

# Effective Leadership

Examining Return to Office Through an Inclusion Lens

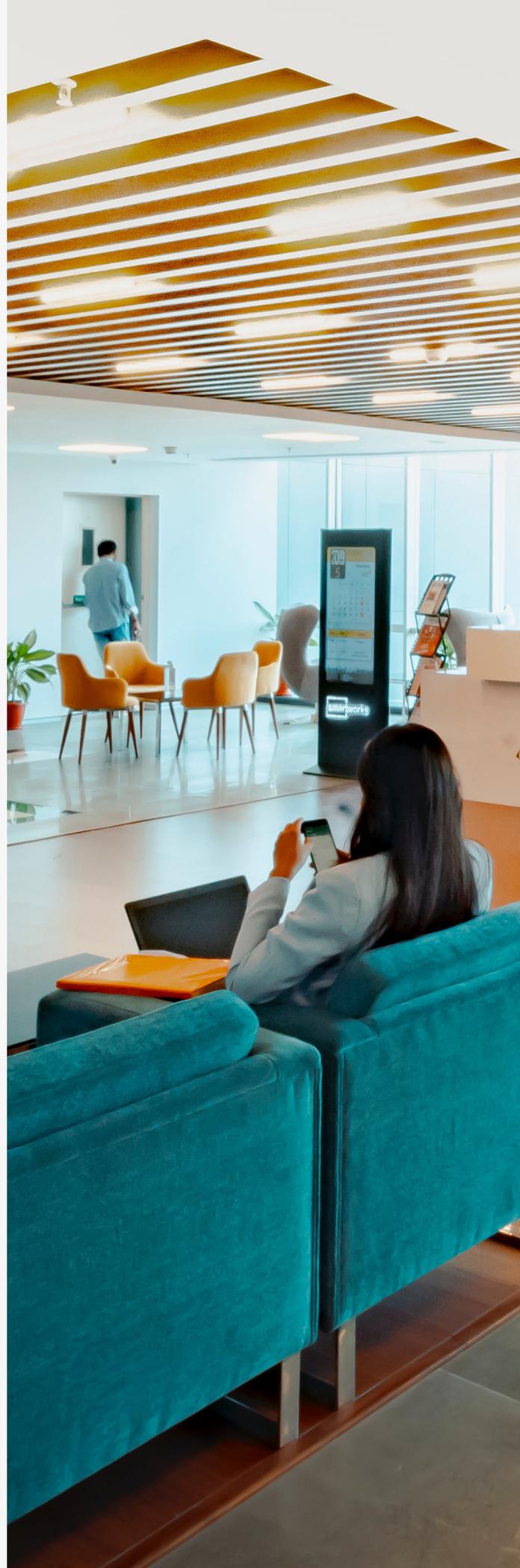
## INTRODUCTION

Shifting your leadership approach to adapt to the new normal



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# SERIES BY:



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## **How do we practice inclusion with a hybrid work team that is part in-office and part remote?**

*“When everyone works remotely, all workplace relationships are equally distant, providing everyone with the same challenges and opportunities. When a handful of employees go back to the office it is going to take extra effort to ensure that remote employees are still included in meetings, conversations, and generally kept “in-the-know.”*

- Georgene Huang, Forbes Magazine, “[Going Back to Normal When Normal No Longer Exists, A Guide to Inclusive Planning](#)” May 7, 2020



## Shifting your leadership approach to adapt to the new normal

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, initially most organizations shifted rapidly to having their teams work remotely. As the months pass, and our teams acclimatize, the adrenaline filled reaction is no longer our response.

In this lower intensity reaction state, our threshold for risk identification can change, resulting in us missing important considerations like the need to address inclusion as part of return to office plans.

The good news is that shifting into this new lower alert level means that we have more time to thoughtfully design and evolve return to office plans without the need for immediate and swift action in response to crisis.

We are at a point today where the transition from all-remote work to a partial or full return to office is in progress. For most firms, this will result in a hybrid work environment where some team members will remain remote and others will return to the office.

Team members who are still remote will continue to work in situations that are not typical while those returning to the office will have to adapt to new facility modifications and protocols for working and interacting. As part of their return to office plans organizations must consider how to develop an inclusive approach that blend teams and work practices that will include both remote and in office team members.

### ACEC-BC Return to Office Survey Findings

In June 2020 ACEC-BC conducted a member survey to gain knowledge and share insights into return to office planning. Within the findings and analysis, one theme that appeared throughout was the need to consider inclusion as part of the planning and execution of return to office.

The [summary report](#) explained that “when all of us are in the office or all of us are at home, the ability to conduct meetings that ensure all team members feel included is simpler”. Further to this, the report suggests that “how we engage in the office is likely to change as a result of RTO plans including physical distancing, reduced density and use of personal protective equipment” but beyond these “procedural or structural [changes], others relate to the heightened focus on employee mental and physical health and how protocols impact a firm’s ability to ensure an inclusive working culture”.

Throughout the report, findings are connected to inclusion, emphasizing the following points:

- A hybrid workforce is complex to manage
- Consideration must be given to ensure remote employees do not feel or are not excluded
- Management of meetings that include both in-person and remote participants should consider how remote team members may be excluded from sidebar conversations, non-verbal communication, and post-meeting interactions.
- Continuing to use virtual meetings is a good option to promote inclusion and place all team members on a “level playing field” in terms of communication.
- Work practices should be reviewed through the lens of inclusion to consider opportunities to engage all team members, regardless of their location.
- Acceptance of personal choices that may not be required by company policy, such as mask wearing, to support our values of equity, diversity, and inclusion, by not drawing attention to team member(s) individual choices.

## Inclusion

In the series [Effective Leadership: Leading Remote Teams with Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#), we talked about how working from home has added new layers, like the following, which reflect specific circumstances and affect individuals in different ways:

- caring for children and others,
- combining work with new responsibilities like home schooling,
- workspace set up and resources,
- privacy issues,
- supporting essential service and health care workers,
- health and safety concerns,
- financial stresses, and
- fatigue and isolation issues.

For some team members who are returning to the office, these factors may no longer be affecting them but new ones such as transportation to and from the office, social distancing in the office, altered schedules and more may be.

Regardless of the specific circumstances, it is more likely that the individuals and groups of individuals that are most impacted by these additional factors are those that are already in groups that are dis-proportionality

represented in engineering. Evidence of unequal impacts of these COVID-19 specific factors are being identified and include:



With this perspective, organizations may want to consider inclusion as part of return to office. This will be examined under the following areas of focus:

1. Leadership approach
2. Communication and management
3. Team dynamics
4. Tools and resources

*Intentional* is a word that will be used often in the following discussion. The purposeful use is as a reminder that we have become effective as leaders often as a result of our ability to praise accomplishment, address issues and support growth through direct observation of our team. While technology has liberated us from the requirement to work together in an office, it can also be a barrier to our success as leaders. The use of technology to lead our teams is best achieved when we connect with intention to support, develop, praise and question.



## WHAT'S NEXT?

On September 17, 2020 we will be releasing Part 1 of 2 of this series which covers Leadership and Communication.

In October 2020 we are hosting two webinars with authors Marcie Cochran and Sharon Batchelor to explore the challenges of a hybrid work environment and examines approaches to consider as part of an inclusive return to office plan.