on merit. However, when examined critically, the concept of meritocracy reveals significant flaws: not everyone begins the race from the same starting line. For instance, a Black transgender woman would start far behind a white cisgender man and would encounter far more obstacles along the way. Ignoring these disparities perpetuates the myth of meritocracy, reinforcing privilege rather than truly recognising potential and achievement. Understanding these dynamics is essential for genuinely promoting DEIB.

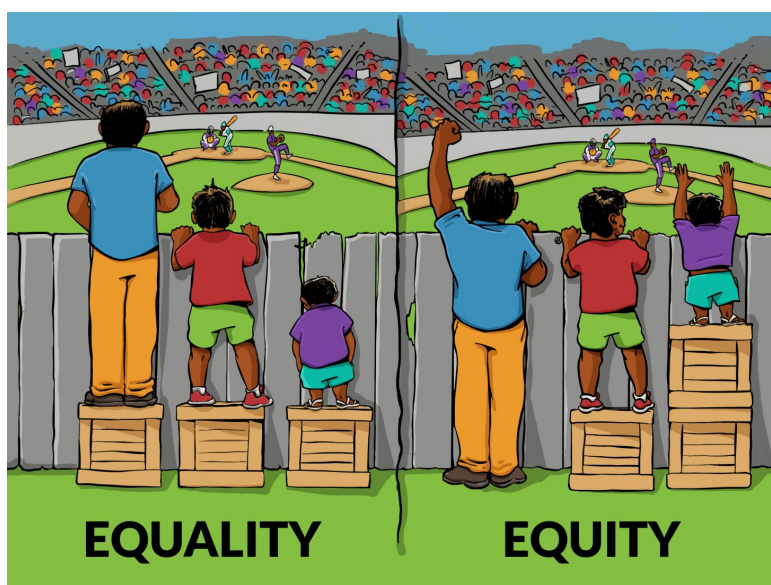
In a metaphorical way, diversity is like a photograph of your leadership programme. The image it captures provides a snapshot of the reality within the programme, who is present, who is missing, and whose perspectives are being considered. While a single photo cannot capture every nuance of diversity, it serves as an initial reflection point. Looking at this photo, organisations must ask themselves whether they are truly proud of what they see. Does it represent the target groups they aim to include?

However, achieving diversity is not a simple process. It requires intentional strategies that go beyond numbers, such as targeted recruitment, changes in the selection criteria, and eliminating systemic barriers that limit access, especially for the underrepresented groups. The next section explores these strategies and outlines practical actions that can drive meaningful change.

2.2.3 Equity

While diversity focusses on representation, equity focusses on providing fair treatment and access to opportunities and addressing systemic barriers. A very important aspect to highlight is that people confuse the concept of equity and equality. Unlike equality, which assumes that distributing the same resources to everyone results in fairness, equity recognises that individuals may need different levels of support to achieve the same outcomes (Bensimon, 2005) (see Figure 2). This distinction is critical in leadership programmes, where structural and systemic inequalities often limit access and opportunities for historically underrepresented groups. Rawls (1971) emphasised this in his theory of justice, arguing that equitable societies ensure that resources and opportunities are distributed in a way that benefits those who have historically been disadvantaged. Without equity, leadership programmes risk reinforcing existing power imbalances rather than addressing them.

Figure 2: Equality vs. equity



Source: interactioninstitute.org | madewithangus.com.
Image by the Interaction Institute for Social Change | Artist: Angus Maguire.

Affirmative actions, such as quotas, can be powerful tools for promoting equity in leadership programmes, as they acknowledge structural inequalities and ensure that historically excluded groups gain access to development opportunities. However, quotas alone are not sufficient to guarantee sustainable equity. Equitable access can be further expanded by redesigning selection processes to value diverse trajectories and lived experiences, rather than solely prioritising traditional academic or professional credentials. Additionally, mentorship programmes and peer support networks play a crucial role in ensuring that underrepresented participants not only enter these programmes but also succeed in them. Financial policies, such as scholarships and stipends, help remove socioeconomic barriers that may prevent participation. So instead of giving the same amount of scholarship for everyone (equality) in your leadership programme, how can we allocate larger amounts to those who need more, reflecting the principle of equity?

2.2.4 Inclusion

Equity lays the foundation for inclusion by ensuring that leadership programmes provide fair access to opportunities and resources for all participants, particularly those from historically marginalised groups. However, equity alone is not enough; it must be complemented by

intentional efforts to create an environment where all individuals feel represented, valued, heard and comfortable contributing.

Ferdman (2010) defines inclusion as a dynamic process that “involves both being fully ourselves and allowing others to be fully themselves in the context of engaging in common pursuits. It means collaborating in a way in which all parties can be fully engaged and subsumed, and yet, paradoxically, at the same time believe that they have not compromised, hidden, or given up any part of themselves”. Experiencing inclusion, therefore, means that individuals feel fully part of the whole while maintaining their authenticity and uniqueness. Central to this experience is the recognition of self-declaration, that is, the ability of individuals to define and express their own identities on their own terms. While this principle is essential, it also faces challenges, particularly when translated into institutional and organisational practices. Without inclusion, equity efforts may fall short, as merely offering access to opportunities does not guarantee that all individuals can fully participate, contribute and thrive.

To foster inclusion in leadership programmes, organisations must go beyond removing barriers and actively build spaces of participation, trust and psychological safety. This includes, for example, creating dialogue strategies that amplify all voices, developing policies to prevent discrimination and fostering learning environments in which individuals can share perspectives without fear of exclusion or retaliation. These elements are fundamental to ensuring that leadership programmes become truly inclusive, and the following sections will explore them in greater detail.

Inclusion operates on multiple, interconnected levels within leadership programmes and organisations. This multi-level perspective not only helps us grasp the complexities of fostering inclusive environments but also provides a framework to design actions and policies that drive meaningful change (Ferdman & Deane, 2006; Shore et al., 2011).

At the individual level (micro level), inclusion in leadership programmes means ensuring that each participant feels valued, respected and empowered to express their authentic self (Shore et al., 2011). It involves recognising and appreciating each person’s unique identity and contributions, creating an environment where individuals can bring their full selves without fear of judgment or pressure to assimilate. It also includes fostering opportunities for personal growth and self-awareness, particularly in understanding unconscious biases and how these shape interpersonal dynamics. Ultimately, it is about developing inclusive mindsets that promote respect, openness and a genuine appreciation for diverse perspectives. This can be supported through individual coaching sessions that explore participants’ personal identities, social positions and leadership trajectories, helping them understand how their lived experiences influence their leadership styles and interactions. Another powerful practice is the use of reflective journals: at the beginning of the programme, each participant receives a dedicated notebook to use throughout the experience, with guided prompts that encourage reflection on topics such as unconscious bias, identity, vulnerability and power. These journals are not shared or evaluated, serving solely as a space for personal exploration. Additionally, implementing structured check-ins at the start of group activities offers a consistent opportunity for participants to share how they are feeling, both emotionally and mentally; this activity can be facilitated in both full-group and small-group formats, accommodating different communication styles and personalities. It also helps identify potential conflicts or moments when someone may feel excluded, allowing for timely intervention before issues escalate.

At the group level (meso level), inclusion within leadership programmes focusses on fostering collaborative and respectful team dynamics. This means intentionally creating a diverse and inclusive cohort where different perspectives are not only present but actively valued and integrated into the collective work. It involves promoting effective collaboration and cross-functional partnerships, ensuring that diverse voices genuinely influence decision-making processes rather than being tokenised. Inclusive group environments also rely on dialogue

strategies that create space for all voices to be heard, while actively preventing dominant narratives from overshadowing minority perspectives. It is important to note that, in the context of this guide, the focus is specifically on organised leadership programmes, where participants come together temporarily for a shared learning journey, rather than on permanent working teams within institutions, which may involve different dynamics.

Ultimately, the goal is to support collective learning, where differences are embraced as strengths and intercultural competencies are continuously developed. A key strategy is the facilitation of an intercultural group agreement session at the beginning of the programme. In this session, participants are invited to share cultural expectations related to communication styles, social interactions, hierarchy, feedback and time management. Together, the group co-creates a set of working agreements that reflect and respect the cultural specificities represented in the cohort. Another essential practice is the intentional composition of diverse teams for collaborative projects, ensuring that factors such as gender, geography, race/ethnicity and professional background are considered to promote balance and equity. These teams benefit from structured group feedback sessions held periodically throughout the programme, providing a consistent space for participants to reflect on team dynamics, inclusion practices, and opportunities for improvement. This regular feedback process helps identify challenges early and creates space for timely adjustments, strengthening group cohesion and ensuring that inclusion remains a lived and evolving experience.

At the organisational and external level (macro level), inclusion extends to the broader institutional structures, leadership culture, internal policies and external relationships that shape an organisation. It involves cultivating a culture grounded in justice, respect and empowerment, where inclusion is embedded as a core value rather than treated as an afterthought. This requires rethinking management systems, from recruitment and performance evaluations to promotions and leadership development, so they align with inclusive principles. It also demands a clear and sustained commitment from top leadership, ensuring that inclusion is integrated into strategic decision-making. Beyond the organisation itself, inclusion entails engaging meaningfully with external communities and stakeholders, and building partnerships that contribute to inclusive leadership ecosystems. This has two interconnected dimensions: on one hand, developing leaders who are more aware, empathetic and equipped to engage with perspectives and realities different from their own, and on the other, actively working to increase diversity in leadership by addressing historical injustices and structural barriers within the programme itself. Some concrete actions may include the incorporation of diversity and inclusion criteria in the selection process, with attention to the representation of historically marginalised communities, such as individuals from racialised groups, Indigenous peoples, and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Programme content also plays a critical role: the curriculum and learning materials should be reviewed and revised to reflect a plurality of voices and knowledge systems, particularly from the Global South, Indigenous communities and Black scholars, ensuring that leadership is not taught from a single perspective. Moreover, building partnerships with local organisations in the countries or regions represented in the programme helps contextualise learning, deepen community engagement and promote a genuine sense of representation and inclusion. A concrete example of this approach is the Shaping Futures Academy (at IDOS), which intentionally co-designs and implements parts of its leadership programme in partnership with local institutions based in African countries. The content is developed in close connection with local knowledge systems, historical contexts and community-based leadership practices. This methodological choice helps decentralise knowledge production and challenge dominant models of leadership development.

This multi-level framework (micro, meso and macro) underscores that creating truly inclusive leadership programmes requires more than individual awareness, it demands systemic change. A holistic and intentional approach ensures that inclusion permeates every aspect of leadership development, from the individual leader to the broader leadership landscape.

2.2.5 Belonging

While inclusion is essential, the ultimate goal of leadership programmes should be to cultivate a deep sense of belonging. Inclusion ensures access and participation; it is about entering a space and having one's presence acknowledged, making existing structures more accessible and representative so that diverse individuals can participate and engage. Inclusion is often seen as a set of actions and practices aimed at widening access and encouraging engagement.

Belonging, however, takes it a step further: it is the feeling of being truly connected within a group and being part of the decision-making process (Brimhall, 2019). It is not only about having a seat at the table, but about feeling respected, valued and empowered to contribute meaningfully to the collective vision. Belonging recognises the importance of shared ownership of processes and relationships, rather than assuming entitlement to positions or spaces. It demands a transformation of existing structures by asking critical questions: Whose norms define the space? Whose voices shape the agenda? Who feels safe enough to speak authentically and who doesn't? Belonging happens when leaders do not just invite diverse individuals into leadership spaces but actively reshape those spaces to reflect, embrace and be co-owned by all (O'Donovan, 2018). It is about the shift from "being included" to "being integral".

Leadership programmes must consider how multiple factors, such as social dynamics, power relations, cultural identity and personal histories, shape participants' experiences. One example of this complexity is language, which often carries deep emotional and cultural significance. Programmes designed for diverse, international cohorts may promote inclusion by common working languages (e.g., English), but this alone does not necessarily create belonging. For many participants, language barriers do not just affect comprehension but also confidence, self-expression and a sense of legitimacy in leadership discussions. Rather than avoiding this challenge, leadership programmes should openly acknowledge it. Talking about the universal experience of struggling with language, whether due to fluency, jargon or differences in communication styles, creates a culture of vulnerability and shared learning. When facilitators and participants recognise that everyone, at some point, faces challenges in expressing themselves fully, it reduces stigma and shifts the focus from perfection to connection. Encouraging open discussions about these difficulties, creating moments where participants can reflect on when they have felt unheard or misunderstood, and normalising linguistic diversity can build trust. In this process, belonging is not about eliminating barriers but about ensuring that individuals feel safe enough to navigate them together.

In addition to addressing linguistic and cultural dimensions, leadership programmes can actively incorporate mechanisms that assess and strengthen belonging. One such approach is to include targeted questions in feedback tools or evaluation surveys that specifically explore how much participants felt a sense of belonging within the cohort and the learning environment. While such practices are more commonly associated with organisational settings, they can be readily adapted to leadership development contexts. The insights gathered can inform future programme design, helping to identify moments of disconnection and opportunities for improvement. Another effective strategy involves mentoring. Pairing participants with mentors who understand, reflect or value their personal and professional backgrounds can foster relational safety and affirmation. This is particularly powerful when the mentoring relationships include programme alumni, who can offer not only guidance but also a sense of continuity and connection to a broader leadership community. Mentoring, in this sense, becomes more than a support mechanism, it serves as a relational anchor that reinforces belonging. Furthermore, programmes can create spaces for diverse perspectives to genuinely influence the programme's direction. This involves moving beyond consultation toward shared decision-making. For instance, in group projects, case studies or collaborative challenges, participants can be encouraged to define their own approaches and frameworks, rather than following predefined templates. This kind of autonomy promotes ownership, and when participants feel that their insights actively shape collective outcomes, their sense of belonging is significantly deepened.

Leadership programmes must move beyond superficial inclusion efforts and engage in critical reflection on how decision-making processes, group dynamics and leadership models either reinforce or challenge existing power structures. Organisations that commit to this work not only create fairer environments but also unlock innovation, strengthen communities and drive sustainable success. Leadership programmes that fully integrate belonging as a core principle move beyond access and representation, fostering genuine transformation where all leaders feel empowered to and capable of shaping the future.

“O silêncio dos privilegiados é cúmplice da manutenção das opressões. É preciso coragem para deslocar-se da zona de conforto e atuar na transformação.”

“The silence of the privileged is complicit in sustaining oppression. It takes courage to step out of the comfort zone and take action toward transformation.”



Djamila Ribeiro
Brazilian philosopher, writer and
one of the leading voices of black feminism
in Latin America

3 Seeing the system, owning your role

3.1 Start with yourself

As already discussed, the landscape of DEIB is evolving, and a new stage in the global conversation is taking place. A turning point is being reached, one that demands a shift not only in discourse and the language used so far, but also in mindset, behaviour and institutional practice. In such complex and uncertain times, it becomes even more essential for individuals and organisations to pause and reflect deeply: Why does this work matter to you? What does it mean for your organisation? Why should it be central to how you identify, develop, and support leadership? What is lost when diversity is sidelined, and what becomes possible when it is genuinely embraced?

To engage with these questions meaningfully, you are invited to begin with yourself, not as a professional or institutional actor, but as a person shaped by lived experiences, histories, privileges and vulnerabilities. When did you first become aware of your identity, your race, gender, class, body or language? Was it a moment of pride or of pain? Did it open doors for you, or did it restrict access?

Many scholars have demonstrated that understanding our own positionality is foundational to acting ethically and equitably in diverse contexts. Awareness of our intersecting identities and the social constructs surrounding them enables us to build the empathy and fairness necessary for inclusive leadership. Reflect on both the opportunities you earned and those you inherited. Who opened doors for you? Who was excluded and continues to be? Whose voices and contributions remain overlooked because they do not conform to dominant norms?

This reflection is a call for accountability. It is about recognising that systems are never neutral and that every person plays a role in reproducing or disrupting them. As Freire (1970) emphasises, transformation begins with critical consciousness, a form of awareness that is inherently linked to action. The DEIB journey is not a short-term act of reflection, nor is it linear.

It is a long-term process requiring sustained commitment, clear purpose, strategic thinking and, crucially, a collective effort grounded in alliances and stakeholder engagement.

Each person operates within institutional structures, and those structures are embedded in broader systemic arrangements. DEIB cannot be viewed as an individual endeavour alone. It must be understood as a multilevel, interdependent process, one that requires engagement across personal, interpersonal, organisational and systemic dimensions. As history has shown, meaningful change is rooted in community and collaboration. Individual awareness, while essential, is insufficient unless embedded in collective movement.

However, trying to act across all levels simultaneously from the limited scope of your own role can be both exhausting and counterproductive. Different levels demand distinct strategies, timelines and alliances. Structural transformation involves tailoring strategies to specific groups while pursuing the main goal of equity and justice. This means you should reflect on what you can do today with the role you already have, your resources, your position in decision-making and your sphere of influence. And equally, it should be part of a coordinated, collective effort.

Now, turn the mirror toward your organisation. How does it reflect the world you aim to impact? Who is on your team and who holds leadership roles? Are they representative of the society you serve or aspire to influence? Is your leadership programme perpetuating patterns of exclusion, or is it intentionally dismantling the barriers that prevent equitable access to opportunity, recognition and influence?

Instead of rushing into surface-level solutions or checklists, return to your “why”. Revisit your mission and values, not as slogans but as living principles. How do they align with equity and inclusion? Where are the gaps between what is declared and what is practiced? This type of reflection is not a supplement to your strategy; it is the foundation. When the purpose is clear, the path becomes intentional. When the intention is shared, action becomes sustainable.

This is also the moment to ask: Who else in your organisation is engaged with this agenda? Who is not, and why? Building alliances requires identifying shared commitments, creating spaces for honest dialogue, and embedding DEIB into existing conversations, not as an isolated subject but as a lens through which to enrich and deepen other priorities. A single question raised in a team meeting or a thoughtful provocation during planning can open space for critical reflection and collective learning.

Resistance is part of the process. Individual and organisational setbacks are inevitable. That is why change also requires strategic analysis. Reflect on the current moment in your organisation. What is already being prioritised? Where could DEIB be integrated or aligned with existing workstreams?

At first, this work may feel overwhelming. Too many layers, too many barriers, too little time. And indeed, trying to transform everything at once can lead to frustration. But remember, systemic change is an ongoing, shared process. What matters is not the size of your first step but the intention and consistency behind it. Even small shifts, a conversation, a design decision, or a deliberate act of inclusion, can contribute meaningfully to broader transformation.

To support this first step, you are invited to explore the privilege check exercise at the end of this section. This tool helps reveal the often-invisible structures that shape access, mobility and safety. It is not about blame, but about building awareness of how your own experience is shaped by systems and how that, in turn, influences how you lead, decide and create spaces for others to thrive.

3.2 The myth of good and bad people

Generally, when people are confronted with instances of discrimination, they tend to analyse them based on what they already know about the individuals involved, their relationship with them and whether that person “seems like someone who would act that way”. This creates a mechanism in which people quickly classify the other as either “good” or “bad”. For instance, when a woman makes a sexist comment, someone might think, “That’s not possible because she is a woman”, or when a non-white male colleague exhibits racist behaviour, it might be dismissed as unintentional because “he supports the anti-racist agenda”. This kind of binary thinking serves as a shield to deny or minimise discriminatory behaviour.

The fundamental issue with this approach is that it overlooks the reality that racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination are structural. As a result, anyone, regardless of identity or good intentions, can consciously or unconsciously perpetuate discrimination. Structural discrimination operates through policies, cultural norms and institutional practices that maintain disparities even in the absence of explicitly prejudiced individuals. Bonilla-Silva (1997) argues that structural racism is not about individual intentions but about a system that distributes resources, opportunities and power unequally, thereby ensuring the persistence of inequality.

This tendency to view discrimination as an individual flaw rather than a systemic issue makes it harder for people to recognise how deeply ingrained biases shape their perceptions and decisions. Unconscious biases play a central role in this dynamic, influencing decisions and interactions in ways that often go unnoticed. Akram (2017) points out that biases are internalised social stereotypes that affect how people perceive and behave. Studies have shown that identical resumes, when assigned names linked to different racial backgrounds, receive different levels of interest from employers, with a clear advantage given to names perceived as white (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Unconscious bias doesn’t just shape discriminatory actions, it also shapes how people interpret discriminatory situations. When someone dismisses a behaviour as non-discriminatory based on their perception of the person involved, they’re often reacting from an unconscious identification or affinity with individuals who reflect parts of their own identity or worldview.

Daniel Kahneman’s research on cognitive biases and decision-making sheds light on how these unconscious mechanisms operate. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), Kahneman explains that human thought processes function through two distinct systems: System 1, which is automatic, fast and driven by intuition; and System 2, which is slower, more deliberate and based on analytical reasoning. Unconscious bias largely stems from System 1 thinking, as this system relies on pre-existing stereotypes and heuristics to make quick decisions. Because it operates with efficiency as a priority, System 1 does not pause to critically assess the fairness or accuracy of these judgments; instead, it draws from learned associations and societal norms. For example, when the team is selecting the candidates for the next leadership academy, they might instinctively perceive a candidate as a “better fit” without recognising that this impression is influenced by implicit associations related to race, gender or educational background. System 2, on the other hand, allows individuals to engage in critical reflection and challenge their biases, but activating it requires effort and intentionality. Without deliberate intervention, most people default to System 1 thinking, which perpetuates existing inequalities. This explains why diversity training and unconscious bias workshops emphasise slowing down decision-making processes, increasing awareness of biases and implementing structured decision-making criteria to counteract the automatic responses of System 1.

Adding to this perspective of how unconscious bias works, in situations involving racism and intersecting identities, Bento (2002) introduces the concept of the “whiteness pact” which describes the implicit agreements that uphold white privilege and reinforce racial hierarchies. This pact operates by downplaying or denying racism, discrediting the lived experiences of non-white individuals and maintaining the status quo through both active exclusion and passive

complicity. Within organisations, this manifests in a lack of representation of Black individuals in leadership, resistance to affirmative action policies and hesitance to adopt structural changes that challenge existing racial power dynamics.

Breaking free from the cycle of viewing discrimination as solely a matter of “bad individuals” is the first step toward meaningful change. Discrimination is not just a moral failing, it is a systemic issue deeply embedded in social structures. However, recognising that discrimination is structural should not lead people to think, “It happens because of structural discrimination; it’s not my fault”. Instead, individuals must take responsibility for their behaviours, even when their actions are unintentional. Whether intentional or not, anyone can perpetuate racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination.

For true progress to take place, it is necessary to move beyond this moral dichotomy and embrace a critical and reflective approach. This involves continuous education on unconscious biases and structural discrimination, the implementation of accountability mechanisms within organisations, the collection of data to uncover patterns of inequality and a genuine commitment from leadership to recognise and address their own biases. Progress depends on acknowledging that even well-intentioned individuals are shaped by biases and that discrimination is upheld by invisible yet powerful structures. Only then can individuals take responsibility for their actions, commit to continuous learning and contribute to the creation of truly inclusive and equitable environments.

3.3 Privilege checklist: self-reflection exercise

Adapted from Peggy McIntosh’s “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1988) and expanded with elements from intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1989).

Instructions:

Check all the statements that apply to you. The more boxes you check, the more likely it is that you have experienced different forms of social privilege. This is not a test or a competition, it is an opportunity for self-reflection on how your identity may influence your experiences in the world.

- I am white.
- I have never been discriminated against because of my skin colour.
- I have never been the only person of my race in a room.
- I have never been made fun of for my accent.
- I have never been told I am attractive “for my race”.
- I have never been a victim of violence because of my race.
- I have never been called a racist name.
- I have never been told I “sound white”.
- A stranger has never asked to touch my hair or questioned if it is real.
- I have never lied about my ethnicity as self-defence.
- I am heterosexual.
- I have never lied about my sexuality.
- I never doubted my parents’ acceptance of my sexuality.

- I have never been called an offensive name because of my sexuality.
- I have never been violently threatened or harmed because of my sexuality.
- I am always comfortable showing affection to my partner in public.
- I have never pretended to be “just friends” with my partner.
- I have never been told my sexuality is “just a phase”.
- I have never been ostracised by my religion for my sexual orientation.
- I am a man.
- I feel comfortable in the gender I was assigned at birth.
- I still identify with the gender I was assigned at birth.
- I have never tried to change my gender or expression to feel safe.
- I have never been denied an opportunity because of my gender.
- I make more money than my professional counterparts of a different gender.
- I have never been catcalled, sexually harassed or assaulted.
- I have never been raped.
- I have never felt unsafe because of my gender.
- I work in a salaried job.
- My family has never lived below the poverty line.
- I didn't have to pay for school with borrowed money.
- I have never gone to bed hungry.
- I have never been homeless.
- My parents pay or have paid some/all of my bills.
- I buy new clothes at least once a month.
- I've had an unpaid internship.
- I've had more than one unpaid internship.
- I went to private school or summer camp.
- I studied abroad.
- I've travelled internationally for leisure.
- I've never had to skip a meal to save money.
- I do not have any physical, learning or social disabilities.
- I have never been told I'm overweight or “too skinny”.
- I have never been shamed for my body type.
- I consider myself physically attractive.
- I have never had an eating disorder.
- I have never experienced depression or anxiety.
- I can afford therapy and/or medication if I need it.
- My parents are heterosexual.
- My parents are both alive.

- My parents are still married.
- I graduated from high school and college.
- My parents financially supported my higher education.
- I had a car in high school.
- I've never had a roommate out of necessity.
- I've always had access to internet and cable.
- I have never been shamed for my religious beliefs.
- I have never been violently threatened or attacked for my religion.
- There is a place of worship for my religion in my community.
- I have never lied about my religion as self-defence.
- All my jobs have been accommodating of my religious practices.
- Nobody has ever tried to "save" me because of my religion.
- I am not nervous in airport security lines.
- I have never heard the statement: "You have been randomly selected for additional screening".
- I have never been cyberbullied for any of my identities.
- I was not bullied as a child for any of my identities.
- I have never tried to distance myself from any of my identities.
- I have never been self-conscious about any of my identities.
- I have never questioned any of my identities.
- I feel privileged because of the identities I was born with.

Reflection:

How many statements did you check? Which ones surprised you? Were there any you had never thought about before? Consider how your checked and unchecked boxes shape the way you experience the world.

“It is not enough to open the door to the rooms of power.
We have to get inside and rearrange the furniture!”



Gertrude Mongella
Tanzanian diplomat,
educator and women's
rights activist

4 Decolonial leadership in practice: from representation to structural transformation

4.1 Leadership reframed: position, practice and inclusion

This section explores leadership through two complementary but distinct lenses: leadership as a position and leadership as a relational and collective practice. Engaging with both dimensions makes it possible to identify how leadership is defined, exercised and legitimised, while also interrogating the social dynamics and institutional structures that contribute to the systematic exclusion of certain groups from positions of influence.

In recent years, both academic and organisational discussions have increasingly embraced more relational and inclusive approaches to leadership. These perspectives emphasise relationships, collaborative practices and social processes (Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Relational leadership understands leadership as a process shaped through social interactions within organisations, recognising it as occurring throughout the organisational logic and potentially disrupting the traditional distinction between “leader” and “follower”. Rather than being located in individuals, leadership is seen as a social influence process that generates coordination and drives change (Uhl-Bien, 2006). This view acknowledges leadership “wherever it occurs” (Hunt & Dodge, 2000). Complementing this perspective, inclusive leadership emphasises the removal of structural and interpersonal barriers that result in exclusion and marginalisation of some groups. It promotes empowerment, shared decision-making and the active participation of diverse stakeholders. Inclusive leadership also requires specific competencies, such as collaboration, relational awareness, coalition-building and the creation of inclusive environments and partnerships (Ferdman, 2010; Ferdman & Deane, 2014). Together, these approaches redirect the focus from individuals as the sole sources of leadership to the dynamic interaction between people, processes and groups.

Despite the growing recognition of these paradigms, traditional models of leadership continue to exert a strong influence. These models often idealise a “single voice” or “heroic” leader figure, typically characterised as authoritative, dominant and individualistic. Such traits still shape hiring and promotion practices, the content of leadership development programmes and prevailing perceptions of leadership potential in many organisations (Everest-Phillips, 2018). Crucially, these ideals are historically rooted in gendered, racialised and class-based norms. Traits conventionally associated with dominance and rationality have been socially ascribed to masculinity

and systematically reinforced as desirable, regardless of the actual gender of those in leadership positions (Veneklasen et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2024).

Participants interviewed for this guide, particularly alumni and current members of leadership programmes from underrepresented backgrounds, reinforced these observations. Many shared that, before joining such programmes, they associated leadership with authority, elitism and white cisgender men. Several noted they had never personally encountered inspiring leaders who looked like them (Black women, Indigenous leaders, persons with disabilities or LGBTQIA+ individuals) in influential roles. While remarkable leaders, such as Nelson Mandela (South African anti-apartheid activist and President of South Africa from 1994 to 1999), Sônia Guajajara (Brazilian Indigenous leader and current Minister of Indigenous Peoples since 2023) and Francia Márquez (Afro-Colombian environmental activist and Vice President of Colombia since 2022), are powerful references, their visibility remains the exception, not the norm. The underrepresentation of these groups in leadership positions continues to reinforce the perception that power is reserved for a privileged few. These testimonies illustrate not only the impact of traditional approaches on the collective imaginary, but also how dominant leadership ideals can exclude and discourage potential leaders from marginalised backgrounds. Beyond adopting more relational and inclusive approaches of leadership, it is essential to apply a decolonial lens that questions normative assumptions and opens space for structurally transformative leadership.

A decolonial lens invites a critical examination of how systemic power, shaped by colonial legacies, permeates leadership contexts and practices. This includes understanding how leadership has historically served to maintain social hierarchies and reinforce dominant worldviews while marginalising others. Decolonial thought highlights the embeddedness of power in institutional arrangements, moving beyond the notion of power as a resource held by individuals to one of structural inequity (Uhl-Bien, 2006). It also prompts exploration of how individuals and collectives have exercised agency to resist and transform these inequities (Ospina & Foldy, 2009).

The consequences of systemic power structures and entrenched leadership paradigms are reflected in significant representation gaps, and these elements continuously reinforce one another. As already mentioned in this guide, women make up more than half of Brazil's population (IBGE, 2022), yet this demographic majority is not mirrored in positions of power, particularly among Black women. Although Black women represent 27.8 per cent of the population (IBGE, 2022), they remain severely underrepresented in political and policy leadership. While the number of elected Black female deputies rose from 13 in 2018 to 29 in 2022, this progress still falls short of equitable representation (Cassela, 2022). In 2023, 33 per cent of leadership positions in Brazil's federal government were held by women, but only 12 per cent were held by Black women, a stark imbalance relative to their presence in the population (Bergamo, 2023). A similar pattern appears in Germany. In 2022, women occupied 29.2 per cent of managerial roles yet held fewer than 15 per cent of executive board positions in the 200 largest companies (Sondergeld et al., 2022). Additionally, only approximately 11.6 per cent of members of the German parliament (OECD, 2024) and about 18 per cent of managerial positions are held by people with a migration background (Destatis, 2024). These figures reveal that, regardless of national context, access to leadership remains shaped by systemic exclusion rather than individual merit alone.

This underrepresentation creates a self-perpetuating cycle: the lack of diversity in leadership roles reinforces narrow prototypes of who qualifies as a leader. These prototypes shape recruitment, development and promotion practices, thereby sustaining leadership as a space primarily occupied by historically dominant groups and continuing to discredit alternative forms of authority and influence.

In this context, leadership development programmes play a pivotal role. When designed with intentionality and critical awareness, they have the potential to act as catalysts for more inclusive, equitable and anti-discriminatory practices. These programmes can help challenge dominant paradigms and broaden the definition of who can lead and how leadership can be exercised. However, they may also unintentionally reproduce exclusionary norms when they prioritise traditional leadership models, emphasise normative traits or fail to address the systemic barriers that hinder access. These tensions must be critically examined to understand the extent to which such programmes are capable of transforming leadership dynamics or reinforcing existing power structures.

Approaching leadership through the dual lenses of position and practice is crucial to understanding how it both reflects and reinforces social inequalities and how it might be reimagined to challenge them. A narrow focus on leadership as a formal position risks overlooking informal or non-traditional leadership practices that are equally impactful. On the other hand, focussing exclusively on relational leadership approaches may obscure the structural barriers that prevent marginalised groups from accessing leadership opportunities in the first place. Both dimensions, and the ways they are reflected in the design and implementation of leadership programmes, must be examined critically in order to illuminate how leadership is constructed and how it can be reimagined in service of systemic transformation.

4.2 Representation is a starting point, not a destination

Who are the decision-makers in your country? In your organisation? In your sector of work? What are their gender identities, ages, racial backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses or nationalities?

Chances are that the answers will reveal a clear imbalance. Leadership roles remain predominantly occupied by individuals from dominant social groups. This pattern reflects an entrenched social order that shapes who gets to lead, whose voices are legitimised and who is systematically excluded. The structural dominance of particular groups reproduces itself not only at the highest levels of government, but across the entire spectrum of public, private and civil society organisations (Adejumo, 2020). This imbalance also influences how public policies, organisational initiatives and strategic plans for society are conceived and implemented. If the population as a whole is not represented in leadership positions, for whom are these policies and initiatives designed? Whose needs are prioritised? And whose interests are truly being served?

At the centre of this conversation is a key concept: representative bureaucracy. Originally developed in the public sector, this theory proposes that public institutions should mirror the demographic composition of the society they serve. Although rooted in government, it offers relevant insights for all organisations. According to this view, a bureaucracy that is more demographically reflective of its constituents is more likely to understand, serve and gain the trust of those constituents (Selden, 1997). There are three key forms of representation within this theory:

- **Passive representation:** This refers to the extent to which the demographic makeup of an institution resembles that of the broader population, measured by variables such as race, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background (Mosher, 1982). A bureaucracy demonstrates passive representation when, for example, the percentage of women or people of colour employed matches their proportion in the general population. However, passive representation focusses solely on numerical parity and does not necessarily imply any effect on public perceptions (psychological perception) or institutional outcomes.
- **Active representation:** Passive representation alone is not sufficient. Active representation occurs when individuals within institutions act in the interests of those they represent—particularly those who share their social characteristics. It involves using one’s position to

challenge discriminatory norms, propose inclusive policies and address historical injustices. Representation becomes meaningful only when those in power actively advocate for equity, rather than simply reflect demographic traits (Hindera, 1993).

- **Symbolic representation:** Distinct from passive representation, symbolic representation refers to the perceptual and psychological effects that the visible presence of diverse bureaucrats can have on the public, even in the absence of any concrete action by those bureaucrats (Ricucci, 2016). For example, the presence of Afro-Brazilian civil servants may increase trust in public institutions among Afro-Brazilian communities. However, symbolic representation also has limits, without structural change and a redistribution of power, symbolism risks becoming mere tokenism.

Leadership, whether in corporations, NGOs, academia or think tanks, shapes policy, culture, priorities and access to resources. When leadership is not representative, entire populations are sidelined from decisions that deeply affect their lives.

It is important to emphasise that a passive representation does not automatically translate into active or inclusive outcomes. Leaders from underrepresented backgrounds often face pressure to assimilate, exclusion from informal networks or a lack of institutional power. For representative leadership to be genuinely transformative, individual beliefs and actions are not enough. Organisations must also cultivate environments that empower leaders to bring their full identities, perspectives and lived experiences into decision-making processes. This requires expanding the foundations of how leadership is understood and valued. It also demands a critical examination of the systems of power, such as patriarchy, structural racism and class privilege, that continue to shape access to leadership roles (Adejumo, 2020).

Achieving representative leadership is not just about demographic parity. It is about fostering inclusion, leveraging diverse perspectives for better outcomes, ensuring fairness and equity and enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of organisations and governments (Sabharwal, 2014). It goes substantially beyond tokenism, which provides a superficial appearance of diversity without the substantive benefits of genuine representation and inclusion (Snell-Guajardo, 2017).

In the context of leadership programmes, this process may begin with the pursuit of passive representation, by attracting and selecting diverse leaders. However, it must move toward active representation, not only by bringing diverse individuals into these spaces, but by intentionally developing their capacity to represent and advocate for their communities. In practical terms, this requires going beyond recruitment efforts and creating inclusive spaces where diverse perspectives are meaningfully integrated and leaders are empowered to drive change. This process can be supported through intentional learning environments that deepen awareness of DEIB, mentorship, training and opportunities for leaders already engaged in active representation to share their experiences and strategies. These practices contribute to decolonising leadership and shifting organisational cultures toward more just and equitable systems.

4.3 Shifting power and decolonising leadership

Inclusive leadership development involves continuous learning through collaborative and respectful relational practices that empower everyone and eliminate barriers to participation. It requires critical self-awareness and the ongoing questioning of normative practices that perpetuate unequal treatment or encourage assimilation. From a decolonial perspective, leadership development and practice must actively engage in the “unlearning” of norms and values rooted in colonial histories and must challenge and disrupt ongoing forms of coloniality (Le Grange, 2022). This approach pushes leadership beyond basic commitments to diversity or inclusion,

aiming instead for a deeper transformation of organisational ideologies and structures to dismantle systemic inequities.

Coloniality continues to operate through interconnected domains of control, economy, authority, gender, sexuality, subjectivity and knowledge (Quijano, 2007). Decolonisation, therefore, is not just about political independence. While the removal of colonial administrations was a significant step, decolonial theory argues that the structures, norms and power dynamics established during colonialism persist across economic, political, cultural and educational systems (Duvisac, 2022; Le Grange, 2022).

A decolonial perspective differs from progressive approaches in that it does not just seek to improve inclusion within existing systems but aims to fundamentally transform the structures, power dynamics and policies that sustain inequality. While progressive initiatives, such as cooperative work or agile leadership models, often promote decentralisation and collaboration, they may still operate within colonial logics. These models often fail to incorporate diverse ways of knowing, overlook how colonial histories shape organisational practices and replicate dominant norms in their methods and practices. Decolonial thinking calls for a profound transformation that centres marginalised epistemologies, critically examines embedded power relations and reimagines leadership from plural and historically grounded perspectives (Lugones, 2010; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Decolonial leadership involves recognising, interrogating and transforming the power dynamics shaped by colonial legacies, dynamics that continue to uphold inequality across institutions and societies. It challenges dominant understandings of power and legitimacy and invites organisations to rethink not only who leads but how leadership is understood and practiced (Adejumo, 2020).

When leadership development initiatives centre underrepresented knowledge systems and create space for alternative worldviews, they move beyond symbolic inclusion. They begin to structurally transform the terms of participation and reimagine what leadership looks like, and whom it serves. Selection processes and criteria based solely on formal titles or degrees from elite universities, as well as leadership models and training content that consistently centre on the same privileged authors, can reinforce exclusionary norms. Rethinking and redesigning these practices can include valuing diverse life experiences in leadership calls; broadening outreach strategies to reach underrepresented communities; incorporating knowledge and authors from different nationalities and perspectives, especially from the Global South; and involving a diverse range of stakeholders in shaping selection criteria. A concrete example is Nigerian scholar Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, who challenges what she defines as the “Western conception of gender” by demonstrating that the Oyo-Yoruba society organised roles not based on sex, but on age and kinship (1997). Her work invites us to consider alternative paradigms of social organisation that have been erased or devalued within dominant academic and institutional discourses (Duvisac, 2022). Similarly, the Climate Justice Charter Movement in South Africa provides a compelling example of decolonial practice by proposing systemic alternatives rooted in ecological and social justice, not in extractive growth models (VeneKlasen et al., 2022).

This guide invites you to reflect, critically and honestly, on how leadership is constructed, who has access to it, and whose perspectives are centred or silenced. Reflection is the essential first step, and it opens the door to deeper awareness. But transformation requires action. Leadership programmes and institutions have to intentionally confront the systems that uphold inequality, embrace diverse ways of knowing and create inclusive spaces where all leaders can thrive. Disrupting the systems that confine leadership to the privileged few is essential to imagining and building futures where power is shared, justice is tangible and leadership truly reflects the radical plurality of society.

Food for thought:

- How does your leadership programme's mandate shape its priorities and definitions of impact, and to what extent are these aligned with decolonial values and inclusive leadership?
- What steps are being taken to move beyond passive or symbolic representation and advance meaningful inclusion and active representation within your leadership programme?
- How is your leadership programme being redesigned to challenge colonial norms, elevate marginalised epistemologies and promote structurally transformative approaches to leadership?
- How is the organisation ensuring that key stakeholders are genuinely engaged in, and held accountable for, the decolonial transformation of your leadership programme?

“Ficamos o tempo todo sendo distraídos por promessas de que lá na frente, em algum lugar, vai se realizar uma ideia de futuro. Essa distração nos tira do agora. Ficamos adiando decisões, adiando mudanças, como se a vida fosse algo que só vai acontecer mais tarde. Mas ela está acontecendo agora. A cada dia em que não fazemos nada, em que mantemos tudo como está, estamos escolhendo um modo de existir que compromete não só o presente, mas qualquer possibilidade de futuro.”

“We’re constantly being distracted by promises that somewhere ahead, at some point, the idea of the future will finally come true. But this distraction pulls us away from the present. We keep postponing decisions, delaying change, as if life is something that will only happen later. But it is happening now. Every day that we do nothing, that we keep things as they are, we are choosing a way of being that compromises not only the present, but any possibility of a future.”



Ailton Krenak
Brazilian Indigenous leader, writer
and environmental activist

5 From intent to impact: turning DEIB into practice

5.1 Know where you stand

Throughout the journey of enhancing DEIB in leadership programmes and organisations, it becomes clear how complex and urgent this agenda is, especially during challenging times when progress can be at risk. Key concepts must be unpacked, and the distinctions between diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging clarified. It is essential to reflect on personal biases, understand the genuine importance of diversity and examine what it means to centre DEIB not only in programme structures but also in values and leadership models. Inclusion requires more than ensuring representation, it demands a shift in how power is distributed, a shift that calls for a decolonised approach to leadership development.

This section offers a practical roadmap for turning intentions into impactful change. It recognises that achieving lasting progress requires a bold and courageous approach, one that addresses structural inequities, confronts cultural norms and behaviours and holds institutions accountable. Making structural and systemic changes to promote DEIB is ongoing work; however, each step you take brings us closer to a more equitable and just society.

Rather than a checklist or a definitive formula, the ideas in this section are a collection of practices, reflections and provocations, rooted in real experiences and diverse perspectives. They draw on interviews with organisations that run leadership programmes, social movements, think tanks, specialists and contemporary literature. This section is an invitation to explore with curiosity, openness and a willingness to question the status quo, as well as a call to action for those committed to transforming leadership programmes and organisational cultures through DEIB.

To make these practices meaningful and sustainable, they should be analysed in light of your organisation's specific context, embedded within your strategic goals and co-designed and agreed upon with key stakeholders. Implementation should also take into account your organisation's capacity, resources and timing. DEIB strategies are most impactful when they are not only aspirational but also feasible and aligned with organisational realities.

Conduct a DEIB assessment: Before implementing changes, it is essential to understand your organisation's current context. A structured assessment can help reveal where your leadership programme stands in terms of diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging. It allows you to identify gaps, understand experiences across different groups, and shape more intentional, impactful strategies. This type of reflection can help answer questions such as:

- Representation: Who is participating in your programme? Who is not being reached or supported?
- Inclusion: Do participants feel safe, heard and respected? What parts of the experience feel exclusive or alienating?
- Equity: Are opportunities, support and recognition fairly distributed among all participants?
- Belonging: Do participants feel like they are integral members of the programme community?

Examine the organisation's history and values: Understand how the organisation's history and foundational values may have shaped its current culture regarding diversity and inclusion. Identify any potential biases or exclusionary practices that may be embedded within these foundations.

Analyse leadership practices and behaviours: Critically assess whether leadership at all levels is representative and demonstrates inclusive behaviours, actively promotes DEIB and holds themselves and others accountable for progress.

To conduct this assessment, you can adopt a mixed approach, using open-source platforms available online and combining them with interviews or focus groups with fellows and alumni from the programme. This combination will provide both broad insights and deep, lived perspectives.

Resources:

- Self-assessment tool on diversity and inclusion, DIGNA: <https://diversitytool.civicus.org/>
- Equity and inclusion self-assessment for advisers, University of California, Berkeley: https://diversity.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/ei_adviser_tool_-_final_web.pdf

Collect and analyse data: Begin by collecting data disaggregated by gender, race, disability status, geography and socio-economic background, ensuring that all information is based on self-identification. A strong evidence base is essential, without it, DEIB initiatives may be shaped by assumptions rather than lived experiences, resulting in misaligned or ineffective efforts. Data is a powerful tool to uncover disparities in areas such as recruitment, retention, career

progression, compensation, access to opportunities and experiences of inclusion and belonging. In contexts where collecting identity-based data is legally restricted or culturally sensitive, it's essential to understand the local legal framework, prioritise informed consent and ensure participant safety. When direct demographic data isn't feasible, organisations can use alternative methods, such as anonymous qualitative inputs or proxy indicators, to uncover structural barriers and exclusionary patterns across individuals' academic and professional paths. All data collection should be voluntary, transparent in its purpose and designed to minimise potential risks to individuals.

- Define what data to collect: Organisations should determine which demographic data is relevant and appropriate for their context. This may include race, gender, disability and socio-economic background, as well as participants' experiences, such as feelings of inclusion, belonging, fairness and instances of bias or micro-aggressions.
- Establish inclusive and ethical methods for data collection, processing and storage: Use a combination of tools to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. These might include anonymous surveys, voluntary demographic forms during onboarding or recruitment, structured interviews, focus groups, exit interviews and analysis of internal records. All methods must ensure privacy, confidentiality and voluntary participation, especially when collecting sensitive or legally restricted data. Consider using anonymous digital platforms, third-party facilitators and transparent communication about how data will be used, while ensuring compliance with local laws.
- Analyse data critically and through an intersectional lens: Once collected, data should be analysed to identify patterns, disparities and opportunities for improvement. Disaggregate the findings to understand how various groups, particularly those at the intersections of multiple identities, experience the programme. For instance, women of colour or people with disabilities may encounter distinct barriers compared with their white or non-disabled peers. Examine not only representation, but also inclusion: who speaks, who is heard, who advances and who feels a sense of belonging. Intersectional analysis helps avoid one-size-fits-all solutions.
- Set data-driven targets: Based on the insights gathered, organisations should establish SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) goals to advance DEIB. These targets should be informed by internal data and relevant external benchmarks.
- Track progress and report findings: Monitor progress regularly and communicate updates internally, and externally, where appropriate, through DEIB transparency reports. Sharing results fosters accountability, supports continuous improvement and reinforces your commitment to inclusive practices.

In situations in which asking for personal data is legally restricted or culturally sensitive, it is crucial to approach information gathering with particular care. In some countries, due to historical concerns about how demographic data has been used, such as during authoritarian regimes or in contexts marked by systemic discrimination, questions related to race, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation may be met with mistrust or even pose legal risks. These factors require organisations to act responsibly and adapt their practices to local realities.

Rather than directly requesting demographic identifiers, consider reframing the inquiry to focus on experiences, challenges and perceived barriers. For example, during selection processes, you might ask candidates about obstacles they've faced in their educational or professional trajectories and how these impacted their paths. This method can highlight systemic inequities without requiring individuals to disclose sensitive information. Open-ended questions such as "Describe a moment when you felt truly included" or "What changes would make you feel more respected and supported?" can also generate valuable insights into organisational culture while preserving participants' autonomy. When questions about identity are not appropriate, reframing

them around perceptions of fairness, access or safety is often more suitable. For instance, instead of asking “Do you identify as LGBTQIA+?”, you might ask “Do people with different gender expressions or sexual orientations feel treated equitably here?” These strategies support meaningful and legally compliant data collection, while respecting the historical and cultural contexts in which your organisation operates.

Finally, it's essential to understand the local context and power dynamics. Conducting a contextual analysis of the historical, social and legal landscape can uncover patterns of exclusion, dominant narratives and institutional discrimination. Collaborating with local organisations, grassroots leaders and subject-matter experts helps ensure your approach is informed by community perspectives rather than imposed from the top down. Rather than assuming what inclusion should look like, co-define it in ways that are culturally relevant and locally grounded.

Confronting normative and colonial structures: To foster inclusive and equitable leadership programmes and organisations, it is essential to examine and challenge the dominant norms and colonial legacies that underpin institutional cultures and practices. Many organisational structures, policies and values are rooted in systems that have historically privileged whiteness, masculinity and heteronormativity, while marginalising other ways of being, knowing and leading. Although diversity is frequently promoted as a goal, this aspiration often falls short due to the reluctance to transform the very power structures that exclude underrepresented voices in the first place. The challenge does not lie in adding diversity to existing models but in deconstructing the models themselves. This involves interrogating what is considered “professional”, “neutral” or “universal” and asking whose perspectives these standards reflect. A critical examination of selection criteria, performance evaluations and leadership frameworks reveals the extent to which systems of coloniality, patriarchy and white supremacy remain embedded in organisational decision-making processes.

Cultivating critical consciousness and shared power: DEIB efforts need to be grounded in a culture of critical consciousness, a collective commitment to reflect on how power, privilege and systemic inequities operate within and beyond the organisation. This involves encouraging individuals and teams to examine their own biases, question the status quo and engage in ongoing learning about structural oppression. Critical consciousness is not a one-time workshop or training; it is a practice of awareness and accountability that becomes part of the organisational ethos. The work of the Odara Institute in Brazil offers a model of this approach through its commitment to political education, youth engagement and community-based strategies to dismantle racism and patriarchy (Instituto Odara, 2024). Their efforts demonstrate how institutions can build a culture of self-reflection and resistance that extends beyond performative inclusion. At the same time, disrupting systemic inequalities requires shifting how power is distributed and exercised in everyday practices. At Odara, this commitment is embodied through participatory governance structures, rotating facilitation roles and collective decision-making processes. These are not merely tools, they are expressions of a deeper commitment to equity. When leadership programmes implement mechanisms that decentralise authority, they provide meaningful opportunities for diverse voices to shape the agenda and outcomes. This is especially critical in environments where traditional hierarchies often silence those at the margins.

Food for thought:

- What perspectives might emerge if you asked past and current participants how your leadership programme made them feel?
- When was the last time your organisation critically examined how its founding values and historical practices may be reinforcing exclusion today?
- What kinds of stories and experiences are missing from your DEIB data, and what new methods could help surface them?
- Which of your selection, evaluation or curriculum practices still reflect colonial or patriarchal norms? What power structures are at play, what could be implemented, and how might you begin this process of change?

5.2 Building the infrastructure

Review conditions for participation and selection criteria: Reviewing conditions for participation and selection criteria is fundamental to selecting a diverse pool of leadership candidates. Go beyond traditional qualifications and explicitly incorporate DEIB-related skills and experiences into your criteria. This might include valuing experience with diverse communities, grassroots movements or a demonstrated understanding of systemic inequalities. Ask yourself:

- What do you truly need to run a successful programme?
- Which candidate profiles can help us achieve that?
- Are these profiles inclusive and aligned with a decolonial perspective?
- Do the criteria help you find the right candidates or are they unintentionally excluding people?
- How can you reframe selection criteria to be skills-based rather than experience-based?

Example: Setting an age limit to target “mid-career professionals” may unintentionally exclude individuals who accessed formal education later in life or had career interruptions due to caregiving or health reasons. Instead of age limits, consider using criteria such as “years of professional experience” (including formal and informal roles) or “leadership demonstrated in community, civic or organisational contexts”. Another example: When listing “good communication skills” as a criterion, reflect on what this truly means. Are you prioritising communication styles that have historically been considered “neutral” or “professional” — often shaped by white, male and academic standards? This may disadvantage candidates who express themselves differently but still communicate effectively. Instead, specify what aspects of communication are needed for the role.

The Latin America headquarters of the philanthropic organisation Imaginable Futures undertook a strategic shift in its vision and funding approach, moving to consistently prioritise organisations led by Black, Indigenous and Quilombola leaders. Rather than relying on fixed quotas or isolated initiatives, the organisation revised its selection criteria and decision-making processes to intentionally direct more resources to these leaders and the issues they champion. This approach seeks to address historical underfunding, recognise traditional knowledge systems and advance equity through ongoing, strategic funding practices. Another example comes from the Managing Global Governance (MGG) Academy, which revised its application form to include the question: “Were there significant challenges or barriers that impacted your access to education and/or professional opportunities? Please describe briefly”. As previously discussed in this guide on

using inclusive questions as a proxy to identify underrepresented groups, this change was introduced to surface structural inequalities that may have shaped applicants' trajectories. It also enabled the selection committee to apply a more equity-informed lens in assessing leadership potential.

It is important to acknowledge that all organisations face limitations, whether related to time, team capacity, budget or sponsor agreements. Still, many of the so-called "barriers to change" are rooted more in mental models and implicit biases than in true logistical constraints. Reframing criteria can be a powerful first step toward building programmes that are genuinely inclusive.

Improve recruitment channels: Recruitment is one of the most critical phases of any selection process. It marks the entry point into the funnel, and if a diverse and aligned pool of applicants is not attracted from the beginning, the rest of the selection process becomes limited from the outset. To strengthen this phase:

- Diversify outreach and recruitment channels. It is essential to clearly understand the mandate and objectives of your leadership programme. Knowing who your programme is designed for, what kind of impact it seeks to generate and how it defines leadership will help guide intentional and aligned actions. Based on that, it becomes easier to establish partnerships with institutions whose work resonates with your mandate. However, it's also important to recognise that power and privilege dynamics are deeply rooted in our societies. If you limit partnerships only to familiar institutions, you may miss the opportunity to connect with potential participants who reflect your target profile but are engaged in spaces you haven't yet considered. With this in mind, partner with grassroots organisations, advocacy networks and platforms that specifically reach underrepresented communities. Analyse which countries your programme targets and conduct targeted searches for organisations in each location. Your alumni network can also be a powerful resource to identify and connect with local partners who have trust and reach within their communities. It is important to approach this as a long-term partnership, not a transactional relationship. Building sustained relationships reflects a decolonial approach by recognising that trust, collaboration and meaningful engagement cannot be extracted. These organisations should not be seen merely as channels to distribute your call for applications, but as key actors with their own agendas, insights and forms of leadership. Taking time to build mutual trust, understand their priorities, and explore how your programme can also support their goals helps rebalance traditional power dynamics and fosters reciprocity, moving from one-sided outreach toward shared ownership and lasting impact.
- Use inclusive and culturally responsive language. Review your calls for application, social media posts and web content. Are you using jargon or institutional language that might alienate some candidates? Could simpler or more welcoming language improve accessibility?
- Include representative visuals. Ensure promotional materials reflect the diversity you aim to attract, whether in race, gender, ability, age or nationality.
- Communicate your DEIB commitment. Don't just practice inclusion, signal it. Highlight your organisation's DEIB values and actions, and name explicitly that you welcome candidates from marginalised and underrepresented backgrounds.

Implement bias-aware selection processes: Even when organisations design inclusive participation conditions, refine selection criteria and diversify recruitment efforts, unconscious bias can still significantly influence decisions. Well-intentioned individuals may unknowingly favour candidates who reflect dominant cultural norms or resemble their own identities. Without intentional safeguards, the selection process may perpetuate systemic inequalities rather than challenge them. Key actions to implement bias-aware selection:

- Provide training in unconscious bias. Equip everyone involved in selection with knowledge about different types of bias (e.g., affinity bias, confirmation bias). Training should also offer practical strategies for mitigating these biases throughout evaluation.
- Use structured rubrics with clearly defined criteria. Develop a scoring matrix that values a range of competencies, including DEIB-relevant attributes, such as grassroots leadership, experience with marginalised communities or resilience through systemic barriers. This helps reduce subjective judgments and allows for more equitable, transparent assessments.
- Diversify your selection committee. Include people with varied lived experiences and identities. Consider inviting alumni and professionals from underrepresented groups. However, representation alone is not enough, ensure these individuals are empowered with tools, information and a shared responsibility to apply a DEIB lens throughout the process. Oxfam, for example, recognises that addressing structural racism and coloniality requires more than symbolic representation, it demands a redistribution of power and genuine solidarity. In its strategy, the organisation emphasises that success will only be achieved when teams and partners in the Global South have control over their work and feel truly empowered. This commitment underscores the need for individuals from historically excluded groups to not only be present in decision-making spaces, but to also have the tools, information and conditions necessary to structurally influence processes (Oxfam, n.d.).
- Document decisions and reflect as a team. Ask reviewers to briefly explain their scoring decisions. After selection, conduct a debriefing to assess whether bias surfaced during evaluation and how it was handled.
- What concrete strategies can you apply to reduce bias in recruitment and selection?

Resources:

- The implicit association test is a free online tool developed by Harvard University to help individuals uncover their unconscious biases by measuring the strength of automatic associations between concepts and evaluations
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

Offer accessible application processes: Accessibility is about dignity, autonomy and respect. It's an invitation to rethink the structures often taken for granted and to intentionally create systems that honour different ways of learning, communicating and engaging. When accessibility is embedded from the start, it signals that every person's experience is valued.

- Ensure all programme information is accessible. Make details about the leadership programme, including the application process, curriculum, schedule and expectations, available in multiple formats. This includes compatibility with screen readers, alternative text for images, captions for videos and transcripts for audio materials.
- Proactively inquire about participants' access needs. Within the application form, include a respectful and non-stigmatising section asking candidates if they require any support or adjustments to complete the application or participate fully in the programme. Importantly, the final decision about the conditions should lie with the participant. Even if your programme does not yet have full accessibility in place, transparency is essential. Allow the individual to decide if and how they would like to proceed. Examples of inclusive language:
 - “If you have difficulty using our online application form, we can provide it in a Word document, plain text format or a larger font size.”
 - “Do you need any other support to complete the application or during the programme?”

- Support different formats for demonstrating leadership. Leadership potential can be expressed in many ways. Be open to receiving applications in alternative formats, such as video submissions, voice recordings or visual portfolios, particularly when these align with the programme's goals and focus.

Food for thought:

- How might your unconscious biases influence the selection decisions?
- Have you ever seen bias affect a selection process (e.g., assumptions about race, disability, education or accent)?
- How could your organisation be more flexible, supportive and transparent in responding to applicants' access needs?
- What structural changes can you introduce to selection processes to actively encourage diverse applicants?
- Which grassroots or community-based organisations could become partners to promote your programme?
- Are your current communication materials aligned with your inclusion goals?

5.3 Programme implementation

Develop and communicate a clear code of conduct: A code of conduct serves as a vital framework, translating the organisation's values into practical guidelines. It should explicitly outline expectations around respectful behaviour, inclusion, anti-discrimination and consequences for violations. Equally important is the establishment of accessible and trusted reporting mechanisms. Participants must feel safe to report incidents of exclusion, harm or bias without fear of retaliation. Develop clear, confidential protocols for receiving and responding to such reports, and ensure the process is handled with transparency, empathy and consistency. Accountability mechanisms must be in place to follow up on concerns in a timely and effective way.

Train staff and facilitators to uphold safety and inclusion: Everyone who interacts with participants, including programme staff, professors and facilitators, should be trained in bias awareness, inclusive facilitation and anti-discrimination practices. Training should include tools for managing sensitive issues, supporting participants' well-being and interrupting micro-aggressions in real time. If your organisation is not yet able to provide full training to all staff, a short-term action can still have a meaningful impact. Start by developing internal guidelines and offering clear alignment sessions about expected behaviours and the code of conduct. These foundational steps can help prevent the reproduction of discriminatory practices and ensure that everyone involved in the programme is aware of their role in fostering an inclusive environment.

Develop comprehensive family support policies: Supporting families begins with acknowledging that equitable participation requires more than simply welcoming parents, it requires concrete structures of care and flexibility. Programmes can offer personalised support by helping fellows identify and access childcare options, understand local enrolment procedures and connect with relevant services. When arranging accommodations, programmes should prioritise options that meet the needs of participants travelling with children or partners, ensuring they feel welcomed and not like exceptions. Beyond logistics, it's essential to nurture a sense of community. Facilitating informal spaces for partners and families to connect and offering ways for partners to engage with the programme (where relevant) can help combat isolation. One example is the Academy of International Affairs of North-Rhine Westphalia: they have a policy for fellows with family that have those needs mentioned previously. Assigning a staff member

specifically responsible for fellow services, including family-related needs, can streamline support and improve participants' sense of security. Encouraging peer networks among parents in the cohort also promotes solidarity and mutual support. Although it is common for organisations to report a lack of financial resources as a barrier to adopting family-inclusive policies, those that have implemented such measures often emphasise that it is also a matter of prioritisation. Rather than requiring significantly more funding, it involves making intentional decisions about where and how to allocate existing resources. For example, some organisations have opted for smaller fellowship cohorts in order to better support participants with families – ensuring that inclusion is not treated as an additional feature, but as a core element of programme design, intentionally embedded into the programme's structure and developed through shared understanding and stakeholder engagement.

Promote a culture of belonging: In addition to addressing structural elements of inclusion, it is essential to cultivate emotional and social connections among participants. A strong sense of belonging helps participants feel valued not just for what they know, but for who they are. To foster this, encourage the formation of peer support networks that promote a sense of shared experience and community throughout the programme. To further deepen this culture of belonging, be attentive to potential cultural sensitivities that may arise during group discussions and activities. Facilitators should create environments where participants feel safe to share cultural narratives, traditions and symbols that are meaningful to them. These exchanges can foster mutual respect and open the door to deeper intercultural and interethnic understanding. Belonging is strengthened when people see their full selves reflected, respected and genuinely valued in the programme environment. For instance, at the MGG Academy, “bar camp” activities are held where participants lead informal sessions on topics that matter to them. While some of these discussions may touch on professional themes, many naturally evolve into rich cultural exchanges, strengthening the bonds within the cohort and allowing diverse voices and identities to flourish.

Promote sponsorship opportunities: Ensure sponsorship and mentorship opportunities are equitably accessible, especially for participants from underrepresented groups. These relationships can provide critical guidance, open doors to leadership spaces, and enhance fellows' visibility within professional networks. To ensure sponsorship opportunities are inclusive, intentionally pair fellows with senior mentors who not only bring institutional knowledge but are also equipped to support underrepresented leaders in navigating systems of power. These sponsors should understand the importance of equitable access and be committed to fostering growth in a way that centres the fellow's lived experience and aspirations. Moreover, if your programme provides financial sponsorships, equity must be embedded into their design. Consider implementing tiered levels of financial support based on candidates' needs and barriers, rather than distributing equal amounts by default. This ensures that fellows facing greater systemic challenges receive the support necessary to fully engage with and benefit from the programme.

Integrate DEIB concepts throughout the curriculum and core competencies: DEIB should be embedded across all modules and leadership competencies, not treated as a separate or optional topic. Ensure participants continuously engage with these values in the context of leadership, sustainability and collaboration. The curriculum should include critical discussions on power, privilege, and systemic inequality, examining how historical and contemporary systems of oppression shape organisations and societies. Invite speakers from underrepresented backgrounds to share their perspectives and experiences, expanding the narrative beyond dominant voices.

Encourage reflexivity and critical self-awareness: Encourage participants to examine their own identities, assumptions and positions of power through reflective journaling, peer dialogue and exercises. By continuously questioning normative practices and practicing humility,

participants develop the critical self-awareness needed to lead inclusively and transform systems, not just navigate them.

Exercise: Power flower, reflecting on identity and power

This activity is a simplified adaptation of the tool “Power Flower – Exploring Your Identity and Privilege”, originally published in the Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit (UN Women/UNPRPD, 2022).

When to use: Use this tool at the start of workshops, team-building activities or learning sessions focussed on equity, inclusion or personal growth. It is meant to spark self-awareness and group reflection on how identity and power shape individual experiences.

Purpose

- Understand how identities intersect and evolve over time.
- Reflect on how certain aspects of identity can bring privilege, while others may lead to discrimination.
- Open conversation about power dynamics in personal and organisational settings.
- Time: 45-60 minutes
- Group size: 20 participants

Facilitator tips

- Create a safe, non-judgmental environment.
- Ideally, the facilitator should be familiar with topics of equity and have experience holding inclusive spaces.
- Adapt activity for participants with disabilities (e.g., describe visuals, provide tactile materials).

Steps

1. Introduction (5-10 min): Welcome the group and explain: “We all have many identities that shape how we move through the world. Some give us advantages. Others may lead to challenges. Today we’ll reflect on our identities and how they relate to power”. Ask the group to agree on a shared context (e.g., your organisation, your country).

2. Build your flower (10-15 min): Hand out the 8-petal flower template. Each petal represents a different social identity. Example categories: gender, race/ethnicity, age, education, socio-economic background, sexual orientation, disability and nationality/citizenship. Participants fill in their own identity in each petal (e.g., “woman”, “Latina”, “college graduate”, etc.). In the centre of the flower, write the agreed context.

3. Power reflection (10-15 min): Ask participants:

- For each category, who tends to have the most power in this context?
- On a separate flipchart or big flower on the wall, write the dominant identity in each petal (e.g., “man”, “white”, “non-disabled”).

4. Count and reflect (10-15 min): Ask participants to count how many of their own identities match the dominant ones. Then, use discussion questions like:

- How did it feel to count your matches?
- Were there surprises?
- How might this shape the way you experience work or community life?
- How can understanding your power help you support others?

Wrap-up: End with a brief reflection: “We all have more power in some ways and less in others. By becoming more aware of our position, we can act with more empathy, accountability and intentionality”. Encourage participants to take the flower home and continue reflecting.

Follow-up questions

- How might power show up differently in a different context (e.g., your home, workplace, school)?
- What actions can you take to create a more equitable environment for others?

Food for thought:

- What rituals, spaces or practices are you cultivating to ensure people feel seen for who they are, not just for what they bring?
- If financial support were based on real-life barriers instead of equal distribution, what new possibilities could open up? And what administrative, legal or ethical considerations would need to be addressed to implement such a system fairly and transparently?
- What narratives are centred in your leadership programme and whose stories are still missing from the conversation?
- What percentage of your facilitators reflect diverse identities (race, gender, ability, income and other dimensions)? What intentional actions can you take to build a more representative and inclusive team?
- How does your organisation currently respond to discrimination situations? What needs to change to ensure participants feel genuinely safe, heard and supported when harm occurs?

5.4 Sustain the change

Budget and resources to improve DEIB: Many organisations and leadership programmes start their DEIB changing process with focus and engagement but fail to create the conditions that allow this work to be sustainable in the long term. One of the most common mistakes is overlooking the need for dedicated resources. Too often, organisations expect DEIB work to be done voluntarily or with minimal support: why is it considered acceptable to underfund this work? The answer may reveal uncomfortable truths about the value placed on DEIB. Allocating a specific budget for DEIB is both a strategic and symbolic decision that requires advocacy and stakeholder engagement. It sends a clear message that this work is important and integral to the organisation’s mission and values. Of course, no institution has unlimited resources – but budgeting is always a matter of priorities. If DEIB is truly a priority, this should be reflected in how resources are allocated.

Provide training for mentors and sponsors: These individuals often have significant influence on how leadership is shaped and how talent is supported within a programme. Their role cannot be taken for granted. Mentors must be prepared to navigate the complexities of intersectionality and be aware of their own biases. Sponsors, likewise, need to be equipped with tools to advocate equitably for talent that may have been historically overlooked or excluded. Providing training and support for these roles is not optional, it is an investment in the integrity and effectiveness of the programme. *Example:* Instead of assigning mentors based only on professional fit, consider matching underrepresented participants (e.g., Black women or first-generation leaders) with mentors who hold institutional privilege and can expand their access to networks. This helps redistribute social and political capital that often remains concentrated.

Consider affirmative action (where legally permitted): This can include implementing targeted support or reserving spots for individuals from historically excluded groups. While affirmative action is often met with resistance or misinterpretation, its purpose is not to “favour” certain candidates over others, but to correct the imbalances caused by systemic barriers that have long restricted access to leadership spaces. A powerful example is the *Elas Periféricas* programme by the *Fundação Tide Setubal* in Brazil, which provides financial support, training and visibility to female leaders from urban peripheries. The programme focusses on women who are Black, Indigenous, trans and from low-income communities, groups systematically excluded from leadership and decision-making spaces. By offering grants and strengthening the organisational capacity of these grassroots leaders, the programme actively redistributes resources and builds pathways to leadership for those historically left out.

Use AI-supported diversity monitoring tools: Artificial intelligence (AI) tools can play a meaningful role in supporting DEIB goals within leadership programmes, provided they are used ethically, transparently and with a critical understanding of the technology itself. AI systems can, for example, be used to analyse the language and imagery in programme outreach materials to identify terms or visual cues that may unintentionally discourage participation from underrepresented groups (through natural language processing (NLP), computer vision (CV) or tools based on large language models like ChatGPT). They can also help track participant profiles across different stages of the selection and engagement process, highlighting representational gaps related to gender, race, disability, socioeconomic background and other social markers (e.g., platforms like Diversio or customisable dashboards created with Power BI). Data visualisation and AI-powered monitoring tools can further support the analysis of participant trajectories throughout the programme cycle, helping identify patterns of advancement or disengagement among different demographic groups (e.g., Looker Studio, Google). However, it is crucial to emphasize that technology is not neutral. Algorithmic systems reflect the biases embedded in the data they are trained on and the intentions of those who design them (Benjamin, 2019). Rather than treating automated reports as ends in themselves, these tools should be used as catalysts for critical reflection, collective sensemaking and to streamline certain administrative processes, without replacing human judgment or lived experience.

Food for thought:

- What changes should be made to your strategic plan to ensure a specific budget is allocated for DEIB actions? Who needs to be convinced?
- How is your organisation using (or how could it use) technologies like AI to advance DEIB?

5.5 Evaluation and evolution

Establish DEIB metrics and tracking mechanisms: Establishing meaningful DEIB metrics is a foundational step. Without clear indicators of progress, organisations risk confusing activity with impact. These metrics must go beyond surface-level representation and align with the organisation's specific DEIB commitments, focus areas and long-term goals. Tracking progress on inclusion, belonging and equitable access can help illuminate where strategies are working and where systemic barriers continue to operate. But metrics alone are not sufficient. They must be accompanied by tools and processes that enable organisations to critically analyse the data, identify trends and recognise patterns that may not be immediately visible.

Gather feedback from participants: A genuinely inclusive evaluation practice requires organisations to engage deeply with the lived experiences of those within their systems. Feedback should be ongoing, multi-channel and inclusive of both formal and informal approaches. The most insightful feedback often arises not from standardised surveys, but from spaces where participants feel safe to speak openly and honestly. Organisations need to ask the right questions, not just whether people feel “included”, but how inclusion is being experienced or denied in the day-to-day realities of the programme. Do participants feel their perspectives are valued and integrated? Do they experience a genuine sense of belonging within their cohort or team? This kind of inquiry demands careful analysis of both stories and sentiments to capture what data alone cannot reveal.

Hold leaders accountable for DEIB outcomes: Evaluation and feedback mechanisms are only as powerful as the accountability structures that support them. Leadership plays a pivotal role in driving and sustaining DEIB efforts, and yet many organisations struggle to make progress when leaders fail to follow through. Many companies express a strong commitment to inclusion but fail to achieve sustained change due to a lack of purposeful follow-through from leadership (Hunt et al., 2020). Declaring DEIB as a core value is not enough, leaders must be held accountable for delivering outcomes. This includes integrating DEIB goals into performance evaluations, establishing mechanisms for transparency and oversight, and making it clear that inclusive leadership is a core responsibility, not a matter of personal interest. When leaders are expected to model inclusive behaviours, challenge systemic bias and act on the insights gathered through data and feedback, DEIB shifts from being an aspiration to becoming a measurable part of how success is defined.

Food for thought:

- What mechanisms are you currently using to capture participants' experiences of inclusion, belonging and equity? How can these be made more meaningful and accessible?
- How are insights from DEIB data and feedback being translated into concrete changes in your leadership programmes?
- What changes are needed to ensure that inclusive leadership is embraced as a core responsibility within your organisation? Who needs to be convinced?

6 Conclusion: a call to sustained, transformative action

Promoting DEIB should be a profound and continuous commitment to transforming the structures, values and practices that shape organisations and leadership programmes. It is a long-term effort that demands consistency, critical reflection and shared responsibility. Its impact only becomes real when these principles are fully embedded in institutional culture and decision-making processes and are prioritised at the highest levels of leadership. As discussed throughout this guide, transformation takes time and advances through strategic alliances within organisations and sustained engagement with stakeholders.

In the context of leadership development, this responsibility becomes even more significant. Organisations that design and implement leadership programmes are not only shaping individual trajectories, they are influencing the kind of leadership that will define institutions, policies and narratives. These programmes must, therefore, operate with the highest standards of equity and inclusion. Public statements of support are not enough; commitment must be translated into concrete action. This includes integrating DEIB into strategic planning, allocating sufficient resources, diversifying teams and embedding inclusive and decolonial frameworks into the different stages of programme design and implementation. Efforts must also be realistic and collectively owned, aligning with stakeholders, recognising internal capacities and ensuring that what is offered can be delivered. While good intentions are essential, sustainable programmes depend on alignment, clear priorities and realistic capacities.

When leadership programmes continue to rely on narrow definitions of potential or fail to address structural inequalities in their selection processes, they risk reproducing the very dynamics they claim to challenge. Transformative leadership cannot be cultivated in spaces that remain exclusive or disconnected from the realities of the communities they intend to serve. Representation among teams, facilitators and mentors is not just a symbolic gesture, it is a powerful indicator of the future being envisioned. Programmes that are genuinely committed to equity understand that their credibility lies in coherence: the alignment between what is declared and what is practiced.

This commitment also requires organisations to engage in honest, and at times uncomfortable, introspection. It means questioning who holds power, whose knowledge is prioritised, whose narratives are legitimised and whose experiences are continually overlooked. These are not questions to be resolved through superficial reforms or isolated initiatives. They require a willingness to redesign systems, redistribute power and create space for leadership to emerge from a broader spectrum of lived experiences. Though this work is demanding, organisations that embrace it with integrity contribute meaningfully to a more inclusive and just world. Pursuing structural change can often feel isolating or discouraging, especially when progress is slow or resistance is strong. Yet this is precisely why building alliances, engaging in networks and sharing the responsibility and opportunity of transformation is essential. Collective efforts make this journey more powerful and sustainable.

This guide is an invitation to move beyond box-checking exercises. It is a call to shift mindsets, reshape practices and reimagine power. It is about cultivating leadership that reflects the diversity of society and is equipped to address its most urgent and complex challenges. This resource is designed to support and strengthen ongoing efforts, offering both space for reflection and practical tools to build leadership programmes that not only develop individuals, but also transform systems.

The time to change is now.

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