Changing Spaces to Change Intergroup Attitudes

Achieving and managing diversity and inclusion is hard. Many organizations have implemented diversity training programs, initiatives, and policies that aim to improve relationships and interaction among members of different groups. While these programs can provide a navigable virtual environment that helps coworkers feel more connected, they may not go far enough in addressing the needs of marginalized groups. Indeed, the digital world offers organizational leaders a unique opportunity to create a more inclusive and equitable workplace.

Similarly, managers may find creative ways to use apps, including Clubhouse (which could provide a space for people to have casual, drop-in conversations) and Microsoft's giant makerspace, The Garage (which may encourage social interactions among employees from diverse backgrounds). The benefits of using these digital spaces extend beyond the physical environment and into the digital sphere, as they can provide a more comfortable and open environment for intergroup contact.

The research on social magnets (e.g., prestigious firms, private country clubs, etc.) suggests that people are more likely to interact with others who are similar to them. This occurs because people who are similar are more likely to be perceived as positive by others. Similarly, people who are similar may be more likely to interact with others who are similar to them.

In the face of such backlash, leaders who aim to implement lasting change must be aware of the potential dangers of focusing too much on digital spaces. For example, leaders must be careful not to create a virtual environment that is segregated by race or ethnicity. Instead, leaders must work to create a more inclusive and equitable workplace that allows employees from all backgrounds to feel truly welcome.

In an organizational context, spaces that are more comfortable for all groups are important. In a recent study of Catholics in Italy, researchers found that students randomly assigned to live with a roommate of a different race during their first year of college had more positive social interactions and relationships with other students. This suggests that leaders who want to create a more inclusive and equitable workplace must be mindful of the potential benefits and drawbacks of different types of digital spaces.

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