



Belonging in the Workplace is not the Same as 'Fitting in'

There is a clear, proven business case for diversity and inclusion. But inclusion often drives "fitting in," meaning people mix with others in the workplace but strive to hide their unique ideas and experiences. The next step after inclusion is belonging in which people are valued for their unique traits.

The typical workforce today is diverse on many levels – racially, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, and even place of work in terms of working remotely or on-site. In the effort to engage such a dynamic workforce, attract diverse people, and strive for an inclusive culture, most companies have developed diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives and invested resources in leadership training on engaging all employees on an equitable basis.

The challenge is that including diverse people does not necessarily mean they have a sense of belonging. Many are "fitting in" which is a process of trying to be like the majority, never fully contributing to the success of the business or reaching full potential. They keep their real identities hidden for fear of being excluded. Belonging in the workplace is not the same as inclusion or fitting in.

Fitting Into a Mold

Female business professionals and entrepreneurs frequently talk about their need to fit a male mold but at the same time are criticized for trying to "be like a man" in pursuit of career goals.

Numerous studies have touted the differences between the leadership styles of men and women. Men are praised for being strong decision-makers making tough decisions, assertive, and career driven. Women are more collaborative and people oriented, and when they fail to fit the mold of the white males, they bump into the glass ceiling. In reverse, women who are "like men," meaning assertive and ambitious, are called aggressive, bossy, and self-interested.

How many LGBTQ+ employees have carefully hidden their identities in the workplace because they fear exclusion and lost career opportunities? How many professional African-Americans are said to be "acting like a white," or how many people from India never speak up because they fear repercussions for being too forward or not fully understanding American cultures?

Diverse people are recruited and hired, and it is tempting to say, "Job well done. Goals reached." They are included, but what business leaders should be asking is, "Do people feel free to bring their authentic selves to work?" When diverse people believe they must keep their authentic selves hidden, the workplace and the business suffers. Authenticity means people do not feel like



they have to fit a mold, withhold unique perspectives, or pretend in any way to be someone different.

Included but not Feeling Safe

There are different ways to exclude people, but one of the most subtle is creating a workplace where the culture discourages expressing differences. Diversity means hiring people who have different personal traits. Inclusion means diverse people are invited to participate in business events and activities.

But getting a seat at the table does not mean the person is comfortable being an authentic self by expressing different perspectives and sharing life and work experiences. It explains the fact that there are many companies with sophisticated D&I policies, procedures, and initiatives that continue to experience low workforce engagement and high turnover of diverse employees. They spend tens of thousands of dollars on initiatives and training, and people still feel isolated and unappreciated.

A sense of belonging brings inclusion to its fullness. Belonging means feeling safe about bringing an authentic self to work. People who have a sense of belonging feel respected for personal differences and comfortable sharing unique perspectives, ideas, and experiences. A company policy may require all project teams to reflect the diversity of the workforce.

Business leaders can point to the team as 40 percent diverse, but the real question is whether the diverse members are fully contributing. In many cases, they are not, or they are not heard. Women and minorities frequently talk about majority team members cutting their comments short or ignoring their ideas by giving only cursory acknowledgment. In a common example, a woman walks into a business meeting and is asked to get coffee. It still happens! The message is this: You are not here as a full participating member.

A workforce culture that does not create a sense of belonging for all employees is still a place filled with bias. Research reported in the Harvard Business Review's article "The Value of Belonging at Work" said 41 percent of people surveyed felt isolated at work.

Verna Myers is an inclusion strategist, cultural change catalyst, influencer, thought leader and author. She coined the expression, "Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance." Continuing this thought, belonging is being encouraged to demonstrate a unique dance that reflects culture or approach and being appreciated for sharing and the creativity valued.

Learning to Show Appreciation

Building a culture of belonging requires business leaders to adopt new behaviors. Due to years of conditioning, managers and supervisors may not understand how to encourage people to speak up without fear or know how to encourage people to take risks. They may not even be aware that some



employees feel isolated, and awareness of the truth is always a first step in overcoming the biases that hold people back.

Leaders must show appreciation for new perspectives and creativity and actively help employees connect with each other. It takes regular messaging from the top management level down, but more importantly, the messaging must be followed up with action. Without action, it is business as usual.

People who are always trying to fit in end up psychologically exhausted, and they leave. The tragedy of not developing a culture of belonging is that innovation is lost; people are not reaching their potential; and creativity is smothered. These are three critical factors for business success and longevity.

It does not do an organization any good to hire diverse people if these same people cannot bring their whole selves to work. A person who is without a sense of belonging and just fitting in will never be fully engaged.