INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY ARE EMBEDDED in our core values and vital to our firm’s ability to understand client issues and deliver differentiated solutions. As we’ve grown to more than 1,000 people in nine offices across the United States, fostering an inclusive environment becomes more challenging—but all the more important.

AS PART OF A JOURNEY to strengthen our culture of inclusion, we began writing quarterly letters designed to stimulate discussion about relevant and sometimes challenging topics. The idea is that healthy and open dialogue is an essential prerequisite to breaking down the barriers to inclusion. Over the past year, we’ve tackled several big issues: unconscious bias, equality of networking opportunities in and out of the office, the value of employee resource groups, and integration of talent at the senior level. Now, as we are into our third year of this conversation, I want to respond to one of the most common questions we hear from our people: What should I be doing on a regular basis to make inclusion real?

The Harvard Business Review article, “What Diversity and Inclusion Policies do Employees Actually Want,” features recent research by the Boston Consulting Group, which surveyed more than 16,000 employees in 14 countries to understand obstacles to inclusion, the programs employed in their workplaces, and what they find most effective. Although nearly all of large (1,000+ employee) companies invest in diversity and inclusion programs, about three quarters of employees in underrepresented groups (women, ethnic and racial minorities, LGBTQ employees) said they have not personally benefited from those I&D programs. Half of all diverse employees reported that they see bias as part of their day-to-day work experience, while white heterosexual males were 13 percent more likely than average to believe that the day-to-day experience and major decisions are free of bias.

While programs can set the tone, creating an inclusive workplace is something that each one of us has the power to influence. And in my view, this is not just about making the workplace inclusive for people of diverse demographics; it is about making the workplace inclusive for everyone. That includes anyone who may...
feel like an outsider—the new person, the person from a different practice or office, the person on the phone, or the introvert—in a workplace setting.

We’ve also heard direct feedback from people across the firm that they are seeking some tangible ways they can help: how can individuals move the needle to build an inclusive culture during their everyday interactions with their colleagues and clients?

With that in mind, here are a few simple things anyone can do on a day-to-day basis to make those around them feel included and like insiders rather than outsiders.

**WELCOMING NEW COLLEAGUES**

Some of our offices have grown to a point that we don’t know everyone. Combine that with the fact that many of us spend significant time at client sites, and it can be hard to make sure new team members feel like part of the team from day one.

1. **Take the initiative to introduce yourself to new hires.** If you are in the office, stop by to say “hi” to these new employees. If you are out in the field, send a quick note of welcome and then follow up in person when you are back in the office. Extend this gesture to those who may be visiting from other offices—if you see an unfamiliar face, take time to introduce yourself. It will be welcomed.

2. **If you are a career advisor, office leader, practice leader, or human resources leader, figure out who your new hire should know, make those introductions, and offer some information to help establish the connection.** “Sue, this is Bob. He is a new manager in our Energy & Utilities practice here in Los Angeles. He comes from XYZ utility and has been part of the team responsible for engaging customers in using new smart meters. His experience may be relevant to you and ABC utility, so I’d suggest the two of you get to know each other.” Better yet, be thinking about who the new hire should meet during the first week and have a calendar of meetings already set up on day one.

3. **“Make it three.”** Many of us schedule meet-and-greets with new hires to introduce ourselves. While there are instances when three’s a crowd, this is typically not one of those. Consider adding a third person to the conversation to facilitate further introductions within the organization.

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**RUNNING MEETINGS**

Our organization, like many, has an insatiable appetite for meetings and conference calls. There are little things we often do in organizing or running meetings that can determine whether someone feels like an insider or an outsider.

1. **Make introductions.** People feel more included and part of the conversation when they know who else is participating. At the beginning of the meeting or call, take a moment to restate the names of the participants and their roles, especially if the participants are not familiar with each other. If time permits, do a round robin of quick introductions.
2| **Announce yourself on calls.** When speaking up during a call, don’t just jump in with your point. Identify yourself: “This is Brian, and I want to offer my thoughts about ABC…”

3| **Be conscious of scheduling.** As meeting leaders, we have a tendency to make others’ schedules work within ours. This can be problematic when meeting across time zones or even continents, as many of us do. Make sure one party isn’t always the one accommodating the other. For example, if you have a standing call with a colleague on the opposite coast, vary the time of the call occasionally so one party isn’t consistently taking the call outside of work hours or at lunchtime.

4| **Strive to end meetings on time.** Many of us go from meeting to meeting to meeting. When your meeting runs long—even if for a very good reason—recognize that the other party may get a “bad rap” for showing up late to the next meeting.

5| **Allocate time for people to speak.** Pause the discussion periodically and ask if anyone has something they’d like to contribute or questions they would like to ask. Not everyone feels comfortable interrupting the discussion to speak up. At the same time, call out interruptions as they happen. “Joe did not have a chance to finish his thought. Let’s go back and hear what he has to say.”

6| **Choose words with care.** Even small words can be important. For example, your greeting of “Hey, guys,” as you walk into the room may not be made with mal intent, but someone may perceive it to be exclusive.

7| **Give credit when credit is due.** “Parroting” or “amplification” gives people confidence to speak up and add their perspectives. “Earlier in the meeting, Mary suggested that we have a working session on the customer roadmap next time we get together. Let’s make sure that is on the agenda.”

8| **Mix up responsibilities for meeting-related tasks: leading, facilitating, taking notes, and ordering lunch.** This allows the team to get to know each other and their respective styles better. It also ensures the less-glamorous tasks aren’t being delegated to the most junior person or the lone woman on the team. When that happens, people who end up taking on administrative tasks more often may feel they are not as important to the team as others in the room.

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**PROMOTING ACTIVE DEBATE RATHER THAN AN ENVIRONMENT THAT FEELS LIKE WALKING ON EGGSHELLS**

Often, the best ideas and solutions—whether that’s for our clients or our firm—come from people who are willing to challenge the status quo.

1| **Make sure people feel safe expressing disagreement, an opposing point of view, or a suggestion for doing things differently.** Take the time to listen, even if you do not agree. And thank the individual for sharing the perspective before responding.

2| **Ask someone unexpected for feedback or ideas.** If you are writing a case study about your project, you might ask a couple of team members to make sure you have captured all the salient points. While you are at it, ask the manager who recently joined your practice. Not only might you get some interesting new perspective or detail you should include; you are sending a message to that manager that you respect her opinion.

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EXPANDING YOUR CIRCLE OF COLLEAGUES

It's easy to default to spending the majority of your time with your project team or practice. However, expanding your internal network helps create better opportunities for collaboration and understanding different perspectives.

1| Choose your seat in the office with purpose. In open consulting space like ours, people tend to sit with their teams, and those teams tend to occupy designated parts of the office. Certainly, this can help in day-to-day collaboration. But every once and awhile, mix it up and sit with or near a different group.

2| Include others in “social” activities. We tend to have lunch, grab a drink or work out with the same people. Find opportunities to invite others to join you in these activities.

This list is not intended to be an exhaustive inventory of ideas. I encourage you to use this to think about your own behaviors and how you can promote an inclusive workplace. Our goal this year is to make inclusion feel “real” to our employees. That means ensuring everyone in the organization understands what we’re doing, why we’re doing it, and how they can get involved. To accomplish this, we must combine larger initiatives and trainings we are implementing as a firm with these smaller actions that each of us can do on a regular basis to contribute to an inclusive culture. You probably have ideas of your own—and since making inclusion real is up to all of us, I would love to hear those ideas and continue to build this list.
We began a journey to strengthen our foundation of inclusion three years ago. What are your thoughts about what we have accomplished and where we need to focus?

We have done a good job of acknowledging the issues surrounding unconscious bias and educating our leaders about its impact on inclusion, but there is still a gap between awareness and executing change. We talk about inclusion, but it doesn’t always feel like something that we live and breathe.

When it comes to executing, I believe that it is our responsibility as individuals to figure out what to do, not the organization’s responsibility to tell us what to do. Each one of us must examine our day-to-day behaviors, assess how those promote or detract from a sense of inclusion, and determine what we need to do differently—and then act on that.

Give some examples of what you mean by examining and changing our behavior.

When you work remotely, as many of us do, it can be hard to maintain an inclusive environment. Standards of communication become especially important to making sure no one is unintentionally excluded, so thinking about how we communicate is often a good place to start. For example, I might notice that certain people are more vocal on our team calls and, therefore, have the most influence on our work. I will then begin taking steps to engage the team members who don’t speak up as much: “So and so hasn’t weighed in. Can we get your opinion?”

Although we do have a feedback-heavy environment and structure, leaders and career advisers should make sure they are checking in regularly and helping create a safe environment for
people to express their concerns: “How are you doing? Are you getting what you need? What can we be doing to support you better?”

**What advice do you have for someone who is struggling with inclusion in the workplace?**

Speak up. I see our leaders becoming more engaged in promoting inclusion and more responsive when people raise concerns. For example, I was frustrated because it felt like the women on our team were usually the ones asked to handle administrative responsibilities such as taking notes or scheduling meetings. These are activities anyone can do, so I said something to one of our office leaders. Someone else on one of my teams spoke up about the team’s use of particular terminology that could be offensive or upsetting to some people. In both cases, the behavior wasn’t intentional—people just didn’t recognize that it was a source of concern.

That said, I also know it can be scary to raise your hand and say that something makes you feel uncomfortable. In those situations, it is useful to focus on building a “safe” network of colleagues outside the boundaries of a project or role. By connecting with people regularly on a personal level, for example over lunch or coffee, this creates a more comfortable environment for discussing your concern(s) and how to address them.

**As a project manager for I&D initiatives, what are you focusing on right now?**

We have just piloted and are preparing to roll out a course on unconscious bias that expands on the leadership workshops we held previously to raise awareness around this topic. Originally, the scope was fairly broad, but based on pilot feedback, we are refining it to put more emphasis on empathy and creating safe space for conversations. Participants will learn about some tools that they can use in their day-to-day operations. The course will be available to everyone and a part of the core curriculum for managers and above.

We are also working closely with our staffing function to increase diversity on project teams and make sure we don’t have the same people working together over and over. This accomplishes several goals—it helps broaden relationships across the firm, and it provides our clients with a diverse range of experiences and perspectives that helps us create more effective solutions.

**How can others support these efforts?**

To effect change, we need all viewpoints. We want anyone, regardless of level, to be involved in a way that reflects their passions and interests—whether that means participating in a course, sharing ideas with our team, speaking up, or adopting new behaviors that help make inclusion real. There is a spot in the I&D conversation for everyone.