



BOSTON COLLEGE
Center for Work & Family
CARROLL SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

COVID-19 Impact on Diversity & Inclusion

HBR - [How to Be an Inclusive Leader Through a Crisis](#)

Leaders must prioritize inclusion right now, more than ever. Organizations are much more likely to be innovative in the face of this crisis if they seek input from a diverse group of employees who approach problems from a variety of perspectives. And at the same time, employees from historically underrepresented groups may feel less safe about speaking up.

- **Ensure that all employees have equal access to technology for remote work.** This is always important, but crucial at this time, when access to technology could make or break an employee's productivity and connection to others. You must ensure everyone has access to a steady internet connection, a device, and any other additional software or hardware. Don't assume everyone already has these provisions – ask, and make them easily available for those who don't.
- **Make virtual meetings equitable by turning on closed captioning, sending documents, and collecting input in advance.** Speaking up in a virtual meeting may be even more challenging for some people than doing so during in-person meetings. Sending information in advance helps create opportunities for people to chime in — and not just those who are comfortable speaking while they think. Closed captioning is especially crucial during webinars or presentations, so that everyone, including those who may have hearing difficulties or spotty WiFi service, can fully participate.
- **Begin meetings with acknowledging everyone in the room,** not just those with high status or privilege. Make it a point to acknowledge the unprecedented situation we're all in before you dive into agenda items. Leaders can set the tone by sharing their own challenges or vulnerabilities.
- **Understand how gender bias may show up.** Research shows that in "normal" work circumstances, women are penalized for being visible caregivers, while fathers receive a fatherhood bonus. During the pandemic, women are bearing the disproportionate burden of responsibility for child, family, home, and healthcare-giving. Show empathy for working parents by checking in with them, offering extra support or pushing back deadlines, and most of all, by showing grace when children of any employees interrupt video meetings.
- **Check in with employees who may be disproportionately impacted by this crisis.** Unfortunately, there's an uptick of racism against Asians and Asian Americans globally. Ensure that you connect with employees who might be affected, while reminding all employees that you take discrimination at work seriously. Share the

proper channels and protocols for reporting discrimination at work. This is also a significantly more challenging time for older and/or immuno-compromised employees, people who have at-risk family members, and employees with physical or mental health issues. Proactively share resources on your organization's health and mental health resources widely.

- **Above all, show compassion.** Managers must recognize that crises affect employees differently — for many from underrepresented communities, this means not just worrying about and providing care for their immediate family, but also caring for extended family and the larger community. Give employees time off if they're sick or need to care for a sick person. Liberally push back deadlines as more people adjust to a new normal. And remember, not everyone has the set-up be equally productive. Common barriers right now include inadequate access to technology, private space, or even the basics such as food or healthcare.

Deloitte - [Practicing inclusive leadership in times of crisis](#)

- In light of COVID-19, it is more important than ever for organizations and individuals to practice inclusive leadership.
- During this period, there has been a rise in bias, xenophobia, and racism, particularly against those of Asian descent. At work, policies also impact individuals in different ways based on things like job classification, socioeconomic status, living situation, immigration status, and ability to work virtually, which can all perpetuate inequities.
- How organizations can foster inclusion as COVID-19 changes the workplace:
 - **Fairness and respect.** Check with employees to ensure that any new policies and guidelines promote equitable treatment of workers and consider whether employees have equal access to resources needed.
 - **Value and belonging.** With many employees now working remotely or working different schedules, implementing low-cost, high-impact practices to foster psychological safety and show appreciation for workers of all types.
 - **Confidence and inspiration.** Create conditions for workers to speak up and make professional concerns and personal needs known. Leverage the brain power of a diverse workforce to change any policies or behaviors that may be unintentionally exclusive
- Research shows that inclusive leaders demonstrate six key traits: **commitment, courage, cognizance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence,** and **collaboration.** Practicing these behaviors can foster a more inclusive work environment during COVID-19, now and in the long-term.

[Why Leadership Diversity Matters in Handling Crises Like COVID-19](#)

Employee health and safety must be the foremost consideration of any business during this viral spread, but one of the greatest challenges is understanding the needs and

circumstances of employees who themselves are diverse in all of the traditional measures, but also are affected by widely varying life, work and family conditions.

During crises, the presence of diversity and the practice of inclusion is essential to challenge us to look at problems differently and consider a wider range of financial issues and impacts that we might not otherwise.

5 crucial diversity & inclusion lessons we need to learn from COVID-19

- **Flexible work is the future.** Many employees who were previously told their jobs couldn't be done remotely are now doing them remotely during COVID-19. Accommodations that were often seen as too expensive or infeasible have now been quickly implemented at many companies. This crisis has shown that disruptions, financial impact, and emotional stress could have been reduced for some companies if they had embraced remote work earlier.
- **Privilege is invisible to those who have it.** Having financial security, good health, ability to drive, access to a vehicle, and a reliable internet connection are things that many of us take for granted, but they're a privilege. Recognizing privilege and choosing what to do with it are important right now. If you can, donate to a local food bank, offer to shop for neighbors, or offer your workspace to a charity.
- **Everyone has mental health.** Despite efforts to talk more about mental health, there is still a stigma associated with it. The current situation is teaching us that none of us are safe from stress and anxiety, whether it's being concerned for a loved one, feeling isolated while social distancing, or facing income challenges. There are many wellbeing resources and tips available, and self care is more important than ever.
- **It's time to rethink how we interact with each other.** Social distancing might feel abnormal, but handshakes and hugs in the workplace have never worked for a lot of people. This situation has forced us to greet each other in more creative and inclusive ways. Additionally, while holding conferences, training sessions, and events online may not be as engaging, it may allow people to attend who couldn't normally go to events in person.
- **We must commit to challenging biases in ourselves and others.** There has been a rise in xenophobia, discrimination, and violence towards Asian people during COVID-19. This is one example of bias and the impact it can have on society. Now is a good time to reflect on unconscious biases, challenge them, and ask whether they are based on factual information.

The new coronavirus affects us all. But some groups may suffer more.

- Some groups will suffer more during a crisis like this, including homeless people, people without health insurance, those living paycheck to paycheck, and other marginalized groups that can't afford to miss work.

- According to Mary Bassett, MD, MPH, "I like to say that all epidemics are both biological and social. We have to take into consideration the ways in which epidemics...often reveal the fissures within our society."
- Philip Alberti, PhD highlights that the burden of stress can worsen risk, saying, "a lot of research shows that stress decreases immune response and makes people more vulnerable to disease. We are seeing community wide stress because of factors such as racism and xenophobia."
- Possible solutions to ease the burden on vulnerable groups:
 - Tackle financial concerns quickly and thoroughly. This could include things like paid sick leave and free testing.
 - The CDC has provided [information](#) for avoiding stigmatizing certain groups and communicating in ways that don't create more fear.
 - Encourage people to access mental health services they need.

How Employee Resource Groups Can Help Manage COVID-19 or Coronavirus Fears

- Dr. Theresa M. Welbourne has done extensive research on employee resource groups (ERGs), and reflects on how they can be useful during the pandemic.
- While coronavirus has forced us to social distance, that doesn't mean that work-centered relationships and support networks.
- Employee resource groups can help to alleviate employee fears, bring calm, and maintain productivity during this time.
- ERGs have been critical in improving diversity by teaching others about groups' needs, breaking cycles of discrimination through meaningful interaction, and using innovation to create new business ideas and solve problems.
- The bottom-up structure of ERGs can be used during this crisis to drive higher levels of coping and help isolated employees who are working from home.
- Dr. Welbourne's research finds that the most effective coping mechanisms include communications and enabling along with reflective learning. This means organizations can improve coping with ERGs, that are often made up of qualified and passionate employees ready to help meet goals for the business and society.

How ERGs Strengthen Communications and Connections as Companies Respond to Coronavirus

Proactive organizations are leveraging the power of employee resource groups/business resource groups (ERGs/BRGs) to play pivotal roles in strategies to strengthen communications and connections with workforces dispersed by COVID-19.

A new survey of Diversity & Inclusion leaders by the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) found three critical functions ERGs/BRGs are taking on:

- In 37% of organizations, ERG/BRG leaders are helping monitor the emotional well-being of group members

- Also in 37% of firms, leaders are surfacing needs and concerns of group members, who may represent older workers, those with disabilities, or other employee populations
- In 34% of organizations, ERG/BRG leaders are being asked to help keep their employee community members connected and engaged

Some ERG/BRG leaders also are stepping up to help ensure that group members receive company communications related to their organizations' COVID-19 responses, and others are coordinating connections with members of their communities who may be able to contribute helpful skills or resources—such as language translations, support with child- or eldercare, aid setting up virtual workers, and the like.

[7 Keys To Keeping Your Firm Inclusive In The Coronavirus Era](#) Law 360

This article is focused on a law firm audience, but makes some good points that are applicable in any type of business.

1. **Ensure equitable distribution of information.** Information is capital. By equitably sharing information, you reduce uncertainty and bolster morale.
2. **Set clear and achievable expectations.** We do better when we understand what is expected of us and when those expectations can actually be met. In isolation, a lack of clear and achievable expectations can create a great deal of anxiety.
3. **Actively maintain relationships.** Generally, we build and strengthen our relationships through in-person contact. As that is not an option in the short term, we need to ensure that we are being proactive in maintaining relationships.
4. **Continue to coach, mentor and sponsor** - we can provide these forms of support virtually and remotely. We can continue to advocate for our team and create access to opportunities.
5. **Show gratitude.** Not only is expressing gratitude good for us, but it creates a more cohesive team. When people are solitarily plugging away, they can feel like a replaceable cog in the machine. We need to remind our team how thankful we are for their support and service.
6. **Use technology.** We are fortunate to be dealing with this crisis at a time when the world is uniquely connected. We can have high quality face-to-face conversations with people across the world.
7. **Spotlight shared goals.** By refocusing on the things that drive us, our teams, and our organizations, we can reaffirm our purpose and stay motivated.

[Why Companies Should Invest in Diversity](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the way we experience work and the way we live our lives. Its economic repercussions have many chief executives knee-deep in crisis management. Although it may be tempting to fixate solely on the financial repercussions of

the ongoing public health crisis, research shows that companies that pay special attention to their employees emerge more resilient and more intact in the long run.

In fact, companies that are lucky enough to effectively see employees through this uncertainty will have put practices in place that align directly with the work of diversity and inclusion professionals. Some of those include making sure everyone has adequate access to the tools they need to successfully perform their jobs from home and helping managers create team cultures that encourage employees to share if they need adjustments made because they are caring for a sick relative or homeschooling young children.

Companies may have to help their middle managers address mental health considerations. They may have to contend with and make space for conversations about the rise in racist rhetoric against Asian Americans. They may find a need to support underrepresented employees as they process the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on Black and Latinx communities. Now is not the time to pull back on diversity and inclusion practices. For the most resilient companies out there, crisis management requires inclusive management.

Additional Resources

Columbia University - [Best Practices for Inclusive Remote Work in the Academy](#)

Worksheet: [20 THINGS Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Professionals Can Do During Covid-19](#)