



CIIS Employer HR Resources

Toolkit 4: Workplace Culture, Inclusion & Belonging

*Helping employers create respectful, inclusive,
and psychologically safe workplaces*



Purpose of this toolkit

This toolkit helps employers strengthen workplace culture after hiring by building respectful behaviours, cross-cultural awareness, psychological safety, wellbeing practices, and sustained inclusion. It is designed for employers, HR professionals, managers, supervisors, and organizational leaders who influence workplace experience.

How to use it

Each chapter can be used independently or as part of a wider culture improvement plan. Each chapter includes one consolidated downloadable tool.

Note on legal and health content

This toolkit provides practical HR guidance and general legal and workplace health awareness. It is not legal, medical, or clinical advice. Employers should seek qualified advice for specific workplace situations, legal obligations, health concerns, investigations, or accommodation matters.

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Section 1: What Inclusion Looks Like in Practice

CIIS Research Insight

CIIS 2024 research found that respondents identified cultural awareness, employer accountability, and workplace culture guidance as important supports for Black immigrant women. This reinforces the need for employers to translate inclusion into daily workplace practice.

Purpose

Inclusion becomes meaningful when employees experience it in ordinary work moments. It is reflected in whether people are invited into conversations, whether their contributions are taken seriously, whether concerns are handled respectfully, and whether employees can participate without feeling they must hide important parts of their identity or experience.

For employers, inclusion should be treated as a workplace practice rather than a general value. It affects how teams collaborate, how leaders make decisions, how work is assigned, and how employees experience opportunity.

Practical signs of inclusion

An inclusive workplace is visible in the way people behave. Team members listen without dismissing unfamiliar perspectives, managers explain expectations clearly, employees are able to ask questions without fear, and leaders respond to concerns consistently. Inclusion also means employees are not expected to assimilate into a narrow idea of professionalism that excludes different communication styles, accents, cultural references, or work histories.

This does not mean every workplace interaction will be perfect. It means the organization has a shared standard for respect and a willingness to correct patterns that exclude people.

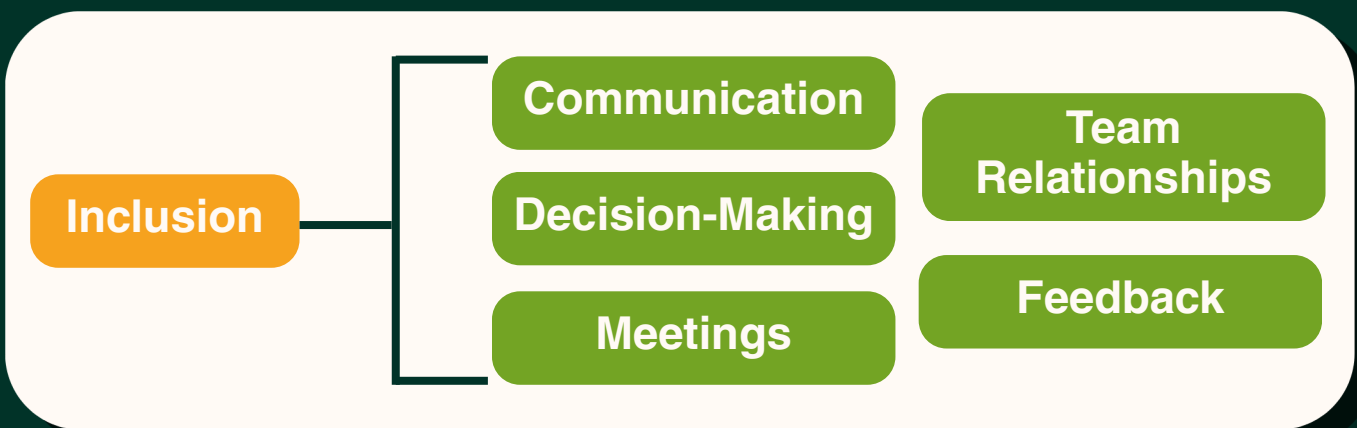
A practical test of inclusion is whether employees can participate fully without needing informal permission from a trusted insider. For example, a new employee should not have to learn through guesswork who is allowed to speak in meetings, how decisions are made, or which social norms matter most.

Employers can use this section to review everyday moments where inclusion either happens or breaks down. The most useful improvements are often simple: clearer meeting roles, more transparent information sharing, and managers who notice who is being left out.

Employer Practice

Define inclusion in behavioural terms. Employers should identify what inclusive conduct looks like in meetings, supervision, decision-making, conflict resolution, and recognition. These expectations should be practical enough for employees and managers to apply.

Review whether employees from different backgrounds are participating fully in team life. If some voices are rarely heard or certain employees are consistently left out of informal networks, culture work should move from broad messaging to specific action.



Reflection Questions

Can employees describe what inclusion looks like in daily behaviour?

Are some employees included formally but left out informally?

Do managers know how to identify exclusion before it becomes a retention issue?

Section 2: Workplace Values and Behaviour

03

Purpose

Workplace values only influence culture when they are connected to expected behaviour. Statements about respect, collaboration, and inclusion lose credibility when employees experience dismissive communication, unequal opportunity, or inconsistent responses to concerns.

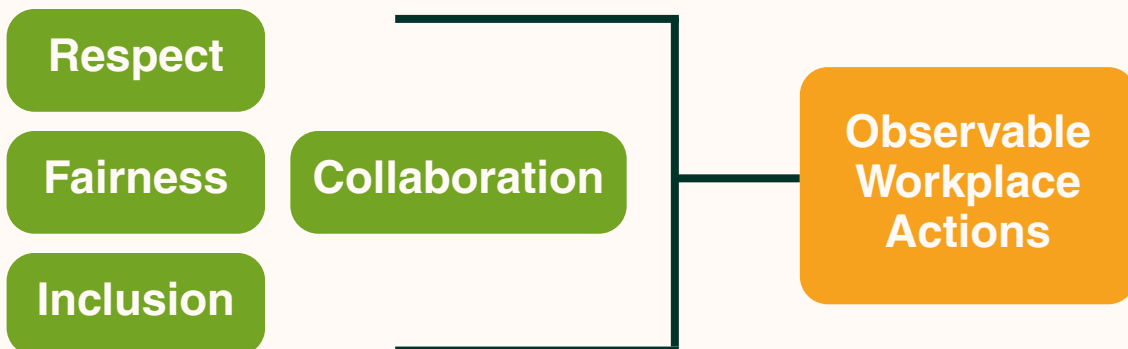
Employers should be able to connect each stated value to what employees and managers are expected to do. A value such as respect may include listening without interruption, addressing inappropriate comments, giving feedback privately, and making room for different communication styles.

Closing the gap between stated and lived values

Many organizations have strong values on paper, but employees judge culture by what is tolerated. If high-performing employees are allowed to behave disrespectfully, the real culture becomes different from the written culture. If managers ignore exclusion because it is uncomfortable to address, employees learn that belonging is conditional.

The strongest cultures are not those with perfect slogans. They are workplaces where behaviour is consistently reinforced, corrected, and modelled by leadership.

Values-to-behaviour



Values should be reinforced in moments of pressure, not only when things are calm. If a team claims to value respect, that value should still apply during deadlines, disagreement, performance concerns, and customer pressure.

Employers can ask managers to identify two or three behaviours that demonstrate each value. This makes values easier to coach, measure, and correct when behaviour drifts.

Employer practice

Translate values into observable behaviours and include them in onboarding, supervision, team norms, and performance conversations. Managers should be encouraged to speak about values in practical workplace language, not abstract statements.

When behaviour contradicts stated values, address it early. Small unresolved patterns can become signals that exclusion is acceptable.

Reflection Questions

Are workplace values reflected in actual behaviour?

Do managers correct behaviour that undermines inclusion?

Are values visible in supervision, team norms, and performance expectations?

Section 3: Psychological Safety and Trust

05

CIIS Research Insight

The Government of Canada describes psychological safety as protecting employees from significant harm to mental health and making reasonable efforts to support mental health. This makes trust and respectful response a workplace quality issue, not only a culture preference.

Purpose

Psychological safety is the condition that allows employees to speak, ask questions, raise concerns, admit mistakes, and contribute ideas without fear of humiliation or retaliation. It supports learning, collaboration, and early problem-solving.

For diverse teams, psychological safety matters because employees may already be navigating uncertainty about workplace norms, communication expectations, or how their background will be perceived. A low-trust environment can cause employees to stay silent even when they have valuable insight.

Trust is built through response

Employees decide whether the workplace is safe based on what happens after someone speaks up. If questions are welcomed, concerns are taken seriously, and mistakes are treated as learning opportunities, trust grows. If employees are embarrassed, ignored, or punished for speaking honestly, silence becomes rational.

Psychological safety does not mean avoiding accountability. It means employees can participate honestly while still being expected to meet clear standards.

Workplace application

A team may appear polite while still lacking psychological safety. Employees may attend meetings, complete tasks, and avoid conflict, but still avoid raising concerns because they do not believe speaking up will help.

Managers can test for trust by noticing whether employees bring forward small concerns early. When employees only speak after problems become serious, the workplace may need stronger psychological safety practices.

Managers should create predictable opportunities for questions, invite quieter voices into discussion without putting them on the spot, and respond constructively when employees raise concerns. Trust is strengthened when leaders follow up on issues rather than only encouraging openness in principle.

Team norms should clarify how disagreement will be handled. Respectful disagreement should be treated as part of good work, not as disloyalty or conflict.



Reflection Questions

Do employees feel safe raising concerns or asking questions?

How do managers respond when employees make mistakes?

Is disagreement treated as useful input or as a problem?

Section 4: Everyday Inclusion Practices

07

Purpose

Inclusion is sustained through repeated small practices. How meetings are chaired, how information is shared, how social activities are planned, and how feedback is delivered can either strengthen belonging or quietly exclude employees.

Everyday inclusion is especially important because exclusion is often subtle. An employee may not be openly mistreated but may be left out of informal updates, overlooked in meetings, assigned less visible work, or rarely considered for growth opportunities.

Where everyday exclusion appears

Exclusion may appear through private side conversations where important decisions are made, assumptions about who will enjoy certain events, repeated mispronunciation of names, jokes that rely on cultural stereotypes, or feedback that is vague and hard to act on. These patterns may seem small individually, but they accumulate.

Employers should treat everyday inclusion as a management discipline. It requires attention, correction, and shared expectations.

Practical Inclusion Cards

Meeting Participation

With ongoing awareness, we'll strengthen our language, culture, and belonging. We'll ensure that all voices are heard and that everyone has the opportunity to contribute. We'll create a safe space for everyone to share their ideas and experiences. We'll foster a culture of respect and inclusion where everyone feels valued and supported.

Information Sharing

With ongoing awareness, we'll strengthen our language, culture, and belonging. We'll ensure that all voices are heard and that everyone has the opportunity to contribute. We'll create a safe space for everyone to share their ideas and experiences. We'll foster a culture of respect and inclusion where everyone feels valued and supported.

Recognition

With ongoing awareness, we'll strengthen our language, culture, and belonging. We'll ensure that all voices are heard and that everyone has the opportunity to contribute. We'll create a safe space for everyone to share their ideas and experiences. We'll foster a culture of respect and inclusion where everyone feels valued and supported.

Team Connection

With ongoing awareness, we'll strengthen our language, culture, and belonging. We'll ensure that all voices are heard and that everyone has the opportunity to contribute. We'll create a safe space for everyone to share their ideas and experiences. We'll foster a culture of respect and inclusion where everyone feels valued and supported.

Everyday inclusion is often revealed in small routines. Who gets invited to informal problem-solving conversations? Whose ideas are repeated before they are accepted? Who receives context before decisions are made?

Employers should not underestimate small patterns. Repeated small exclusions can have the same retention impact as larger incidents because they shape whether employees feel they truly belong.

Employer practice

Use inclusive meeting habits, rotate visible opportunities, ensure information is shared through formal channels, and design team activities that do not rely on one narrow cultural or social norm.

Managers should check whether employees have equal access to information, support, and informal networks. A workplace can appear inclusive on paper while still operating through closed informal systems.

Reflection Questions

Are informal networks helping some employees more than others?

Do team practices make room for different communication and social preferences?

Are managers noticing small exclusion patterns early?

Section 5: Leadership Influence on Culture

09

Purpose

Leaders shape culture through what they model, reward, ignore, and address. Employees watch whether leaders treat inclusion as central to good management or as an optional initiative.

Culture change is difficult when leaders delegate inclusion entirely to HR while continuing to tolerate behaviours that undermine trust. Leaders must be visible in setting expectations and consistent in responding when those expectations are not met.

Leadership credibility

Leadership credibility depends on consistency. Employees are more likely to trust inclusion efforts when leaders communicate clearly, listen to feedback, act on patterns, and hold managers accountable. A single workshop or statement is not enough if everyday leadership behaviour does not change.

Inclusion work becomes stronger when leaders connect it to organizational performance, retention, innovation, service quality, and employee wellbeing.

Workplace application

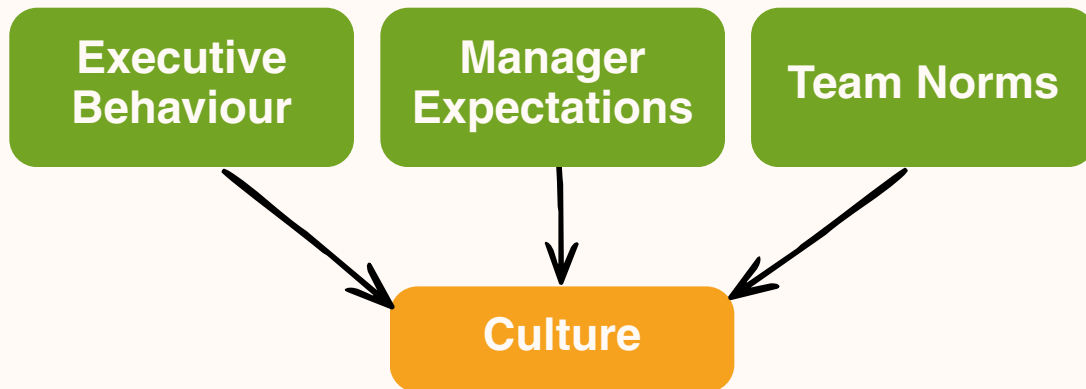
Leaders set the emotional temperature of a workplace. If leaders are dismissive, rushed, or inconsistent, managers often copy that style. If leaders pause, listen, and correct behaviour respectfully, those habits spread too.

Leadership influence should be visible in decisions about time and resources. If inclusion is important, managers need time to learn, tools to apply, and permission to address culture issues before they become crises.

Leaders should set expectations for respectful behaviour, require managers to address exclusion, review culture indicators, and model humility when learning about experiences different from their own.

Leadership conversations should include culture risks alongside operational risks, because workplace culture affects performance, retention, and credibility.

Leadership Influence Diagram



Reflection Questions

*Do leaders model the culture they ask others to build?
Are managers accountable for inclusion in daily practice?
Is culture treated as a strategic workplace priority?*

Chapter Takeaway



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Inclusive culture is built through everyday behaviour, consistent leadership, and practical systems that make respect and belonging visible in daily work.



Section 1: Communication Styles Across Cultures

Purpose

Communication differences can affect how employees participate in meetings, ask questions, respond to feedback, share achievements, or disagree with colleagues. These differences may be shaped by culture, previous workplaces, education, language, personality, and power dynamics.

Employers should avoid treating one communication style as the only professional standard. Directness, caution, formality, silence, eye contact, and self-promotion can carry different meanings in different contexts.

Interpreting communication accurately

A more formal employee may be showing respect, not distance. A quieter employee may be processing information or waiting for an invitation to contribute. A direct employee may not intend disrespect. A candidate or employee who emphasizes group success may still have made a substantial personal contribution.

The goal is not to excuse poor communication. The goal is to interpret communication carefully before making assumptions about capability, confidence, or engagement.

Workplace application

A practical example is meeting participation. Some employees contribute best after reviewing written information, while others think out loud in discussion. A team that only values fast verbal responses may miss strong insight from reflective contributors.

Employers can improve communication by sharing agendas in advance, summarizing decisions afterward, and inviting input in writing as well as in meetings.

Managers can improve communication by using clear language, checking understanding, avoiding idioms when clarity matters, and inviting participation in more than one format. Written follow-up after meetings can help employees who process information differently or need time to reflect.

Teams should be encouraged to ask clarifying questions rather than assume intent.



Reflection Questions

Are managers interpreting communication style too quickly?

Do employees have more than one way to contribute?

Are team members encouraged to clarify before judging intent?

Section 2: Different Approaches to Leadership

14

Purpose

Employees may come from workplace cultures with different expectations about authority, initiative, hierarchy, and decision-making. Some employees may be used to waiting for clear direction before acting, while others may expect broad autonomy. Some may view direct disagreement with a manager as disrespectful, while others see it as normal collaboration.

These differences can create misunderstanding if expectations are not explained. A manager may interpret caution as lack of initiative, while an employee may interpret informal leadership as lack of direction.

Making leadership expectations explicit

Inclusive workplaces explain how leadership works locally and organizationally. Employees should understand when independent decision-making is expected, how to raise concerns, how to challenge ideas respectfully, and how authority is exercised in the organization.

This clarity benefits everyone, not only immigrant employees. Many workplace conflicts begin because assumptions about leadership and initiative were never discussed.



Employees may interpret leadership behaviour differently depending on prior workplaces. A manager who says “use your judgment” may intend empowerment, while an employee may hear uncertainty about expectations.

Clear leadership language reduces anxiety. Managers should explain what decisions employees can make independently, what requires consultation, and how to escalate issues appropriately.

Employer practice

Managers should describe expectations around decision-making, escalation, initiative, and feedback. They should also ask employees about the conditions that help them do their best work.

Leaders should avoid judging capability based on whether an employee immediately mirrors the dominant leadership style in the organization.

Reflection Questions

Are leadership expectations explained clearly?
Could employees misread informal leadership norms?
Do managers recognize different ways of showing initiative?

Section 3: Collaboration and Decision-Making Differences

16

Purpose

Collaboration styles vary. Some employees may expect consensus before moving forward, while others may expect quick decisions from a designated leader. Some may prefer detailed discussion, while others prioritize speed. These differences can affect meetings, project work, and team relationships.

Teams become stronger when they understand how decisions are made and how different perspectives will be considered.

Reducing friction in team processes

Workplace tension often increases when decision rules are unclear. Employees may not know whether a meeting is for consultation, brainstorming, approval, or information sharing. This can lead to frustration and uneven participation.

Clear decision processes improve inclusion because employees know when and how their input matters.

Workplace application

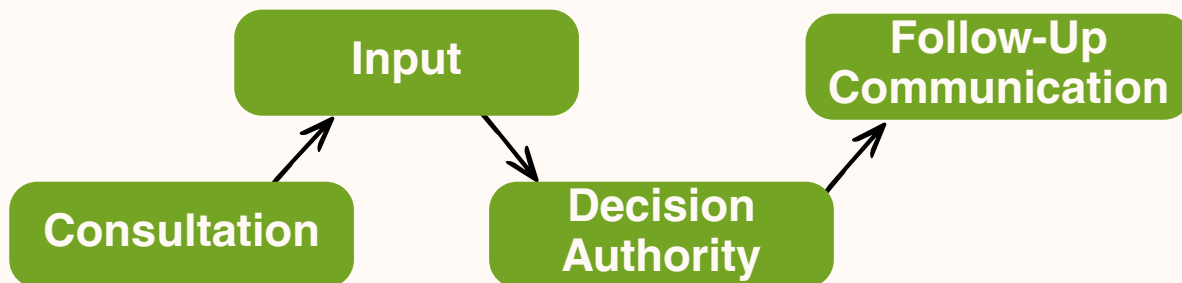
Cross-cultural collaboration improves when teams know whether a discussion is meant to gather input or make a decision. Without that clarity, employees may leave meetings unsure whether their views mattered.

Managers can close the loop by naming the decision, explaining what input influenced it, and clarifying the next step. This builds trust even when not every suggestion is adopted.

Before collaborative work begins, managers should clarify decision roles, timelines, expectations for input, and how disagreement will be handled. Meeting chairs should summarize decisions and next steps so everyone leaves with the same understanding.

Teams should use structured methods for gathering input when power dynamics or communication style may prevent open participation.

Decision-Making Flow



Reflection Questions

*Do employees know how decisions are made?
Are meetings structured so different voices can contribute?
Is disagreement handled respectfully?*

Section 4: Managing Misunderstandings Respectfully

18

Purpose

Misunderstandings are normal in diverse workplaces. The issue is not whether they happen, but how they are handled. If misunderstandings are ignored, they can become resentment, exclusion, or conflict. If they are handled respectfully, they can build understanding and trust.

Respectful management of misunderstandings requires curiosity, clarity, and accountability. It should not require employees from marginalized backgrounds to educate everyone alone or absorb repeated harm without support.

Distinguishing misunderstanding from harmful behaviour

Some situations are genuine miscommunication. Others involve disrespect, bias, or repeated behaviour that must be addressed directly. Employers need judgment and process. Labelling everything a misunderstanding can minimize harm; labelling every difference as misconduct can discourage open learning.

A strong workplace can hold both truths: people may need space to learn, and employees deserve respectful treatment.

Workplace application

A misunderstanding may begin with tone, timing, or an assumption about intent. The faster a manager supports respectful clarification, the less likely the issue is to become personal or entrenched.

Good repair language is simple: describe what happened, acknowledge impact, clarify intent where helpful, and agree on future behaviour. This keeps the focus on working well together.

Managers should intervene early, invite clarification, document serious concerns, and focus on behaviour and impact. Where a pattern involves harassment, discrimination, or repeated exclusion, it should be addressed through the appropriate workplace process.

Teams should be encouraged to repair working relationships without ignoring accountability.

Respectful Conversation Model

Listen

Acknowledge
Impact

Follow-Up

Clarify

Agree on
Next Steps

Reflection Questions

*Do managers respond to misunderstandings early?
Are harmful patterns addressed rather than minimized?
Do employees know how to raise concerns safely?*

Section 5: Building Cross-Cultural Awareness

20

CIIS Research Insight

CIIS survey respondents identified guidance on workplace culture and expectations as a major support need. This supports the importance of employer-side cultural awareness, not only newcomer adjustment.

Purpose

Cross-cultural awareness helps employees work effectively across differences without reducing people to stereotypes. It encourages employees to notice assumptions, ask better questions, and understand that professional norms are not universal.

Awareness should be practical. Employees need tools for communication, collaboration, feedback, and conflict, not abstract cultural generalizations.

Avoiding stereotypes

Cultural awareness becomes harmful when it assumes every person from a group behaves the same way. Employees are shaped by culture, but also by profession, personality, language, age, education, migration experience, and individual preference.

The most useful approach is to build curiosity and shared norms while treating each employee as an individual.

Workplace application

Cross-cultural awareness should help teams become more curious and less certain about assumptions. It should not become a list of rules about how particular groups behave.

A useful team exercise is to discuss working preferences: how people like to receive feedback, what helps them participate, and how they prefer to handle disagreement.

Provide cross-cultural learning that focuses on workplace scenarios, reflective questions, and practical tools. Encourage teams to discuss working preferences, communication expectations, and feedback needs without asking employees to represent an entire culture.

Cross-cultural awareness should be part of team development, onboarding, and manager training.

Cross-Cultural Awareness

Communication

Feedback

Authority

Teamwork

Conflict

Identity

Reflection Questions

Does cultural awareness training avoid stereotypes?
Are teams discussing working preferences respectfully?
Are managers equipped to lead across differences?

Chapter Takeaway



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Cross-cultural awareness strengthens teams when it helps employees understand differences without stereotyping or placing the burden of adjustment on one group.



Section 1: Understanding Workplace Exclusion

Purpose

Workplace exclusion can be formal or informal. Formal exclusion may involve denial of opportunities, unequal access to projects, or lack of advancement. Informal exclusion may involve being left out of conversations, social networks, or information channels that affect work.

Exclusion is often hard to prove in one moment but easy to feel over time. Employees may notice patterns in who is invited, whose ideas are credited, who receives support, and who is assumed to belong.

How exclusion affects work

Exclusion reduces trust, performance, wellbeing, and retention. It can also prevent employers from benefiting from the full capability of their teams. Employees who feel excluded may stop contributing ideas, avoid risk, and begin looking for opportunities elsewhere.

For immigrant employees and racialized employees, exclusion can reinforce earlier experiences of being undervalued or misunderstood in the labour market.

Workplace application

Exclusion often appears in opportunity patterns. An employee may be competent and well-liked but repeatedly left out of visible work, stretch assignments, or informal conversations where decisions begin.

Employers can review work allocation and recognition patterns to see whether the same employees are consistently given access to growth and visibility.

Managers should watch for patterns in participation, recognition, work allocation, and access to informal information. Culture reviews should examine who is included in meaningful opportunities, not only who is present in the organization.

Leaders should treat exclusion as a workplace issue that affects performance and retention, not as a personal sensitivity.



Reflection Questions

*Who has access to informal information and opportunities?
Are some employees present but not meaningfully included?
How does exclusion show up in team routines?*

Section 2: Recognizing Microaggressions

25

Purpose

Microaggressions are everyday comments, questions, or behaviours that communicate disrespect, stereotype, or exclusion toward a person based on identity or perceived difference. They may be intentional or unintentional, but their impact can be significant, especially when repeated.

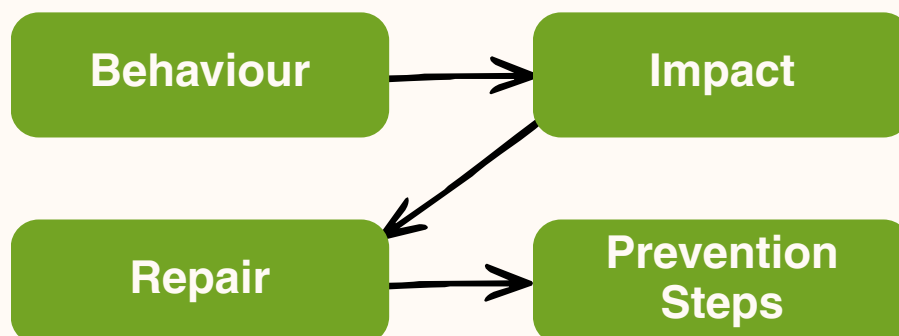
Examples may include repeatedly mispronouncing a name after correction, expressing surprise at someone's language ability, making assumptions about where a person is from, touching hair or commenting on appearance in racialized ways, or dismissing concerns as overreaction.

Impact over intent

Workplaces often get stuck on whether harm was intended. Intent matters, but it does not erase impact. A professional response focuses on what happened, how it affected the employee, what standard applies, and what needs to change.

Employees should not have to repeatedly absorb small harms to keep the peace. Over time, microaggressions can damage belonging, trust, and psychological safety.

Microaggression Response



Microaggressions often appear as comments that seem small to the speaker but carry a repeated message to the employee. The issue is not one awkward sentence alone, but the pattern and meaning it creates over time.

Managers should avoid asking employees to prove that a comment was harmful before taking it seriously. A respectful conversation can address impact without immediately escalating every issue into a formal complaint.

Employer practice

Provide examples of microaggressions in training, but avoid turning examples into a narrow checklist. Managers should learn to respond to patterns, listen without defensiveness, and redirect behaviour early.

When someone raises a concern, focus first on understanding and addressing the behaviour rather than debating whether the person should have been affected.

Reflection Questions

Do employees understand how subtle behaviours can create exclusion?

Are concerns about microaggressions handled respectfully?

Do managers focus on impact as well as intent?

Section 3: Responding to Harmful Behaviour

27

CIIS Research Insight

Ontario guidance under the Occupational Health and Safety Act requires employers to have workplace harassment policies and programs, and to provide workers with information and instruction about them.

Purpose

Harmful behaviour should be addressed promptly and proportionately. Ignoring early concerns can signal that disrespect is tolerated. Overreacting without understanding can also reduce trust. Employers need a response approach that is fair, respectful, and consistent.

The response should consider the nature of the behaviour, whether it is repeated, its impact, any power dynamics involved, and whether it may fall under harassment or discrimination obligations.

Good response principles

A strong response begins with listening and documenting. Managers should avoid minimizing language such as 'that is just how they are' or 'I am sure they did not mean it.' The focus should remain on workplace standards and the behaviour that needs to change.

Where behaviour may involve harassment, discrimination, threats, or reprisal, the organization should follow its formal policy and legal obligations.

Workplace application

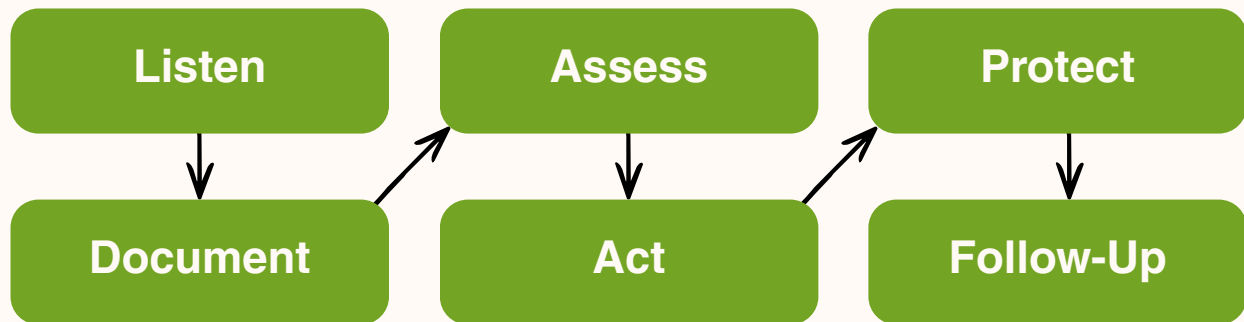
The first response can determine whether employees trust the organization. If a manager minimizes the concern, the employee may never report again. If the manager listens and follows the process, trust becomes possible.

Employers should prepare managers with simple response language so they do not improvise during sensitive moments.

Create a clear response pathway: listen, assess, document, address behaviour, protect against retaliation, and follow up. Managers should know when they can handle a concern directly and when HR, leadership, or a formal process must be involved.

Employees should know that respectful reporting is encouraged and that concerns will be handled seriously.

Response Pathway



Reflection Questions

Do managers know how to respond to harmful behaviour?

Are concerns documented appropriately?

Is follow-up built into the response process?

Section 4: Building Respectful Workplace Standards

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Purpose

Respectful workplace standards make expectations clear before problems occur. Employees should understand what behaviour is expected, what behaviour is unacceptable, how concerns can be raised, and how the organization responds.

Standards should apply to everyone, including high performers, senior leaders, clients, volunteers, contractors, and board members where relevant. Respect loses credibility when exceptions are made for powerful people.

What standards should cover

A practical respectful workplace standard should address harassment, discrimination, bullying, exclusion, retaliation, confidentiality, and reporting. It should also describe everyday expectations such as respectful communication, meeting conduct, feedback practices, and professional disagreement.

The strongest standards are supported by training, manager tools, and consistent consequences.

A hand is shown in the bottom right corner, holding a piece of white chalk and drawing the word "RESPECT" in large, bold, block letters on a dark green chalkboard. The letters are filled with a light green, textured pattern. The hand is positioned as if it has just finished drawing the letter 'T'.

Standards are easier to apply when they include examples. Employees should understand what respectful disagreement looks like, what crosses the line, and how to raise a concern.

Respectful workplace standards should also apply to remote and hybrid spaces, including chat messages, virtual meetings, and online collaboration tools.

Employer practice

Review policies for clarity and practical use. Employees should not need legal expertise to understand how to raise a concern. Managers should receive scenario-based training so they can apply standards in real situations.

Standards should be communicated during onboarding and revisited regularly through team conversations and leadership messages.

Reflection Questions

Are respectful workplace standards clear and practical?

Do employees know how to raise concerns?

Are standards applied consistently regardless of seniority?

Section 5: Accountability and Reporting

31

Purpose

Reporting systems only work when employees trust them. If employees believe nothing will happen, that they will be blamed, or that confidentiality will not be respected, they may stay silent even when harm is serious.

Accountability requires more than having a policy. It requires accessible reporting options, timely response, protection against reprisal, careful documentation, and visible commitment to improvement.

Building trust in reporting

Employers should make reporting pathways clear and provide more than one route where possible. Employees may not feel safe reporting to the person directly above them, especially if the concern involves that person or their close colleague.

After a concern is raised, follow-up matters. Even when confidentiality limits what can be shared, employees should understand that the concern was received and that the process is moving appropriately.

Workplace application

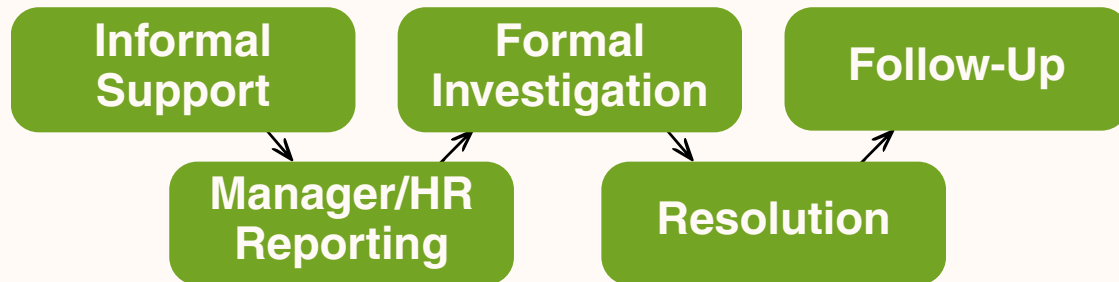
A reporting process that exists only in a policy may not feel accessible to employees. People need to know who to contact, what will happen next, and how confidentiality will be protected.

Employers should review whether employees trust the process enough to use it. Low reporting may mean few issues, but it may also mean low confidence in response.

Create a simple reporting guide that explains options, timelines, confidentiality, protection from reprisal, and possible next steps. Train managers to receive concerns without defensiveness or retaliation.

Review reporting data for patterns, not only individual incidents. Repeated low-level concerns in one team may reveal a culture issue before a serious complaint emerges.

Reporting Pathway



Reflection Questions

Do employees trust the reporting process?

Are there multiple ways to raise concerns?

Does the organization review patterns in reports and concerns?

Chapter Takeaway



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Respectful workplaces require clear standards, trusted reporting pathways, and consistent responses to exclusion, bias, harassment, and harmful behaviour.



Section 1: Why Psychological Safety Matters**Purpose**

Psychological safety allows employees to contribute, learn, and raise concerns without fear of humiliation or punishment. It supports innovation, risk awareness, and healthy collaboration because employees are more likely to speak up before problems grow.

Inclusion is difficult to sustain without psychological safety. Employees may be invited into the room but still remain silent if they believe their ideas will be dismissed or their mistakes will be used against them.

Connection to performance

Psychological safety is sometimes misunderstood as comfort or agreement. In practice, it supports higher standards because employees can discuss problems early, challenge weak ideas, and learn from mistakes. It creates the conditions for honest work.

A low-safety workplace may appear calm because no one speaks up, but silence can hide confusion, risk, disengagement, and harm.

Workplace application

Psychological safety affects risk management. Employees who feel unsafe may avoid reporting errors, unclear instructions, client issues, or interpersonal harm until the problem has grown.

Leaders can reinforce safety by thanking employees for surfacing issues and focusing first on learning and correction.

Managers should invite input, thank employees for raising issues, respond constructively to mistakes, and model openness about learning. Leaders should review whether employees feel safe speaking across hierarchy and difference.

Psychological safety should be considered in team reviews, change management, workload discussions, and conflict resolution.

Psychological Safety Model

Speak Up

Challenge

Improve

Learn

Support

Reflection Questions

*Do employees raise concerns before issues escalate?
Are mistakes handled as learning opportunities where appropriate?
Can employees disagree respectfully across hierarchy?*

Section 2: Mental Health and Workplace Inclusion

36

CIIS Research Insight

Government of Canada guidance identifies workplace psychological health as an organizational issue that can be supported through practical strategies at different levels of the workplace.

Purpose

Mental health and inclusion intersect. Employees who experience exclusion, discrimination, chronic stress, or lack of support may face increased psychological strain. Employers are not expected to diagnose employees, but they are responsible for creating conditions that support a healthy and respectful workplace.

Workplace mental health should be approached through prevention, support, and respectful response. It should not be limited to crisis response or individual resilience messaging.

Workplace factors that matter

Risk factors may include excessive workload, unclear expectations, harassment, bullying, poor communication, lack of recognition, and low control over work. Protective factors include supportive supervision, role clarity, respectful relationships, inclusion, and access to assistance.

For immigrant and racialized employees, mental health can also be affected by repeated experiences of bias, pressure to prove competence, isolation, and uncertainty about belonging.

Workplace application

A workplace can offer wellness resources while still creating stress through unclear expectations, exclusion, or disrespectful behaviour. Wellbeing programs are strongest when paired with healthy management practices.

Employers should be careful not to make mental health support feel like a substitute for fixing harmful workplace conditions.

Organizations should connect inclusion work with wellbeing work. Review whether employees have role clarity, reasonable workload, respectful supervision, and safe ways to raise concerns. Provide information about available supports without requiring employees to disclose personal health information publicly.

Managers should be trained to notice changes in behaviour, invite supportive conversations, and refer employees to appropriate resources rather than trying to act as clinicians.

Wellbeing Ecosystem

Workload

Role Clarity

Respect

Inclusion

Support

Resources

Reflection Questions

Are wellbeing efforts connected to inclusion and respect?

Do managers know how to respond supportively without overstepping?

Are employees aware of available supports?

Section 3: Supporting Employee Wellbeing

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Purpose

Supporting wellbeing means creating everyday conditions that allow people to work sustainably. This includes manageable expectations, clear priorities, respectful relationships, access to support, and flexibility where possible.

Wellbeing should not be framed only as an employee's personal responsibility. Employers influence wellbeing through workload design, manager behaviour, communication practices, and organizational culture.

Practical supports

Employees benefit from clear priorities, realistic timelines, regular check-ins, respectful feedback, and access to resources such as employee assistance programs where available. Support can also include flexibility, workload review, conflict resolution, and referral to accommodation processes when needed.

Wellbeing support is strongest when employees can access it before a problem becomes severe.



Wellbeing support can be practical and modest. A manager who helps an employee clarify priorities, adjust a deadline, or access a support resource may prevent a larger issue from developing.

Employers should review whether workloads are sustainable across the team, not only whether individual employees are coping.

Employer practice

Managers should discuss workload and priorities regularly, especially during periods of change. Leaders should review whether employees are being asked to absorb ongoing pressure without resources, clarity, or recovery time.

Wellbeing practices should be reviewed for equity. Supports should be accessible to employees with different schedules, roles, communication preferences, caregiving responsibilities, and workplace locations.

Reflection Questions

Are workloads and priorities discussed openly?

Are supports accessible across roles and schedules?

Do employees feel able to ask for help before reaching crisis?

Section 4: Encouraging Open Communication

40

Purpose

Open communication helps employers identify risks, support employees, and improve team functioning. Employees are more likely to communicate openly when they believe their input will be respected and used responsibly.

Open communication does not mean employees must disclose personal information. It means they can ask questions, raise work-related concerns, request clarification, and discuss barriers without fear of negative consequences.

Manager habits

Managers create openness through predictable check-ins, clear responses, follow-through, and respectful listening. If employees repeatedly raise concerns and nothing changes, communication will close down.

Open communication is also supported by multiple channels. Some employees may speak more comfortably one-on-one, in writing, through surveys, or through facilitated discussions.

Workplace application

Employees often stop communicating when they believe nothing will change. Asking for feedback repeatedly without visible action can reduce trust.

After receiving feedback, leaders should communicate what was heard, what will change, what cannot change now, and why. This closes the loop respectfully.

Provide regular opportunities for employees to share feedback. Use both formal and informal channels, and explain what will happen with the information collected. Follow up visibly when changes are made.

Managers should avoid defensiveness. A concern is often an opportunity to fix a workplace issue before it becomes a larger problem.

Communication Channels

**1-On-1
Check-Ins**

**Team
Meetings**

Surveys

**Confidential
Reporting Routes**

Reflection Questions

Do employees have safe ways to communicate concerns?

Do leaders follow up after feedback?

Are communication channels accessible to different employee needs?

Section 5: Building Trust Within Teams

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Purpose

Trust grows when employees experience consistency, respect, competence, and care. Teams with trust are better able to handle disagreement, change, feedback, and pressure.

Trust is especially important in diverse teams because employees may be navigating differences in communication, culture, identity, and power. Without trust, employees may interpret uncertainty as risk and withdraw.

Trust is practical

Trust is built through behaviour: keeping commitments, giving credit fairly, addressing issues promptly, sharing information appropriately, and applying standards consistently. It is damaged when leaders say one thing and do another, when conflict is ignored, or when accountability feels uneven.

Trust also requires repair. When harm happens, teams need acknowledgement, action, and follow-up.

Trust-Building

Consistency

Respect

Follow-Through

Fairness

Repair

Trust is built through consistency over time. A single team-building activity cannot overcome unfair work allocation, poor follow-through, or unresolved conflict.

Managers can strengthen trust by explaining decisions, acknowledging uncertainty, sharing credit, and addressing concerns before they become patterns.

Employer practice

Managers should build trust through reliable communication, fair work allocation, transparent decisions, and respectful follow-through. Team norms should include how employees will collaborate, disagree, and repair issues when needed.

Leaders should not assume trust exists because employees are polite. Silence can reflect fear, fatigue, or low expectations.

Reflection Questions

Do employees trust managers to respond fairly?

Are decisions explained clearly enough to reduce uncertainty?

Does the team repair harm when trust is damaged?

Chapter Takeaway



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Psychological safety and wellbeing are workplace conditions shaped by communication, workload, trust, respect, and leadership response.



Section 1: Measuring Inclusion

Purpose

Inclusion should be measured through employee experience, workplace outcomes, and practice consistency. Employers should look beyond representation and ask whether employees feel respected, heard, supported, and able to grow.

Measurement helps organizations identify gaps between policy and lived experience. It also helps leaders move from assumptions to evidence.

What to measure

Useful indicators may include employee survey results, engagement patterns, retention, promotion access, participation in development opportunities, harassment or discrimination concerns, exit interview themes, and manager follow-through on inclusion goals.

Measurement should be proportionate. Small organizations can begin with simple surveys and structured conversations. The goal is practical insight, not excessive reporting.

Workplace application

Measurement should be practical and responsible. A small employer may not need complex dashboards, but it can still review employee feedback, retention patterns, and whether concerns are being resolved.

The purpose of measurement is improvement. If data is collected but no action follows, employees may become less willing to participate in future surveys.

Choose a small set of inclusion indicators and review them regularly. Protect confidentiality, explain why information is being collected, and show employees how feedback leads to action.

Avoid collecting demographic information unless there is a clear purpose, appropriate consent, and a responsible plan for use and storage.

Inclusion Dashboard

Employee
Experience

Retention

Participation

Concerns

Improvement
Actions

Reflection Questions

Are we measuring employee experience, not only representation?

Do inclusion measures lead to action?

Are privacy and confidentiality respected?

Section 2: Gathering Employee Feedback

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CIIS Research Insight

CIIS 2024 research found that many respondents believed employers need more guidance and resources. Ongoing feedback helps employers avoid assuming that inclusion efforts are working without evidence.

Purpose

Employee feedback helps employers understand how culture is experienced in practice. Leaders may believe a workplace is inclusive while employees experience uneven respect, unclear reporting, or limited voice.

Feedback should be gathered through methods that employees can trust. This may include anonymous surveys, listening sessions, stay conversations, team reviews, or facilitated discussions.

Making feedback safe and useful

Employees are more likely to share honest feedback when they know why it is being collected, how it will be used, and whether confidentiality will be protected. They also need to see that feedback leads to visible action.

Feedback processes should not place the burden of solving inclusion problems on employees who experience harm. Employers are responsible for turning insight into action.

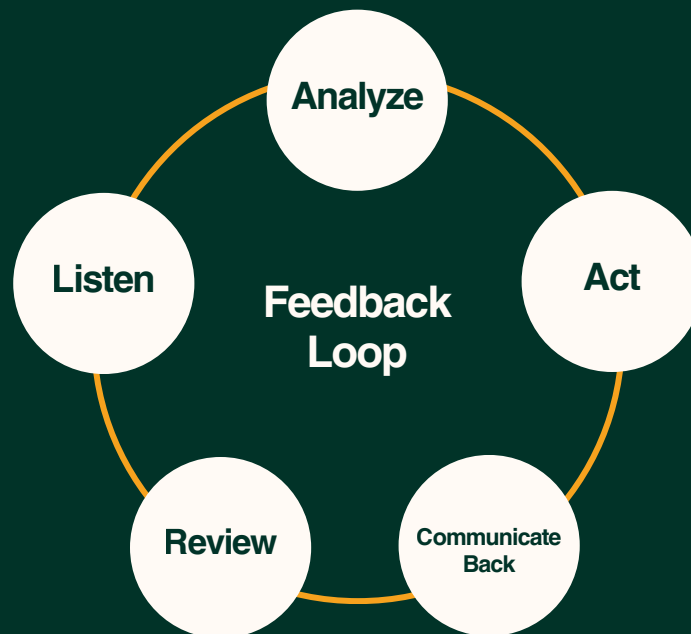
Workplace application

Feedback methods should match the workplace. Some employees will speak in a group, others may prefer an anonymous survey, and others may need one-on-one conversation to feel safe.

Employers should avoid asking employees from marginalized groups to relive difficult experiences without a clear plan for action and support.

Use simple, focused questions about respect, belonging, communication, trust, opportunity, and response to concerns. After collecting feedback, summarize themes and identify actions without exposing individual employees.

Managers should receive support to respond to feedback constructively rather than defensively.



Reflection Questions

Do employees trust feedback processes?

Does the organization communicate what changed after feedback?

Are managers prepared to receive feedback without defensiveness?

Section 3: Continuous Improvement Strategies

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Purpose

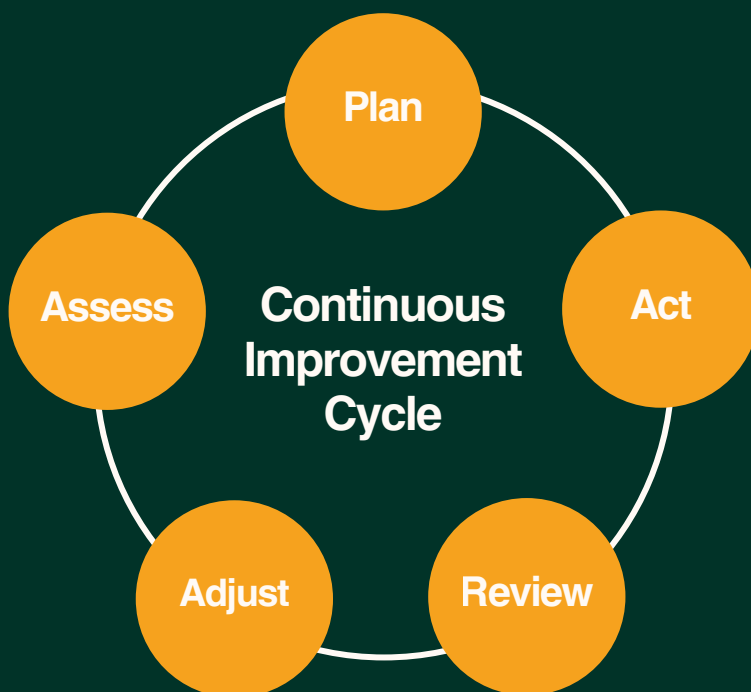
Inclusion improves through repeated cycles of review, action, and learning. A single training session or policy update rarely changes culture on its own. Employers need a process for identifying issues, testing improvements, and adjusting over time.

Continuous improvement keeps inclusion connected to real workplace conditions. It also helps organizations respond as teams grow, leadership changes, or new issues emerge.

From action plans to habits

Action plans often fail when they are too broad or disconnected from daily work. Strong plans identify specific issues, assign owners, set timelines, and track follow-up. Over time, these actions should become normal management habits rather than special projects.

Improvement also requires reflection. If an action does not work, the organization should learn from it rather than abandon the issue.



Continuous improvement works best when actions are small enough to complete. For example, improving meeting participation may be more achievable than launching a broad culture transformation with no owner.

Each improvement should have an owner, a timeline, and a follow-up point. Without these, inclusion plans often remain aspirational.

Employer practice

Use a simple improvement cycle: identify the issue, choose an action, assign responsibility, communicate the plan, implement, review, and adjust. Keep actions realistic enough to complete.

Prioritize changes that affect daily employee experience, such as meeting norms, manager check-ins, reporting clarity, and access to opportunity.

Reflection Questions

Are inclusion actions specific and owned?

Do leaders review progress regularly?

Are improvements connected to everyday workplace practice?

Section 4: Leadership Accountability

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Purpose

Inclusion is sustained when leaders are accountable for culture outcomes. Without accountability, inclusion can become dependent on individual champions rather than embedded in how the organization operates.

Leadership accountability means leaders set expectations, provide resources, review progress, respond to concerns, and ensure managers are equipped to lead inclusive teams.

Making accountability real

Accountability should be visible in planning, manager expectations, performance discussions, and resource decisions. Leaders should ask what barriers employees are experiencing, what patterns exist, and what actions are being taken.

Accountability is not about blame. It is about ownership. Leaders are responsible for creating the conditions that allow inclusion to be practiced consistently.

Workplace application

Leadership accountability becomes visible when leaders ask about culture with the same seriousness as finance, operations, or service delivery. What is measured and discussed tends to get managed.

Leaders should also be willing to hear uncomfortable feedback. Defensiveness from senior leaders can quickly shut down culture improvement.

Assign leadership ownership for inclusion goals and review progress at regular intervals. Managers should be expected to support respectful workplace practices, address concerns early, and create inclusive team routines.

Inclusion should be connected to organizational risk, retention, wellbeing, and performance, not treated as a separate side initiative.

Leadership Accountability Model

Expectations

Resources

Manager
Support

Metrics

Follow-Up

Reflection Questions

Who is responsible for inclusion progress?

Are managers held accountable for workplace culture?

Do leaders allocate time and resources to inclusion work?

Section 5: Embedding Inclusion into Workplace Culture

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Purpose

Inclusion becomes sustainable when it is built into regular workplace systems. This includes hiring, onboarding, performance management, leadership development, communication, conflict resolution, wellbeing, and employee feedback.

When inclusion is embedded, employees do not experience it as an occasional campaign. They experience it through the ordinary systems that shape work.

Sustaining the work

Embedding inclusion requires consistency. New managers should learn the organization's expectations. Policies should align with practice. Employees should know how concerns are handled. Leaders should review culture data and act on patterns.

The goal is a workplace where respect, inclusion, and psychological safety are part of how work gets done.

Embedded Inclusion System



Embedding inclusion means designing systems so good practice does not depend on one passionate employee. If inclusion disappears when a champion leaves, it has not yet been built into the organization.

Employers can embed inclusion by adding it to manager onboarding, team norms, performance conversations, feedback cycles, and policy review processes.

Employer practice

Review existing systems and ask where inclusion should be built in. This may include onboarding scripts, meeting practices, manager training, reporting tools, performance conversations, and leadership dashboards.

Sustainability improves when inclusion is owned by the organization as a whole rather than by one person or committee.

Reflection Questions

Is inclusion built into regular workplace systems?

Will inclusion practices continue if individual champions leave?

Do employees experience inclusion consistently across the organization?

Chapter Takeaway



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Inclusion becomes sustainable when it is measured, reviewed, acted on, and embedded into regular workplace systems.



1. Building an Inclusive Workplace Culture

Build practical culture expectations and inclusive daily behaviours.

2. Understanding Cultural Differences in the Workplace

Strengthen cross-cultural communication, collaboration, and awareness.

3. Preventing Exclusion, Bias & Microaggressions

Prevent and respond to exclusion, bias, microaggressions, harassment, and discrimination.

4. Employee Wellbeing & Psychological Safety

Support wellbeing and psychological safety through trust, communication, and manager practice.

5. Strengthening Inclusion Over Time

Measure inclusion, use employee feedback, and embed improvement into workplace systems.

Downloadable Tools Guide

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Each chapter includes one consolidated downloadable tool. The tools combine the most useful checklists, prompts, and planning elements into one employer-facing resource per chapter.

1. Workplace Culture and Inclusion Assessment

*Use this tool with **Chapter 1: Building an Inclusive Workplace Culture***

Supports review of inclusion behaviours, workplace values, trust, everyday practices, and leadership influence.

2. Cross-Cultural Awareness and Communication Reflection Guide

*Use this tool with **Chapter 2: Understanding Cultural Differences in the Workplace***

Supports reflection on communication styles, leadership expectations, decision-making, misunderstandings, and cross-cultural awareness.

3. Respectful Workplace and Bias Response Guide

*Use this tool with **Chapter 3: Preventing Exclusion, Bias & Microaggressions***

Supports respectful workplace standards, bias response, incident documentation, and reporting process review.

4. Psychological Safety and Wellbeing Conversation Guide

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*Use this tool with **Chapter 4: Employee Wellbeing & Psychological Safety***

Supports psychological safety, wellbeing conversations, workload discussion, communication, and team trust.

5. Workplace Inclusion Action Plan

*Use this tool with **Chapter 5: Strengthening Inclusion Over Time***

Supports inclusion measurement, feedback review, continuous improvement, leadership accountability, and action planning.

Legal and Source Note

This toolkit was informed by CIIS 2024 research on Black immigrant employment barriers in Canada, including findings related to employer resource gaps, workplace culture guidance, employer accountability, mentorship, and retention support.

Official legal and workplace health references used include Ontario guidance on workplace harassment and the Occupational Health and Safety Act; Ontario Human Rights Commission guidance on the Ontario Human Rights Code, discrimination, harassment, and accommodation; Government of Canada guidance on psychological health and safety in the workplace; the Mental Health Commission of Canada National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace; the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety resources on workplace bullying, violence, harassment, and psychosocial health; and Canadian Human Rights Commission guidance for federally regulated employers on harassment and violence.

Employers should confirm jurisdiction-specific requirements before applying legal or workplace safety guidance. This toolkit is intended as practical HR guidance, not legal advice.