

# Inclusive Leadership Across Cultures:

## Practical Patterns for Global Engineering Teams

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# Key Concepts of Inclusive Leadership

## Definition and Importance



Inclusive leadership is the practice of valuing diverse perspectives and fostering a sense of belonging, which is essential for creating innovative and high-performing teams. It promotes equity and respect among all individuals.

## Benefits in a Global Context



In a global context, inclusive leadership enhances collaboration and adaptability across cultures, leading to improved problem-solving, greater market reach, and increased employee satisfaction, thereby driving organizational success.

# 3 Common cross-cultural failure modes

## 1. Silence vs Disagreement

How to surface dissent without forcing confrontation.

## 2. Hierarchy vs challenge

How to invite “safe pushback” and avoid decision-by-deference.

## 3. Direct vs indirect feedback

How to give clarity without disrespect, and how to receive feedback without defensiveness.

# 1) Silence vs

## Disagreement

### What it looks like (in engineering teams)

- **False consensus** - apparent agreement without genuine commitment. Meetings are “smooth” and fast... but decisions later get quietly ignored or overlooked.
- **Shadow dissent** - unspoken opposition expressed through inaction. People agree in the meeting room but then raise concerns outside the meeting rooms, in DMs, side chats, or after the deadline slips.

# 1) Silence vs Disagreement

ctd

- **Differed Disagreement** - objections emerge after the decision point. “Any questions?” is met with silence, yet outcome shows surprise objections.
- **Silent cohorts** — specific groups consistently remain quiet while others almost never contribute during meetings.

# Why it happens (the cultural + structural drivers)

01

**Cultural Difference:** Some cultures perceive public disagreement as disrespectful, immature or face-threatening.

02

**Language Barrier:** First, Second etc language barrier

03

**Fluency bias:** Articulate speakers are perceived as more credible or prepared. reward the most fluent/most senior/most confident

## Why it happens (the cultural + structural drivers)

- 04 **Diplomatic Signalling** — Disagreement is intentionally understated to preserve harmony.
- 05 **Psychological safety gap** — Some groups feel significantly less safe speaking up. junior staff, new joiners, minorities, contractors, or offshore teams feel higher risk.

# How to fix it

## **Mechanism A:**

Separate thinking, suggesting, contributions from talking.

Pre-reads + written input before meetings.

Use async doc comments or a form to collect dissent privately. Async doc comments" means: people add their input in writing, on their own time, directly inside a shared document (instead of having to speak up live in a meetings)

## **Mechanism B:**

Make dissent a role, not a personality.

Explicitly reward dissent:

“Your job is to find what we’re not seeing.”

- Assign a rotating “risk caller / red team” role.

Leader line · “Today, Jordan is our red-team.

Their job is to disagree on purpose so we pressure-test this.”

# How to fix it

## **Mechanism C:**

Use structured rounds (equal airtime).

Do a quick “round” where each person suggests or answers one narrow question (30–60 seconds).

- Or use chat-first: everyone types their view, then speak.

## **Mechanism D:**

Provide a low-friction “disagree channel”. A single phrase people can use without drama:

- 1 “I have a concern.”
- 2 “I am not fully aligned yet.”
- 3 “Can we pressure-test this?” · Give an alternative to public disagreement: “If you’d rather, send concerns anonymously to the doc by 5pm.”

## 2) Hierarchy vs Challenge

### What it looks like:

- People often defer to the most senior person, the loudest voice.

### Why it Happens:

Some cultures emphasize respect through deference;

### What it Costs:

Decision-by-deference leads to mediocre architecture choices and higher operational risk.

# How to fix it – “invite safe pushback”

## **Mechanism**

### **A:**

Speak last (or delay your opinion).

- Ask for input first, especially from quieter or more junior folks.
- Use: “I’ll share my view after hearing at least two alternatives.”

## **Mechanism**

### **B:**

Make dissenting view/challenge an explicit expectation.

- Add/encourage a norm: “Disagree with ideas, not people.”
- Leaders say out loud: “I expect you to make your inputs/challenge this.”

## **Mechanism**

### **C:**

Add a “How to disagree” step in decisions

every decision recap includes:

- “How can someone raise a concern after this meeting?”
- “What evidence would trigger revisiting this?”

This protects juniors: they can disagree without derailing or being seen as insubordinate.

# How to fix it – “invite safe pushback”

## Mechanism

### D:

Use “bounded pushback” formats. People often need a safe container to disagree.

Examples:

- Options format: “Give me 2 alternatives + tradeoffs.”
- Risk format: “Name the risk and propose mitigation.”
  - Disagree-and-commit format: “State your concern, record it, then commit after decision.”

## Mechanism

### E:

Build “pushback ladders”  
A pushback ladder gives culturally-respectful ways to challenge, increasing intensity only as needed:

1. Clarifying: “Can you help me understand the goal here?”
2. Evidence: “What data led us to this conclusion?”
3. Alternative: “Could we compare with option B for latency/cost?”

## Mechanism

### F:

Repair script when hierarchy shuts down challenge  
“I think my seniority may be compressing the room. I am going to pause and ask for risks and alternatives in writing. I’ll also ask two people to argue the opposite view so we can stress-test this.”

### 3) Direct vs Indirect Feedback

#### What it looks like:

Direct communicators think: "Why are they being evasive?"

Just say it."

- Indirect

communicators think: "Why are they being harsh/disrespectful?"

#### Why it Happens:

Low-context vs high-context norms: some cultures value clarity; others value harmony/face.

Different meanings of the same phrases:

"Interesting" / "We'll see" / "That's one way" can mean "no."

#### What it Costs:

- Confusion about expectations; repeated rework.
- Hidden resentment and disengagement.
  - People managers spend more time "decoding" than coaching.

# How to fix it

## Mechanism

### A:

Agree on a shared feedback "protocol" A team norm can bridge cultures:

- Feedback is about work, tied to impact, with a next step.

Separate intent and impact.

- Choose channel: public praise, private critique.

## Mechanism

### B:

#### Simple template

- Observation: "In the PR, the tests are missing for X."
- Impact: "This increases regression risk and slows review."
- Request: "Please add tests for X and Y before merge."
- Support: "If you want, I can pair for 20 mins."

## Mechanism

### C:

#### Use "warm clarity"

You don't have to be vague to be kind. You can be clear and respectful.

Warm clarity phrases

- "I'm saying this directly because I want you to succeed here."
- "This is about the work, not you."

# How to fix it

## **Mechanism**

### **D:**

For indirect cultures—  
make the signal unambiguous  
If you tend to be indirect, add  
a clear marker:

- “To be explicit: I don’t think  
we should ship  
this as-is.”
- “My recommendation is no  
until we address X.”

This prevents accidental  
ambiguity.

## **Mechanism**

### **E:**

Receiving feedback without  
defensiveness (the “3-step”)

1. Acknowledge: “Thanks for  
telling me.”
2. Clarify: “Can you share an  
example so I understand?”
3. Commit: “Here’s what I’ll  
change by Friday.”

Receiver script

- “I’m feeling defensive, so  
I’m going to pause.”

## **Mechanism**

### **F:**

Repair script after a cultural  
misread. · “I think we may  
have a style mismatch. My  
intent was clarity, but I may  
have landed as harsh. Can we  
reset? What feedback style  
works best for you, and how  
should we handle this going  
forward?”

# Putting it together: the meta-pattern

All three failure modes share the same core fix: Turn hidden norms into explicit operating agreements.



- Make disagreement safe by design (not personality).
- Make challenge a responsibility (not rebellion).
- Make feedback a shared protocol (not a culture clash).





# Thanks for listening!

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