

Organization Practice

Sustaining and strengthening inclusion in our new remote environment

Thoughtful action now can help teams build new habits, strengthen connections, and encourage the growth of inclusive cultures that will better realize the full potential of all employees.

by Diana Ellsworth, Ruth Imose, Stephanie Madner, and Rens van den Broek



Working from home has become commonplace globally. The dramatic workplace changes introduced in response to COVID-19 have provided organizations the opportunity to reset team dynamics. This major shift can, and *should*, also serve as a catalyst to embed more inclusive practices and more effective leadership skills. Since working remotely could become permanent for some employees in the next normal, organizations and teams should not miss this opportunity to introduce new, valuable habits.

An inclusive work environment doesn't just happen; it requires sustained effort (see sidebar, "Inclusion, defined"). Stresses from COVID-19 and extended isolation are driving a range of negative emotions in employees. On top of that, recent prominent examples of racial injustice have affected many employees in ways that cannot be left behind when work begins. This is especially true for Black employees. While the systemic nature of racism demands systemic action, individual actions are an important part of supporting employees and ensuring they can continue to make meaningful contributions. Team leaders have an important role to play.

Why inclusion matters more than ever

During times of crisis, the focus on inclusion becomes ever more critical, but addressing it isn't always as straightforward as it might initially appear. For instance, individuals can have mixed views on how inclusive their workplace is. Employees may feel that their employer's overall environment is generally not inclusive (perhaps because of

perceived inequitable access to resources or support) but their personal experiences may reflect inclusion based on frequent interactions with their team and immediate supervisors.

Accordingly, an inclusive environment cannot be achieved solely through systemic efforts, such as identifying and addressing unconscious bias and unintended consequences in formal processes. An inclusive environment is created in equal part by the behavior of individuals (leaders and peers), who make conscious inclusion a daily practice. Effective people management demands inclusive behavior, not least because inclusion leads to better outcomes and can support foundational business goals:

- **Win the war for talent.** Recent McKinsey research found that 39 percent of all respondents say they have turned down or decided not to pursue a job because of a perceived lack of inclusion at an organization.¹
- **Increase retention of critical talent.** Employees who experience microaggressions are three times more likely to think about leaving their jobs.²
- **Improve the quality of decision making.** Teams with greater diversity and inclusion make more accurate decisions.³
- **Build greater resonance and trust with customers.** Treating employees well is the highest-impact way to communicate an organization's values and strengthen relationships with their customers.⁴

Ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, is set up to contribute their best thinking and work to organizational success requires understanding how each employee is experiencing inclusion. Leaders must be compassionate, strive to understand the challenges of their teams, and respond in ways that promote inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic complicates this goal.

Inclusion, defined

We define inclusion as the degree to which organizations embrace all employees and enable them to make meaningful contributions.

¹ "Understanding organizational barriers to a more inclusive workplace," June 23, 2020, McKinsey.com.

² Alexis Krivkovich, Marie-Claude Nadeau, Kelsey Robinson, Nicole Robinson, Irina Starikova, and Lareina Yee, "Women in the Workplace 2018," October 2018, McKinsey.com.

³ See Heidi Grant and David Rock, "Why diverse teams are smarter," *Harvard Business Review*, November 4, 2016, hbr.com.

⁴ See Denise Lee Yohn, "Reminder: Customers care how you treat your employees," *Harvard Business Review*, September 26, 2018, hbr.com.

Seven practices to reinforce inclusion in remote workforces

People are now connecting in entirely different ways, often experiencing greater connectivity than they did before the pandemic. However, this environment does not guarantee greater inclusion at work. Without targeted intervention, noninclusive dynamics among on-site teams have the potential to be amplified in a remote context. For example, the habit of interacting primarily with familiar team members versus building new connections, supporters, and champions may be even harder to overcome when impromptu, in-person interactions are no longer possible. This dynamic is especially true for employees who already felt like an “only” on their team.⁵

This moment provides an unprecedented window into the lived experiences of others. Many employees are now balancing a greater number of personal and professional priorities—and it is all on show on videoconferences. Those who aren’t comfortable sharing their full selves may feel even more exposed at a time when they may be experiencing greater stress and challenges than ever before. These inadvertent disclosures may include aspects of a person’s life they had previously covered and did not feel prepared to share.

Leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics on their team and in their organization. We have therefore developed a menu of seven actions for leaders to promote inclusion in remote working and establish new habits in their team.

1



Demonstrate vulnerability and empathy

Team members should feel comfortable being open and vulnerable, share more of themselves, and learn how to better support others.

For example:

- ✓ Embrace the opportunity to share more about yourself (for instance, show your home and important people or animals in your life).
- ✓ Get to know team members on a more personal level by asking open-ended questions on topics they care about.
- ✓ Create space to learn what is on everyone’s mind; ask, “What’s going on with you, how is your home life influencing work life?”
- ✓ Allocate time each week to do a physical-emotional-intellectual (PEI) check-in, asking each attendee to share details on how they are feeling physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Leaders should answer honestly and remind people, “It’s okay not to feel okay.”

⁵ For more, see “Key findings from the Women in the Workplace 2018 report,” LeanIn.Org; based on *Women in the Workplace 2018*, a joint report from LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, October 2018, leanin.org.

2



Ask about people’s needs, acknowledge them, and tailor actions accordingly

Leaders cannot effectively advocate for someone without understanding what they are facing. Therefore, they could take a moment to ask what a team member might want or need instead of assuming.

For example:

- ✓ Ask team members to share potential distractions or challenges they are facing and what they need to be fully present.
- ✓ Share your personal circumstances and unexpected needs as they arise, demonstrate your understanding, and encourage others to feel more comfortable doing the same.
- ✓ Reduce the length of meetings by five minutes from the usual 15-minute increments, allowing team members time to quickly check in with children or others at home before jumping onto the next call or videoconference. For example, a 30-minute call could become 25 minutes; a 60-minute call could be reduced to 55 or even 50 minutes.
- ✓ Establish direct communication with coworkers who may feel like “onlys,” see how they are doing, and make a point to draw them into discussions.
- ✓ Be brave and address the “elephant in the room”: acknowledge difficult situations, ask questions, and create space for people to share openly how they are feeling and what they need.
- ✓ Be willing to have challenging conversations; start by acknowledging potential mistakes, and emphasize a desire to learn if others are open to teaching.

Without targeted intervention, noninclusive dynamics among on-site teams have the potential to be amplified in a remote context.

3



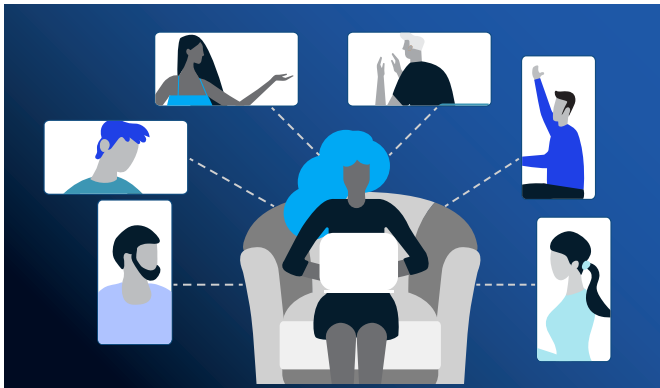
Challenge personal assumptions, adopt a learning orientation, and seek to understand others' experiences and personal styles

This exercise can broaden a leader's perspective on the definition of effective leadership, employee contributions, and ensure people feel seen and heard.

For example:

- ✓ Acknowledge what you don't know, and express a desire to learn more.
- ✓ Ask questions before asserting, rather than assuming someone's experience.
- ✓ Be aware of different communication styles and avoid letting them influence your assessment of a person's contributions. When you find yourself jumping to a conclusion, assume positive intent and consider alternative explanations for the situation. People might be struggling to get into the conversation versus having nothing to contribute; their communication style might be unconventional rather than ineffective.

4



Build space for diverse perspectives and encourage greater participation

Leaders should harness the power of their teams' diverse perspectives to enhance performance. To ensure team members have an equal opportunity to contribute in virtual meetings, leaders must prevent meeting attendees from defaulting to observer mode.

For example:

- ✓ Send out an agenda for the meeting ahead of time, with clearly defined roles and content topics.
- ✓ Have a rotating schedule of call facilitators.
- ✓ Start the meeting by asking everyone to answer the same question to get their voices into the discussion.
- ✓ Ask every participant for their opinion at least once and acknowledge their answers.
- ✓ Give credit where it's due; when an individual reiterates an idea that someone else put forward earlier in the meeting, point out who shared the idea originally.
- ✓ Draw attention to and celebrate different opinions and the value different perspectives play in getting the best answer.
- ✓ Coach team members through potential conflict by encouraging curiosity and learning how to be comfortable with not being right. Leaders should embrace the idea that their job isn't to have answers to everything, but to guide the team to the best solutions.

Leaders must be compassionate, strive to understand the challenges of their teams, and respond in ways that promote inclusion.

5



Make time for structured remote team building and networking

It's important to create space for connection as a substitute for in-person, impromptu engagement. Leaders should facilitate connections across the team and overcome the tendency to be drawn to the team members they already know.

For example:

- ✓ Set up semiregular remote sessions dedicated solely to familiarizing team members with one another.
- ✓ Develop exercises or games that encourage interactions with unfamiliar team members:
 - Pair team members up to get to know one another, joining in if needed to make the number work. Each person should be asked to introduce their partner to the group.
 - Set up a trivia game where everyone on the team submits a few fun facts about themselves. Questions can be developed to bring together the facts, drawing attention to both similarities and different strengths across the team.
 - Ask team members to share two truths and a lie. "Who would have thought it?" moments abound as participants share unlikely stories about themselves and learn more about each other.
 - Group team members into pairs or trios (depending on the numbers) and send them to separate virtual breakout rooms, IM channels, or phone calls to identify four similarities and one difference. After ten minutes, everyone can be asked to share with the group.
- ✓ Draw on the energy and ideas across the group to develop a diverse set of virtual team events. Team members should be asked to volunteer to define a team-building event focused on getting to know each other and rotate the responsibility.

6



Be intentional about mentoring and developing all team members

Remote leaders face greater barriers to thinking of someone beyond their immediate network of go-to people. Experiment with new ways to allocate opportunities, as well as expand a leader's circle.

For example:

- ✓ Schedule regular one-on-one check-ins to discuss how individual team members are doing; assess their goals, interests, and explore their professional development intentions. Leaders should keep a running list of who they spoke with, and when, to ensure interaction with the whole team.
- ✓ Assess the list of mentees and sponsors, and make it a point to add someone with a different background.
- ✓ Keep a running list of people and their goals. When an opportunity arises, a leader should look at the list before allocating the opportunity to the first person who comes to mind.
- ✓ Ask rather than assume a team member would or would not want an opportunity.
- ✓ Increase transparency of opportunities by asking the whole team for volunteers.

7



Encourage team members to set individual inclusion commitments

Everyone plays a role in creating a more inclusive working environment. Leaders should reinforce this priority, establish accountability, and encourage experimentation with new behaviors.

For example:

- ✓ Share your commitment with your team and be specific about the steps you're taking to be more inclusive, such as by saying, "I will _____ this week; please hold me accountable."
 - ✓ Ask each team member to commit to a tangible (and observable) inclusive practice to experiment with each week.
 - ✓ Share a list of inclusive actions for inspiration:
- Invest in the well-being and fair treatment of others**
- ✓ Ensure people get the credit they deserve and clarify who raised an idea.
 - ✓ Return the conversation to someone who has been talked over or interrupted.

- ✓ Pay attention to who is not speaking and actively bring them into the dialogue.
- ✓ Suspend judgment when someone behaves differently and seek to understand their actions and motivation.
- ✓ Every couple of weeks, set up time to chat with at least one person you're not familiar with.

Become an ally to and advocate for targets of mistreatment

- ✓ Draw attention to symbolic reminders of male-dominated work culture (for example, “bro talk” or references to males as “men” and females as “girls”).
- ✓ Draw attention to the use of “other” language within or outside of the group.
- ✓ Join an ally group and attend or volunteer to host diversity and inclusion events or discussions.
- ✓ Stand up for others if you see instances of noninclusive behavior.

Lead with curiosity and seek to understand perspectives different from your own

- ✓ Listen intently; draw attention to interruptions.
- ✓ Invite different opinions to help you learn; after sharing a viewpoint, explicitly ask if there are any additional perspectives you should consider.
- ✓ Ask questions to learn more and share what you understand to make others feel heard.

Support others to achieve their goals

- ✓ Volunteer to take on “office housework” (for example, taking notes and organizing events) so it doesn't always fall to the same person.
 - ✓ Take the time to share advice or knowledge from your experience with others.
 - ✓ Challenge yourself to quickly respond to the next ask for help (for example, request for review of a document) that comes from one of your team members.
 - ✓ Establish common language to celebrate inclusive behavior or draw attention to noninclusive behavior in the moment without implying judgment. For example, as a team, select videoconferencing tools or a word or term to call out noninclusive behavior.
 - ✓ Set up an end-of-week reflection (or include one in existing meetings) to celebrate positive changes and areas for continued growth as a team and reinforce a more inclusive environment.
-

The move to remote working has the potential to be catalytic in redefining how leaders make others feel connected and valued. Physical distancing could inadvertently be the impetus to increased emotional and social connection between team members and collective feelings of being heard, known, and respected. Leaders who take action can ultimately increase the level of inclusion and belonging among employees, even after we enter the next normal.

These inclusive practices not only make leaders more effective but also unlock the potential of teams and organizations. Achieving these goals, however, requires thoughtful and targeted action.

Many of these may seem simple, yet we find that not everyone takes them. Leaders should reflect on what might be holding them back and encourage their teams to do the same.⁶ Ultimately, everyone in an organization contributes to building a more inclusive and effective working environment. People will be remembered for how they act and treat others during this time. Individuals and organizations that get it right will have an advantage regardless of what the future holds.

⁶ *McKinsey Organization Blog*, "Do your employees struggle with these three common roadblocks?," by Alexander DiLeonardo, David Mendelsohn, and Nick Rosemarino, October 14, 2019, McKinsey.com.

Diana Ellsworth is a partner in McKinsey's Atlanta office. **Ruth Imose** and **Stephanie Madner** are consultants in the New York office, where **Rens van den Broek** is an associate partner.

The authors wish to thank Kevin Dolan and Charlotte Relyea for their contributions to this article.

Copyright © 2020 McKinsey & Company. All rights reserved.