

**proudly queer/openly allied:  
how leadership drives  
LGBTQ+ inclusion at work**

# abstract

Do you know that the presence of leaders from the LGBTQ+ community is reflective of the organization's deep commitment to the diversity agenda? The community believes that this also helps in creating a culture of inclusion. When leaders consistently demonstrate their own support for the LGBTQ+ community and share their time for such initiatives, HR professionals' work of sensitizing employees and implementing initiatives becomes much easier. It is true that leaders lead and can make the real impact in the organization's commitment toward inclusion.



“If there are more people out in the senior leadership, that’s going to be very, very helpful for the ground level employees to start feeling safe. Being safe and feeling safe are two different things.” - Ruj, a 33 year old non binary/gay individual leading strategic planning and growth at Forage AI

This is a revealing statement made by one of the LGBTQ+ community members who participated in the recent Randstad research study, ‘[Inclusion Without Exception: Where India Inc. stands with respect to the LGBTQ+ community.](#)’ It points to the very significant role that community members see for leaders when it comes to inclusion - indeed, leadership is seen as an essential factor without which other organizational efforts are bound to struggle or even fail.

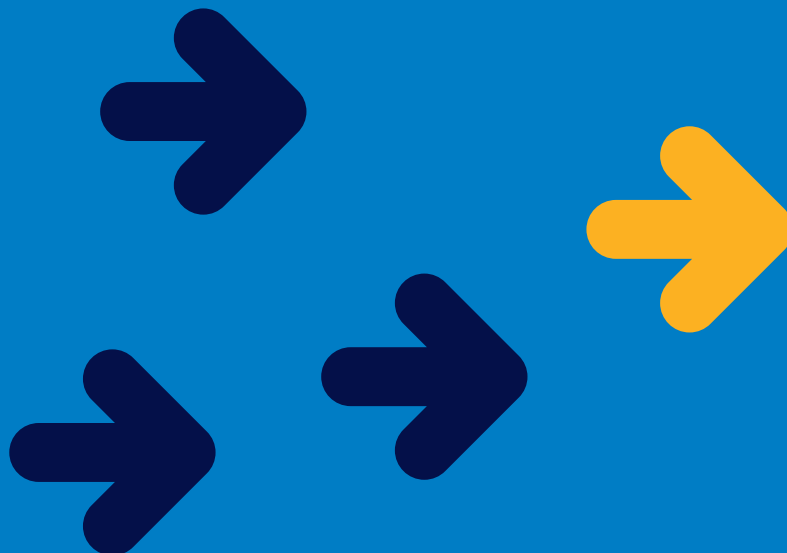
Human Resource (HR) and Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) leaders too highlight the role of leadership, albeit from a different perspective. Let’s look at how these two sets of people, LGBTQ+ employees and HR professionals, have a common need when it comes to the role of leaders..

## leaders define the culture

At a first level, the presence of leaders who are themselves part of the LGBTQ+ community sends a strong signal to others that the company is not just creating policies at a superficial level, but genuinely welcomes all people and encourages them to be their unique selves.

It provides enormous clarity on what the company’s culture is, without it having to be spelt out.

As Tanvi, a transwoman working for a financial services company says, “If there’s a leader who’s a part of the community, dresses the way he/she wants, then that opens up a completely different conversation. That is why I say you have to have leaders from the LGBTQIA+ community. When such leaders will open up on the dais, there will be a cultural change that follows it.”



Secondly, the presence of queer leaders also assures employees from the LGBTQ+ community that the organization is committed to such hiring at all levels, and not just at entry level to 'make up the diversity numbers.' Tanvi explains, There are only a few people that I know of and only one person who is openly gay. I honestly feel that it's still a problem. We are still counting diversity in numbers – that's a problem for me. We are not looking at diversity more holistically. The moment diversity becomes numbers, growth gets hampered. What I see happening is that if a 50-50 split is required between men and women, it happens at the lower levels within the organization instead of having it at all levels. Even today, there are only a few women at the leadership and higher levels. With LGBTQ+, there is even more bias. If you want to hire, don't hire for the sake of doing so. That is where I am struggling a little bit. A company is trying to show that it is inclusive, but hiring at a lower level. That doesn't work for me.

Some also feel that the complete absence of openly queer leaders explains why many team members continue to treat LGBTQ+ people as oddities or curiosities - in other words, the presence of such leaders helps in normalizing being queer. As Sanchit, a 26 year old queer MBA student from Mumbai says, "With famous people in leadership positions coming out/being queer, the stigma goes away. It really helps."

## explicit, consistent allyship matters

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What of leaders who may not be queer themselves but are explicitly and consistently supportive of the LGBTQ+ community? They play a big role too!

Vocal support from such leaders is seen as critical in many ways. It's not enough to be 'neutral'. As Shubham Bhatnagar, a 32-year-old gay man and a senior journalist in Delhi says, "Leaders behave as if the community does not exist." This leaves the field open for colleagues to be indifferent or even judgemental, and not take any effort towards examining their own biases.

On the other hand, supportive leadership sets the tone for what is expected from others. As Rene, a 34 year old gender fluid person working in sales in a Tech company says, "Role of leadership is important as everything cascades from the leadership only – what you talk, how you talk, what line not to cross etc."

In another important way too, leadership support helps.

While gender sensitization programs exist in many companies, they are often viewed as something to get through, a mandatory 'check box'. The visible support of leaders ensures that employees see such programs as worth spending their own time on.

Swapnil, a 28 year old bisexual software developer at Virtusa in Bangalore explains that leadership presence in such activities sets the tone for others' participation.

Given the widespread ignorance about the LGBTQ+ community and even homophobia, in the broader Indian context, such leaders give community members the freedom to come out in the workplace. Annith Infanta, a lesbian woman employed with a global MNC narrates how at a previous employment, she never thought of coming out. She says, "I didn't feel it was okay to be myself at work. I worked here for 2.5 years and I kept my personal and professional life separate. It was difficult for me to form connections." Later on, at her present employer, a leader's experience-sharing inspired her to talk about herself. Another positive impact is that such leaders also encourage others to become allies.



## leadership drives enforcement

Finally, LGBTQ+ community members also point to the presence of supportive leadership as being essential to enforce D&I policies on discrimination-free workplaces. Their support ensures that not only are employees trained and sensitized on appropriate behaviour, but inappropriate behaviour is also dealt with consistently. As Abhishek Ghosh, a queer person working in consulting in Mumbai puts it, “If someone discriminates against me, can I anonymously complain to the senior, and will they take it seriously? Will senior leaders support me? Will they understand, empathize, or act when needed and ensure it doesn’t happen again?”

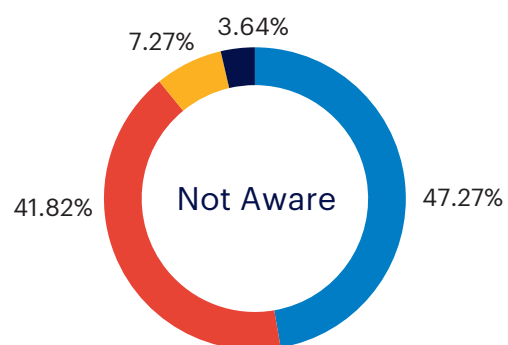
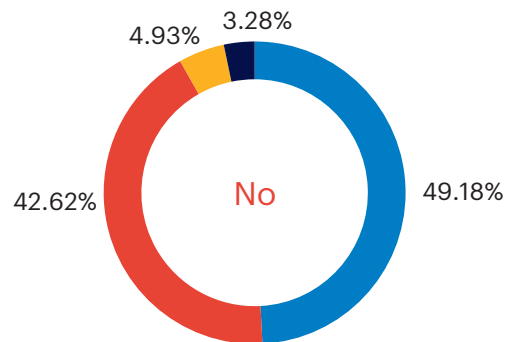
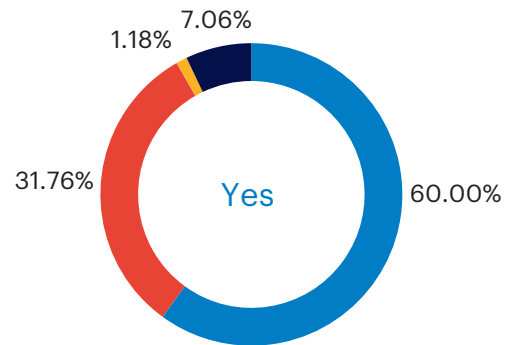
They also point out that leaders need to consult existing members of the community while designing inclusion initiatives, to ensure that their lived experiences are taken into account - otherwise, policies made in a vacuum or even just directly adopted from the Western context may not work in Indian workplaces.



## the spectrum of leadership support for HR teams

In an allied quantitative survey with 201 business leaders by Randstad, when asked if LGBTQ+ inclusion is a part of their organization’s business leaders goal, 42% responded saying ‘yes’. 60% of these respondents were from MNCs, pointing to their being more proactive in this area, and also perhaps more impelled by global policies.

is LGBTQ+ inclusion business leaders goal



■ MNC ■ Indian Company (Private) ■ Public Sector Company ■ Others

The close involvement and support of top leaders matters greatly to HR teams charged with designing and implementing D&I policies. The reality in the Indian context is that in many MNCs where the D&I policies are being driven by global leadership (American/European), not all leaders are truly on-board.

A senior HR leader from a leading tech company who chooses to be anonymous shares how they faced issues of acceptance from the Indian leadership due to what she calls “their closed thought process on hiring from LGBTQ+ community.” So their first challenge was to align the leadership, who had their own doubts about how other employees would react to openly queer colleagues. In such cases, HR faces the formidable challenge of first educating senior leaders, depending on their openness to such discussions.

Another scenario exists where the leadership is nominally supportive but does not really want to spend their own time on LGBTQ+ inclusion, whether due to hidden bias or simply not perceiving the value of such inclusion in business terms. This has many repercussions, as pointed out by members of the LGBTQ+ community. Geetha Thiagarajan Geo HR Head, APAC also adds, “With things like this, you need the senior most person in the management or the board member to have an equally, equally invested agenda.”

On the other hand, when top leaders are fully invested, consistently demonstrate their own support for the LGBTQ+ community and also are willing to share their time for such initiatives, HR professionals feel that their work of sensitizing employees and implementing hiring or any other policies becomes much easier.

Organizations too need to create such programs in a structured manner, rather than leaving it to individual leaders’ inclinations alone. For instance, Pallavi Tandon, Senior Manager, Global Learning, Expedia Group highlights their ‘Voices of leadership’ campaign that has enabled leaders from across the globe to speak on matters of inclusion and diversity.



Leaders clearly have a disproportionate impact on how an organisation includes the LGBTQ+ community, how genuine the push towards belonging is, and at what scale. Vineeta Raghuwanshi, Associate Director HR and D&I Champion, EY India helps us summarise their presence in the larger picture, as she says, "Active support for LGBTQ+ inclusion from leadership, role models

and allies is critical to advance inclusion in a meaningful way and show members of the LGBTQ+ community they are not alone. Many LGBTQ+ members do not feel able to be out at work and we all have to come together and work towards building that confidence, remove biases, take big and small steps to create a welcoming, inclusive and supportive environment."





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