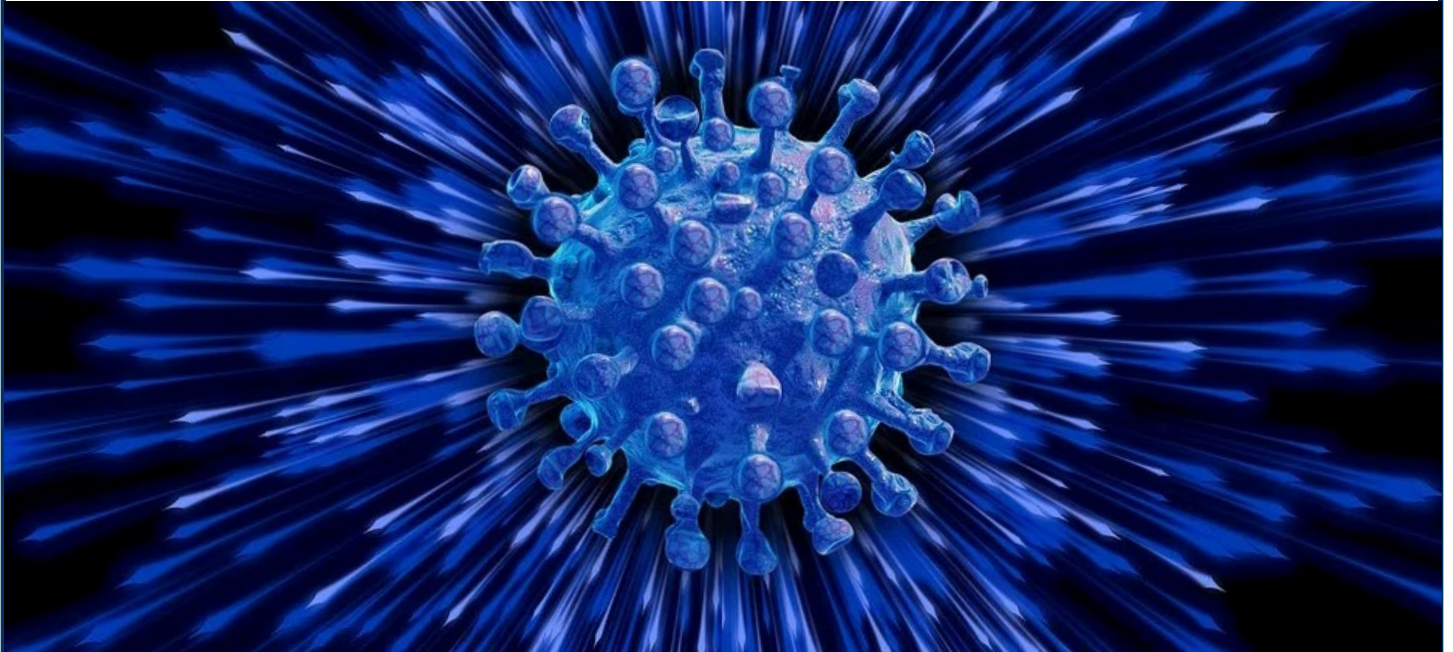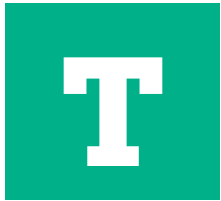Simmons
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THE GENDERED IMPACT OF
COVID 19
AND REMOTE WORK ON WOMEN
AND ORGANIZATIONS

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T he world of work has dramatically shifted with the COVID outbreak. Employees across all industries and all levels are now working remotely, significantly impacting how work gets done. In emergencies, it is tempting (and appropriate) to quickly develop infrastructure (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack) and processes (virtual meetings, Google docs). But while organizations are scrambling to develop the infrastructure and processes needed to enable this virtual work, it is critical to keep in mind the axiom "culture trumps strategy every time."

This axiom points to another and equally fundamental challenge: how to evolve from a primarily face-to-face culture to a virtual one that enables employees to fully contribute. Organizations that have worked diligently to make their cultures more diverse and inclusive now must intentionally think about the impact remote work has on that culture. How do diverse voices continue to be included in decisions that are being made quickly? How are those decisions informed by the needs of diverse employees who are being differentially affected by remote work? How do senior leaders resist quickly tapping only from their inner circle to lead initiatives? Without attention to how remote work is impacting the culture of an organization, an organization's strategy of remaining viable will be hampered by a workforce that is not fully included and empowered to contribute.

To address the challenge of aligning culture with strategy, in this commentary we first provide a brief overview of the gender dynamics that are present in every organization and how those dynamics may be exacerbated by remote work. Secondly, we offer recommendations for both organizations and individuals who are committed to continuing their diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) efforts during the COVID crises and remote work. Our goal is to assist organizations and individuals in facing the immediate crises and in continuing their DE&I work for a brighter future beyond.

Before we begin it is important to note two underlying tenets. One, this commentary focuses on the potential exclusion and invisibility remote work may

have on professional women. But it is important for leaders to address the needs of the lowest paid workers during this time as well. Second, we believe that "what's good for women in organizations is good for all employees." While our recommendations are directed towards women, they will be just as impactful for people of all social identities.

Gender dynamics in organizations:

We know that all organizations are 'gendered', in that they reflect the people who created them. For most organizations that means the 'way we do things around here' is often associated with masculine behaviors. These norms mean that employees may be expected to:

- interrupt others, speak loudly, and use exaggerated language in order to convey confidence;

- take risks, speak directly, and be gregarious in order to be seen as a leader;

- be available 24/7 for work in order to be seen as committed and 'doing whatever it takes.'

- talk about their accomplishments in order to capture promotions

- mold themselves to represent the "model employee"

The conflation of those expectations with masculinity creates challenges for employees who are not white and male. Women who interrupt may be seen as rude; who speak directly as 'bossy'; who talk about their accomplishments as 'bragging.' For women of color, the challenges are compounded – they face those gendered expectations as well as myths/expectations based on racial differences. The logical outcome of women being misinterpreted over time is that they withdraw by not talking in meetings, not raising their hands for promotions... or by ultimately leaving the organization.

Many organizations have worked hard to identify these unintentional yet powerful, often unspoken and often unconscious expectations. Acknowledgement

of these barriers enables organizations to change them in an effort to benefit from the diversity of its employees. Organizations have ramped up mentoring and sponsoring for women; have re-examined promotion practices (such as the requirements around travel and relocation) that differentially impacts women; have set aggressive goals for diversity on boards and in senior management.

Those efforts have moved organizations towards work cultures that offer more potential for all employees to fully contribute, be recognized, valued and rewarded for their diverse contributions.

Now comes COVID, and the strategy of remote work. What can leaders in organizations do today to be thoughtful and intentional about continuing their work to build inclusive work cultures? What can women in those organizations do to continue contributing and being valued? What can they both do to continue building strong work cultures that will serve both the organization and individuals today....and once we move past this crisis?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERS IN ORGANIZATIONS

1 **SET BOUNDARIES** around when individuals are expected to be 'at work' while at home. How soon do emails need to be answered? Just because people are at home doesn't mean they can work 24/7. Many employees will be taking care of children, parents, ailing family members or friends. Just getting regular life activities accomplished (i.e., groceries, laundry) will take up more time.

2 **PAUSE WHEN MAKING DECISIONS.** When gathering people together in crises to make a decision, it's very easy to pull in fewer and just your closest colleagues. Resist that, because by doing so you're more likely to rely on people who are like you and think like you. Doing so means you miss making more broadly effective and sustainable decisions as you fail to include diverse perspectives, or recognize the breadth of issues your employees are facing.

3 **OUT OF SIGHT OUT OF MIND:** Because you are in virtual mode, you only see who you invite to be with you online. As a result, your scope of input and perspectives narrow. You no longer run into someone in the cafeteria who is in town from another business unit/geographic location. You no longer get pulled into a meeting spur of the moment as you pass by a conference room. Make a list of people whose opinions and perspectives you value, and be intentional about setting up ways of staying in touch.

4 **ESTABLISH HOW AIR TIME IS USED** in Zoom or virtual meetings. Women are socialized to not interrupt, and research shows that both men and women more freely interrupt women than men. If there are no protocols established and maintained, women's voices often aren't heard. Establish a separate "air traffic controller" role to pay attention to people who are raising hands to speak, and temporarily mute those who keep interrupting.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS

1 **OUT OF SIGHT OUT OF MIND.** Actively work against this very normal dynamic that everyone falls prey to, especially in times of crises when biologically we are hard-wired to narrow our focus. With remote work, your exposure to people is constrained by who invites you to meetings, and who their participants are. Be strategic in staying visible to other key people. Keep emails short, with links to interesting ideas and useful information. Send those emails, and updates of your work, to people who are making decisions, and who are critical to your career. Be strategic to remain 'visible'.

2 **BE PRESENT AND VERBAL IN MEETINGS.** So many decisions are being made quickly in meetings. Challenge yourself to get airtime so you can contribute (and be seen as a valued contributor). Literally wave in your photo tile if 'raising hands' with virtual icons is not working. If you can get the agenda and participant list ahead of time, have "meetings before the meetings" where you share your ideas and hear others' one on one where airtime isn't so tight. Email a follow up to participants with new ideas or things you didn't get airtime to share.

3 **BE A CONTRIBUTOR TO BUILDING D&I INTO THE VIRTUAL SPACE.** Ask people who are silent (or not called on) in meetings to share their ideas. Protect their airtime as others interrupt them. Look at the 'participant' list and invite someone left off to the meeting. When urged to make a decision in the moment, and you believe other perspectives are needed, don't fall prey to the pressure ---"let me get back to you" is as viable a strategy in the virtual world as it is in the physical world.

4 **BE DILIGENT ABOUT THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF STEREOTYPES OR UNCONSCIOUS BIAS.** Be observant about how work is getting done, and who is being sidelined. Exclusion may be happening due to chaos, anxiety, and/or the need for expediency. It may also be due to unconscious bias. Be an active problem solver by identifying and proposing new ways of getting work done that is both expeditious and inclusive.

None of these recommendations for leaders or individuals are easy, especially when COVID represents an immediate existential threat for many organizations and their employees. The challenge is doing the work that enables companies to remain viable, while being mindful of the workplace culture. New ways of doing things will evolve whether they are intentionally determined or not: how decisions are made, how power is used, how inclusive we are, how we act or not act on our values. When we are on the 'other side' of the pandemic, the question will be: is your organization's culture in a better place than where it was before COVID hit?

Endnotes

For more on the axiom about culture and strategy, see: https://hbr.org/2011/03/culture-trumps-strategy-every Culture Trumps Strategy, Every Time by Nilofer Merchant, March 22, 2011; or for an historical investigation on how that axiom evolved, see: https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/05/23/culture-eats/

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion efforts focus on highlighting "information and tools to help leaders make the changes that will lead to more diverse, equitable and inclusive organizations" (https://independentsector.org/resource/why-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-matter/)

For more information on the impact COVID and remote work is having on low wage women in the service sector, check out: "Women working in the shadows and the Coronavirus threat, by Amalia Arredondo, March 25, 2020 at:

https://www.arredondoadvisorygroup.com/2020/03/25/women-working-in-the-shadows-and-the-coronavirus-threat/

For more information on gender dynamics in the workplace, see the following sites: https://www.simmons.edu/sites/default/files/2019-03/Insights%2002.pdf; https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/gender-equality-workplace/; https://hbr.org/2020/03/whats-really-holding-women-back

For more information about women and communication, refer to any of Deborah Tannen's work ("Talking 9 to 5" published by William Morrow & Company, NY; or "The power of talk: who gets heard" published through Harvard Business School Press, #99510); or Maureen Scully's "Gender and Virtual Work: How New Technologies Influence Work Practices and Gender Equity", CGO Insight #12 at https://www.simmons.edu/academics/research/cgo/publications