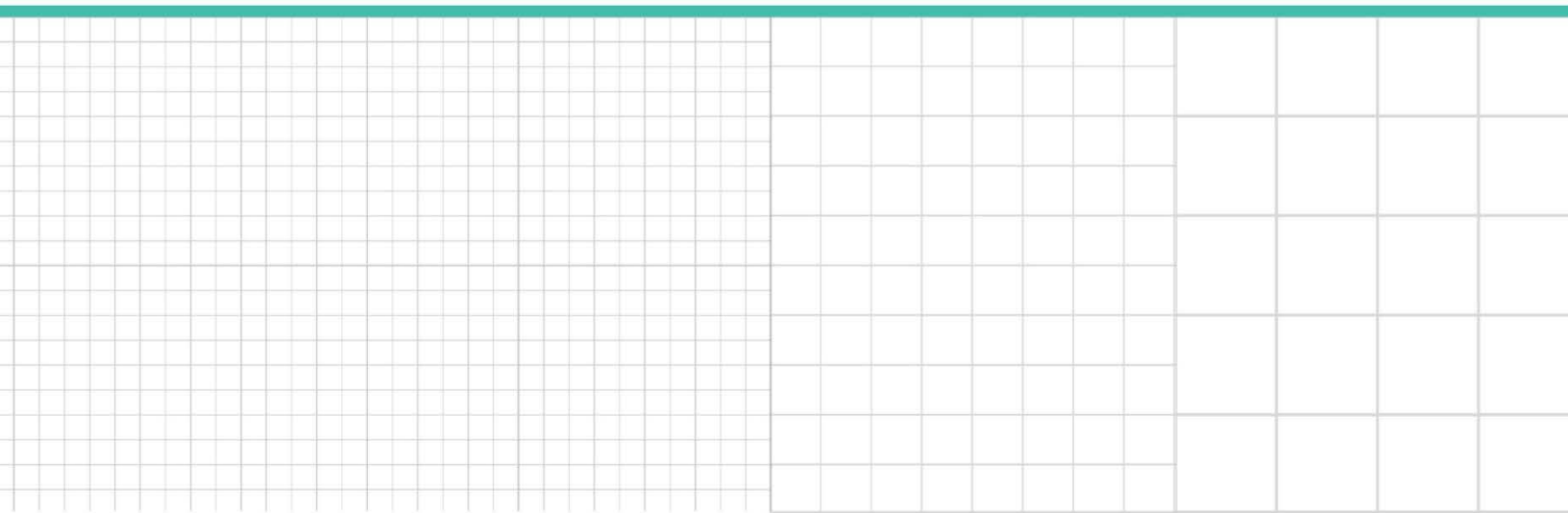


Professional Perspective

Strategies to Foster Inclusion During Covid-19

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Strategies to Foster Inclusion During Covid-19

Contributed by *Iveliz R. Crespo, Reed Smith*

In an effort to prevent the spread of Covid-19, companies around the globe have closed their office doors, leaving many employees without work. For those offered the privilege of working remotely, fear and uncertainty remain.

Undoubtedly, this pandemic will challenge organizations' current approaches to employee management and overall company culture. As Covid-19 continues to spread—along with virus-induced closures, damaged global markets, and prolonged social isolation—it is more important now than ever that organizations and their leaders continue to foster inclusivity.

This is new terrain for all involved. Whether it's a public or private company, nonprofit, or university, major organizations can be models for how other entities should, or should not, respond to the crisis. Here are three intentional strategies that business leaders should consider to ensure organizations remain inclusive during the pandemic.

Maintain Communication

The spread of Covid-19 has birthed a number of reactions including fear, anxiety, inability to focus, and increasing concerns around health and safety. During these uncertain times, the need for steady, calm, inclusive leadership is paramount. As such, employers should think strategically about both the content of their messaging and its tone.

They should:

- Be empathetic in their communications and recognize the anxiety that employees are experiencing
- Maintain channels to collect employee feedback in order to address concerns as they arise
- Understand that these are difficult times for everyone but some may be more at risk than others, due to support structures, resources, or personal health

Empathetic leaders are able to keep in mind that this pandemic is impacting everyone and not just their businesses. They are cognizant of the toll that stress can have on the morale and productivity of their workforce and are prepared to address employee concerns with open lines of communication. Using clear and transparent communication regarding day-to-day operations, expectations, and goals can help mitigate the stress of the unknown.

Lastly, they should provide accurate information on the nature of the virus and affirmatively communicate the importance of safe and inclusive workplaces. During pandemics, the spread of misinformation, bias, and racial stereotyping can spread faster than the virus itself. Internal communications can help provide accurate information, explore employee emotions and concerns, and, most importantly, play a role in mitigating the effects of bias and stereotyping.

To correct employee misconceptions about the virus, these authoritative sources of information that are regularly updated by professionals.

- [The Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#)
- [The World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#)
- [Additional WHO guidance](#)

Remote Work

As the number of companies forced to lay off their workforces or close entirely increases, those fortunate enough to have the opportunity to work remotely are still struggling to adjust to their new "normal."

Employers should keep abreast of the various difficulties that arise from remote work situations and develop plans to address them. This new work environment may affect specific groups more than others. For example:

Employees with Limited Technology Access

Some employees may not have access to the technology needed for remote work. This includes employees with limited financial resources or those living in rural areas with limited or no access to the internet. Given the diversity of our workforce, even employees with access may not be knowledgeable on how to use the technology itself.

Leaders should determine if resources are available to enable employees to do their jobs, and provide training on the available technology and software. Perhaps an organization has extra technology that they can provide (computers, tablets, hotspots, etc.). Some companies may even have stipends to cover the cost of out-of-pocket technology expenses. Weigh these options and provide these resources, if available, to ensure that remote work is accessible to all employees afforded with the opportunity to work remotely.

Employees with Anxiety or Other Mental Health Issues

While many employees, irrespective of preexisting conditions, are feeling anxious and fearful, the looming uncertainty partnered with social distancing can exacerbate preexisting mental health issues.

Remote work options keep employees physically safe, but consider the impact this new work environment has on employee mental health. This type of prolonged isolation may be difficult for many and may ultimately have a negative impact on employee productivity.

Organizations should continue looking for ways to keep teams connected. This includes using more video conferences whenever possible or feasible, scheduling one-on-ones with employees, or organizing virtual pizza parties or coffee breaks. Beyond this, they may also share information on apps, podcasts, and online programs focused on well-being, mindfulness, and meditation.

Many companies offer employee assistance programs. Those that do should send weekly reminders of the program to their staff.

Employees with Parental or Caregiver Responsibilities

For many employees, this newfound remote work environment has created a dual adjustment—working from home, as well as caring for children, elderly parents, and/or sick loved ones. In some instances, working parents have the added expectation of homeschooling their children.

Leaders should acknowledge that their workforce may be struggling with balancing this convergence of responsibilities.

While it is instinctual in times of economic crisis for leaders to be concerned with the bottom line and productivity, those concerns need to be balanced with understanding and compassion by focusing on inclusivity.

Included below are actions to take to be inclusive of employees with caregiver responsibilities:

Ensure two-way communication. Check in with people individually at reasonable times. Determine what their needs are and work together to set realistic goals and timelines. Be clear about business objectives and expectations.

Be flexible. Consider allowing employees to flex their hours around their other responsibilities. Ensure the focus is on previously agreed on output metrics, not hours worked. If managers work with employees to set clear goals and realistic timelines, employees can focus on achieving goals on a schedule that works for them.

Provide resources. Determine if the organization is financially able to subsidize childcare or caregiver expenses for your employees. For those are not able to provide financial support, determine if there are resources available (open childcare centers, caregiver assistance programs, tips/ advice for parents and caregivers, etc.) and share them with employees.

Employees with Disabilities

During the shift to virtual work, be mindful that some remote communication platforms may create challenges for deaf or blind employees. Always check in directly with employees to ensure that the communication medium is accessible.

Diversity and Inclusion

Pandemic-induced workplace solutions like remote work and flexible work schedules may bring benefits and other impacts on diversity initiatives. While many industries have started to realize the value of a diverse workforce, many organizations struggle with finding diverse candidates to fill roles. Remote work increases the pool of candidates and decreases the non-work-related reasons (relocation, commute time, familial responsibilities, etc.) they decline job offers. Similarly, flexible work schedules and the companies offering them, have always appealed to a wide range of workers from a variety of diverse backgrounds.

In fact, parents, caregivers and people with disabilities have long been advocating for accommodations like individualized workplace arrangements, remote work, or online instruction. Largely, they have been denied these opportunities. Employers should reflect on how swiftly they responded to the pandemic by implementing flexible schedules or remote work and be prepared to implement permanent policies. By maintaining these policies after the pandemic ends, they are expanding the applicant pool and making the workplace more accessible and inclusive of people with disabilities, women, caregivers, parents, and people of color.

Another benefit that this new virtual era brings is the opportunity to rethink approaches to D&I programming. By leveraging technology, organizations can continue creating safe spaces for people to engage in dialogue, team-building exercises, and reflection.

Video conferencing and webinar-specific software may be used to replace traditional in-person competency or inclusivity trainings. Many of these platforms provide the opportunity to poll attendees, enter into virtual breakout sessions, and engage in real-time Q&A with employees. These mechanisms allow individuals that may not feel comfortable sharing in a larger group participate in a meaningful way.

As bias against Asian communities intensifies, employers should also be cognizant of the impact that this may have on employees. It is important to be clear with the workforce and constituents that discrimination has no place in the organization. Be aware that staff, clients, consumers, or others may refuse to work with employees of Asian descent. Prepare staff on how to respond to discriminatory comments and behavior. Remind employees on reporting procedures and consider providing upstander training and resources on allyship. These trainings provide intervention techniques to help interested allies shift from being bystanders to upstanders—someone who holds their coworkers accountable for bias or discriminatory behavior.

Employee resource groups should be empowered to continue providing support. ERGs can organize online panel discussions, web-based trainings, virtual hangouts, or lunch and learns. ERGs should continue providing mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. If a company has a formal mentorship program, employees should be encouraged to stay connected virtually.

A business is only as successful as its people. While these are polarizing and isolating times, leaders should take concrete steps to bring people together. They can lead with compassion and remain committed to fostering work environments that are not only physically safe, but broadly inclusive and connected.