Cultivating Belonging in the Workplace

An Employer Guide

About This Guide

Acknowledgments

This guide was developed jointly by the Health Action Alliance and Civic Alliance, in partnership with the Ad Council and Belonging Begins with Us.

It was informed by insights from the Belonging Barometer — which was developed by Over Zero and the American Immigration Council's Center for Inclusion and Belonging as part of their efforts to understand the state of belonging in the nation— and Belonging Begins with Us, a partnership between the Ad Council and a coalition of partner organizations from across the country.

Special thanks to Kelie Charles (Home Depot), Josh Frazier-Sparks (Walmart), Christina Rivera Glennon (Levi Strauss & Co.) and Stefanie Maynard-Collier (Capital One) for informing this guide through interviews about their companies' best practices to build a culture of belonging in which employees and business can thrive.

About the Health Action Alliance

The Health Action Alliance is a joint initiative of the Ad Council, CDC Foundation, de Beaumont Foundation, National Safety Council and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation — in partnership with Meteorite — which helps employers navigate evolving health challenges, improve the health of workers and engage with public health partners to build stronger, healthier communities. Learn more at healthaction.org.

About the Civic Alliance

The Civic Alliance is America's premier nonpartisan coalition of businesses united by a commitment to our democracy, which we believe depends upon active participation in safe, accessible, and trusted elections. Founded by Democracy Works and the CAA Foundation and powered by Meteorite, the Civic Alliance supports its member companies as they inspire their employees and consumers to engage in civic life and their communities. To learn more about or join the Civic Alliance, and review a complete list of its member companies visit civicalliance.com.

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The Two-Minute Read

- An ongoing global pandemic and an increasingly polarized society have contributed to people feeling less connected and experiencing more mental health stress. Organizations may already see this show up in the form of checked-out employees, alienated customers and workplace tension.

- By developing and implementing a **strategy for belonging**, employers can realize business benefits. Fostering belonging enhances employees' feeling of security and value, with positive effects on retention, innovation, productivity and more. Intentional belonging is the next step in the evolution of a company's diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) journey.

- As one of the nation's few well-trusted institutions, employers may be in the best position to turn back the tide on disconnection and division, and foster the healthy civil discourse and civic engagement that would further improve conditions for business.

Informed by business leaders and nuanced national research, this guide is designed to help you:

- Understand the current state of belonging in the workplace
- Build a business case for developing a strategy on belonging
- Take action to foster belonging and measure your progress

These 5 steps offer a roadmap for employers to cultivate belonging in the workplace:

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STEP 1
Identify and live your corporate values
Take actions to bring your organization's mission statement to life, allowing employees to experience your stated values in consistent ways.

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STEP 2
Create a culture of respectful communication
Feeling secure enough to speak freely is a sign of psychological safety and belonging. Invite bold conversations at work, even about non-work topics. Modeling vulnerability and continually incorporating the language of belonging is fundamental to establishing a safe environment and to facilitating difficult conversations.

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Listen to your workers and tailor your approach to their needs
Go deeper than annual surveys and your existing demographic data, and enlist employee resource groups (ERGs) and allies to develop programming. Pay attention to frontline workers, get feedback from all worker communities, and champion employees' sense of self.

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STEP 4
Integrate belonging into company structures and policies
Belonging begins with hiring and onboarding, and should extend to employees of all seniority levels through mentorship, workstyles that play to employee strengths, and purposeful connection.

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STEP 5
Measure your progress for continual improvement and accountability
Once you have a plan for increasing belonging in the workplace, it's important to set transparent metrics. These targets should incorporate feedback from all employee groups, be reflected in individual performance objectives, and be considered for public disclosure.

By starting this journey towards increased belonging, companies can change workers' mindsets to embrace empathy and actively seek common ground. The potential impact of this work is enormous. Thanks to the trust workers place in their employers, coupled with the diverse makeup of the workplace and the unrivaled capabilities of the private sector, companies may have the ability to improve employee mental health and decrease polarization, all while fostering belonging for the good of the bottom line and the country.

What Is Belonging in the Workplace?

Belonging is many things. It is the comforting feeling of connectedness and inclusion. Belonging is felt as a direct result of connection between people and should be cultivated by each member of a group — whether coworkers, family or community members. When we belong, we can be different, be our authentic selves and know we are valued and welcomed. We trust that our opinions will be respected and that we have the freedom to share them openly. In the workplace (and beyond), an additional dimension of belonging is knowing we can influence the work we do and co-create with others.

You may recognize the elements of belonging as also making up psychological safety, one of the pillars of a healthy workplace culture. Indeed, psychological safety — "the ability to take risks and be vulnerable" — is the basis for belonging.

The Belonging Barometer, a resource from the Center for Inclusion and Belonging and Over Zero, measures 10 factors of belonging in the workplace:

1. Emotional connectedness to your co-workers

2. Feeling included

3. Ability to influence decisions

4. Ability to be your authentic self

5. Feeling valued for your contributions

6. Having satisfying relationships

7. Feeling like an "insider"

8. Comfort expressing opinions

9. Feeling treated equally

10. Feeling belonging with co-workers

Why It Matters to Employers

Employers should have a strong interest in enhancing belonging: there is a direct link between belonging and employee retention, engagement and performance.

A focus on belonging is also a way forward for organizations grappling with the effects of disconnected employees, political polarization, and resistance to change from a diversifying workforce. Company leaders tell us that because the desire to belong is universal — at some point in our lives, we've all experienced the sting of being left out — framing your diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives around belonging can generate more buy-in from skeptical employees.

If employees don't feel a sense of belonging in the workplace, it can affect their mental health, which has costly implications for business in productivity, absenteeism and turnover. A 2016 survey found that 24% of workers said a divisive political environment led to negative work outcomes, including poor work quality and lower productivity. As you'll see below, building a culture of belonging by strengthening psychological safety, has been proven to be the leading driver of successful teams.

Employees also deeply care about belonging and have concerns about polarization. We know that 93% of Gen Z globally believe that feeling like they belong at work is important (they make up roughly 20% of the US workforce). And a recent study from FiveThirtyEight found that almost 3 in 10 Americans said they were worried about extremism and polarization, with 62% of Americans wanting the U.S. to actively reduce political polarization.

As an employer, you have strategies available to you to help your employees feel a sense of belonging that will make them their best selves in the workplace — and out.

This guide is designed to help you take action.

The Business Case for Belonging

The vast majority of businesses recognize the urgency of fostering a sense of belonging in the workplace. According to research from Deloitte, 79% of organizations say increasing belonging is "important" or "very important" to their immediate success. Nearly all (93%) agree that belonging drives performance.

Mitigating polarization through belonging also bolsters our democracy, and companies rely on a strong responsive democracy — it's inseparable from America's standing as the world's largest economy.

Rising political polarization can have serious ramifications for businesses. Controversial issues showing up in the workplace have increased internal conflict. And despite pressure to speak out publicly about contentious subjects, such public statements can alienate consumers with opposing views and could make the company a target for lawmakers who disagree.

Meanwhile, one of the threats to belonging — a growing epidemic of loneliness — impacts productivity and workforce retention. A survey of nearly 6,000 workers by Cigna found that lonely employees miss a week more of work than non-lonely co-workers and are almost twice as likely to want to quit within the next year.

Average Days Missed Per Year

DAYS

- 7.0 — Lonely
- **5.7 more days missed**
- 1.3 — Not Lonely

Intention to Quit Job Within the Next Year

PERCENT

- 56.6% — Lonely
- **~2x greater likelihood**
- 29.3% — Not Lonely
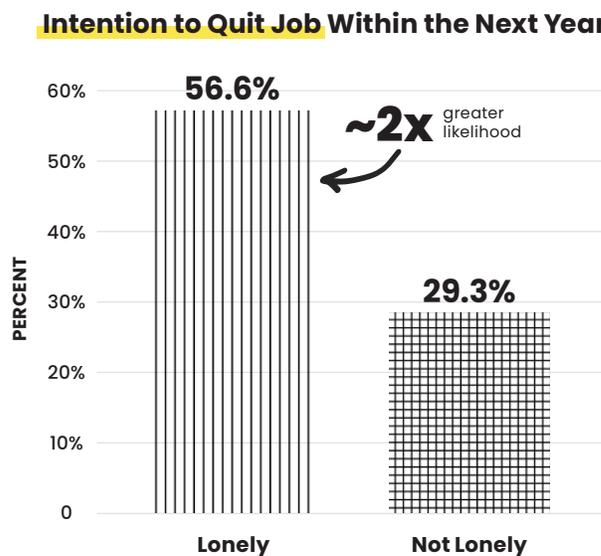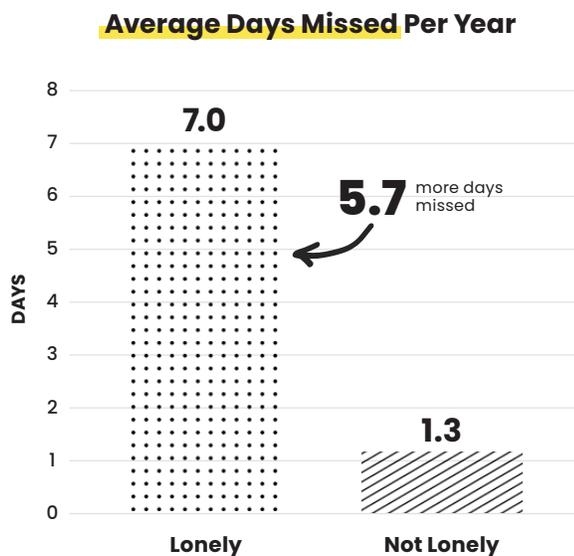
Source: Analysis of Cigna Loneliness Index data for employed respondents (5,927 workers).

Loneliness also affects the physical health of your people. Social isolation carries a risk of early death on par with smoking, obesity and a lack of exercise.

But in the challenge, there is also opportunity. Deloitte found that organizations with a culture that addresses the full spectrum of belonging — employees' sense of comfort, connection and contribution — are:

- **2x as likely to meet or exceed financial targets**
- **3x as likely to be high-performing**
- **6x as likely to be innovative and agile**
- **8x as likely to achieve better business outcomes**

It's hard to overstate the importance of psychological safety, the foundation of belonging. Google famously studied 180 teams from across its company for over a year, enlisting its top statisticians and researchers to find out how to build the perfect team. They found that psychological safety was more important than any other factor — any combination of personalities or skills, or even setting clear goals and accountability — to a team's success.

Belonging shows benefits for recruitment, too. Unsurprisingly, when workers feel connected to their colleagues and company, valued for their contributions, and able to influence the direction of their work, they are more likely than employees with a lower sense of belonging to recommend their workplace to another person.

How likely are you to recommend your job to a friend of family member?
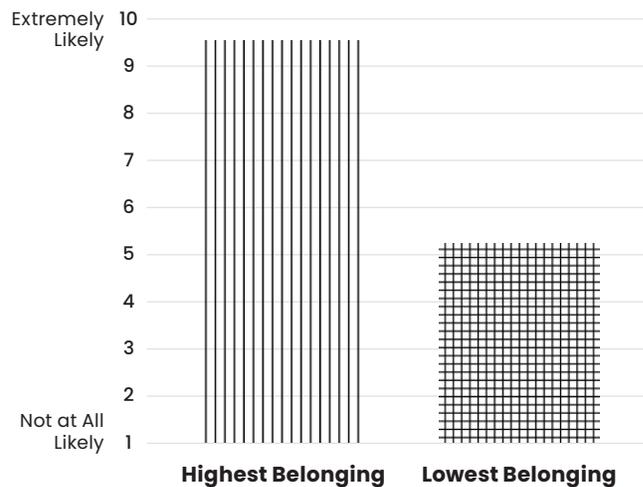
Source: Belonging Barometer, Center for Inclusion and Belonging and Over Zero

The Belonging Barometer shows that higher rates of workplace belonging equate to higher rates of local and national belonging, translating into stronger trust in each other and our democratic institutions. Increased belonging is also associated with more satisfaction with and optimism for our democracy. The nation's economic strength may even depend on this belonging and trust: from encouraging investment to reducing social unrest, the strength of our democracy drives economic growth and opportunity.

How Did We Get Here?

The State Of Workplace Belonging In America
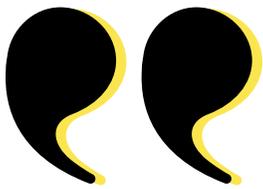
With Americans now more likely to move into neighborhoods where people look like them, worship like them, and vote like them, the workplace may be one of the last places where people from different backgrounds can get to know each other.

Wendy Feliz

Founding Director, Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council

A crisis exacerbated by the pandemic

Americans were feeling lonely even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Three in five workers in the U.S. considered themselves lonely in a 2019 survey sponsored by Cigna, part of a decades-long decline in community activity that covers everything from attending religious services to social club membership. Additional research has also shown that loneliness increased as a result of pandemic shutdowns and isolation — and remained high even as restrictions were relaxed. COVID-19 has likely made permanent changes to people's social lives in ways we are only beginning to understand.

Polarization from a charged political climate

As loneliness has increased, so has polarization. Those two trends may be related. Whatever the causes of rising polarization are, when everything from elementary school curricula to public health measures to trust in elections becomes a matter of partisan division and mutual suspicion, and the perceived distance between the two sides grows ever greater, there is a heightened risk of people losing empathy for others with an opposing view.

In fact, from a party perspective, <u>Americans hold misperceptions</u> about one another, meaning not only is there a lack of empathy, but partisan assumptions themselves are limiting opportunities for connection. More than the mere presence of politics in the workplace, that loss of personal empathy — the all-too-quick sorting and dismissal of others based on their beliefs — is a threat to belonging in the workplace.

Socioeconomic status, race and gender as predictors

The conditions for belonging are systemic, as well. According to the Center for Inclusion and Belonging and Over Zero's forthcoming Belonging Barometer, when socioeconomic status is included, the relationship between race and (lack of) belonging disappears. That said, there are differences in belonging across racial and gender lines: Asian Americans and those identifying as gender non-binary report the lowest workplace belonging scores in the nation.

Workplace Belonging
by race, gender, and socioeconomic status

Legend: Belonging · Ambivalence · Lack of Belonging
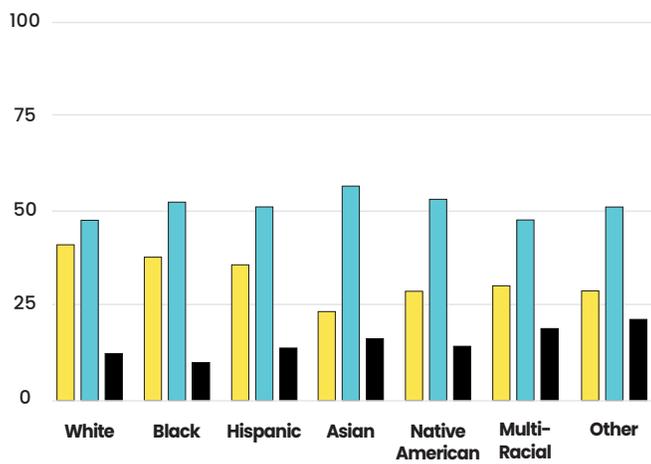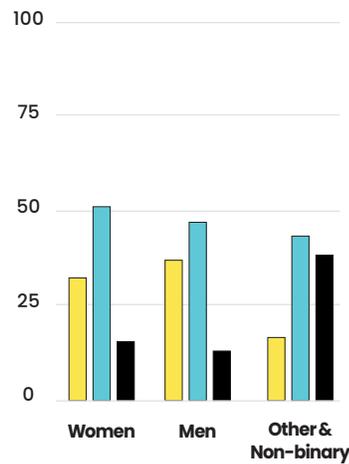
by Race / by Gender / by Socioeconomic Status
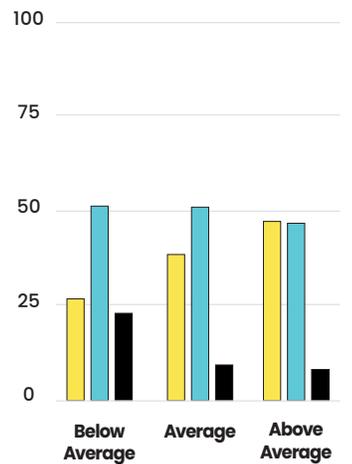
The Importance of Employers

Employers have trust

Trust in major institutions is on the decline. The Edelman Trust Barometer puts it in even more stark terms: "There is a collapse of trust in democracies." Decreasing trust and increasing isolation are two sides of the same coin, and both are challenges for building belonging. But as trust in government, media, NGOs and the business community wanes, "My employer" remains the most trusted institution in the U.S. Employers are not only well placed to turn back the trends on belonging — they cannot rely on any other institutions to fix the problem.

### The workplace as a space for connection

Positive social contact across lines of difference is shown to increase empathy and cooperation between groups, but in America today we are less likely than ever to be exposed to those unlike us. One force potentially working against empathy is people's lack of exposure to others who are not like them (i.e. in race, religion, political preference, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status or national origin). But as the Belonging Barometer will show, the workplace remains one of the only consistent spaces with more frequent contact between groups from different backgrounds and diverse perspectives. Employers can leverage this built-in advantage by cultivating belonging — and the rest of society may depend on them to do so.

The workplace is part of the community

As workplaces foster belonging, they also help to educate, normalize and inspire positive employee attitudes and behaviors between people from different backgrounds. This behavior change doesn't stay within the walls of the workplace, but extends into homes, neighborhoods and communities. By practicing belonging at work, employees model belonging for their families, friends and neighbors.

Workplaces provide an opportunity for positive cross-group contact.

% of US Residents Who Have One or More Relationships with Someone from a Different...
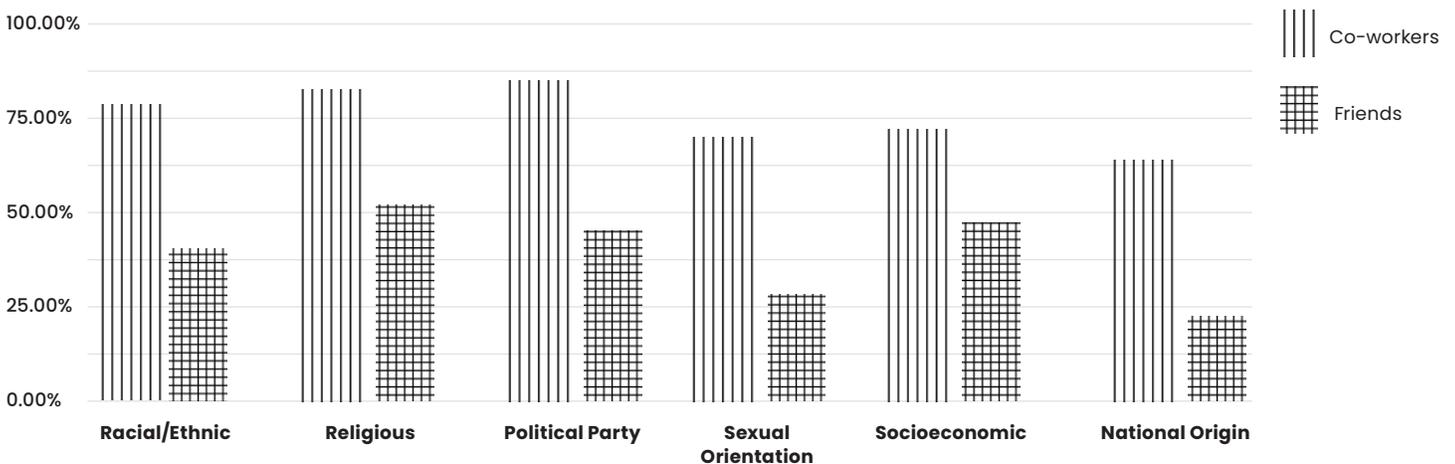
Five Steps to Cultivating Belonging in the Workplace

"

Belonging doesn't happen by accident. It's something that is co-created by each of us.

LEVI STRAUSS & CO. | Christina Rivera Glennon

Head of DEI Programs and Operations, Levi Strauss & Co

Only 1 in 7 companies report feeling prepared to cultivate belonging, even though they embrace it as a priority. Fostering belonging requires commitment, leadership, and careful listening and communication. And, when you're working on belonging, it's essential to involve employees from across demographic identities and historically marginalized communities.

Remember, your goal is to support your employees' sense of comfort and contribution in order to unlock the full potential of your teams — it's not to impose conformity or discourage differences of opinion. Not everyone at work will share the same beliefs and backgrounds; that's OK. By creating a culture of connection and respect, with clear ground rules for tough conversations, you can harness your employees' diverse skills so they can work together to move your organization forward.

These **5 steps** offer a roadmap for your path to cultivating belonging in the workplace.

STEP 1

Identify and Live Your Corporate Values

Implement actions that bring your organization's mission statement to life.

- **Communicate your company values.** That mission statement you worked so hard on and the values that guide your business decisions should be the touchstones that unite your employees, regardless of their backgrounds and beliefs. Make sure your company values are communicated at every level, from the C-suite on down, and in onboarding materials, your company website, social media and elsewhere.

- **Establish psychological safety.** For a culture of belonging to take root, employees need to know they won't be punished or humiliated for making mistakes or speaking up with ideas, questions or concerns. In fact, finding ways to recognize learnings and celebrate differing opinions can bolster this culture. A free-flowing environment of psychological safety has the added benefit of strengthening innovation.

- **Emphasize cooperation over competition.** Collaborative team assignments give workers a reason to come together for a common goal despite any differences. It may also give them a chance to get to know each other. You can foster this cooperation by praising the work of the team and its individuals, as well as by implementing rewards or bonuses based on teamwork.

- **Be generous with praise.** The Harvard Business Review reports, "Across industries, every measure of morale, productivity, performance, customer satisfaction, and employee retention soars when managers regularly provide recognition." Acknowledge employee contributions and successes regularly. Be vocal with your gratitude and celebrate employees' success whenever possible. If employees are embarrassed about public recognition, make sure they hear meaningful appreciation one-on-one.

- **Start meetings and huddles with an intentional practice of belonging.** Just as checking in is valuable for mental health, it is highly effective for workplace belonging, too. Research from Ernst & Young shows that checking in is even more desired than receiving feedback. In team settings, friendly icebreakers — about anything from favorite TV shows to talking about your hometown to family traditions — can open conversation, build personal connection, find common ground and surface universal experiences.

- **Create nonpartisan civic engagement opportunities to deepen employee engagement.** Company-led efforts to increase participation in democracy, through activities like voter registration, voter education and recruiting poll workers, have been shown to deepen employee engagement and create purpose. Voting and active participation in civic life may also improve mental health and personal resilience. The Civic Alliance's Corporate Civic Playbook offers companies specific, nonpartisan actions they can take to cultivate a culture of civic participation.

- **Support mental and physical well-being.** When you help employees show up as their best selves and take a meaningful interest in their well-being, you build connection with workers. Check out the Health Action Alliance's Workplace Mental Health Playbook to build out your company's comprehensive gameplan.
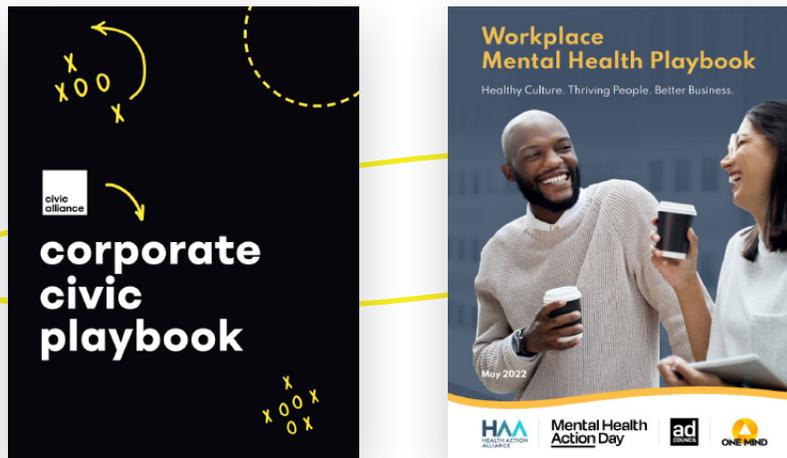
Fueling innovation.

At Home Depot, monthly communications that go to all associates are a platform for leaders to intentionally build a culture where every associate feels included and valued for who they are. As that culture is built within each team, it's also built across the company.
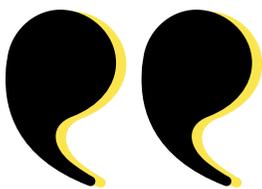
Because we have associates who feel secure in raising their hand and saying, 'I'm thinking about this a little bit differently,' it helps us be innovative and create solutions for all our customers.

Kelie Charles

Senior Director - Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Home Depot

STEP 2
Create a Culture of Respectful Communication

Feeling secure enough to speak freely is a sign of psychological safety and belonging. Here's how to keep even difficult conversations productive.

- **Invite bold conversations about work.** Since part of psychological safety is feeling free to speak up, let challenging conversations around work topics take place. With a skilled discussion facilitator, invite colleagues to consider experiences and positions that reflect an opposing viewpoint from their own to help foster familiarity with an uncomfortable difference in opinion. If this feels daunting, start with regularly scheduled sessions where teams are assured they can speak candidly, then build out from there.

- **Model vulnerability.** Taking the risk to speak up makes a person vulnerable. But your employees won't make themselves vulnerable if leaders don't reflect this behavior first. Share your own vulnerabilities with your team, and approach difficult conversations with curiosity. Practicing vulnerability related to work has been shown to reduce anxiety and improve performance among executives. As part of practicing vulnerability, turn to storytelling. Storytelling is a proven method for building trust and making meaningful connections and is a core element of Belonging Begins with Us, which features stories of understanding, community and belonging from people across America. The campaign has created guidelines for capturing and sharing stories.

> **Pro-Tip:** Share real stories of how employees foster or feel belonging in the workplace to help model vulnerability at all levels and normalize belonging behaviors. Consider other communications moments to invite employees to share personal stories of belonging. Greenhouse.io, a small business providing inclusive hiring and onboarding software, frames their commitment to DEI as 'Building Belonging,' and shares the stories of its employees and their belonging journeys on their website, as part promoting inclusivity.

- **Allow difficult conversations on non-work topics, too.** Respectful discussions, even around controversial topics, can foster belonging. Research has shown that banning talk about politics at work is not an effective strategy. In fact, when software company Basecamp reportedly banned discussions about social and political issues, some 30% of their employees resigned, reflecting the fact that these employees wanted the support to have bold or challenging conversations.

Braver Angels

essential PARTNERS

The key is to establish guardrails that prevent the conversation from veering into harassment. Ensure insulting or dehumanizing language is clearly off-limits. Set ground rules that require mutual respect. Employees who take opposing views should not be labeled or treated as wrong. More often than not, when employees from across the aisle actually connect in a respectful manner, they are able to find common ground. Consider engaging a nonprofit organization focused on bridging the ideological divide to help facilitate discussions among your employees, like Braver Angels and Essential Partners.

- **Lean on the professionals.** Consider coaching your teams in civil dialogue. Here are tools you can reference to build your plan:

THE BETTER ARGUMENTS PROJECT

A collaboration of the Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program, Allstate, and Facing History and Ourselves, Better Arguments Project, is a national civic initiative created to help bridge divides – not by papering over those divides but by helping people have better arguments. They offer free trainings, webinars and resources.

The Dialogue Project

The Dialogue Project, a research effort to explore what role business can play to help improve civil discourse and reduce polarization, provides recommendations to help companies lead conversations that bridge the divide.
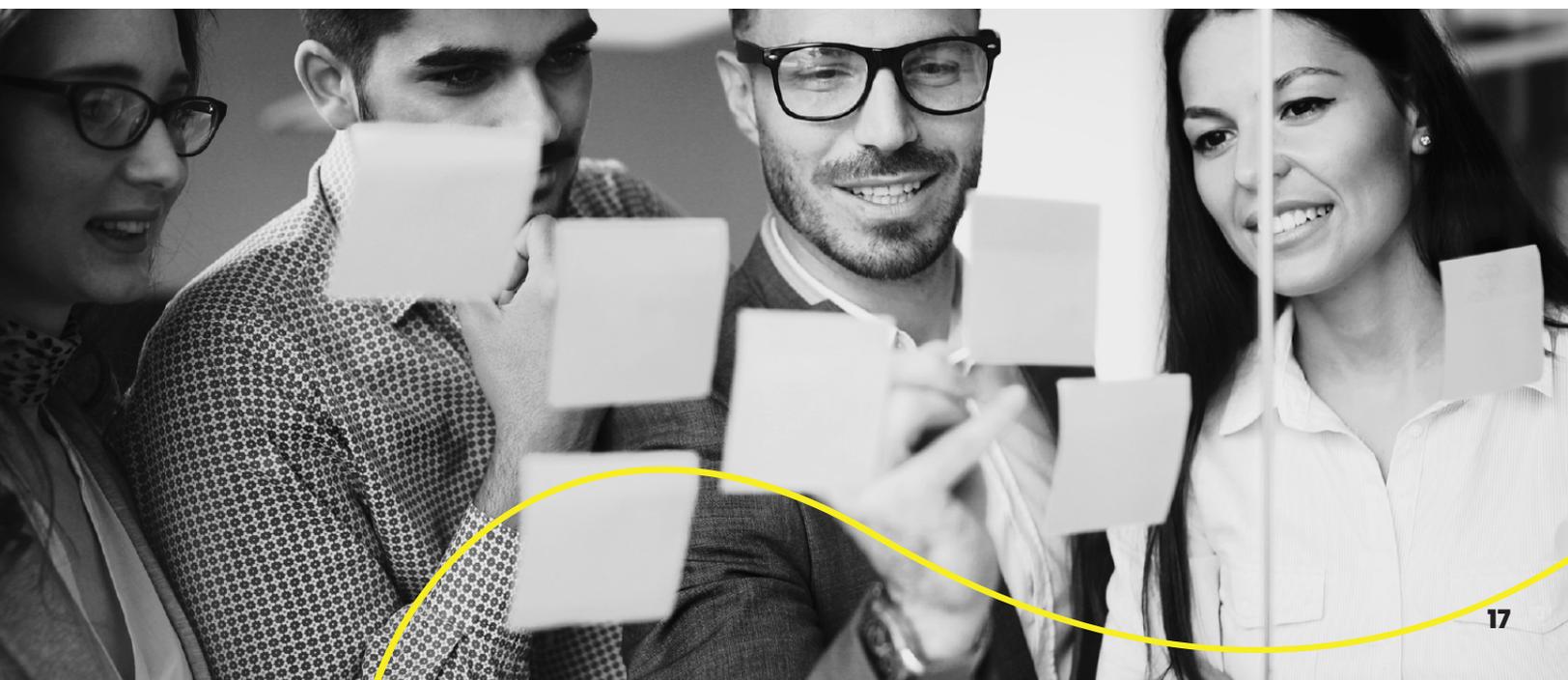
- **Use the language of belonging.** The language of belonging is fundamental to establishing a safe environment and incorporating this language intentionally is the next step in the evolution of a company's diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) journey. Talk to your DEI team or employee resource group (ERG) leaders to inform your company's word choice in order to make it as inclusive as possible across internal and external materials. For a deeper dive, consult the American Psychological Association's Inclusive Language Guidelines.

Pro-Tip: In all communications with your employees, ensure you are sharing fact-based information. Mis- and disinformation can fuel employee division and challenge internal culture. Vet information through tools like 'How To Know What To Trust' from News Literacy Project. Consider hosting mis- and disinformation training sessions for your employees.

Make everyone feel they belong.

Embracing a culture of belonging as part of their DEI efforts, Walmart has committed to building a welcoming culture across their stores and the communities they serve. As part of this commitment to centering belonging, Walmart has supported and embraced the Ad Council's Belonging Begins with Up campaign through thought leadership, donated media, and community activations.
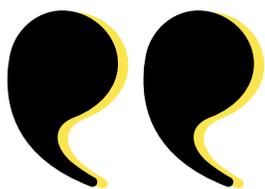
> A lot of this begins with narrative change. Everyone knows what it feels like to be left out. It could be as minor as not getting picked in middle school gym or as major as feeling left out at work. So our framing has definitely moved increasingly towards belonging as the ultimate goal.

Walmart ⚹

Josh Frazier-Sparks

Director - Culture, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion at Walmart

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STEP 3

Listen to Your Workers and Facilitate an Employee Cenetred Approach to Meet Their Needs

Go deeper than annual surveys and existing demographic data, and enlist ERGs and allies to develop programming.

- **Pay attention to frontline workers.** Hourly and frontline workers may have a very different workplace experience than salaried employees in the office — make sure they are represented in your feedback and community-building, and included in the development of your belonging work. Because socioeconomic status is negatively associated with belonging, lower-wage employees may require additional support for you to meet their needs.

> **Pro Tip: Capital One, Home Depot, Levi Strauss & Co. and Walmart** all focus their belonging work on their frontline workers. **Capital One** creates space for belonging and leadership through an upward mobility program that allows associates to shadow corporate workers via internal internships designed to help create a pipeline from front line jobs to careers in corporate headquarter locations.

- **Gather feedback from across worker communities.** Whether through anonymous surveys or all-hands town halls, you need to know whether employees from across worker communities are feeling engaged and supported. Because employees may have ideas before the next quarterly survey, consider options for virtual comment boxes or open-door availability.

> **Pro-Tip: Levi Strauss & Co.** routinely sends pulse surveys on engagement which are shared with C-suite leadership and people leaders across the organization, not just the HR and DEI teams.
>
> **Walmart** corporate leaders make intentional efforts to listen to their front line associates with facility visits and regular listening sessions.
>
> **General Motors** hosts listening sessions by senior leaders to hear directly from employees. In 2020, they customized those sessions to understand the specific perspectives and feelings of Black employees.

- **Make sure you have robust demographic data.** To draw statistically meaningful conclusions about the opinions of employees from historically marginalized communities, you may need better data. Consider implementing self-ID, which allows employees to self-define and disclose demographic information you may not otherwise have (e.g. non-binary, LGBTQ, trans, Veteran or disability status). It is worth noting that a sense of trust, built on belonging, will help your employees feel comfortable opting in to such disclosures.

- **Empower employee resource groups (ERGs).** ERGs can be your biggest assets in fostering belonging. Work with them to help you identify the needs of their representative communities, create programming, host candid conversations about their lived experiences, and lead on company-wide diversity and heritage celebrations.

> **Pro-Tip:** Launch or engage a civically focused ERG. Rallying around an inclusive topic, like voting registration or volunteering in the community, can help connect employees around a shared goal while also increasing understanding across diverse colleagues.

- **Encourage ERGs to work together.** Joint activations not only amplify impact, they also reflect people's intersecting identities and build new bridges between groups of employees.

> **Pro-Tip:** Walmart encourages its ERGs to collaborate on programming, recognizing that people hold multiple identities and that can be reflected through connecting ERGs and building allies.

- **Provide opportunities to create allyship.** Partner with ERG leaders to invite and encourage allies to join ERGs. Frame discussion of ERGs in terms of affinity and allyship so that they're seen as ways of networking with people of different backgrounds. Making information about all the ERGs openly available to all employees via online platforms may help them feel more accessible to allies.
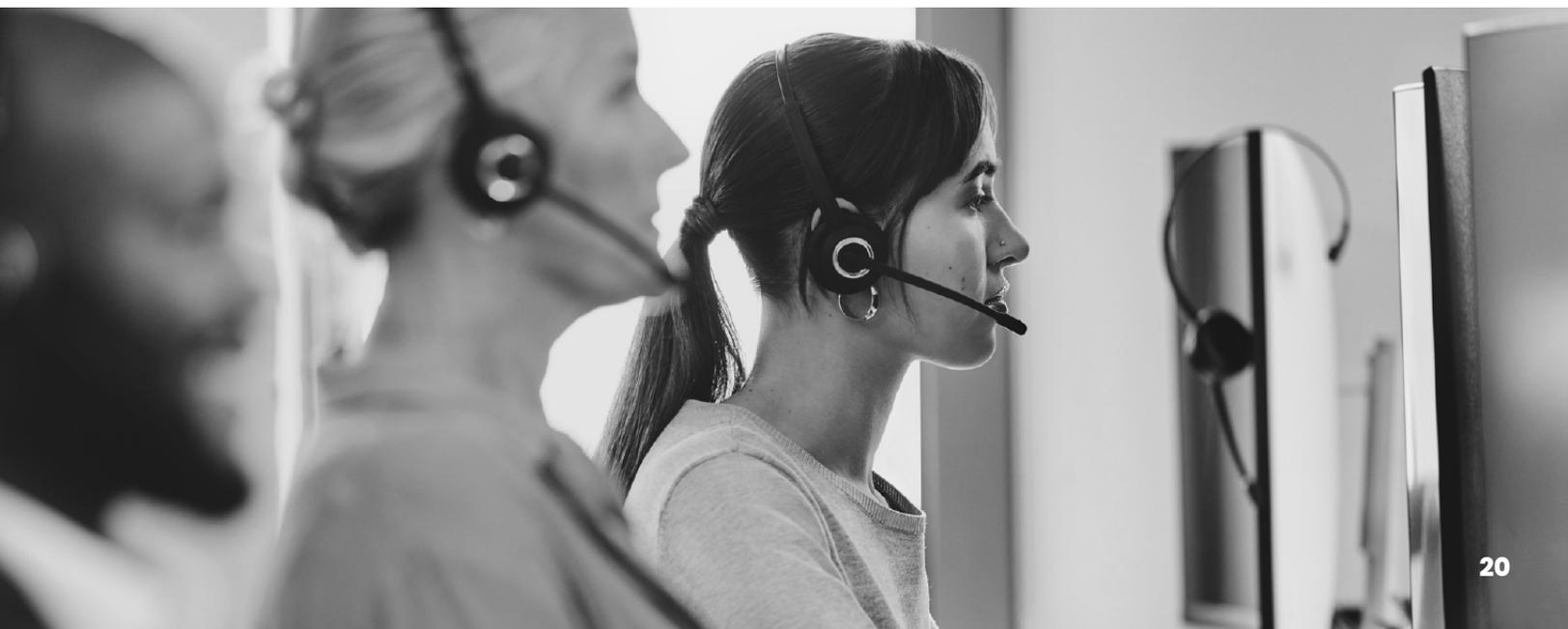
- **Champion your employees' sense of self.** Look for ways to support employees' display of their identities to promote an environment where they — and customers — feel like they belong. Ideas include name tags that share the languages an employee speaks or including pronouns (she/her, they/them) during introductions or on name tags and email signatures.

Ask the right questions.

Along with its pulse surveys (see above) Levi Strauss & Co. hosts "True Blue sessions" - open conversations with employees - to collect anecdotal evidence on inclusion and belonging. One of the questions that the company asks in these conversations is, "Can you be your authentic self at LS&Co.? Please Explain."
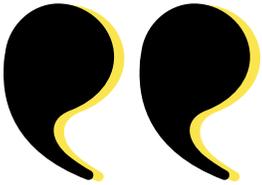
This way we know if and how people are experiencing belonging and we can create programming based on what people are telling us.

LEVI STRAUSS & CO. | Christina Rivera Glennon

Head of DEI Programs and Operations, Levi Strauss & Co

STEP 4

Integrate Belonging into Company Structures and Policies

Belonging begins with hiring and onboarding, and should extend to employees of all seniority levels through mentorship and purposeful connection.

- **Hire with belonging in mind.** Don't just consider whether a potential employee fits in at your company; ask whether that person can help create belonging. This helps keep your company culture from narrowing into a single "fit." In the interview process, ask them for their experience in bridging differences, acting as a mentor and involving others in their work.

- **Make the most of onboarding.** Practices like co-worker shadowing, "speed-friending" to meet others, an introduction to ERGs, showcasing your mental health offerings and in-person social events can seed positive bonds and inspire belonging.

- **Allow for workstyles that fit employees' individual strengths and needs.** Ask your employees how they work best, and collaborate with them to offer solutions. Assess your team's individual needs, then adjust workflows to allow employees to do their jobs better and feel agency over their work hours. This extends to technology, too — for example, workers who use the phone less than they want, and those who use video calls, instant messaging and social media more than they want, are all more likely to feel lonely.

- **Connect remote and on-site employees.** If you offer employees the option to work remotely, it shouldn't come at the cost of inclusion. Create opportunities to bring all employees together, whether in person or virtually, at a regular cadence to foster team alignment. To keep remote workers feeling connected to each other, you can encourage or even facilitate scheduled virtual coffee breaks or similar activities. Ensure that opportunities to connect allow employees to build relationships outside of their current circles. Consider offering opportunities to help office and frontline workers and employees from different backgrounds connect.

- **Curate meaningful in-person moments.** All-staff conferences, retreats and conventions of hundreds or even thousands of associates are already valuable for instilling connection. Go further with thematic programming aligned with belonging. For instance, invite guest speakers who can inspire employees to consider what they can achieve together through their unique skills and passions.

- **Establish mentorship programs.** One-on-one rapport may be a welcome change for employees who don't take to group activities. Even better, mentorship has been shown to lead to higher retention rates for both mentors and mentees, with women and employees of color likelier than others to credit mentorship to their career development. Mentorship has also been shown to overcome exclusion, especially when the mentors come prepared to coach someone who has experienced exclusion. That could make it particularly valuable for employees from Gen Z, who have reported some of the highest rates of mental distress and disconnection during the pandemic.
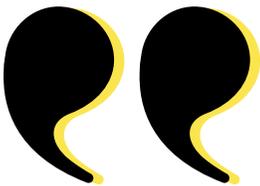
Diversity is about all of us; inclusion is what we do in the moments that matter, which opens the door for belonging. It's important to remember that it's not about belonging actions, but instead about belonging outcomes and conditions.

Stefanie Maynard-Collier

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STEP 5

Measure Your Progress for Continual Improvement and Accountability

Once you have a plan for increasing belonging in the workplace, it's important to set transparent metrics. There's a role for all employees to play.

- **Set metrics for engagement, psychological safety and belonging.** You need to understand perceived company norms and know whether you're building a culture where people of all different backgrounds want to come and stay. Retention rates, especially among underrepresented groups, are one great indicator. Consider other metrics that may show increased engagement, connectivity and therefore belonging, like employee engagement in volunteer programs or civic activations.

- **Survey employees on all the different factors of belonging.** You might ask employees to anonymously rate their sense of belonging using the Belonging Barometer. The 10 workplace items, rated on a 1-5 scale, capture elements of social connection, inclusion, psychological safety, influence, value, authenticity, feeling like an "insider," and sense of equality.   The Belonging Barometer items are listed below. The frequency with which they are asked, the way they are analyzed, and how the findings are shared with employees are all tools in effectively learning about and leveraging workplace belonging. For more information or guidance, contact Over Zero.

1. I feel emotionally connected to my co-workers.

2. Co-workers welcome and include me in team activities.

3. I am unable to influence decisions at my workplace.

4. I feel unable to be my whole and authentic self with my co-workers.

5. My team values me and my contributions.

6. My relationships with co-workers are as satisfying as I want them to be.

7. I feel like an "insider" who understands how my company/organization works.

8. I am comfortable expressing my opinions with my co-workers and superiors.

9. I am treated as "less than" other employees

10. When I'm with my coworkers, I feel like I truly belong.

- **Make belonging a performance metric company-wide.** At every level of your company, consider asking employees in their performance reviews how they have fostered belonging. For departmental leaders and others, you may want to set goals around inclusive leadership, inclusion training and mentorship activity. Senior leadership should share their personal and departmental belonging goals with all employees to be transparent about their own accountability and the priority for belonging across the organization.

- **For publicly traded companies, consider including belonging in human capital disclosures.** The human capital disclosure requirement that is now part of Form 10-K in public companies' annual filings may be an opportunity to share measures of your company's progress on belonging and engagement. With many companies already reporting on gender and racial representation or efforts to support underrepresented groups, actions your company is taking to improve belonging may appeal to shareholders with an interest in stakeholder capitalism.

Conclusion

As a vehicle for hiring and keeping the talent that will help your company excel and solve the challenges of disconnection, it is clear why employers are embracing belonging.

In addition, belonging also provides shape and substance to company efforts in DEI, as something that all employees can relate to and rally around. And while there is more to workplace mental health than will show up in your belonging metrics, if you are fostering belonging then you are building up the psychological safety that is a foundation of worker well-being.

For companies active in corporate civic engagement, likewise, belonging offers a bridge between employees' daily experience at work and your company's external commitment to a strong democracy. At their core, in the workplace and in daily life, belonging and civic engagement are both about feeling full involvement, agency and participation — and the impact people can make when they feel included.

And that points to the greater potential of companies as cultivators of belonging. Many companies are rightfully troubled by our country's increasing polarization and what it means to the future stability of their business. But companies are not powerless over this trend. The tools presented in this guide chart a course not toward good behavior in the workplace but rather toward changing workers' mindsets to embrace more empathy and seek common ground. Along with the trust workers have in their employers, the diverse makeup of the workplace and the unrivaled capabilities of the private sector, this gives companies the ability to reshape the belonging crisis for the good of the bottom line and our nation.

Additional Resources

Our Communications Toolkit for Fostering Belonging in the Workplace

- Using Communication to Cultivate Belonging: Tips for Leaders and Managers
- Belonging and Civil Discourse: Tips for Workplace Conversation during Election Season
- Sample CEO Letter

Related Resources

- Belonging Begins with Us Campaign
  A national initiative by the Ad Council and American Immigration Council designed to drive belonging for everyone by promoting connection to create welcoming communities.

- Center for Inclusion and Belonging
- Civic Alliance's Corporate Civic Playbook
- Health Action Alliance's Mental Health Playbook
- Fostering Belonging for Public Sector Employees: A Guide by Accenture
- Belonging Begins With Us Community Toolkit

Civic Alliance Co-Founders

CAA foundation | Democracy Works

Health Action Alliance Organizing Partners

ad COUNCIL | CDC Foundation *Together our impact is greater* | de Beaumont *BOLD SOLUTIONS FOR HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES*

nsc National Safety Council | Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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