DRINKS UNITED

Inclusive Leadership Roadmap

Prepared by Drinks United with input from the November 2025 Drinks United Leadership Summit.

Why Inclusive Leadership Matters Now

The UK drinks industry is at a pivotal moment. To create workplaces where everyone feels safe, included, and supported, leaders must actively shape the culture of their organisations. Inclusive leadership is not an optional skill; it is now a core requirement for high-performing, resilient, and future-ready businesses.

This roadmap provides a practical guide for leaders to build the skills, behaviours, and organisational conditions that drive meaningful inclusion. It draws on themes surfaced at the Drinks United Leadership Summit and global evidence on what works in sustained culture change.

Insights from the Leadership Summit

The Drinks United Leadership Summit convened 72 leaders and culture champions from 42 companies across the industry, and explored privilege, inclusive leadership, allyship, accountability, and the realities of shaping culture through exercises, keynote reflections, and facilitated breakouts. This roadmap is grounded in the conversations and reflections shared on the day.

Leaders shared the moments that test their confidence, the everyday habits that shape team culture, and the responsibility that comes with positional influence. Each breakout explored a different aspect of inclusive leadership: how to start the journey; using influence to open doors for others; stepping in early to prevent harm; and owning actions through accountability and follow-through.

The roadmap that follows translates these themes into practical steps to support leaders to lead inclusively, and take meaningful action within their organisations and across the wider industry.

1. Start With Self

Foundations of Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership begins with self-awareness and a willingness to examine how power, privilege, and influence show up in everyday decisions.

Why this matters
Decades of research (1, 2) show that leadership behaviours are among the strongest predictors of team psychological safety; which is how safe team members feel to speak up, take risks, and admit mistakes. **Teams mirror the behaviours leaders model.**

What good looks like
- Leaders demonstrate curiosity, humility, and willingness to learn.
- They acknowledge bias without defensiveness.
- They role-model the behaviours they expect from others.

Practices you can adopt immediately
- Ask more than you tell. Replace assumptions with questions.
- Seek feedback deliberately. Ask: "What do I do that helps you feel included, what gets in the way?"
- Build a micro-reflection habit:
    - Who benefited from my last decision?
    - Who was missing?
    - Whose voice did I not hear?
- Use inclusive language and avoid jargon that creates distance.
- Normalise vulnerability: "I don't have all the answers — but I'm committed to learning."
- Educate yourself on changing workforce needs through training, coaching, or other development.

2. Shape the Everyday Experience

Inclusive Habits in Daily Practice

Inclusive cultures are not built through policies alone, they are built through daily habits.

Why this matters

Research shows that when leaders use inclusive habits in everyday interactions, such as inviting input, structuring conversations clearly, and ensuring all voices are heard, employees are more likely to speak up and engage (3). A review of 22 global studies found that inclusive leadership habits reliably improve engagement and participation (4). **Small, consistent leadership practices have a meaningful impact on how confident people feel contributing to their teams.**

What good looks like
- Meetings designed for diverse needs;
- Clear expectations and structured communication;
- Regular check-ins that create psychological safety.

Practical habits leaders can implement
- In meetings:
  - Front-load meetings with structure, purpose and expected outcomes to support neurodiverse and introverted colleagues.
  - Ensure every voice is heard: intentionally draw in quieter speakers.
- In teams:
  - Run inclusive team check-ins: ask "How are we working together?" not just "What are we delivering?"
  - Normalise needs: ask colleagues what helps them do their best work in team environments.
- In recruitment and onboarding:
  - Ask onboarding questions: "What do you need to feel welcomed and able to thrive here?"
- In everyday leadership:
  - Lead with curiosity: ask before assuming, check your reasoning.
  - Make learning visible: share small examples of where you are adapting your own habits.

3. Use Your Influence

Allyship and Opening Doors for Others

Allyship is not a label; it is a practice that requires attention, action, and accountability.

Why this matters
Evidence shows that when senior leaders actively sponsor colleagues and use their influence to open doors, it strengthens feelings of inclusion and improves access to career opportunities (5). Sponsorship is especially important for underrepresented groups who often face structural barriers to progression (6). **Allyship and sponsorship from leaders create real, measurable opportunities for people to grow and thrive.**

What good looks like
- Leaders use their positional privilege to amplify underrepresented voices.
- Sponsorship — not just mentorship — is embedded into leadership expectations.
- Barriers in systems (not people) are identified and removed.

Actions leaders can take
- Champion someone who is not already in your immediate circle. Advocacy from a senior figure dramatically increases progression opportunities.
- Give visibility. Spotlight achievements of colleagues from marginalised groups in company meetings, newsletters, and panels.
- Create opportunities: invite colleagues to stretch projects, cross-functional meetings, or leadership shadowing.
- Interrogate your recruitment assumptions: "Are we hiring for cultural fit or cultural contribution?"
- Check who is not in the room — and why.

4. Act in the Moment

Intervention Skills for Leaders

Intervening early is essential to preventing harm and maintaining a safe, respectful culture. Much of the harm in workplace environments arises not from intent, but from moments that go unaddressed.

Why this matters

Studies show that when people are equipped and supported to intervene early in moments of exclusion or harm, they feel more confident stepping in and are more likely to do so. People who undergo workplace bystander programmes frequently apply intervention techniques in real situations (7), and UK case studies such as the NHS Active Bystander Programme show improvements in psychological safety when leaders reinforce these behaviours (8). **Building intervention capability — and modelling it from the top — helps create safer, more respectful team cultures.**

What good looks like
- Leaders recognise cues quickly;
- They prioritise connection before correction;
- They "call in" with care and clarity;
- They follow up after the moment to support those impacted.

Intervention tools for leaders
- Connection before correction: "Can I check something with you?"; "I might have misunderstood, but…"
- Call in rather than call out:
  - Call out = public correction
  - Call in = private, developmental conversation
- Notice non-verbal signals: discomfort, withdrawal, tension
- Use quiet check-ins: "Are you okay if we pause?"
- Own mistakes publicly: "I didn't handle that as well as I could. Here's what I'm learning."

5. Sustain the Change

Accountability and Cultural Leadership

True inclusion requires structural commitment, not individual enthusiasm.

Why this matters

Embedding inclusion and safeguarding through leadership accountability, transparent data, and structural supports is what turns short-lived initiatives into lasting cultural change. Research shows that inclusive leadership has greater impact when it is reinforced by clear policies, systems, and organisational expectations, leading to stronger organisational performance and more consistent culture outcomes (9). In high-risk environments, sustained leader commitment to safe and inclusive behaviours, supported by regular review and feedback loops, helps prevent harm and maintain trust. **Building inclusive culture is not a "nice to have"; it is a strategic investment in resilience, performance, and reputation.**

What good looks like

- DEI is on the leadership agenda as a standing item;
- Responsibilities are clear and measurable;
- Progress is communicated openly;
- Success belongs to the organisation, not only to DEI champions.

Practical actions for CEOs

- Set expectations for what inclusive leadership looks like in your leadership team.
- Tie inclusive behaviours to performance and talent decisions.
- Create time for DEI — not as "extra", but as core business activity.
- Use survey data to identify hotspots and inform your People Plan.
- Role-model transparency: share what you are learning and where you are still growing.
- Establish review rhythms: quarterly updates, people metrics, and qualitative insights.

Putting the roadmap into practice

Inclusive leadership is not a one-off initiative, it is a practice that develops over time. This roadmap is designed to support you through each stage: Start with Self, Shape the Everyday Experience, Use Your Influence, Act in the Moment and Sustain the Change.

Across every stage of this roadmap, inclusive leadership draws on the same core elements. Leaders bring a mindset of curiosity, awareness, and humility. They build habits that shape how people feel every day. They use their influence to create opportunities and visibility for others. They show courage by acting early and calling people in with care. And they put in place the structures — expectations, accountability, and metrics — that make inclusion part of how their organisation works.

Taken together, these elements help leaders move from intention to lasting cultural change; within their own organisations and across the wider UK drinks industry.

How Drinks United can help
Drinks United is here to support you as you put this toolkit into practice. You can draw on:
- Resource Hub: templates, tools, learning materials, and a providers directory for specialist support.
- Safeguarding Support Line & Support Bot: confidential guidance on safety, harassment, and wellbeing.
- Survey Insights: anonymised data and benchmarking to help you understand where your organisation stands.
- Leadership Community: opportunities to connect with other leaders through consultations, events, and training.
- Shared Standards: a network of organisations aligned around common expectations for a safe, inclusive, and supportive industry.

You do not have to do this alone. With your leadership — and the tools, insights, and community offered by Drinks United — we can build an industry where everyone feels safe, included, and supported.

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Ask for Angela · Australian Vintage · BB&R Ltd · Bordeaux Index · Brewgooder · Butcombe Group · C&C Group · Casella Family Brands · Club Soda · Côte Brasserie · Decanter (Future Ltd) · Drinks United · Everleaf Drinks · Freixenet Copestick · Gallo · Gonzalez Byass UK · Hallgarten Wines · Hatch Mansfield · Hillebrand Gori UK · Indigo Wine · Intellima · Lay & Wheeler · Liberty Wines · Limestone & Jones · London City Bond · Marks & Spencer · Mentzendorff & Co · North South Wines · Nyetimber · Pol Roger Portfolio · Refresco · Sainsbury's · Schenk Family UK · Six Till Six · Tesco · The Vintners Company · The Wine Society · VCT Europe · William Grant & Sons · Wine Australia · WSET · Zeno Wine

Have something you wish to add? Get in touch with us at hello@drinksunited.co.uk and we'll include it in the next revision.

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