



Raising the Bar for Employee Networks

A Practical Toolkit for Reimagining Effective Employee Networks



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“Reimagined Employee Networks balance inward care with outward connection, creating trusted spaces where lived experience is honoured, while intentionally inviting others to engage, learn and contribute”. Matt Cameron, Chief Executive of LGBT Great, part of Allied People Group

Welcome and Introduction

As we look ahead, our shared ambition is clear: ‘Raising the Bar’ - strengthening Leadership, fostering Optimism and enabling Empowerment across organisations. Employee Networks sit at the heart of this ambition.

In many organisations, the purpose and structure of Employee Networks have been unclear. Historically positioned as standalone affinity groups, they are now being reframed by forward-looking organisations as enterprise-wide enablers of talent, culture and performance. When positioned intentionally, Employee Networks become strategic enhancers, structured talent ecosystems that:

1. Surface insight to inform leadership decisions
2. Embed psychological safety into organisational life
3. Strengthen cohesion across functions, departments and communities

This is leadership in action. It is optimism translated into shared purpose. It is empowerment made practical. When designed well, Employee Networks form part of organisational architecture, strengthening alignment between business strategy and lived experience, and ensuring inclusion is embedded, not incidental.

What is the Purpose of this Toolkit?

This toolkit provides a practical framework for designing and activating Employee Networks in ways that are intentional, effective and sustainable. It aims to support organisations to:

- Build capability within Employee Network leadership
- Align Employee Networks to business strategy
- Clarify governance and strengthen senior leadership sponsorship
- Elevate Networks as engines of cohesion and psychological safety
- Measure cultural and talent impact



1. Why are Employee Networks a Strategic Imperative?

Employee Networks are becoming more important, not less, in today's operating environment. The external context has shifted, and forward-looking organisations are responding accordingly.

We are navigating heightened geopolitical tension, polarised political discourse and rapid technological disruption. Hybrid and remote working models have reshaped how connection is formed and sustained. Artificial intelligence is redefining roles, accelerating decision-making and altering workforce expectations. In this context, leadership is no longer solely about direction-setting, it is about enabling community and cohesion.

The future of leadership is relational. It requires building trust across difference, strengthening community in dispersed teams and ensuring people feel anchored in times of change. Employee Networks provide critical infrastructure for this.

The Power of Allyship and Belonging research reinforces this dynamic. The findings highlight three key drivers of inclusive culture:

1. **Allyship as a belonging enhancer** – employee networks contribute to visible engagement which increases feelings of safety and inclusion.
2. **The power of lived experience** - structured platforms for voice improve trust and organisational insight.
3. **Empathy as a core leadership capability** - understanding difference strengthens decision-making and resilience.

Employee Networks help forward-thinking organisations to create structured community-based environments where these drivers can thrive. They enable talent to connect beyond formal hierarchy, build confidence and develop connection.

However, there is an important caveat. In some organisations, Employee Networks have unintentionally reinforced separation, by operating in silos, competing for attention or lacking alignment to enterprise priorities. Without coordination and shared inclusion themes, fragmentation can undermine cohesion.

The opportunity is not to reduce Employee Networks, but to integrate them intentionally. When properly aligned, connected and supported by senior leadership, Employee Networks become engines of cohesion - strengthening belonging, surfacing insight and reinforcing organisational resilience in a complex world.



2. Why Do Some Employee Networks Stall?

Despite strong intent and committed leadership, some Employee Networks struggle to deliver sustained, enterprise-wide impact. The issue is rarely effort. More often, it is a lack of clarity around purpose, mandate and integration. Three common challenges emerge:

1. Capacity and Fragmentation

Employee Network Leaders often balance responsibilities alongside demanding roles. Multiple Networks may compete for visibility and resources, leading to fatigue and duplication. Sometimes the solution is not more activity, but fewer, better-aligned initiatives that drive meaningful outcomes.

2. Inward Focus Without Enterprise Connection

Safe spaces are essential, but Networks can become overly inward-looking. Sustained influence requires linking community insight to business priorities and shared inclusion themes. Without outward connection, impact remains limited.

3. Unclear Mandate and Accountability

Blurred expectations and weak governance create confusion. Without engaged senior sponsorship, Networks risk being overextended or underutilised. Forward-looking organisations recognise that doing less, and working smarter, unlocks greater cohesion and impact. The differentiator is not volume; it is strategic connection and intentional design.



3. Raising The Bar

To successfully elevate the impact of Employee Networks, it is essential to understand the mechanisms through which they operate and the simple strategies that can enhance their effectiveness.

The following section explores key approaches that some forward-thinking organisations are adopting to enable their networks to raise the bar, focusing on clarity of purpose, strong sponsorship, and increased connectivity.

3.1 Three Modes of Employee Network Activation are Emerging

Employee Networks are most effective when their role is clearly defined and flexibly applied. Through our work across forward-thinking organisations, we see three primary modes of activation: **Connect, Inform and Transform**. Employee Networks may move between these over time, depending on organisational priorities, resources and context. Clarity of activation protects impact. Fluidity of activation enables relevance.

Forward-looking organisations do not fix Networks into one mode. They activate the appropriate mode at the appropriate time; they Connect during periods of challenge and change, Inform when shaping policy or strategy, and Transform when specific outcomes are sought.

What matters is clarity and transparency. Employee Networks and Senior Leadership Sponsors must be clear which mode is active at a particular time and for which tasks.

1. **Connect - Belonging and Psychological Safety**

- Connect mode focuses on creating trusted spaces where talent feel seen, heard and valued. It strengthens peer connection, confidence and affirms lived experience.
- Typically, identity- or experience-aligned, Connect is typically member-led, voluntary and supported by lighter governance. It is not accountable for business delivery.
- This mode is foundational. It builds trust, role models and confidence. Without connection, influence and impact cannot be sustained.

Connect Example: An LGBTQ+ Network hosts a monthly “Community Connect” forum, a confidential, peer-led space for LGBTQ+ colleagues and those who stand alongside them to share experiences and learn from one another. Each session includes a short lived-experience story, facilitated small-group dialogue and signposting to relevant support resources.



2. Inform - Insight and Organisational Learning

- Inform mode moves beyond connection into structured influence. Here, Networks help to surface lived-experience insight, identify friction points and provide input.
- With clear mandate, senior leader sponsorship and defined governance, Inform operates as an advisory mechanism.
- It translates lived experiences into cultural intelligence that helps to improve leadership awareness, policy development and decision-making.

Inform Example: A Trans and Non-Binary Listening Group is convened quarterly and hosted by the Senior Leadership Sponsor, creating a structured forum to surface lived experience and external pressures affecting colleagues. Participants share insight on workplace policies, client interactions and the broader societal context influencing wellbeing and safety.

3. Transform - Enterprise Delivery and Business Impact

- Transform mode is outcome-focused and aligned directly to organisational priorities. It supports innovation, strategic initiatives and talent or culture transformation.
- Typically, cross-functional and time-bound, Transform initiatives operate with defined objectives and success measures.
- At this stage, the Employee Network acts as an enterprise partner – to support and enable delivery.

Transform Example: An LGBTQ+ Network partners with Parenting, Early Careers and Carers Networks to co-design a cross-community learning session focused on supporting young people and colleagues with caring responsibilities. The initiative is time-bound, aligned to talent retention and wellbeing priorities, and sponsored by HR and Inclusion leadership. Working cross-functionally, the networks pool lived experience and data insights to shape one high-impact session, followed by the development of a practical internal toolkit addressing multi-dimensional needs.

“Raising the bar for Employee Networks is not about doing more. It is about leading with clarity, aligning intention to strategy and ensuring every voice feels seen, heard and valued.”



3.2 Design Employee Networks Based on Organisational Size

In forward-thinking organisations, effective Employee Networks are intentionally designed to reflect organisational scale, resources and priorities, while activating the appropriate mode: Connect, Inform or Transform.

Employee Number	Description	Recommended Approach
0 -1000	Leaner teams lack critical mass for separate networks. Usually no dedicated inclusion headcount.	One single integrated network; visible senior sponsorship; participation from across different identities and lived experiences; programming aligned to universal inclusion themes.
1001 – 5000	Some critical mass for separate networks. Dedicated inclusion headcount is sometimes available.	One central coordinating inclusion group with several identity or focus-based networks; clear sponsorship and governance; programming aligned to universal inclusion themes with some separate programming for each network.
5000+	Large critical mass for separate networks. Usually has dedicated inclusion headcount and, or teams.	One central coordinating inclusion group often with many networks aligned to factors such as region, identity, experience or focus area; clear sponsorship and governance; programming aligned to universal inclusion themes with separate programming for each network.

Universal Inclusion Themes Strengthen Cohesion Across Employee Networks

Cohesion strengthens when inclusion is framed around shared human needs rather than separate agendas. Through [Allied People Group \(APG\)](#), we promote a universal model of inclusion and empowerment: everyone wants to feel valued, respected, heard and able to contribute fully.



Universal themes such as belonging, fairness, psychological safety, wellbeing and opportunity resonate across all Employee Networks and talent communities, even though lived experiences differ a lot. Bringing together Employee Network by focusing on universal themes helps to create shared language, increases engagement and reduces fragmentation.

Difference is not diluted; it is understood within a common framework. This is how Employee Networks contribute to enterprise-wide cohesion and sustained impact. This is particularly useful in smaller-medium sized organisation where there is not enough critical mass to build and sustain multiple networks.

Effective Techniques to Strengthen Cohesion

Technique	What It Looks Like in Practice	Questions	Alignment
Theme-Led Forums	Establish an enterprise-wide inclusion theme (e.g., belonging, fairness, psychological safety) and explore it across multiple Employee Networks. Convene shared sessions to surface common threads and distinct lived experiences, reinforcing unity without erasing nuance.	<i>How are we anchoring our conversations in themes that unite the organisation, rather than allowing discussions to fragment?</i>	Connect → Inform
Cross-Community Interaction	Facilitate structured dialogue between different talent communities around shared organisational challenges. Encourage learning across difference and rotate participation to broaden empathy and cohesion.	<i>Where are we creating visible spaces where difference is explored within shared understanding, rather than operating in silos?</i>	Connect
Insight Capture Loops	Create a disciplined process to document emerging themes from community discussions. Provide concise insight briefs to Sponsors and leadership, with clear recommendations and feedback mechanisms.	<i>What are we learning and how are we ensuring those insights help to inform policy, culture or strategy?</i>	Inform
Leadership Listening Sessions	Design moderated sessions where senior leaders actively listen, reflect and commit to follow-up actions. Communicate outcomes to reinforce credibility and accountability.	<i>How are we demonstrating active listening and what has tangibly changed as a result?</i>	Inform → Transform
External Partnerships	Engage specialist organisations or industry bodies. Leverage resources, insights into strategy and capability development.	<i>How could external expertise enhance our knowledge, credibility and long-term confidence?</i>	Inform → Transform



3.3 Employee Networks Help Enhance of Wellbeing and Sustainability

Forward-thinking organisations are repositioning Employee Networks as strategic contributors of culture building, but also as drivers of wider sustainability impact. They empower their people to lead this work with clarity of mandate and alignment to enterprise priorities.

When intentionally designed, Employee Networks strengthen psychological safety, reduce isolation and build resilience in hybrid and fast-changing environments. By elevating lived experience through structured dialogue, they help identify barriers, inform fairer policies and shape inclusive leadership behaviours.

Forward-looking organisations connect Network activity directly to talent sustainability, strengthening belonging, increasing visibility of underrepresented voices, and supporting long-term workforce participation. Through collaboration across communities and with external partners, they build credibility, deepen shared learning, and demonstrate alignment with wider ambitions.

One practical way organisations are achieving this is by aligning Employee Network activity with the [EU Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#). By intentionally mapping network priorities to recognised global sustainability benchmarks, organisations elevate inclusion from an internal engagement initiative to a measurable contributor to long-term societal impact. See **Appendix A** for how you can map the work of Employee Networks to the SDGs.



3.4 What is the Role of the Employee Network Leader?

In forward-looking organisations Employee Network Leaders are not simply coordinators of internal activity. They are culture shapers, insight translators and contributors to long-term organisational and societal progress.

Employee Networks operate at the intersection of people, culture and purpose. As a Leader or Chair, your influence extends beyond engagement. It contributes to measurable impact across culture, talent and institutional credibility. To Raise the Bar as an Employee Network Leader is to focus on three things:

1. Building Community and Cohesion

- Create psychologically safe spaces that unite people around universal inclusion themes.
- Strengthen trust across difference and anchor belonging as a shared organisational priority.

2. Encouraging and Capturing Insight

- Translate lived experience into constructive, solution-focused intelligence that informs leadership and improves systems.

3. Delivering Sustainable Impact

- Align activity to business priorities and global sustainability goals, ensuring your Network contributes to both organisational performance and societal progress.
- Raising the bar means moving beyond activity to intentional influence - strengthening culture internally while contributing responsibly to the world beyond the organisation.

See **Appendix B** for further information on the roles and responsibilities of a Network Leader.



3.5 What is the Role of the Senior Leadership Sponsor?

One of the most important responsibilities of a Senior Leadership Sponsor is ensuring clarity about how an Employee Network is activated at any given time. Employee Networks typically operate across three modes, Connect, Inform and Transform. Each mode carries different needs, governance requirements, resource implications and levels of accountability. Strategic sponsorship requires recognising these differences and aligning support accordingly. To Raise the Bar as a Senior Leadership Sponsors is to focus on three things:

1. Define the Mode and Its Mandate

Forward-thinking Senior Leadership Sponsors are explicit about which mode is active at a particular time. They ensure:

- Objectives are clearly articulated
- Scope is appropriately defined
- Accountability matches mandate

Not every Network should operate in Transform mode all the time. Not every moment requires Inform. Overextension weakens credibility and exhausts volunteer energy.

2. Protect Integrity and Volunteer Capacity

Forward-thinking Senior Leadership Sponsors play a critical role in safeguarding the Network from misaligned expectations. This includes:

- Protecting Connect spaces from becoming over-strategised
- Preventing informal groups from carrying enterprise delivery accountability
- Ensuring governance is proportionate to purpose

Connect mode must always be sustained. It builds the psychological safety and relational trust upon which influence and impact depend.

3. Align Insight with Strategy

Where Inform or Transform modes are activated, Sponsors ensure that:

- Lived-experience insight is integrated into leadership dialogue
- Recommendations are considered within business decision-making
- Outcomes are visible and credible

See **Appendix C** for more information on the role of Senior Sponsors.

“The future belongs to leaders who can connect across difference.”



3.6 Measurement & Impact

A focused measurement approach helps Employee Networks demonstrate value without creating unnecessary reporting burden. The aim is to track meaningful signals of cohesion, influence and organisational contribution.

1. Reach & Participation

Assess how broadly the Network is engaging the workforce:

- Attendance and repeat participation
- Growth in membership or reach
- Diversity of participation across functions, grades and locations

2. Belonging & Psychological Safety

Track indicators of trust and inclusion:

- Pulse survey themes linked to belonging and voice
- Qualitative insight from listening sessions
- Shifts in sentiment over time

3. Insight & Organisational Influence

Evaluate whether lived experience informs action:

- Insight briefs or recommendations submitted
- Evidence of policy or process improvements influenced
- Visible leadership follow-up and feedback loops

4. Cohesion Across Communities

Measure collaboration and shared impact:

- Joint initiatives aligned to universal inclusion themes
- Cross-community participation and shared programming

5. Leadership & Talent Impact

Consider longer-term signals of strategic value:

- Senior Sponsor visibility and responsiveness
- Informal sponsorship and visibility opportunities created
- Retention or progression trends (where appropriate and possible to track)



Conclusion

Employee Networks are no longer optional forums, they are strategic enablers of leadership, optimism and empowerment. In a complex and rapidly changing environment, Raising the Bar means moving from activity to intentional cohesion and integration.

With clear purpose, defined activation modes and strong sponsorship, Employee Networks help to strengthen psychological safety, translate lived experience into organisational intelligence and align inclusion to priorities.

This is not necessarily about doing more. It is about designing smarter, protecting trust, enabling influence and ensuring insight informs action. Forward-looking organisations that lead with clarity and cohesion will not only strengthen culture, but they will also build sustainable growth for their people and Raise the Bar for the future.

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Appendix A - Employee Networks and the Sustainability Development Goals

SDG	Goal Name	How Employee Networks Contribute
SDG 3	Good Health and Well-being	Creating psychologically safe spaces strengthens mental wellbeing and resilience. Networks foster connection in hybrid environments and reduce isolation.
SDG 5	Gender Equality	Gender-equity-focused networks elevate underrepresented voices, surface systemic barriers, and support progression pathways.
SDG 8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Strengthening belonging, engagement, and talent retention supports sustainable workforce participation and long-term organisational performance.
SDG 10	Reduced Inequalities	Employee Networks amplify lived experiences and identify structural barriers, contributing to fairer systems and more inclusive policies.
SDG 16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Fostering dialogue across difference builds trust, transparency, and ethical leadership.
SDG 17	Partnerships for the Goals	Collaboration with external partners, industry bodies, and peer networks enhances knowledge-sharing and collective progress.



Appendix B - Employee Network Leader Roles and Responsibilities

Role Component	Description
Purpose of the Role	Build belonging and psychological safety, elevate lived experience, align community insight with organisational priorities, contribute to inclusive culture and sustainable talent outcomes.
Community Stewardship	Create safe, trusted spaces; ensure broad participation; lead with universal inclusion themes that unite.
Strategic Alignment	Align network priorities with business strategy; partner with senior sponsors; clarify operating mode (Connect, Inform, Transform).
Insight Translation	Capture themes from lived experience; present insights constructively; support organisational learning.
Collaboration & Partnership	Partner with other networks; engage external organisations; support enterprise-wide inclusion initiatives.
Governance and Sustainability	Define objectives, protect volunteer capacity, monitor engagement and impact.
Leadership Capabilities	Emotional intelligence, empathy, influence, strategic thinking, clarity, resilience, ability to navigate nuance.
Role Boundaries	Not solely responsible for organisational change; must have mandate; requires senior sponsorship.
Impact of the Role	Strengthens cohesion, builds psychological safety, enhances talent visibility, improves leadership awareness, and supports organisational resilience.



Appendix C – The Role of the Senior Leadership Sponsor

Role Component	Description
Purpose of the Role	Provide executive-level legitimacy and alignment; champion the Network; align to business and talent priorities; clarify activation mode (Connect, Inform, Transform).
Empathy & Lived Experience Integration	Model inclusive leadership grounded in structured listening, curiosity and humility; value lived experience as organisational intelligence.
Strategic Alignment	Integrate Network priorities into enterprise agenda; ensure inclusion supports performance outcomes.
Influence & Advocacy	Remove structural barriers; open access to decision-makers; advocate for community recommendations; ensure insight informs policy and culture.
Governance & Accountability	Provide disciplined oversight; clarify scope and accountability; prevent mandate creep; ensure proportionate governance.
Resource Enablement	Ensure sustainable delivery; support appropriate resourcing; recognise contributions visibly.
Cohesion & Connectivity	Prevent fragmentation; encourage cross-network coordination; anchor activity in universal inclusion themes.
External & Sustainability Alignment	Connect Network activity to broader institutional responsibility; align to the UN SDGs; position Networks as contributors to responsible growth.





Appendix D – Employee Network Governance Framework

Strategic Pillar	Employee Networks / Talent Communities	Employee Network Leaders	Senior Leader Sponsors	Central Inclusion Group
Purpose	Create spaces, strengthen belonging and psychological safety, represent lived experience, elevate insight and support inclusion outcomes.	Lead, steward and coordinate community activity; build connection and psychological safety; translate insight constructively.	Champion the community at senior levels, remove barriers, ensure visibility and alignment with organisational priorities.	Provide enterprise-wide coordination, alignment and governance across all networks and sponsors.
Primary Focus	Universal inclusion (open networks) + identity-specific insight (gender, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, disability).	Facilitation, insight gathering, safe-space creation, constructive challenge.	Strategic guidance, advocacy, resource enablement, organisational influence.	Strategic oversight, prioritisation, coherence, governance.
What They Enable	Trust, cohesion, community voice, systemic insight, visibility, progression pathways.	Psychological safety, participation, insight translation, community momentum.	Access to decision-makers, accountability, integration of lived-experience insight into business strategy.	Consistency, alignment, clarity of roles, measurement and enterprise impact.
How They Operate	Flexible model combining open participation and representative structures.	Volunteer-led, insight-driven, connected to employee experience.	Senior-mandated, connected to business strategy and talent priorities.	Cross-enterprise forum ensuring coordination, governance and strategic focus.
Strategic Value	Strengthens culture, belonging, equity and targeted action.	Builds community, surfaces insight, supports talent outcomes.	Drives organisational support and accelerates change through influence.	Ensures system-level clarity and organisational impact at scale.
Leadership Capabilities	N/A (community members).	Empathy, facilitation, communication clarity, constructive challenge, resilience.	Empathy, strategic thinking, influence, visibility, commitment to inclusion and performance.	Governance capability, prioritisation, cross-functional collaboration.

