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**Inclusion Starts with 'I'? The Missing Ingredient in Leading Change  
The Case of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper examines how organizations can overcome cultural barriers and support leaders in creating more inclusive workplaces.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Drawing from personal experience as a senior leader within the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the author provides a brief overview of the organization's approach to creating a more diverse and inclusive workplace, including her role in overseeing the change effort. The author then describes how certain aspects of the RCMP culture manifested in bias against others, and contributed to leaders' efforts to cover up important parts of their identity to fit in. Finally, the author presents self-acceptance and personal vulnerability as building blocks for a more inclusive style of leadership.

**Findings** – The findings of this paper suggest that diversity and inclusion efforts that fail to address harmful aspects of organizational culture are unlikely to be successful. The findings also suggest that this barrier may be overcome through a greater understanding of the cultural norms that are most valued, of practising inclusion at three different levels, starting with the individual, and of supporting leaders to begin the practice of inclusion, from the inside out.

**Originality/value** – This paper makes an important contribution to the field of organization development by providing a brief snapshot of one leader's experience in attempting to create a more diverse and inclusive workplace, and makes recommendations for how the challenges presented might be overcome.

**Keywords:** leadership development; diversity; inclusion; organizational change and learning

## **Inclusion Starts with ‘I’? The Missing Ingredient in Leadership The Case of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)**

In recent years, organization development experts have recognized that diversity alone is insufficient to create the conditions in which the diverse experiences and talents of individuals can be fully leveraged in the workplace. As such, diversity initiatives have increasingly shifted from an approach that is largely about counting people to one that considers diversity + inclusion (Ferdman, 2014). While these two terms are often mixed together and assumed to be the same thing, they are quite different. Whereas diversity refers to the differences among people, inclusion is about making these differences count.

To facilitate workplace inclusion, diversity and inclusion efforts have frequently focused on the role of leaders, namely, to promote a more open and welcoming environment in which the diverse identities of individuals are valued and appreciated for what they bring to the team (Randel et al., 2018). However, as the following case demonstrates, this may be easier said than done due to the presence of significant internal barriers, such as organizational culture, that create expectations for behaviors.

### **Diversity, inclusion and the police**

In late 2011, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) became the subject of serious allegations of gender discrimination and harassment (including sexual harassment) from current and former serving female police officers. Following internal and external pressure, an action plan was developed to address two primary areas: organizational culture and the composition of the workforce. Due to past experiences leading various organizational change efforts, I was tasked to oversee the implementation of this plan, which focused on traditional policies and practices related to recruitment, training, career development, mentoring, providing work-life flexibility, and so on for women and other marginalized groups.

## **Culture as a barrier to inclusion**

The male-dominated environment of policing, together with a focus physical strength and emotional self-regulation, has meant that police work is often associated with men and not women. Therefore, female officers may downplay their femininity to fit in. For example, it was not uncommon for female officers to go out of their way to demonstrate toughness, such as hiding their emotions, to avoid associating with other female officers, or to join in on jokes about women who were struggling at work.

Having become proficient at ‘blending in’, promoting an action plan that focused primarily on women was much more difficult than expected, and not something I had considered when I accepted the role. Initially, I tended to marginalize the focus on gender. I also questioned the significance of issues associated with women working in a hyper-masculine occupation. What’s more, when it came time to assume the role as co-chair for a national women’s advisory committee, this proved to be a ‘bridge too far’. I resigned from the role after little more than a month. Worse still, during the process to hire a research assistant for my team, I initially overlooked a star candidate because he was soft spoken and shy – meaning he was not sufficiently masculine enough.

## **The act of covering**

It was only after other members began to share their stories, did I realize that I had spent a significant part of my professional life denying a fundamental part of my identity (i.e., being a woman). While this was a profound insight on its own, the more significant realization was that the socialization process within the RCMP had created an unconscious bias that caused me to judge others against an ideal image of masculinity. The ultimate irony was that I was charged with helping to create a more welcoming environment for women, yet I could not accept my own

female identity nor seemingly could I accept ‘femininity’ in others. Conversations with senior colleagues soon confirmed that the act of covering was more pervasive than expected. For instance, other senior leaders admitted they had covered up their sexuality, their physical and mental health, or even their commitment to family, all with the aim of being accepted by others.

The police organizational culture, with its focus on toughness and avoidance of anything deemed weak, had long conditioned leaders at all levels to consider personal vulnerability as a sign of weakness. Therefore, efforts were made by me and others to only show parts of ourselves at work out of fear of how those hidden parts would be perceived. In addition to the previous examples, this involved leaders holding back from sharing an unpopular opinion, asking for help (i.e., for post-traumatic stress), admitting a mistake, or standing up for themselves when they were bullied. In sum, the organizational culture presented a formidable barrier to inclusion and to organizational learning that was unlikely to be undone through a traditional approach to change.

### **The building block of inclusive Leadership**

Dr. Brené Brown, author of *Daring Greatly*, suggests that vulnerability is at the core of all emotions and feelings, yet too often feeling is confused with failing and emotion is confused as a liability. If organizational leaders are unable to be vulnerable, then it is difficult to create the conditions for workplace inclusion in which others can practice vulnerability and authenticity, and satisfy their need for belongingness (strong and healthy relationships with others). Thus, experts suggest that the practice of inclusion requires leaders to first look within and understand their own identities without feeling the need to compromise or cover up any of these important identities that make them who they are. In other words:

To include others effectively and wholeheartedly, we first have to include ourselves; when we acknowledge the diversity of experiences, interests, and values that exist within ourselves, we are better equipped to notice and recognize the diversity around us in a more generative manner. (Ferdman & Roberts, 2014, p. 146)

## **Getting to inclusion**

The RCMP experience highlights that efforts to promote diversity and inclusion do not operate in a vacuum. Organizational policies, practices, and culture can act as significant barriers to change. Further, when formal leaders are charged to enact a more inclusive leadership style, cultural norms that value certain identities over others can compel leaders to hide their authentic selves. In addition, when specific cultural norms are valorized and endorsed, they can lead to unconscious biases that manifest in harmful ways. Based on the foregoing, this paper presents recommendations to overcome barriers to workplace inclusion.

- For one, it is recommended that diversity and inclusion efforts incorporate a cultural audit to gain a better understanding of expected behavioural norms, and how people experience the workplace as a result. Ideally, in addition to individual interviews, this audit should also include observations of leaders in formal meetings and other settings to identify how leaders and other individuals relate to each other;
- Further, a review of organizational policies and practices, such as responses to harassment or bullying complaints and leader selection and development processes, can identify the behaviours that are tolerated and the types of performance that are supported and recognized, along with expectations of what it takes to get ahead;
- Additionally, efforts to create inclusion are likely to be more successful through a focus on each level of inclusion (that is the individual, team, and the organization), which involves outlining expectations for behaviour at all levels, establishing opportunities for knowledge and skill development, and creating mechanisms to both support and hold individuals accountable.

- Finally, and perhaps the most challenging activity, is for senior leaders to engage in dialogue about the practice of inclusion, beginning with how they might encourage vulnerability and authenticity in themselves. As this is likely to be a difficult exercise, professional expertise may be required to coach and support leaders through this process so that they can begin ‘modeling the way’ for others to follow.

## **Conclusion**

This paper draws from experiences within one police organization; however, many of the identified themes can be generalized to other organizational settings in which women are in the minority and/or emphasis is placed on physical toughness. This paper also demonstrates that leaders have a critical role in shaping organizational norms that promote openness and acceptance of the diverse identities that individuals bring to the workplace.

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