

Creating Inclusive Team Environments

How we collaborate has been significantly changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals may now be feeling differently about coming back to work in an office setting — whether that's due to health and safety concerns, personal at-home needs, or stress over uncertainty and change.

The important thing to remember is that this transition may impact each of your colleagues differently — based on geographic location as well as their unique personal circumstances. Here are some strategies to help you foster inclusive environments that showcase flexibility to people's varying needs and circumstances.

Establish Psychological Safety

The foundations for an inclusive team environment is psychological safety. Psychological safety refers to an individual's belief that their environment is safe for risk-taking, without worry that they will be seen as incompetent, negative, or disruptive. According to [researchers at Google](#), it is the most important factor and common denominator among high-performing teams.

So, what does psychological safety look like in practice at work?



A team member has a radical idea and feels safe sharing it in a team meeting.



An executive is corrected before sharing inaccurate data in a public meeting.



An employee feels comfortable sharing their mental health situation with a team member or manager.



An employee feels safe asking their HR liaison or manager about mental health resources available.



An employee observes their manager or company leader hold themselves accountable for a mistake.



Implement Inclusive Team Norms

Fostering a psychologically safe environment starts with creating norms that enable team members to bring up concerns, openly share when mistakes are made, and be vulnerable about their challenges. Consider implementing the below strategies to help your teams communicate and collaborate in a more effective and inclusive way.

Communication Norms

- When someone asks hard questions, express appreciation for their courage to speak up.
- Encourage team members to voice questions and comments from a place of curiosity, even if they are unfinished or not completely thought through.
- Don't deter out-of-the-box questions, and directly ask people for divergent opinions.

Meeting Norms

- Use shared documents for agendas and shared collaboration tools that make it easier for remote employees to participate.
- Avoid non-inclusive statements like "It's so nice to be in a room together" or "I wish you could join us here in person."
- Add a web-conferencing link to every meeting invite. Request attendees to join individually, even if many are in the same room, so that the conversation feels equitable to remote employees.

Practice Active Listening

Active listening techniques, often used in Dialectical Behavior Therapy, are powerful tools that can help create an inclusive environment. Even two minutes of active listening and validating can be incredibly helpful during a conversation.



What to Avoid

- Moving to problem-solving too soon
- Making judgements
- Interrupting
- Closed body language
- Distracted by devices
- Asking "why" questions
"Why is this project stressful for you?"
- Moving straight to reassurance
"I'm sure everything will be okay."



What to Do

- Be fully present and attentive
- Reflective listening
- Restate and summarize
- Open body language with good eye contact
- Put away devices or close other windows
- Ask to understand (not to make a point)
"Is the tight deadline contributing to your stress?"
- Validate their emotional experience
"I can understand why that's causing you stress."

