

# Practicing Radical Inclusion

How to avoid common problems that leave attendees feeling disengaged, unwanted and excluded from your event experience.

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## Practicing radical inclusion

What does it mean to be radically inclusive?

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Common mistakes and solutions

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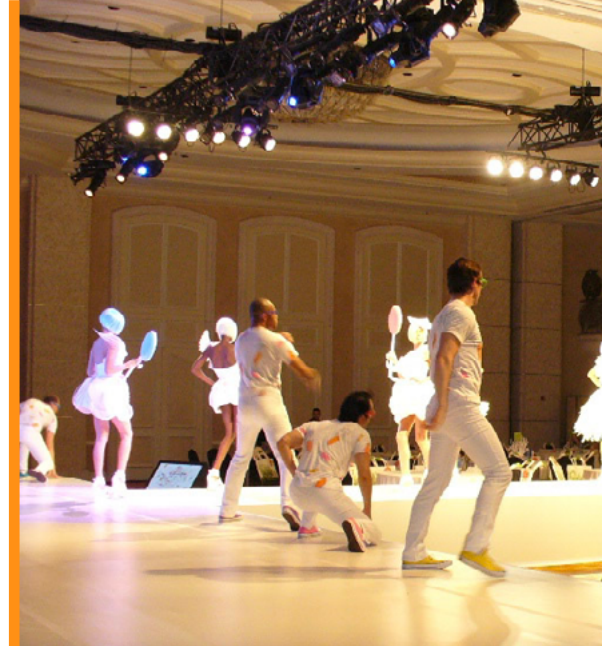
How to be radically inclusive

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# What does it mean to be radically inclusive?

Receiving an invitation to an event doesn't mean you'll feel included there. Remember the awkwardness of school dances? For many people — especially first-time attendees and introverts — events can be as awkward and painful as attending one of those socials and never being asked to dance.

Being radically inclusive means that you're looking at your event ecosystem to identify and eliminate any barriers to enjoyment. It signals that you're taking active steps to engage people investing in your event to meet them where they are. When you do this, participants feel well cared for, important and appreciated. This is important if you want them to recommend your event to others and want to attend the next one.



## Common mistakes and solutions

There are more than 200 ways in which humans differ from each other. That makes it incredibly difficult to accommodate everyone. But here are some common mistakes to avoid as well as potential solutions.

### 1. Scheduling events on religious or cultural holidays.

Want to send a message to an entire group that you don't care whether they show up? Schedule an event for a day they must be in religious observance or that has deep cultural meaning. You can't avoid every event, but at least look at the calendar before setting your date.

### 2. Doing something that's 'cool' without considering audience limitations.

Have you ever tried to get food from a food truck while on crutches? How about sitting in a beanbag chair with fifty-year-old knees? If you're going to experiment with trying something new, don't forget to add elements that accommodate the needs of people who may find that option uncomfortable. For example, a mix of high, low and standing seating. Or 'comfort concierge' who can aid people in need of assistance by offering guidance to open areas or even offering an extra set of hands, eyes or ears, if needed.

### 3. Setting rooms too tightly.

Don't forget that once people are in the room, bags and other personal items are going to clog passageways. If you don't want people with mobility issues stuck in the back of the room, think about how to create a space that's easier for people to navigate, whether it's on one or two feet, sticks or wheels. If someone needs to travel with a companion, is there a way to guarantee that they can always sit together?

### 4. Crammed agendas.

Tight schedules aren't good for anyone. It makes it difficult for people with physical challenges to get around. They're difficult for people with limited attention spans or who get overloaded. And even the well-rested attendee will get frazzled having to run around without getting time to rest. Make sure there's time for people to process what they've learned and enjoy the synchronicity of making new connections without having to run to the next thing. Adding space will also help them learn better.

### 5. Lack of ground rules.

Diversity is the cornerstone of innovation. However, if you're bringing people with diverse backgrounds and points of view together, you need to do so thoughtfully. Lay down some commonsense ground rules for participation and/or hire a qualified facilitator to navigate sensitive conversations. This will help you create a safe space for conversation where everyone feels invited to contribute. A healthy event ecosystem is one in which not only does everyone have a seat at the table, but also they know they are being seen and heard.

### 6. Not doing your research.

Knowing who your event participants are and what they care about will help you craft thoughtful programs, marketing campaigns and onsite event experiences. For example: If you must ask for titles like Dr. or Ms., also include non-binary or non-gender specific ones like Mx. Paying attention to minute details like that can have a significant impact on participant happiness. Show your customers you care by treating them the way they want to be treated.



### 7. Allowing event team members or organization executives to indulge in outdated tropes and jokes.

Some people may find it disorienting to be told something they grew up joking about is now considered offensive. But it's important to point out when it happens or talk with them beforehand, so it stops happening. As Maya Angelou said, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." The cost of not being considerate and promoting tone-deaf content or making off-color jokes is alienating whole segments of your audience. Knowing better and doing or saying something inappropriate tells those communities that you don't care about them, and that they're not welcome. That's not a message anyone should want to send.

# How to be radically inclusive

To be radically inclusive, you want to troubleshoot your event, inside and out, and look at what the experience might be like for different segments of your audience.

Your goal is to make sure everyone feels comfortable, welcome and engaged. Here are some ways to do that.

## 1. Know your audience.

During registration, give participants a chance to volunteer their preference, allergy, alcohol-free and disability status. Assure them that you are collecting the information only to make their event experience more enjoyable, and that it will be kept private. Make sure that you have contact information so you can send special instructions or know how to get in touch if you have follow-up questions.

## 2. Walk the event with your participants' challenges in mind.

Walk through the physical space as well as your program and identify any areas of potential challenge. For example: Are there accessibility options for the hearing or visually impaired on your event platform? Also mentally go through program and content to identify opportunities to be more inclusive. For example: Are additional wayfinding signage and break stations required for the passageway to ADA-accessible ramps or shuttles?

## 3. Ask for help.

Don't assume that you know best. Some situations may be temporary, some are permanent, and how the affected individual wants to be treated might differ than what you expect. For example, hiring a real-time American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter for your hearing impaired audience might seem like an innovative idea. But if they don't speak ASL, they still won't understand your content. Rather than assume, ask the person who's affected. They might give you more effective solutions and help you avoid actions that might be unintentionally offensive.

## 4. Communicate what's available, early and often.

The best plans in the world will fall apart if anyone along the chain is uninformed. For example, it's not enough to educate the banquet captain about allergies and special needs, banquet servers need to know as well. The participants need to know how to receive their meals or

ask for them, and who to ask. And the registration desk may need training on how to communicate the instruction during check-in. Think about sharing essential information three times in three different ways, so no one gets missed.

## 5. Make exceptions the rule.

It's easy to get overwhelmed when you look at requests as individual needs. But what if you looked at them as parameters and worked to use those limitations to create something that everyone could enjoy? For example: Challenge the chef to prepare a menu free of all reported allergens rather than individual allergy-free meals. Or, during Ramadan, make sure meals are available before sunrise and after sunset.

## 6. Be flexible.

If someone needs a caregiver or companion, it might be tempting to ask for them to register for the full conference rate. But if this caregiver or companion doesn't come, then the individual probably would not attend either. Consider a policy that covers any hard costs you need to cover but doesn't penalize the participant for having this additional need. Or waive the fee completely for caregivers/companions.

## 7. Apologize quickly, and then make good.

You can't troubleshoot everything. There will be some mistakes. If there is a misstep, the best thing you can do is apologize and make amends. Then take note so you and your team can avoid the situation in the future.

## 8. Don't forget the shy people in the back.

Extroverts have no trouble mixing and mingling, but what about people who aren't as confident? How will you help them find friends to navigate the experience with? Consider an ambassador, buddy or first-timers program as well as quieter spaces and distinct types of networking events that favor those who aren't so bold.



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