INFLUENCER
AN OUTLOOK ON LEADERSHIP & CHANGE
HUMANdynamic

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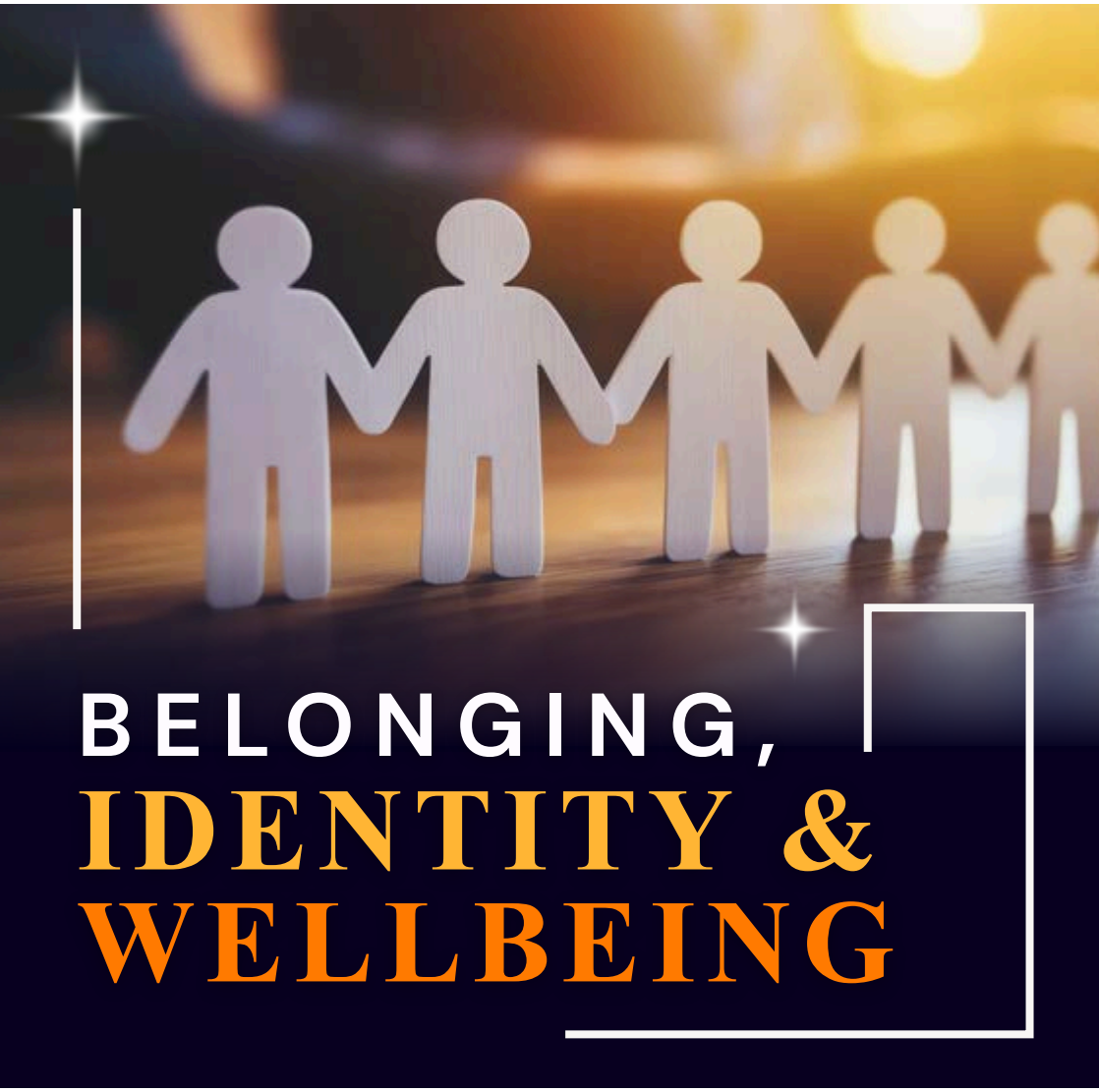

BELONGING, IDENTITY & WELLBEING

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AN OUTLOOK ON LEADERSHIP & CHANGE

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Carrying MORE THAN THE JOB

When an employee walks into a meeting room or a team lunch, what would they instinctively scan for? For employees who carry a minority identity, that glance often ends with a realization that they are "the only one". This solo status takes many forms, whether as the only woman in a technical department, the lone representative of an ethnic minority group on an executive team, a neurodivergent employee trying to navigate the rigid corporate structures, or the oldest person at a fast-paced startup.

By nature, people feel more at ease when surrounded by those who share similar life experiences or backgrounds. The absence of that familiar connection puts a minority employee on constant alert. Instead of focusing on their work, their mind keeps reading group dynamics, managing how their differences are perceived, and carefully self-editing every word before speaking. This internal filtering creates a heavy, invisible workload that drains energy and the creative capacity needed to perform their actual role.

Being the "only one" also triggers **the spotlight effect**, where every success is heavily examined, and so is every failure. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company's Women in the Workplace report (2018)[1] documented that employees in solo status are more heavily scrutinised than their peers, with their successes and failures placed under a microscope. They are also more likely to feel that their actions reflect positively or negatively on everyone like them, creating the constant anxiety that a single mistake will be viewed as confirmation of stereotypes about their group. Solo status also imposes a **burden of representation**: in discussions on diversity, hiring, or cultural matters, these employees are frequently expected to speak as the voice for their identity, regardless of their area of expertise or personal comfort.

To manage these compounding pressures, many minority employees resort to masking or code-switching to blend into the dominant corporate culture. While modifying behavioural traits, language styles, or even clothing choices may offer short-term protection from bias, the long-term cost is significant. McCluney et al. (2019)[2] found that constant code-switching depletes cognitive resources and hinders performance. Performing commonality with colleagues also reduces authentic self-expression and contributes to burnout.

What the Individual Can Do

1. Code-switch with conscious intention.

Treating code-switching as a deliberate professional choice. Maintaining a clear mental boundary between one's professional persona and authentic self prevents the emotional exhaustion caused by constant masking (McCluney et al., 2019)[2]. When adaptation is deployed as a controlled career tool rather than a daily performance, its toll diminishes considerably.

2. Deploy microinterventions to redirect subtle bias.

When facing an implicit microaggression, a minority employee's responses are not limited to silence or direct confrontation. Sue et al. (2019)[3] introduced the concept of microinterventions, a calibrated, low-risk responses designed to return the cognitive load to the speaker without breaking professional decorum. The following clarifying questions illustrate this approach:

- *"Could you help me understand what you meant by that comment?"*
- *"May I ask what led you to that assumption?"*

These questions protect personal boundaries, invite reflection from colleagues, and prevent the minority employee from absorbing the full emotional cost of the interaction alone.

3. Build a supportive ecosystem.

Minority employees should not rely solely on an immediate team that may lack the specific perspective to understand their day-to-day experience. Actively building connections through employee resource groups, cross-functional mentors, or external professional networks provides meaningful validation. Restoring a sense of belonging through genuine community is one of the most effective buffers against the burnout that identity concealment produces (Cortopassi, Quinn & Nicolas, 2024)[4].

4. Shed the proxy burden.

Professionals in solo status must consciously remind themselves that they are not the spokespeople for an entire demographic. Their mistakes do not define their community, and their successes belong entirely to them. Thompson and Sekaquaptewa (2002)[5] demonstrated that the performance decrements associated with solo status worsen when individuals internalise the belief that they represent everyone like them. When minority employees stop measuring their daily performance against the expectations of their entire group, they free up their mental energy for the work that matters.

Summary

Even though the hidden strain of being the "only one" could undermine professional focus, when minority employees choose when to adapt, establish boundaries against bias, and release the pressure to represent an entire demographic, they can enhance their personal effectiveness by protecting their mental energy, giving them the clarity and stamina to perform at their best.

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Sheau Huey Ho
Consultant, Solution Innovation & Excellence, Human Dynamic APAC

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.

Sonia Hillary
Consultant - Solution, Innovation & Excellence, Human Dynamic APAC

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FROM ALLYSHIP TO Everyday Action

Recently, I watched Devil Wears Prada 2. In the team meeting scenes, Miranda's secretary reminded her to refrain from using certain words that may be perceived negatively from a DEI perspective. Those scenes kept me thinking, is that the right approach to discuss matters at work? Where people become overly cautious about using words, or describing certain situations, or even raising issues, for fear that they might offend others. But in doing so, are we really protecting the rights of the minority groups, or are we "ticking the box" for DEI policies?

Inclusive cultures are not built merely through DEI policies. Instead, they result from consistent actions that make people feel safe, seen, and supported. The three phases of allyship outline that the first stage begins with awareness: a deep sense of self-awareness of our own biases and privileges and to recognize the inequalities that are present within the group or company; the second stage calls for action: using the platform we have to speak up against the discrimination and the third stage strengthens integration of inclusion habits into daily life, reflecting on our actions, workplace practices to ensure we are actively and genuinely inclusive. I will focus on the second stage in this article.

We can work on the action stage through the "3S" allyship model.

SEE
the Moment

- Slow down, take notice of exclusion in everyday situations:
  - Is someone repeatedly interrupted while speaking or presenting, as if his/her opinion does not matter?
  - Is a colleague being ignored or left out of the conversation?
  - Are jokes or comments creating discomfort, even if unintentionally?
  - Are assumptions being made about someone's caregiving responsibilities, gender, ethnicity, background, or abilities?

SPEAK
with Intention

Intervene, no matter how small your action may be, it still matters.

- Speak against the person interrupting, "I think he/she was still speaking, let's hear him/her out."
- Always include everyone in the conversation, ask "What do you think?"
- Correct those making assumptions and encourage them to check, when in doubt, always clarify.

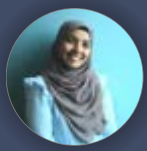
Remember, this is not a confrontational approach. It is being assertive when you notice any exclusion behaviors. This builds leadership trust and emotional safety.

SUPPORT
Consistently

Allyship is enhanced when support is consistently demonstrated.

- Where it is due, credit people publicly.
- When you notice a potential problem, check in privately.
- Advocate for them at platforms/avenues they are absent from.
- Create flexibility that protects family and wellbeing.

These practices will move allyship from only symbols or ideas into actual systems.



Sharmini Karim
Direktur Pelaksana - Malaysia, Singapura, Australia & Selandia Baru

REST LOOKS DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE

After a week of non-stop meetings, frequent interactions with clients and colleagues, what helps you recharge?

As an introvert myself, what restores me is simply having some quiet time alone without any interruption. A close friend of mine is the complete opposite. What helps her is connection. She would feel much energized after sharing a meal with friends, joining fun activities, or simply being surrounded by people. That's how she lets go of tension and feels lighter.

We often hear familiar suggestions for self-care such as getting more sleep, taking a break, going on holiday, exercising, practising mindfulness etc. They are all great tips. It's just that rest and recovery are deeply personal.

Our personalities, responsibilities, and daily demands all influence what recovery looks like. A parent caring for young children or ageing parents may just want a moment where they are not solving someone else's needs. Someone who is managing a health condition, chronic fatigue, or energy limitations that others may not see, may need more frequent, shorter breaks throughout the day, rather than back-to-back meetings or the pressure of being "constantly reachable".

That is why generic wellness advice does not always feel relevant to everyone. Before deciding what helps you recharge, it may be more important to understand what has actually been draining you. Once we understand that, recovery becomes much more intentional.

So, what can we do differently?

Xin Yuan Low
Director - Solution, Innovation & Excellence, Human Dynamic APAC

1 Be clearer about what is actually draining you

Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith, in her book Sacred Rest[1], offers a helpful reminder that rest is much broader than sleep alone. Her framework describes different forms of depletion, including physical, mental, emotional, social, sensory, creative, and spiritual fatigue, which explains why simply "taking a break" does not always leave us feeling restored. For example, if you feel tired even after resting, but your work has started to feel empty, repetitive, or disconnected from what matters to you, the depletion may be spiritual rather than physical. What you may need is not more sleep, but time to reconnect with meaning, purpose, or the bigger "why" behind what you do.

The clearer we are about what is draining us, the better we can recover intentionally.

2 Catch yourself when guilt takes over

Many of us stay online longer while working from home, reply to messages immediately, or say yes when we are already drained because we worry about how it might look to others. This kind of pressure can be exhausting in its own way. Catching yourself in those moments is often the first step towards changing the pattern. Then gently ask yourself: Is this truly necessary, or am I responding to guilt? Sometimes the healthier choice is giving yourself permission to step away, reply later, or simply choose rest without needing to justify it.

3 Protect small recovery moments before exhaustion builds up

Recovery does not always need to be big. Going on a holiday might help, but what often makes the bigger difference are the smaller habits we repeat consistently. Creating breathing space between meetings, taking lunch away from your screen, stepping out for a short walk, or setting a clearer log-off time can help prevent deeper depletion. What's more important is to choose those that work for you.

4 If you lead others, be mindful of the signals you send

Workplace culture is often built up by small everyday behaviours. You may send emails late at night simply because that's when you work best, but your team may read that as, "I should be online too." Small habits like using "schedule send," protecting focus time, or openly modelling healthy boundaries can make a bigger difference than we realise.

At the heart of it, recovery is personal. What drains us is not always obvious, and what helps us recharge will not look the same for everyone. Perhaps part of building a more inclusive workplace is making a little more room for those differences.

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What Happens After Pride Month Ends...

Pride Month often brings many visible gestures of support: rainbow logos, internal campaigns, social media posts, and celebration events. These efforts are important because they help create awareness and visibility. But after Pride Month ends, organizations should ask themselves an honest question: What happens next?

In many organizations, DEI efforts become more active only during certain awareness months. But sustainable diversity, equity, and inclusion is not only about celebrations or symbolic support. Real inclusion is reflected in everyday workplace experience whether employees feel respected, psychologically safe, heard, and accepted for who they are.

From our experience working with leaders and organizations, companies with stronger DEI maturity usually treat inclusion as part of culture-building, not only as an HR initiative or yearly campaign. It becomes part of leadership behaviour, communication, decision-making, and people practices.

For example, organizations may celebrate LGBTQ+ employees during Pride Month, but sustainable inclusion also means looking deeper into policies, hiring practices, leadership representation, employee benefits, and workplace culture throughout the year. Leaders also need the capability and confidence to manage uncomfortable conversations, unconscious bias, and microaggressions in a respectful and human way.

Another important point is this, inclusion work is not always highly visible. Sometimes, it can be seen in smaller daily moments. Who gets opportunities? Whose opinions are listened to during meetings? Can employees speak openly without fear of judgement? Do people feel they need to hide certain parts of themselves to fit in?

Today's employees are paying closer attention to these things. They are not only looking at what organizations say externally, but also whether the internal culture truly matches those messages. When inclusion is practised consistently, employees are more likely to feel trust, belonging, engagement, and connection to the organization.

Pride Month can be a meaningful starting point. But long-term inclusion is built in the months after the campaigns are over. Sustainable DEI requires continuous effort, leadership ownership, and willingness to move beyond symbolic gestures into real cultural change.

Reflection

- What inclusion efforts continue in your organization after awareness campaigns end?
- Do employees from diverse backgrounds feel psychologically safe throughout the year?
- How are leaders being encouraged or held accountable for inclusive behaviour?
- Is DEI part of everyday workplace culture, or mostly visible during special events and celebrations?

Shalini Gunarajan
Senior Consultant,
Human Dynamic
Malaysia