

LEADING INCLUSIVE SYSTEMS CHANGE:

Practical Moves for Resistance & Momentum



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This resource supports anyone leading inclusive change—whether in a formal facilitation role or from a leadership position. Inclusive systems change surfaces predictable moments of resistance, discomfort, and urgency. What matters most is how leaders respond in those moments.

PART I: 5 LEADER MOVES

1) WHEN BELIEF IS CONFUSED WITH EVIDENCE

You may hear (or think):

- “We already do inclusion.”
- “Our district is inclusive.”

Leader move:

Shift from intent to impact.

Try saying or asking:

- “Let’s make sure we’re using the same definition of inclusion.”
- “What evidence would tell us inclusion is working for all students?”
- “Where do our systems consistently support belonging, and where do they not?”

Why this matters:

Systems don’t change based on belief alone. They change when leaders are willing to look honestly at patterns.

2. WHEN DEFICIT THINKING APPEARS

You may hear (or think):

- “This won’t work for those students.”
- “Some students need something different.”

Leader move:

Reframe the issue as system design, not student capacity.

Try saying or asking:

- “What supports would make success possible?”
- “What’s structural here, and what are we assuming is a student issue?”
- “How could we design differently to expand access?”

Why this matters:

Inclusive systems are built when leaders treat barriers as design challenges, not fixed traits.

3. WHEN FAIRNESS IS USED TO JUSTIFY EXCLUSION

You may hear (or think):

- “This isn’t fair to other students.”

Leader move:

Clarify equity without escalating emotion.

Try saying or asking:

- “Fair doesn’t mean the same, it means everyone gets what they need.”
- “Who are we worried about, and what outcomes are we trying to protect?”

Why this matters:

Fairness arguments often signal fear. Leaders keep the focus on outcomes and belonging.

4. WHEN STAFFING BECOMES THE DEFAULT SOLUTION

You may hear (or think):

- “We just need more paraprofessionals.”
- “We’re understaffed.”

Leader move:

Differentiate support from staffing.

Try saying or asking:

- “I agree students need support, let’s talk about what kind of support improves outcomes.”
- “What problem are we trying to solve with staffing alone?”

Why this matters:

Staffing decisions are systems decisions. Without structural clarity, adding adults often reinforces dependence.

5. WHEN OVERWHELM SHOWS UP

You may hear (or think):

- “This is too much.”
- “We can’t do all of this.”

Leader move:

Slow the work without stopping it.

Try saying or asking:

- “We’re not doing everything at once.”
- “Sequencing matters more than speed.”
- “What’s one system-level shift that would make everything else easier?”

Why this matters:

Sustainable change requires pacing, not pressure.

PART II: 3 FACILITATOR MOVES

1. WHEN THE GROUP JUMPS TO SOLUTIONS

Facilitator move:

Protect the sequence.

Try saying:

- “That’s an important idea, and timing matters.”
- “What clarity do we still need before acting?”

Why this matters:

Premature solutions often lock in inequitable structures.

2. WHEN THE CONVERSATION DRIFTS TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS

Facilitator move:

Zoom out to the system.

Try saying:

- “What system is creating this challenge?”
- “If this is happening for one student, where else might it be happening?”

Why this matters:

Book studies and PD are not case management meetings.

3. WHEN EMOTIONS OR DEFENSIVENESS RISE

Facilitator move:

Name emotion without centering it.

Try saying:

- “Discomfort is part of real change.”
- “We can acknowledge how hard this feels and stay focused on student belonging.”

Why this matters:

Emotional validation should not derail equity goals.

PART III: UNIVERSAL SELF-CHECK FOR LEADERS & FACILITATORS

IF I AM FIXING...

I'm jumping in too fast.

Pause. Ask a question. Let the group think.

Reset question:

"What do we need to understand better before solving this?"

IF I AM DEFENDING...

I'm trying to convince instead of lead.

Re-anchor to values and vision.

Reset question:

"What does our shared vision ask of us here?"

IF I AM LEADING...

I'm holding the through-line and the pace.

I'm allowing discomfort without escalating it.

I'm trusting the process.

Leading sounds like:

- "We don't have to solve this today."
- "Let's come back to our shared definition."
- "What's the next right step, not the perfect one?"

ONE-SENTENCE RESET (FOR ANYONE LEADING CHANGE)

What does leadership, not urgency, require right now?

TRYING TO MOVE INCLUSION FORWARD... BUT FACING PUSHBACK ALONG THE WAY?

SHOW ME WHAT ACTUALLY WORKS

