LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSION BRIEF

How MSD Leaders Protect and Expand the Space for Inclusion

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Introduction

Dramatic shifts in the funding landscape are tightening resources, while direct pushback against gender equality and broader social inclusion has narrowed the political space for inclusive practice in several contexts. Elsewhere, the scope of inclusion[1] is expanding without a commensurate increase in resources. In both situations, leadership matters more than ever. It protects and expands the space for smart, sustainable development work that confronts the structural barriers shaping how markets function, who participates, and who benefits.

This paper explores how leaders expand or contract the space for inclusion on market systems development (MSD) programs, as seen through the perspectives of GEDSI advisors. It builds on three strands of work: the Global GEDSI in MSD Conversation Series, which surfaced practitioner consensus on what is needed to meaningfully advance GEDSI in MSD programs; the MSD Team Leader Competency Framework, which defines the core capabilities Team Leaders (TLs) need to steer systemic change at scale; and the Inclusion and Leadership Research Series, which examined who gets to lead MSD programs, and why.

Why GEDSI Matters in MSD

Markets that exclude women, youth, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups operate below their potential. They forgo gains in innovation, productivity and demand, and they reproduce the structural barriers that can make systems brittle in the face of shocks. MSD programs that do not engage these underlying inequities may produce gains that revert to the prior equilibrium once external support ends.

Who are MSD Leaders?

Leaders include those with formal authority, such as donors, Team Leaders, Deputy Team Leaders, senior technical directors and project directors, as well as those who exercise influence through technical expertise, relationships, convening power or repeated day-to-day decisions.

Across these bodies of work and the interviews underpinning this paper, visible and sustained leadership support emerges as the single biggest determinant of the depth, quality and persistence of inclusion outcomes. This brief translates that finding into five leadership behaviors: setting the mandate, building culture, managing risk, allocating scarce resources, and building coalitions. For each behavior, it identifies the mechanisms that make leadership material for advancing or undermining GEDSI.

These dynamics matter because leadership rarely affects inclusion through one formal decision or one person alone. It works through repeated signals, incentives, questions, trade-offs, and moments of protection or silence that shape

[1]Terminology on gender equality, disability and social inclusion varies across donors, programs and contexts. This brief uses GEDSI when referring to the specific technical field of gender equality, disability and social inclusion, and inclusion as a broader umbrella term that readers are invited to contextualize to their own mandates and operating environments. Different terms are used where they reflect program language, advisor roles or the broader audience for the brief.

what teams believe is possible, legitimate, and expected. In practice, the most effective leadership we observed often involved a constellation of senior actors: the Team Leader, Deputy Team Leader, senior technical directors and, in some cases, a Project Director above the TL. This matters for staffing requirements, accountability lines and succession planning when a key leader leaves.

The primary research comprises eight semi-structured interviews with GEDSI advisors working on MSD programs. We spoke with GEDSI advisors, seven women and two men, because they are often directly affected by leadership behavior on inclusion. Their perspectives offer a grounded view of the signals, incentives, risks and trade-offs that shape inclusion work inside program teams. Respondents were anonymised with consent. The sample spans DFAT, Global Affairs Canada, Mastercard Foundation, SDC, UN and USAID (1) funded programs, across agricultural, financial and broader market systems sectors in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and Eastern Europe.

AI tools were used to support transcript review, synthesis and drafting, with appropriate privacy measures applied to protect respondent confidentiality. The analysis, interpretation and final writing remained the responsibility of the authors, with findings checked against the source material and peer reviewed to strengthen human ownership and accountability.

There are important limitations to this brief. First, the sample is small, skewed towards DFAT-funded programs, and not fully representative of MSD operating contexts globally. Second, the brief draws on advisor reflections about how leadership behaviors were experienced and interpreted, which means the findings capture one side of the leadership relationship. This framing may unintentionally understate the strategic leadership and influence exercised by GEDSI advisors themselves. GEDSI advisors are not only recipients of leadership behavior; they are often agenda setters, coalition builders, risk managers and internal change agents in their own right. The focus of this brief is therefore not on whether GEDSI advisors have agency, but on how leaders can either enable or constrain that agency through the signals, protection, resources and authority they provide. Third, only dedicated GEDSI advisors working on GE(D)SI-mainstreamed programs were interviewed. The analysis does not capture the perspectives of advisors who hold multiple roles, nor GEDSI advisors working on targeted GEDSI or WEE MSD programs. The findings should therefore be read as indicative rather than exhaustive. Further research drawing on Team Leaders, Deputy Team Leaders, donors, implementing partner senior management, and GEDSI advisors as strategic leaders would deepen the analysis.

This brief begins with an in-depth look at five leadership behaviors and the reasons they matter and then closes with a practical tip sheet to help leaders put these behaviors into action. It is written for current and emerging leaders in donor and implementer roles, offering practical guidance on how they can use their authority, influence and day-to-day choices to meaningfully advance GEDSI across different operating contexts.

Five behaviors that shape the space for inclusion

Across the interviews and wider evidence base, leadership influence on inclusion concentrates in five behaviors. Effective leaders were not equally strong across all five. More often, they were strong in two or three, understood which behavior the moment required, and drew on the wider leadership constellation to fill the gaps. The five behaviors are best understood as a toolkit rather than a checklist. Mandate-setting and culture-building emerged as the hardest to delegate because they depend most directly on what the TL names, models and protects. Risk management, resource allocation and coalition-building were more readily shared across deputies, senior technical

directors and project directors. One advisor captured the point plainly, noting that a leader who embodied all five would be “a Superman or Superwoman.”

Importantly, most of these behaviors do not require large new budget lines, new tools or elaborate processes. They require conscious leadership choices: asking the inclusion question in concept note reviews, naming inclusive practice in team meetings, backing advisors when risks arise, protecting minimum resources, and using seniority to bring the right actors into the room. Two exceptions are worth noting. Hiring for inclusive values and protecting GEDSI resourcing under pressure both cost time and political capital. However, they both shape outcomes more deeply than any single tool or framework. Where these behaviors are absent or poorly executed, the gap is not neutral. Silence and mixed signaling, for example, can function much like overt resistance.

1. Mandate setter

How leaders define the mandate sets the ceiling for what inclusion work can achieve. The mandate is the stated and unstated purpose of the program: what it will do, who it will prioritize and what counts as success. When leaders treat inclusion as discretionary, teams calibrate accordingly. When leaders embed it into investment criteria, performance frameworks and partner selection, they signal that it is core to program logic. The mechanism is signaling, not enforcement: the cumulative effect of small decisions about what to ask about, what to fund and what to escalate. This behavior also aligns closely with the TL Competency Framework, particularly the competencies linked to managing a portfolio of interventions and coordinating effectively across program functions.

Mandate-setting is a daily activity, not a one-off design decision. On a DFAT-funded MSD program in South Asia, the Project Director had built a benchmark into the way concept notes were reviewed:

> *“When the Project Director sees a concept note, he wants to see intentional design, intentional activities that say we have thought about GEDSI, we have looked into it, and there is no opportunity. That is the benchmark he set.”*
>
> ***(Inclusion Coordinator, DFAT MSD program, South Asia)***

The practical effect is repetition. Every concept note or intervention design becomes an occasion for the team to demonstrate, in writing, that they have engaged with the inclusion question. The standard does not need to be enforced from the top each time, because the pattern of asking is itself the standard.

Distributing ownership beyond the GEDSI lead changes how the mandate is read. On another program, the Team Leader and Deputy Team Leader were each named against a specific top-level inclusion indicator, distributing ownership at the most senior level. The advisor on that program reported a measurable shift in how partner-facing teams discussed inclusion in design conversations. Mandate is clearest, in practice, when at least one of the key performance indicators belongs to someone in the leadership or technical teams other than the GEDSI advisor. Distribution comes with a caveat. A GEDSI and Safeguarding lead on a MSD program in West Africa described how staff were given exposure to GEDSI ideas, but without the full depth of expertise, occasionally ran ahead in ways that produced well-meaning errors. In one case, scholarships were awarded to people perceived to have disabilities who, on assessment, did not. The underlying dynamic is the opposite of the enabling case: when responsibility is genuinely shared, decisions get made faster; when the knowledge does not catch up to the responsibility, the team makes consequential mistakes. Distributing ownership

therefore works best when paired with continued GEDSI expert involvement at decision points and continuous capacity building, not as a one-time handover.

Equally important is what leaders do after the mandate is set. Two advisors described the same gap: business models that were inclusive on paper drifted back to counting women and buying equipment in implementation, with little follow-through on the social commitments partners had made at approval. This is the mandate-implementation gap that the GEDSI Conversation Series flagged as a persistent challenge across programs. Protecting implementation quality is therefore a distinct dimension of mandate-setting. The evidence points to three things: implementation plans with named focal points, a monitoring cadence that revisits commitments after approval, and follow-through when commitments are missed.

Order of framing is itself a mandate-setting act. On an SDC-funded MSD program in the Western Balkans, the GEDSI advisor described a pattern familiar across the sample: MSD was introduced to partners first, and GEDSI was layered on afterwards. Once that order is set, inclusion is read as an add-on rather than a property of the system being built. She framed this as a leader-level choice, independent of the donor framing:

> *"[If the initial conversations with partners] does not include anything about gender equality and social inclusion, it will perpetuate the same inequalities and people would see [GEDSI] as an add-on and not something that is built within the system and necessary. So, the struggle there is to have the leader push for this from the get-go."*
> ***(GEDSI Advisor, SDC-funded MSD program, Western Balkans)***

This is also where the implicit assumption that MSD is intrinsically inclusive breaks down: several advisors, including this one, pushed back directly on that framing, noting that market-rule-driven interventions will reproduce the prevailing distribution of access and voice unless inclusion is built in from the first conversation.

Box 1: The Vital Role of Donors

The donor sets the floor. The TL sets the ceiling. Every advisor identified the donor as the upstream actor shaping what the TL can do: donor priorities show up in the results framework, indicator targets, review cadence, safeguarding protocols and the flexibility or inflexibility of the budget to respond to local norms. The TL's autonomy operates within the space the donor defines, and changes in donor posture, including a leadership transition at the country office level, can contract or expand that space without warning.

"Your boss's boss's boss's boss has to be very committed to it, so that the commitment runs down the chain."
(Inclusion Coordinator, DFAT MSD program, South Asia)

Donor behavior shapes how far a TL can push the mandate. Several TLs, according to respondents, went beyond the donor ask because they personally believed in the work. Others did the minimum because no one above them was asking for more. This pattern matches the GEDSI Conversation Series findings that donor mandates are often the single most important factor that enables programs to keep GEDSI on the table when contexts are resistant. Donors who hardcode inclusion into the theory of change and logframe, who maintain review cadence on inclusion results beyond the mid-term, and who provide flexibility for the slower work of norm change expand the space in which a TL can set a more ambitious mandate.

2. Culture builder

Organizational culture shapes inclusion outcomes more durably than any single tool or framework. In this context, culture refers to the pattern of norms around curiosity, accountability, learning, psychological safety and the legitimacy of surfacing uncomfortable dynamics. It is built incrementally, in the words and actions of leaders across both major moments and ordinary day-to-day exchanges. The GEDSI Conversation Series identified leadership-modelled organizational culture as one of the conditions that distinguishes sustainable from fragile inclusion outcomes; the interviews show how that pattern develops in practice. This behavior aligns closely with the TL Competency Framework's emphasis on shaping a team's learning culture.

Public recognition in small moments has outsized effect on what teams treat as expected. On a USAID-funded MSD program in East Africa, the Team Leader used team meetings as a routine opportunity to acknowledge inclusive behavior:

> *"At staff meetings the Team Leader would say: I want to congratulate the team who went to the field this week because I saw that it was a gender balanced team. It included women and men, and I saw some young people."*
> ***(GESI Advisor, USAID MSD program, East Africa)***

The same advisor described the TL extending this pattern to operational decisions, including praising Human Resources for hiring a female driver. The way it works is recognition-as-norm-setting. What is named publicly is what the team learns to prioritize. The absence of recognition has the inverse effect. This pattern costs nothing and compounds quickly, but it requires the TL to notice and to translate those observations into public acknowledgement.

The most enabling leaders build culture carriers across the team rather than relying on the GEDSI lead alone. On the South Asia program, the TL had informally recruited other staff members to bring up GEDSI in conversation so that the work of normalizing inclusive practice did not sit with one person. The advisor described it as moving from one person trying to move the impossible to a distributed pattern of asking. This is consistent with the GESDI Conversation Series finding that GESI champions who carry the work alone face strain, isolation and burnout. Distributing the work makes it easier to sustain when the specialist leaves or the political environment hardens. It also builds more meaningful outcomes as GEDSI solutions are relevant to the challenges being faced, not aside.

Hiring decisions carry culture more than most leaders acknowledge. Recruitment is one of the most consequential and most underused leadership levers on inclusion. TLs that embraced and advanced GEDSI, according to respondents, probed candidates on past inclusion experience and included the GEDSI advisor on interview panels for senior hires:

> *"The Team Leader has a real role in making sure key positions in the program are filled by people with the right profile and attitude regarding inclusion. Having an ally, or not, in a key position makes a big difference."*
> ***(GEDSI Advisor, DFAT MSD programs, Pacific)***

A second pattern surfaced in the same conversations: TLs who came up through implementation tended to carry inclusive culture more easily than those who arrived from outside the sector. The

GEDSI Conversation Series reached the same conclusion in stronger language, finding that hiring senior leaders with inclusive values was as critical as hiring for technical credentials. Culture-building, in this sense, starts at the point of hire and is difficult to retrofit later.

Space for failure is part of culture, and inclusion work tends to fail before it succeeds. One advisor described her TL on a now-cancelled USAID program: "He made it in such a way that failure was not seen as an error. It was seen as, if this doesn't work, take the next option." The same advisor contrasted that pattern with other teams, where failure was treated as a fearful event and staff withdrew from the harder cases as a result. Selection effect explains this pattern. Teams that cannot fail openly do not take on the cases where system-level change is most needed because those cases carry the highest probability of visible failure.. The Conversation Series captured this same dynamic in its observation that the slow, relational work of shifting power dynamics receives little recognition or support relative to quick wins, and that this misalignment of incentives is one of the structural reasons inclusion stalls.

Box 2: What Leaders Do Not Say

Silence and mixed signaling have the same effect as overt resistance. Much of the leadership literature on inclusion focuses on what leaders do. Across the interviews, what leaders did not do was equally decisive. One advisor described the daily cost of working for an unresponsive TL:

"When communication is stilled, or time-bound communication is not responded to, we have heightened risk of things going wrong. Half education is dangerous. It's more dangerous than no education."

(GEDSI Lead, USAID agricultural markets program, West Africa)

Teams read silence as disapproval and the work slows. The advisor absorbs the risk of moving without sign-off. Mixed signaling does similar work. One advisor described a TL whose stated technical position was pro-GEDSI but whose communication style told staff the work was not protected. Inconsistency between the words and the signals erodes the mandate faster than it is set.

Organizational culture also breaks in specific, observable ways. Not every GEDSI advisor experience was positive. One advisor described an MSD program that began with an inclusive team culture but deteriorated as the TL's interpersonal conduct eroded trust inside the team and with the donor; the program was not renewed for a second phase. Two behaviors the advisor identified as decisive: visible preferential treatment among team members, and a pattern in which the TL's emotional responses in team conflict shaped whether disagreements could be raised. The underlying dynamic is that organizational culture, once signaled as contingent on the leader's temperament, can shift: advisors stop taking the risks that inclusion work requires, team members stop modelling behaviors that might single them out, and the slow relational work GEDSI depends on is the first thing to erode. These patterns are rarely captured in formal evaluations, but they recur in the reasons inclusion ambitions do not survive a program cycle.

3. Risk manager

Risk management on inclusion looks different depending on the leader, and the pattern matters more than the formal protocol. Inclusion work generates political, reputational and operational risks, particularly in contexts where gender and social norms are openly debated or actively resisted. It can create potential for unintended harm. The interviews surfaced four distinct

patterns in how TLs manage that risk. Recognizing which pattern a leader defaults to, and whether it fits the moment, is itself a form of leadership competence. This aligns closely with the TL Competency Framework's focus on creating the space for teams to operate.

The absorber takes on risk personally to protect the team. This is the pattern the Conversation Series describes most often as enabling. On the South Asia program, the TL's default was to position herself as the primary point of contact when partners or government raised objections:

> *"The Team Leader said, don't worry if anyone comes asking questions, direct them to me."*
> ***(Inclusion Coordinator, DFAT MSD program, South Asia)***

The way it works is that the TL's seniority becomes the buffer between the technical work and the political environment. The work continues; the conversation about whether it should continue happens at a level where the advisor is not exposed. The cost of this pattern is concentrated risk at the top, which is sustainable when the TL has political capital to spend and unsustainable when that capital is depleted.

The escalator hands risky decisions up the chain. On programs with strong head-office or donor backing, this can work, because the upstream decision-maker has both the authority and the appetite to handle the call. The pattern slows decisions and dilutes accountability when inclusion work requires fast judgement in the field, and the cost typically lands on the advisor, who has to carry the risk of acting without clear sign-off.

The compliance-delegator relies on donor safeguarding protocols to do the work. Where donor protocols are tight, this produces careful implementation, but it does not always build the TL's own capability to manage novel risks. When the political context evolves faster than the donor framework, programs in this mode tend to be slow to recalibrate. This pattern was named explicitly in the Conversation Series critique that GEDSI risks being delivered as a reporting exercise rather than a transformative practice.

The creator-through-absence manages risk by not engaging at all.. When the TL does not respond, does not sign off and does not weigh in, the advisor is left to make the call:

> *"I'm left asking myself, am I on track? Am I doing the right thing? And then silence is what's welcomed. This leaves me in the position to automatically take the role, even at my own risk."*
> ***(GEDSI Lead, USAID agricultural markets program, West Africa)***

Silence is not neutral in this context. It transfers risk to the advisor, often without the authority or protection needed to manage it, and gradually erodes trust in leadership.

Risk-management orientation travels with the individual, not the program. On a MSD program in West Africa, the GESI and Safeguarding lead described how a transition between two Project Directors moved the program across these archetypes within a single phase. Under the previous Project Director, the pattern resembled the absorber: she would lead the conversation on team-makeup questions and internal-diversity issues, providing visible support to the GESI and Safeguarding lead. Under the incoming Project Director, the pattern on the same questions resembled creator-through-absence, with a stance closer to "let people just do it as they want," which left the GESI and Safeguarding lead to push from below. The point is that risk management depends heavily on the individual leader. It is not only shaped by the program or donor requirements. When the leader

changes, the program can shift quickly, even if the formal process and the advisor's role stay the same. This is one practical reason why broader leadership support matters. When responsibility is shared across the senior leadership team, leadership transitions are less likely to disrupt the program's approach to inclusion.

The strongest risk managers prepared their teams before backlash arrived. Anticipation is the behavior that distinguishes them from reactive risk management. On the South Asia program, the TL routinely surfaced the difficult questions in advance:

> *"The Team Leader asked, are we really putting women in danger by pushing this work? We would sit down and think of the pros and cons of things and think of the external narrative we would have when questions do come."*
> ***(Inclusion Coordinator, DFAT MSD program, South Asia)***

The way it works is rehearsal. The team is not surprised by the question when it arrives. The external narrative is already drafted; the lines of accountability are already clear. This pattern matches the Conversation Series finding that programs with leadership backing are better able to push boundaries and to absorb resistance when it arises. It also builds the organizational muscle that makes the next round of resistance easier to handle.

4. Allocator of scarcity

The TL's discretion over scarce resources depends on where inclusion sits in the program. As funding tightens and delivery windows shorten, decisions about time, staffing, sequencing and resourcing become consequential. The TL's allocator role was not uniform across the sample. Two factors shape it: the size and flexibility of the donor envelope, and whether inclusion sits in the main program budget or in a smaller cross-cutting line. Where inclusion is in the main envelope, the TL has flexibility under shocks; where it sits as a cross-cutting line, it tends to be cut first when pressure rises. This links closely to the TL Competency Framework's focus on managing across functions, because resourcing decisions shape what teams can realistically deliver.

When resources are adequate and inclusion is core, the constraint is team uptake rather than budget. One advisor put this plainly:

> *"It is fairly well resourced. If at all, it's getting the team to use those resources, use that time and take on that ownership."*
> ***(Inclusion Coordinator, DFAT MSD program, South Asia)***

In this configuration, the allocator role becomes a culture-building task. The TL has to keep nudging the team to use what is available, because the absence of a budget constraint can produce passive consumption rather than active deployment.

When inclusion sits as a small cross-cutting envelope, every budget cycle becomes a renegotiation. On a USAID-funded program in East Africa, the advisor described component leads protecting their own targets at the expense of the inclusion line:

> *"In terms of scarcity, they were saying, we want to give more for GESI. But we have these big targets to achieve in financial access, so we won't give much money for financial literacy of women."*
> ***(GESI Advisor, USAID MSD program, East Africa)***

In this architecture, the TL's allocator role is defensive: protecting the floor more than expanding the ceiling. That requires steady attention across the planning cycle, not just at annual review. Under active budget cuts, the task becomes more challenging. The GEDSI Conversation Series captured this dynamic in its observation that donors are raising the bar on inclusion without matching the resourcing, leaving programs to sequence ambitions and treat progress rather than perfection as the benchmark of success.

The 2025 funding shock has sharpened what allocator of scarcity means in practice. One advisor working on a UN agency program that embeds MSD logic inside a donor environment not built for it described a narrowing of the partner pool after reductions in US support to multiple UN agencies. Under tighter resourcing, her team could engage companies already undertaking some form of gender responsive practice: safer bets likely to produce visible results on a shorter timeline. By contrast, the companies whose practices most needed to change, those without existing policies or inclusive business models, were drifting out of reach precisely because they were higher risk partners. This weakens the potential for systemic change in the sector. The firms most likely to reproduce exclusion are also the firms that may most need program support to become more inclusive, sustainable providers of market solutions.

Acute scarcity drives risk-adjusted prioritisation: the TL's allocator decision concentrates what remains where success is likeliest, which is not always where inclusion impact is largest. This is one of the specific ways aid contraction narrows inclusion ambition without any individual leader visibly retreating.

5. Coalition builder

Coalition-building is sometimes led by the TL, sometimes delegated, and sometimes done around the TL entirely. Inclusion work tends not to land without coalitions inside the organization and among external stakeholders, including skeptical mid-level staff, partner organizations, donor counterparts and government interlocutors. The coalition-building behavior, among respondents, varied more by individual TL than any of the other four behaviors, which makes it the hardest to generalise about and the easiest to leave under-managed. Like risk management, this behavior is also aligned with the TL competency of creating the space to operate.

Internal coalitions start small and spread by repetition. On the South Asia program, the advisor described the pattern that worked on her program:

> *"You start conversations in small groups and then those small groups have conversations with other small groups. And then it spreads, and then we come to one big room like a GESI training or a conversation, and that whole coalition building really starts."*
> ***(Inclusion Coordinator, DFAT MSD program, South Asia)***

The reason it works is because it is incremental. A formal training is the visible event, but the work that makes the training land has happened in small-group conversations weeks before. This pattern echoes the Conversation Series finding that peer learning and cross-functional networks reduce the isolation of GEDSI champions and sustain motivation over time.

External coalitions require the TL to read the political landscape and to act on what the donor cannot say openly. On one East Africa program, the TL had built strong partnerships for most program components but had deferred inclusion coalitions to the advisor:

> *"He tried to build some coalition concerning other components. But for GESI, I had to remind him, because he didn't know who to partner with. So, I'll propose, maybe we should have a coalition with the Council of Persons with Disabilities."*
> ***(GESI Advisor, USAID MSD program, East Africa)***

The cost of that pattern is fragility. The advisor carried the relationship-building, which made the coalition vulnerable to her departure. By contrast, on a DFAT-funded program in South Asia, the TL built coalitions to match the donor's unspoken priorities:

> *"If you have a good understanding with the donor, you understand what the donors are expecting, some of the unspoken agendas, because they cannot always officially say a lot of things. But if you can read between the lines, you understand them."*
> ***(Deputy TL responsible for GEDSI portfolio, DFAT MSD program, South Asia)***

What matters here is political literacy. The TL recognizes that donors operate under their own constraints and uses coalition-building to advance objectives that the donor would endorse but cannot publicly require.

Business-facing and social-sector coalitions pull in different directions, and the TL has to bridge them. On the SDC-funded program in the Western Balkans, the GEDSI advisor described a pattern that recurred across contexts: coalitions with Chambers of Commerce and European industry associations were welcomed by partners and understood to add commercial value; coalitions with women's organizations and the local Roma People's Association were not. Business actors needed the benefits translated into a language they could see in their own P&L before they would sit at the same table as civil-society partners. The TL's coalition work here is the preparation: framing the business case for the inclusion partner, sequencing who meets whom, and holding the convening when the private-sector actors are comfortable. Without that translation layer, the coalitions that inclusion work depends on remain operationally necessary but socially separate, and the advisor is left carrying the load.

The decisive variable is whether the TL provides political cover for the advisor's coalition-building, regardless of who leads the work. One advisor compared two TLs on different programs. On the first, coalition-building was delegated entirely to the GEDSI team and worked because the TL backed the advisor publicly when partners pushed back. On the second, the TL led the work directly with government and key institutions. Both approaches produced durable coalitions. Where political cover was absent on either model, the coalition work was fragile and rarely outlived the advisor.

A less-discussed coalition move is the TL stepping back to let the GEDSI advisor visibly lead. Advisors described a meaningful shift in how stakeholders treated inclusion when the TL deliberately

handed the lead role, chairing a partner meeting, opening a coalition conversation, to the GEDSI advisor rather than introducing and then passing the mic. The way it works is positional signal. When the TL stays at the front of every meeting, inclusion tends to be read as a subordinate agenda held by the advisor; when the advisor is at the front with the TL's visible backing behind them, inclusion is read as program-level. One advisor phrased this as a request for TLs to "give the individuals the role for the stakeholders to perceive it as important as well." This is a lighter-touch version of the mandate-setting behavior, done through who stands where rather than what gets said, and it is one of the cheapest behaviors to practice. It is also visibly absent in the cases where the advisor is always in the supporting position, which signals the reverse.

A contextual practice, not a checklist

Leadership for inclusion is a toolkit, not a template. The five behaviors in this brief are not a uniform recipe to be applied in the same way across every program. The most effective GEDSI advocates were often strong in two or three behaviors, recognized which behavior the moment demanded, and worked through a wider leadership constellation, including deputies, senior technical directors and project directors, to fill the gaps. This has consequences because inclusion is rarely effectively protected by one person alone. It is protected through repeated choices about what gets named, resourced, defended, followed up and normalized.

Donors shape the space in which those choices are made. They set the floor through their strategies, results frameworks, review questions, funding decisions and tolerance for risk. Program leaders then determine how much of that space is taken up. In some contexts, the space for inclusion will continue to narrow; in others, it may expand but without the resources needed to match ambition. In both cases, silence undermines inclusion faster than overt resistance because teams read silence as permission to deprioritize the work. What the TL does next, which behavior they use, for which audience and at which moment, is the decision that matters. A companion one-page tip sheet translates these five behaviors into practical actions leaders can take this week, this month and this quarter.

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THE CANOPY LAB

Leadership for Inclusion: Tip Sheet

Five behaviours shape the space for inclusion in MSD programmes: **mandate setter, culture builder, risk manager, allocator of scarcity, coalition builder.** A toolkit, not a checklist. Below are concrete moves for this week, this month and this quarter, and three habits to stop now.

THIS WEEK

Three small culture-builder moves

Build the organizational culture

Drop in. Ten minutes with the GEDSI advisor, no agenda. The signal that the conversation is welcome matters more than the content.

- **Name what you see.** Publicly acknowledge an inclusive behaviour someone showed in the next team meeting. What you name, the team learns to prioritize.
- **Ask the question.** On the next investment under review, ask whether the design shows intentional thinking on inclusion. Make it routine.

THIS MONTH

Sharpen the mandate and decide your risk mode

Sharpen the mandate

- **Audit the architecture.** Check whether inclusion appears in investment-review criteria, performance framework and partner-selection rubric.
- **Name ownership by indicator.** Assign at least one top-level inclusion indicator to a senior staff member who is not the GEDSI lead.
- **Track implementation, not just design.** Require partners to report against inclusion commitments made at approval. Build a cadence where partners expect to be asked.

Decide how you'll handle political pushback

- **Pick your risk mode.** Absorb pushback so the technical work continues, escalate to the donor, or work through compliance? Choose a position: what the team reads as your default becomes the mode.

THIS QUARTER

Hiring and budget architecture

Hire for inclusive values

- **Probe past experience.** In senior-role interviews, ask candidates to describe an inclusion problem they handled and what they learned. Listen for curiosity, not just credentials.
- **Put the GEDSI advisor on the panel.** For any senior or technical lead hire, the GEDSI advisor should have a vote. Explain your reasoning that hiring is the most durable culture lever a TL has.

Ask where GEDSI sits in your budget

- **Open the budget.** If GEDSI is in the main envelope, you have flexibility under shocks. If it sits as a cross-cutting line, it will be cut first.

STOP DOING

Three habits that undermine inclusion

- **Making the GEDSI advisor carry the weight.** Distribute the lift: assign a senior KPI to someone other than the advisor; recruit culture carriers across the team; put GEDSI in the first question you ask of every investment, partner and hire.
- **Sending mixed signals.** Saying the work matters while everyday signals say otherwise. A throwaway joke that passes without pushback, an aside treated as not worth the friction. Your team reads the signals, not the statements.
- **Introducing MSD first, inclusion second.** Once stakeholders meet a programme framed around market rules, inclusion is heard as an add-on. Order of framing is itself a mandate-setting act.