

# 6 Ways to Foster Inclusion Among Remote Workers

By Roy Maurer

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**T**he coronavirus pandemic and the sudden shift to remote work complicates what was already a major challenge for HR: cultivating and managing an inclusive workplace.

"An inclusive work environment doesn't just happen, it requires sustained effort," said Diana Ellsworth, a partner at McKinsey & Company based in Atlanta. "Stresses from COVID-19 and extended isolation are driving a range of negative emotions in employees, [and] ... during times of crisis, the focus on inclusion becomes ever more critical."

Lauren Romansky, managing vice president at research and advisory firm Gartner, said that since March, "HR has been focused on understanding and managing the employee experience for an increasingly remote workforce. One risk that a lot of HR and diversity and inclusion leaders have been concerned about is that the inclusion component would be neglected. Being consistent about inclusion is particularly challenging," she said.

Achieving an inclusive environment happens through both systemic efforts and by the behavior of individuals who make conscious inclusion a daily practice, Ellsworth said. "Effective people management demands inclusive behavior, not least because inclusion leads to better outcomes and can support foundational business goals."

Inclusion—which develops from psychological safety, trust and belonging—is a critical driver of outcomes like productivity and engagement, which are being sorely tested during this time of unprecedented disruption.

To build and maintain inclusion in today's remote work environment, HR leaders should consider the following six tactics:

**Show empathy.** Belonging—the need to feel that managers and colleagues care about one another—is a critical aspect of inclusion and engagement, Romansky said. "In a traditional work environment, managers and employees demonstrate care through in-person social interactions, such as stopping by a colleague's cubicle to say hello, scheduling a coffee chat with a friend or reconnecting with the team through a work-sponsored social event. However, in a remote work environment, demonstrating care is far more challenging."

Ellsworth said that team leaders should embrace the opportunity to share about themselves, get to know team members on a more personal level and allocate time each week to check in on how people are feeling physically and emotionally. "Ask about people's needs, acknowledge them, and tailor actions accordingly," she said. "Leaders cannot effectively advocate for someone without understanding what they are facing. Acknowledge difficult situations, ask questions and create space for people to share openly how they are feeling and what they need."

**Encourage participation.** Without targeted intervention, exclusionary dynamics among teams have the potential to be amplified in a remote context, Ellsworth said. She advised team leaders to establish direct communication with workers and make a point to draw them into team discussions and ensure that team members have an equal opportunity to contribute in virtual meetings.

Managers also need to be aware of their team members' different communication styles. "People might be struggling to get into the conversation—their communication style might be unconventional rather than ineffective," Ellsworth said.

**Create structured team building.** Romansky said that HR should work with managers on ways to simulate social interactions that encourage connectedness as a substitute for in-person engagement. "How this is played out is contextualized based on organizational and team culture, but it can also be personalized the most," she said. "Virtual coffee chats, happy hours, team celebrations and digital recognition are all relatively easy ways to encourage a group of any size to convene and bond with one another."

Ellsworth suggested developing exercises or games that encourage getting to know one another and sharing about each other with the team. "Draw on the energy and ideas across the group to develop a diverse set of virtual team events," she said. "Team members should be asked to volunteer to define a team-building event focused on getting to know each other and rotate the responsibility."

**Tap ERGs to collect feedback, support connection.** Romansky said that the most successful employee resource groups (ERGs) drive change and plug into talent and business processes to make sure that the organization's decision-making is inclusive. "While ERGs are traditionally set up to connect employees with shared identities, they can also be used to engage nonmembers by providing support and guidance on emerging challenges," she said. "The fact that the structure already exists is hugely important. HR leaders should identify the ERGs that have the greatest potential to reveal critical insights into the new employee experience to understand how different groups of employees are experiencing the new remote work environment."

ERGs can also support emerging employee needs. For example, a group for working parents may be able to offer ideas and guidance to employees on how to balance caregiving and work responsibilities, Romansky said.

In addition to providing HR leaders with an opportunity to hear different employee sentiments and perceptions, ERGs can facilitate much-needed social connection among employees. "Previously, social connection by itself would have been a low bar, but now it's a critical component of what ERGs can deliver," she said.

**Be intentional about developing all employees.** "The number one quality of an inclusive leader is supporting team growth," Romansky said. "What's hard about that right now is that everyone is being asked to do more with less, and the challenge is providing mentoring and development in an environment where rewards may be hard-pressed."

It's also easier for development opportunities to go to the "trusted few" in the manager's immediate network, she said. "Leaders must make sure that underrepresented talent is on the call list when any of these high-profile opportunities and projects open up and not out-of-sight, out-of-mind."

Ellsworth said that managers should schedule regular one-on-one check-ins to discuss individual team members' goals, interests and professional development ideas. "Keep a running list of people and their goals," she said. "When an opportunity arises, 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 and increase transparency of opportunities by asking the whole team for volunteers."

**Reevaluate inclusion efforts.** Senior HR leaders should reassess how the organization can further support inclusion during this time, Romansky said. "Benefits, work-from-home resources and other offerings should be reviewed to ensure they continue to accommodate employees with diverse needs. Working parents, employees with caregiving responsibilities, sick employees, quarantined employees, employees with disabilities and other talent segments may require new or different support as they work from home."

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