Thinking Beyond Diversity
Remote work has been trending up in recent years, and work-from-home directives have dramatically changed notions of what can and can’t be accomplished away from the office. From my perspective, this is really good news.

Technology opens the door to discussions that involve compassion and empathy for others—for example, of single parenting, for those responsible for elder care, for people who require quiet space to work, for those with disabilities—and provides opportunities to upend the traditional nine-to-five work routine. Compassion, empathy, and understanding also happen to be at the root of something very important to VMware: diversity and inclusion (D&I).

What’s the difference between the two terms? As head of D&I for VMware, I field this question regularly. A good way to think about it is this: Diversity is the facts about who we are. Inclusion is intentional. It’s about the way we choose to behave every day. D&I is more than numbers, it’s engagement.

At VMware, we’ve been focused on increasing the diversity of our employee population for some time now. We have established, aggressive diversity goals that are tied to compensation. We are focused both on increasing diversity across gender, race, and ethnicity, but we have also broadened the scope of diversity to include sexual identity, religion, disability, and a variety of educational backgrounds, experiences, and even geographies.

More recently, we’ve become more focused on the inclusivity part of the equation, and the pandemic has accelerated our thinking around these objectives and strategies. Not only do we expect our diversity numbers to be on track, but we want to build a corporate culture that lets all employees feel like they belong and that they can be their authentic selves at work without being penalized.
Leveling the Playing Field
At most companies, the mandate to work from home was abrupt. While many of the changes have been positive (for example, videoconferencing is being called the “great leveler”), working from home has also raised questions around engagement. We have to keep inclusivity top of mind as we choose communication and collaboration approaches, and even performance metrics, going forward into our new normal of working. When technology is working well, it connects us, and everyone is equally represented—in the case of video, on the screen, individuals can hear better, participate easily, and feel more included.

At the same time, companies have responsibilities to remedy traditional and new power dynamics that become part of virtual meetings. The way leaders treat their teams, talk to their teams, and acknowledge points in meetings still matter as to whether people feel included. In larger virtual meetings, some may find it difficult to get their points across. That makes it even more important for leaders to pay attention to the interactions and dynamics at play.

Although we still have to grapple with missing the hallway conversations and the impromptu debates around the coffee station, leaders need to be thinking about best practices for distributed workforces beyond everyone being online. How will spontaneous interactions—which were often bursting with creativity—continue to happen? How are decisions being made in all-virtual environments, and how will they be made when less of the team is virtual? How are decisions cascaded to entire teams? How and where are decisions documented? How are employees doing with workplace culture? How are individuals being brought along the company decision-making journey so they feel a part of the action, the team and, ultimately, the company?

All of these questions need to be answered before we can understand how to truly promote inclusivity in a distributed environment.

KEY TAKEAWAY
Working from home raises new questions around inclusivity, communication and employee engagement. It’s important that companies remedy traditional and new power dynamics in a distributed workforce.
Tips for Bringing Inclusivity into Distributed Workforces

Management consultants, such as McKinsey & Company, talk about the concept of inclusiveness across three dimensions. Here’s how we are translating them at VMware:

1. **Openness** – This is about whether employees feel safe enough to express different thoughts, ideas, and concerns. The new, virtual “ask-me-anything” (AMA) sessions that VMware leaders are having are proving enormously popular. They truly promote openness and are bringing employees much closer to leadership. Seeing our leaders in their houses, their kids interrupting, their pets barking in the background, makes the company much more personal and authentic. It means a lot to our people, and I would like this to continue.

2. **Equality** – This is about fairness. Is there a perception of fairness, an equal chance for all employees to succeed no matter where they are located? The fact that VMware employees are turning their videos on so we can see each other helps. Leaders with inclusivity on their minds can and should be looking for openings into where and how to establish a sense of equality. Perhaps it means noticing that Emerson is unmuted, signaling an opinion to contribute, and pausing the chatter to give Emerson an opportunity to speak. Or suggesting to Rowan, who is reticent yet always has valuable things to offer, to use the chat window to interject. That way, the leader can give that person a chance to jump in. Of course, this is a totally different way of managing, and we must ensure leaders are keeping proximity bias top of mind while improving their soft skills, especially communication and listening, to give employees everywhere equal opportunity.

3. **Belonging** – This is about sharing positive connections to one another and the organization. This is how, again, being compassionate arises. Some of our employees tell me that they are feeling more connected to each other now. In a way, that’s ironic, because we’re no longer in each other’s physical presences. But we are going through something big together, and that gives us a sense of shared experience and of shared goals.

**KEY TAKEAWAY**

Inclusiveness in the workplace is demonstrated across three dimensions: openness, equality and belonging.
Inclusion as a Business Differentiator

It turns out that the art of celebrating people from a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives isn’t just a nice thing to do, it’s smart business. Global studies have repeatedly proven that D&I-advanced companies are more productive, innovative, and successful. They are more likely to generate better-than-average profits, capture new markets, and generate more revenue from innovation.

At VMware, we know we have a huge opportunity to move D&I forward. A more diverse and inclusive workforce will give us greater creative insight into the implications of seeding our technology around the globe. Inclusivity will drive our ability to succeed in ways we haven’t thought of yet.

It’s also important—in light of current protests around the world combined with the impact of the pandemic on our most marginalized communities—that companies continue to prioritize D&I. Otherwise, organizations run the risk of undermining previous efforts to prioritize and amplify D&I efforts, such as losing great talent or overlooking exclusive behaviors or unconscious biases that can manifest quickly among a distributed remote workforce.

Recommendation: Keep the D&I Vision Fresh

Without strategic and meaningful implementation, diversity and inclusion can quickly lose value, becoming no more than organizational buzzwords. Clear goals and action combined with transparency and open conversation are key to success. Enterprises that don’t put D&I into meaningful practice today will experience a negative, trickle-down effect on future talent acquisition and retention, product and service innovation, market differentiation, and customer experience and satisfaction.

Leaders need to realize that D&I efforts add value. Workers that belong and feel taken care of give the most back to their companies. By offering flexibility and choice, and let’s not forget compassion and empathy, in a truly rich D&I environment, businesses can end up with a much more productive and loyal workforce. There’s a huge business case for D&I, and the opportunity for greater acceptance has been presented to us. Leaders globally just need to seize it.

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