



6 Ways to Foster Belonging in the Workplace

Taking Diversity & Inclusion
to the Next Level

A Culture Amp ebook

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Introduction

In an effort to better understand how people think about diversity and inclusion within their workplaces, [Culture Amp](#) and [Paradigm](#) built the first Inclusion Survey for the tech industry. We surveyed over 7,000 individuals from 35 organizations covering topics like fairness, voice, opportunities, purpose and decision making.

We discovered many of the anecdotal evidence and narratives surrounding diversity and inclusion ring true; namely, that people from different demographics experience the workplace differently. But moreover, we found a single metric that was consistently and universally tied to a person's workplace commitment, motivation, pride and recommendation — a sense of belonging.

We found this to be true regardless of a person's gender, ethnicity, age group or sexual orientation. Moreover, the correlation between belonging and engagement was markedly stronger for historically underrepresented groups. While diversity and inclusion are important metrics in their own right, there is evidence to suggest that a focus on belonging can most helpfully frame inclusion initiatives in the workplace.

Belonging

Belonging is 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. It's the basic fundamental drive to form and maintain lasting, positive, and significant relationships with others [1]. At the workplace, these relationships can be extended to the organization and its values [2] and to the work itself.

Why should we focus on belonging?

Recent research [3] identifies that some traditional diversity programs don't have the intended impact. Iris Bohnet, Harvard professor and leading authority on gender equality in the workplace, says bias training can often highlight differences and make them more salient, or worse, spark backlash. [4]

At [key technology companies](#), there has been no progress (or negligible gains) in meeting employee diversity targets, suggesting a revolving door where diverse hires are made, but not retained; or not hired at all.

In our [Diversity, Inclusion and Intersectionality Report 2018](#) research we found that belonging has a strong correlation to commitment and motivation at the workplace, directly translating to employee retention, pride, and motivation. Engaged employees are often eager to recommend their organization as a great place to work to their peer group. But above all, a sense of belonging has particularly higher correlations to engagement for those who have been historically underrepresented or felt left out, suggesting that initiatives centered around cultivating a sense of overall belonging may have greater impact on improving workplace engagement.

What's employee engagement?

At [Culture Amp](#), we define employee engagement as *the level of connection, motivation and commitment a person feels for the place they work.*

We look at five factors to understand employee engagement: present commitment; future commitment; recommendation of the employer; pride in working for the employer; and how motivated a person feels about their work.

As part of the diversity and inclusion survey we ask questions about these key factors, so we can understand how the experiences of people from specific demographics impact on employee engagement.

What does belonging look like in practice?

What makes one person feel that they belong at a workplace can be different from their colleagues, depending on whether one or the other is from an underrepresented group, which group they are from, and a myriad of other personal traits. However, there is significant evidence (outside the workplace) that setting the scene for belonging can impact whether or not a person feels they belong, and even how successful they are. It's these studies that we believe will shape new initiatives to create workplaces where people from both majority and underrepresented groups feel at home.

Research by [Cohen and Walton \(2007\)](#) [5] shows that it can be productive to normalize concerns about belonging. The researchers demonstrated to students that concerns about belonging are normal, and that they can lessen with time. This intervention improved the grade point averages of participating black students, who were subsequently willing to take on more academically challenging courses and had more confidence in their own academic potential. This intervention also showed promise of buffering students against future hardship.

In 2015, a follow-up study [6] implemented a 60-minute intervention for women in highly male-dominated engineering programs. This intervention emphasized hardships that the genders shared, and incorporated aspects of self-identity that went beyond education and gender. The program created a sense of belonging and actually eliminated gender differences in university grade point averages.

Normalization of concern is not to be confused with a denial of difference. In fact, the normalization of concern can be complemented by the acknowledgement of differences.

Research published across 2014 [7] and 2015 [8] by Stephens, Hamedani and Destin showed how a difference education program could enhance outcomes. The researchers hosted a panel discussion that explored students' diverse social-class backgrounds and how they affected college experiences. They found that the program reduced the gap in grade point averages between students who were the first generation in their family to attend college and their continuing-generation peers.

People who feel they belong perform better, become more willing to challenge themselves, and are more resilient. The implications are powerful, and these approaches suggest the act of emphasizing / actions that emphasize people belong at the organization needn't necessarily be complex.

Six approaches you can use to help people feel they belong

We are only scratching the surface in terms of understanding how belonging affects people at work, but we see immense promise in incorporating belonging as a part of any diversity and inclusion strategy. While research has been done predominantly in academic settings, we believe the findings are no less applicable to the workplace. With that in mind, we've put together a list of six ways to build and foster belonging at your workplace.

- 1 Know how you're tracking
- 2 Social bonds
- 3 Trusting relationships
- 4 Be intentional about inclusion
- 5 Bring belonging out into the open
- 6 A shared vision makes all the difference

1. Know how you're tracking

Collecting information about engagement at your organization using an [Employee Engagement survey](#) will allow you to identify strengths and areas for improvement across the organization. You'll also be able to take a look at engagement across demographic groups. Once you have an idea of overall engagement, you might choose to launch a survey focused specifically on diversity and inclusion. The [Culture Amp and Paradigm Inclusion Survey](#) will highlight areas for focus, including whether or not people feel they belong. You'll also learn what's important to each underrepresented group. With this information on hand, you'll be able to take action and measure progress.

Want to find out more about our diversity and inclusion survey?

[Learn more here >](#)

2. Social bonds

Bringing people together can provide an environment where people feel they belong. As suggested in several studies (including [Nahemow & Lawton 1975 \[9\]](#)) proximity and personal interactions contribute greatly to creating social bonds. [Wilder and Thompson \[10\]](#) found that people seemed to form favorable views towards people with whom they spent time, even if they were people they previously disliked or had stereotyped unfavorably.

In the workplace, you might want to explore opportunities to create social bonds through:

- how teams are structured;
- how groups can be brought together to solve specific problems outside their day-to-day work;
- how offices are designed to create opportunities for social interactions;
- how and where remote teams are brought together to build social bonds.

Connecting with Coworkers

[Culture Amp](#) and many other organizations use a Slackbot called Donut to match people across the business to get to know each other over a coffee and a donut.

[Read more about how Culture Amp uses Donut here >](#)

3. Trusting relationships

Developing belonging should not only happen amongst peer groups. Those who have a trusting relationship with a mentor (or manager) are better able to take advantage of critical feedback and other opportunities to learn [11]. The benefits of these trusting relationships are often greater amongst people from stigmatized groups.

In the workplace, you can facilitate trusting mentor relationships by:

- having a formal or informal mentor program;
- coaching mentors and managers on how to get the best out of 1:1 meetings;
- encouraging mentors and managers to discuss engagement survey results with their teams.

Pinterest focus on inclusion

[Paradigm](#) worked with Pinterest to design an inclusive approach to management. They used employee engagement survey results to understand how managers were performing in areas that impacted people feeling included, then interviewed a range of managers to identify the habits of exceptionally inclusive managers. In addition to making time for connecting through social activities, they found successful managers lead by example.

[Read more about what Pinterest and Paradigm learnt here >](#)

4. Be intentional about inclusion

Unless people consciously try to be inclusive, exclusion can occur by accident. Even unintentional ambient cues can undermine people's sense of belonging. For example, Walton, Murphy and Ryan point out that 'Walls lined with photos of senior executives that exclude women and people of color may cause members of underrepresented groups to doubt their prospects.' [12]

Now and again, check in and ask yourself, "Am I making others feel they belong where we are?" Being mindful of our own actions can influence how others perceive their sense of belonging.

Actively including people goes beyond just inviting them to meetings. Consider how you can ensure everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

A few approaches to consider are:

- Ask for initial input on a project via a shared document rather than in a group meeting;
- If a group meeting is the best way to collaborate, set aside a few minutes for all participants to put their ideas on post-it notes and have each participant stand up and put their ideas on a board, grouping them as they go;
- Be clear about how decisions will be made and don't make decisions 'offline' with a select few team members.

5. Bring belonging out into the open

The belonging intervention experiments by Cohen and Walton [5, 6] are an important reminder of the power of openness and narrative. Hearing frank and positive stories from all job levels can powerfully influence people's sense of belonging. Understanding another person's story – the broader aspects of their life, such as hobbies or outside interests, concerns or hardships – can dissolve interpersonal barriers. Recognizing the universality of certain experiences can dispel the limitations that people often impose on themselves.

There are many ways to encourage the sharing of personal stories in the workplace.

- 'How might we' sessions – focused on your organization's values – can prompt people to share stories of how they have felt when someone's behavior has been aligned with (or not aligned with) company values. Focusing on such experiences builds empathy. Being vulnerable in sharing experiences can solidify a feeling of belonging;
- Retell stories at the executive level. Some of the world's most successful leaders take stories that people within the organization have shared, and retell them again and again. This is an authentic and effective way to highlight the importance of belonging – especially because it's anchored in real experiences owned by employees;
- Storytelling has been shown to be a fitting communication method for creating an environment where people feel they belong. To harness this, it is increasingly popular to train leaders on effective storytelling.

6. A shared vision makes all the difference

Shared purpose, values, and goals can significantly contribute to a person's feeling of belonging. People feel a sense of belonging when they believe the work they do is significant. Having a vision and goals for your organization is the first step. Communicating your vision in a way that motivates people is the next.

It's important to remind ourselves that our vision isn't just a nice statement to hang on the wall. You could focus on:

- Regularly revisiting your purpose and values to ensure they reflect your organization and where you're going;
- Helping leaders understand why the vision, goals and values are important. Your organization will be more successful when they 'walk the talk';
- Making time to help employees design and/or understand how they contribute.

One Airbnb

Airbnb's all-company conference 'One Airbnb' brings together employees from all over the world in San Francisco. The four-day conference agenda includes:

Day One: Strategy and vision for the year, and a bit of getting to know the founders (looking back and forward).

Day Two: Unpacking the Culture Amp engagement survey to talk about where Airbnb did well and what they didn't do well in.

Day Three: A day of learning, with about 40 foundational courses to choose from, such as courses themed around giving better presentations and project management.

Day Four: 'Air Fair' where people from different parts of the company set up a booth to share what it is that they do and answer questions.

[Read more about Airbnb's approach here >](#)



Understanding diversity and inclusion at your organization

Whether you've been measuring engagement for many years or are just starting out, we'd love to chat about how we can help you collect, understand and act on feedback to enhance your workplace for everyone. If diversity, inclusion and belonging is a focus for you, our unique survey and powerful insights can set you on the right track to shape and measure effective initiatives.

[Learn more](#)

cultureamp.com/diversity-inclusion

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