



**COVID-19:
WOMEN, EQUITY,
AND INCLUSION
IN THE FUTURE
OF WORK**

A New Path

The Covid-19 Storm Has Blown Us Into Uncharted Territory.

Office towers are emptied. Employees who usually work on-site are sequestered at home. Millions of service workers, and a growing number of corporate workers, have lost their jobs. Businesses are determining how to safely reopen their doors in a drastically different reality. Meanwhile, essential workers are putting their lives at risk.

Organizational leaders, from CEOs to new managers, have recognized that work has changed in profound ways—and it's never going back to the way it was. Uncertainty and fear are rampant. Social inequalities are magnified. Empathy and trust have become critical as physical distancing makes connecting across differences particularly challenging. And companies around the world have been forced into an unplanned experiment with remote and flexible working.

This disruption is unprecedented and shocking. But it also is an opportunity for corporate leaders to assess what they value, how they lead, and how their teams work together. If we take this time to proactively reimagine our future, we can shed old priorities, choices, habits, and exclusionary behaviors and clear the slate for new, better ones that benefit business and people. We can design a more equitable, inclusive, and fulfilling workplace in which people can belong, contribute, and thrive.

But How, Exactly, Do We Do This?

The pandemic has smashed all the usual signposts and eroded many of the structures that previously supported our workplaces and society. In their absence, corporations are in a unique position to blaze a new path. Leaders—and all of us—must challenge ourselves to find the will and fortitude to reimagine organizations and society. We must leave behind the idea that work is confined to specific times and places. We must recognize and honor the humanity and interconnectedness of our colleagues, neighbors, and communities. We must balance safety, business continuity concerns, and the imperative of broad social equity amid prolonged uncertainty.

Catalyst has a map to this new path, and its guiding light is inclusion. Drawing upon research and our expertise in creating workplaces that work for women, we chart our course around five strategies that will turbocharge the journey to a more inclusive future of work.



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LEAD INCLUSIVELY THROUGH CRISIS

Successful leadership during times of extreme uncertainty and ambiguity requires a foundation of inclusion built with vision, courage, clear communication, diversity, equity, transparency, and resilience.

TACKLE INEQUITIES

Broad and entrenched social inequities have been exacerbated and magnified; companies that diminish these divisions in their workplaces position themselves for greater success.

CONNECT WITH EMPATHY

Empathy is a skill that helps bond colleagues together and sets the foundation for an integrated and inclusive workplace.



5 STRATEGIES For a Better Workplace

TRUST YOUR TEAM

Trust—involving team members as decision-makers and contributors—is a key element of inclusion and a catalyst for team empowerment.

WORK REMOTELY AND FLEXIBLY

With more disruptions inevitable, learning how to work remotely and flexibly is a business-continuity necessity and inclusion accelerator.

1. Lead Inclusively Through Crisis

Orient Employees in a Disorienting Time

In a crisis, inclusive leadership is paramount to a quick, cohesive, and sustainable response.¹ With an inclusive mindset, you can create predictability amid unpredictability—orienting employees in this disorienting time with a compelling vision and a credible roadmap that motivates people to achieve it.

In an environment of extreme uncertainty and ambiguity, change is necessary for business survival—and how you do it matters. As you pivot to new strategies and missions, and organizations update infrastructure and technology, your ability to effectively implement these changes is crucial.

If you adopt transparent and equitable change processes and goals as well as build trust, you can reduce the negative impact of difficult yet necessary changes on employees' wellbeing and job outcomes.² And when employees are less stressed, better engaged, and feel less ambiguity, their commitment and performance improve,³ and the organization will function more effectively and efficiently.

KEY MESSAGES

- Inclusive leadership is paramount to a quick, cohesive, and sustainable response.
- Strong and inclusive leadership during a crisis creates predictability amid unpredictability.
- Agility is enhanced by diversity.
- Transparency, equity, and communication create a foundation of trust and inclusion that allows change to happen.
- Resilient leaders cultivate resilient teams that not only survive but also learn and thrive during uncertain times.

Agility Requires Diversity and Inclusive Change Management

Agility in both disruptive and “normal” times is enhanced by diversity.⁴ Diverse teams are better equipped to explore, analyze, and brainstorm all the organizational consequences of uncertainty.⁵ With a variety of skills, life experiences, and perspectives in the conversation, a diverse team’s chances of choosing a successful change strategy increase.

Once a strategy is adopted, change management, which deals with preparing employees to understand and enact new changes, becomes central to both responding quickly and allaying employee fears and stress about potential ambiguity. Transparency, equity, and communication create a foundation of trust and inclusion that allows change to happen with more support and commitment from employees.⁶

Transparency is necessary because uncertain times can create ambiguity about employees’ roles in organizations, and role ambiguity can lead to negative psychological outcomes such as stress and depression in employees.⁷

- Top-down strategies of change—even if meticulously designed and technically precise—do not suffice for building agility.⁸ Leaders must take the human side of organizational changes seriously.
- Leaders should help employees navigate role ambiguity by involving them in decision-making processes.
 - > Including employees in decision-making is linked to greater employee engagement and organizational citizenship behaviors,⁹ which are invaluable for organizations and leaders during a time of crisis.
- Transparency and transfer of knowledge can improve both employee engagement and business outcomes.¹⁰

Equity helps ensure that different experiences and perspectives are considered as the organization undergoes rapid changes.

- People are more likely to resist change if they don’t view it as just.¹¹
 - > During difficult times, sensitivities to injustice could be heightened, and employees who already feel marginalized might be more likely to perceive unfairness.



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- Employees may find it extremely difficult to make predictions and informed decisions about the best course of action because they lack information about the nature of the environment, how the organization will be affected, and what the organization's options for responding are¹²—for both the short- and long-terms.
 - > Each of us experiences this uncertainty differently, with the most vulnerable among us bearing the most severe consequences.¹³
- Uncertain times may also be prime opportunities for new leaders to arise; organizations should keep an eye open for emerging leaders and give them opportunities to thrive.

Clear communication on roles, processes, and goals will go a long way to helping employees feel grounded, especially if they are working in new and different ways.

- Leaders should re-evaluate organizational structures, culture, and expectations and remove any roadblocks to open communication and flow of information.
- A flatter hierarchy might allow subject-area experts to communicate more easily with decision-makers.¹⁴

Build Resilient Teams

Besides managing the change process, leaders in an unpredictable time who demonstrate resilience can model behaviors—such as confidence and courage—to diminish some of the difficulties employees face and improve team and organizational performance.¹⁵ Other characteristics associated with leadership resilience include emotional intelligence, strategic thinking, the ability to learn from past experiences, flexibility in use of various leadership approaches, and the ability to develop other people.¹⁶

In conditions of uncertainty and unpredictability, when everyday conversations can be challenging, successful leadership should be demonstrated through “dialogue and learning”¹⁷—giving team members a way to be heard and feel seen, even if you can’t offer a concrete solution. Being a good listener requires empathy, a leadership skill useful for connecting with employees who are bewildered by the new circumstances confronting their teams, organizations, families, and societies.¹⁸

Resilient leaders cultivate resilient teams that not only survive but also think boldly and courageously, learn, and thrive during uncertain times. Resilient teams have several characteristics:¹⁹

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CONFIDENCE

Teams have confidence in their collective ability to get through the difficult times.



ROLE CLARITY

Teams establish role clarity and a shared understanding of goals and how to achieve them.



AGILITY

Teams quickly respond to adverse conditions by investing in the right expertise at the right time.



PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Teams enjoy a level of latitude to make missteps and ability to take risks that allows them to feel safe and learn from each other.



These characteristics can alleviate anxieties and create an empowering workplace in which team members with a sense of purpose can propose creative solutions to today's unique conditions.

Even with our best efforts and inclusive leadership, though, work is harder in a crisis of this magnitude.

- Be realistic in your expectations for people.
- Reward small successes and provide feedback to reinforce employee resilience and efficiency in adjusting to changes.
- Don't forget that resources and investments in employee psychological wellbeing are central to your organization's ability to regain its balance and momentum after the chaos settles.²⁰

Learning Must Continue

As with any opportunity to change, this moment is also an opportunity to learn. Research shows that organizations with the right change-management structures and cultures in place are better positioned to use the learnings from uncertain times to prepare for a future crisis.²¹

- Clarify roles, processes, and policies so that teams can collect, analyze, and disseminate new and evolving knowledge to make further progress.
- Emphasize cultural norms and values such as transparency, integrity, accountability, and psychological safety to enhance organizational capacity to learn during turbulent times.²²
- Learn to learn during disruption so that employees can become comfortable with ambiguity and serve the organization well in an unpredictable future.

2. Tackle Inequities

Social Divisions Drive Unequal Experiences

People are suffering and dying. But they are not suffering and dying equally.

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare worldwide social divisions that literally determine who lives and who dies. These deep-rooted inequities—based on interconnected factors such as occupation, income, race/ethnicity, gender, age, ability, or access to critical resources such as affordable housing, food, clean water, medicine, and job security—shape our vastly different experiences in this crisis and beyond.

It's impossible to separate these divisions from our workplaces. But CEOs, board directors, and other leaders have the power to alleviate them. Within the broad framework of societal inequities, we are all interdependent; creating an equitable, productive workplace both benefits businesses and lifts people.

Occupation

Front-line workers provide lifesaving care and essential services while risking their own safety.

Globally, women are overrepresented in many of these occupations and industries—though not in leadership positions. For example, women represent over 70% of workers in health and social care institutions, but only 25% of executive roles in senior leadership.²³ In the United States, women hold more essential jobs than men; one in three jobs held by women is considered essential; and women of color are the most likely group to hold an essential job.²⁴ Because of social disparities, many essential workers are people of color, ethnic minorities, and migrant workers.²⁵ Many of these essential jobs pay low wages and don't provide paid sick leave.²⁶

On the flip side, many of the industries largely shut down due to the onslaught of Covid-19 are disproportionately staffed by women, younger workers, part-time employees, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.²⁷

KEY MESSAGES

- Deep-rooted inequities shape our vastly different experiences in this crisis.
- Organizations have the power to alleviate these social divisions with the following actions:
 - > Ramp up your commitment to diversity and inclusion.
 - > Redefine what gender equity looks like in your organization.
 - > Face biases and stereotypes head-on.
 - > Reskill your workforce for the future.
 - > Build effective gender partnerships.
 - > Leverage your employee resource groups.

Economic Security

With the global economy in disarray, millions of people are facing job loss,²⁸ food insecurity,²⁹ and financial hardship.³⁰ Ultimately, half a billion people globally could fall into poverty because of this health and financial crisis.³¹ All over the world, people from marginalized communities are not only disproportionately affected economically but are more vulnerable to the disease itself.

People from all economic strata are experiencing the weight of financial insecurity in the face of this global pandemic. The International Labour Organization reports that “more than four of five people (81%) in the global workforce of 3.3 billion are currently affected by full or partial workplace closures.”³² In a recent US-based poll, nearly 60% of those surveyed expect extensive unemployment and economic downturn to happen in the next five years. Additionally, 44% of people who remain in either part- or full-time jobs have had their hours cut and/or their income reduced because of Covid-19, and over 40% fear losing their jobs in the near future.³³

Health

Covid-19 is hitting marginalized communities hard—a result of structural barriers, inequalities, vulnerabilities (such as lack of access to health care, housing, education, job opportunities), and social stigmas that disadvantage some and create privileges for others.³⁴

In the United States, Black and Latinx people are getting sick more often and have worse outcomes—including higher death rates—than white people.³⁵ People of Asian descent have been stigmatized, stereotyped, and mistreated, threatening their access to needed health care and affecting their overall wellbeing and mental health.³⁶ Globally, Indigenous people have limited access to health and essential services, clean water and soap, sanitation services, and medical help, especially in their own language, which puts them at greater risk.³⁷

Older people, already more likely to experience serious and life-threatening coronavirus complications,³⁸ are also affected by ageist bias that influences decisions about their care. In particular, the initial association of the coronavirus with the elderly reinforced a harmful view of this vulnerable population as expendable,³⁹ influencing their emotional and mental health.⁴⁰

People with disabilities are also experiencing heightened discrimination amid this pandemic, particularly in healthcare policies.⁴¹ For example, some US states rolled out emergency policies for allocating scarce ventilators that explicitly disadvantaged people with disabilities.⁴²

Men are dying at a higher rate than women are from Covid-19.⁴³ Masculine norms and stigmas around mental health issues⁴⁴ can discourage men from getting care, reaching out for help, or expressing that they're having a hard time.⁴⁵



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Caregiving

Traditionally, women have been far more likely than men to be responsible for childcare and other caregiving activities, even when they also have paid jobs.⁴⁶ With almost 70% of the world's students affected by school closures,⁴⁷ working families face the untenable task of schooling-at-home while maintaining some form of employment. They can no longer rely on outside support with childcare, meals, and cleaning that often helps them have time to work. In many families, women have taken on the bulk of these additional tasks. Falling into gender stereotypical roles is one reason; another is economic due to the gender pay gap.⁴⁸

Men are also adversely impacted. Research shows that men often pay a penalty for prioritizing childcare.⁴⁹ Men may also feel pressure to act as though it's business as usual to meet the demands of an overly combative work culture.

Digital Access

Lack of reliable high-speed internet service for those without financial resources or in rural areas makes it difficult, if not impossible, to work remotely, maintain connections with loved ones, and secure food, school materials, telehealth appointments, and other essential services. In the United States, over 20 million people lack broadband access.⁵⁰ Globally, 3.7 billion people can't access the internet, with women 23% less likely than men to use mobile internet.⁵¹

Violence

Many people confined at home live with domestic violence. With tensions running high and nowhere to go, victims of intimate partner abuse and child abuse have few options during the pandemic.⁵² Countries across the globe are seeing an increase in reported domestic violence cases, helpline calls, and emergency shelter requests.⁵³ While advocates, businesses, and communities are finding creative solutions to reach out to those in need,⁵⁴ the risks remain pervasive.

Acts of racism and xenophobia have increased as well, reflecting the worst of humanity in a time of crisis. In the United States, people of Asian descent have reported being physically and verbally attacked by those who blame them for the disease.⁵⁵

Without Equity, There Are No Solutions

All of these social inequities magnify the tremendous uncertainty and peril that people in every industry, occupation, and job level are facing today. Employees bring their lived experiences and concerns to work. Senior leaders who discount these issues and put inclusion efforts aside as “non-essential” are short-sighted and may cause irreparable damage.⁵⁶ The organizations that acknowledge and honor the many facets of employee lives can build a more equitable and inclusive future in which social divisions are diminished and everyone can thrive. Start with the following actions:

Reimagine inclusion initiatives to address a different business landscape.

- Consider modifying practices related to hiring, development, networking, and visibility opportunities now that so much work is done remotely. Find ways to identify new talent who are stepping up to the challenge of leading during this uncertain time.
- Analyze workforce data to reveal opportunity gaps,⁵⁷ prioritize initiatives, and allocate resources. Gather new data on how people from various marginalized groups are affected by the current situation.
- Maintain momentum with women’s sponsorship programs, which are essential to combating three critical barriers to advancement: exclusion from informal networks, lack of role models, and gender stereotypes. Sponsorship enables women to have access to power in a company and make their accomplishments known, two factors that predict women’s advancement and thus help level the playing field.⁵⁸

Redefine what gender equity looks like in your organization.

Efforts to achieve gender equality at work tend to focus on equal pay, access to leadership positions, and work-life effectiveness.⁵⁹ But Covid-19 is revealing a wider range of social issues that affect employees at all levels.

- Look at your organization’s responses through the lens of gender in intersection with other dimensions of identity such as race/ethnicity, nationality, class, age, sexual orientation, ability, religion, Indigenous status, and migration or refugee status.⁶⁰
- Take stock of who is at greater risk of being laid off, who is being identified for critical assignments, and who is overworked or undervalued.
- Examine different cuts of your workforce data to identify patterns of employment before and after the pandemic. When you don’t have data, talk to your employees to gather data.
- Create a plan for how you will continue to take into account these intersectional factors so you won’t lose ground as you move toward a more diverse workforce.

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Challenge yourself and others to face biases and stereotypes.

The stress of our new environments—at work and home—can increase biased beliefs⁶¹ and stereotypical thinking⁶² that can harm colleagues in small and large ways.

- Don't let biases go unchecked. Implicit biases are tricky because they're unintentional mental shortcuts that don't reflect our conscious intentions or values. We're most likely to rely on them when our brains are fatigued, allowing biases to influence our judgments, decisions, and behavior and possibly leading us to discriminate against certain groups.⁶³ Indeed, that sense of fatigue can be experienced during times of extreme uncertainty—like a global pandemic paired with an economic shutdown.
- Take intentional actions to debunk stereotypes. These uncertain times can lead to rigidity in our thinking, which can set the stage for stereotyping. Stereotypes are sticky and can be difficult to change; even neutral or ambiguous information about a social group is often interpreted by others as stereotype-reinforcing.⁶⁴ Encourage leaders and employees to question all their assumptions about other people.

Reskill your workforce for the future.

The equitable future we want to create requires new ways of thinking about who we hire and how we train people at all career stages.

- Reassess relevant job qualifications, including notions of traditional higher education as the path to obtaining jobs. Not only does the current disruption to higher education limit access to degrees, there are reasons to believe that we will not return to the structures and formats of our pre-pandemic educational system.⁶⁵
- Train all employees to be digitally literate. They might not need to know how to code, but they will need to be able to work with new technology. The right training can mitigate inequities associated with access to education and expand the talent pool.
- Recruit differently. The question is no longer, "Does this person have the necessary skills or background?" Instead, ask, "Does this person have the interest and ability to learn the necessary skills?"
- Make sure your reskilling efforts don't leave out members of traditionally marginalized groups. This is a good opportunity to try to level the playing field.

Build effective gender partnerships.

Gender partnership refers to people of all gender identities assuming mutual accountability for driving a culture of inclusion in which everyone has a stake and can benefit.

- Start by defining what type of partnerships your company is seeking to build. Yes, partnerships among women and men are needed. But other partnerships are also critical. For example, men can support men, women can work across racial and ethnic groups, and transgender and non-binary employees can partner with their cisgender colleagues.
- Use these partnerships to break down the status quo and shift thinking to build alliances that address bias and inspire collective action.
- Remember that partnership is not just about how those in the majority can “help” those in the minority. Partnership is about connecting within and across lines of difference.

Leverage your employee resource groups.

Employee resource groups (ERGs) can play a critical role in providing support and connection in times of stress. Many organizations rely on ERGs (e.g., for working parents, veterans, employees of color, women) to enhance inclusion.

- Set priorities to help your ERGs meet the challenges of Covid-19 in new and unexpected ways. For example, use them to celebrate the heroism involved in simply showing up to work regardless of “essential” or “frontline” classifications.
- Consider establishing new ERGs to support emergent groups of valuable and vulnerable employees who have taken on greater risk and responsibility, such as IT professionals who check and maintain their office’s tech and security infrastructure or finance managers with no means of electronically processing payments.
- Invest in more cross-ERG activities for learning and sharing experiences across groups. Although Covid-19 is upending our personal and work lives in different ways, your employees will benefit from greater connection and resources to help them thrive in this time.

3. Connect With Empathy

Empathy Builds Human Connections

With so much tragedy, misfortune, and unease during the pandemic, we hear a lot about the need for empathy. But what exactly does empathy entail? And why is it so important right now?

Empathy is not just a trait—it’s a critical future-of-work skill we use to create connection, care, and understanding with other people. This makes it a uniquely human skill that is not easily automated by emerging technologies like artificial intelligence. Because it helps bond colleagues together, it’s also essential to building an inclusive work environment.⁶⁶

Let’s say we are empathizing with a colleague whose father is sick. We can empathize by relating in three possible ways:⁶⁷

KEY MESSAGES

- Empathy is a learnable skill that is essential to building an inclusive work environment.
- There are three aspects of empathy: cognitive, affective, and behavioral.
- Empathy is linked to many positive outcomes that teams can leverage to become more agile and innovative in times of crisis.
- Organizations can train employees to increase their skill in empathy.

TYPE OF EMPATHY	FORMALLY KNOWN AS	WHAT YOU DO	YOU MIGHT SAY
Head/Thinking	Cognitive	You imagine how your colleague is feeling from their unique perspective.	“I bet this must be very difficult and scary for you.”
Heart/Feeling	Affective	You feel concern and/or have similar emotions as your colleague.	“I understand how worried you must be feeling. I’m worried about your father’s health, too.”
Action/Doing	Behavioral ⁶⁸	You demonstrate active listening and a desire to understand more about their feelings, experiences, or reactions.	“It sounds like you’re feeling pretty worried and scared. Is that right? How can I best support you during this time?”

Connecting to other people in one or more of these ways can help your team weather disruptions such as the current public health crisis because it engages colleagues as fellow humans and prompts responses that are kind and intentional rather than fearful and unsure.

Empathy Has Benefits—and Pitfalls

Empathy is linked to effective team collaboration, increased morale, reduced stress, and more inclusive attitudes at work.⁶⁹ Empathic work cultures support wellbeing, retention, and recruitment⁷⁰ and can reduce negative behaviors like sexual harassment.⁷¹ During times of disruption and talent shortages, when organizations need to be agile and innovative, empathy is an important differentiator that may lead to team success.⁷²

Perhaps equally important, empathy may prevent leaders from responding inappropriately in ways that are perceived as tone-deaf or privileged.

For example, research has shown that people are less likely to empathize with people from a different racial, social, or cultural group⁷³ which can be exacerbated by unconscious bias.⁷⁴ We may even feel happy about others' suffering if they are not part of our own group.⁷⁵

Empathy is critical for organizations to survive the current crisis. It can set the tone of your company and build its reputation as employees and consumers carefully observe the responses and reactions of leadership in difficult times like these. It is also a crucial ingredient to help position your organization for long-term success. We're in a collective moment unlike any in modern history, and with an empathy skill set, you can create the workplace of the future: one where we all belong and thrive.

However, we must always keep in mind that although perspective-taking (putting yourself in someone else's shoes) and empathy are often discussed as if they are interchangeable, perspective-taking is rather a potential precursor to empathy.⁷⁶ After all, if you imagine yourself in your colleague's shoes, you would imagine how you would react in that situation. If your colleague is reacting differently from the way you would, then you won't necessarily develop empathy for them and actually may end up judging them, consciously or unconsciously, for not doing it the way you would. To show empathy, you need to imagine how your colleague is feeling, not your own feelings—and check in with them to make sure that you're understanding their experience accurately.

For many people, this type of perspective-taking can be hard, particularly if there are differences in power or status.⁷⁷ But the alternative is decreased empathy and increased prejudice.⁷⁸ In particular, an "empathy gap" between what leaders *think* employees want and what employees really want is not unusual. In fact, employees rate CEOs as less empathic than their peers are, and three-quarters of employees think diverse leadership makes companies more empathic.⁷⁹

How to Cultivate Empathy

In a world where disruptions are only going to become more frequent, responding with empathy is one way to manage the difficulty of change. Empathy involves attending to the holistic experiences of colleagues, supporting each other through the struggles we face, and showing concern in your organizational and leadership decisions. Start cultivating your organization's empathy skills now to be ready for the future ahead.

- **Be intentional:** Empathy is a learnable skill. When engaging with someone from a background different from yours, remind yourself that you need to make extra effort to show empathic concern. Remember that each of us experiences just a sliver of the reality that exists in our world, and the varied life experiences of people don't negate any one person's reality. Rather, they add to the rich fabric of human experience.
- **Invest in training:** Organizations can train employees to increase their skill in empathy.⁸⁰ Data shows that empathy training works and that its effects are measurable.⁸¹ One exciting new method is through fully immersive virtual reality that gives people a chance to experience the world as a member of another group. For example, users can experience being the only woman in an important meeting or imagine what it's like to be homeless. Studies of this type of training show that it has a positive effect on empathy and prosocial behavior⁸² and may decrease prejudice against people from other groups.⁸³
- **Recognize and appreciate other views:** Being able to understand, affirm, and appreciate other people's views is a crucial inclusive leadership skill because it sets the foundation for a more integrated and empathic workplace.

4. Trust Your Team

Trust Is Multifaceted

Uncertainty associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences conflict with the human psychological need for stability and control. For employees, these needs can be fulfilled by being trusted as contributors, influencers, and decision-makers in their organizations. Being trusted is one hallmark of an inclusive workplace.⁸⁴

Building a workplace with trust is not easy. Trust at work is complex with several different dimensions, including:⁸⁵

- **Where trust resides:** This dimension of trust focuses on the object of trust, such as trusting a colleague to deliver something as promised, belief in an inspirational leader, or trust in an organization. At work, all employees across all levels should be trusted. Yes, trust is earned, but it's not reserved only for your CEO, senior leaders, the go-to person on your team, or people who look like you. All employees in your organization can experience inclusion by being trusted.
- **What trust entails:** This dimension of trust focuses on employees' abilities to contribute to their jobs and be influential decision-makers in their roles, such as trusting someone to make a decision or keep a piece of information confidential. Trust is not just a feeling; it's an action that allows employees to deliver, be influential, and contribute.
- **How trust evolves:** This dimension of trust focuses on the manner in which trust is built, such as when you trust in processes, ways of working, or relationships. This trust is built over time, iteratively, through employees delivering results and experiencing organizational, team, and leader effectiveness.

Because trust is multifaceted, building it requires an active, holistic approach that uses team dynamics, fair organizational practices, and inclusive leadership as key drivers. It's an interconnected process but one well worth undertaking, as it is a catalyst for team empowerment.⁸⁶

KEY MESSAGES

- Trust—involving team members as decision-makers and contributors—is a key element of inclusion.
- Trust has three dimensions: where it resides, what it entails, and how it evolves.
- Women and people of color often have fewer opportunities to participate in or influence decision-making.
- Organizations should be transparent about when decisions are made, how they are made, and who is involved.

In fact, trust—involving team members as decision-makers and contributors—is a key element of inclusion.⁸⁷ Participating in decision-making has been shown to be a factor in many positive employee experiences and outcomes, including:

- Retention.⁸⁸
- Career advancement, well-being, performance, and organizational commitment.⁸⁹
- Job satisfaction and autonomy.⁹⁰
- Employees using their voices.⁹¹
- Organizational citizenship behavior.⁹²
- Employee engagement through perceived supervisor support.⁹³

Being included in decision-making occurs when employee input is solicited both as part of the process and informally, as when employees may give input in a one-on-one check-in, team-building activity, or virtual coffee chat.⁹⁴

Despite the importance of participating in decision-making to building trust and inclusion, opportunities are not always shared equitably. Women and people of color often have fewer opportunities to participate in or influence decision-making.⁹⁵ Although there is evidence that more digital workplaces support easier communication across hierarchies,⁹⁶ organizations that do not transition to a more democratic structure run the risk of further excluding individuals from groups that are traditionally excluded from the decision-making process.

This dynamic can be especially detrimental in uncertain times such as the current pandemic because, as we know, diverse teams enhance agility. Additionally, more democratic decision-making processes play a role in reducing stereotyping and bias.⁹⁷

In a time of crisis, a lack of trust among colleagues, leaders, and teams will become immediately apparent. Trust is especially important now that some teams are working remotely and others are on the frontlines of the pandemic. To be agile and effective, organizations need all their employees to experience inclusion and trust. Developing employees as decision makers and contributors also frees up leaders to do more of their own important work.



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Actions That Drive Experiences of Being Trusted

- **Build cross-functional teams:** Assemble cross-functional groups to explore company values and the role of those values in the team's decision-making during this uncertain time. Build a framework or tool to ensure these company values guide decision-making processes.
- **Engage with staff regularly:** Be transparent about when decisions are made, how they are made, and who is involved. Host open forums for employees to voice their feedback. For participants unable to make weekly meetings, solicit feedback by allowing participants to submit their feedback beforehand—for example, via email or anonymous poll. Record meetings, when appropriate, to increase transparency and accessibility.
- **Prioritize team-building:**
 - > Clearly and collaboratively define goals.
 - > Focus on the process, not individual people.
 - > Intentionally create spaces (e.g., online forums or blogs, kudo boards, intranet) for team members to value and highlight their colleagues' strengths and contributions.
 - > Create norms for celebrating successes both in person and virtually to prevent the achievements of remote workers from going unnoticed.
 - > Openly discuss and define what "failures" and opportunities look like during this uncertain time.

5. Work Remotely and Flexibly

Business-Continuity Solution

Many people now working at home are learning that remote work is most successful when teams are also flexible in how and when work gets done. Developing the skills to do this serves teams well not just during a crisis, but into a future that is sure to hold more uncertainty and disruption for reasons as varied as new waves of the pandemic to extreme weather to geopolitical upheavals.

In truth, flexible and remote working are remarkably effective⁹⁸—if they are established with inclusive leadership skills such as empathy, effective communication, and trust. Leaders with these skills and the right tools can facilitate teamwork, inclusion, and innovation through almost any kind of disruption—and create more diverse and equitable teams.

KEY MESSAGES

- Flexible and remote working are remarkably effective—if they are established with inclusive leadership skills such as empathy, effective communication, and trust.
- Helping people flexibly manage their work and life responsibilities during a crisis is not a special benefit but a necessity.
- Nimble leaders willing to re-evaluate policies and structures for remote and flexible work will be poised to adapt and respond to our current and future crises most effectively.

REMOTE ≠ FLEX⁹⁹

TO CLARIFY THE TERMINOLOGY:

- **Remote** work is done in a location other than the organization's physical office. An employee who works from home is one type of remote worker, but remote workers can work from anywhere. Members of a distributed team work in different locations and time zones, which may include home offices and the organization's physical offices.
- **Flexible work** is our ability to control how, where, and when we work, as well as how our careers progress, through *flexible work arrangements* (FWAs).
- **Work-life effectiveness** is a talent management strategy that crafts jobs and careers so that all employees can handle their work and life priorities, ultimately benefiting both the employees and the business.

Leading Outward for Best Results

Managing flexible, distributed teams that are more equitable for everyone requires inclusive leadership. Catalyst research¹⁰⁰ tells us that three “Leading Outward” behaviors work in tandem to create an inclusive environment where employees are valued, trusted, and can thrive.

- First, managers must distribute *ownership* of work and tasks rather than micromanage. When you help employees understand the big picture and how their work contributes to larger team goals, and guide them to solve their own problems, they will be able to appropriately decide how, where, and when to work.
- Second, managers must ensure *accountability*, which means that you hold team members responsible for their behavior, development, and work processes. Holding people accountable by focusing on results and not virtual face-time helps foster a sense of trust, which is integral to successful flexible, dispersed teams.
- Third, managers should show *allyship* for people from underrepresented and marginalized groups by amplifying their contributions, intentionally ensuring that all voices are heard in group discussions, and respectfully asking about their life experiences.



**HELPING PEOPLE
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Pandemic Considerations

The pandemic has brought a unique set of circumstances to working remotely and flexibly. Many of us are scared, distracted, and restricted from most of our usual social and personal outlets. Many are isolated or living alone with limited physical connection to loved ones. Many have children who require supervision, feeding, and some sort of education, and many are responsible for ensuring the health, safety, and care of our older parents, family members, or loved ones. Many have partners or roommates suddenly working from home next to us, newly unemployed, or braving the outside world as essential workers. Many are worried about an uncertain future as businesses and workplaces re-open. All of us sorely need to experience empathy from our leaders, managers, and teammates for the specific challenges we each face in this time.

Women working from home may have increased responsibilities because the domestic work of childcare, cooking, and cleaning traditionally falls on women’s shoulders.¹⁰¹ With much external help off-limits, many women are likely spending more time than usual on household and care-taking work—which can’t always be done after normal work hours. Helping people manage their work and life responsibilities through flexible scheduling is not a special benefit at a time like this, but a necessity.

Women are disproportionately impacted by crises, disasters, and societal disruptions—and Covid-19 checks all of those boxes.¹⁰² Women of color may experience additional stresses: In the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, for example,¹⁰³ women of color face unique barriers to quality

healthcare. Moreover, Catalyst research has shown that a large portion of women of color experience an “emotional tax” at work—being “on guard” by anticipating and consciously preparing for potential bias or discrimination.¹⁰⁴ Notably, we have also shown that inclusive workplaces and flexible work arrangements can help mitigate the emotional tax.¹⁰⁵

Set Up Your Remote Team for Success

Successfully building a remote and flexible workplace is much more than simply sending employees home with laptops. The following guidelines will help you work together more effectively and efficiently.

1. **Make sure everyone has the right tools and secure technology** (e.g., video calling, instant messaging, cloud servers, project management software) and knows how to use them. Train employees who have different levels of digital literacy.
2. **Check in with teammates regularly.** Share successes with this way of working and discuss challenges.
3. **Set expectations** for what types of communication will happen on which platforms so people aren’t overloaded by emails, chats, and video calls.
4. **Create time and space for a virtual water cooler** where people can relax together, share pet photos, or even discuss the weather. Providing this space helps build relationships when we might be feeling isolated.¹⁰⁶
5. **Role-model** inclusive communication, collaboration norms, and flexible working. Let people know when you’re taking time to be with family or stepping out to the store.¹⁰⁷
6. **Call out biased behaviors**, such as when men talk over women. Women’s lived experiences suggest that gender bias in digital communication—or “virtual sexism”—is not unusual.
7. If you are a member of a dominant group, **reach out to members of underrepresented groups.** When many of our fellow colleagues are remote, we may tend to associate more with people who are similar to us. Remember to redirect this impulse.
8. **Embrace emojis and gifs.** They can help communicate tone, soften feedback, and strengthen notes of appreciation in the absence of nonverbal cues.
9. **Manage for miscommunication.** Email recipients tend to “fill in the blanks” when interpreting emails, and may assume a more negative tone than intended, particularly in the absence of verbal cues or other forms of personal expression.¹⁰⁸ In an authentic way, err on the side of being more upbeat in text, instant messages, and emails than you may be in verbal communications.

How Flex Work Can Benefit Everyone

Not all employees have the option to work remotely, but everyone can benefit from flexible workplace practices. In fact, many retailers, restaurants, and hotels successfully have implemented flex policies and seen a boost in employee satisfaction and productivity.¹⁰⁹ Organizations with policies, structures, and cultures that support employees and their families are more equitable across class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Some ideas for infusing flexibility into these workplaces include:

1. **Floating employee-relief pool:** People can fill in when a scheduled employee has an emergency or is sick.
2. **Advance schedule notification:** This gives employees more time to make the accommodations they need to be able to fulfill their shifts.
3. **Shift-swapping:** Employees can swap shifts with one another to manage personal needs. This works best when employees are responsible for arranging the swaps.
4. **Flex policies for vacation and sick time:** Employees can use this time as they see fit, including for errands, medical appointments, and family matters. Leave should be available in small increments, such as a few hours or half-day.
5. **Paid sick leave:** Employees shouldn't have to choose between coming to work sick or losing their income.
6. **Employee polls:** Ask staff how the organization could be more flexible, outside of time and space, to support them in their work and as people.

The Future of Work

For a long time, people have struggled to manage their work and life demands. We know that long hours do not equate to more or better work. And yet our culture of overwork often drives people to make difficult choices. All too often, women are pushed into accommodations that stall their careers, while men are not.¹¹⁰

A more humane and inclusive goal is to create work-life effectiveness, which makes it possible for everyone to succeed in their unique situations and circumstances. Caregivers won't have to feel guilty about attending to a family member's needs. People with disabilities can work from the safety and comfort of their own homes. Employees can run a time-sensitive errand. What used to be a special accommodation for a few is now the norm. When *everyone* works this way, the stigma disappears.

Restructuring expectations will redefine equality in the workplace and set a new standard for success with which hierarchy-conforming organizations will not be able to compete. Nimble leaders willing to re-evaluate policies and structures for remote and flexible work will be poised to adapt and respond

to our current and future crises most effectively—and their responses will be remembered by talent and consumers when they are choosing where to work and what to buy. Organizations acting now in the short term will be the ones defining not only the future of work—but the future of us all.

Forging Ahead Together

We have demonstrated the urgency of these five strategies: Leading inclusively through a crisis, tackling inequities, connecting with empathy, trusting your team, and working remotely and flexibly. Before Covid-19, many leaders may have viewed these strategies as “nice-to-have,” not in their area of expertise, or outside the scope of their business. They may have dismissed these strategies as not important, too complex, too niche, or unnecessary in a market where growth seemed nearly unstoppable.

But the pandemic has stripped away typical markers of success, and many of us literally are fighting for our lives, livelihoods, and businesses. Like a school of fish scattering from a large predator, elements of society and business have contracted and separated. With less to hold onto, we now see that our biggest asset is each other.

Our business strategies can and should be beacons guiding us forward to one another and a more connected, stronger future. To accelerate, our leaders, teams, and people will need courage to tackle harsh new realities and reimagine leadership, and strength to reconstruct more humane and agile workplaces. Working together, following the Catalyst map, we can navigate to a future with more equity, inclusion, and fulfillment.



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Catalyst is a global nonprofit working with some of the world’s most powerful CEOs and leading companies to help build workplaces that work for women. Founded in 1962, Catalyst drives change with pioneering research, practical tools, and proven solutions to accelerate and advance women into leadership—because progress for women is progress for everyone.

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