



A Sense of Belonging



I recently read an article by Danny Langloss in which he talks about “The Seven Pillars of Ownership.” Starting with Psychological Safety, which I’ve discussed in the past, and Purpose, which we just spent the last month on, he talks about “Belonging.” He describes it as feeling seen, heard, valued, accepted, cared for, supported, and appreciated.

Most understand what each word means as we read the above list of descriptors. Yet, why do many programs struggle with creating a culture of belongingness, and what can we do about it?



Well, here are some common barriers:

- Top-down initiatives with little to no input from staff who are expected to implement them.
- Diversity without inclusiveness – there may be different ethnicities, but groups “stick to their own kind” and don’t co-mingle.
- Staff are not acknowledged regularly for the work they do.
- Daily schedules are set up in a way that minimizes time to connect with one another.

And while I’m sure you can add more to the list above, what does that leave us with?

Staff who possibly...

- Express frustration or discontent regularly
- Decrease their participation
- Decline in their overall work or productivity
- Communicate less and less over time
- Engage less and less over time
- Self-isolate



So, why is "belonging" so important?

A 2019 study by BetterUp found that workplace belonging can lead to an estimated 56 percent increase in job performance, a 50 percent reduction in turnover risk, and a 75 percent decrease in employee sick days. The study found that a single incidence of "micro-exclusion" (subtle or unintentional ways in which individuals or groups are discriminated against or excluded based on various factors, like race, gender, age, or disability.) can lead to an immediate 25 percent decline in an individual's performance on a team project.



Just think about it... what could your organization do if your staff's performance went up over 50%? Or if turnover went down by 50%? If sick days decreased overall?

Danny shares what he calls "drivers" to belonging. Feeling seen, heard, Valued, and cared for. So, what does this mean for us?

- Revisiting "respect". Literally discussing what respect looks like, feels like, and sounds like? Once we have these "concrete understandings" rather than assumptions (cause we know what happens when we assume!), we apply them to specific circumstances, such as how differences are handled.
- Relooking at connection. How do we build a sense of community where connections are authentic and meaningful? Where people feel they're a part of the team, not just in a team?
- Redefining contribution. This goes beyond roles and responsibilities to truly understand how one's individual efforts and talents align with and contribute to the organization's vision and mission. And just for the record... "Belonging based on
- contribution does not require people to agree on everything. Instead, it celebrates individuals' and teams' diversity of thought in ways that promote their commitment to shared outcomes, enabling them to engage in discussions considering various perspectives to reach an agreement." When teams are united by a common purpose, differences in opinion on matters unrelated to that purpose can become less relevant—and differences in opinion on how to achieve that purpose become grounds for reasonable dialogue rather than a source of divisiveness.

So, how can we consciously cultivate belongingness in the workplace? With the key word being consciously! For example, many of us have a list of tasks the employee needs to go through when onboarding, but how many of us include the following to foster a sense of belonging right away?

- **Support the new employees in making connections within the first 30 days.** This includes people within their immediate (core) team and those in the larger team. To be clear, this goes beyond giving them an organization chart (although this can also be very helpful!).
 - Take them around personally or assign a mentor or an onboarding ambassador to have lunch with them several times during the first weeks. – This is great for extroverts.
 - Ask support staff (front desk staff, maintenance, etc.) to record a short one-to-two-minute video introducing themselves, their work, and how they can support during the first weeks. – This is great for introverts.
 - Put together a small welcome packet with a greeting or welcome card that everyone signs.
- **Don't forget about existing employees.** Sometimes, long-standing employees take each other for granted. And just like any relationship, ongoing care must be intentional and planned for.
 - Take a look around your staff space. Is it bare bones, or is there a sense of welcome?
 - A comfortable chair or small couch donated by someone getting new furniture.
 - A celebration wall where people can post pictures of significant personal events.
 - Post a quote or joke of the week.
 - Provide opportunities for ongoing connections. For example, the next time you have a meeting, try one of the following:
 - Have a “greeter” welcome everyone as they come in.
 - Ask for celebrations from the week.
 - Play a quick round of “If you really knew me...” or “Would you rather ____ or ____?”





- **Honor the wisdom within.** When new initiatives, policies, and procedures come down the line, ask staff for ideas on how to implement. This will reinforce the idea of contribution and ownership.
 - To ensure various perspectives, make sure to include staff from different role groups.
 - Ask thoughtful questions such as, “From your perspective, how do you see this working”? Then genuinely listen to what each person has to say.
 - When asking employees to do surveys, explain the importance and how the data will be used. Get the results back in a timely manner and remember the “thank you”.
 - Don’t forget about succession planning. Create opportunities for different people to take on small tasks that will give their leadership skills a boost.
- **Give feedback on a regular basis.** Just like we do with children, we want to “catch our teams being good”! To celebrate or acknowledge our teams with positive descriptive feedback.
 - Acknowledge the individual efforts of those who play “team”. For example, when an individual include their teammates in decisions or agreements.
 - Acknowledge whole team efforts when you see “core” teams playing “big” team. For example, when teams work together to reach a common goal.

