

Culture Counts

Building an Inclusive Workplace Where Everyone Belongs

Handout for American Bus Association Presentation

By Carole Copeland Thomas

Why Culture Matters in the ABA Industry

Workplace culture is not an abstract concept—it directly affects performance, safety, retention, customer experience, and reputation. In the motorcoach, tourism, and travel sectors, culture shows up every day:

- On the road
- In terminals and offices
- In customer-facing interactions
- During high-pressure operational moments

As the workforce becomes more multigenerational, global, and culturally diverse, leaders can no longer rely on “the way we’ve always done it.” Culture must be intentional, inclusive, and actively managed.

Inclusion Is Not a Slogan—It’s a Daily Practice

True inclusion goes beyond policies, statements, or annual training sessions. Employees quickly recognize the difference between:

- Performative commitments
- Meaningful, lived practices

Inclusion shows up in:

- How schedules are assigned
- How feedback is delivered
- How conflict is handled
- How leadership responds when something goes wrong

When inclusion is superficial, trust erodes.

When inclusion is authentic, trust grows—and trust is the foundation of a strong culture.

Psychological Safety: A Non-Negotiable

Psychological safety means employees feel able to:

- Speak up
- Ask questions
- Admit mistakes
- Raise concerns
- Share ideas

without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or retaliation.

In safety-critical industries like motorcoach and tourism, silence can be dangerous. When employees feel unsafe speaking up, small issues become major problems. When they feel safe, organizations become:

- More agile
- More responsive
- More resilient

Psychological safety is also a key driver of retention—a competitive advantage in an industry facing labor shortages.

Empathetic Leadership Sets the Tone

Empathy does not mean lowering standards. It means:

- Recognizing employees as human beings first
- Listening actively
- Asking thoughtful questions
- Responding with fairness and consistency

Drivers, dispatchers, operations staff, sales teams, and managers may experience the workplace differently—and those differences matter. Leaders who understand this build stronger, more loyal teams.

Cultural Competence Strengthens Leadership

Cultural competence is the ability to:

- Work effectively across differences
- Reduce misunderstandings
- Build trust across diverse teams

In an industry serving diverse travelers across regions and cultures, cultural competence:

- Improves internal collaboration
- Enhances customer experience
- Helps employees feel seen rather than overlooked

From Good Intentions to Real Execution

Many organizations want to be inclusive but struggle with execution. Operationalizing belonging means embedding inclusion into:

- Hiring and onboarding
- Training and development
- Performance management
- Leadership decision-making

Key questions leaders should ask:

- Who gets opportunities?
- Who has access to decision-makers?
- Whose voices are heard in meetings?

This work requires honesty—even when conversations feel uncomfortable.

What Works for Small and Mid-Sized Organizations

Inclusion does not require large budgets or complex systems. It requires:

- Consistency
- Clarity

- Commitment

Simple actions make a difference:

- Setting clear expectations for respectful behavior
- Addressing issues promptly
- Inviting diverse perspectives into problem-solving
- Modeling inclusive leadership from the top

When leaders demonstrate these behaviors, they signal that belonging is not optional—it is how the organization operates.

Inclusion Is a Business Strategy

Employees are ambassadors. Their engagement directly affects:

- Customer satisfaction
- Brand reputation
- Partner relationships

When employees feel supported and respected, that care carries over to passengers, tour groups, and destinations. Inclusive culture is not only an internal priority—it is a competitive advantage.

The Takeaway

Culture is created every day, one interaction at a time.
Belonging does not happen by accident.

When employees feel:

- Seen
- Heard
- Supported

they do more than complete tasks. They contribute ideas, solve problems, and take pride in their work.

That is when culture stops being a concept—and becomes a force that strengthens safety, retention, innovation, and long-term success.

About the Author

Carole Copeland Thomas is an award-winning TEDx speaker, trainer, and global thought leader who has moderated conversations on diversity, equity, inclusion, and multiculturalism since 1987. She has spoken in 45 states and nine countries and has visited 32 countries on six continents. Carole serves on the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors at Meet Boston and chairs its Multicultural Committee.

www.carolecopelandthomas.com

+1 508 947-5755

carole@mssconnect.com

