Promoting an Inclusive Workplace by Holding Space

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Law firms, companies, universities, and governmental entities are making strides in developing and modifying their diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, and most of these changes are considerable advancements over the previous policies. For those of us who have been laboring toward inclusion for decades, this is a welcome course of action. While there is still a long way to go, someone finally heard our shouts sounding over the rooftops of our workplaces.

On the other hand, policies are just a starting point. When not backed up by actual leadership practices, they are just meaningless words and sounding gongs. And herein lies a problem. "There are many different types of workplaces, with many different types of employees having many different working styles."[1] Good leadership practices must promote these new policies, not by eliminating these differences but by recognizing their value and giving them a voice.

We can do this by turning to the one thing that permeates all workplaces—employee relationships. Leaders must learn how to manage these relationships to increase inclusiveness and give voice to the differences brought by diverse employees. This article promotes a new theory of leadership practice designed to do just that. By holding space for each employee, leaders will allow employees from all walks of life to thrive, grow, and become participating members of any team.

A Thought Experiment

Think back to your high school physics class. Before Einstein, classical mechanics ruled the day. Space was thought of in Euclidean terms as having three dimensions, and time was considered to be separate and distinct from space. Time flowed at a constant rate, it was thought, regardless of an observer's viewpoint.

Then a young patent clerk got involved in the physics game. Einstein revolutionized our understanding of space and time by combining the two into a single four-dimensional model, now known as spacetime. The consequences of his discovery—which we all know as the theory of relativity—were paradigm shifting. Most relevant to our purposes, Einstein introduced the idea that time is relative to the position of

an observer. In other words, there is no absolute frame of reference.

To visualize this concept, picture an astronaut taking a flash photo while standing exactly at the midpoint of a Falcon Heavy spaceship traveling to Mars. To the astronaut, the light from the flash will appear to proceed to the front and back of the spacecraft at the exact same speed, striking their respective

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points at the exact same time. Now picture a hypothetical observer standing on a stationary ship that happened to be alongside the Falcon Heavy at the exact moment the astronaut took the flash photo. To the observer standing still, the light will appear to travel toward the rear of the spacecraft more quickly than toward the front of the craft. This is because the rear of the Falcon Heavy is moving toward the point

where the photo was taken, while the front of the craft is moving away from that point. Because the light traveling to the back of the ship has a shorter distance to travel than the light traveling to the front, the ship's motion causes the flash of light to strike the ends of the ship at different times.

In other words, time and distance are relative to the positions of the astronaut and the observer. And although they differ, both observations are equally valid and equally important to our understanding of physics.

The Classical Model of Leadership

Like the classical model of science, the classical model of leadership is built around the idea that there is an absolute frame of reference. There is only one way to do things, this theory states, and that frame of reference is usually provided by the person who takes up the most space on a team.

We all have experience working with people who promote the classical model. They are usually the most extroverted, loud-talking personalities in the room. They assert their opinions by dominating, intimidating, and stepping on their colleagues, all in the name of "good business." They push their viewpoints by ignoring diverse opinions or by simply denying others the chance to discuss their ideas.

But the classical model isn't just limited to senior lawyers and businesspersons. Most of us have worked for junior partners who demand that their ideas be followed, whether or not they are fully informed. And who hasn't experienced a senior associate asserting her singularity with mandates such as "I don't want you talking about this case with the partner; only I will do that," or "You can come to the meeting with the client, but I will do all the talking."

These are only some ways adherents to the classical model grab space and deny opportunities in an attempt to assert a single frame of reference. The problem with this approach is that it takes many different kinds of people with many different backgrounds, and various personalities with multi-diverse ideas, "for businesses to thrive in the long-term. This is especially true for businesses seeking long-term success in a global and diverse market."[2]

We need to create and hold space for all employees to express their opinions if we want our businesses to thrive. And this is what the relativity model of leadership does.

The Relativity Model of Leadership

Like Einstein's theory of relativity, the relativity model of leadership recognizes that there are many different viewpoints on any single issue, and each viewpoint is valid and important to a complete understanding of an issue. This is especially important in globally focused and diverse workplaces, where employees come in multiple and far-reaching varieties.

If we glance around our workplaces, we will (or should) find differences everywhere we look. For example, some employees will be purpose driven, some will be principle driven, and others will be financially motivated. Many employees will be extroverts, others will be introverts, and some will be ambiverts (a balance of both). Some will be comfortable speaking the first thoughts

that come into their minds, while others will need to think long and hard about individual questions. More than a few employees will have cultural backgrounds that differ from the majority culture, regardless of their skin color, and others will come from familial backgrounds with different values and ethics. Hopefully a firm's employees include people from all ages, races, gender identities, and religions, as well as those with neurotypical and neurodiverse characteristics.

Each of these employees bring to the table individual viewpoints, thoughts, and opinions that can contribute to a greater understanding of problems, issues, and projects. Just as in physics, the relativity model of leadership relies on these diverse viewpoints because they provide a broader understanding of the issues at hand and, in the business context, they provide a larger body of insights needed to develop resolutions.

But these diverse viewpoints can't be heard if all employees are not given space to express

their views. This raises a question: how do we successfully provide a platform for employees to express their thoughts?

Holding Space for All Employees

Holding space is a leadership practice that gives all employees a voice, regardless of their backgrounds, personalities, gender identities, or level of experience. The concept is widely used in psychology and therapy circles, but when adapted to the workplace, it fosters innovative practices and a more inclusive environment.

By holding space, leaders create workplace cultures that promote listening over talking, that value respect over dominance, and that embrace the relativity theory of leadership. Holding space isn't just a psychological theory designed to make employees "feel" more valued. It's a vital leadership practice for globally focused firms and businesses because it rejects the concept of an absolute frame of reference, recognizes the need for diverse insights to problem solving,

and promotes the importance of divergent viewpoints to a complete understanding of the issues.

But holding space is difficult for those leaders who have risen to the top by asserting themselves and watching out for their own best good. The practice requires constant vigilance until the habit is developed. Here are some activities that can help leaders begin to hold space.

Be Present to All Employees

People naturally gravitate toward individuals with similar cultures and personalities. Thus, many leaders will give preferential treatment to their friends and favorite coworkers, perpetuating the leader's style, ideas, and biases. But if you choose to be a leader, you should be a good leader to all employees. You shouldn't have inner circles, elite teams, and go-to employees, thereby marginalizing those outside the in-crowd. Every employee is an important part of the team, and it is the leader's job to be present for all of them.

The recent pandemic has placed this issue on the front burner. A common complaint from employees is that they feel isolated. They are aware that their supervisors are communicating with certain employees, but others can go weeks without hearing from their bosses in a meaningful way. The message these leaders send is that some employees don't matter, their opinions are irrelevant, and their insights are not valuable.

Good leaders reach out to each employee equally. If you don't want to be present to everyone on your team, don't be a leader!

Be Attentive When Employees Speak

Leaders should pay attention when their employees are talking. The primary activity in paying attention is being quiet and listening. This can be hard, especially for extroverts. But good leaders see the value in allowing others to fully express their thoughts and ideas, and they make sure that others do the same. When colleagues interrupt one another, they send the message that the other's opinion is not valuable.

Good leaders also use nonverbal clues to show they are listening, such as making eye contact, nodding, leaning forward, and avoiding distractions. And they apply these active listening techniques uniformly. A supervisor who listens attentively to one employee, but then proceeds to look at his phone or out the window when another has the floor, sends a powerful message about whose thoughts and opinions he does (and does not) value.

Be Self-Appropriative

It's easy for leaders to think they are the best lawyers in the room. They assume that because they are leaders, they are the best at analysis, strategy, tactics, oral argument, witness examination, and so on. But good leadership requires a set of tools wholly divorced from legal or business skills. To hold space for employees, good leaders must set aside their egos and sense of self-importance and recognize the value that others bring to the team. This is not easy to do.

Setting aside one's ego requires leaders to be self-appropriative. Leaders must ask questions about themselves, gain insights, and make critical judgments about their own skills, biases, and areas that need improvement. Only in doing so will leaders gain a better understanding of where they fit in the context of their team's skill sets. And these insights will help them better appreciate the diversity of skill sets in their employees and hold space for these employees.

Be Humble

Leaders often want to have all the answers, or at least convince others that they do. It can be challenging to admit—even to ourselves—that we are inadequate at any given task. Recognizing that someone is a better writer, better at strategy and tactics, better with opposing counsel, or better at long-term thinking requires confidence

to admit that we ourselves have areas where we can improve. This requires humility.

One way to practice humility is to approach tasks and challenges with a beginner's mind, to see things as a novice would. Instead of working to fix the problem right away, sit back and try to see it with fresh eyes, as a first-year in the field would do. How would a novice conceptualize the problem and attempt to resolve it? Going through this practice can help leaders slow down, change their perspective and orientation, and accept that there are many ways to perceive, approach, and solve problems and challenges.

Hold Tasks and Give Credit

Holding space does not just mean listening when others talk. It also requires holding tasks for others and giving credit.

We have all worked with leaders who hide information, hoard key data, maneuver to be the sole client contact, dash off important emails ahead of the person who did all the work, and otherwise grab credit for their employees' work. This is the opposite of holding space, and it leads to employees who don't feel invested in the work and who lack a sense of belonging in the team or organization.

To foster an ownership mentality within the organization, leaders should include their employees in client contacts, encourage associates to speak up, ensure opportunities for others to send key emails, and guarantee open access to all information. In other words, leaders should give space, not take it.

Create an Atmosphere of Openness

Holding space requires a culture of openness where employees are valued and feel safe providing their ideas and sharing their thoughts, and this can only happen if employees trust their supervisors. To foster trust, leaders should work at connecting with employees, not only about their work but also about shared interests. Leaders who make a point to get to know their employees and invite them into discussion foster good relationships. Leaders who fail to do this create workplaces where employees keep their ideas and insights hidden and team collaboration is anemic.

Conclusion

Homogeneity will kill a project and destroy a firm. If the only ideas allowed around the table are those promoted by the leader, new ideas will never be advanced. If the only solutions considered are those presented by the leader in previous projects, fresh insights can't manifest to provide new solutions. But by adhering to the relativity theory of leadership and holding space for all employees, we can generate creativity and innovation in problem solving, thereby expanding and growing our firms and businesses. **CL**

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1. Ridge, "Managing Relational Space in a Diverse Workplace," 48 *Colo. Law.* 8 (Oct. 2019).
2. *Id.* at 9.