BETA

Belonging In The Workplace: A New Approach to Diversity And Inclusivity

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As we make the case for diversity and inclusion in the workplace, it is important to consider that people experience the same context

and situation in different ways depending on their own background, culture, and so on. However, one thing remains consistent in positive workplace culture, and that is the sense of belonging.

Baumeister and Leary define belonging as "the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group or place, and as the basic fundamental drive to form and maintain lasting, positive, and significant relationships with others." People are motivated by an inherent desire to form inter-personal links and connections. But many diversity initiatives do not have the necessary impact.

My work with organizations of different sizes and in different industries has consistently shown that it is tricky to impose a template of diversity initiatives, and sometimes these can result in a backlash. I have always maintained that if we work towards creating a positive workplace culture, and focus on a sense of well-being and belonging for all, it is much easier to create an inclusive workplace.

It is crucial to assert that when I talk about a sense of belonging, I am not talking about a culture of "best fit." In fact, completely the opposite. Here, the intention is not to focus on trying to hire people who will fit into workplace culture, or support the employee in fitting into existing workplace culture at the cost of their own identity. This will have a completely opposite effect.

The idea is not to ignore differences but to normalize how we discuss and talk about them. The idea is that everyone is different, and they are equal. My research shows that people who feel they belong perform better, become more willing to challenge themselves, and are more resilient.

One way that a sense of belonging can be nurtured is by creating a stronger sense of community. In a related post, I have talked about the value of kindness, generosity, and gratitude in the workplace. A sense of community can also be nurtured by regular interactions and collaboration. We tend to stereotype people less and are less fearful of difference when we are more familiar with them or spend more time with them. Nahemow and Lawton show in their research that proximity and personal interactions contribute greatly to creating social bonds. In digital and remote working environments, we have to consider how we can enable this because it is also an important aspect of inclusivity that people are able to work in a way that suits them best. It will take some creativity, but it isn't impossible to find ways in which such proximal social interactions can be enabled to foster social bonds.

Having an intention to create a diverse workplace is important. But it is not enough. More important is to consider if there is true inclusivity. Do all employees, from all groups, have equal representation and voice? Walton, Murphy and Ryan, for instance, provide an excellent example of how implicit seclusion and isolation can occur, such as "walls lined with photos of senior executives that exclude women and people of color may cause members of underrepresented groups to doubt their prospects."

Research has shown that creating a safe, non-judgemental space for people to share their personal stories can create empathy and also a

sense of belonging. Cohen and Walton created belonging intervention experiments that showed the power of openness and narrative. Implicit stigmatization and microaggressions can create a toxic workplace, and give rise to belonging uncertainty. Storytelling has been shown to be an extremely effective way of authentic leadership and creating an inclusive style of communication. It can also be used very effectively to share vision and goals. Companies such as Facebook, Google and Airbnb do this well by bringing their employees together at large annual conferences, and creating a sense of shared vision.

To create a sense of belonging, firstly and most importantly, a sense of trust has to be established. Trust in the company's mission, and trust in the leadership's vision and goals. Once this is established, and every employee feels that they are an integral part of the organization, irrespective of their differences and background, it would lead to a strong sense of belonging, and identity with the organization. And, this will lead to positive and more inclusive workplace culture.

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Award-winning author of 'SWAY: Unravelling Unconscious Bias', behavioural scientist and two-time TEDx speaker, and founder of a research think-tank '50 Percent Project'. I... **Read More**

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