

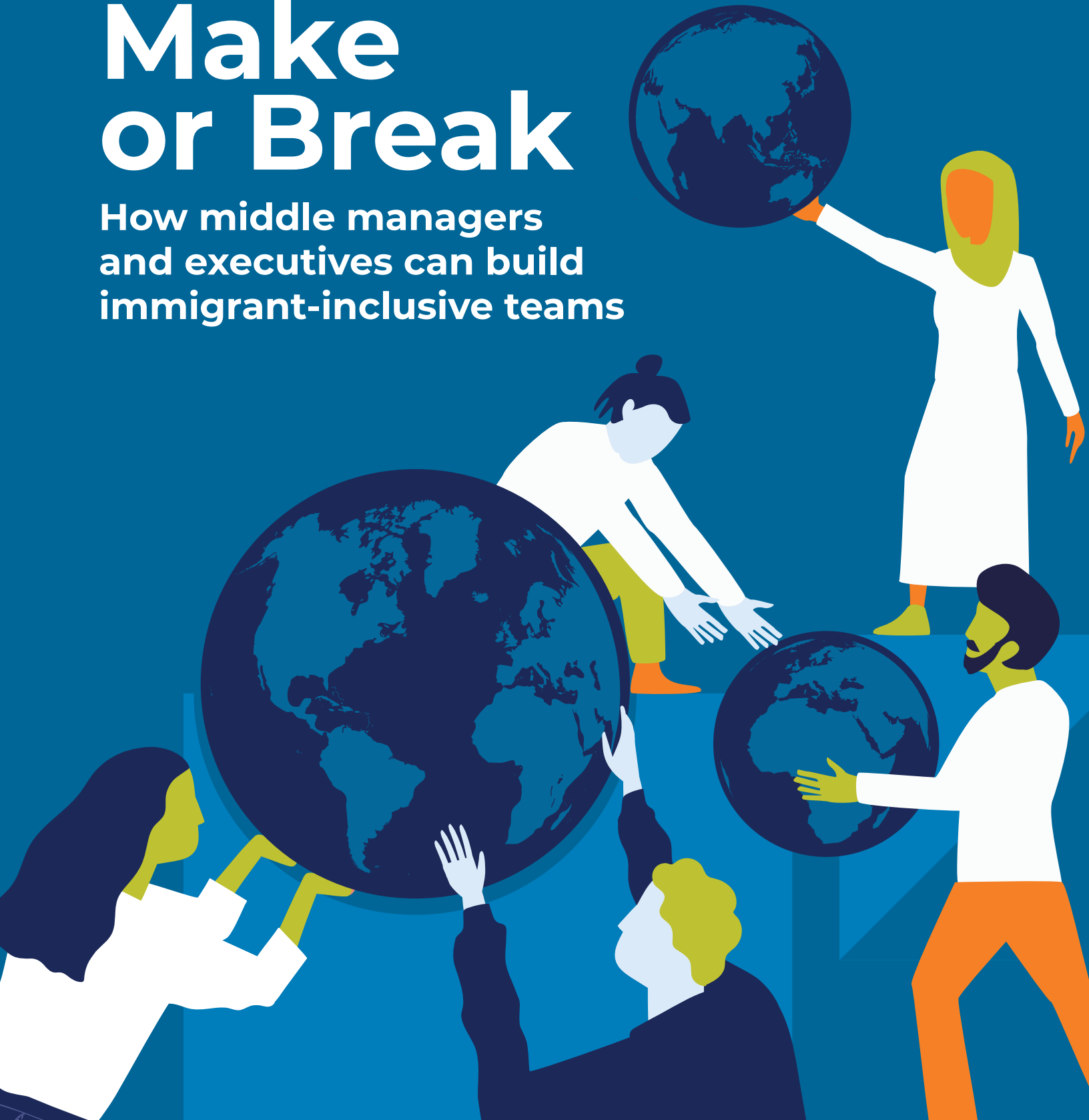


Toronto Region Immigrant  
Employment Council

Diversity Drives Success

# Make or Break

How middle managers  
and executives can build  
immigrant-inclusive teams



The Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) champions the talent and experience that immigrants bring to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). They support organizations to become more inclusive, and help newcomers expand their professional networks and understand the local labour market. They collaborate with leaders and organizations to build a GTA where immigrant professionals can contribute to their fullest potential.

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# Foreword

The idea to call this report “make or break” came out of a discussion held at TRIEC’s 2020 Immigrant Inclusion Summit. At that summit, there was an appetite to hear more about the practical actions and steps middle managers can take to build inclusion in their teams. However, at the same time, we know from organizational behavior theory that true change cannot be sustained unless the most senior leaders are active participants in setting vision and strategy, and modeling behavior at the systems-level.

The diversity and inclusion journey is neither simple nor quick. Similar to a marathon, an organization needs to have a strategy and a plan for how they are going to reach the finish line before training actually begins. When training for a race, building strength and distance is achieved through a variety of mechanisms. Building internal inclusion strength and capacity is no different: collecting data to make evidence-based decisions; senior leaders modeling behavior; evaluating and adjusting of human resource practices; learning and development taking place individually and in groups. And then, just after an organization believes it has crossed the proverbial finish line, it comes to realize that, collectively, the organization can improve its personal best. For example, they might realize they need to focus on immigrant career advancement in order to truly have diverse and inclusive practices at all levels of the organization.

This report focuses on creating *immigrant inclusive* workplaces, since this group of employees face unique challenges that are layered on top of other intersecting identities. We know that groups such as women, BIPOC and LGBTQIA2S can be underrepresented within workplaces. When you add the adjective “immigrant” or “newcomer” in front of any one or a combination of these identities, then the challenges are compounded. In Canada and in particular in the GTA, where our labour market depends on immigration and the vast majority of immigrants do have intersecting identities, TRIEC believes in the importance of highlighting the success organizations can have when they take their inclusion journey one step further – reaching for the organization’s new personal best.



Adwoa K. Buahene  
CEO



# Executive Summary

The past year has been one of massive disruption and uncertainty, with a global pandemic and economic downturn putting our resilience and adaptability to the test. Immigrants, especially recent immigrants and women, were among those hardest hit by COVID-19. Sectors that typically employ a lot of immigrants, such as tourism and hospitality, were among the most heavily affected by the pandemic.

At the same time, immigrants' efforts on the front line, particularly in long term care work and the healthcare sector, have once again shown that their contribution to the workforce is invaluable. As Canada starts to emerge from the pandemic and rebuild, social and economic recovery must and will draw upon the knowledge and skills of immigrants.

Yet Canada still has a long way to go before it is fully maximizing the potential of its immigrant talent. TRIEC's previous studies have shown that finding employment is only the first step in ensuring the career success of immigrants. Other factors include whether immigrants feel welcomed and appreciated in the workplace, and whether they have a chance to climb up the career ladder.

Middle managers have a significant influence on what happens after an immigrant is hired. It is middle managers who determine: do immigrant employees feel part of their team? Do they get the feedback they need? Do they get assigned strategic projects and responsibilities on a par with their non-immigrant colleagues? Through their day-to-day decisions and actions, middle managers make or break an immigrant's sense of inclusion and therefore their performance – whether they will thrive or flounder.

The other key puzzle piece is executives, who set the vision and the strategy for the organization. Their commitment to and understanding of what is required for an organization to not only successfully embark on, but also sustain the inclusion journey is critical. However, exactly what executives need to do organizationally to support middle managers is less frequently discussed.



This study looks at how executives can support middle management to be more inclusive – and what middle managers can do to pave the way for immigrant success in their teams. It looks at the existing evidence, but its focus is on key informant interviews with middle managers and diversity and inclusion leaders. In this report, we aim to offer thoughtful, practical, real-world actions for leaders. Who better to provide these than the managers who have such a deep understanding of the realities that this study highlights? We have spoken to a key group of people who not only have experience working in middle management but who also, for the most part, are immigrants, who have lived experience of the unique challenges that immigrants face in the labour market and in the workplace.

Executives' role is to understand these challenges. This requires introspection: Does the organization have a biased view of international education and work experience compared to education and experience gained in Canada? Do high performing-employees whose first language is not English stand an equal chance of getting promoted to more senior and client-facing roles?

Addressing these challenges requires not only holding their middle managers accountable for inclusion, but providing them with the budget, know-how and time to act. Incentives are essential to cement inclusive behavior – whether it's through implicit acknowledgement or explicit rewards.

What works best will change depending on organizational and team cultures. Lastly, being vulnerable, humble and empathetic will set up an executive as a genuine role model for middle management.

While change cannot happen without executive support, middle managers are not without power and influence. Intentionality helps move the needle in significant ways: asking team members about their working styles and preferences; ensuring that team dynamics work for everyone; considering how cultural differences influence everyone's behavior and what kinds of behavior gets rewarded are key. Positive intentionality in managerial action creates a 'bubble of inclusivity' that embraces and shields the team. Middle managers should also collaborate with their human resources and diversity and inclusion colleagues to design and implement inclusive hiring practices to avoid overlooking immigrant talent. Finally, encouraging team members to find mentors opens up immigrant colleagues' access to advice, champions and support.



# Background

Immigration continues to be a key driver of Canada's population and economic growth. The pandemic has not changed the fact that this country's population is rapidly aging. Around one in four Canadians in the workforce will be 55 or over by 2036, according to Statistics Canada.<sup>i</sup> Canada's birth rate has been below the replacement rate since 1971, and immigrants are vital to filling the roles that retiring Baby Boomers will leave behind.<sup>ii</sup>

As we look ahead to a recovery from the pandemic, the skills shortages that were present in the labour market beforehand remain an issue. Last year around half of Canadian employers reported that they faced difficulties in accessing the right talent.<sup>iii</sup> Previous studies have shown that small and medium enterprises encounter similar challenges in talent sourcing on a regular basis.<sup>iv</sup>

TRIEC's previous research has found that maximizing immigrant contributions in the labour market goes far beyond making sure newcomers can secure their first job.<sup>v</sup> That first job's quality and commensurability with an immigrant's previous roles is key and has an impact on the rest of their career. However, even this is only an initial step. Just because they hire immigrant talent, this does not mean that organizations are equipped with the knowledge and means to create inclusive workplaces that nurture and promote that talent. The *Building a Corporate Ladder for All* study confirmed that without diversity and inclusion, and the right talent management practices, few immigrants will ever climb up the career ladder.<sup>vi</sup>

Within talent management, having an inclusive approach is a must. The one group that makes (or breaks) the efforts of creating immigrant-inclusive teams is **middle managers**. They have the most influence on the day-to-day experiences of employees.<sup>vii</sup> They hold the key to who gets recruited, stays with the organization or gets promoted. How they approach and work with immigrant talent could go a long way towards addressing immigrant underemployment. However, they can also perpetuate the underutilization of talent and therefore by extension, the skills gaps in the labour market.

It is important to acknowledge upfront, as many interviewees in this study highlighted, that when middle managers learn about diversity and inclusion, they usually agree with the concepts and principles, and have good intentions about building inclusive teams. However, good intentions are not enough when it comes to building and leading an inclusive team with diverse talent. Executives need to set middle managers up for success by equipping them with the required skills, knowledge and resources, and facilitate ownership and accountability. Middle managers are also not powerless in their individual capacities – through self-awareness and an inquisitive and empathetic mindset, they too have the ability within their teams to move the needle on inclusion.

Empowering middle managers and holding them accountable for inclusive team-building is essential to fully leveraging the skills and experience of immigrants, and recent immigrants in particular. It is the key to creating more inclusive workplaces that positively affect the bottom line – from attaining higher profits to being an “employer of choice” among an increasingly diversity and inclusion conscious workforce.<sup>viii</sup> It is not just for the greater good of the organization, it is also for the team – most middle managers would prefer diverse and inclusive teams, that achieve better results than homogenous teams, in terms of innovation and performance.<sup>ix</sup>

# About the Study

This study looks at the role that middle managers play in forming and leading immigrant-inclusive teams (see definitions in the methodology section). When we embarked on this research, we set out to answer two key questions:

- How can executives support middle managers to adopt inclusive practices?
- What are the ways that middle managers can effectively build and lead immigrant-inclusive teams?

We asked middle managers to tell us about the support they would like to receive from senior executives to build more inclusive teams. The majority of these middle managers are or were at one time immigrants. This study can therefore offer a unique perspective because at its heart are people who are double “experts by experience”. These interviewees share their observations and insights as middle managers and offer professional stories of immigration and the barriers that they faced in the Canadian workplace.

We first provide a brief overview of the role middle managers play in achieving their organization’s diversity and inclusion goals. Then, based on our interviews, we present how executives can support middle managers to own their inclusion practices and actively practice inclusion within their teams on a day-to-day basis. Following this discussion, we focus on how middle managers drive inclusion within their team, including how they assess performance, provide feedback and engage with team members in an effective manner.

The study uses real-life examples, based on the experiences of middle managers, to observe what kind of competencies, behaviors and practices contribute to inclusion. While the focus of this report is immigrant inclusion, these experiences help ground the arguments in the broader sphere of diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

## Methodology

This research includes: 1) a review of existing literature about how diversity and inclusion intersects with the roles and responsibilities of middle managers; 2) key informant interviews with middle managers, many of whom were immigrants, and; 3) key informant interviews with human resources and diversity and inclusion leaders from various industries.

We conducted key informant interviews with 30 people, split between middle managers and HR and diversity and inclusion leaders. The interviews with middle managers covered how inclusion relates to their day-to-day work, what kind of supports they received from their leaders, and what kind of suggestions they had for building immigrant-inclusive teams. The interviews with diversity and inclusion leaders, on the other hand, concentrated more on what kind of skills, resources and supports middle managers need to build more diverse and inclusive teams and how executives can enable and encourage inclusive behaviors in their middle management.



# Terms and Definitions

## Middle manager

In literature as well as in practice, there is no standard definition of what makes a mid-level manager. It depends on the industry as well as the organization. The common denominator is that middle managers usually supervise line managers and report to senior management, holding titles such as divisional manager or director. For the purposes of this study, TRIEC defines middle management as those who are above frontline managers but are below Vice-President level.

## Inclusive middle manager

What does an inclusive middle manager look like? Deloitte has listed the six vital traits of an inclusive leader: “cognizance, curiosity, courage, cultural intelligence, collaboration and commitment.”<sup>x</sup> These traits are critical for building inclusive teams. Middle managers need to be aware of their own biases and learn about their team members’ backgrounds and working styles. They need to commit to hiring and advancing diverse talent, and encouraging and celebrating diverse perspectives. They further have to maintain and strengthen their commitment to inclusion by demonstrating vulnerability and authentic leadership.

## Immigrant (professional)

Similar to previous TRIEC studies, the focus is on immigrants with professional training, education, and experience who obtained their undergraduate degree or diploma outside of Canada, prior to immigrating here. The workplace and inclusion challenges faced by these immigrants directly relate to a perceived “lack” of Canadian experience and education as well as other aspects of their identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and others.

The term “newcomers” refers to immigrants who have landed in Canada in the last five years. As some of the challenges immigrants face in the workplace extend beyond five years, we use the term “immigrants” when we are explaining the barriers facing both newcomers and more established immigrants.

## Immigrant inclusion

According to TRIEC, immigrant-inclusive teams and organizations are those where immigrants can bring their whole personal and professional self to work, and undertake duties and responsibilities that fit their professional background and skill sets. This starts with newcomers being hired into roles commensurate with their experience and extends well into career advancement, where international experience and other aspects of their immigrant identities are not barriers in their path towards reaching more senior roles.





# Middle Managers and Inclusion: What we already know

Most of the existing studies on middle managers and inclusion focus on inclusion writ large – not specifically immigrant inclusion. As most diversity and inclusion initiatives do not define and target immigrants separately from other diversity groups, there isn't much literature on the impact of middle management practices on immigrant success in the workplace. While this section looks at the evidence that is available –we aim to help bridge this gap and establish a knowledge base through this report.

Middle managers make or break the efforts of creating inclusive and therefore high-performing teams across an organization. Yet they are traditionally an underserved group in the diversity and inclusion space. Existing research suggests that senior executives often don't know how to best support their middle managers to learn the skills they need to lead their teams inclusively.<sup>xi</sup> With limited support and resources from the top, inclusion can easily fall down the priority list of middle managers from “must do” to “nice to do.”

Middle managers are further “crunched” between competing priorities. Their role simultaneously involves:

- i) translating strategy into action through their teams;
- ii) collaborating with their peers; and
- iii) nurturing a good working relationship with their executives.<sup>xii</sup>

One concept that explains the occasional absence of inclusive behavior among mid-level managers is that of “middle status conformity.” According to this argument, actors in the middle of a hierarchy are more likely to conform to status quo than those either at the bottom or top – those at the bottom do not feel strongly invested in the current state, and those at the top have the social capital to deviate from existing practices. Diversity and inclusion is one area where this we can see conformity effect in action– there is a disconnect between leaders who feel confident and empowered to drive an inclusion agenda versus middle managers who are held accountable, and compensated and promoted for following the status quo.<sup>xiii</sup>

This might help explain why barriers such as the perception that immigrants need “Canadian experience” to secure commensurate employment, and the discounting of the value of international qualifications and work experience, have been so challenging to dismantle. Middle managers need to be encouraged by senior executives to take risks that drive structural change as well as leading to greater diversity of ideas and perspectives.<sup>xv</sup>

Advancing diversity and inclusion is a gateway to higher-performing, more innovative teams, as well as teams that are more tuned into the needs and motivations of their clients. A study from Australia found that inclusive teams are:

- Ten times more likely to work effectively and collaboratively to meet expectations
- Nine times more likely to look for new ways to address challenges
- Five times more likely to offer quality client/customer service
- Three times more likely to put in extra effort to help their team to find success

compared to non-inclusive teams.<sup>xvi</sup> In this way, the business case for inclusion is not just that it benefits the broader organization – but that it also benefits the middle managers themselves, who are interested in forming and leading high-performing teams.

# Primary Research: What we have learned

The primary research findings of this report are organized into two sections. The first section focuses on the role of executives in empowering middle managers to act inclusively and drive immigrant inclusion within their teams. The second section analyzes the behaviors and practices of middle managers. Both sets of findings are presented in the form of key actions that each group can take.



## Part I: The Role of Executives

### 1 Understand the challenges immigrants face - and design a targeted, systematic response

The first step in supporting middle managers is to diagnose accurately what kind of challenges immigrants face in their workplace, and which interventions are needed. Do immigrants have an equal chance of getting hired? Do they get promoted as often as their non-immigrant counterparts? Our key informant interviews confirmed that the inclusion strategies and frameworks of many employers do not define immigrants as a distinct group from other underrepresented groups like racialized people. The data to answer such questions are rarely collected.

**Executives need to recognize that being an immigrant to Canada significantly and uniquely affects someone's career success and opportunities for advancement.<sup>xvii</sup>**

### 2 Empower your managers and hold them accountable

As the conduit between executives and lower levels of management, middle managers are under significant pressure to deliver results. Every middle manager will consider how allocating time and resources to diversity and inclusion will affect their ability to meet their operational key performance indicators. Our interviews showed that interventions like mandatory diversity and inclusion trainings are not sufficient when creating ownership and accountability. It is up to executives to prioritize diversity and immigrant inclusion as an organizational mandate, and demonstrate how diversity and inclusion can be imbedded within operational decisions and practices at all levels.

*"Middle managers are facing a 'time crunch.' It's not that they are not interested or don't care – but they have a lot to deliver on, which leaves them very limited time to even think about a newcomer's experience."*

Diversity and inclusion leader

As several of the key informant interviewees put it, executives must acknowledge that changing established practices is perceived as a risk by middle managers. Many are used to hiring and promoting people that they are familiar working with – who “fit” in with current norms and expectations. Many hiring managers default to putting their white, male and Canadian-educated employees forward for promotion, because those managers themselves tend to be white and male with similar degrees. These behaviours are inherently rooted in Canada’s existing corporate culture and ways of doing business. Immigrants with diverse working styles are often not part of what is considered to be a “fit”.

One interviewee highlighted that the “unwritten rules” in an organization – practices and norms that are not explicit – define who/ what is considered as a fit. It is not uncommon that these unwritten rules clash with the inclusion agenda that the organization sets. Immigrants could therefore continue to be excluded even after hiring, since these rules significantly influence performance assessment and promotions. **Executives need to identify, call out and address the unwritten rules that hinder inclusive behavior.**

As many of the diversity and inclusion leaders we interviewed warned, organizations may not always be clear about what inclusion means for employees’ day-to-day work, and middle managers are no exception. Middle managers have to navigate resources and frameworks that are often incomplete or confusing – which means diversity and inclusion becomes an “add-on” to their usual set of duties and responsibilities.

Then comes the question of how to mainstream diversity and inclusion into the day-to-day work and actions of middle managers. Most interviewees agreed that inclusion should be a clear and formal responsibility of middle managers. This would include redefining success for middle managers in a way that encourages inclusive behavior – in terms of their key performance indicators and performance assessment. In order to hold middle managers accountable, executives need to provide the resources to advance inclusion in their work, which includes budget and time – without which, as one interviewee highlighted, it won’t be considered as a “real priority.” None of the middle managers that were interviewed who worked outside of the human resources and diversity and inclusion space had KPIs relating directly to diversity and inclusion. Some interviewees also cautioned that explicit KPIs could be potentially counter-productive as they would increase the level of pressure on middle managers.

*“Managers are discouraged from developing their teams at times, especially if the organization is facing a retention challenge. If you have an immigrant on your team, whose skills might be underutilized, and you help them to develop their career and contribute more, they might end up getting a better opportunity – and this might negatively affect your KPI.”*

Middle manager

*“What gets measured gets done. The performance metrics of middle managers has to include diversity, inclusion and equity indicators and targets.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader

*“Executives often give conflicting messages about ... expectations. Middle managers are usually rewarded for being prompt and delivering to the clients quickly. Building a diverse and inclusive team takes time, so it ends up at best in the secondary list of priorities.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader

This challenge could be overcome by the ways in which KPIs are defined and how middle managers are held accountable. As one interviewee put it, KPIs don't have to be specific quotas or hard figures that say "As a middle manager, you have to target X% of your team to be composed of immigrants." Instead, they could target specific behaviours that elevate immigrant inclusion, such as defining newcomers as a target group in succession planning, and committing to actions such as mentoring and sponsorship to help them grow in their current roles.

This relates to the key question of how executives can encourage inclusive behavior. The interviewees had different opinions on this, which can be split into two broad categories, illustrated in the below table.



Table 1. Explicit rewards vs. power of acknowledgement

Rewarding inclusion accomplishments	Acknowledgement and endorsement by executives
<p>According to this view, progress in diversity and inclusion needs to be <b>rewarded explicitly</b>. Performance evaluation needs to clearly outline objectives and rewards – as middle managers will otherwise prioritize other duties that bring more compensation and advancement opportunities.</p>	<p>This perspective argues that executives <b>acknowledging and validating</b> inclusive behavior is what will drive middle management to own and practice inclusion. Diversity and inclusion should not be attached to rewards. There is a risk of tokenization that could cause managers not to fully internalize inclusive values – therefore potentially achieving diversity but not inclusion.</p>

Either of these approaches on their own, or a combination of the two, could produce the intended results – what will work best will depend on the organization and organizational culture, as well as the sub-cultures within. In organizations/teams where manager performance and meeting divisional targets is usually rewarded with financial benefits, explicit objectives and rewards could work better. In others, where recognition and appreciation are an integral part of the workplace/team culture, the power of acknowledgement might supersede any financial perks.

“In our organization, we assess ... performance for middle managers through both goals and values. Goals are operational expectations ... in terms of business unit achievements and the bottom line. Values is how you reach those goals – what were the actual strategies and principles that you followed? Values is directly tied to the cumulative piece of assessment with regards to bonuses as well as promotion prospects.”

Diversity and inclusion leader

### 3 Be the change you want to see

For wider uptake of inclusive behavior by middle management, executives need to demonstrate that diversity and inclusion is a priority through their own actions. As one interviewee highlighted, this goes far beyond putting out statements in support of causes such as Black Lives Matter. In the case of immigrants, this means executives acting to counter unconscious biases towards immigrant talent, eliminating biased advice given to the immigrant employees in their organization, and approaching the skills and competencies of immigrants more holistically – not just as a way of filling entry-level jobs.

The key informant interviews confirmed that unconscious bias remains a significant barrier to the kind of roles, duties and responsibilities immigrants are given. Interviewees shared that organizations are still resistant to offer senior and client-facing roles to those who were not born here and for whom English may not be their first language. International education and experience, even experience gained in multinational corporations, is discounted against experience obtained in Canada.

As several of the middle manager interviewees underlined, immigrants often receive ‘biased’ advice within their workplaces on subjects such as their responsibilities, compensation and advancement. This includes asking immigrants to be content with “what they can get” as one interviewee put it – regardless of whether their skills are fully utilized and if their job description matches their previous international experience. This serves to reinforce the disproportionate unemployment and underemployment gaps that immigrants face, compared to non-immigrants.<sup>xviii</sup> **Senior leadership has a key responsibility to call out behaviours and practices that prevent immigrant employees from taking on new projects and responsibilities, negotiating a new salary or getting a promotion.**

Executives need to hold up the same standards at the leadership level. If a leadership team is predominantly from a single ethnic background or gender, calls for middle managers to act inclusively will not be genuine. As one interviewee highlighted, executives also have to ensure that their go-to people for advice on diversity and inclusion belong to different identity groups, and are not all from the same gender and ethnocultural backgrounds.

*“I have seen cases where employed newcomers are not taken into consideration for more senior roles if English is not their first language. The focus should be on their skills and not whether they speak with an accent or not.”*

Middle manager

*“One of the most frequent advice given to immigrants who would like to progress within an organization is the ‘you should be grateful’ mindset. This is biased advice – you should feel comfortable to ask for more – whether in terms of salary or responsibilities.”*

Middle manager

*“I was interviewing for a minimum-income job and I asked hiring manager if there was any other position where my marketing and communications skills would be more relevant. The manager told me that I don’t have Canadian experience, and that I had to start somewhere. He gave the example of the company’s CEO who started his career as a truck driver.”*

Middle manager

One way executives can connect with middle managers on inclusion is through being vulnerable and showing vulnerability, so that the managers can do the same within their teams. When senior leaders take risks and open up space for conversation, people feel more valued and more able to be authentic. Both middle manager and diversity and inclusion leader interviewees shared stories of executives being vulnerable – e.g. through disclosing their sexual orientation, or mental health challenges that they were facing, which in turn allowed their teams to share their experiences more openly.

*“I didn’t talk about my child at work for many years as I was afraid this would be interpreted as a sign of weakness.”*

Middle manager

*“Policies and training won’t solve all the problems to achieve inclusion, accountability will solve most, but then it ultimately comes down to... role modeling and inclusive behavior.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader



#### 4 Build intercultural competencies

As with performing any other task successfully, acting inclusively requires the right knowledge, competencies and skills. **Executives need to expand opportunities for their middle managers to acquire intercultural skills and exercise the attributes that are associated with inclusive leadership.**

Both the diversity and inclusion leaders and middle managers that we interviewed underlined that **intercultural competencies** – the ability to see differences and commonalities between cultures and adapt behavior accordingly – is critical for middle managers to be able to build immigrant inclusive teams. Individuals define the top qualities and behavior of a good employee differently. Middle managers need to have open conversations with their teams to observe how these perspectives shape their approach to their work. For example, the concept of “respect” in the workplace is different across cultures. It could mean having collaborative relationships with colleagues in one country, while in others, it might be defined as following the procedures and processes set for you by your manager.

As several diversity and inclusion leader interviewees emphasized, every employee, including immigrant employees, requires a certain degree of intercultural competence – the level varies depending on the role. In most cases, middle managers don’t need more information about what diversity and inclusion is, but need the skills to navigate the differences in work styles. Managers need to set up open communication and feedback channels with their team members, so that they can comfortably speak up or raise their concerns.



As for how these intercultural competencies can be acquired, unconscious bias training is a good first step. However, it is not sufficient, especially in the form of a stand-alone session. In many organizations, broader diversity and inclusion trainings continue to concentrate on executives. There is a need for continuous and customized trainings that will support middle managers to apply the learnings in their work. These need to feature practical and day-to-day solutions to the everyday questions that middle managers face – from whom to recruit to their team to whom to assign the next critical client presentation.

Empathy and humility are two key competencies that were highlighted by many of the interviewees as critical for inclusive behavior. Mentoring a newcomer employee could help middle managers become more authentic and open-minded, as mentors become more appreciative of diverse talent and develop their coaching and leadership skills.<sup>xix</sup> Likewise, humility is an asset for middle managers when navigating cultural differences in the workplace, especially when it comes to working with newcomers. It is important not to always assume that the existing ways of doing things is the best. Interacting with diverse employees with an open mind and a curiosity to learn can transform how you communicate and collaborate in the workplace.

*“There is no perfect inclusive leader. You have to always keep asking, “what can I do better?”*

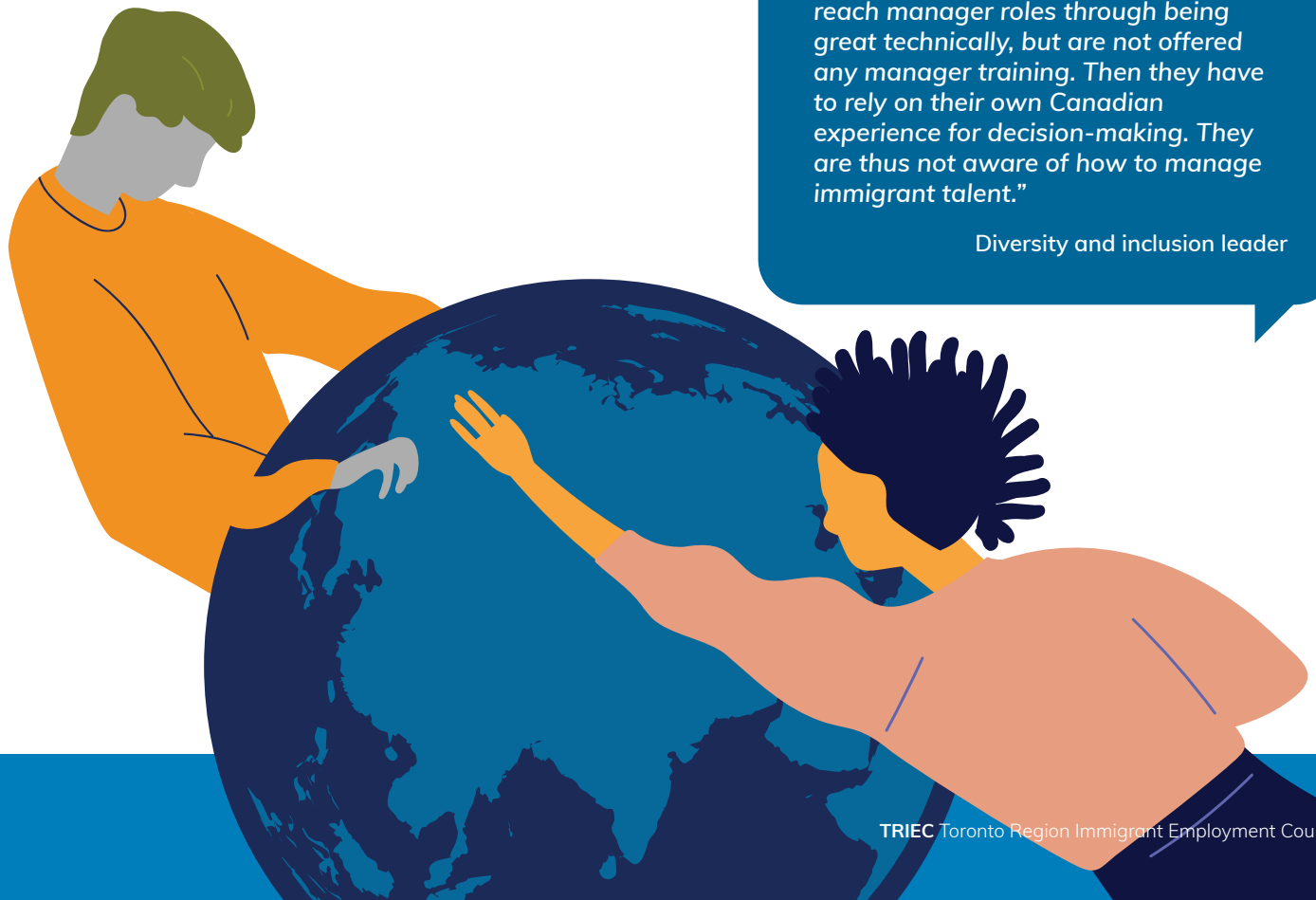
Diversity and inclusion leader

*“Immigrants themselves need intercultural skills, like everyone else. In my home country, I was surrounded with people from the same ethnocultural background. Here, I had to work with people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds, and I faced the challenge of navigating everyone’s different working styles.”*

Middle manager

*“Many employees [born in Canada] reach manager roles through being great technically, but are not offered any manager training. Then they have to rely on their own Canadian experience for decision-making. They are thus not aware of how to manage immigrant talent.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader





## PART II: The Role of Middle Managers

### 1 Create a “bubble of inclusivity”

Although inclusion needs to start with executives making it a priority for the entire organization, middle managers are not powerless. Through the right approach, attitudes and behaviour, they can create a “bubble of inclusivity” – even within an organization that is not advanced in their diversity and inclusion journey.

How can a middle manager kickstart or progress in their inclusion journey by empowering members of their team? The principle of **“intentionality”** is critical according to several diversity and inclusion leaders interviewed. **Middle managers need to be intentional in developing their relationships with their team members, in order to ensure that the team performs well and delivers on the required outcomes. The core of this is to establish team dynamics in a way that works for everyone – including those who might be new to Canada and are used to different workplace cultures and practices.** For instance, when looking for new ideas, is calling a meeting and asking all team members the best way to innovate? Or are there alternative ways of brainstorming that could work better for different team members? Answering these questions would inevitably lead to middle managers to thinking about and reflecting on how their own values shape their thinking and behavior.

*“If your team members don’t feel comfortable being put on the spot in meetings, you can try to send the meeting questions in advance to give them time to prepare – these small acts and day-to-day experiences make the biggest impact.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader

*“It’s about authentically connecting with your team and just being curious and learning about others. You have to model positive behavior, curiosity and even how to deal with mistakes.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader



Many of the interviewees agreed that **middle managers can do more in their individual capacity to proactively adopt inclusive behavior. This starts with a diagnostic of where they are currently in their inclusion journey – asking questions like who am I missing in my team? Do I have different identity groups, including newcomers and established immigrants, represented in my team? Am I always going to the same team members for strategic projects?** It involves asking their team's and peers' feedback on whether they are acting inclusively, and if they have any blind spots.

As one interviewee argued, fostering open communication with the team is especially helpful when the overarching organizational culture is not inclusive. The reality needs to inform what action the middle manager takes – for instance, if their team consists of a single gender, ethnicity or race, they will have to put more effort into recruiting from a wider and more diverse talent pool (see below section on hiring for more discussion on this), which was voiced by many interviewees. Middle managers may not have all the answers, but piloting new ideas and practices within their own sphere of influence based on these observations could make a difference.

As in the case of executives, both middle manager and diversity and inclusion leader interviewees highlighted empathy and humility as essential attributes that middle managers should have. They need to have an open and learning mindset when considering any potential existing challenges in building a more inclusive team and how these might be addressed. They should encourage constructive criticism from their employees to help them identify these challenges. Doing this requires building trust with their team members, so they feel able to share their genuine thoughts and experiences.

Middle managers also need to support employees within and beyond their teams to be and act as their true selves, especially with those with whom they do not share similar identities and backgrounds. This is a vital component of employees' day-to-day experiences of inclusion, and could be practiced during a coffee chat, in a team meeting, or over a promotion decision.<sup>xx</sup>

*"Middle managers sometimes avoid these discussions for the fear of saying the 'wrong thing.' However, acknowledging what you don't know about the experiences of an immigrant team member and asking for permission to learn, creates the space to find the right footing and move forward."*

Diversity and inclusion leader

*"As a Black and female middle manager, I would like to tell all my peers not to make assumptions. We don't experience racism and other challenges at the workplace the same way. Intersectionality is a big factor. Ask your diverse team members what their experiences are, and build good rapport with them. Do they face challenges as an immigrant, as a woman, as a member of LGBTQ+ community or as all of these things?"*

Middle manager

## 2 Think about how feedback is given

How middle managers assess performance and provide feedback can make or break whether their immigrant team members feel included. The way they define a team member's success is again based on perceptions of 'fit' – which are predominantly based on Anglo-Saxon characteristics. As one interviewee put it, the value systems of middle managers usually follows the North American, male and heteronormative perspectives.

**Middle managers need to think about which behaviours are valued in the Canadian workplace, and how these behaviours might differ across countries and cultures.** Acknowledging and navigating these differences is key to being an inclusive leader who facilitates the success of their team. For instance, when describing their contribution to a team or group project, an immigrant from a collectivist culture might use the language “we” more than “I” – which could be misleading for the middle manager. One interviewee highlighted that it's very challenging to undo the rules and etiquette that immigrants have internalized for years. There is a power imbalance in managers ignoring the soft skills that immigrants already have – and asking them to change or adapt behavior. Similarly, if there is a miscommunication between a client and a newcomer team member, it's important to not to make any judgements based on assumptions, but instead to try to understand what happened, and why the team member responded in a particular way.

A similar example is the mode of communication. If English is not the first language of a newcomer employee, they might initially prefer written communication and feedback to verbal. **Middle managers are responsible for ensuring that different working styles and preferences are accommodated.**

Newcomers, as with any new employee, might run into challenges in their work, but as pointed out by some of the interviewees, micromanagement isn't the right response to dealing with any barriers that they might be facing. They might initially need more support during onboarding, but they have to then be provided with the space to leverage their international experience and to advance their skills through practice, including making mistakes. The goal of middle managers should be to empower newcomer employees to handle their tasks with the knowledge and skills they bring.

*“In my home country, you have a very direct communication with your team members – here is the task and here is the deadline. Here, people communicate indirectly. The manager will tell the subordinate, can you take care of this “if you have time”? A newcomer might take this as I have to focus on other priorities. And the manager might then get disappointed when this task is not done, and could mark the person as not that competent.”*

Middle manager

*“We came across an immigrant woman from one of the Asian countries as a candidate for an engineer role in a mining company. She had a very strong accent when speaking English. She had incredible accomplishments in her resume, so the leader of the team hired her. They worked together to find ways of effective communication, and the immigrant woman absolutely thrived in the role. This showed the team how important and beneficial it is to navigate differences.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader

### 3 Review hiring practices

Recruitment is another area where middle managers can eliminate barriers for immigrants by adopting more inclusive practices. Interviewees highlighted three areas of recruitment where middle managers can advance inclusion: i) creating the job description, ii) posting the job role and iii) assessing the competencies required for the role.

**Writing the job description is a key first step. Managers going through hiring processes should consider which key competencies and qualities are required for the position, and express clearly what is a “must-have” and what is a “nice-to-have”.** As one interviewee highlighted, job descriptions otherwise become “laundry lists” and people then self-select for the roles they think they qualify for. For instance, research shows that women are less likely to apply for the jobs that they think they are underqualified for,<sup>xxi</sup> and the interviews confirmed once again that this applies particularly to immigrant women. Middle managers should ensure that job descriptions clearly articulate the duties and responsibilities involved and the key competencies required to successfully undertake them.

Posting a new job opening in an inclusive way is as important as creating the job description. As several diversity and inclusion leader interviewees underlined, organizations need to conduct targeted outreach to increase applications by diversity groups, including immigrants. Hiring from the same talent pools is unlikely to change the outcome. **Middle managers need to collaborate with human resources to share job openings through different communications channels (e.g. through collaborating with employment service providers or professional immigrant networks) to reach various underrepresented groups and communities.**

Middle managers also need to consider how they will assess the key skills and competencies needed for the position. **An assessment of immigrant skills beyond their formal qualifications would provide a more holistic view of their potential<sup>xxii</sup> and help avoid pitfalls like neglecting a candidate due to lack of “Canadian experience”.** This goes hand in hand with other inclusive hiring practices, such as having a diverse hiring and interview committee.

*“Successful middle managers build teams that have different strengths and skill sets, and ensure an enabling environment for them to fit like a puzzle board.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader



*“If you are hiring as a middle manager, and if the candidate has a post-secondary degree from a school that you [haven’t heard of], does that take away the individual’s experience? You lose significant talent if you don’t value international credentials and experience.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader

A few of the interviewees emphasised that inclusive practices are also critical in the onboarding stage. Onboarding buddies in particular could help newcomers to have a successful probation period. If an organization does not have a full-fledged buddy system in place, middle managers can introduce such practices formally or informally within their teams.



*"We were interviewing for a new manager role in my team. A young immigrant man of East Asian origin came for the interview. He was extremely well prepared. We had a diverse panel present, and at the end of the interview, we had a debrief. The panel members argued that the person was too prepared and too structured, which they interpreted as a sign of lack of transparency and honesty. This was a gripping moment for me – I thought about how as an immigrant, your cultural upbringing and experiences affect the way you demonstrate being prepared. Assuming that being overly prepared is a sign of lack of trust and empathy is problematic, and I explained this to my colleagues, who understood where I was coming from."*

*It was also interesting, because we also had a normative white guy in the interviews, who demonstrated miniscule effort, but was able to appeal to the panel as trustworthy, calm and easy to work with. You shouldn't make assumptions right away based on North American values. Take the time to understand the values of your potential and current team members, and which part of the world they are coming from. If you don't have an awareness about this, then you will limit the opportunities for immigrants who come through the door."*

Diversity and inclusion leader

## 4 Connect the team to mentors and be a champion

TRIEC's previous research has shown that mentoring and sponsorship increases the representation of immigrant talent within organizations.<sup>xxiii</sup> Middle managers can guide and support their team members to cultivate such relationships – as this will ensure that their team is set for success.

Mentoring – providing advice, insights and support based on the mentor's experience – could be instrumental in supporting newcomer employees to find their initial footing within their roles. Many of the immigrant interviewees in management roles said that having a committed mentor played a significant role in their career advancement. Sponsorship, on the other hand, usually follows at a later stage once the employee is more settled – with different degrees of engagement and support.<sup>xxiv</sup>

**Middle managers should encourage their teams to network and establish mentoring relationships outside of their teams and departments.**

The middle manager interviewees highlighted that a shared occupational or ethnocultural background can be the basis of a fruitful mentoring relationship, and this can work even better if the person is not within the same department and has no active working relationship with their mentee. One of the interviewees also argued that such connections would help immigrant employees to overcome workplace barriers such as “emotional tax”<sup>xxv</sup> – strong feelings of being different from colleagues based on different facets of identity, which then leads to attrition in terms of health, well-being and success in the workplace.

Similarly, as highlighted by several middle manager and diversity and inclusion leader interviewees, middle managers should also consider mentoring employees in other teams. This connects back to the idea of a “bubble of inclusivity” – by being mentors, middle managers could extend their bubble to their peers and their teams.

*“Successful immigrants that I came across had great mentors – someone who is not their boss and does not have a direct impact on their role, who acted as a sounding board. Both mentors from different parts of the same organization or from the broader industry or community make a difference.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader

*“Many organizations have pockets within them that practice inclusion on a day-to-day basis, while other pockets are far behind.”*

Diversity and inclusion leader

*“There was a new opportunity in my organization and it seemed like a good fit for me and my career progression. My middle manager did not believe that I could get the position – so I networked and found another manager, who was more supportive and connected me with the senior leader of the hiring unit. I ended up getting that position.”*

Middle manager

# Recommendations

Based on the research findings, these are the top takeaways for executives and middle managers to advance immigrant inclusion within their organizations and teams:

## Executives

- Understand what kind of challenges immigrants face in the labour market and in the workplace, and collect data on your organization's diversity and inclusion efforts
- Hold middle managers accountable for diversity and inclusion, and set aside time, learning opportunities and budget for them to work towards diversity and inclusion goals and targets
- Create incentives for demonstrating inclusive behavior, whether eligibility for promotions or formal recognition
- Live up to the inclusion standards that you set for middle managers – show vulnerability, empathy and humility

## Middle Managers

- Commit to creating a “bubble of inclusivity” – talk to team members about their working styles and experiences and ensure that the team dynamics work for everyone
- Assess how behaviours are being valued and how cultural norms affect those judgements
- Adjust hiring practices to uncover biases that diminish the value of international education and work experience
- Promote a mentorship culture by connecting newcomers and established immigrant employees to a mentor



# Conclusion

The renewed focus on diversity and inclusion in Canada as a result of movements like Black Lives Matter is a perfect reminder to executives to see inclusion as a marathon, not a sprint. The drive to achieve inclusion needs to be systematically and intentionally cascaded down to all management levels. Practice is key to finding the right rhythm, but even then, progress will take commitment, time and resources.

Even when an organization may feel they have crossed the finish line, there is always the opportunity to improve its “personal best” time. Continued assessment of talent management practices and behaviours will serve the organization’s and its teams’ performance well.

Our research demonstrates that middle managers, when empowered and supported by executives, can help create an immigrant-inclusive workplace – where immigrants are empowered as a result of, and not in spite of, international experience.

**Ultimately this will have a wider positive impact, building a labour market in which immigrant talent finds commensurate employment and career advancement is bolstered.**





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For questions about TRIEC's programs,  
please contact Raj Dam at  
[rdam@triec.ca](mailto:rdam@triec.ca)

**Toronto Region  
Immigrant Employment Council**

603-250 Dundas St. West,  
Toronto ON, M5T 2Z5  
Canada

416-944-1946

**[triec.ca](http://triec.ca)**