



# INCLUSION: THE NEW LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

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How Emphasis on Inclusion Is Changing the Way We Lead—and Communicate



Quantified Communications

By Noah Zandan

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*As a focus on diversity reshapes the business landscape, leaders must develop a new set of skills in order to keep their organizations ahead of the curve. What does inclusive leadership look like, and how can today's leaders learn to foster—and thrive in—increasingly diverse environments?*

In recent months, the buzz about diversity and inclusion in the workplace has grown to a roar, with more and more research and thought leadership being published on the subject and more and more of our leaders making a commitment to inclusion. However, there's one piece that seems to be missing: how to be a more inclusive communicator.

As experts in the field of leadership communication, the research team at Quantified was interested in learning how leading executives are communicating their commitment to inclusion in an increasingly diverse business world. We used our proprietary communication analytics platform and benchmarking database to evaluate how leaders demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity through communication, and we found three surprising insights as to how and when leaders use inclusive language.

- 1. Despite the emphasis on inclusion, very few leaders have actually developed an inclusive communication style**
- 2. Men use 8 percent more inclusive language than women**
- 3. Interviews are the least inclusive communication setting**

In this white paper, we will provide a broad examination of the emerging style of inclusive leadership, then go into detail about Quantified Communications' findings on the use of inclusive language. Finally, we will offer a few recommendations for executives wishing to use communication to signal their commitment to inclusion.

## The New Leadership Imperative

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***“By working together toward diversity and inclusion within our workplaces, industries, and broader business community, we can cultivate meaningful change for our society.”***

— [CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion](#)

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In 2017, led by PwC’s US Chairman, Tim Ryan, 175 CEOs launched the [CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion](#), pledging their commitment to advance diversity and inclusion within the workplace. Today, more than 450 CEOs of the world’s leading companies—including the leaders at powerhouses such as Cisco, Morgan Stanley, Target, and Walmart—have committed to creating a safe workplace environment for dialog, addressing and mitigating unconscious bias, and supporting other companies’ efforts by sharing both best practices and tough lessons learned.

This initiative is representative of a broader shift that has taken place in the global business landscape in recent years. As markets have become more global, customers have become more selective in the products and services they consume, and workforce demographics have evolved, diversity and inclusion have become a critical strategic focal point for organizations of all sizes and across every industry.

### What, Exactly, Is Meant by “Inclusion”?

As with any topic of this magnitude, there are many different ways to look at it.

[One recent study](#) from Deloitte and the Billie Jean King Leadership initiative shows that, while baby boomers and gen-Xers traditionally approach inclusion as a legal imperative to treat individuals fairly regardless of demographic differences, millennials view the concept as the fostering of a collaborative environment that embraces differing ideas and perspectives for the good of the business. Meg Bolger articulates the latter attitude in a [General Assembly](#) article:

**“Inclusion is about folks with different identities feeling and/or being valued, leveraged, and welcomed within a given setting.”**

And one respondent to [Deloitte’s 2016 study on inclusive leadership](#) said, “Fundamentally, inclusion is a principle that anybody who is good enough to be employed within the team is capable of becoming a leader and developing to the best of their potential.

The semantics may vary, but if we boil it down, inclusion refers to the principle that, regardless of background, viewpoints, or beliefs, every team member’s contributions (or every customer’s or stakeholder’s) are valued and worthy of respect.

## The Business Case for Inclusion

While many would argue (and, frankly, we'd agree) that the case for inclusion isn't so much about the business as about human values and decency, research has shown time and again that a focus on diversity and inclusion leads to countless benefits for a business's productivity, morale, and bottom line.

- [Stanford Graduate School of Business](#) sociologist Martin Ruef analyzed the social networks of 766 entrepreneurs, and he found that Entrepreneurs who spend more time with a diverse network are three times more likely to innovate than entrepreneurs stuck within a uniform network.
- [The Center for Talent Innovation](#) found that employees at diverse organizations are 45 percent likelier to report that their firm's market share grew over the previous year and 70 percent likelier to report that the firm captured a new market.
- [A recent McKinsey report](#) shows that companies in the top 25 percent for ethnic diversity are 35 percent more likely to have financial returns above the national industry median.
- [Google's two-year study on team performance](#) found the common element among the highest-performing teams was the psychological safety that comes from open-minded collaboration and acceptance of disparate perspectives and viewpoints.

Of course, many of these results are likely driven by the effect inclusive corporate cultures have on the individuals working within or alongside the organizations. Liz Guthridge, a communication expert here at Quantified Communications, [has written on the effects inclusion](#)—or lack thereof—can have on individual performance:

*Our brains react intensely to social situations, especially feelings of social inclusion and exclusion. Being part of a group makes us feel better. And when we feel included, supported and respected, we perform better.*

*But when we feel excluded, the reverse happens. Our work performance can suffer: we can get sick, either physically, mentally or both, and our relationships with work colleagues, friends and family can suffer.*

Human empathy aside, it's easy to imagine the negative effects on an organization when employees who feel excluded lose all motivation and productivity—or when potential customers, investors, or community stakeholders don't feel included and therefore decide to take their time and resources elsewhere.

The market demands and the business advantages are clear: leaders who want to help their organizations achieve success must embrace inclusion as a leadership imperative.

## How Leaders Use Communication to Signal Their Commitment to Inclusion

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So what can today's leaders do to foster inclusivity? In a recent report entitled "[The Six Signature Traits of Inclusive Leadership](#)," Deloitte concludes that inclusive leaders are committed to not only valuing but also encouraging diverse viewpoints, recognizing and combatting subconscious biases, and fostering collaborative environments in which participants are comfortable revealing their own shortcomings in order to invite new perspectives.

Many leaders today emphasize that they value inclusion, and in many cases, their actions support their claims; we see them embracing the six principles of inclusive leadership.

**However, we also see communication patterns that signal exclusion, even in the midst of discussions about inclusivity.**

Why is that? According to Quantified communication expert Liz Guthridge, many leaders (and especially those who are stronger analytical thinkers than social thinkers) simply aren't aware of the extent to which their language, body language, and nonverbal cues send signals that "You don't belong in this group. We don't see you. We don't want to hear from you. You're not important to us."

For example, consider speakers who refer to "mankind" and unintentionally exclude women, or ask audiences to "think back to sixty years ago," alienating any audience members younger than that. These seem like innocuous phrases, and they certainly may not be intended to leave anyone out, but the reality is that our brains are wired to look for threats. (That's why, when we look out at a crowd, [we're likely to zero in on the one angry face](#), even if everyone else looks happy.) So even if our audience members don't consciously notice it, when we use exclusionary language—no matter how innocently—they're likely to begin to feel like they don't belong. As a result, at best, they disengage. At worst, they turn on us.

### What Does Inclusive Language Look Like?

Research has demonstrated that inclusive language references group cohesiveness. It shows that the people in the room are unified, assuring audience members that the message belongs as much to them as to the people sitting next to them.

So what does that look like, exactly? Here are a few phrases you might expect to hear in a presentation. We've written them out two different ways—once with inclusive language and once without.

Non-inclusive	Inclusive
"I am excited to celebrate many great achievements from the last quarter."	"We've made many great achievements in the last quarter, and we should all be excited to celebrate."
"The <i>man</i> power in this organization is just astounding."	"The talent <i>you all</i> bring to this organization is just astounding."
" <i>Some of you will be too young</i> to remember, this, but..."	"There was a time when..."

Though none of the phrases in the first column is explicitly, intentionally exclusive, each alienates certain members of the audience. In the first, the speaker appears to be keeping the credit (and the celebration) for himself. In the second, the use of the common term “manpower” subconsciously excludes women. In the third, the speaker implies that the following story won’t be relevant to anyone under a certain age, inviting younger audience members to tune out. But small modifications to each phrase make them inclusive of everyone listening—and increase the chances the entire audience will remain engaged with and supportive of the speaker’s message.

### **Let’s look at a couple of real-world examples:**

In his keynote introducing Oculus 3, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg starts by explicitly sharing his goal with his audience, and he goes on to acknowledge how their own beliefs and desires align with his message. In doing so, he engages listeners by actively including them—and their directly held beliefs—in the conversation.

*Now, we all share this big goal together. We're here to make virtual reality the next major computing platform. And in Facebook, this is something that we're really committed to. You know, I'm an engineer and I think a key part of the engineering mindset is this hope and this belief that you can take any system that's out there and make it much, much better than it is today. And as I look out today, I see a lot of people who share this engineering mindset, and we all know where we want to improve and where we want virtual reality to eventually get. Right?*

And in his 2015 election victory speech, Justin Trudeau is careful to express his gratitude and respect not only for his own supporters but also for the opposing party, and by ensuring his message carries the tone of “we” rather than “us versus them,” he forges a sense of community in an otherwise divisive situation.

*Now I want to take a moment to speak about my colleagues across the aisle. Tonight, I received phone calls from all of them, including from Mr. Harper. Stephen Harper has served this country for a decade, and as with anyone who has devoted their life to this country, we thank him for his service.*

*Now over the course of this campaign, I had the opportunity to have a couple of brief personal conversations with him about our families. It reminded me of the extraordinary and unique sacrifices that are made by anybody who serves this country at the highest levels, and I want to remind everyone, as I've said many times over the course of this campaign: Conservatives are not our enemies; they're our neighbors. Leadership is about bringing people of all different perspectives together.*

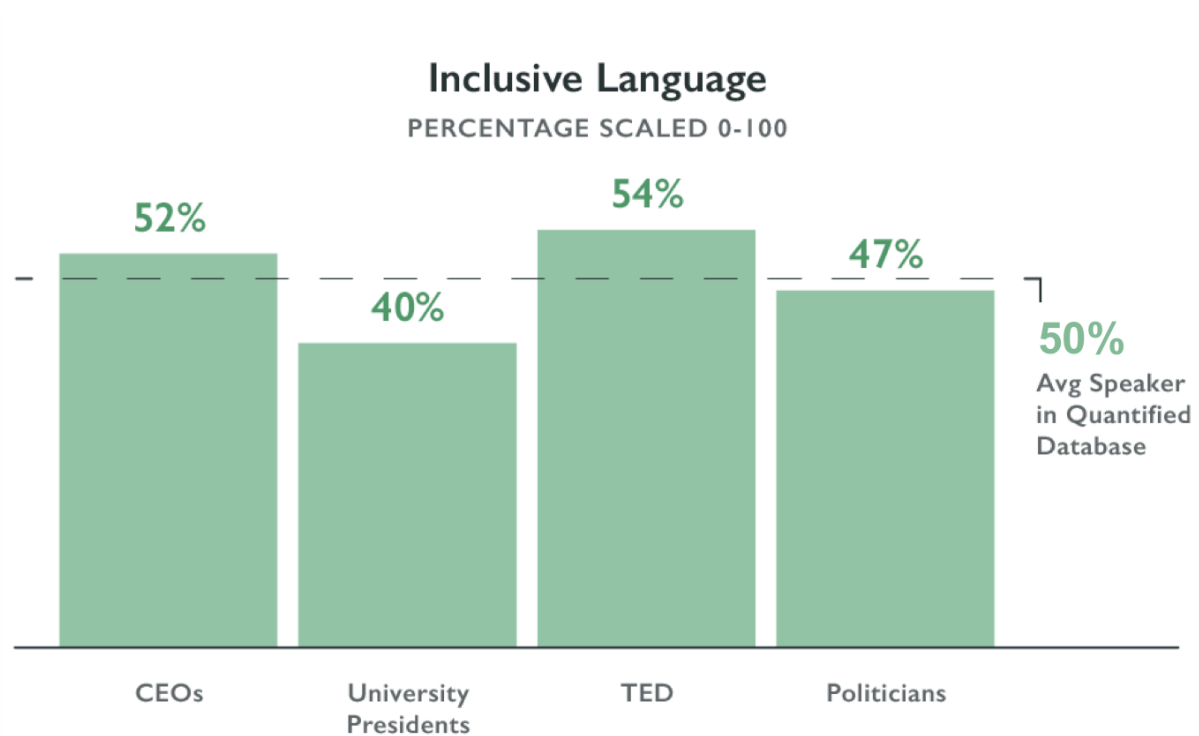
### **How Do Leaders Use Inclusive Language Today?**

To get a sense of how today’s leaders use inclusive language, we used our proprietary communication analytics platform, which contains millions of data points on the communication patterns of leaders and professionals across every industry around the globe, and we found three fascinating patterns around the use of inclusive language by our corporate and political leaders.

## 1. Despite the emphasis on inclusion, very few leaders have actually developed an inclusive communication style.

No matter how we cut the data, one thing became clear over and over again: today's leaders aren't using enough inclusive language to support the claims they're making about valuing inclusivity in their fields.

We looked at trends in communication by CEOs, university presidents, and even TED speakers, and we found that none of these groups—who represent our most important corporate and cultural leaders—are using significantly more inclusive language than the average speaker in our database.

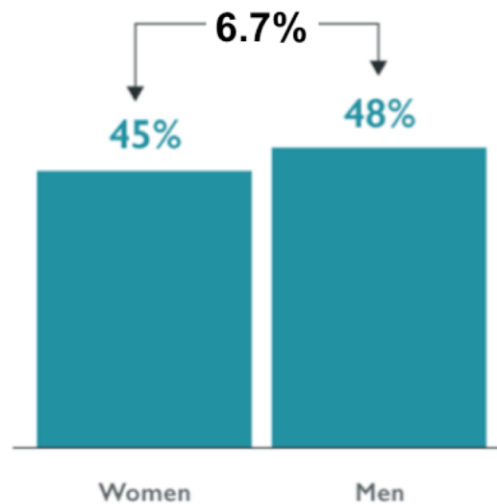


This was the finding that shocked us the most. Given how many of our corporate and political leaders have become activists for inclusion within their companies or constituencies, we were optimistic that we'd find more inclusive language across the board. But the low inclusion scores for these high-profile groups further emphasize just how engrained non-inclusive language is in our vocabularies and highlight the need for our next generation of inclusive leaders to home in on the language patterns that will support their core values.

## 2. Men Use 6.7% More Inclusive Language than Women

We looked at a random sample of 2,000 keynotes and interviews—1,000 from women and 1,000 from men—and found that men tend to use 6.7 percent more inclusive language than women.

**Inclusive Language by Gender**  
PERCENTAGE SCALED 0-100



Though the gap is small, we were surprised, having anticipated that women, who are known for their relationship-oriented communication, would score higher in inclusive language than their male counterparts. This could be an indicator that non-inclusive language is so engrained in our cultural vocabulary that even those who are often left out don't think to make a change, or it could be indicative of [the pressure women often feel to communicate like men](#) in order to be taken seriously in business.



### 3. Interviews Are the Least Inclusive Communication Setting

Finally, we compared speaker performance across six different settings in order to identify when our leaders are at their most and least inclusive.

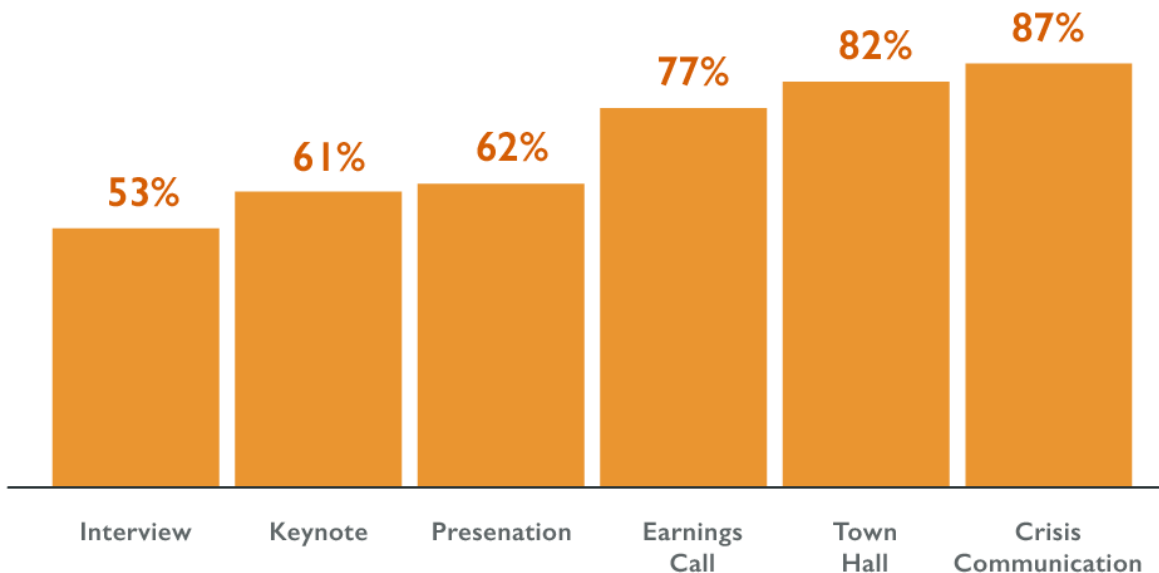
We found that speakers use the most inclusive language in crisis settings as they rally the troops. According to Guthridge, that's good news:

*It's great to see that speakers use the most inclusive language in crisis situations. That's when we look to leaders to explain how they're keeping employees, customers, family members, and others safe, calm, and informed. There's always a chance of some crisis around the corner, and leaders need to step up and be the "consolers in chief" of everyone, not just the "in group."*

In contrast, we found the least inclusive language in interview settings. Guthridge suggests this is because, when leaders are being interviewed, their tendency is to sell themselves to the interviewer and the public—they're more focused on distinguishing themselves as charismatic, authoritative leaders than on being team players. However, it's important to remember that, if customers, employees, and other key stakeholders who see the interview feel alienated by the leader's language, they may begin to withdraw from active engagement with the company.

#### Inclusive Language by Communication Type

PERCENTAGE SCALED 0-100



## Recommendations: How to Engage and Inspire Teams by Using More Inclusive Language

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The number-one rule for any successful communication event is to know your audience. You'll need to find out the basic demographics, but you'll also need to get a clear understanding of their values, beliefs, and concerns. Only then can you truly tailor your presentation to make them feel included.

Once you've gotten to know your audience as well as you know yourself, here are three other ways to become a more inclusive communicator:

1. As you're speaking, look for ways to indicate that you acknowledge and value other perspectives, and affirm diverse contributions. "You may feel differently about this, but..."
2. Focus on language that fosters a sense of community and mutual ownership over goals and achievements, and avoid those common phrases that are accidentally exclusive. Use "we" language rather than "I" language, replace "man vs. machine" with "human vs. machine," and avoid alienating segments of your audience based on age or other demographics.
3. Stop talking once in a while, and listen. Guthridge points out one fake ask she hears all the time: speakers say, "We want to hear from you," and then fail to offer a Q&A session or any other opportunity for audience members to give feedback or ask questions. There's no quicker way to exclude listeners than by preventing them from participating.

## Conclusion

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It's a new age of inclusion and diversity in the business world (and, frankly, it's about time), and that necessitates a change in the way we approach leadership. Today's leaders need to value and promote diverse backgrounds, viewpoints, and perspectives, identify and combat unconscious bias, and learn to be a little more vulnerable about what they don't know. And they have to teach their teams to do the same.

We're witnessing countless leaders across many industries make a commitment to inclusivity, but at the same time, they're struggling to signal that commitment through their communication. And no matter how much leaders emphasize that they value inclusion, if their words don't support their message, audiences will be skeptical.

Here at Quantified, we applaud the steps our business world is taking to encourage diversity, and we encourage leaders who've made the commitment to foster inclusive corporate cultures to be sure their communication styles reflect their values.



# Want to learn more?

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