Exponential Talent LLC

Guide to
Designing
Inclusive Events

May 2019

Exponential Talent LLC
Raising Your Talent to a Higher Power

"Privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it's not a problem to you personally." ~ David Gaider

How your organization engages its people through events is one of the most visible demonstrations of its values. People often judge if an organization is "walking the talk" of diversity and inclusion (D&I) by how inclusive events are. Whether organizing a team activity, offsite, event, or conference, infuse D&I throughout your event experiences.

COMMON INCLUSION CHALLENGES AT EVENTS

Exponential Talent often solicits employee perspectives through surveys and focus groups to learn whether or not they experience their company cultures as inclusive. Event experiences--both positive and negative--are often described to us as a way people experience inclusion or exclusion. This dynamic makes sense because events at work are specifically designed to create community and foster networks, and so events have both a direct impact on inclusion as well as a symbolic one in terms of how the company is walking the talk of inclusion.

Some common feedback we hear from employees about events includes:

The leaders or speakers all look / sound the same.

I'm the only one here like me.

I have dietary needs that are not met [e.g., allergies, faith-related, health-related].

There is too much focus on alcohol.

The event is at a time of day / day of week that I can't attend.

I have social anxiety / neurodiversity / introversion. Unstructured events are particularly stressful.

I'm older. The events are really designed for young people.

I'm LGBTQAI. The events are really designed for straight people.

I'm not interested in the activities — which are always the same.

I'm remote. Only people in offices get to go to events. I'm left out.

I have accessibility needs that aren't considered.

I can't be me.

I don't feel safe.

![Exponential Talent LLC logo] **Exponential Talent LLC**
Raising Your Talent to a Higher Power

Guide to Designing Inclusive Events

While no single event will meet the needs of all the diverse employees or stakeholders of an organization, a commitment to inclusive events and activities is essential to an inclusive culture.

- ❏ Remove as many barriers to participation as possible for each event.
- ❏ Review your portfolio of events to see if the mix offers a good variety.
- ❏ Remember not to let "perfection be the enemy of the good" — do what's possible and be honest about items on which you are still working.

If you don't have time to review all the checklists, keep these tips top of mind:

- ❏ Formal or large events should **have a Code of Conduct** and good procedures to implement it to keep participants safe.
- ❏ Who is on stage matters. **Ensure speakers are diverse.**
- ❏ **Structure is an antidote to bias** - plus it puts a lot of people who dread events at ease. Whether it is a game or an activity or a facilitated discussion, structure your event.
- ❏ **Rotate the event design** including the type of activity, the time and the day of the week, and the type of food and drink. Variety will meet more different kinds of needs.
- ❏ **Be intentionally inclusive** in selecting the accessible venue, designing the activity, choosing the food and beverages, and creating communications. There are lots of specific tips below. However, the most important step is to be very deliberate about inclusion.
- ❏ **Participant surveys can provide helpful input** - but watch out, the needs of underrepresented groups have to be amplified. The survey overall score is--by definition--a majority group score.

USING THIS GUIDE

The following checklists help event organizers to create more inclusive events and activities. While not all events require all the tips, skimming this document can bring to mind things that may otherwise be overlooked. Remember, a few moments of consideration in the planning process can mean the world to those who come to the event.

For each of the icons below, click it to hyperlink to that section of the document.

Event Design

Event Communication

Activity Content

Venue

Accessibility

Food and Alcohol

Event Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Participating as a Speaker or Panelist in Another Organization's Event

EVENT DESIGN

❏ Establish an event planning team with representatives from a variety of groups and diversity dimensions.

❏ Provide a Code of Conduct to all participants and support its use.

> ❏ For internal events, there is usually a company Code of Conduct or other employee policies that provide guidance. For major events, a reminder of the code is helpful.
>
> ❏ For external events, provide a Code of Conduct to all participants. Establish procedures to implement the Code of Conduct for each event.

❏ Seek broad input on event design from the people involved in and/or attending the event; avoid "votes," however, as underrepresented groups will be underrepresented in the voting.

❏ Choose a day that does not conflict with key holy or cultural days.

❏ Choose a time and event length that allows part-time people and those with after work responsibilities to attend (such as eldercare, childcare, or other personal commitments).

> ❏ If your team or group has periodic events, consider varying event times so that all team members are able to attend some events.
>
> ❏ Let people know if it

❏ Provide information well in advance so people can plan their participation at your event and arrange their personal schedules and support systems accordingly. Note if it is OK to attend for just part of the time.

❏ Consider providing childcare during the event.

❏ Plan how remote team members will be invited and engaged.

> ❏ For virtual teams, consider a virtual party.
>
> ❏ For teams where some members are physically co-located and others are not, consider a mix of virtual and in-person events.

❏ If the event has a fee, consider if it will limit some groups from attending. Consider scholarships or similar options.

❏ Share coordination of events among team members; research shows that members of underrepresented groups may be asked to perform more administrative work than others.

❏ Be inclusive of the full spectrum of gender identity (e.g., invite people to share pronoun preferences on name tags, offer gender neutral lavatories, etc.)

Exponential Talent LLC
Raising Your Talent to a Higher Power

EVENT COMMUNICATION

❏ Communicate your commitment to diversity and inclusion to event invitees.

❏ Use inclusive language (e.g., "friends, everyone, folks" not "guys, gals, ladies, gentleman"; "they" not "he" or "she") and inclusive images in your invitation and event materials (e.g., don't show heterosexual couples only; include images of people with disabilities, etc.)

❏ Update registration forms if gender or other identification is requested to ensure non-binary gender options such as the "Mx." honorific rather than just using Mr., Mrs., or Ms.

❏ Provide any dress code or suggested clothing or equipment.

❏ Describe the activity so people can be prepared. Communicate physical requirements such as up to 30 minutes walking or there are two flights of steep stairs.

❏ If your communication includes images of people, ensure they reflect the diversity of attendees (ages, races/ethnicities, abilities, genders, etc.) If images of couples are included, provide a mix of gay and straight couple images.

❏ Consider whether communications should be provided in multiple languages.

❏ Provide multiple options for accessible communication (email, telephone, TTY (teletypewriter), etc.).

❏ Make sure the event website follows the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

❏ Test communications with a diverse group and gather feedback before sending them out (particularly for large events).

❏ Consider reminding everyone to seek out people different from themselves with whom to network. The natural unconscious tendency is for "like to seek like". A reminder can change this dynamic.

ACTIVITY CONTENT

❏ Ensure speakers and entertainers represent a variety of diversity dimensions including gender identity, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, age, veteran status, level, expertise, geographies, and more.

> ❏ Leverage employee resource groups to help identify speakers.
>
> ❏ Avoid "tokenizing," which is selecting speakers only to avoid criticism or to create an appearance of diversity. The key is to have sincere diversity efforts.
>
> ❏ Check that speakers from underrepresented groups don't have limited roles such as only making introductions. Balance the air time allocated to speakers from underrepresented groups relative to speakers from majority groups.

❏ Offer activities or themes that are broadly appealing. For periodic gatherings, vary the type of event or activity each time. For example, if it's a sports outing one time, try something very different the next time like a museum outing, a cooking class, or a service project.

❏ Consider using structured activities like a game or a team-building exercise. Structure can ease the discomfort many people experience in social settings (e.g., being different from others, having social anxiety, being an introvert, feeling like an impostor, etc.)

❏ Recognize that formal attire for black tie or other gala events creates real challenges for gender non-conforming individuals and socio-economically disadvantaged people.

❏ Avoid themes that are gendered, heteronormative, or specific to one race/ethnicity, culture, or faith (unless, of course, you are hosting a cultural awareness event to celebrate and educate about a particular tradition).

❏ Create inclusive and random ways to divide people into groups (e.g., birth months or last digit of mobile phone numbers or assigned seating) to help people meet more people who are different.

> ❏ Do not separate people along diversity lines if at all possible (such as men in one group and women in the other).
>
> ❏ Avoid "picking" teams -- those chosen last experience feelings of exclusion.

❏ Provide an inclusive welcome to the event or activity.

❏ Close with an inclusive message – thank all the people who made the event possible, not just the organizing committee or chair but also acknowledge the volunteers, facilities team, AV team, clean-up crew, or others who made it a success.

VENUE

❏ Check the history and significance of the venue to see if it would make any group of people feel unwelcome. Confirm the venue is welcoming to all participants, e.g., people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, indigenous peoples, Black or African American people, etc.

❏ Ensure the venue is accessible (see accessibility before for more information.)

❏ Evaluate if there are spaces for a lactation room, a prayer room and a quiet room.
   ❏ Consider buying or renting a pod. See for example Mamava Inflatable pods.

❏ Select venues that provide gender neutral restrooms. Review any restroom policy.
   ❏ Consider converting existing bathrooms by posting new signage.

❏ Ensure adequate lighting. Evaluate if flashing or strobe lights will be in use as these may trigger seizures or other reactions for people with certain physical or mental conditions.

❏ Check sound levels. Sound must be adequately loud for hearing impaired participants. At the same time, neurodiverse participants may be triggered by loud noise or music. Consider having some time periods that are "quiet" where loud music is not playing.

❏ If the venue is a restaurant, check to see if braille menus are available if needed.

❏ Review any dress code for the venue.

ACCESSIBILITY

❏ Select a location and event site that is accessible to people of all abilities and ages and that can meet individual needs; visit the event venue in advance to assess its functionality.

❏ Ensure all event venues and hotels comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or similar accessibility in other geographies including for rooms, movement between sessions, and lavatories.

❏ Provide ground transportation that is accessible if needed.

❏ Ask participants if they need any accommodations to fully participate and ask for their preferred method of communication to follow up on such requests.

❏ Provide support for people with physical limitations, for people who are deaf or have limited hearing, people who are blind or have sight challenges, and others with similar needs.

❏ Ensure the event registration and the event website are accessible, if applicable.

❏ Brief and train event staff on accessibility needs and ensure they know emergency response procedures.

FOOD AND ALCOHOL

❏ Ask about dietary restrictions in advance at event registration or via email for small gatherings. Ensure that special requests can be met with food comparable in quality to that being served to guests without dietary restrictions. If the request cannot be accommodated, inform the impacted attendees in advance.

❏ Ensure host or organizers know what do in case of an allergic reaction or other health emergency.

❏ Require that caterers and banquet staff can comply with labelling needs for food allergies and receive training in cross contamination.

❏ Provide inclusive food options, e.g. vegetarian/vegan, gluten free, peanut free, low sugar or sugar free, kosher and halal, or non-alcoholic beverages. (Avoid pork.)

❏ Consider accessibility in food provision, e.g., be mindful that a buffet or reception food might be difficult for someone using mobility devices and ensure staff are available to provide assistance.

❏ Consider diversity in your vendor selection, proactively finding suppliers from underrepresented groups.

❏ Be thoughtful about the potential exclusionary nature of alcohol served at events.

> ❏ Always offer an equal number and quality of special, non-alcoholic beverages as alcoholic beverages such as specialty cocktails (i.e., not just soda).
> ❏ Consider serving just beer and wine.
> ❏ Consider using drink "tickets" to limit alcohol consumption.
> ❏ Consider closing the bar an hour or two before the event ends.

❏ Serve food, such as appetizers, from the start of events where alcohol is served.

❏ If children will be at the event, consider removing alcohol altogether.

❏ Never assume that drinking alcohol is the norm and ensure that your conversations and actions are friendly to those choosing not to drink.

> ❏ Never pressure people to drink.

❏ Particularly when alcohol is served, be sure to arrange safe passage home or offer easy access to public transportation, so everyone can get home safely.

❏ For groups that meet together regularly, consider having a mix of events with and without alcohol. For example, alternate a Friday afternoon happy hour with an ice cream social.

Exponential Talent LLC
Raising Your Talent to a Higher Power

EVENT EVALUATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

❏ For recurring events, provide a suggestion box or feedback survey or both.
  ❏ For surveys, watch out: average scores will reflect majority groups and will not be helpful to understand how underrepresented groups felt included.
  ❏ To address the challenge of majority groups in surveys, consider providing an option for people to voluntarily provide demographic information. Then analyze event feedback to see if any demographic group had a different experience from others.
  ❏ If you will be collecting demographic data, be sure to establish and communicate a confidentiality protocol and ensure that all questions have an option for "Prefer not to state."
❏ Depending on the type of event, a wide range of metrics can be useful such as:
  ❏ The number and percentage of diverse speakers
  ❏ The percentage of air time diverse speakers were featured
  ❏ The diversity of attendees
  ❏ Attendee feedback surveys on the inclusivity of the event and event communications
  ❏ A comparison of the event experience by demographic group as reported on participant feedback surveys (see above)

PARTICIPATING AS A SPEAKER OR PANELIST IN ANOTHER ORGANIZATION'S EVENT

❏ Before accepting a role to speak at an event, ask the hosts about their efforts to create an inclusive event and review the Code of Conduct.
❏ Request information on the diversity of speakers at the event or for the panel on which you would speak. If the event or the panel lacks diversity, request they add diverse speakers before accepting the invitation or suggest an expert from an underrepresented group who could be added.

Learn More

Burton Blatt Institute (BBI) at Syracuse University, Accessible Training Checklist, May, 2012.

American Bar Association, Commission on Disability Rights and Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice, "Planning Accessible Meetings and Events: A Toolkit," 2015.

Bizzabo, "New Study: Almost 70% of Professional Event Speakers are Male," November 1, 2018.

Darren Hill, "How to avoid a 'manel': Panel Pledge signee Darren Hill offers 3 ways to do it," Financial Review, May, 2016.

Gartner, "Some Employers Rethink Alcohol at Summer Events in Wake of #MeToo," June, 2018.

iSight, "18 of the Best Code of Conduct Examples."

Jonathan Carpenter, "5 Ways to Include Remote Employees in Holiday Celebrations and Kickoff Events," OWLLabs, January 2019.

Julius Solaris, "The Event Industry's Problem with Alcohol," Event Manager Blog, Apri, 2018.

Katherine Phillips, Tracy Dumas, and Nancy Rothbard, "Diversity and Authenticity," *Harvard Business Review*, March-April, 2018.

Kelli White, "How to Plan for Attendees with Special Diets," Event Management, October, 2018.

Ruchika Tulshyan, "How Managers Can Make Casual Networking Events More Inclusive," *Harvard Business Review*, October 22, 2018.

Meetings Today, "5 Ways to Create More LGBTQ-Inclusive Events," February, 2018.

UC Berkeley, "Top 10 Tips for Making your Website Accessible."

#tackaNEJ, "Men Say No, Thanks"

Thanai Pongdee, MD, FAAAAI, "Event Planning and Food Allergy Awareness," American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology.

Exponential Talent LLC
Raising Your Talent to a Higher Power

Speaker Resources

[Executive Speakers Bureau/Diversity Speakers](#)

[Leading Authorities, Inc. Diversity Speakers](#)

[Speak Out](#)

[Women Who Keynote](#)

[We Speak Too](#)

Suggest a Change and/or Contact Us

We welcome suggestions to improve our guide. We love to learn from contrary opinions and new ideas. Please email us with your thoughts at **info@exponentialtalent.com**.