



# **BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE CONGRESSIONAL OFFICE**

An Introductory Guide for Congressional  
Staff and Leadership



- Developing leaders that reflect America -

## About the Authors

**Laura Maristany** is the associate director for constructive politics at Democracy Fund, an independent foundation working to ensure that our political system is able to withstand new challenges and deliver on its promise to the American people. Focusing on constructive politics, Laura leads the Governance program's strategy to explore what unites us, while helping governing institutions become more diverse, inclusive, and better able to serve all Americans. A seasoned advocate and movement- and community-builder with extensive Capitol Hill and policymaking experience, Laura has spent her career leading efforts to develop and implement more inclusive legislative agendas and governing institutions.

**Maria Robles Meier** is an inclusion expert, a leader on diversity in the public sector, and the founder of *We Are The People*, an organization supporting diverse professionals in public service. She previously served as a senior-level congressional staffer in both U.S. Senate and House leadership offices. In addition, she was executive director of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and led the Senate Democratic Diversity Initiative. Her roles and experiences provide a unique perspective that includes diversity and inclusion, professional development, and the workings of Congress, all of which she uses in her consulting practice to empower change makers.

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## About Representative Democracy

**Representative Democracy** is a coalition of nine think tanks, nonpartisan organizations, and civil rights groups that believe diversity strengthens institutions of government and authenticates this country's tradition of democracy and civic engagement. The coalition includes a Brain Trust of practitioners and experts in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). Working across communities, this group supports and encourages learning, methods, and tactics to advance DEIB in congressional offices and internal administrative operations in the Capitol. In the workplace, technical expertise support may include developing a customized framework with goals and metrics, training modules for staff, and communication strategies that center DEIB.

For more information and DEIB resources, please visit [www.repdemocracy.org](http://www.repdemocracy.org).

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Introduction	05
The Purpose of This Guide	07
Definitions: Understanding Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging	09
Intentional Steps Your Office Can Take	13
Reaching and Hiring the Best Talent	19
Developing Clear Job Descriptions	19
Creating an Intentional Search Process	22
Ensuring an Inclusive and Accessible Process	24
The Ongoing Effort of Building a DEIB Hiring Process	28
Beyond Hiring: Creating an Inclusive Workplace	29
Strategies for Retaining Talented Staff	29
Allyship Requires Self-Awareness	33
A Lifelong Process	35

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*Throughout this guide, this icon indicates quotes sourced from congressional staffers who wish to remain anonymous.*

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# INTRODUCTION

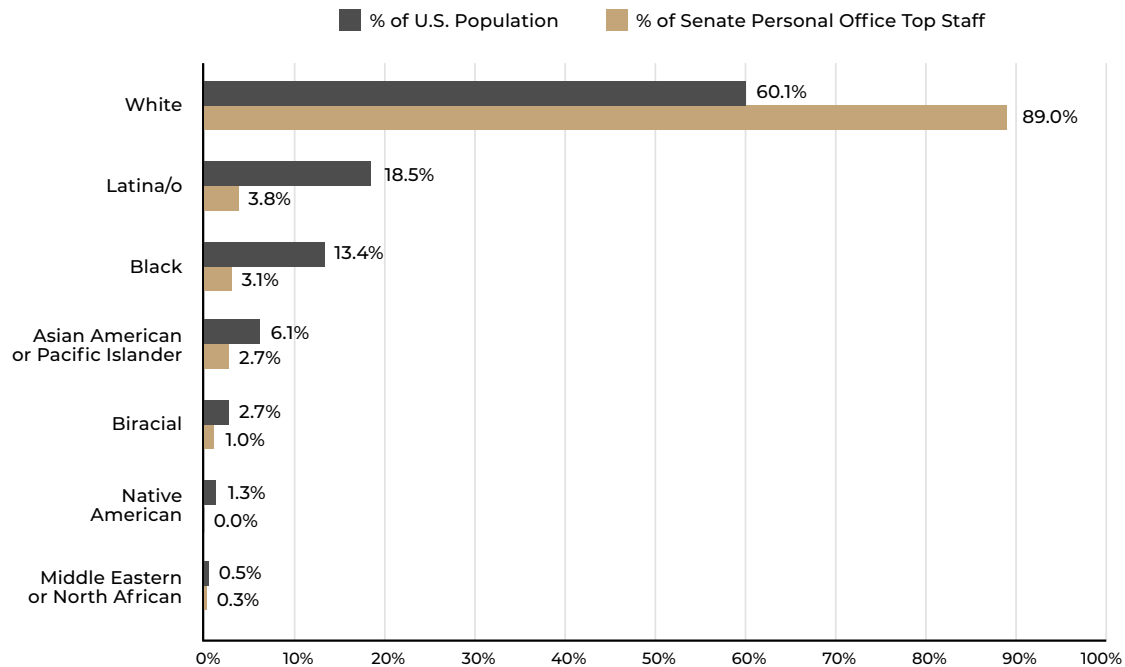
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Representative government is a founding ideal of American democracy, and no other institution has a greater responsibility to uphold this standard than the U.S. Congress. As a representative body, Congress can more effectively carry out its constitutional responsibility to legislate when it looks like the communities it represents. From interns to elected representatives, “We the People” — all voices, backgrounds, and experiences — belong in Congress. This guide provides you — congressional staff with hiring and other HR responsibilities — with resources and information to help create a Congress where we are all represented.

As our nation becomes more diverse, the makeup of Congress has continued to change as well. The 116th Congress is the most racially and ethnically diverse in history, yet it is far from representative of America’s diversity. According to [Pew Research Center](#), “one in five voting members (22 percent) of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate are racial or ethnic minorities,” but they represent nearly 40 percent of the nation’s population. [Represent Women](#) reports that women make up over 51 percent of the U.S. population but only 25 percent of the U.S. Senate and 23 percent of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Particularly acute is the lack of diversity among congressional staff — those who support the members’ work and serve as a critical link to their constituents. More senior staff, who make many legislative decisions, are especially unrepresentative of our national demographics. In a recent [report on Senate staff diversity](#), the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that people of color make up nearly 40 percent of the U.S. population, but only 11 percent of all Senate office top staff. Focusing on who constitutes senior leadership in congressional offices provides an insightful view into how representative our decision makers are. More importantly, it identifies the structural underpinnings of leadership pathways in the institution. While it may be unintentional, the lack of representative staff in senior leadership positions is essentially shutting out millions of Americans with distinct perspectives and experiences from the policymaking process.

## Racial Demographics of Senate Personal Office Top Staff vs. U.S. Population



SOURCE: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. *Racial Diversity Among Top Staff in Senate Personal Offices*



Some argue that congressional offices are much more diverse at more junior levels. However, the findings of the [first-ever analysis](#) of racial representation among interns in the House of Representatives suggest that entry-level pathways into Congress are also struggling to increase diversity, despite recent congressional efforts to provide paid internship opportunities. The report, commissioned by Pay Our Interns, “found strong evidence that the congressional workplace is racially segregated. A lawmaker’s race, political party, and the demographic composition of their congressional district all have a strong effect on whom they hire as interns.” The report observed that white students represented 85 percent of interns in the individual offices of House Republicans and 62 percent of interns in the offices of House Democrats. Since many offices look at internships as direct pathways into congressional jobs, any diverse job seekers who cannot afford to accept an unpaid internship or lack the networks and referrals to obtain a paid position are already at a disadvantage. Creating opportunities for more diverse students to take advantage of congressional internships and full-time staff vacancies does not happen by chance. It requires intentionality and purpose.

From entry-level to the most senior positions, a lack of representation means that much is missing from the debates shaping our national policy and priorities. In the future, workplaces will rely heavily on strong collaboration and inclusive environments.

[Decades of studies](#) have repeatedly shown that teams with more diverse experiences, backgrounds, and ideas produce better and more innovative products. Democracy itself will be better served when we have the input and influence of more voices to formulate effective and responsive national policy.

## The Purpose of This Guide

You occupy a position within a congressional office that decides who gets hired — whether it is an intern or senior staff member. You care about building and supporting a great work environment. You recognize that diversity is a strength and that different perspectives lead to better results. This “wholeness” makes you a stronger leader, your staff better employees, and your office the embodiment of public service.

But you also see structural barriers in the setup and functioning of congressional operations that stand in the way of creating the most inclusive work environment for your team. With no central human resources office or HR director on staff, where do you start? How do you build systems and processes that create an inclusive workplace? Where can staff go, and what programs can they access to develop their leadership skills? How do you equitably recognize and reward the contributions of all employees?

Congressional staff face job-related demands unlike any other work environment. Navigating large workloads, endless meetings and committee hearings, constituent engagements, and thorny politics are a constant challenge on the Hill. Many staffers also worry about financial pressures, given the low salaries of these positions, and may juggle other part-time jobs to help pay their bills.

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***The biggest frustration for chiefs is the unique HR environment on the Hill. They have retreats and trainings, but the people brought in are not always relevant to hiring on the Hill.”***

### **Congressional Brain Drain: A New America Study**

Declining resources and workplace support have increased demands on congressional staff and reduced legislative capacity, according to a study by New America called [Congressional Brain Drain](#). The report presents the most comprehensive time-series, cross-sectional survey of congressional staffers' professional backgrounds, career paths, policy views, technical knowledge, substantive expertise, and job experiences ever conducted.

By focusing on structural issues in the congressional workplace, the New America study identifies 12 drivers of brain drain:

- 1. Congress is a funnel to lucrative jobs in lobbying.**
- 2. Staff resources have shifted to the district.**
- 3. There are fewer resources to pay staff.**
- 4. Staff pay is declining.**
- 5. Congressional staffers in important roles are largely inexperienced.**
- 6. Capitol Hill is staffed primarily by Millennials.**
- 7. Turnover among congressional staff is exceedingly high.**
- 8. Most staff do not see working in Congress as a long-term career option.**
- 9. Staffers work extremely long hours and are spread thin.**
- 10. Staff like working for their boss but not so much for Congress.**
- 11. In Congress, experience yields knowledge but is not rewarded.**
- 12. Staffers are highly partisan and highly ideological.**

Despite the need and demand for these jobs, the New America study found that structural issues in the way Congress functions are forcing highly qualified talent to leave the Hill and seek better employment opportunities elsewhere.

For people of color and women, the urge to leave Congress is compounded by additional barriers to equity and career advancement. While there are legislative efforts to address these concerns and modernize Congress, you have a key role to play in workplace reform. Your approach to diversity, the team you assemble, and the way you support staff to create an inclusive workplace will make a big difference in your office and in the quality of the service provided to the people you represent. Whether supporting legislation or helping constituents with their casework, staff are your most precious resource.

With so many demands for your attention, hiring a diverse staff and creating a more inclusive work environment may seem like a relatively low priority. Yet consider the increased burden high turnover creates for the rest of your staff and the amount of time spent repeating the hiring process. Consider the time lost to addressing staff grievances over alleged unequal treatment or denied promotions. Setting up a process to create or expand staff diversity and build a well-functioning, inclusive team is not an impossible task. In the long run, stronger staffing practices can actually help reduce your workload and lead to better results and more legislative wins. Many offices are already actively seeking to build more diverse staffs and workplaces that recognize their contributions. This guide will show how they are achieving it and offer suggestions for your office.

This guide is specific to your goals to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in your office. It does not replace existing guidelines, legal procedures, and applicable employment laws required of congressional offices. For additional information on existing resources, visit the Congressional Management Foundation's "[Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide](#)." If you have questions about laws and policies that apply to your office, reach out to the Committee on House Administration or the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration.

This guide has been informed by interviews with current and former congressional hiring managers and staff. It also includes anonymous information and quotes from diverse congressional staff submitted as part of [Representative Democracy](#) grantee event surveys. The tips and resources in this guide are part of the authors' efforts to promote a more functional Congress. With their combined knowledge of DEIB practices across sectors, they have developed a first-of-its-kind framework adjusted for the congressional context.

## Definitions: Understanding Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

This guide is different from other resources on the mechanics of doing your job as a manager in a congressional office. Our approach is built on the premise that diversity is a strength. Having a diverse staff brings multifaceted perspectives to policymaking that reflect the experiences of all Americans. As noted previously, the engagement and inclusion of new voices will make your office more effective and build increased capacity to achieve your member's goals. DEIB is not an end goal. It is a process of operating and a manner of being. It is the lens through which you see your workplace functioning better and stronger. When done correctly, DEIB allows for richer insights and more comprehensive solutions. Such results, desired in any office, are particularly relevant to the representative institution that is Congress.

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging is a journey that requires understanding of these concepts and their simultaneous implementation. Given the many definitions of these words, we are providing general ones aligned with the values of Representative Democracy and applying the terms to the unique environment of the congressional workplace.

## Diversity

When talking about diversity, we are referring to the tactics and best practices you can adopt to ensure that the makeup of your team adequately represents the community your office serves. These practices can help you reach more diverse people in your hiring process. Diversity is commonly thought of in reference to race and ethnicity. It can also include other identity markers, such as socioeconomic background, gender, religious identity, sexual orientation, disability, geographic location, and military service. Addressing all of these distinctions is essential to a more representative Congress and to your leadership as a policymaker.







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*I didn't want to leave my first job on the Hill — I really liked it, but I had so many student loans, I couldn't afford to stay, and getting financial help from home wasn't an option. It didn't help that my colleagues couldn't really relate to what I was going through.”*

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## Equity

Equity refers to the principles of fairness and equal access in a given system or process. When formulating a DEIB strategy, the “E” in equity must recognize that different groups of people face larger barriers to opportunity because of past injustices and unfair treatment. The starting line is staggered even when you presume all things are equal. When considered in a workplace, equity ensures there is extra care, equal access to information and resources, and fair treatment for all people. This guide focuses on the application of equity principles in the hiring process. Such principles can help you develop a strategy to ensure that the people you want to reach do not face barriers hindering their employment while advantaging others.

On Capitol Hill, where overworked offices focused on legislation and constituent services have little time to design new hiring approaches or update job descriptions that resonate with a broader group of applicants, a strong equity lens can change the way you routinely conduct hiring. Despite every effort to hire more diverse staff, you may not be hearing from well-qualified, diverse candidates. Requirements unrelated to a specific skill set, or in place simply because “it’s what we have always done,” may present barriers for candidates with different backgrounds, unintentionally excluding them from consideration. Ensuring that your processes are accessible and account for inequities in the system is key to creating a more diverse team.

## Inclusion and belonging

Inclusion refers to creating a space where each individual’s voice and perspective are meaningfully incorporated in decision making. It takes work to co-create an environment of trust and a shared vision. Belonging ensures that people are welcomed and valued. In a workplace, it recognizes the skills, assets, and richness of experience an employee offers. It is the creation of an environment where staff members bring their “whole selves.” Under these conditions, employees unsurprisingly become co-creators in shaping your office’s vision, values, and external work.

Do the people on your team feel like they belong? Are there patterns among groups of people who do or do not feel like they belong? Inclusion and belonging refer to the long-term work that can help not only build strong teams but also grow and support them, thereby increasing retention.

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***You need to have folks  
in the room who can bring  
the [diverse] perspectives.  
It serves the member better.”***

Like the other values we address, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging are not about treating one person or one group of people differently. DEIB shapes your leadership approach, providing all staff with the opportunity to be thriving contributors to a team that best serves members and, ultimately, constituents.



# INTENTIONAL STEPS YOUR OFFICE CAN TAKE

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The hiring process on Capitol Hill is chaotic. The congressional calendar does not stop because of vacant spots on your team. Someone still has to cover all the committee hearings, markups, and floor votes. Already strapped for human capital and resources, even one vacancy in a congressional office can add to saturated workloads on your team. Under these conditions, the priority is to fill the vacancy as soon as possible while managing competing demands for your attention. Without an HR operation or process, it is impossible to sift through hundreds, sometimes thousands of resumes, for each vacancy. At this point, it is too late to create a process that can effectively reach more diverse candidates. Many congressional staffers can relate to this scenario, but there are proactive measures that can better position your office for reaching and recruiting more diverse talent when a vacancy occurs. The process starts by ensuring that everyone on your team is clear on the member's values and goals.

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***The senator is really the one who sets the direction with regards to diversity hiring.”***

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## **Be intentional in establishing your DEIB policy**

Increasing staff diversity and retention needs to be an explicit priority for your team. While congressional hiring managers say that a diverse staff is a priority, many admit their office's diversity policy is implied or assumed. Yet without specifics, there can be no shared value or vision to work toward.

A written statement declaring that your office supports and values a diverse and inclusive workplace is important. A values statement also provides guidance about how to engage internally with colleagues and externally with constituents. The members of your team will be able to leverage this statement in their day-to-day interactions and their collaborative work across Congress.

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***We never had a discussion about it; it would have been good to have a larger inclusion discussion.”***

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## Define what diversity means for your office

Your district's or state's demographics are an ideal starting point to discuss what diversity means for your office and the people you serve. Each state or district has a story to be told. Many parts of the country have seen rapid demographic shifts over a fairly short period of time. Broader socioeconomic trends of populations moving from urban to suburban settings and vice versa can impact your constituents' experiences and needs. This critical information will help you create a DEIB statement that reflects your constituency's particular characteristics.

Look at your office's priorities and who they impact. Your district staff are regularly interacting with your constituents. Help promote exchanges between your district and legislative staff and other congressional offices, which can help inform your team about the issues affecting your constituents and the nation as a whole. One resource to consider is the Former Members of Congress (FMC) Association, which coordinates [District Director Study Tours](#). These tours create opportunities to meet and build relationships with other district directors across party lines and throughout the country. FMC brings district directors together in hopes that the exchange of ideas, approaches, analysis, and understanding of common challenges will foster relationships based on collegiality and shared experiences.

Armed with this information, you can start writing your office's DEIB statement, an important step in turning words into actions. A DEIB statement does not have to be long or complicated. It is a way to affirm your office's commitment to a workplace that is diverse, inclusive, and reflective of the people you serve.

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***We have a base in our district, so we make a point of trying to hire someone from a military family. People who grew up in military families don't have a home district.”***

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### **Two examples of DEIB statements that can be adapted for your office**

The office of Senator/Congressperson \_\_\_\_\_ supports diversity in all its forms and is committed to building a team that reflects the many backgrounds, identities, and experiences of the constituents of \_\_\_\_\_ (state/district). In this way, we can support the work of (member's name) \_\_\_\_\_ to be a voice for all.

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We are proud to represent a state/district that reflects the rich diversity that makes our country great. The office of Senator/Rep. \_\_\_\_\_, therefore, supports and values diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in our hiring practices and in how our office operates as a team. By doing so, we can provide the highest level of service to the constituents of \_\_\_\_\_ (state or district).

You should also engage your team in developing your office's guiding principles. This is a good way to co-create a vision for how the office will function internally and externally. You can start by asking the members of your team to discuss values they think are essential for all to uphold in your work. These values can include collaboration, integrity, service to your community, and continuous learning, among others.

### **Be clear about the recruitment, hiring, and retention process**

Prospective candidates for positions, as well as members of your current team, can better assess their ability to work and grow in your office if they have a clear understanding of its processes, priorities, and metrics for success. The key is to develop a clear internal process that guides hiring, compensation, and promotion and that describes the skills valued for advancement. This clarity will help you better recognize differences and nontraditional skill sets as assets within your team, which in turn, strengthens your office. These interconnected concepts will not only help increase diversity, create equity, and build a system that fosters inclusion, but also ultimately develop a more cohesive office structure. Finally, it is important that this information be easily accessible and understood by everyone on staff.



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*I had been working really hard and putting in long hours when a white guy who was hired after me got a promotion and a pay raise. When I finally got up the courage to ask my manager, he said it wasn't intentional, but they had forgotten about me.”*

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## Create an equitable office environment through transparent and standardized practices

In the rapid hiring process many Hill offices use, many decisions may be left to the discretion of the hiring manager. The lack of an established, transparent policy on salaries, job titles, and job requirements can result in implicit bias or preferential treatment within your team. Everyone brings their own experiences, values, and stories to the workplace, which affects how they interact with others. Without established procedures and norms, the “rules” may change or be applied differently to each staff person. By standardizing the process, you institute a necessary equity lens.

- There are many resources that can help you interrupt bias in your organization. For an additional reference, please see [“You Can’t Change What You Can’t See: Interrupting Racial and Gender Bias in the Legal Profession.”](#)

## Establish nonbinding, voluntary pay bands

Although each office manages budgets differently, pay systems should include a salary floor and an average salary for each position in your office. By defining staff pay parameters, you eliminate ambiguity and define expectations about office roles, promotion requirements, bonuses, and any other types of compensation. This honest disclosure helps counter feelings of unequal treatment and pay across the team and allows for better financial planning around expected staff salaries.

## Designate a lead for hiring and staff development

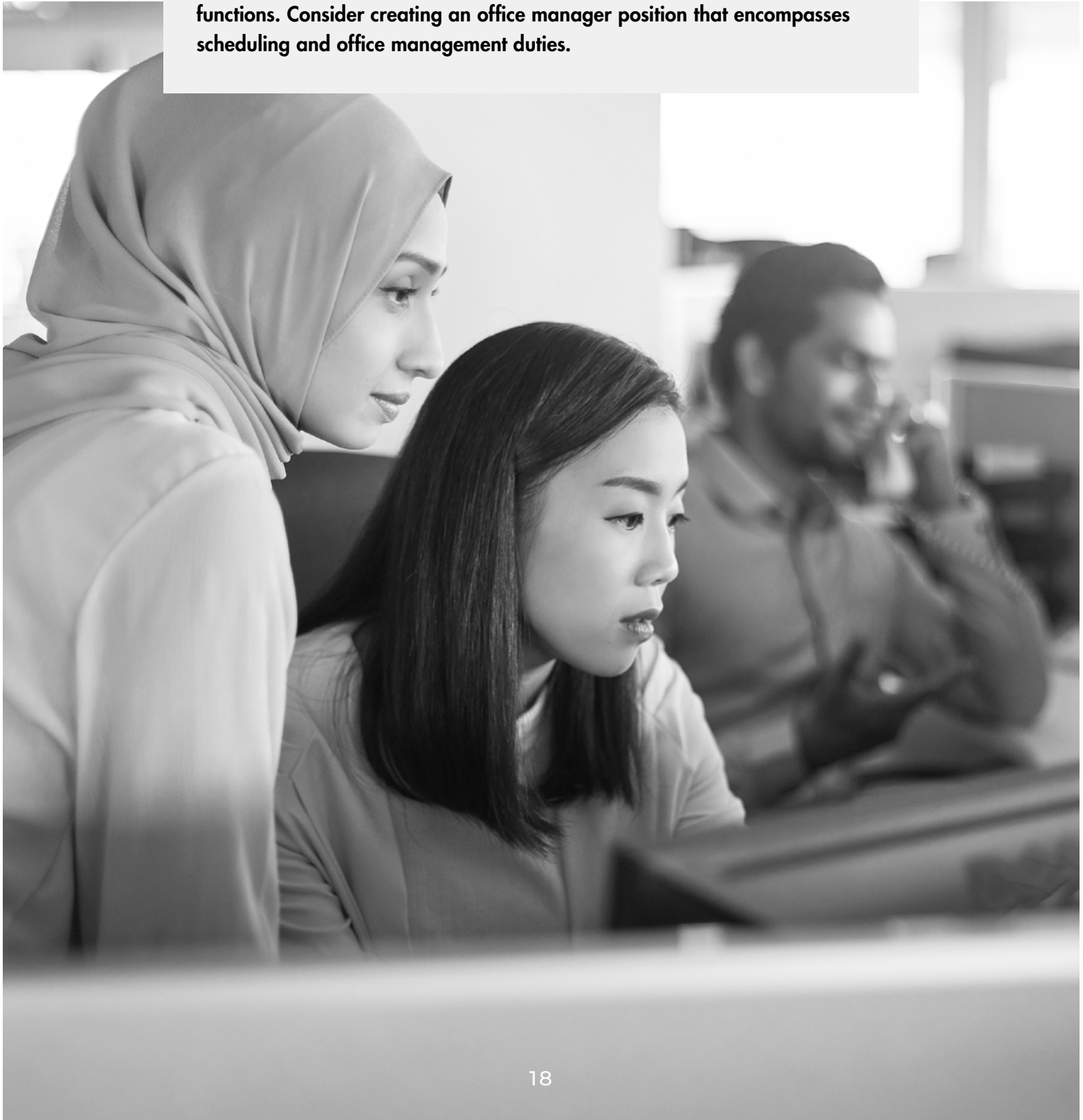
Having limited staff – particularly in House offices – and high workloads makes it difficult for staff to assess and navigate professional growth opportunities or even identify the manager of broader personnel issues. Scenarios that may arise range from asking for a promotion to potentially experiencing discrimination within your office or in interactions with constituents. In some cases, these issues should be handled within your office. In others, however, you may need to seek assistance from other congressional resources. While Congress has established resources that can help with personnel issues, your team may not know how to access or apply them.

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***We had concerns with our chief of staff’s mental health, and the member was in the district. We didn’t know who to take the concern to. We didn’t know who could help.”***



**Designate a person in your office as the lead for hiring and staff development. This person can also be charged with implementing and managing some of the processes recommended in this guide. Some offices have office manager positions that handle schedules, office budgets, and HR functions. Consider creating an office manager position that encompasses scheduling and office management duties.**



# REACHING AND HIRING THE BEST TALENT

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## Developing Clear Job Descriptions

**Have clarity around what you are looking for in a given role.**

Congressional offices vary in how they leverage their staff expertise, which can lead to uncertainty on the part of job seekers. Being clear about what is important and focusing on specific skills before you begin the recruitment and interview processes can help reduce bias and apply equity in your hiring practice. Job descriptions also help ensure that everyone involved in the process is clear on what you are looking for in a new hire and that there are defined job functions and expectations for each position.

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***One challenge is a lack of awareness of what the jobs are and what they entail so it hurts our ability to attract candidates.”***

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As a congressional hiring manager, and especially if you are staffing a new office, you have some discretion to define roles on your team. A good starting place is looking at how other House or Senate offices define their team's roles and responsibilities. Do not hesitate to use different titles or a mix of responsibilities. For example, some offices find it difficult to hire for scheduling roles. Instead of schedulers, consider seeking office managers whose responsibilities include scheduling.



See the Congressional Management Foundation's [\*Setting Course Management Guide\*](#) for additional tips on how to develop job descriptions for your office.

As you craft job descriptions, also consider the myriad issues and activities your office will need to work on beyond the committees to which your member is assigned. Clearly define the experience needed for each of these roles, whether it is technical expertise or broader qualities like the capacity to learn in a fast-paced environment.

**Look for transferable skills.** Ensure that you have assigned issues across your team. Typically, legislative assistants and legislative directors will handle committee work and the member's most important issues. Nevertheless, you can start to create pathways for staff assistants and legislative correspondents by assigning them issues that fall outside those realms. As you develop job descriptions for junior staff, consider what skills will be key to carrying out their current role as well as future roles they might fill within your office.

**Think about what expertise applicants should bring in relation to what they can learn on the job.** Requiring previous Hill experience may eliminate whole groups of candidates who, in many cases, are not in a financial position to work as unpaid congressional interns. By opening up the hiring process to focus on transferable skill sets and how a candidate can grow in the position, you create more possibilities for finding job candidates from diverse backgrounds.

There is no question that the work experience on Capitol Hill is unique. It has its own vernacular, processes, and environment. Not surprisingly, many job vacancies, particularly for more senior positions, require previous Hill experience (or at least state it as a preference). We know

### ➤ Is your process accessible? AN EYE TOWARD EQUITY

- Be specific about what it takes to be successful in the position.
- Invest in leadership development that can help your team explore how their backgrounds and stories affect the way they perceive prospective candidates.



from recent studies referenced earlier in this guide that diversity is still lacking in more senior congressional positions. Limiting a job candidate pool to those already on the Hill is a significant barrier to developing a more diverse Congress. This practice forces offices to rely on very limited pools of talent that have followed established career pathways — for example, former congressional interns or people who have come into Congress from campaigns. (It is worth noting that both of these environments are notorious for having little to no diversity.) Traditional practices for filling staff vacancies make it very difficult for candidates from other sectors, who could be just as qualified, to make it through the hiring process.





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*I was the staff assistant,  
but because I also spoke  
Spanish fluently, I would  
assist our communication  
team translating the  
member's press releases to  
make them more accessible  
to all our constituents.”*

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### ➤ Is your process accessible? AN EYE TOWARD EQUITY

Clearly define what aspects of previous experience are necessary for any given role and what can be learned on the job. While previous Hill experience can bring a useful set of skills, over-relying on this as a primary criterion for selecting new hires will limit the diversity in your pool of applicants.

## Creating an Intentional Search Process

Your team is clear on what you're looking for, and you are ready to find the perfect addition to your staff. How do you reach them?

**Expand your networks.** A well-established piece of advice for anyone seeking a job or a promotion on the Hill is to network. This advice also

applies to the the process of pursuing greater diversity. As a hiring manager, you undoubtedly have established networks that offer a reliable source of resumes. The challenge for most of us is that our networks look like us. Not surprisingly, the resumes you receive will mirror these homogeneous networks. Expanding your networks when announcing job vacancies and maintaining an ongoing resume-collection process will help broaden the pool of candidates for your office.

### **Look to your home state or district to build a DEIB network or advisory team.**

Community members, who are the front line for understanding local issues, can become conduits for identifying talent or for encouraging exploration of Capitol Hill as a career option for underrepresented populations.

### **Broaden your network of individuals or resume/candidate referral sources to increase the pool of candidates for vacancies.**

A great place to start looking for diverse resumes is [the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion](#), a bipartisan office committed to creating and maintaining a more diverse and equitable workforce in Congress. The [Senate Democratic Diversity Initiative](#), which assists Senate Democratic offices in building a diverse workforce, is another option for identifying potential candidates. Also, turn to House and Senate colleagues. Ask them to share some of their resumes from past vacancy announcements, particularly if they have had success attracting diverse applicants.

There are several D.C.- and Hill-based organizations that focus on staff diversity in Congress or professional development for diverse staffers. By adding them to your contact list, you may find great candidates your established networks overlooked.

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*When you are a staffer, going 100 miles an hour, with your hair on fire, you don't have time to fill a position quickly. So, you rely on your networks. And, our networks look like us.”*

Building a distribution list that reaches beyond your usual contacts will make your networks more inclusive and allow you to identify potential staff even when there is no vacancy.

- **Diversity-focused congressional staff associations:** There are congressional staff organizations based in the House and Senate that are resources for diverse Hill staff. The House Office of Diversity and Inclusion [has listed some of them on its website](#). Most of these organizations collect resumes and share job vacancies with their membership. In particular, they often create job banks during the period of transition to a new Congress.
- **Membership-based external associations:** Off the Hill, there are professional associations for staff from diverse backgrounds. Their members often act as mentors to younger staff and many collect resumes or can distribute job openings to their networks. For example, [Representative Democracy](#) is a good source of candidates for senior-level positions.
- **National policy and civil rights organizations:** Diverse advocacy and policy organizations may not maintain a database of resumes, but they are staffed by policy experts and specialists with networks that include your target population. Include civil rights organizations and other nonprofit organizations on your distribution list when looking for job candidates.
- **For more senior positions,** consider adding local, diverse chambers of commerce to your lists.
- **Contact colleges and universities for diverse interns or entry-level staff.** Include schools that have federal designations, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and Tribal Colleges and Universities, to reach potential candidates who might not ordinarily consider applying to a congressional office.

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*We tried once,  
but didn't have  
any results.”*

It may seem frustrating to make a good-faith effort and not get the desired results. But trying something once is not a genuine good-faith effort. Broadening your networks requires cultivation and maintenance. You cannot expect to get the perfect candidate after the first try. Maintaining communication with broad-based groups that are initially unfamiliar to you and your staff is a powerful step in this DEIB journey. Conversely, for the organizations, regular check-ins and touchpoints

will help authenticate your intent to build an inclusive staff and will increase the chances of developing new channels for finding more diverse job candidates.

## Ensuring an Inclusive and Accessible Process

Once you have developed criteria for each role in your office and a list of networks to reach more diverse applicants, it's time to define the interview process. The values statement and clear job description will help your team engage in this process more effectively and with an eye toward DEIB.

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*We hire based on 'fit' — it's hard to define, it's just a feeling sometimes.”*

**Make sure the people who will be part of the interview process are clear on the position's must-haves and nice-to-haves.** Once you have narrowed down the applicants and are ready to conduct in-person interviews, decide who from your team should be part of the interview process. For each job opening, aim to include two to four staffers beyond the chief and the member in the interview process. Ideally, you should ensure representation across levels (e.g., staff assistants to legislative directors should be considered). With clearly defined roles, job expectations, and skill sets, a team approach to interviews can broaden perspectives and provide additional insight to mitigate any one person's lived experience and the bias it can bring to the process. Unconscious bias can be reinforced in quick processes that do not have standardized approaches or transparency.

Hill hiring managers regularly refer to a candidate's “fit” with the office culture as a deciding factor when filling staff vacancies. Yet hiring based on fit, without exploring what that term means in your office, can be a dangerous practice. Every workplace on or off of the Hill has an office culture that is often implied. Is it shared experience, viewpoints, or backgrounds? Does everyone on your team share this vision? A more transparent way to approach the notion of “office culture” is to define its values and priorities. Staff usually refer to those set by top management or the member. Not everyone on your team may have the same definition of office values, which can limit inclusion and reinforce bias in the interview

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*Staffs are small, the offices are crowded, people work long hours. You all have to be able to get along.”*

processes. It is important to refer to your office's DEIB statement or statement of values to ensure your team and the member are on the same page.

Supporting the shared office values and vision is a critical part of staff cohesion. Yet these intangibles may be limiting who gets hired. It is a good practice to ask yourself what defines your office's culture. Is it a commitment to your member's agenda and goals? Is your definition inclusive? Specifying skills, knowledge base, and work attributes helps take the ambiguity out of the hiring process. Do not focus on how new hires can replicate what the current staff are doing. Instead, look at how they can complement your office's skills and expertise and add new views and approaches to your team.

**Build on the Rooney Rule.** You may be familiar with the "Rooney Rule" or, perhaps, even applying this policy in your hiring process. First developed in 2003 by the National Football League, the rule was intended to address the lack of diversity among coaching staff. It requires teams to interview at least one qualified diverse candidate when they have a vacancy for a coaching position. While initially meeting with some success, the numbers of diverse coaching staff have not been sustained. Analysis of the rule in later years has suggested that interviewing a single diverse candidate is not enough to ensure an ongoing inclusive work environment.

Likewise, for congressional offices, collecting diverse resumes is merely one part of a larger effort. If you are employing the Rooney Rule, and even if it has yielded some success, consider how to build on these efforts. It is not enough to simply hire diverse staff. How do you ensure that all staff members have the opportunity for professional development and career growth? Look at ways to encourage team building and allow for the inclusion of more voices in your office's

### ➤ Is your process accessible? AN EYE TOWARD EQUITY

**Ask questions about what may be keeping more candidates from making it through your hiring process.** Ensuring that your processes account for inequities in the system is key to creating a more diverse team. If your system is repeatedly yielding one type of job candidate or hires with similar backgrounds, it is a good idea to look at how you are conducting the process.

There are concrete actions you can take to help create a more equitable hiring process:

- Standardize the questions for all candidates. Focus on the skill sets that are important for the position but can also come from a range of experiences and jobs.
- Include more staff members in the interview process and allow them to share their insights.





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*I have heard of skill development-related programs within the Congressional Hispanic Staff Association, but have not yet heard of other leadership development programs on the Hill.”*

processes and procedures. Finally, consider creating a success plan to develop and retain the staff you have hired. Ultimately this will help your staff be better prepared to support your member's goals and serve your constituents.

**Help your staff members access professional development opportunities that can equip them to better understand how unconscious biases may be affecting their ability to engage with people with different backgrounds and experiences during the interview process.** Your staff are your first line of access, or barriers, to entry for more diverse candidates. Whether through feedback or professional development opportunities, invest in their growth. This will help them engage more inclusively and with a strong DEIB filter, not only during recruitment processes but also in interactions with each other and constituents.

**Include team building and leadership development as a line item in your office budget.** When seeking training to help build a strong DEIB filter throughout your team, consider making professional development a priority. This means helping staff access cost-efficient leadership development opportunities and investing in the creation of tailored trainings through expert facilitators.

#### Other training opportunities

- [Representative Democracy](#) includes widely respected organizations that offer leadership development programs and career development support for diverse congressional staff at every level, from interns to chiefs of staff to elected officials.
- A good starting point is Congressional Management Foundation's webinar on [Sustainable Performance Management — How to Increase Efficiency and Productivity in Your Team](#).
- [The Brain Trust for a Representative Democracy](#) provides lists of facilitators, executive coaches, and practitioners who can help you integrate training into your work.

## The Ongoing Effort of Building a DEIB Hiring Process

One of the greatest challenges facing job seekers on the Hill is timing. Often, getting considered for a position means being in the right place at the right time. Moreover, the hiring process can happen very quickly. The congressional calendar does not wait, and an office vacancy adds to the employee workload of an already overtaxed staff. So how do you find the time to intentionally and thoughtfully assemble a team that will not just survive but, ideally, thrive in this type of environment?

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*I've seen positions get filled in a matter of a few hours.”*

**Even if your office is fully staffed, find time once or twice a year to meet with potential candidates and include other members of your team in the process.** Assign someone in your office to collect resumes and to promote any openings through congressional listservs that include all staff levels. The first thing to consider is that the hiring process is ongoing. When there is a vacancy, especially when Congress is in session, the natural reaction is to fill it as quickly as possible. Most managers say that they have been in this position, and almost all report that they depend on their tried-and-true networks to provide resumes of potential job candidates. Some of those networks include congressional listservs that promote openings to a very small group of Hill insiders.

**Maintain an ongoing process of collecting resumes from a broad range of sources to create a pool of diverse candidates when you do have a job opening.** You are likely overwhelmed with requests for informational interviews by people seeking to get their foot in the door or grow their careers. Consider setting aside time during recess to get to know potential future candidates. This can involve an informal coffee or more structured “speed interview” sessions. To get the word out, consider sharing these opportunities with the diverse staff associations.



# BEYOND HIRING: CREATING AN INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE

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## Strategies for Retaining Talented Staff

Too often, the DEIB process ends once someone is hired. Thinking about diversity and how your office staff can be more representative is important, but it is only the first step. Promoting DEIB in the workplace must go beyond circulating resumes to be truly effective. Building lists, doing outreach, and creating programs to support bringing new voices into Congress are important, but these activities barely scratch the surface for creating an inclusive workplace. What happens to all those talented people once they are hired and face the challenges of working on the Hill?

**Have a plan to keep the talent you hired.** If you are committed to having an office that looks like and acts in the service of your constituents, you need both a plan to bring more diverse talent to your team and another one to keep them there. Promoting a more diverse team is part of a larger holistic system of developing staff and creating an environment that supports and grows talent. To retain the top talent you have worked so hard to hire, you will need a plan to foster a more inclusive work environment. This requires planning and a commitment to leadership development across your team.

**Create a plan to help new hires be successful in your office.** Give your new hires the strongest foundation to succeed on your team, and you will save time and resources over the long term. Some offices call such plans “onboarding”; others include this information in the office handbook. What’s important is having a single document that new staff can easily access to learn more about your values and expectations. Ask offices you think are doing well with new staff to share their handbooks. You can then adjust their templates to include your office’s DEIB and value statements.

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*Staff retention is equally important. The senator focuses on professional development and a positive work environment for the staff.”*

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*It’s trial by fire on the Hill.”*

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*I have not talked to one staff person of color who does not have a story of an incident, a comment, something that was directed at them because of who they are. A lot of the time you feel like you just have to put your head down and put up with it.”*

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**Consider developing mentorship plans.** Assign someone on your team to mentor new staffers as they learn more about your office, and as you learn more about them. Beyond the handbook, try to give new employees guidance about what success looks like for their role. Job descriptions are a good starting point, but you should also set aside time to get to know them and for them to get to know the team.

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*I was taught to keep your head down and work hard.  
I would have been too afraid to ask questions.”*

**Set aside funds and time to host team retreats.** As a leader, you set the tone for how issues are handled in the office. Staff meetings or periodic retreats are good opportunities not only to focus on tasks but also to create an open and supportive forum for addressing any underlying tensions in the office. Staff retreats that focus on relationship building and give your team a space to think about long-term goals will create the foundations of a healthier work environment. And because your team is unique, it is a good idea to bring external facilitators to help guide conversations. This can mitigate power dynamics that may otherwise keep your team, especially more diverse staff, from engaging in the conversation. The [Better Arguments Project](#), [Welcoming America](#), and [Brain Trust for a Representative Democracy](#) are resources that can help you identify facilitators for these conversations.

There are many resources with quick questions to help your team members engage meaningfully when you are pressed for time. The answers to these questions can help you and your team to open up to one another and enhance mutual understanding. Questions include:

- What’s one thing helping you focus this week?
- What’s inspiring you today?
- What gives you hope about the work you are leading?

As with the hiring process, consider establishing targets for training and for staff participation in professional development opportunities. There are many accessible opportunities for staff that have been approved by the [Office of Congressional Ethics](#). Workloads and the demands of a congressional schedule may not lend themselves to extra time for professional development. However, providing time and opportunities for training and other professional development can enhance office productivity and reduce staff turnover. In addition, you will increase your staff talent resources, which can help fill positions when vacancies arise.

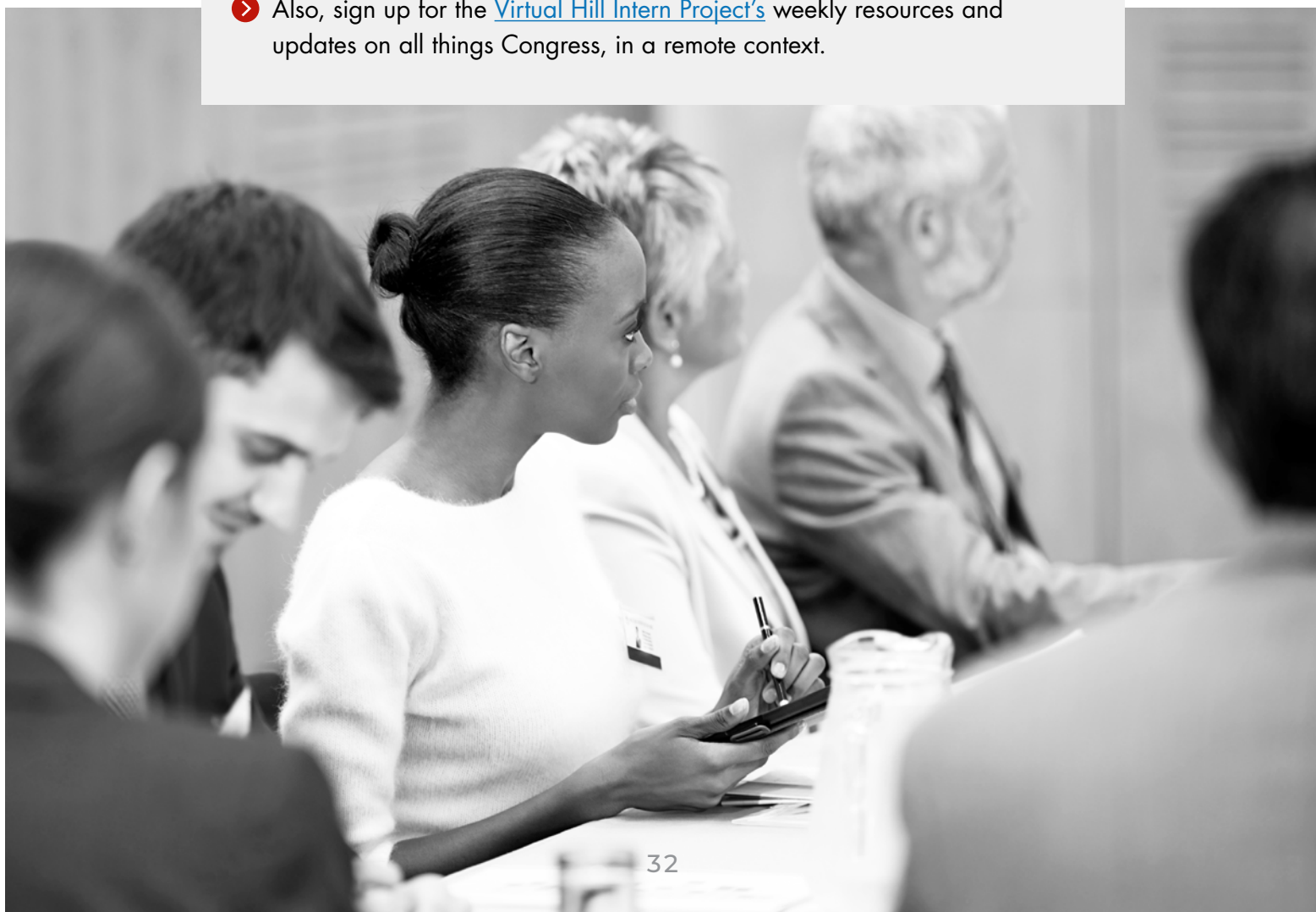
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*I was the only minority in the office. I didn't want to look like I didn't know what I was doing.”*

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### Leadership in COVID times

- Is your team working remotely? The [Working from Home Guide](#), developed by the Modernization Staff Association, includes resources on how to manage your remote team more effectively.
- Also, sign up for the [Virtual Hill Intern Project's](#) weekly resources and updates on all things Congress, in a remote context.



## Allyship Requires Self-Awareness

“The duality of our lived experiences as Black Americans and participants in the federal policy making process forces us to reconcile our nation’s past and present on a daily basis. For example, some of the office buildings in which we work are named after self-avowed racists. When we walk the corridors of the U.S. Capitol, we are aware that a largely minority support staff still maintains a building that was built by the hands of enslaved Black laborers. While we help write the laws that govern the United States, we still live in a society that treats us and our families as second-class citizens.”

– August 27, 2020, [Open Letter to Congressional Leadership, Joint Congressional Staff Task Force for Racial Justice and Reform](#)

When your team is diverse, your office is closer to leveraging its many benefits. Navigating the mosaic of experiences and differences on your team is now more important than ever. It also requires the ultimate commitment to building an inclusive environment — one where everyone on your team feels like they belong. To do that, you need to become an ally to your team. That means working on yourself. It also means doing everything in your power to eliminate structural barriers for your staff. Most importantly, it means you will speak up for them, and you will commit to seeking ways to better understand their experiences.

Allyship is a true test of leadership that can help you create a genuinely inclusive office. We all have our stories, and those stories can sometimes create blind spots that promote inequality on our teams. If you care about keeping the team you have worked so hard to build, you need to commit to combating inequities whenever and wherever they show up. They may be found in interactions among your team, with constituents, and with other offices.

“Belonging is not about joining an exclusive club, or even being made to feel that you belong, but about co-creating that to which we all must belong, which requires engagement with power. As frames, both ‘inclusion’ and ‘equity’ fall short of fully capturing these co-creative components.”

– John Powell, author and expert on “belonging”

➤ Visit the [Brain Trust for a Representative Democracy](#) regularly for resources to help you grow as a more inclusive leader and a better ally. Additional resources can help you:

- Learn about [microaggressions](#). There are many articles available that explain what seemingly harmless and sometimes casual comments could be saying to your peers.
- Understand the power dynamics in your office and how they may be keeping it from becoming a more inclusive workplace.
- Identify structural barriers and do something about them. Low salaries, unpaid internships, and extreme turnover are all systemic barriers that keep people out of congressional jobs.
- Create a strong culture of feedback within your team.

**Prioritize creating a welcoming environment for your team.** A growing number of organizations and movements are recalibrating their approaches to consensus building. What these organizations have come to realize is that for people to feel like they belong, they must see themselves as co-creators of the future of any given system.

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***Staff of color need supportive communities.”***

**Create spaces to have better arguments.** Connecting with individuals who hold dramatically different views from ones we are comfortable with requires a commitment to diversity of opinion and, most importantly, a willingness to practice how to disagree constructively. These skills will help your staff collaborate more effectively with each other and constituents. Activities that support this approach do not have to be large nor do you need to reserve them for special occasions like staff retreats.

As a manager, seek training opportunities and guidance on facilitating difficult conversations and building a more cohesive and inclusive staff. [The Better Arguments Project](#) has free resources, including worksheets and trainings, on how to facilitate difficult conversations among people with differing backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints.

# A LIFELONG PROCESS

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Your commitment to promoting a more inclusive work environment starts in your office but extends to the very core of your role as a leader in Congress. Living those values as a team can also extend to how you develop your workplace policies and promote change, both in your districts and in communities across America. You can start with some of the recommendations in this guide, but it is important to understand that this is a process you engage in for life.

Working on Capitol Hill is an experience like no other. It is an environment populated by smart, committed individuals who have the ability to shape and impact policy that addresses every element of our daily lives. It is also a chaotic, frantic, and sometimes poorly compensated workplace that makes great demands on congressional staff.

Unfortunately, we also know that staffing on the Hill has not kept pace with our national demographic shifts. To strengthen our democratic process, we need a representative democracy. Those who make hiring decisions for Congress need to adopt intentional and systemic approaches to increasing staff diversity, ensuring equity, expanding inclusion, and fostering an environment of belonging. Such steps will enable staff to become strong, well-functioning teams that serve their constituents well. This work can begin at whatever stage you are in with your approach, but the key is to be clear and specific.

You are not alone in this process. Off the Hill, there are organizations to support and enhance your efforts to increase staff diversity at all levels. On the Hill, there are training resources and organizations that share the same goal of creating a government that truly reflects “We the People.”

For additional resources, please visit the [Representative Democracy website](#).



