CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Basics of Belonging

by Janine Lee

Image Credit | Brooke Cagle

Why Belonging is equally, if not more, important than Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion.

☑ INSIGHT | OPINION   09 Oct 2023

Most corporations have Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs and a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO). However, not all companies have a focus on Belonging (B). Should we add a "B" and focus holistically on "DEIB" instead?

Following George Floyd's murder in 2020, many corporations have focused on creating more inclusive workplaces. Recently, many companies have been renaming departments from Diversity and Inclusion to Diversity and Belonging and from DEI to DEIB (Miller, 2023)[1]. And, according to Gallup's research, 84% of chief human resources officers say their organization's investment in DEIB is increasing (Brecheisen, 2023)[2].

Now is an even more critical time to focus on DEIB with the recent June 29, 2023, SCOTUS decision overturning affirmative action in schools, effectively ending consideration of race in college admissions. Corporations must reassure employees that they belong and still stand by their DEI commitments.

What is Belonging?

Diversity is about a collective or a group; it's the presence of difference within a setting such as the workplace (Bolger, 2020)[3]. Diversity could be about the variations within a group, such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and other differing factors.

Equity recognizes advantages and barriers that create an unequal starting place, creates commitments to correct and address the imbalance, and ensures everyone has access to the same opportunities3. If participants were in a cycling race, they would not all be given the same bicycle, but one that suits their physical body shape so that everyone has an equal chance of winning.

Inclusion ensures individuals with different identities are included and treated fairly within a given setting such as your team, workplace, or industry[3]. Inclusion is focused more on how individuals interact with one another. However, just because someone is included doesn't mean that they feel they belong.

Belonging, specifically workplace belonging, is the degree to which an individual feels personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others within an organizational environment (Cockshaw & Shochet, 2010)[4].

Simply put, the party analogy is often used to differentiate DEIB concepts. Diversity is about representation across different demographic groups as guests. Equity gives each guest fair and equal access to attend regardless of their background. Inclusion means everyone is invited to the party and also asked to dance. Belonging is whether guests feel accepted at the party based on the conversation, music, and environment. In summary, belonging is whether the guests want to stay at the party or if they feel isolated and want to leave.

Why is Belonging Important?

"Belonging gives sense to my work. I feel less stressed and more psychologically safe. Hence, I can contribute more without fear of making mistakes or being ostracized. It's not everything, but it is close. The only thing above it would be pay," said a woman of color (WOC) survey participant (Lee, 2023)[5].

Sense of belonging (SOB) is a fundamental human need with a subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual experiences (Allen et al., 2021)[6]. A lack of workplace belonging where employees do not feel accepted or valued at

work can be enormously detrimental to psychological well-being and sense of self, and can decrease engagement, motivation and performance (Waller, 2022)[7].

Workplace belonging is critical for retention; research indicates that a lack of sense of belonging (SOB) results in negative consequences for individuals, teams, corporations, and profit. SOB can vary depending on one's perceptions of environmental context and social cues (Schall et al., 2016)[8]. For example, a smile from a coworker could be perceived as a sign of inclusion or interpreted as an artificial gesture and a symbol of exclusion. Research suggests that belonging-related stressors can result in intense adverse effects for identified outgroups, typically minority groups (Walton & Brady, 2017)[9].

Belonging is recommended to be a distinctive category in order to measure progress, implement improvements, and announce company focus on an important dimension. Research shows that when employees belong in the workplace, they are three times more likely to look forward to coming to work, five times more likely to want to stay at their company, and nine times more likely to say they are being treated fairly regardless of their race (Bond, 2022)[10]. Furthermore, Gartner research shows that organizations with an increased focus on belonging initiatives will demonstrate greater on-the-job effort and higher employee performance (Wiles & Turner, 2022)[11]. Companies who add the "B" to "DEIB" communicate to potential new hires and their existing employees their awareness of the concept and, more importantly, a commitment to building an environment where their top talent wants to be.

Ultimately, a lack of workplace belonging is a crucial factor in the decision for individuals to leave a company or industry. Companies will never realize the full potential of their talent unless they feel they belong. Belonging strengthens the talent pool, psychological safety, employee engagement, decision-making, performance, and innovation.

What can a Leader do to Increase Belonging?

Managers can take several steps to increase belonging within the work environment.

1. Create strong team norms and embody them.

Leaders can purposefully create a culture which increases belonging. Create strong team values and norms that allow team members to thrive. For example, a team norm could be created to ensure all opinions in the room are heard. Embodying these values might include difficult conversations, asking challenging questions, and pushing back on broader organizational dynamics.

2. Foster peer-based relationships.

Organic relationships can transpire through structured opportunities such as onboarding buddies, mentorship, social activities, and other opportunities to form a connection. Encourage your team members to attend company events, training, community events, join Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), and even participate in external organizations5. The goal is to protect their time to participate in activities where peer relationships are formed so that they can feel accepted and respected.

3. Continue educating yourself.

Sign up for DEIB training and learn how to be the best ally for your team members. Practice how to speak up in the moments that matter when team members are feeling disrespected in a public setting. Get feedback from your team members and continue growing in the areas of discomfort.

4. Strengthen your pipeline programs.

Representation matters. People want to see people like them in leadership roles and within their teams whom they can identify with. Employees feel most seen, supported, and connected when others are similar to them within their teams, particularly within leadership (Kennedy & Jain-Link, 2021).[12]

5. "Walk the talk."

Role model the behaviors you want to see and follow through with commitments. Make decisions that are equitable when it comes to hiring, performance, and growth opportunities. Invest budget in DEIB activities to ensure belonging is prioritized. Mentor

and sponsor underrepresented groups when opportunities arise. The goal here is to hold yourself and other leaders accountable.

References

1. Miller, Jennifer (2023). *Why Some Companies Are Saying 'Diversity and Belonging' Instead of 'Diversity and Inclusion.'* New York Times

2. Brecheisen, Jeremie (2023). *Research: Where Employees Think Companies' DEIB Efforts Are Failing.* Harvard Business Review.

3. Bloger, Meg (2020). *What's the difference between Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity?* General Assembly.

4. Cockshaw & Shochet (2010). *The link between belongingness and depressive symptoms: An exploration in the workplace interpersonal context.* Australian Psychologist.

5. Lee, Janine (2023). *We Belong: Women of Color in Technology (WOCT).* ProQuest.

6. Allen et al. (2021). *Belonging: A review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research.* Australian Journal of Psychology,

7. Waller (2022). *A sense of belonging at work: a guide to improving well-being and performance.* Routledge.

8. Schall et al. (2016). *'Fitting in' in high school: How adolescent belonging is influenced by locus of control beliefs.* International Journal of Adolescence and Youth.

9. Walton & Brady (2017). *The many questions of belonging.* Guilford Press.

10. Bond, Tony (2022). *Belonging in the Workplace: What Does It Mean and Why Does It Matter?* Great Place to Work.

11. Wiles & Turner (2022). *3 Ways to Build a Sense of Belonging in the Workplace.* Gartner.

12. Kennedy & Jain-Link (2011). *What Does It Take to Build a Culture of Belonging?* Harvard Business Review.

Janine Lee (Follow)

Dr. Janine Lee is a Lecturer at UC Berkeley's Haas MBA Program. She is a USC Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.) graduate who published her dissertation on sense of belonging for women of color in technology. Janine has received multiple awards from Fortune 500 companies as a DEIB Champion.