

How to Be an Inclusive Leader Through a Crisis

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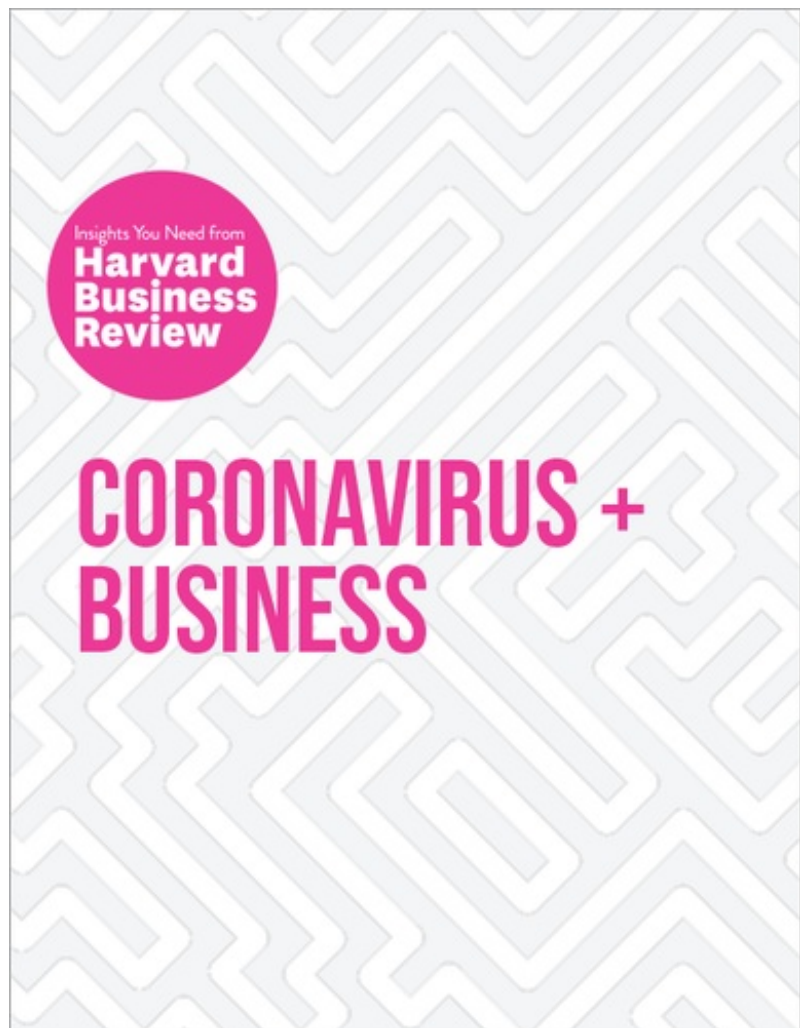
Leaders are under extraordinary pressure right now. They are expected to make decisions quickly with incomplete and rapidly evolving information. And unfortunately, being in crisis mode can cause even the most intentional and well-meaning leaders to fall into patterns of bias and exclusion. [Research shows that when we're stressed](#), we often default to heuristics and gut instincts, rather than making deliberate and goal-oriented decisions.

And yet, 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](#).

Further Reading

“Now is a time for leaders to think about what type of leader they need to be for all of their workers, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized,” says workplace culture and human capital strategist, Daisy Auger-Dominguez. “As we [hopefully] move from rapid response to short- to long-term recovery, community, connection, and allyship — including deep awareness about how implicit bias shows up in decision making — will become even more important critical leadership competencies.”

Below I offer some specific tactics to make sure you are prioritizing inclusive behaviors in your workplace during this crisis.



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. There can’t be disparities in your organization when it comes to access to technology. Harvard Business School professor [Tsedal Neeley recently wrote](#) that managers right now need to “get the infrastructure right.” She urges leaders to ask themselves, “do people have the requisite technology or access to it?” If you expect employees to continue delivering comparable levels of productivity during the pandemic, you must ensure everyone has access to a steady internet connection, a device, and any other additional software or hardware. As a manager, 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. If you’re presenting, I also recommend using a chat function to reiterate important points, and

opening it up to others who may feel more comfortable asking questions or making comments in writing. In addition, as Neeley suggests: “Follow up these virtual meetings with redundant communication to ensure that people have heard you and that they’re OK with the outcome...You should have multiple touchpoints through various media to continue the trail of conversation.” Again, this ensures that if someone doesn’t have a top-speed internet connection at home or wasn’t able to hear or understand everything during a video meeting, they still have access to the necessary information. Record key meetings and share the link with employees.

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. Your team will appreciate it if you say, “This is hard.” In smaller meetings, check in individually with each person on how they’re doing. I had to quickly transition the last three sessions of my in-person college class online this month. And even though navigating it with 22 students wasn’t easy, I built in time during every class for each person to share “a win” or “a challenge” before launching into my curriculum. When I do these check-ins, I notice that more students speak up during the rest of the class, whether it’s virtual or in person. On the other hand, when I skip check-ins to keep us on schedule, I’ve observed that the same few students feel comfortable speaking up, while introverts and those from underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to stay silent.

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 — they’re offered more money or made to believe that they’re more reliable. During the pandemic, women are bearing the disproportionate burden of responsibility for child, family, home, and healthcare-giving, says Auger-Dominguez. “The reality is that we have not normalized what should be seen as the most natural and normal of occurrences in our lives. And to this add the layers of race, class, nationality, and other marginalized lenses, and you can see how many layers of oppression are holding women back from simply surviving in these precarious times.” Watch out for biased language in performance evaluations of female employees with children — especially with references to their productivity or reliability during the remote work period.

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.

Melissa Abad, a sociologist at Stanford VMware Women’s Leadership Innovation Lab, also urges us to be more thoughtful in how we interpret the way women of color speak. “When Black or Latina women are stressed, that can be viewed negatively in work communication, compared with other people in the majority expressing the same

emotion.” She recommends that managers be deliberate about who they’re giving feedback to, especially around communication, and to take time to ask themselves whether that feedback could be biased.

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. Abad recommends proactively sharing 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 to be equally productive. Common barriers right now include inadequate access to technology, private space, or even the basics such as food or healthcare.

“The crisis gives us the chance to evaluate the structure of work and how organizational processes have to adapt,” says Abad. As we navigate uncharted territory, we have a unique opportunity to examine ways we could be more inclusive to all employees, but especially those who may be dealing with significantly more challenges.

When we get to the other side of this pandemic, my hope is that more of us learn to lead inclusively and with empathy, not only in crisis but also in calm.

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