

Study shows how leaders can break down 'benevolent marginalization'

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There has been significant growth in the implementation of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives in the workplace—but that doesn't mean businesses are getting it right. In their efforts to break

down barriers, firms often end up marginalizing disadvantaged groups, resulting in more harm than good.

Patricia Hein, professor of sustainability at the Ivey Business School at Western University, and Shaz Ansari, professor of strategy and innovation at Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, U.K., gained insights from a decade of research on benevolent [marginalization](#) experienced by women and individuals with disabilities in the workplace. This phenomenon manifests as subtle discrimination that impacts various groups and makes them unlikely to intervene or dissent, thereby hindering their advancement and perpetuating organizational inequality.

The work is [published](#) in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

Hein first witnessed benevolent marginalization while pursuing her Ph.D. in Berlin, Germany, where she attended a protest rally organized by disability activists fighting against inequality in the workplace.

"[The activists] told me they feel invisible and like they don't have a voice," said Hein. "I was wondering, how can that be the case when we focus so much on diversity in organizations? When I started interviewing them, I soon realized there are more subtle forms of marginalization that are often not addressed in diversity programs."

Perpetuating inequality among workers with disabilities

Hein and Ansari examined marginalizing behaviors in two settings. A more extreme example involved interviewing employees in sheltered workshops—segregated organizations where disabled people work in protected environments. They observed that well-intentioned managers

often develop inclusion initiatives based on assumptions that all workers with [disabilities](#) share identical needs of help and assistance—a paternalistic or even infantilizing approach that perpetuates inequality.

An example of a patronizing initiative Hein and Ansari observed involved assigning jobs that limited [public engagement](#) and could be carried out within the confines of the sheltered workshop, such as metal processing, industrial assembly, packaging and shipping. In contrast, a successful inclusive practice involved establishing a farmer's market in consultation with these workers and their representatives.

"Engaging directly with people from outside the sheltered workshop environment while selling farm produce gave these workers newfound self-belief, autonomy, and a sense of empowerment," writes Hein in her Harvard Business Review article, "How Managers Can Dismantle 'Benevolent Marginalization.'"

Female networking is not always working

The second setting Hein examined was by attending dozens of female networking events, interviewing over 60 women throughout Germany, the U.K. and Canada.

"Women told me they feel like these events don't work, especially if they're organized by firms and oftentimes even male managers," said Hein.

"They felt almost disillusioned or disengaged. Leaders somewhat expect gratitude and there's this very weird dynamic where they feel they're doing something great, but the outcome is actually perpetuation of existing inequality systems."

Hein notes that a remarkable transformation can occur when women

take charge of these initiatives and tailor them to meet their individual needs. This can be achieved through collaborating with women across different levels of seniority to foster an inclusive networking environment that promotes diverse voices, offers mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, and creates spaces where women can openly and genuinely engage.

"Our research suggests that women need to adopt a strategic, long-term perspective in their networking endeavors, prioritize follow-ups to build [strong relationships](#), delineate tangible goals for professional advancement, and engage in ongoing evaluation and improvement of these initiatives," writes Hein. The result: Women gain a sense of empowerment and find their voices to collectively combat gender inequality head-on.

Strategies to tackle benevolent marginalization at work

Through studying the phenomenon of benevolent marginalization, Hein and Ansari shared three key insights that serve as tools for managers looking to go beyond good intentions and take those first steps towards genuine inclusion.

Shift your perspective from help to empowerment

Hein encourages managers to first focus on introspection and think about personal paternalistic assumptions and biases. After taking time for self-reflection, the next step is to reach out to those who you feel are being marginalized, build trust, and actively listen to what they have to say. Hein recommends also talking to colleagues, mentors, and coaches as a way to reflect on your own behaviors.

"Being open and maybe even hearing something you don't agree with is not always easy," she said. "These conversations are difficult. There's not one group of [women](#). There's not one group of disabled workers. We're all different, so make sure you listen to individual perspectives and don't make assumptions about entire groups."

Harness allies in non-managerial roles

It is critical to leverage the power of intermediaries, such as support staff, close colleagues, and friends, who are closer to the experiences and challenges faced by their marginalized peers, Hein writes. One way to select these allies is by letting marginalized groups participate in anonymous voting.

Hein provided an example from one of the sheltered workshops she observed in Germany where marginalized employees had an anonymous voting process to select their inclusion champions. "Figure out a way where people feel confident sharing feedback and comfortable sharing how they feel," she said.

Create supportive spaces by handing over responsibilities to disadvantaged individuals

Managers should avoid the top-down approach, says Hein. The only way to create an empowering collective that truly helps these individuals is to hand over responsibilities to those who are meant to benefit from an initiative.

"True [inclusion](#) demands a recognition of the diverse experiences and unique needs of everyone within supportive spaces, and these individuals must have the choice to shape these spaces themselves."

More information: Patricia Hein et al, From Sheltered to Included: The Emancipation of Disabled Workers from Benevolent Marginalization, *Academy of Management Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2020.1689](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2020.1689)

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