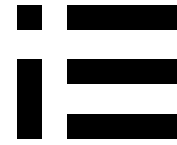


# **CULTURE FIRST: MENTAL HEALTH AND INCLUSIVE THINKING IN AN AI WORLD**

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*In an AI-driven world, culture is not optional—it's the foundation for sustainable change.*

As artificial intelligence (AI) rapidly reshapes how we work, learn, and connect, one truth is becoming increasingly clear: culture is not a side issue—it's the foundation on which meaningful change stands. Whether in classrooms, boardrooms, or community spaces, the success of new technologies depends not just on how they're built, but on how people experience them. Yet many organisations and educational institutions rush to adopt AI without considering the emotional and relational infrastructure needed to make these changes sustainable.

Mental health and inclusive thinking are often treated as separate concerns—ethical, personal, or HR-related. But in reality, they are strategic imperatives. Without them, innovation falters, relationships fray, and the promise of progress becomes a source of pressure. In an AI-driven world, where speed and efficiency dominate, we must ask: how do we protect the human core of our systems? How do we design cultures that support difference, nurture wellbeing, and invite everyone to contribute?

### The Power of Cognitive Diversity

Professor Alex Edmans' [recent report](#) on cognitive diversity highlights a simple but powerful idea: teams made up of people who think differently perform better. When individuals bring varied life experiences, problem-solving styles, and cultural perspectives, they generate more creative ideas and spot risks that others might miss. This is true in education, business, and social change. But these benefits only emerge when people feel safe to speak up.

In many environments, especially those under pressure or undergoing change, people may

hold back. They worry about being judged, misunderstood, or excluded. This leads to conformity—where everyone agrees just to avoid conflict. The result is groupthink, a dynamic where innovation stalls and important voices go unheard.

In schools, this might look like students who stop asking questions because they fear sounding “stupid,” or staff who avoid raising concerns about policy changes that feel rushed or inequitable. In global organisations, it might mean junior team members deferring to senior voices, even when they see flaws in a strategy. These silences are costly—not just emotionally, but strategically.

### Psychological Safety as a Foundation

This is where mental health becomes essential. It's not just about preventing burnout or managing stress—it's about creating spaces where people feel emotionally supported and safe to be themselves. Psychological safety allows individuals to share ideas that are different, challenging, or unconventional. It encourages honest dialogue and helps teams stay resilient in the face of uncertainty.

In inclusive cultures, mental health is built into the design. It's part of how meetings are run, how feedback is given, and how leadership is practiced. It's not an add-on—it's the glue that holds diverse teams together. When people feel mentally well and emotionally safe, they are more likely to take risks, challenge assumptions, and contribute fully. This is especially important in educational settings, where students and staff alike face increasing pressures—from performance metrics to digital surveillance. When mental health is neglected, it becomes harder to foster curiosity, creativity,

and critical thinking. But when it's prioritised, it opens the door to deeper learning and more meaningful collaboration.

### Leadership and the Role of Vulnerability

Leadership plays a key role in shaping this culture. Edmans argues that disagreement should not just be allowed—it should be actively encouraged. Leaders must model vulnerability by sharing their own blind spots and uncertainties. They can introduce practices like silent starts (where everyone reflects before speaking), rotating facilitators, and devil's advocate roles to surface quieter voices and challenge dominant narratives.

This kind of leadership requires emotional intelligence. It means listening deeply, interrupting bias, and creating rituals that make inclusion real. It also means recognising when psychological safety is eroding—and responding with empathy and clarity.

In practice, this might look like a school leader who opens staff meetings by acknowledging the emotional toll of recent changes, or a university dean who invites feedback on strategic plans before they're finalised. It might mean a team lead who notices when someone has gone quiet and checks in privately—not to pressure, but to support.

### Emotional Labour and the Cost of Inclusion

It's also important to recognise the emotional labour involved in inclusion work. People from marginalised groups often carry the burden of educating others, challenging bias, and

navigating systems not built with them in mind. This labour is often invisible—and exhausting.

When mental health is not part of the cultural design, this emotional labour goes unacknowledged. People burn out, disengage, or leave. But when it's recognised and supported, it becomes a source of strength. It allows individuals to contribute meaningfully without sacrificing their wellbeing.

Organisations and educational institutions must therefore move beyond surface-level inclusion. It's not enough to celebrate diversity—we must create systems that support it. That means listening, adapting, and investing in the emotional health of our communities.

### AI and the Risk of Regressive Culture

AI brings incredible potential—but it also carries risk. Algorithms can reinforce bias, automate exclusion, and create environments where human nuance is lost. If culture is not actively shaped, AI can accelerate regressive patterns—silencing dissent, flattening difference, and prioritising efficiency over empathy.

To counter this, we must design cultures that are intentionally inclusive. That means questioning how AI tools are used, who they serve, and what values they reflect. It means involving diverse voices in technology decisions and ensuring that mental health is part of the conversation—not an afterthought.

## Proposed Solutions

To build cultures that support mental health and inclusive thinking, organisations and educational institutions can take several practical steps:

### 1. Design Teams Intentionally

- Match tasks to thinking styles (e.g. analytical, creative, relational)
- Ensure a mix of backgrounds and perspectives
- Avoid tokenism by valuing all contributions equally

### 2. Embed Psychological Safety into Daily Practice

- Use inclusive meeting structures (silent starts, rotating chairs)
- Encourage honest feedback and reward constructive dissent
- Train staff in emotional intelligence and bias awareness

### 3. Support Mental Health Proactively

- Provide access to mental health resources and peer support
- Normalise conversations about wellbeing
- Recognise emotional labour and create space for recovery

### 4. Adapt to Cultural Contexts

- Learn how local norms shape trust and communication
- Co-create inclusion strategies with diverse communities
- Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches to leadership and engagement

### 5. Connect Diversity to Purpose

- Frame cognitive diversity as a way to deepen meaning, not just improve performance
- Use storytelling to highlight the value of different perspectives
- Align inclusion efforts with organisational or educational values

### 6. Rethink AI Integration

- Involve diverse voices in AI design and implementation
- Audit tools for bias and emotional impact
- Use AI to support—not replace—human connection

### 7. Invest in Leadership Development

- Train leaders in inclusive facilitation and emotional literacy
- Encourage vulnerability and model reflective practice
- Create accountability structures for cultural health

## Conclusion

- Culture is not optional: It's the foundation for sustainable change in an AI-driven world.
- Mental health and inclusive thinking are strategic: They enable innovation, resilience, and authentic connection.
- Cognitive diversity needs psychological safety: Without it, difference becomes a source of stress rather than strength.
- Leadership must evolve: Vulnerability, emotional intelligence, and inclusive practices are essential.
- Global and educational contexts require nuance: Inclusion must be locally relevant and co-designed.
- Purpose matters: Diversity should be linked to values and meaning—not just metrics.
- AI must be human-centred: Technology should support inclusion, not undermine it.

As AI accelerates change, the stakes for managing difference grow higher. Organisations and educators who prioritise mental health and inclusive thinking will not only adapt—they will lead. They will build cultures that are not just resilient, but regenerative. And they will ensure that progress is not just technological—but deeply human.

# References

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## Cognitive Diversity Full Research

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