



TENT

# How to create a culturally inclusive workplace for refugee employees

A Resource for  
HR/ People Teams and  
Managers



## By the end of this presentation, you will learn:

- ▲ What is cultural inclusion and why it's important for companies hiring refugees
- ▲ How to educate your workforce to build cultural inclusion
- ▲ Best practices for cultural inclusion with a focus on refugees



# Contents

---

**1**

---

**WHY CULTURAL  
INCLUSION IS KEY  
TO REFUGEES'  
INTEGRATION**

---

---

**2**

---

**EDUCATING YOUR  
WORKFORCE ON  
CULTURAL  
INCLUSION**

---

---

**3**

---

**MAKING YOUR  
WORKPLACE  
CULTURALLY  
INCLUSIVE FOR  
REFUGEES**

---



## Refugees come from many countries and cultural backgrounds

A refugee is an individual who has been forced to flee their country because of a well-founded fear of persecution or violence. For example:

- Someone fleeing civil war in Syria
- Someone who is Buddhist fleeing religious persecution in China
- Someone from the LGBTQ community fleeing persecution in Iran
- Someone protesting for democracy fleeing persecution in Eritrea



**Refugees may face cultural barriers when they join a workplace in their new host country because they:**

- Need to adapt to the host country's workplace norms, such as communication styles and co-worker relationships.
- Have weaker community or social networks than in their country of origin and are still building a sense of belonging.
- Have a lower level of language proficiency than their colleagues and struggle to understand language nuance.

## Why invest in a culturally inclusive environment for refugee employees

- **Diversity** is only one part of the D&I equation - HR teams need to also focus on "inclusion" to make sure that the organization reaps the benefits of recruiting a diverse workforce.
- **Inclusion** should go beyond representation to promote open-mindedness and fairness in the workplace.
- **Cultural inclusion** is the full and successful integration of diverse people into a workplace. A culturally inclusive workplace cultivates respect, equity, and a positive recognition of differences. When companies are culturally inclusive, it allows all employees to flourish - enhancing innovation, productivity, and employee engagement.

As such, companies should make cultural inclusion part of their broader D&I framework.

## Why invest in a culturally inclusive environment for refugee employees

For the purposes of this presentation, we will focus on how companies can build cultural inclusion for refugee employees.

Attrition is typically highest for refugee employees during their first month at a new job. However, by taking steps to create a culturally inclusive environment from the get-go, your organization can set up refugee workers for success and can increase their retention rates, making them happier and longer-term employees -- and avoiding the need to replace them with new hires!



## Cultural inclusion is good for companies AND for refugee workers

- ✓ When refugees better understand their new host community's culture, they can better adapt to the workplace, increasing their prospects of success.
  - ✓ Respect and appreciation of all cultures help refugees feel engaged in their workplace.
  - ✓ Cultural inclusion deepens workplace relationships, enabling refugees to build a professional network.
- ✓ Reducing cultural barriers can enhance productivity by preventing slowdowns that are caused by misunderstandings or conflict.
  - ✓ Businesses can benefit from new ideas, collaboration, and productivity with a diverse AND inclusive workforce.



# Contents

---

1

---

**WHY CULTURAL  
INCLUSION IS KEY  
TO REFUGEES'  
INTEGRATION**

---

---

2

---

**EDUCATING YOUR  
WORKFORCE ON  
CULTURAL  
INCLUSION**

---

---

3

---

**MAKING YOUR  
WORKPLACE  
CULTURALLY  
INCLUSIVE FOR  
REFUGEES**

---

## Going beyond “cultural knowledge”: building “cultural competence”

Organizations should aim to build cultural competence. This often happens in stages:

“Cultural knowledge” — knowing about some cultural characteristics, history, values, beliefs, and behaviors of another ethnic or cultural group.

“Cultural awareness” — being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes.

“Cultural sensitivity” — knowing that differences exist between cultures, but not assigning values to the differences (better or worse, right or wrong).

“Cultural competence” — brings together the previous stages. A culturally competent organization has the capacity to incorporate into its system many different behaviors, attitudes, and policies, and work effectively in cross-cultural settings to produce better outcomes.

In the next slides, we’ll provide some recommendations on how to educate your workforce to achieve cultural competence.  
(Sourced from Cultural Competence and Spirituality in Community Building)

## Educating managers on refugees' unique D&I needs

- Building a culturally inclusive workplace for refugee workers starts by educating the whole workforce, including leadership. Leaders and managers are at the frontlines of creating a culturally inclusive environment.
- Companies often have mandatory D&I training for managers to help them learn how to manage diverse teams. These training sessions often address unconscious bias on gender, race, or other personal identities, and help leaders practice behaviors like active listening and encouraging different points of view.

While companies may already implement this leadership training as part of a broader D&I strategy, we recommend that D&I training for managers specifically address how they can help **refugees**, among other diverse groups, feel included.

## Educating managers on cultural inclusion

During leadership D&I training, managers can talk about real-life scenarios that they could face with a refugee employee, such as:

- Supervising an employee that may need flexibility if they have recently arrived in their host country and have appointments related to refugee services.
- Learning how to respectfully listen and respond when a refugee employee shares their personal background, which may include a difficult story about fleeing their country.
- Managing a team with a new refugee colleague and working through potential conflicts or misunderstandings with other team members resulting from cultural differences.

It's important that leaders at every level undergo training that helps them learn how to set an example of inclusive behavior. Managers should also receive feedback from their teams and their own supervisors on how they are helping to create an inclusive environment for employees. This is particularly important for companies that have a structured refugee hiring program so they can evaluate the program's overall success.



## Educating the rest of the workforce on cultural inclusion

Beyond leadership training, companies should organize HR-led training for all employees to learn best practices that promote cultural inclusion, with a focus on the inclusion of refugees.

Here are some **best practices** that HR managers can share during these training sessions:

Being conscious of **communication styles**. In some cultures, it may be considered impolite to say “no” directly to a request or to have a dissenting opinion. In other cultures, it may be considered most efficient and mindful to be brief and direct. Being aware of these differences can help reduce misunderstandings.

A person who fled their home country may feel distrust or insecurity when it comes to disclosing personal information due to previous experiences, which other employees might find confusing. Coworkers should be aware of this so that they **don't cross certain boundaries** when they have personal conversations with their refugee coworkers.

Employees should understand the importance of **active listening** and fostering a positive and courteous forum for dialogue. Training should help employees practice active listening and provide real-life examples of how to engage with coworkers with different points of view in a productive way.

## Onboarding all new employees with a focus on cultural inclusion

▶ Educating your workforce on cultural inclusion starts with an **onboarding program** for new employees that sets the expectation of respect for cultural differences and promotes shared common values on day one.

While an onboarding program that addresses cultural inclusion is likely part of your broader D&I foundation, here are **some ways you can ensure that onboarding recognizes cultural inclusion with a focus on new refugee workers:**

- Clearly convey the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion during onboarding, emphasizing that refugees are part of the company's diverse workforce.
- Ensure that onboarding resources include a code of ethics that prohibit discrimination based on country of origin and cultural identity, among other factors like gender, race, religion, etc., and set clear consequences for non-compliance. Clearly explain procedures for reporting violations to the code of ethics.
- Provide materials to all employees on ways they can get involved in the company's D&I efforts, with a specific reference to refugee inclusion initiatives like an Employee Resource Group (ERG), buddy program, or mentorship initiative (to be discussed later in the presentation).

# Contents

---

1

---

**WHY CULTURAL  
INCLUSION IS KEY  
TO REFUGEES'  
INTEGRATION**

---

---

2

---

**EDUCATING YOUR  
WORKFORCE ON  
CULTURAL  
INCLUSION**

---

---

3

---

**MAKING YOUR  
WORKPLACE  
CULTURALLY  
INCLUSIVE FOR  
REFUGEES**

---

## Welcoming refugee workers with a focus on cultural inclusion

During the first few weeks of a new refugee's employment, HR should have an enhanced presence with the employee. **Personalized guidance from HR during this onboarding phase will help reduce the cultural barriers** that the new worker may face while getting acclimated.

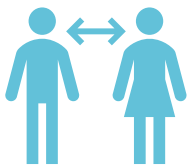
This personalized onboarding program for refugee workers could include:

- A one-on-one meeting with the HR lead responsible for the new hire so that they can share resources and provide guidance during the first week of employment.
- Sharing information on where refugee employees can go for meditation and prayer within the workplace. (If this does not exist, make sure that the organization dedicates a space for this).
- Sharing information on the nearest clinics, banks, and grocery stores if the worker is new to the local community.
- Suggestions for how refugee employees can share their story and background with coworkers and managers if they wish to.
- Setting the refugee worker up with a buddy in the first week of employment who can help guide them and provide more support.



## Matching new refugee employees with “buddies” or co-workers

A **buddy system** is a more informal relationship than a mentorship. Putting a buddy system in place provides psychological and social support for a new refugee employee, especially if that buddy shares a cultural identity with the new hire.



A buddy that shares a **native language and/or a cultural identity** with a new refugee hire can give the employee a sense of trust, safety, and inclusion.

The buddy can help address the new hire’s **questions relating to the company’s culture**.

They can offer **advice and resources** that can help their refugee coworker adjust to their new surroundings.

They can help ease the **social integration** process as the new hire is introduced to other company staff by someone who is already integrated at the company.

## Ensuring the whole company 'walks the talk' on cultural inclusion

Organizations should ensure that they have a structure that promotes a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment for all employees. Here are some ways organizations can create an inclusive workplace, especially for refugees:

- Creating a safe and secluded place for meditation or prayer and allowing for flexibility in schedules for employees who have specific prayer times.
- Providing flexibility in the dress code or different uniform options for employees who have a religious dress code, like wearing a hijab or yarmulke.
- Making sure that the organization's cafeteria has options that cater to diets that arise from cultural traditions, such as vegetarian, vegan, and no-pork options.
- Reviewing the company's holiday schedule to ensure that the organization includes floating holidays, which can be used for specific cultural or religious days.
- For employees that may have low levels of proficiency in the host country's language, it's important to provide language "workarounds", such as matching the employee with a coworker who speaks their native language, or ensuring that training and HR resources are in the employee's native language.

## Celebrating refugees' cultural backgrounds in the workplace

Organizations should celebrate the diversity of refugee workers' cultural backgrounds and traditions to help them feel more included and reduce cultural barriers. There are many ways to celebrate cultural diversity in the workplace, including:

- A diversity and inclusion-focused event where refugee workers, among other employees, can showcase their traditions, such as certain foods from their home countries, music, or other customs. This can help foster connection with their coworkers through shared experiences.
- A diversity and inclusion-focused book or film club can help refugee workers share their experiences through literature or movies that can inform co-workers about their cultural history and backgrounds, and create an open space for dialogue.
- Celebrating refugee workers' stories by connecting refugee workers with the company's communications department so they can share their story through internal or external communication channels, such as an internal company blog featuring refugee employees.
- Holding social events that recognize cultural differences. This can include providing options for vegetarians or those with other diets, encouraging activities that are inclusive of people who don't drink alcohol, and using language that is religion-neutral (holiday party vs. Christmas party).

## Asking for feedback from employees

To evaluate your organization's progress on creating a culturally inclusive environment, it's important to ask for feedback from refugee employees on how to improve so they can feel welcome, safe, and free to be themselves.

- 1) **Provide multiple ways for refugee employees to provide feedback on their experience (along with other non-refugee employees).** This can be done through anonymized in-house surveys, one-on-one meetings with HR, or even company-wide town halls, depending on how comfortable the employee feels with sharing their feedback.
- 2) **Monitor and evaluate cultural inclusion goals and make them a part of the organization's measurable goals.** One example would be for the organization as a whole to set a goal to increase the retention rate of refugee employees and implement inclusion efforts to try to reach that goal.
- 3) **Listen to feedback from refugee employees on how the company can be more inclusive.** There should be a clear line of communication created by HR teams for this feedback to reach top management at the organization.



# PASTRAMI BAR



**Thank you!**

## Resources

Community Tool Box, *Cultural Competence and Spirituality in Community Building*, <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/culture/cultural-competence/culturally-competent-organizations/main>, 2019.

Colorado Equity Alliance, *Equitable Hiring Guide*, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fb1J8vf9Kcyxb8J\\_Tj2BkX5aYZ6UsQd3/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fb1J8vf9Kcyxb8J_Tj2BkX5aYZ6UsQd3/view), 2021.

Deloitte Insights, *A New Home at Work*, <https://www.tent.org/resources/employers-guide-refugees-workplace/>, 2019.

Carleton University, *Improving Immigrant Inclusion in the Workplace*, <https://carleton.ca/criw/wp-content/uploads/Report-Improving-Immigrant-Inclusion-in-the-Workplace.pdf>, 2019.

Society for Human Resource Management, *Six Steps for Building an Inclusive Workplace*, <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0418/pages/6-steps-for-building-an-inclusive-workplace.aspx>, 2018.