



LEAD
IDEAS
SKILLS

LEADING WITHOUT ASSUMPTIONS

A manager schedules a late-evening call assuming “everyone can make it.”

A team lead hesitates to assign a high-visibility project to a working mother because “she already has a lot going on.”

An employee stays silent in meetings and is quietly labelled disengaged.

Years ago, when I had just finished college and was interviewing for jobs, I made a statement which was the absolute definition of unconscious bias – I assumed that the manager was a male! When I was corrected, I was utterly shocked at myself! Why did I make that assumption?... That experience became a pivoting point, offering insights that reshaped my perspective.

None of these moments are usually driven by bad intent. They could be driven by consideration, bias and assumptions, which could be the invisible autopilot settings that set the tone for workplace culture.

In today’s APAC workplaces, a project team may include five generations, multiple languages, hybrid schedules, caregivers,

expatriates, neurodiverse employees, different genders, and colleagues from vastly different cultural contexts. Diversity is already in the room. Inclusion is whether everyone gets invited into the conversation.

Too often, managers lead with invisible shortcuts: assumptions about availability, communication styles, ambition, family responsibilities, being the “loudest”, or even “professionalism.” These assumptions can quietly influence opportunities, trust, and performance. Research from McKinsey & Company (2020)¹ found that 84% of employees reported experiencing workplace microaggressions, while employees who feel included are significantly more engaged and committed at work.

Inclusive leadership is not about memorising perfect terminology or leading from fear of “saying the wrong thing.” It is about curiosity over certainty. A good manager replaces assumptions with questions, flexibility, and consistent respect.





THE MANAGER'S PLAYBOOK

CHECK ASSUMPTIONS BEFORE MAKING DECISIONS

Avoid assigning opportunities based on perceived personal constraints. Instead of assuming a parent cannot travel or a junior employee is not ready to present, ask openly and fairly.

USE LANGUAGE THAT WIDENS PARTICIPATION

Small shifts matter. "What support would help you succeed?" lands differently from "Can you handle this?" Inclusive language creates psychological safety without making conversations clinical or overly cautious.

BUILD FLEXIBILITY INTO TEAM NORMS

In APAC teams spanning geographies and cultures, flexibility is often the difference between inclusion and silent disengagement. Rotate meeting times, respect religious and cultural observances, and avoid rewarding only those visible online late at night.

PRACTICE VISIBLE ALLYSHIP

Allyship is not performative theatre with corporate confetti. It is simple, consistent action: correcting interruptions in meetings, crediting ideas accurately, and speaking up when bias appears.

DO'S & DON'TS FOR MANAGERS

DO

- Ask rather than assume.
- Encourage multiple communication styles.
- Normalize flexibility without stigma.
- Invite quieter voices into discussions.
- Appreciating uniqueness whilst also feeling a sense of social connectedness.
- Admit when you are still learning.

DON'T

- Confuse sameness with fairness.
- Expect employees to educate everyone else.
- Reward presenteeism over outcomes.
- Use humour that relies on stereotypes.
- Treat DEI as an HR-only responsibility.



According to Deloitte Insights (2016)², inclusive leaders consistently demonstrate fairness, curiosity, and commitment to understanding individual differences. In practice, that leadership style creates something powerful: teams where people spend less energy masking who they are and more energy contributing meaningfully.

The future of leadership in APAC will not belong to managers who have every answer. It will belong to those willing to listen before they label.



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