

COVID-19 Resources: Maintaining Inclusion in a Time of Chaos

We are all under great pressure as we face into this pandemic and its consequences. Lives are upended, schools are closed, work has shifted to virtual, and many are balancing worries about health, safety, income, and the changes that lie ahead. How do you as a leader navigate through this chaotic and uncertain time, while also staying aligned with core principles?

We know that many of us, Aspen Leadership Group included, hold a strong commitment to one core principle – **maintaining inclusion for all**. It goes beyond the DEI trainings we've all been through. We know deep in our core that including all voices and bringing in diverse perspectives makes our teams stronger and our decisions better for the whole. **But under pressure, people revert to the default** – reaching out to the connections they know in the way they have made decisions in the past. It is easier to talk to those you “know best”, to make decisions based on input from one person “you trust”, or to turn to those “like us” to share stories. There is no right or wrong about it – humans seek what is comfortable and known in difficult times. And yet, **we no longer want those previous outcomes**.

We can't wish those old practices away. They WILL happen without thinking because they are wired into us. Think about them as being almost a groove in your brain of “This is what I do when uncertainty reigns.” However, with our commitment to inclusion, we can catch ourselves. And when we catch ourselves, or others on the team remind us, we can clearly and overtly **choose new behaviors that move us towards better outcomes** that benefit our stakeholders more broadly and more equitably. What behaviors and processes can we put in place to make sure all members of our team are included and have a voice in the midst of all this chaos?

The Leader

- Take a moment to pause and reflect on your commitment of inclusion. Has that been demonstrated in how you are running virtual team meetings, tapping people for counsel, or asking for innovative ideas from diverse perspectives?
- If it has, kudos to you. Please share how you've been able to do this in the face of enormous pressure!
- If it has not, then recommit to inclusion. Review what you did automatically. What is it that draws you to that automatic reaction? How can you reframe that to be more conscious of including voices and diverse input?
- Recommit, and make this overt to your team. Ask them to remind you when you forget so you can learn a new response.
- Reset your standards and expectations. Then follow-through with simple but intentional processes that help you achieve them.

Actions for the Team

- **Ask everyone to be part of maintaining inclusion throughout this difficult time.**
 - If you've set up a buddy system to check in on each other, ask them to connect regularly with someone different than their own identity, i.e. different genders, different identities, different ages.
- **Design your decision-making consciously**
 - If you've made your decisions quickly but with just a couple of people you trust, consider adding diverse perspectives to your trusted group. You can still be nimble, but your decisions will be enhanced.
 - We saw this unfold at our firm. Just a few of us moved quickly to send to our community a first statement about the coronavirus, our concern for our community, and what actions we were taking. It was a fine message, but fine is not enough in these times. We now have a leadership group of about six people with different ages, identities, and backgrounds. Our meetings don't last any longer but both our communications and decisions have been richer, stronger, and even more well received by our community and aligned with our unique values.
- **Design your team meetings consciously**
 - As we discussed in a [previous briefing](#), every individual has a different reaction under pressure. Some lean forward, some pull back, and some freeze. All this may show up in your virtual meetings. Set up processes to allow everyone to have their ideas heard, if they choose to share them. Some examples include:
 - Remind the team at the beginning of each meeting that we have a commitment to inclusion and want to have all voices be heard.
 - Create a process for people to show when they are ready to speak (show a hand) and call on them with an intention of allowing those who may speak less often to be heard.
 - Do a conscious round robin in which each person is given a chance to speak.
- **Be aware that not everyone is experiencing the effects of this pandemic in the same way.**
 - Structural oppression and generations of social inequity mean that different groups of people are experiencing the impact differently. People on your teams or in your communities may not have extra income or the space needed to stock up on food or supplies. They may not have open air space to recreate in. Concerns over healthcare costs, childcare and benefits available through schools, and job insecurity for loved ones may be exacerbated during this time.
 - Be mindful of how you nuance messages of "We're all in this together" and make sure to offer additional supports for those who

may be facing exceptional hardship.

Designs for External Stakeholders

- Inclusion also means including perspectives beyond our own teams.
- Chaotic times requires creative and caring people to be at the table to design new approaches. Our donors and volunteers may very well bring in ideas an internal staff would not have thought of.
- While it may be a well-practiced behavior to have the staff and leaders create strategies and present them to donors and volunteers, that may not serve you in these times.
- Transparency, a request for help, and diverse perspectives will move you beyond your own imagination. This is a time to PARTNER with our stakeholders and ask for their partnership as well.
- During Hurricane Katrina, the American Red Cross was at a loss at how to provide immediate cash support to the millions who had lost their homes and been displaced across the country. The CIO called on his stakeholders – leaders in the technology and finance communities. They flew in, sat in the ARC cafeteria for two days and designed an entirely new process for distribution of funds. They fully supported the changes and the costs that would be needed.
 - Take this concept virtual; ask your team how to include stakeholder and volunteer input on the challenges you face. Including everyone's expertise, perspective, care for your mission, and sincere desire to help may make all the difference in helping you find an unimaginable solution to a seemingly insurmountable challenge.

In Summary:

1. Be aware of the behaviors you revert to and recommit to keeping a culture of inclusion front and center.
2. Bring diverse perspectives into your decision-making processes – you will surface stronger, more innovative ideas to respond to the moment.
3. Design your team operations to be inclusive, even if remote – seek input continuously, elevate all voices, and pay attention to where extra supports are needed.
4. Lean into partnership with your external stakeholders.