

Publication: People Matters

Spokesperson: Praveen Purohit, CHRO, VAML

What are some of the unique challenges organisations encounter when implementing inclusion initiatives in manufacturing and operational environments compared to corporate office settings?

Unlike corporate office settings, manufacturing floors operate under continuous shifts, safety-critical protocols, and rigid physical constraints that naturally limit standard HR interventions. In these environments, operational silos are deeper, linguistic diversity is more pronounced, and the foundational infrastructure ranging from restrooms to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) has historically been engineered for a traditional, homogenous workforce.

Furthermore, critical day-to-day decisions are executed at the shift-supervisor level, introducing a high degree of variance in how policies are practiced. Under intense operational pressure, productivity and safety KPIs can inadvertently overshadow inclusion mandates.

At VAML, we have addressed these systemic barriers by treating diversity not as a peripheral HR project, but as a core business imperative. We operationalize this through a robust governance framework that defines clear ownership, decision rights, and performance metrics such as retention rates, safety incidents, and promotion velocity, directly tied to manager incentives. Stratagems like our **3×3×3 rotation programs** and cross-functional mentorships expose diverse talent to frontline realities early in their careers. Concurrently, comprehensive infrastructure modernization removes the practical barriers to entry, effectively transforming corporate policy into daily shop-floor practice.

Why can creating a sense of belonging be more complex in frontline and shop-floor workplaces where employees work in close-knit, operationally intensive environments?

Creating a sense of belonging in frontline and shop-floor environments is inherently more complex because of the way work and social dynamics intersect. These are tightly interdependent teams operating under high production pressure, where employees spend long hours together, not just on the shop floor, but often across shared spaces like transport, cafeterias, and residential facilities. As a result, behaviours, both positive and negative, tend to get amplified quickly.

At the same time, the operational intensity of these roles leaves limited emotional bandwidth, and traditional feedback or escalation channels are not always as accessible or frequently used as they are in corporate settings. This can make perceptions, biases, or discomfort harder to surface and address in real time.

At VAML, we recognise that belonging in such environments has to be deliberately built into the system, not left to chance. This starts with visible representation, today, women constitute **21% of our core operations**, and we have **51 transgender employees** integrated into frontline roles. Deploying all-women teams across critical assets such as potlines, locomotives, and the *Agnivahini* fire squad helps normalise inclusion in traditionally male-dominated spaces.

Equally important is embedding inclusion into everyday operations. We do this through peer-led support structures on the shop floor, inclusive messaging in daily toolbox talks, and accessible, confidential grievance redressal mechanisms that are aligned to shift-based working.

Together, these interventions help ensure that belonging is not seen as a standalone initiative, but as a lived, day-to-day experience across our operational ecosystem.

How should organisations address practical considerations such as facilities, accommodation, safety, and workplace infrastructure when building more inclusive industrial workplaces?

In industrial workplaces, inclusion is ultimately tested not in policy, but in infrastructure. If facilities, accommodation, safety systems, and workplace design are not built for diversity, inclusion remains aspirational.

Organisations therefore need to move beyond intent and address a few fundamentals. This starts with **equitable access to basic infrastructure**, secure and hygienic restrooms, appropriate changing facilities, and PPE and uniforms designed for different body types. Accommodation and transport systems also play a critical role, especially in remote or shift-based operations. Housing policies must be fair and flexible, while transit needs to be safe, reliable, and aligned to shift timings.

Safety and wellbeing frameworks must evolve in parallel. This includes **inclusive medical support, gender-sensitive policies, and accessible grievance mechanisms** that work within the realities of a shop-floor environment. Importantly, these systems must be easy to use and trusted by employees.

At VAML, we have taken a structured approach to embedding inclusion into our operating ecosystem. Our **Gender Reaffirmation Policy** is a key example, providing

financial assistance of up to ₹2 lakh, paid leave, medical guidance, and importantly, assurance of safe and appropriate accommodation. Alongside this, we have focused on **on-ground readiness**, from deploying women-led teams in core operations and ensuring access to suitable facilities, to strengthening safety protocols and shift-aligned transport for a diverse workforce.

We recognise that in manufacturing environments, scale and complexity require a phased approach. Infrastructure interventions are piloted at specific sites, refined based on feedback and impact on safety and retention, and then scaled across locations. This ensures that inclusion is not a one-time upgrade, but a continuously evolving system.

Ultimately, building inclusive industrial workplaces is about ensuring that **every employee, regardless of gender, identity, or role, can participate fully, safely, and with dignity in the workplace.**

In your experience, what role do frontline managers and supervisors play in shaping employees' day-to-day experience of inclusion and acceptance?

Frontline managers and supervisors are where inclusion becomes real, or breaks down. Policies don't shape day-to-day experience; people do. And on the shop floor, that responsibility sits squarely with supervisors. They make the daily decisions that matter, who gets which role, who is trained on critical equipment, how teams are spoken to, and how conflicts are handled. So for an employee, their immediate manager *is* the organisation. If the supervisor is fair, respectful, and consistent, inclusion feels natural. If not, no policy can compensate for that gap.

At VAML, this is why we treat frontline leadership as a critical lever for inclusion. We are very clear that **inclusive leadership is part of operational excellence**. We invest in building this capability through focused training on bias awareness, inclusive decision-making, and conflict handling, but more importantly, we **build accountability into the system**. Inclusive behaviours are embedded into performance goals, and we track outcomes such as team engagement, retention, and grievance resolution at the manager level.

At the same time, we support supervisors with **on-ground enablers**, peer champions, clear escalation mechanisms, and structured communication platforms, so they are not navigating these situations in isolation.

Ultimately, in industrial environments, culture is what is practised every day on the floor. And frontline managers are the ones who set that standard.

How can organisations ensure that inclusion efforts extend beyond policies and awareness programmes to influence workplace behaviours and culture on the ground?

To move beyond performative compliance or passive awareness, diversity and inclusion must be institutionalized as core operational metrics. This means directly linking shift retention, absenteeism trends, grievance resolution velocity, and localized engagement scores to the KPIs of operational leaders.

Inclusion can be embedded into the literal rhythm of the manufacturing day through several practical mechanisms:

- **Operational Integration:** Commencing every shift with inclusive toolbox talks and utilizing pre-shift checklists that audit workplace dignity and psychological safety items.
- **On-the-Floor Governance:** Deploying shift-aligned inclusion champions, peer support circles, and buddy programs to resolve friction points in real-time.
- **Transparent Progression:** Enforcing highly objective, transparent criteria for training selections and promotions, closely monitored by HR during transition periods.
- **Anonymized Trend Reporting:** Utilizing confidential, rapid-response reporting channels that share anonymized trend data back with the teams to demonstrate accountability.

When senior leaders complement these systems by regularly participating in shift rotations and publicly addressing cultural infractions, it solidifies the cultural shift. Vedanta's operational realities, such as our landmark gender-affirmation frameworks and our all-women power and poutine teams demonstrate that when policy is backed by rigorous operational execution, culture transforms permanently.

What lessons has Vedanta Aluminium learned from creating opportunities for transgender professionals in a traditionally male-dominated industry?

One of our biggest learnings has been that inclusion in a traditionally male-dominated industry like manufacturing cannot be approached as a one-off initiative, it has to be built as a system.

Our journey at VAML began with a pilot at BALCO, where we first onboarded transgender professionals into security and operating roles. What that experience reinforced very quickly was that **hiring alone does not create inclusion, workplace readiness does**. We had to invest equally in sensitisation, infrastructure, and manager capability to ensure that inclusion translated into a real, day-to-day experience.

As we expanded these efforts across our operations, a second lesson became very clear, **representation needs to be scaled to be sustainable**. Moving from isolated hiring to building meaningful representation across units helped normalise diversity within teams and reduce the risk of social isolation. Today, transgender employees are integrated across VAML's locations and are contributing across a range of roles.

We have also learned that **capability building is critical to long-term success**. Many individuals come in with limited exposure to formal industrial environments, so structured skilling, on-the-job training, and clear career pathways are essential to enable confidence and performance. Inclusion becomes durable only when it is linked to growth and not just entry.

Another important insight has been that **policy must solve real barriers**. Through continuous feedback, we recognised challenges around healthcare access, financial constraints, and housing stigma. This led to targeted interventions such as our Gender Reaffirmation Policy, accommodation support within townships, and structured onboarding through buddy programmes, ensuring that employees can integrate with dignity and stability.

Finally, we've seen that **inclusion in manufacturing extends beyond the workplace**. Sustained efforts in sensitisation, within teams, among partners, and even in surrounding communities, are critical to building acceptance at scale.

Today, what started as an early initiative in one unit has evolved into a business-wide approach across VAML, with **51 transgender employees** now part of our workforce, and we remain committed to continuing this momentum by enabling more individuals to join and thrive within our system.

Looking ahead, what will distinguish organisations that successfully embed inclusion into operational environments from those where inclusion remains largely policy driven?

Moving forward, the defining differentiator will be the shift from HR-centric mandates to true operational integration. Visionary organizations will treat inclusion as a fundamental component of shift rostering, safety protocols, and mainstream talent pipelines rather than an isolated corporate initiative. In these leading organizations, frontline managers will be held strictly accountable through data-driven performance reviews and tied financial incentives.

Furthermore, companies will distinguish themselves by their willingness to make capital investments in tangible physical and medical infrastructure such as diverse housing, adapted PPE, and comprehensive transitional healthcare rather than relying solely on classroom bias training. They will systematically publish disaggregated

metrics tracking frontline recruitment, retention, and upward mobility, moving quickly to rectify equity gaps.

Ultimately, the organisations that succeed will be those that recognise a simple truth: **in operational environments, inclusion is not what you say, it is what your systems enable and your leaders practise, consistently and at scale.**