

CHAPTER 5

Belonging

AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT of building trust is creating an environment where everyone can feel that they belong. If we feel devalued or excluded in our work environment, it is hard to trust the people around us.

Creating a sense of belonging isn't just about doing the right thing. Creating an environment where people feel like they belong is also good for business. The research is clear that when people with different voices, perspectives, and backgrounds have a seat and a voice at the table, performance improves.¹ This is becoming more important than ever in the battle for talent. New job reports on what workers are looking for at work show that people are choosing work environments that they believe support inclusion and belonging.^{2,3}

In our own research on caregivers, a sense of belonging was associated with better overall well-being and an intention to stay in the organization and promote it to others. Fostering a sense of belonging is not just about creating a great environment for current caregivers but also about attracting, hiring, and retaining the best talent in the industry to be a part of your organization or team. It is also about keeping them well and able to give their best to patients and to one another.

Not belonging can be very lonely, and we spend too much time at work to feel lonely there. Loneliness has a profound effect on

physical health and mental well-being. A large study found that chronic loneliness has a similar effect on your health and longevity as smoking about 15 cigarettes per day.⁴⁵ We are not encouraging you to pick up a new smoking habit. But what this research tells us is that it would essentially be healthier to find a friend and smoke 14 cigarettes a day together than to be chronically lonely.

We don't want to create organizations where everybody feels like they must look and act the same way to belong. We want to create organizations where our shared values are lived out and protected so that everyone can belong as long as we have those values in common. Some organizations do a really good job of communicating these shared values and even screening for adoption of them during the hiring process. That gives us a greater chance of having people in our organizations and teams who can unite around common ideals. In healthcare, we have a great advantage that many of us are in the industry because we want to bring healing and health to patients, whether we work in the supply chain or at the bedside.

ELEMENTS OF BELONGING

The research literature suggests that several key elements contribute to a sense of belonging.

- **Competencies:** This is a person's ability to engage in behaviors that foster social connection. An employee who lacks these skills may benefit from coaching and development. These behaviors include understanding social cues, emotional regulation, and an ability to engage in conversation with others.
- **Opportunities to belong:** This is the availability of people, time, and places for employees to connect. These opportunities may include gathering in a physical office location or planning regular meetings or events at which people can connect. Employers may also create affinity

groups that like-minded individuals can use to connect within the organization.

- **Motivation:** This is a person's intrinsic desire to belong and connect with others. Most people have at least some motivation to belong at work, though the extent of the need varies.⁶
- **Perceptions:** Even if a person has the skills, opportunities, and motivation to belong, they can still have a perception that they just don't fit in. This can be heavily influenced by past experiences or by the biases and actions of others.

IN-GROUPS AND OUT-GROUPS

It is also important to note that we can't feel that we belong if we also feel "less-than" or "other" because of some element of our personal history, experiences, background, appearance, or social standing. Unfortunately, this often happens in reality (more on this in chapter 8).

Humans tend to think highly of ourselves, so we often want to hire and promote a bunch of people just like us. Our tendency is for "birds of a feather to flock together." One problem is that homogeneous teams typically underperform on most tasks compared to diverse teams, though sometimes the decision-making processes on diverse teams come with more conflict. The degree of improved performance is influenced by whether the team's diversity is managed well. When a new person joins an organization or team, they tend to be categorized into the "in-group" or the "out-group."^{7,8} This usually happens subconsciously.

In-group selection may include people who graduated from a certain school, look a certain way, or even view work similarly (e.g., "In *our* department we work hard and play hard!"). It could be based on gender, parental status, wardrobe, the football team you root for, or whether you initiate a hangout after work. These in-group members typically get more engagement, more mentoring

and coaching from the leaders, and more opportunities for growth and high-profile exposures. There is a pretty good chance you view somebody as part of the in-group if you think, “That person really looks like a leader” or “We need to hire more people like them.”

The out-group is usually characterized by “not really fitting in here.” This categorization usually happens quickly and unconsciously and often has less to do with competence than with external characteristics and the preferences of the leader. This is a big problem, because the in-group usually outperforms the out-group as a result of the extra support they get. Once somebody is categorized into the out-group, they get fewer resources and their performance suffers, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy. This arrangement makes a big difference in terms of the relational connections needed for success.

BELONGING AT THE CENTER

A sense of belonging is central to all other conditions needed for employees to flourish and for organizations to maximize the human margin. Belonging and engagement go hand in hand.

A sense of belonging is a powerful intrinsic motivator. *Intrinsic* describes a characteristic that is essential to something’s nature. When we are intrinsically motivated, we don’t do things to be recognized for the action. We participate because of the emotions it brings us: joy, fulfillment, and a sense of purpose. We do it because we think, “I belong here.” Intrinsic motivation drives us to achieve self-awareness and self-improvement. It is the internal emotion that adds to our emotional bank account. *Extrinsic* motivators are rewards that come not from within but from outside ourselves. These can be compensation, promotions, awards, and so forth. There is nothing wrong with extrinsic motivators, but building a sense of belonging will get more results over the long term than extrinsic rewards alone.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO GIVE PEOPLE A SENSE OF BELONGING?

Entire books have been written on belonging. It is a complex subject. It is helpful to stay away from words like “simple” and “easy” as well as terms like “little things.” If creating a culture of belonging with all its accompanying benefits were simple or easy, this book would not be needed. And in leadership there are no little things. Everything we do or say has an impact.

- **Get intentional.** First, understand that creating a sense of belonging doesn’t just happen. When we get intentional about creating it, we can see the endless opportunities to make people feel like they are part of the team.
- **Focus on mission, vision, and values.** It may also help to do a deep dive into your organization’s mission, vision, and values. It is more likely that by focusing on these shared values, you can bring a diverse team together around these values and create a deeper sense of belonging. It is also important for making sure that new hires into the organization align with your values. By screening new employees for values alignment on the way in, you maximize the chance that they will be able to experience a sense of belonging. It’s vital that the new hire gets a feel for your culture early on. This will help them fit in more quickly so they can experience that crucial sense of belonging that makes them want to stay and sets them up to succeed long-term.
- **Start early.** In fact, it is important to start building belonging well before the employee is hired and starts the job: during the interview process, during preboarding (that window between accepting the job and officially starting work), and during onboarding, which is the time frame when people feel most vulnerable.

We can build belonging by involving potential coworkers in the selection process. This actually creates a sense of belonging for both parties. The applicant gets to know their future coworkers, and the coworkers get input into selection. A cautionary note is to be mindful of the tendency to select those who remind us of ourselves.

We now know that accepting a job and showing up for it are two different actions. The earlier we can create that sense of belonging, the more likely a new hire is to follow through. Even after the job has been accepted, we still need to “court” the candidate.

Consider the following example from TriHealth in Cincinnati, Ohio. Department director Joi Lindlau keeps in touch with every new hire before they even start the job. A few days before the actual start date, the new hire receives a message from her. It shows which parking lot to park in (during the interview process the person parks in a different spot, and TriHealth has a big campus) and which entrance to use. She even includes a photo of the door they will enter. Joi includes a reminder to the new hire to wear their name badge and assures them that she will meet them at the door on the first day. This is a good way to stay connected with the new hire. It shows caring and reduces anxiety.

There are other ways to create belonging during the preboarding session. For example, you might send a welcome video from the team. Employees often question whether they have made the right decision when selecting an employer. Let them know that they have indeed made the right decision and are in the right place.

A new hire will be comparing their “insides” (how they feel) with the “outsides” (how other people appear) of more experienced employees. This creates that “less-than” feeling and generates thoughts such as “I don’t belong.” The excitement of a new job can diminish quickly. There’s a new boss and new teammates. There can also be different technology, different processes, and so

forth. Tasks take longer to achieve, and the individual feels they are not making it.

Another effective way to address this feeling is to have the more experienced staff meet with the new hire to share how they felt those first days. Many organizations commingle employees who are new to their roles and the organization with experienced people who are only new to the organization. For example, during nurse orientation, new graduates and experienced nurses who are just new to the organization attend the same general nurse orientation. For experienced nurses, the challenge is to show interest in items that may be very routine. New graduates will be cautious to speak up and may be intimidated by the experienced nurses. Some of the experienced nurses may have forgotten how they felt as new grads.

Here is a solution that helps everyone. At the beginning of the session, ask each experienced nurse to share how they felt when they started their first job. You will feel the mood in the room shift. It brings the experienced nurses back to their start. Brand-new grads think, “You felt like this too, and look how well you have done!” Connections will be built. It creates belonging.

That is just one example of how you can take straightforward action to foster a sense of belonging among your team members. Other strategies include the following:

- **Say it.** Tell your people that they belong on the team. You might say, “I am so glad you are here. You are just what our team needs” or “I love the creativity you bring to this team.”
- **Get intentional about building relationships with employees.** Get to know them by showing an interest in both their personal lives and their professional growth.
- **Encourage open communication.** The heart of belonging centers around being heard, understood, and valued. By creating an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing their ideas and concerns, leaders can demonstrate that they value their employees’ input and engagement.

- **Be an accessible leader.** Sometimes rigid structures get in the way of people feeling that they can come to you. Break down these barriers by letting them know that your door is always open and that you are willing to hear hard things.
- **Make sure employees understand what training and development will look like.** New hires (and especially young people) want to be assured that they'll grow and progress in your company. Let them know up-front that you take this seriously. Inform them that you'll create an individualized development plan for each employee and review it no less frequently than every month. When you tell employees up-front that you plan to invest in them, it not only relieves anxiety but also helps them feel cared for. That's an important part of belonging.
- **Provide frequent (and early) feedback and coaching.** This relieves anxiety and lets employees know how they are doing. It also lets them know you are invested in them and that they are important parts of the team.
- **Be on the lookout for biases.** Because we tend to gravitate toward people like ourselves, it is easy to develop blind spots and biases in how we treat and include others. Be watchful for the formation of in-groups. What unspoken features tend to give somebody a better chance of being in an in-group? Be proactive in giving everyone support, attention, and the chance to be included and succeed.
- **Personalize your approach.** Understand that belonging is different for everybody.

While activities like these help, let's not guess on belonging. Think of the *precision medicine* approach to care, where we provide a treatment plan based on the individual. Marcia Horn, president and CEO of the International Cancer Advocacy Network, a not-for-profit organization that assists people with cancer, lets each person know that they are an individual. No two people are alike. She calls

the approach $N = 1$ to signify that in statistical terms, everyone is an N of 1. We can adapt this mindset by creating conditions that make each person feel they belong. There will be consistency in many areas; however, by asking each person what is important to them, we help create the feeling that “this is the place for me.”

A SURPRISING WAY TO MAKE A CONNECTION: ASK SOMEBODY FOR A FAVOR

An important part of belonging is being asked to help. People in healthcare are natural problem solvers. There is magic in the question “What do you think?” It shows respect, demonstrates listening, and lets people know that you trust them. A big win is that this question provides an opportunity for open and honest feedback and conversation. This is a hard one for some leaders because of their empathy for their team. They think, “How can I ask them to do one more thing when they are so busy?” However, engaged people want the organization to do well. They become more engaged by being asked for their thoughts.

Years ago, a facilitator shared what she does if someone at an event asks a question she’s not sure how to answer. After all, she is seen as the expert. She said that she asks the group what *they* think. The answer that comes back is better than hers would have been. Take every opportunity to ask, “What do you think we should do?”

Communication is addressed throughout this book. In a recent study that Healthcare Plus Solutions Group, LLC, funded about models of care, themes emerged around communication, which connects to belonging.⁹ We found a critical gap between how leaders view solutions and how frontline workers view them. The big reason for the gap is that the front line are not brought into the conversation soon enough.

People want to have input into decisions that affect their work. When we give them a chance to weigh in, they feel a sense of ownership, which supports belonging. When Houston Methodist

designed a new outpatient center building, they prioritized employee belonging and patient experience. They invited employees to help name the patient rooms. The majority of the artwork on the walls was created by employees. Houston Methodist even reserved the 23rd floor, with the best view in the organization, for an employee gym to send the message, “This is your building. You belong here, and we saved the best for you.”

FOSTERING GOOD COWORKER RELATIONSHIPS

The importance of coworker relationships cannot be overstated. We know that having friends at work makes a big difference in how people feel about their job. The 2023 Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Workplace Romance and Relationships Survey found that US employees who have close friends at work are much more likely to say they feel a strong sense of belonging than those who don’t.¹⁰ The survey also suggested that having close friends at work improves retention. Here are some strategies leaders can use to help foster relationships and belonging on their teams.

Create a culture of accountability. While it’s not possible to force friendships, leaders can do a lot to encourage strong, positive coworker relationships. One tactic is to create a culture of accountability. When people are held accountable for meeting deadlines, completing assignments, and fulfilling their obligations to the team, there will be less dissension and more harmony between coworkers. People won’t resent coworkers for “coasting” or requiring others to pick up their slack. This culture also includes accountability for hurtful behaviors. People will struggle to belong if gossip, aggression, belittling, or other unprofessional behaviors of other team members are tolerated by the leader.

Establish group norms and make them explicit. Take steps to ensure that people treat others with fairness and respect. A Standards of Behavior document that explains what’s acceptable and

unacceptable is a powerful tool. The idea is to spell out what “right” looks like—avoid gossip, knock on doors rather than barging in, smile and say good morning, etc.—and have people sign the document. This keeps people aware of their behavior and paves the way for positive interactions between coworkers.

Celebrate together. Finally, the more that employees spend time together and get to know each other as people (not just workers), the closer they will become. The idea is to create a sense of community. This can include team-building activities, social events, or volunteer opportunities. Look for ways to bring people together. A great way to do this is to celebrate employees’ personal milestones, such as a marriage, a new home, or a new baby. Birthdays matter too. All of these celebrations strengthen coworker bonds and make friendships more likely to develop. Be mindful that activities outside of working hours may be perceived differently by employees with heavy family or caregiving obligations.

Foster psychological safety. It is important to make sure there is a high degree of psychological safety in the workplace. This is a critical factor in helping employees feel that they belong. When people know they can tell the truth without negative reactions from leaders and team members, they won’t bottle things up and distance themselves. When ideas are shared, be sure to give them a chance to be explored rather than shutting down the discussion. Employees will feel free to express themselves, voice their opinions, and take the kinds of risks we want them to take—the kinds that lead to collaboration, innovation, and meaningful work. All of this is needed for employees to flourish.

Belonging is vital for retention, but the benefits are so much more than that. When a person feels that they belong in their workplace, their willingness to offer ideas on how to improve operations is elevated. They are more likely to share their thoughts in an open and honest fashion. They will take more risks (in a good way) because they feel they are in this for the long haul. They represent the organization in a positive way, both inside and outside the workplace. Bottom line: belonging is good for our people and good for business.

By prioritizing belonging, we can help each person feel, “This is the place for me. I would not want to be anywhere else.”

REFERENCES

1. McKinsey & Company. 2020. “Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters.” Published May 19. <http://mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters>.
2. Lean In. 2022. “Women in the Workplace: Key Findings 2022.” McKinsey & Company. <http://leanin.org/women-in-the-workplace/2022>.
3. De Smet, A., B. Dowling, B. Hancock, and B. Schaninger. 2022. “The Great Attrition Is Making Hiring Harder. Are You Searching the Right Talent Pools?” *McKinsey Quarterly*. Published July. <http://mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/business%20of%20functions/people%20and%20organizational%20performance/our%20insights/the%20great%20attrition%20is%20making%20hiring%20harder%20are%20you%20searching%20the%20right%20talent%20pools/the-great-attrition-is-making-hiring-harder-vf.pdf>.
4. Cigna. 2020. “Loneliness and the Impact.” Published January. <https://cigna.com/static/www-cigna-com/docs/health-care-providers/resources/loneliness-index-provider-flyer.pdf>.
5. Holt-Lunstad, J., T. B. Smith, M. Baker, T. Harris, and D. Stephenson. 2015. “Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-analytic Review.” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10(2): 227–37.
6. Allen, K.-A., M. L. Kern, C. S. Rozek, D. McInerney, and G. M. Slavich. 2021. “Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research.” *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73(1): 87–102.

7. Dansereau Jr., F., G. Graen, and W. J. Haga. 1975. "A Vertical Dyad Linkage Approach to Leadership Within Formal Organizations: A Longitudinal Investigation of the Role Making Process." *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 13(1): 46–78.
8. Tajfel, H., and J. Turner. 1979. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In M. J. Hatch and M. Schultz (eds.), *Organizational Identity: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
9. Joslin Insight. 2023. *Models of Care: Insight Study*. Published March 23. <http://healthcareplussg.com/models-of-care-insight-study-results>.
10. Navarra, K. 2023. "Workplace Romances Can Be Tricky, but Friendships Boost Retention." SHRM Research Institute. Published February 7. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/workplace-romances-can-be-tricky-but-friendships-boost-retention.aspx>.