

# How to build a culture of belonging

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## Body

It's time to end the era of diversity programs. Instead, we need to shift our focus to build workplace cultures of true belonging. With the US labor pool shrinking for the first time in history and on the heels of record-high quit rates, organizations need to redouble their efforts to attract and retain talent. And as we deal with the physical and emotional scars of the ongoing pandemic, people are looking for leaders who will use this time of change to make work better.

The traditional teaching methodology of mandatory diversity training has not worked in the past. However, we have an opportunity to re-imagine our organizations to be more fair, compassionate and innovative. We have decades of research into organizational behavior, psychology, neuroscience and human motivation on our side. But in practice, there are still traps that hold back diversity, inclusion and belonging efforts from succeeding. These are four ways to build a culture of belonging.

### Aim for belonging before diversity

As individuals, we don't experience diversity; we experience a sense of belonging. We experience different dimensions and intersections of our identities, and when we don't feel like we belong, we are more likely to have antisocial behaviors and eventually tire of our work. A recent BetterUp Labs report on inclusive leadership shares insights based on 10,000+ members engaged in virtual coaching to understand how people are navigating their organizations and their lives. The findings showed that the pandemic amplified needs for belonging, which is at an all-time low. We have also found that employees with low belonging are 34% lower on intentions to stay.

But when we feel valued by those around us, we are able to take risks, look out for others and pursue mastering our craft. Building an authentic culture where all people feel like they belong is the foundation companies need to build in order to reap the benefits of diversity. Diversity refers often to representation of different cultures, ethnicities, religions and gender. While there are still gaps in representation across the workforce, the end goal is to build enduring organizations that will attract, retain and benefit from the largest possible pool of talent. Without belonging, that will be impossible. BetterUp Labs has found that employees who feel excluded experience 25% loss in performance and are 50% greater risk of turnover. We've also found that employees with higher levels of belonging show a 56% increase in job performance and a 75% reduction in sick days.

Employees are highly attuned to the organizational norms, culture and expectations. If leaders, managers and peers are not consistently making an effort to shape an inclusive environment, cynicism can take root. To foster belonging, organizations can create opportunities for connection, conversation and learning.

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Mid-level managers, who typically lead two-thirds of an organization, have a disproportionate influence on the organization's culture. If managers aren't creating an inclusive culture or don't have the tools and support to unpack their own unconscious biases, then attempts at positive culture change will likely fall flat. By shaping the day-to-day experience of individuals, people managers act as agents of change for the entire organization. In fact, BetterUp has found that when direct reports view their manager as inclusive, their global perceptions of how much the organization supports them improves by 20%. Not surprisingly, when employees feel supported, they are 3.4 times more likely to have high job satisfaction, 2.7 times more likely to have high organizational commitment, 2.1 times more likely to be high in stress management, and 1.9 times more likely to be highly engaged.

Listen closely to employees

Many organizations run directly to solve the problem before taking the time to listen. Understand that people have many dimensions of identity, which creates a lot of variance in how they experience work and what they value. Mass programs that address a narrow need or topic are likely to fail. As an example, BetterUp Labs has found that racial and ethnic minorities in particular are 1.6 times more likely to experience low belonging in the workplace, but when they're part of teams with high psychological safety, they report higher levels of connection and intent to stay. We also know that women are more likely to feel the strain of additional home responsibilities such as childcare. Our research found that women are leaning into career issues with coaching, as they explore topics like re-thinking the role of their work and career.

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Parents also need more support than ever. For parents, the most frequently discussed topics in coaching are stress management and self-care. A narrow program for women in leadership, for example, is likely to have little impact if it does not address the connections that make the issue complex to solve. Most of your under-represented employees are not looking for an instant solution, but they are looking for understanding and partnership in addressing issues that have existed in our communities and workplaces for generations. Organizations can ensure that their executive team is engaged in listening to employees, particularly under-represented or vulnerable populations. Encourage forums for open conversations, sharing personal experiences and ideas to make the organization stronger.

Create and communicate the "Big Why"

Can employees make the connection of why diversity, inclusion and belonging matters for the mission of their organization? That connection must be explicit, important and compelling to bring it to life as part of the flow of work. Organizations often cite the business case for diversity and inclusion because it is very compelling. However the human impact is just as important as the business case. People react and remember stories. We need a clear story of why this matters and what it looks like when we get there. This can be achieved through story visioning exercises by leadership and different groups in the organization. It is important that the why connects with the impact of the organization - the mission, customers, products - in a way that lasts and directly contributes to the success of the mission. With a strong why, the clarity and repetition needed to make diversity, inclusion, and belonging a core part of the way of operating can be possible.

Coach rather than tell

Organizations will often find the latest content on diversity, whether it be microaggressions, unconscious bias or anti-racism among popular concepts, and quickly package and send to employees through online training modules. The problem is that many employees are left feeling like they were told what to do, but may not have the skill it takes to practice it at work. For some, it may even create fear of saying the wrong thing, or worse, being perceived as racist or hateful. The idea of improving our ability to help others belong is something that we must learn through ongoing learning, reflection, and practice.

And that is just what is missing - being coached, rather than told what to do or not to do.

## Classification

### Industry:

Psychology (74%)

### Subject:

Associations & Organizations (90%), Corporate Culture (90%), Labor & Employment (90%), Workplace Diversity & Inclusion (90%), Diversity & Inclusion (89%), Labor Force (89%), Human Resources (78%), Middle Management (76%), Psychology (74%), Race & Ethnicity (73%), Emotions (71%), Religion (50%)

**Load Date:** Mar 01, 2022 10:27