WHY DIBS?

WHY BELONGING IS VITAL TO YOUR ORGANIZATION'S DIVERSITY & INCLUSION STRATEGY

Feminuity Fortay

SUMMARY

While diversity and inclusion strategies are becoming increasingly popular amongst competitive organizations today, we argue that there is a crucial missing piece: belonging.

Employees must feel socially connected and valued, as all humans have an innate need to belong.[1] Loss of social connectedness and loneliness, which have been increasing over the last couple decades, can lead to serious health issues, diminished performance and productivity,[2] lack of commitment, and an overall withdrawal from work[3] – all of which are detrimental to general well-being and the overall organizational success.

We propose that a practice of belonging must be integrated into core business strategies, as it tackles issues related to, but independent of, diversity and inclusion tactics. Incorporating a practice of belonging also opens the door to promising interventions, resulting in a variety of positive work behaviours. Overall, a more holistic and sustainable strategy is one that focuses on diversity, inclusion, and belonging, or DIBs, as we like to refer to it, first coined by Pat Wadors.[4]

---

[1] Roy F. Baumeister, and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497-529.
[2] Vivek Murthy, "Work and the Loneliness Epidemic," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2017, https://hbr.org/cover-story/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic.
[3] Hakan Ozcelik, and Sigal Barsade, "Work Loneliness and Employee Performance," *Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings* 8, no. 1 (2011): 1–6, 2011, https://faculty.wharton.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Work_Loneliness_Performance_Study.pdf.
[4] Pat Wadors, "Diversity Efforts Fall Short Unless Employees Feel That They Belong," *Harvard Business Review*, August 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/08/diversity-efforts-fall-short-unless-employees-feel-that-they-belong.

THE STRATEGY SO FAR: DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Diversity is broader than demographics. It is diversity of thoughts, experiences, and perspectives.[5] Dimensions of diversity include everything from age, to race, to gender, to sexual orientation, to where one has lived and much, much more.[6] The interpretation of diversity can also vary significantly depending on where you are in the world. Diversity is relational; in other words, an employee is not diverse, but teams, groups, and entire organizations can, and should, be diverse. Valuing these multiplicities within a team, group, or organization is what facilitates the realization of the value of diversity.

Diversity can lead to positive work behaviours, such as increased performance and creativity.[7] In one study, researchers investigated team performance when either a new "in-group" member – an individual with a similar background and experience – or a new "out-group" member – an individual with a differing diverse background and experience – joined the team. They found that teams with a new "out-group" member significantly outperformed the team with the "in-group" member.[8]

Having said this, without an inclusion strategy, diversity can also lead to negative work behaviours, such as workplace discrimination, decreased work attachment, increased conflict, higher staff turnover, decreased performance,[9] and lower net profits.[10] Inclusion strategies ensure all members have access to resources, can participate in decision-making processes, and have opportunities for advancement in the organization.[11] Both diversity and inclusion strategies must be in place to not only prevent negative work outcomes, but to augment the likelihood of positive organizational gains.

In practice, the limited gains that have resulted from the implementation of diversity and inclusion policies have not been commensurate with the considerable amount of time and resources that organizations have invested into these strategies. Why is this the case?

THIS IGNORES AN INNATE NEED: BELONGING

An important aspect of diversity and inclusion strategies has been absent: belonging. As Wadors put it, "I realized that what's missing from the discussion is this notion of *belonging*. No matter their background, skin color, or gender, employees wanted what I wanted: to belong."[12] Humans have an innate need for a sense of validation and connection with others,[13] as well as a need to feel unique.[14] *Belonging* meets this need, as it encompasses being yourself, being accepted, and being valued for who you are.[15] Employees want and actually *need* to feel like they belong with their coworkers, with their work teams, and within their organizations writ-large. Feelings of belonging have been related to a variety of positive work behaviours[16] and, for some employees, can be an even greater motivator than compensation.[17] In addition, scientists claim that humans cannot be healthy – emotionally, mentally, spiritually, or physically – without feeling connected to others.[18] Consequently, implementing belonging strategies will result in organizational benefits.

But, even more importantly, as we have learned through our work in this space, without belonging, the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion strategies will likely be compromised.

BELONGING CAN NIP LONELINESS IN THE BUD

When employees do not feel they belong, they feel lonely. Loneliness leads to serious health concerns, such as an increase in stress, a weaker immune system, and difficulty sleeping.[19] Loneliness also contributes to negative work behaviours: hindered creativity, difficulty with decision-making,[20] decreased

[5] Yves RF Guillaume, Jeremy F. Dawson, Steve A. Woods, Claudia A. Sacramento, and Michael A. West, "Getting Diversity at Work to Work: What We Know and What We Still Don't Know," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 86, no. 2 (2013): 123-141.
[6] Lynn M. Shore, Jeanette N. Cleveland, and Diana Sanchez, "Inclusive workplaces: A review and model," Human Resource Management Review (2017): 1-14, doi: 10.1177/0149206310385943.
[7] Yves RF Guillaume, Jeremy F. Dawson, Steve A. Woods, Claudia A. Sacramento, and Michael A. West, "Getting diversity at work to work: What we know and what we still don't know," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 86, no. 2 (2013): 123-141.
[8] Katherine Phillips, Katie Liljenquist, and Margaret Neale, 2009, "Is the Pain Worth the Gain? The Advantages and Liabilities of Agreeing with Socially Distinct Newcomers," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35 (3): 336-350, doi:10.1177/0146167208328062.
[9] Lynn M. Shore, Jeanette N. Cleveland, and Diana Sanchez, "Inclusive workplaces: A review and model," Human Resource Management Review (2017): 1-14, doi: 10.1177/0149206310385943.
[10] Yves RF Guillaume, Jeremy F. Dawson, Steve A. Woods, Claudia A. Sacramento, and Michael A. West, "Getting Diversity at Work to Work: What We Know and What We Still Don't Know," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 86, no. 2 (2013): 123-141.
[11] Lynn M. Shore, Jeanette N. Cleveland, and Diana Sanchez, "Inclusive workplaces: A review and model," Human Resource Management Review (2017): 1-14, doi: 10.1177/0149206310385943.
[12] Pat Wadors, "Diversity Efforts Fall Short Unless Employees Feel That They Belong," *Harvard Business Review*, August 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/08/diversity-efforts-fall-short-unless-employees-feel-that-they-belong.
[13] Roy F. Baumeister, and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497-529.
[14] Marilynn B. Brewer, "The Social Self: On being the Same and Different at the Same Time," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 17, no. 5 (10, 1991): 475-482, https://www-lib-uwo-ca.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/docview/618086186?accountid=15115.
[15] Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2017).
[16] Gregory M. Walton, and Geoffrey L. Cohen, "A Question of Belonging: Race, Social Fit, and Achievement," *Journal of personality and social psychology* 92, no. 1 (2007): 82-96.
[17] Pat Wadors, "Diversity Efforts Fall Short Unless Employees Feel That They Belong," *Harvard Business Review*, August 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/08/diversity-efforts-fall-short-unless-employees-feel-that-they-belong.
[18] Ron Friedman, *The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace* (New York: Perigee, Penguin Random House, 2014), 105.
[19] Ron Friedman, *The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace* (New York: Perigee, Penguin Random House, 2014), 105.
[20] Vivek Murthy, "Work and the Loneliness Epidemic," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2017, https://hbr.org/cover-story/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic.

feelings of reward,[21] less efficient performance, and a lack of commitment.[22] Time is taken away from work tasks when a person uses energy to mask their loneliness.[23] This should be a primary focus because, despite being the most technologically connected generation in human history, loneliness has largely increased over the last 35 years.[24] Today, about 35% of adults are lonely,[25] and feel like they have inadequate social interactions.

Work is an opportunity for people to build relationships. Organizations can help its staff develop real connections through emphasizing belonging and valuing people for who they are.

As a result, impactful belonging strategies can mitigate or prevent some of the negative work behaviours detailed earlier. When an employee has a connection with others, they don't feel as lonely; in turn, they are healthier, more productive employees. In addition, employees are likely to invest more in their work because they don't want to let their colleagues down.[26]

The implementation of belonging strategies not only result in organizational benefits but are vital to ensure the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion strategies. Therefore, incorporating belonging creates an all-encompassing strategy.

HOW TO FACILITATE FEELINGS OF BELONGING & INCREASE PERFORMANCE

Creating a culture of belonging does not require an organization-wide initiative; in fact, investing just a few moments of incremental daily effort can be effective in the long run. With that said, we formulated some interventions that can help you to build a practice of belonging within your organization.

1. **The feeling of not belonging is universal, so let's talk about it openly and work to normalize the feeling.**

If one thinks they are the only person who feels like they don't belong, it can exacerbate this attitude or outlook. In reality, many people feel like they don't belong at different times in their lives, and the first step towards mitigating or eliminating this sentiment is to acknowledge it and discuss it more candidly.

In fact, according to recent research, disclosing feelings of not-belonging can help expedite the process of enabling individuals to ensure they feel like they are part of the community.[27] Sharing negative feelings with others, such as feelings of not-belonging, also develops an individual's social support network.[28]

It is important to open space for feelings of belonging and not-belonging within organizations. Here are some ideas to consider within your organization:

- o Open space for the conversation about belonging during the hiring and on-boarding process
- o Check-in with employees about how they're feeling during feedback sessions and/or performance reviews
- o Create a physical or digital space within your organization to encourage these conversations
- o Challenge leadership to share their feelings of belonging/not-belonging openly

2. **Prioritize finding time to tell your story, and really listen to your peers' stories.**

Sharing stories with each other can encourage social connectedness, build empathy between people, and foster a sense of belonging. In fact, when we respond to our peers' stories with our own vulnerabilities and build on their feelings, we are demonstrating that we care.

[21] Ron Friedman, *The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace* (New York: Perigee, Penguin Random House, 2014), 105.
[22] Hakan Ozcelik, and Sigal Barsade, "Work Loneliness and Employee Performance," *Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings* 8, no. 1 (2011): 1-6, 2011, https://faculty.wharton.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Work_Loneliness_Performance_Study.pdf.
[23] Ron Friedman, *The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace* (New York: Perigee, Penguin Random House, 2014), 105.
[24] Vivek Murthy, "Work and the Loneliness Epidemic," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2017, https://hbr.org/cover-story/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic.
[25] C. Wilson, and B. Moulton, "Loneliness Among Older Adults: A National Survey of Adults 45+," *Prepared by Knowledge Networks and Insight Policy Research. Washington, DC: AAR*, http://assets. aarp. org/rgcenter/general/loneliness2010. pdf (2010).
[26] Ron Friedman, *The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace* (New York: Perigee, Penguin Random House, 2014), 103.
[27] Gregory M. Walton, and Geoffrey L. Cohen, "A Question of Belonging: Race, Social Fit, and Achievement," *Journal of personality and social psychology* 92, no. 1 (2007): 82-96.
[28] Ron Friedman, *The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace* (New York: Perigee, Penguin Random House, 2014), 123.

In addition, when people hear a story from beginning to end, their bodies release chemicals that make them more empathetic.[29] This creates an opportunity for people to connect, and in doing so, individuals begin to feel like they belong. Consequently, it is imperative that organizations facilitate opportunities for employees to share stories, as story-telling can combat loneliness and encourage feelings of belonging leading to organizational success.

Here are some ideas to consider in your organization:

- o Embed storytelling into team meetings
- o Create a physical or digital space in your office for stories to be shared
- o Offer workshops and training on effective storytelling to employees
- o Wadors suggests that when you introduce someone, introduce them in a way that goes beyond their name, job title, or credentials.[30] This may help spark small moments for storytelling

3. When possible, no matter how digital the world becomes, find ways to maximize face time.

Despite the popularity and ease of social media and online communication, there is no substitute for face-to-face interaction. If we know that talking about our lack of belonging and sharing stores can mitigate these feelings, how can we prioritize more face time together?

One study compared the effects of having a brief social interaction virtually to face-to-face. They found that only face-to-face interactions resulted in an increase in a sense of belonging and positive mood.[31] In creating a belonging strategy, we need to ensure that we tailor strategies to better encourage face-to-face connections in workplaces.

Here are a few ideas:

- o Instead of emailing someone a few feet away from you, walk over to them and have a conversation
- o Turn phone calls into video calls
- o Turn emails into quick video or phone calls
- o Avoid a long email thread by scheduling a brief meeting to discuss with a colleague more efficiently

4. Work towards fostering an environment that encourages colleagues to have challenging or uncomfortable conversations.

When we spend more face-to-face time together, it's inevitable that we're going to feel challenged by others, and data indicates that counterpoints are more likely to come from those who look, feel, and think differently than we do. Accordingly, it is critical to learn how to have these hard conversations. We aren't always going to agree with others, and we're likely going to feel uncomfortable and challenged by others within our organizations.

There are strategies we can use to help us understand each other and to help navigate these differences:

- o Try to avoid shutting down or "agree to disagree" (it's important to validate others' feelings[32])
- o View a disagreement or moment of conflict as an opportunity to learn and build a connection with someone who looks, feels, or thinks differently than you
- o Provide training to staff on active listening
- o Host a workshop on empathy-building for staff

[29] Paul J. Zak, "Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling," *Harvard Business Review*, October 2014, https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling.
[30] Pat Wadors, "Diversity Efforts Fall Short Unless Employees Feel That They Belong," *Harvard Business Review*, August 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/08/diversity-efforts-fall-short-unless-employees-feel-that-they-belong.
[31] Donald F. Sacco, and Mohamed M. Ismail. 2014. "Social Belongingness Satisfaction as a Function of Interaction Medium: Face-to-Face Interactions Facilitate Greater Social Belonging and Interaction Enjoyment Compared to Instant Messaging." *Computers in Human Behavior* 36: 359-364, doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2014.04.004.
[32] Ron Friedman, *The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace* (New York: Perigee, Penguin Random House, 2014), 148.

5. Screw political correctness; just do the work and be better to each other.

When sharing stories or having hard conversations, how can we actually help each other to learn and grow? Too often, we worry about being politically correct; we worry that we might use the wrong vernacular or latest socially acceptable language. Unfortunately, political correctness is often much more about appearing to be good to others than it is about actually putting in the work to be good to others.

We can help each other learn and grow using some simple strategies:

- o If you do not know about something – whether it's a person's religious beliefs, their sexual orientation, their dietary choices, or perhaps even their political views – say so. Ask them more about it
- o Spend some time conducting independent research, or, if the person seems comfortable, ask more about it and work to really listen to their response
- o Shift away from trying to be politically correct, and instead focus on using inclusive language (committing to using inclusive language means that we take a more mindful approach to including a diverse group of people, perspectives, and experiences in our word choices and comments)
- o Extend the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words, and actions of others

6. Get support!

Beyond the tools above, organizations like ours partner with innovation companies every day to help them to navigate this largely unmapped territory of diversity, inclusion, and belonging strategy.

There are some great platforms on the market, such as Fortay, which is a predictive culture-first recruiting and analytics platform designed for the purpose of building diverse and highly effective teams. Fortay's approach is an important part of the DIBs solution because it supports a range of dimensions of diversity, including personalities and perspectives. By focusing on diversity in all its forms, Fortay helps to generate robust inclusive organizational cultures that support belonging.

Our team at Feminuity partnered with the great folks at Fortay to bring the DIBs survey to fruition. To learn more about DIBs or sign up to bring DIBs to your organization, click here.

CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, we believe that implementing a diversity and inclusion strategy is absolutely necessary, but likely inadequate. Feelings of belonging – being valued for who you are and feeling socially connected – must become a primary focus for organizations. When we target this human need, we open the door for a variety of interventions, and more positive work outcomes are the result. By instilling a culture of belonging, you are promoting the well-being of employees, while ensuring that employees commit to the organization, think creatively, and perform efficiently. As a result, your organization will achieve true diversity through all levels, and be more successful.

Diversity and inclusion efforts are important, but it's belonging that ultimately affects how we feel in our teams and in our organizations, and has the greatest impact on our talent and business success.

We feel that cultivating an environment where all employees feel like they belong is a goal that everyone can embrace. Want to chat about your organization's diversity, inclusion, and belonging efforts? Reach out at hello@feminuity.org.

Authors:
Dr. Sarah Saska, Co-Founder & CEO, Feminuity (sarah.saska@feminuity.org)
Marlina Kinnersley, Co-Founder & CEO, Fortay (marlina@fortay.co)
Rebecca Factor, Lead Consultant, Feminuity
Ivana Lochhead, Partner, Feminuity