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Promoting Diversity & Inclusion and Claims Team Management While Working Remote

DIVERSITY AND CHANGE

Diversity is the mixture of individuals in society, while **inclusion** is allowing that mixture to exist and work well together.

I am sure everyone has heard the phrase; “The only thing constant in this world is “change”. Our yearly, monthly, and daily activities (and at this time) circumstance require one to adapt or be left behind. Unfortunately, the world has been maneuvering through a pandemic which required change of an epic proportion. This changed the way we went about “normal” daily activities. There was no choice, we had to adapt to stay productive and maintain efficiency. Many operations went to the teleworking approach which served multiple purposes but primarily allowing workers to work directly from their homes and to stay safe and healthy. The paradigm shift required many claims leaders and individual contributors to work from home for the first time. With any “change” there are obstacles and challenges. In this new remote environment, how does one not only perfect their “elevator pitch” but have the opportunities to give it? Additionally, seasoned teleworkers were facing unique challenges due to the impact of an influx of non-traditional teleworkers.

DEFINING A SUCCESSFUL REMOTE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

There are misconceptions of remote work environments in the workplace. Misconceptions such as lack of productivity, time inefficiency, work indifference. I learned early in my career as both a claim professional and a manager that all the above depends on the individual. I was fortunate to begin my career as an outside adjuster. To be successful as a remote worker, one must possess discipline and a strong network of coworkers and leaders.

Successful remote working environments operate on the principles of having the necessary tools to accomplish goals and trust/confidence between management and staff. Organizations must stress the continuity of what it means to be “present” to your insured, the challenges of maintaining DOI compliance, as well as some useful solutions on how to remain effective, both as a manager and as an adjuster.

Our industry often involves collaborating with many teams. In the remote environment, there are unforeseen negative effects that impact development in all aspects of the job and upward mobility. The main culprit is communication or lack thereof. I am sure everyone is familiar with Charles Shultz's Peanuts cartoon with Charlie Brown and Snoopy. In the memorable classroom scenes Miss Othmar or Mrs. Haemeyer (depending on your generation) was the teacher. Each time she spoke the audience heard the inaudible "WAH, WAH...WAH WAH..." sound. The individuals that understood the teacher were the students...not the audience. Sometimes it can be the same working remotely. Poor internet connection, hurried conversations in which the main instruction is not communicated properly resulting in inefficiency or a costly error. Working remotely or in an in-person office setting effective communication is important.

ALIGNING DIVERSITY INTO THE REMOTE WORKPLACE.

We are all aware that diversity and inclusion is important in the workplace. On the opposite side of the coin the remote working environment does not automatically guarantee an equal, diverse, and inclusive environment. The trick is how to transfer the concepts into a remote working environment?

The common thread to working remotely is to stay connected. Not only in the staying connected to the internet via ethernet cable or wireless but staying connected with individuals. Claim professionals can navigate different avenues for information sharing. There are internet tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, any numerous social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram etc., but the goal is to be "in the know." Knowledge is power and staying in contact with those that possess knowledge shows maturity and wisdom. To help with this identify mentors and/or sponsors online. Remember diversity is also defined as "*a range of different things.*" And a working synonym of diversity is variety. There can be inclusion challenges while working in an office setting as well as remote. Take for instance the proverbial office meeting (in person) where individual always fill in the back row and afraid to ask questions. This is more of a challenge on an internet media platform when you cannot see people like you (especially for minority groups). Individuals tend to hide and not ask important questions. As you can see, this does not fit into the concept of "blending in" but promote isolation which is the enemy of diversity and inclusion. Companies more specific leaders can play specific roles when they witness this type of behavior from individuals such as having them lead a meeting, present a topic for discussion, or outline an agenda for future meetings. Staying connected is the key.

LEGAL CONCERNS RELATED TO REMOTE WORK

Unfortunately, discrimination and harassment in the workplace do not simply disappear when employees leave the office and work remotely. Harassment and discrimination do happen over the phone and via video conference. In fact, the absence of bystanders and a decentralized workplace may actually encourage and embolden would-be harassers. Another unique aspect of remote work is that the employee's family may be exposed to the harassment as well given the blurring of lines between work life and home life.

While not specific to remote work, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased harassment and discrimination of Asian employees. As most people are well-aware of from recent news coverage, this harassment has tipped over into the zone of physical assault and even murder in some circumstances. Employers need to be proactive in this area to ensure all employees of Asian background are protected from this type of conduct in the workplace.

Because of these new avenues of discrimination and harassment, employers need to take steps to ensure that their remote workforce is appropriately monitored and protected. This include modifying existing policies, ensuring records are retained appropriately and developing an effective method of investigation into claims of remote harassment or discrimination.

In keeping with the issues related to maintaining diversity and inclusion generally when the workforce is remote, employers also need to examine their performance review and promotion process during this time. Changes may be needed to ensure that inadvertent discrimination does not occur given the distance between managers and their team, or because of hybrid environments when some employees opt to return to the office earlier than others.

SO, WHAT IS THE SOLUTION

How do we seek to maintain productivity, efficiency, diversity, and inclusion with the remote office workforce? It begins and ends with the 4 basic concepts: Avoiding Complacency, Maintaining lines of Communication, Trust/Responsibility and Fostering Inclusion/Participation for all parties. Although we are not in the office and maintaining physical interaction with our peers and managers, we have a responsibility to maintain a level of professionalism and pride in our work product. As stated earlier we are required to be “present” to your insured, maintain Department of Insurance compliance, and provide useful solutions on how to remain effective managers and insurance professionals. It is paramount for the lines of communication to remain open for both the leadership team and claim professional. Adjusting skills are often developed via collaboration and direct management. We must have trust in one another to work toward established team goals that were established for the unit and organization. It is easier for development opportunities to go to the “trusted few” in the manager’s immediate network. Leaders must make sure that underrepresented talent is on the call list when any of these high-profile opportunities and projects opens and not out-of-sight, out-of-mind.