



## Addressing the impact of COVID-19 Practicing inclusive leadership in times of crisis

The transition to a new way of working—in the context of a global pandemic with far-reaching societal and economic implications—presents both challenges and opportunities for promoting diversity and fostering inclusion. Before COVID-19, the social and business imperatives for diversity and inclusion (D&I) became increasingly clear, with commitment to and investment in D&I on the rise across corporate America and around the world. Now, in light of COVID-19, it is more important than ever for organizations and individuals to practice inclusive leadership.

In this period of heightened uncertainty, a perceived lack of control and the spread of misinformation increases risks of bias, xenophobia, and racism (especially against those of Asian descent) that impact people in the workplace and beyond. At work, ever-changing policies impact individuals in different ways—based on, for example, job classification, socioeconomic status, living situation, family structure, immigration status, or the ease of virtual alternatives to daily work—which can perpetuate inequities in the workplace. Therefore, organizations must take steps now to continue to strengthen diversity and build inclusive cultures in ways unlike ever before—through new communications strategies (internal and external), programs, data collection practices, and interventions that continue the momentum toward a more equitable and just world. And leaders—that is, all of us—must adapt the daily practice of inclusive leadership as well.

### How organizations can foster inclusion as COVID-19 changes the workplace<sup>1</sup>

- Fairness and respect.** Check with employees—through pulse surveys or mechanisms—to validate that any new policies or guidelines promote equitable treatment of all workers and consider whether workers have equal access to the resources needed to perform jobs.
- Value and belonging.** Especially given that many workers are remote or working new schedules, implement low-cost, high-impact practices to foster psychological safety, and show appreciation for and recognize workers of all types for their continuous contributions.
- Confidence and inspiration.** Create conditions for workers to speak up and confidently make professional concerns and personal needs known. Leveraging the collective brain power of a diverse workforce can help expose policies or behaviors that are unintentionally exclusive.

### A SPOTLIGHT ON BIAS

As humans, we have bias. These biases—often described as mental shortcuts—allow us to efficiently make judgments and decisions without access to every piece of information. Research has proven that in moments of stress and anxiety, our biases are amplified. In the best of cases, these biases serve as instinctual mechanisms of self-preservation during crisis. But in the workplace, when our minds are distracted, we must be even more careful that our biases do not contribute to inequities or exclusion.

#### Unconscious biases to watch out for in times of crisis

##### **Affinity bias**

We tend to associate with individuals we believe are like us, as opposed to those with whom we do not identify.

*When working virtually an inclusive leader intentionally seeks talent outside of “go-to” circles for assignments or opportunities.*

##### **Confirmation bias**

We tend to only consider information that confirms our point of view.

*Lacking the data one collects from interacting with others physically or casually, inclusive leaders focus on intentionally creating spaces to connect more deeply with colleagues and teams.*

##### **Personality error bias**

We assume an individual's behavior is core to their personality, without considering external factors.

*The world is facing the same pandemic, but not all situations are equal. Inclusive leaders are cognizant that others may exhibit behavior that is the product of circumstance—not who they are as a person.*

Research shows that inclusive leaders demonstrate **six signature traits**: commitment, courage, cognizance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration.<sup>2</sup> By cultivating and practicing these behaviors, leaders can foster a more inclusive workplace environment in the face of COVID-19—both today and in the long-term.

## How can inclusive leadership address immediate employee needs?

**Remain committed to building an inclusive culture.** Due to the origin of the COVID-19 outbreak, Asian communities have been the target of increased racial aggression. Inclusive leaders:

- Make support resources available for those impacted by discriminatory or aggressive behavior
- Leverage virtual townhalls to reiterate anti-discrimination policies and address bias with the facts
- Use constructive language and avoid calling COVID-19 by a name that associates the virus with a specific geography or people

**Have the courage to hold yourself and others accountable.** This is the time to challenge both status quo practices and new guidelines that might exacerbate D&I challenges within an organization. Inclusive leaders draw on humility to be allies for employees and:

- Tell their personal stories to foster transparency, candor, and empathy
- Speak up when intolerant language is used in the workplace
- Acknowledge policies that aren't inclusive and take action to improve them

## **Be cognizant of biases and blind spots.**

Employees come from increasingly diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Inclusive leaders use feedback channels (such as internal social media and monitored mailboxes) to avoid personal blind spots and ensure policies are not unintentionally excluding any segment of the workforce.

## How can inclusive leadership shape evolving D&I practices?

### **Build cultural intelligence.**

The backlash faced by Asian individuals, communities, and businesses in response to COVID-19 highlights the need for increased cultural intelligence. Inclusive leaders focus on short and long-term solutions through trainings and workforce experiences that heighten cultural sensitivity and encourage allyship.

**Be curious and learn throughout the crisis.** The COVID-19 crisis is evolving and forcing organizations to constantly adapt. Inclusive leaders will learn from changes that have had a positive impact on the workforce and identify new ways to:

- Be an ally for employees who are facing reduced work hours, caring full time for children or others affected by the virus, or lacking basic necessities like funds to buy supplies for a potential quarantine
- Balance workforce safety with critical business needs
- Explore ways to virtually attract diverse talent and rely less on location-based sourcing strategies

### **Reimagine how your organization collaborates.**

Around the world, organizations are mandating extended periods of remote work or alternate work schedules. Inclusive leaders will explore ways to maintain this flexibility even after the pandemic and:

- Empower their organizations with versatile work policies and tools, well-being support systems, and rewards that meet the needs of a diverse workforce
- Establish guidelines to help workers adapt to a long-term shift in working styles and improve collaboration between teammates with different schedules or geographical locations

## Contact:

### For more information on how to respond, recover and thrive:

- Connect to Deloitte leaders [www.deloitte.com/COVID-19-leaders](http://www.deloitte.com/COVID-19-leaders)
- Visit [www.deloitte.com/COVID-19](http://www.deloitte.com/COVID-19)

#### Sources:

1. Based on the "Elements of inclusion" published in "The six signature traits of inclusive leadership," Deloitte, 2016.
2. "The six signature traits of inclusive leadership," Deloitte, 2016.

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