

GDC

March 21-25, 2022
San Francisco, CA

Accessibility and Accommodation Microtalks

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Inclusive Leadership For Everyone

Sunni Pavlovic (she/her)

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There are two major questions on my mind in 2022. The first one is: leadership. How do we cultivate a healthy culture of leadership in the games industry? The second one is: inclusion. How do we push our industry to be a more welcoming, accommodating, and inclusive place? I spend my time thinking and discussing these questions, which brings me to “Inclusive Leadership For Everyone”.

I want to share leadership lessons I’ve learned working in games. I will also speak from the perspective of someone who would have benefitted from more inclusive leadership around me. Most importantly I want to share simple, concrete steps for how to think and act like an inclusive leader.



My Background

- Production
- Operations
- Biz Dev
- Team Management
- Publishing
- Hiring/HR



Really quickly, who am I and how did I come to give this talk?

I have diverse work experience, but for the last 12 years the game industry has been my home. Most recently I was at Yacht Club Games and before that I was at thatgamecompany. For pretty much the entire time, I was either the only woman or the most senior woman, and a woman of color as well as neurodivergent, on these teams which fed my desire to make the industry a more welcoming space for diverse talent to thrive.

“We Are All Spiderman”



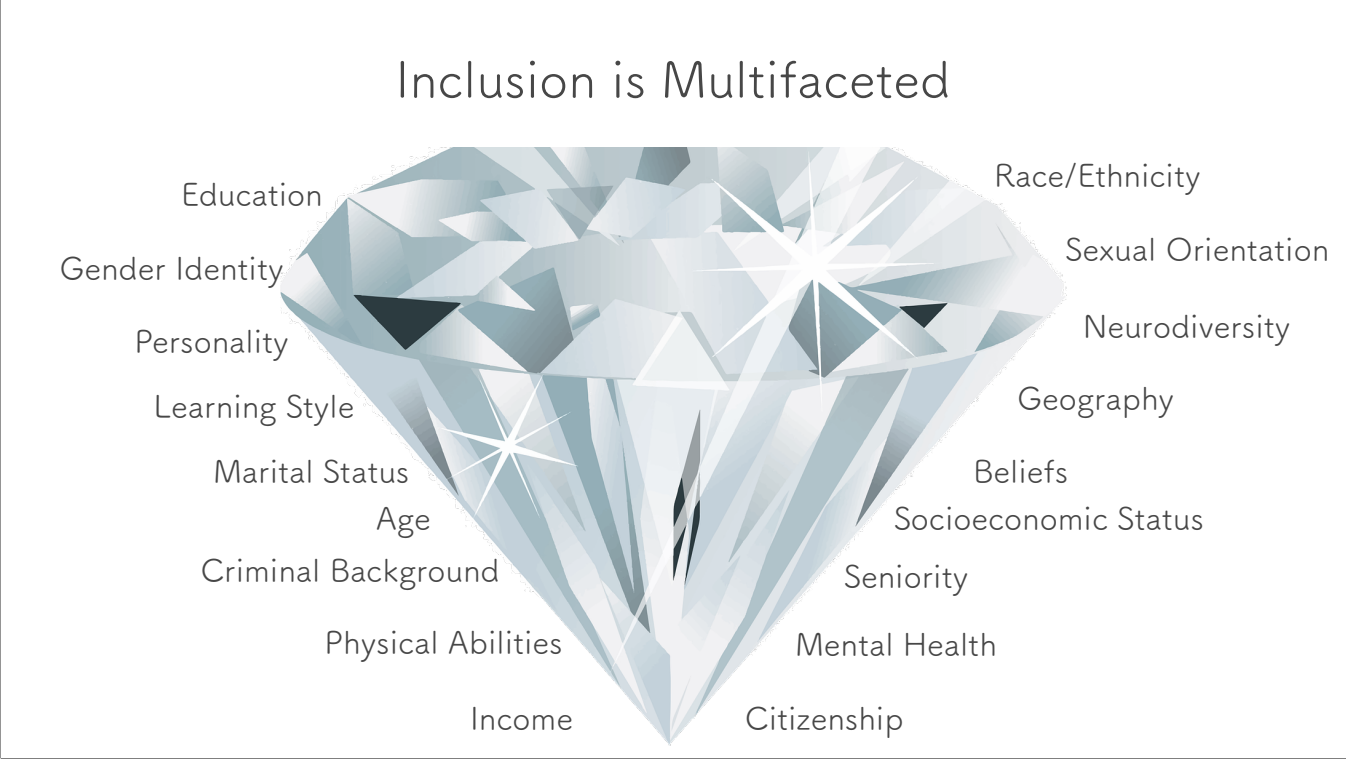
I watched "Spider-man: into the spider-verse" when it came out in theaters in 2018. I actually saw it twice in theaters because it was that good. What resonated with me was the idea that "We are all Spiderman". That is to say, each of us is a leader in our own unique way. I don't need to wait for anyone else to step up and start making change in the areas I care about. I have the ability to enact positive change. I also don't need to wait for permission to take action. The same goes for each of us. We are all leaders here.

Regardless of where we are in our respective careers or what we have accomplished, it's important to establish we all have the ability within us to lead. We are all Spiderman.

Inclusion is Multifaceted



To be an inclusive leader, we have to understand who it is we are trying to include. Diversity is multifaceted, so inclusion is as well. Like a finely cut gem that sparkles and shines, diversity in our workplaces is far from one-dimensional.



The list here is by no means exhaustive. Rather, it is a sampling of the diversity around us. The point is: there is more diversity in our midst than we may realize - in the people we work with, in their friends and families, and in those who play our games. Our goal as inclusive leaders is to be more actively mindful in making individuals from all backgrounds feel welcome.

Inclusion is Multifaceted: Doing Better



Review language in everyday situations

- Ex: “man month” vs. “developer month”



Review listed requirements in job postings

- Ex: years of experience & degrees vs. competencies

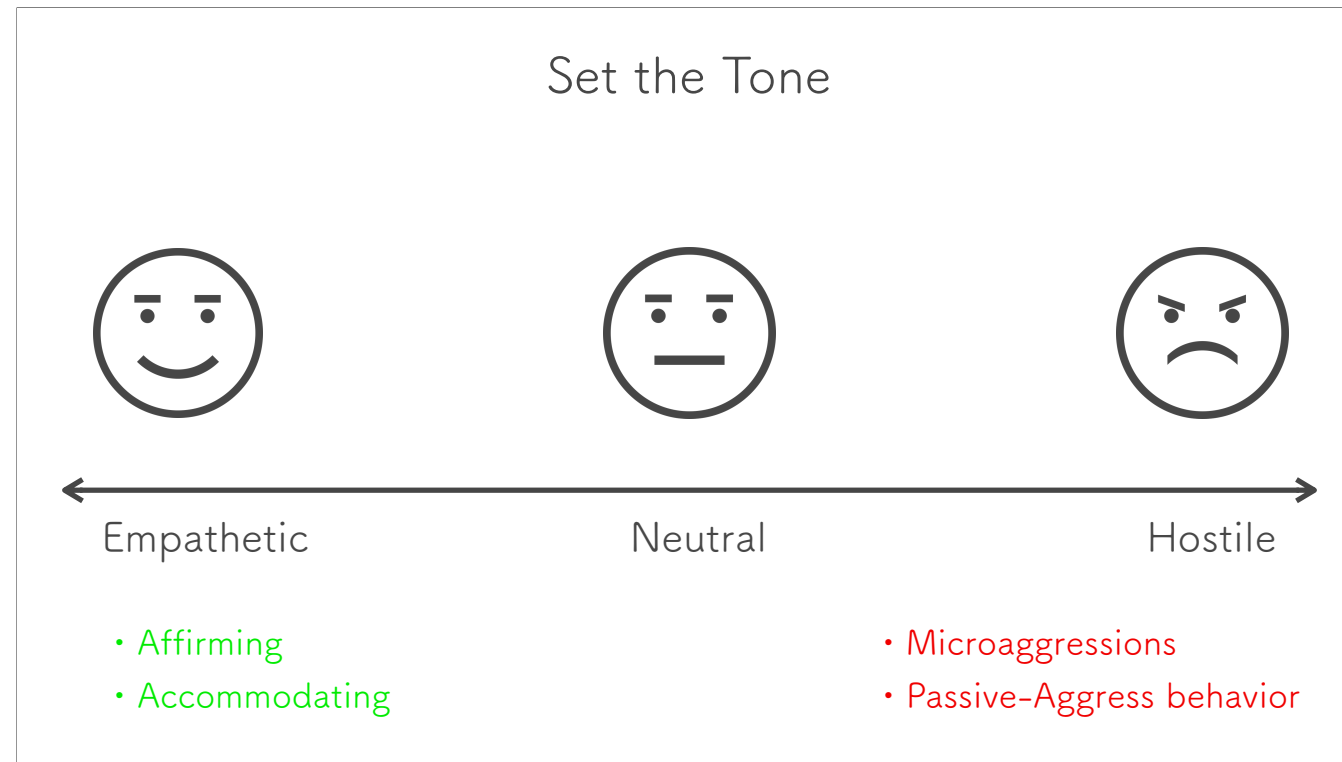


Review company policies

- Ex: mandatory on-site vs. optional remote work

It is so easy to fall back on the status quo and overlook that diverse audiences have diverse needs. Therefore, inclusive leaders should be on the active lookout for whether current practices and processes privilege any particular groups to the detriment of others. If so, we need to prioritize doing better. Doing better involves taking an inclusive perspective in updating and replacing old practices that perpetuate and reinforce inequities. A few examples to illustrate:

The language we use in our everyday work situations — using gender neutral language like “developer month” instead of “man month”. Making sure job postings highlight desired competencies instead of filtering out candidates on criteria that don’t directly correspond to success on the job. Or taking a flexible approach to our company policies wherever possible so that those with different needs can continue to thrive. Those with caretaker responsibilities are more likely to feel supported and included when they are allowed more flexibility with their hours and work location, for example.



Abstracting from those examples, it's clear that inclusive practices don't "just happen" on their own. Instead, leaders are responsible for setting the tone and prioritizing inclusive values and putting them into direct action. The alternative is leaving things to happen on their own. In a best case scenario, a marginalized individual's experiences are no worse than neutral encounters - neither directly harmful but also not especially supportive or welcoming.

In a much worse case, a marginalized individual may be encountering a hostile workplace where microaggressions and passive aggressive behavior are left unchecked.

Inclusive Leadership Starts With Psychological Safety



Psychological Safety:

"A team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are **comfortable being themselves.**" – Amy

Edmondson, HBS

Inclusive leadership is very much rooted in Psychological Safety, a concept that comes from Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson. In her words, Psychological Safety "describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves." She said psychological safety includes 'a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up'.

Psychological Safety vs. Psychological Threat

Feelings of Psychological

Safety:

- Included
- Heard
- Respected
- Welcomed
- Appreciated
- Empowered

Feelings of Psychological

Threat:

- Small
- Anxious
- Powerless
- In Despair

To better understand the concept of psychological safety, let's compare it against psychological threat. Feeling psychologically safe means individuals feel free to share what's on their minds because they experience a pattern of being included, heard, respected, welcomed, appreciated, and empowered.

In contrast, psychological threat often takes root when an individual's ideas are frequently dismissed, criticized, forgotten, or ridiculed. This type of pattern can leave individuals feeling small, anxious, powerless, and in despair.

In my experience, inclusivity has always gone hand-in-hand with psychological safety. When we make it safe to talk about the factors holding us back, suddenly it's possible to actively engage in real problem solving, and things can get better. Then we continue to feel safe and included and continue to share and contribute in a virtuous cycle.

The opposite is true as well with psychological threat: a problem crops up, it doesn't feel safe to speak up, the problem persists and perhaps gets worse, the individual feels even more anxious and in despair, and the vicious cycle continues.

Workplace Benefits of Psychological Safety



- More Energized
- More Engaged
- Less Burnout
- More Productive
- Higher Retention
- More Satisfied
- More Joy at Work

Author Paul J. Zak's took a close look at building Psychologically Safe workplaces, in his book *Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High-Performance Companies*. Specifically, he contrasted the outcomes of adults working in companies with high levels of trust compared to those in companies with low levels of trust. The results make it clear that psychological safety in the workplace are a win.

Our goal as inclusive leaders is to build a culture of psychological safety on our teams. Not only does it promote inclusion, it's also good for business.

Inclusive Leadership & Psychological Safety

Google's "Project Aristotle" verified
that Psychological Safety is a top
indicator for team performance and
successful collaboration!



Google engaged in a multi-year research project codenamed "Project Aristotle". What did they discover? Psychological safety is a top indicator for team performance and successful collaboration! We can benefit from Google's extensive resources and apply their findings to our own work.

Creative endeavors like game development especially thrive on psychological safety. Leaders understand when we feel psychologically safe, we feel empowered to take risks, which might lead to failure, but can then also lead to innovation, better processes, and better outcomes.

Align Incentives With Outcomes



To change the status quo, we need to change the incentives that support the status quo.

For example, what kind of metrics are we tracking in our company performance reviews which tie into performance bonuses? When we focus on a few general categories such as annual profit and level of seniority, that says a lot about the values and priorities the studio wants to incentivize. More importantly, what factors are clearly being left out of the conversations? What about including qualities and skills such as emotional maturity, open-mindedness, collaboration, and communication in a performance review? Incentivizing those qualities will lead to a radically different studio culture.



It's not enough to have an idea for improvement, as leaders we have to take our ideas and turn them into action items. That's why, it's not real if it's not a task. If it's not a task, it's just an idea. When change is needed, create a task, make sure it has a deliverable, assign it to someone, with a due date and a priority, and hold that person accountable for completing the task.

When someone comes in with an idea for change, it is critical to support them with resources. The resources to take on tasks that affect change has to come from somewhere. We can't realistically expect change to happen if we don't provide the proper time, priority, and budget resources to make that kind of change real. Any idea for change has to be tied to a concrete task.

“When a flower doesn't bloom you fix the
environment in which it grows, not the flower”



- Alexander den Heijer

“When a flower doesn’t bloom you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower” is an excellent summary of how to be an inclusive leader. Inclusive leaders make a practice of taking a people-first approach and practice empathy. They look for what in our systems, practices, approaches needs changing, rather than assuming our differences are the source of problems. Instead, inclusive leaders are able to see differences as a source of strength.

Inclusive Leadership For Everyone



- We are all leaders
- Inclusivity is multifaceted
- Set the tone
- Start with Psychological Safety
- Align Incentives with Outcomes
- Make it a Task

As leaders, there is so much work for us to do make our spaces safe, accommodating, and inclusive. First, we must recognize that we are leaders with the ability to enact positive change. Next, we need to be aware there are many facets of diversity we want to be inclusive of and there are many ways we can push ourselves to do better. As leaders we need to set the tone, making sure we're actively practicing inclusive values in our studios. Building inclusive studios starts with psychological safety, which is good for teams and provides real workplace results. We need to incentivize the outcomes we want by actively rewarding the change we're looking to make. And when we're ready to enact positive change, we have to turn ideas into action by creating tasks that are supported with concrete resources.



These topics are all very near and dear to me and I'm happy to chat about any of these topics further: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sunnipavlovic/>

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Building Accessibility Into Your Company Culture

Jay Justice (she/her, he/him)
Director, LGBT HQ

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A Very Full 10 Minutes, Starting Now

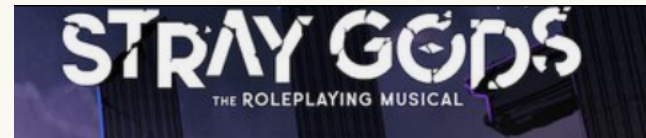
- Intro
- Owning Our Community
- Understanding Disability
- The Impact of Inaccessibility
- Implementing Accommodations
- Building an Accessible Culture

Wait a minute, who are you?



Jay Justice: editor, consultant, sensitivity reader, advocate, student, developer, streamer, costumer/cosplayer...I'm tired

How did you get into all that?



13 years in the industry
1st gig: Promo for Ultimate Alliance 2
Massive comic book geek
Games = Storytelling
Recent work includes Mass Effect Legendary Edition, Idle Champions of the Forgotten Realms, Stray Gods: The Roleplaying Musical

Owning Our Community

Accessibility discussions in games are often met with aggressive gatekeeping and pushback

“That’s not who we are” is avoidance, dismissive and not especially helpful

We **are** our community. We are its behavior, its living, breathing ecosystem. We are what we foster, what we encourage and what we build. And what we need to build is accessibility.

So far so good

Everyone has been great

Not a single bad experience working in the games industry

Why does everyone keep asking if I'm new



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A Bit To Unpack Here

A sample consult: Jay! We have some disabled (or Black, Queer, Jamaican, New Yorker, AfroLatinx, genderfluid, woman) characters in our upcoming release and we'd love for you to have a crack at them. **We don't have any disabled staff here** so we are looking for someone with lived experience to consult.'

You don't have **any** disabled staff members?

Are you sure??

Understanding Disability

‘We don’t have any disabled staff here.’ That seems unlikely. No matter how small your company, you probably do! 1 in 4 Americans is disabled.

15% of the world—over 1 billion people are disabled.

Maybe you have a more limited or narrow idea of what a disability is. A lot of people have preconceived notions of what disability ‘looks like’.

Maybe you don’t know about invisible disabilities, which are physical, mental or neurological conditions that limit a person's movements, senses, or activities that are invisible to others.

The Impact of Inaccessibility

If you...somehow... don't have a single disabled employee at your company(or don't have any that feel comfortable divulging their disability status to you) it could be due to your company culture being inaccessible.

Only 39% of disabled people do disclose their disability at work, and 13% of them don't have a choice, because their disability is visible.

Disabled people don't disclose at work because of a justified fear of harassment, devaluing of their work, and loss of opportunity for advancement. These fears can be addressed by changing the company culture to one that is more accessible.

Implementing Accommodations

Many companies say they will not discriminate against disabled people during the hiring process. But sometimes they do unintentionally by not providing accommodations.

Don't wait for a disabled applicant to implement accessibility. Be proactive by researching ways to make your hiring & onboarding processes more accessible.

Even if you think you don't have any disabled employees, take the time to provide alternative solutions and access to resources. You don't need to see a disability to provide an accommodation.

Building An Accessible Culture

Commit to researching and building accommodations into your hiring, onboarding and standard processes. Be flexible and willing to adapt to different situations—there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Foster a workplace culture that has zero tolerance for discrimination. You can't build accessibility on an unstable platform.

Reach out to diverse communities for applicants. Look outside the bubble.

Prioritize giving access to the tools necessary for each employee to succeed. Openly state that accessibility is the company goal. Empower your staff to seek accommodations that can help them reach their full potential. [Accessibility is proven to improve brand perception, employee retention and profits.](#)

Takeaway

Our community is imperfect, but we can improve it with our actions, by providing access to marginalized communities.

There are a billion disabled people, thousands of different types of disabilities, not all are visible, **you don't need to see a disability to provide an accommodation.**

Inaccessibility can be unintentional, but accessibility **must** be intent followed by action. Impact > intent every time.

Including accessibility in all facets of your company culture will improve the value of your company immensely.

Thank you for watching!

its me im the happy potato <3



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Not Your Bardic Inspiration

advocacy, disability, and the
struggle to simply exist

Makenzie De Armas (she/her)

Associate Game Designer – Wizards of the Coast

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introduction

- Makenzie De Armas
 - Associate Game Designer, D&D TRPG
 - Education and Advocacy Lead, Disability Community of Wizards



the nature of advocacy

Inspiration Porn: a portrayal of disability in media that—

- Expresses sentimentality or pity toward a disabled individual
- Has an uplifting moral message, primarily meant for a nondisabled audience
- Objectifies the disabled person

where does **advocacy** end
and **inspiration porn** begin?

inspiration and intent

Bardic Inspiration: a game mechanic that allows you to grant another character a bonus die, which they can add to a roll of their choice

- This is **entirely controlled by the player**—the player decides how, when, and to whom to give this bonus die to.
- In this scenario, **individual agency** is key.

dynamic accessibility

1. Make space for **disabled voices** to tell their own stories from their perspectives.
2. Acknowledge that disabled triumph is indicative of **overarching systemic problems**, not individual merit.
3. Actively strive to **implement change** in your environment.

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Flexibility in Communication Styles as an Everyday Accommodation

Raffael Boccamazzo, PsyD (he/him)
“Doctor B”
Clinical Director, TakeThis.org

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Potential Strategies in Meeting Communication Needs

- Nonjudgmentally discuss communication needs explicitly and ahead of time.
- Check in and adjust.
- Notice omissions and ambiguity. Clarify.
- Mutually check understanding. Clarify.

Potential Strategies in Meeting Communication Needs (TL;DR)

