

A Manager's COVID-19 Toolkit:

**Five ways to use diversity, equity, and inclusion
to make your organization more resilient**

Natania Malin Gazeck
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Consultant
Published April 8, 2020
Updated May 12, 2020

Want to help your organization come out the other side of COVID-19 feeling proud of its response to the crisis? You've come to the right place.

As a [diversity, equity, and inclusion \(DEI\) consultant](#), I spend my days helping organizations live their values. I'm grateful to work with leaders who prioritize building organizations whose ethics are reflected in their work and environment. But as the public health and economic impacts of COVID-19 create significant pressure for all organizations, I'm starting to hear some new questions from clients who care deeply about their DEI work:

What can I be doing to build team morale through this transition? How can I make budget decisions in a way that is aligned with our organizational values? Do we have time for our diversity, equity, and inclusion work during coronavirus?

As we discuss the answers that are right for each of them, I find a common thread: **it's in times of crisis, when living by our values feels harder than ever, that doing so matters most.**

COVID-19 has put a lot of pressure on both personal and professional values. Companies are navigating new problems and tough decisions every day, and many are worried about compromising the diversity, equity, and inclusion values that they've worked to shape. Workers are facing challenges they've never had before, and looking to employers for support through difficult transitions.

Managers who are modeling their company's values to build strength and resilience during this challenging time start by acknowledging two things:

- A. Exhaustion and inability to focus are normal, healthy responses to a global pandemic. Feeling stressed, tired, and unproductive is a natural and understandable reaction to what's going on.¹
- B. Making space for all of the new responsibilities people have right now is important. Prioritizing things like childcare, making time to focus on mental health, and other care work will keep us healthy, flatten the curve, and enable much higher quality work when we do have time for it.

¹ We're experiencing collective trauma right now. When mammals experience trauma, [our sympathetic nervous systems kick in](#) - we often refer to that as "fight or flight" mode. In fight or flight, the brain can't focus on anything outside the immediate threat - that's why it's so difficult to be productive right now, and why we're often drawn to the news even though we know that reading it obsessively doesn't usually help. To make matters worse, anyone who isn't an "essential worker" right now can't do much to directly fight this threat (except stay home), and since this is a *global* pandemic, nobody can flee. (Except, I suppose, astronauts.) When neither fight nor flight are options, the body "plays dead" as a last resort to protect itself against a threat. And to top it all off, [we're collectively grieving](#) in many ways. That's why many of us are feeling super exhausted right now - it's actually a healthy response!

So, we can't have *business as usual* right now. Navigating new stress about health and finances while homeschooling kids, managing depression and anxiety, and staying on schedule at work...probably isn't realistic. But that's ok! What's key is that we adapt our business strategies accordingly.

With this in mind, here are five ways your organization can use strong diversity, equity, and inclusion values to navigate this pandemic.

How to use this toolkit:

1. [Assemble a diverse crisis response team](#), if you haven't already. Include employees who have different perspectives than you, know things you don't know, and/or can help you understand possible unintended consequences of different decisions (perhaps because the decisions will impact them differently). This likely means, at a minimum, including people who represent different levels and departments within the organization. If you have Employee Resource Groups and/or a Diversity Council, ask them to send representatives to help create demographic diversity on your team.
2. With that team, consider which of the ideas below might be appropriate actions for you to take. Ground your discussion in your organization's values. Discuss what you can do to **ensure your actions during this time represent the kind of organization you aspire to be**. Your list might include adaptations of the ideas in this series, and/or new ideas that the discussion helps you uncover. (In which case, [let me know what you uncover](#) so I can share it with others!)
3. Take it one step further: what's stopping you from [keeping these adjustments once the pandemic is over](#)? The disability justice community has been [advocating for many of these changes for a long time](#), and has pioneered many of the best practices we're all benefiting from right now. [Many of these adjustments would make the workforce much more inclusive if adapted in the long-term](#), allowing us to benefit from increased diversity and enjoy the benefits of living our values more fully. We may find, in other words, that [there are parts of business as usual we don't need to go back to](#).
4. Communicate any changes with the whole organization, being as transparent as possible. Explain how the decisions you've made are rooted in your values.
5. Finally, share your journey! We're all learning with each other right now, so don't forget to tell me and your colleagues what unique ideas you come up with, and reach out when you want to [talk things through with an expert](#).

One:
If nothing else, combat xenophobia and racism.

Why: Inaccurate rhetoric and the spread of misinformation about the virus has fueled a rise in violent, racist acts and hate speech, particularly toward East Asians. The pandemic has also highlighted and exacerbated the consequences of systemic and structural racism, adding to a feeling of urgency around these issues for some, and awakening others to them for the first time.

How:

- Use language accurately in your company communications: remember this virus is called COVID-19 or novel coronavirus -- it is NOT the “China virus” or the “Wuhan virus,” and referring to it as such stokes [stigma](#), racial violence, and oppression. If you hear folks referring to it as such or see other xenophobic or racist behavior, create a learning moment to make it clear that hate is not tolerated in your organization.
- If your company doesn't already have [written non-discrimination and anti-harassment policy and complaint procedures](#), there's no time like the present. Make sure your policy is socialized so managers know where to turn if they hear from their team about instances of discrimination, see harmful language used on Slack, etc.
 - Don't think these kinds of incidents happen in your workplace? Remember, they're chronically under-reported. All the more reason to be proactive and clear with your employees about company values and policy.
- Be proactive! One client told me about a restaurant featuring recipes from Wuhan on their menu to help celebrate a culture that is being targeted so negatively. What kinds of proactively [anti-racist](#) actions is your company uniquely suited to take on? Skip down to #5 for more ideas.

Two: Get creative with benefits.

Why: Added stress hurts productivity and work quality and [weakens our immune systems](#). And [a global pandemic creates no shortage of added stress](#).

How:

Leading with empathy, think creatively about what kinds of additional benefits could help your team right now. Some great examples:

- Unlimited PTO for new responsibilities related to COVID-19. Think: childcare (and homeschooling!) or family care, recovering from illness, grocery shopping during off-peak store hours, mental health care, etc. Remember that caring for one's own mental health is critical during this time, and must be valued just as much as any of the other responsibilities listed here. Unlimited PTO helps employees to be more focused on the task in front of them, worrying less about what they "should" be doing with that time.
 - Regardless of your PTO policy, emphasize [equitable treatment around schedule flexibility](#). For example, rather than shifting work away from parents with known childcare responsibilities, asking those who haven't shared about any extra obligations to pick up the slack, think about ways to make everyone's load lighter. In other words, assume everyone has extra responsibilities at home right now, even if they're not easily visible to you.
- Not requiring a doctor's note for [sick leave](#). This has the added benefit of relieving some burden on health care workers right now.
- Reimbursement (or a stipend) for utility bills related to work (like internet, cell phones, electricity, etc).
- Reimbursement (or a stipend) to help employees set up their home office. [Having an ergonomic, professional office setup can make a big difference for productivity and well being](#). If you have any essential employees in your physical office, it may be more cost effective to have them ship some of your office supplies to employees who need them at home.

Three: Enable and celebrate work-from-home best practices.

Why: The experience of working from home is VERY different right now. Trust those of us who've been doing it for a while: [We're not "working from home." We're at home during a crisis trying to work.](#) That makes it all the more important to embrace those best practices.

How:

Thanks to leadership from the [disability justice](#) community, we already have very [strong best practices](#) to help boost productivity while working from home. Some of my favorites include:

- [Set up blocks of time in your calendar to be unavailable.](#) Working from home can make work days a lot longer, which is often harmful to our mental and physical health. Make sure your calendar includes breaks during the day (lunch is a great one to start with) so you step away from your computer to move around. [Set aside time to be offline or do nothing](#) when it works for your schedule.
- Remember to schedule breaks in between meetings. Just because you don't have to physically move from one meeting to another doesn't mean you don't need time to consolidate your follow-up notes, take a bio break, and prep for your next meeting. (I like using [Google's "Speedy Meetings" feature](#) to make this a default when I forget.)
- Use your video camera during those virtual meetings.* Physical distancing doesn't have to mean a total loss of connectedness, and our communication is often enhanced when we can see each other's facial expressions. Use a silly virtual background if you don't want to show everyone the room you're in - or embrace it and give your colleagues a tour of your home office!

*And be understanding with colleagues who need a break from the video camera for a moment. [Zoom fatigue is real!](#)

- [Set routines](#) where you can. My favorite is a morning walk that replaces my commute.
- [Create an "office space"](#) in your home that's dedicated to work. Don't use that space for other things, and don't do your work in other spaces. This can do wonders for mental health! If you're in a studio apartment or otherwise don't have this available as an option, think creatively about how to distinguish your work space and time from other activities. For example, I use my kitchen table as my desk. During my "work day" I use my kitchen's overhead light, but I switch to the oven lamp when the work day is over, transforming the space and sending my brain an important signal that I'm not "at work" any more.

Four: Step up your employee engagement game.

Why: Effective people management is crucial in a crisis, and we know that employee engagement has a strong impact on business success--but our go-to methods for these key functions might not work (or be appropriate) in these non-standard times. Thinking creatively about supporting teams virtually can offer new ways to show them that you care about them as people, providing resources and opportunities to not only boost their productivity, but to reinvest them emotionally in their organization.

How:

Think about unique ways to [boost team morale and build community](#) inside your organization, even while you're physically apart. Examples I've seen include:

- Model the work-from-home best practices listed in this series by doing them yourself. Take PTO to care for yourself and your family. Join virtual happy hours and lunches. Make sure it's on the calendar so your team sees that it's something they can do, too.
- Reconsider how you count "work time." Is it more important for your team to be working during certain hours, or that they complete their work within a reasonable amount of time? Many work cultures create pressure for staff to "prove" that they're available by responding to emails and Slack messages quickly. While it's true that some roles require immediate responses and for us to work during certain hours, many do not. Be clear about your expectations and priorities with your team, being as flexible as you can about work hours given everyone's additional responsibilities.
- [Adjust goals and priorities](#) with your team. This is a big shift, and not all timelines can or should proceed as planned. Work proactively with your team to make sure they know that adapting timelines is expected during this time. It's the responsible way to proceed -- and you're doing it too.
 - If you're making budget cuts, adjusting goals and priorities takes on extra importance. Provide strong support to help staff navigate the impact of those cuts on how they spend their time. For example, if you decide to cut all salaries by 20% and have staff only work 80% of the time, provide clear guidance around what that 80% should look like. Is the company closed every Friday? Should all employees or teams set their own hours? Is there a block of time each day when all employees should try to be available to each other? What projects will be cut, priorities shifted, or goals adjusted to accommodate for the reduced capacity?
- Start meetings with a personal check-in. If we were in the office together, you'd have time for casual chatter about the weekend or families in between meetings or in the

halls. It's important to make time for water-cooler chatter even though we don't have the water cooler right now.

- Put extra time into fostering team engagement. Virtual happy hours (my favorite is “meet pets and families” day), “lunch and learns” over Zoom, themed meetings (funny hat day, anyone?) and more can be great moments to connect despite physical distance.
- Create an online message board, Slack channel, or intranet page where employees can share stories and resources that are working for them, build community virtually, and connect with other team members outside of your immediate team. Keep this separate from spaces where you're sharing important information (you might want a Slack channel for that, too) so that it feels more like a place of refuge.
- [Adapt your onboarding practices](#) to help new employees feel included and well integrated into the team. Reach out in advance to ask new team members what technology they need, set up a schedule of virtual coffee chats so they can get to know their new colleagues, and communicate expectations with extra clarity and care.
- Collect feedback explicitly about this to make sure you're responding to your employees' needs appropriately. Depending on your org size and culture, a [formal survey](#) might be helpful.

Five:
Consider your broader impact.

Why: Because it's the right thing to do. And because it's an incredible opportunity to show the world what your brand stands for.

How:

Convene a diverse group to think about how your organization is uniquely situated to help others right now. Examples I'm seeing include:

- C-Suite leaders are foregoing their salaries to reduce the need for layoffs or pay cuts for more financially vulnerable staff. Others are scaffolding pay freezes or pay cuts so that they don't disproportionately cause more harm to those who make lower salaries. Consider what a minimum wage would look like if it aligned with your company values, and try to design pay cuts such that they don't put anyone below that salary. ([This will also benefit your company's bottom line!](#))
- [Companies are continuing to pay hourly service providers](#) (and part-timers, contractors, vendors, and others) whose services they may not be able to use but who may rely on income from them.
- [Zoom is an extreme example](#), but many companies whose products can help essential workers are finding ways to [donate those goods](#), provide discounts, or fundraise to provide goods where they're needed. (Just make sure you're actually producing the tools that are needed so you [don't make Elon Musk's mistake](#).)
- Companies are re-purposing their resources to make an impact. [Restaurants are preparing meals for healthcare workers](#) and those living in poverty. [Perfume factories and distilleries are producing hand sanitizer](#). [Clothing factories are making face masks](#). You may not have these kinds of resources available to you, but employees could have creative ideas for ways to repurpose the resources you do have.
- Whatever you decide, think critically to **avoid performative activism**. For example, those [hotels illuminating vacant rooms in the shape of hearts](#) to "thank" healthcare workers? What if instead of advertising that they have unused resources right now, they donated those rooms to healthcare workers or homeless people in their cities? One of those choices might be flashier, but the other makes a concrete difference in flattening the curve.

What other dilemmas are you facing around coronavirus? How have these tools and others been working for you? [Reach out](#) and I'd be honored to navigate this together with you.