

BELONGING

The Key to Organizational Success

BY FEDERICA PETERSON



Belonging. Such a simple word in theory, but powerful and life-changing in its impact.

The concepts of inclusion and belonging are not new. In fact, they are rooted in the very fabric of organizational development. A company's mission and vision strategies are designed with a team aspect in mind, which, in all respects, is determined by each individual effort. And that effort is driven by the innate, human desire to belong.

So what does belonging really mean? It depends on who you ask. The definition has personal meaning for every one of us, and if you are a leader of an organization, it is important to understand this. The Webster's Dictionary definition of belonging states, "To be part of or in natural association with something; to be a member of a group; to have a suitable or appropriate place." For the workplace, the general sense of belonging means feeling valued in a way that makes an employee perceive the organization cares for people as individuals, which can manifest as having positive connections with others and being able to bring your authentic self to work. This is woven intricately and purposefully within the fabric of the organizational culture.

COMPANY CULTURE, EXCLUSION, AND BELONGING

Company culture is a powerful thing. It defines what is acceptable and what is not and gives direction on how things should be done. If your people don't feel like they belong, they will become outcasts literally or implicitly, which ultimately will stifle their potential and, more important, their commitment to your organization. When people feel like they don't belong, they literally are "working for their lives," which means their effort is driven by fear and survival. When you are working in that headspace, you are cautious with the decisions you make. You're careful not to rely on your own thinking or think outside the box, and by no means is risk-taking an option.

A sense of belonging can also be jeopardized by acts of exclusion from co-workers through micro- or macroaggressions. These include talking over or shutting colleagues down when they try to contribute and devaluing their contributions, which often is done unknowingly through unconscious bias. I have observed managers evaluate contributions by team members from the perspective of their thinking or the group's thinking and not give credibility to others who do not align with those thought patterns. People who are different from us think differently because their experiences are different, their understanding is different, and their knowledge base is different. I have seen this time and time again in homogeneous team settings. When someone comes into the team who is "different," whether

it be gender, race, or even disability, the person with the difference has work to do to be accepted.

Whether we like it or not, when we are comfortable in our surroundings and the people we work with, we don't like to muddle it up with things that we are not comfortable with. That discomfort can come from many places, such as lack of experience or exposure, stereotypes we don't even realize we have, or even our own insecurities with potentially being misunderstood. Teams that have worked together for a long time develop a bond, and that bond can create territorial behaviors if someone comes in that may change the dynamics. Even worse, those on the receiving end of these exclusionary behaviors can be subject to victimizing again if they voice their concern and it is turned around, making it an issue about them. If you are not careful, this can become bullying, and over time these instances of exclusion can manifest into trauma for the excluded employee. The result is that the employee shuts down and eventually leaves the company altogether, quietly or with some legal recourse.

To be fair, none of us wakes up in the morning with the intention of excluding others. But whether intended or not, it can happen. In a recent discussion I had with some colleagues about businesses opening back up, we talked about the very real issue that there are some diverse employees who do not want to leave the virtual work environment. The reason is that while they have been at home, it has been safe for them. They have not had to deal with the constant biases and microaggressions that come with being in the office—the constant daily slights that people of diverse backgrounds deal with on a regular basis from well-meaning and not-so-well-meaning colleagues.

The conversation was interesting because we discovered that all of us, coming from different vocations, had experienced similar behaviors from our colleagues and co-workers over our long careers in leadership. My friend accurately described it as being in an abusive marriage. You don't want to keep coming back, but you have to because you need to make a living. And no matter where you go, it just doesn't seem to be any different. Imagine that any employee in your company may feel this way, that working for you is like being in an abusive relationship they cannot escape. I don't believe any employer wants that for their employees.

So what can you do about it? Take it all seriously. If you are committed to a DEI strategy for your company, then *commit*. It is not just about training—it's about committing to behavior change and being willing to understand, willing to make mistakes and, more important, willing to be comfortable with



Belonging and the Bottom Line

- ▶ **40%** of people say they feel isolated at work.
- ▶ Job performance increased by **56%** for workers that have a high sense of belonging.
- ▶ The risk of turnover decreased by **50%**.
- ▶ Sick days were reduced by **75%**.
- ▶ In a company of **10,000 employees**, this could result in an annual savings of more than **\$52 million**.

Source: *Harvard Business Review*, BetterUp study

being uncomfortable. We have to start somewhere, and the only way to make a difference is to commit. Not just in the dollars but to the shift in mindset.

BELONGING AND THE BOTTOM LINE

Why do you want to put this much effort into fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion at your company? Because it will ultimately affect your bottom line. Organizations that are not inclusive are at risk of not achieving their goals and/or sustaining high performance. Inclusive organizations benefit because it increases innovation, creativity, motivation and engagement, which are leading factors in high-performing companies.

Inclusion is a company's competitive edge. Companies that are more inclusive outperform their competitors that are not. Consider this: When your employees are happy, your customers are happy, which leads to greater retention

on both sides and an increase to your bottom line. The point is that belonging is a catalyst to performance in any organization. If we know this to be true, then why is this such a defining concept today?

A recent *Harvard Business Review* article highlighted a study conducted by BetterUp on loneliness and purpose. It provides some startling facts on the reality of belonging and why it is necessary for business success. Consider that 40% of people say they feel isolated at work. Despite all the understanding we may have on the "concept" of belonging, the practical application in a corporate culture is not always as evident. This study suggested some notable benefits to companies whose workers have a high sense of belonging: job performance increased by 56%, the risk of turnover decreased by 50%, and sick days were reduced by 75%. In a company of 10,000 employees, this could result in an annual savings of more than \$52 million. These statistics need to be seriously considered for the viability, longevity, and overall competitive edge a company could potentially achieve.

It is important to note that work cultures have evolved over the years, and a sense of belonging is becoming more and more a catalyst of employee retention and acquisition. The younger workforce of today is far more empowered than some of the older generations, and considering this, they have higher expectations. Ultimately employees are now recognizing the power they have over their career success by evaluating whether a company is a good fit for them. They are realizing they have a choice, which in the long run will be better for them and the company they choose to work for.

What does all this mean for companies today? It is leading to a revolution in the workplace, where valuing your workers' well-being must be a central focus. This should not be done just through "lip service"—by having some nicely constructed mission and vision statements—but must be representative of the behavior that shapes the culture that touches every employee in the company. The "check the box" mentality is no longer acceptable, and organizations that don't evolve may not be able to compete over time.

In conclusion, it is important for leaders to have a deeper understanding of what belonging is, why it is important, and what the business and human impact is on their organization. It has been my experience in working with leaders over the years that the more aware we can become, the more we can create a vision of what we want to be. Without being able to see what we could be, we will never become what we need to be. Evolution is necessary for every organization to not only survive but thrive. [AQ](#)

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