Why EDI Policies Alone Aren't Enough: Leadership Behaviour Drives Real Inclusion in Irish Insurance

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Initial findings from a mixed-methods study with 115 survey respondents and 21 semi-structured interviews shows that senior leaders' daily actions shape belonging and retention more than diversity targets or formal initiatives.

Insurance firms continue to invest in diversity, equality and inclusion (EDI) amid talent competition, regulatory expectations on culture, and the need for stronger employee engagement. A convergent mixed-methods study of the Irish insurance sector comprising 115 employee survey responses plus 21 in-depth interviews highlights a consistent message from participants: inclusive leadership behaviour is the strongest driver of whether EDI efforts create genuine belonging or remain largely symbolic.

The survey captured a mid-career workforce (largest group aged 35-44, strong Millennial representation) working mainly in multinationals (69%), with women comprising 59% of respondents. While organisations have rolled out mandatory training, gender-pay reporting and hybrid policies, employees described a clear gap between policy and everyday experience.

Leadership behaviour is the decisive factor

Quantitative results showed that perceptions of senior leadership team (SLT) inclusivity strongly predicted psychological safety, sense of belonging, and comfort being oneself at work. Correlations were moderate to strong (e.g., SLT inclusivity with belonging $\rho = .535$; psychological safety with belonging $\rho = .666$). Regression models confirmed large effects: when employees felt leaders prioritised inclusion, the odds of positive outcomes rose sharply. When leaders did not prioritise it, or staff were unsure, odds dropped dramatically.

In contrast, the demographic composition of leadership teams had no significant predictive power. Participants repeatedly described leadership actions as more influential than who holds senior roles. One interviewee noted the importance of visible engagement: "Tone from the top is highly inclusive" (Survey, Reference 6). Where leaders modelled fairness and accountability, trust grew; where favouritism or distance prevailed, cynicism followed.

Everyday cultural barriers persist

Employees who experienced their workplace as respectful and diverse were significantly more likely to recommend their employer. Respect correlated moderately-to-strongly with perceived diversity ($\rho = .579$) and with willingness to recommend the organisation ($\rho = .449$). Yet the 25-34 age group was least likely to recommend their firm, citing weaker respectful culture.

Qualitative accounts revealed subtle but recurring barriers. Many described "club" cultures based on shared schools, suburbs, rugby backgrounds or long tenure that advantaged insiders. Nepotism and internal hiring limited merit-based progression, especially for those outside Dublin-centric networks or in satellite offices. One participant explained:

"Everyone went to the same two universities in Dublin; everyone is from the same few suburbs. They are a club playing at being fair and pretending to care about diversity" (Survey, Reference 7).

Another added:

"If you're not in that group you don't fit their background" (Transcript 20).

Self-censorship around EDI topics was common due to fear of profession repercussions. Gender added complexity. Working mothers often felt

"tolerated" rather than supported, with caregiving responsibilities reducing visibility and promotion chances. One participant reflected:

"I believe I've suffered discrimination as a result of becoming a mother" (Transcript 1).

Some male employees worried that quota-style approaches could disadvantage them or erode merit. Outsourced teams and regional staff sometimes felt treated as second-tier.

At the same time, hybrid working was widely valued as a practical step toward greater inclusion. Employees praised it for improving regional access, work-life balance, and attraction of new talent. Several noted it helped bridge geographic divides and made the sector more appealing to those outside Dublin.

Awareness of recent EDI changes was higher among older employees, senior staff and those in multinationals. Formal mechanisms such as training received positive mentions as necessary progress, but many viewed them as "tick-box" when not reinforced by consistent leadership action. Trust in reporting systems remained low.

What the research suggests for the sector

The findings point to several areas where these cultural patterns may matter for insurance workplaces. Younger employees and those outside dominant networks appeared to disengage more quickly, which could affect retention and employer advocacy in a competitive labour market. Low psychological safety was linked by participants to reduced willingness to speak up about concerns. Participants also connected genuine inclusion to richer collaboration and decision-making, noting that diverse perspectives add value only when people feel safe to contribute fully. Finally, visible gaps between stated commitments and lived experience may affect how organisations demonstrate cultural fairness more broadly.

Practical steps suggested by the findings

1. Prioritise visible leadership modelling
   Senior leaders can demonstrate inclusion through regular engagement across levels and locations, consistent policy enforcement, and accountability for all staff.
2. Address network and geographic biases
   Review hiring, promotion and development processes for transparency and ensure satellite and hybrid arrangements genuinely support visibility and opportunity for all.
3. Support caregiving realities
   Strengthen practical measures for parents (mothers and fathers alike) to reduce unintended penalties and avoid backlash.
4. Measure what employees actually experience
   Track psychological safety and belonging through regular pulse checks rather than demographics alone, linking insights to retention and engagement indicators.

This ongoing research suggests that insurers treating inclusive leadership as a core cultural driver, rather than a compliance checkbox, may see stronger talent retention, more open workplace dialogue, and more meaningful returns on EDI investment.

In Ireland's tight-knit insurance sector, where reputation and word-of-mouth matter greatly, the gap between policy and culture is costly; closing this gap appears to be a practical opportunity rather than an abstract ideal. When senior leaders consistently prioritise inclusion through everyday behaviour, EDI moves from symbolic to substantive, where employees genuinely feel they belong and can contribute fully.