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COVID-19 and the 3 A's of Inclusion

Our world has changed due to COVID-19. Many of us feel disconnected and isolated. Diverse employees and new hires are at the greatest risk of falling into this disconnected state, because their sense of belonging may have already been tenuous.

How can we cultivate belonging for everyone in the workplace? Andrea Lipton with Harvard Business Publishing says the answer is three simple actions she calls *The Three A's of Inclusion: Awareness, Authenticity, and Accountability*.

A **AWARENESS:** Be aware of who you're relying on and who you might be inadvertently excluding.

Each of us has established patterns and biases. During times of stress, part of our natural response is to default to our comfort zone where these habits live. To help cultivate belonging in our organizations, we need to first recognize our patterns so we can break out of them.

To do this, notice who your "usual suspects" are – the people you regularly connect with, work with, and talk to. Now notice who you have not connected with recently. Reach out to those individuals and see how they are doing.

You might even consider inviting these employees to meetings that they don't have to attend but might enjoy or get value from participating in. If you are in a leadership role, consider having skip-level meetings and giving more junior people in your organization access to you. An invitation can go a long way in making someone feel included. This is especially true of new hires, who are missing out on opportunities to build relationships through face-to-face meetings and hallway conversations.

In virtual meetings, be aware of who is participating and who is not. If you are using a virtual meeting tool like Teams or Zoom, and you notice someone is not participating, use the private chat feature to check in with them. This allows you to check in on the person without putting him/her on the spot like you would if the meeting were in person.

A **AUTHENTICITY:** Allow time in meetings to check in personally.

We are all facing varying degrees of disruption to our lives thanks to the pandemic. While this is in many ways a shared experience, it is also a deeply individual one. In challenging times like this, the psychological toll it takes to put on your "game face" can be debilitating.

Giving people space to show up as their full selves is a critical part of creating an inclusive culture. Now, as all of us are experiencing stress from uncertainty and constant change, it's especially useful to set aside time at the beginning of meetings to check in and connect interpersonally. If you are the leader, consider sharing first and being open, authentic, and vulnerable about your own challenges. This will give others permission to do the same.

A **ACCOUNTABILITY:** Be responsible for your privilege.

Be aware that while we are all weathering the same storm, we are not all in the same boat. Some of our colleagues have been ill, had loved ones who have been ill, or have lost loved ones to COVID-19, while many of us, thankfully, have not. Some of us are homeschooling children while others are not. Some have had family members lose hours, income, and/or jobs while others have not. Some of us are sheltering in place with family and loved ones, while others are totally alone. When you share authentically about how you are experiencing the pandemic, be mindful of how your experience may be a reflection of privileges you enjoy like time to yourself, access to personal outdoor space like a yard, or financial security.

Take a moment to commit to a few specific actions you will take to foster inclusion in today's chaotic work environment.

Source: *Cultivating Belonging in the Era of COVID-19: Putting the Three A's of Inclusion to Work*
www.harvardbusiness.org/cultivating-belonging-in-the-era-of-covid-19-putting-the-three-as-of-inclusion-to-work