

Enhancing a sense of belonging in our communities

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To grow our human society, it is imperative that we constantly reflect on our interactions with everyone around us. Presently, division pervades every stratum of society, from workplaces to educational institutions, manifesting along cultural, perspective-based, belief-oriented, and political lines. It is crucial that we cultivate a heightened sense of belonging in our various spheres of interaction within communities. This entails the cultivation of environments where everyone feels at ease to express their true selves and actively engage in conversations. Fundamentally, we ought to ensure that individuals get heard and are valued, to allow us to mutually gain from our interactions.

In the spirit of developing a sense of belonging in our communities, the Materials Research Society as part of its programming for Global Diversity Awareness Month in October 2023, held a workshop titled “Making Your Workplace, Lab or Classroom a Community of Belonging.” The workshop sought to address the importance of intentionality in helping others feel embraced and supported within our communities. The workshop was led by Meriel Martínez, program director at the Nonprofit Leadership Center, where she is engaged in training and development in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The

workshop emphasized and encouraged more open dialogue on complex issues.

At the outset, Martínez asked attendees, “What makes you feel heard, seen, and respected when engaging with a community?” Attendees expressed thoughts centered on the importance of consistent attention, both verbally and nonverbally, signifying genuine interest in their perspectives. It was acknowledged that these cues might vary across cultural backgrounds, with actions deemed rude in some cultures being considered appropriate in others.

We realize then that a sense of belonging is a *subjective* feeling of being an integral part of our surroundings. Given its subjective nature, it necessitates a conscientious effort to comprehend how each individual we engage with perceives acknowledgment and visibility. Fundamentally, we all seek environments where we can authentically express ourselves without fear of bias against our identities or backgrounds. These are spaces where people genuinely welcome our complete selves, with the understanding that every individual, with their unique attributes, brings something distinctive to the table.

Such environments of belonging bring about a cultural revolution in the workplace, enabling employees to form

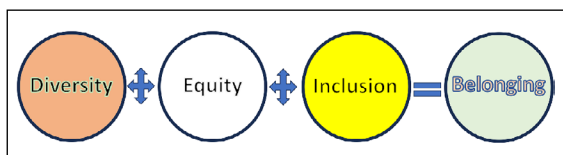
meaningful connections with colleagues beyond the professional realm. We spend substantial amounts of our time at work, often interacting with a professional veneer.

What if we could look forward to being at work every day because of a welcoming atmosphere grounded in trust and mutual respect? Beyond just being human and helping foster a sense of belonging for others, such an environment also helps workplaces and businesses thrive. Additionally, they become fertile grounds for cultivating creativity, innovation, and effective problem-solving. Martínez emphasized, and all participants concurred, that the bottom line of a company is not necessarily the bottom line of DEI efforts. Rather, genuinely embracing people is the bottom line of DEI.

Establishing inclusive and belonging environments requires a proactive approach in DEI efforts. DEI goes beyond merely hiring a diverse workforce; it involves *intentional* efforts to embrace the diversity within that workforce. Research¹ indicates that groups embracing DEI generate more ideas and perform better than diverse groups lacking a deliberate focus on equity and inclusion. Delving into the essence of DEI, “Diversity” encompasses all the ways people differ, encapsulating various characteristics that distinguish individuals or groups. This includes identities, personalities, lived experiences, and perspectives.

One practical means of embracing diversity is through the “Equity” component of DEI. Equity entails fair treatment and ensuring equal access, opportunities, and advancement for every individual or group. Equity goes beyond equality in that it involves identifying what people really need and diligently working toward providing that. For instance, striving for equity involves seeking to understand why some individuals or groups are not fully participating in our communities and working to eliminate those barriers. Another tool for embracing diversity is “Inclusion.” It involves creating environments and atmospheres in which individuals or groups can feel welcomed, respected, and valued enough to fully participate.

Martínez spearheaded discussions on integrating DEI principles



This figure shows how a sense of belonging results from diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.



into various societal realms, including workplaces and laboratories. Conversations revolved around the crucial role of organizations and leaders in fostering a sense of belonging through a plethora of DEI initiatives. One key focus was on leaders actively acknowledging their biases and understanding on how these biases impact hiring decisions and interactions with employees, including promotions. Leaders were encouraged to model the expectations they have for their employees. Furthermore, creating safe environments for all employees was highlighted, emphasizing the importance of promoting healthy debates and prioritizing authenticity over conformity. Establishing such environments involves encouraging employees to share their ideas and recognizing each individual for their unique contributions.

Furthermore, leaders should devise innovative strategies for integrating staff and students in various decision-making processes. This involves finding out what staff would like to learn or have access to and making those resources available. In the spirit of inclusivity, leaders should be receptive to flexible work policies, allowing

employees to be productive while maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Essentially, individuals should not be made to feel that their value is contingent on sacrificing sleep. Given the increased prevalence of remote work post-COVID-19, it is imperative to consider the needs of remote workers for them to remain well-connected within the organization. This begins with adapting the onboarding process to be inclusive of remote workers' needs, clearly communicating expectations, and providing accessible resources. Additionally, offering a variety of collaboration tools, employee resource groups, and team-building activities contributes to fostering a sense of belonging for remote workers within the organization. Beyond initiatives aimed at fostering DEI, leaders must implement measures to track progress. Offering diverse channels for seeking and obtaining feedback from employees is essential. The feedback gathered serves as a valuable resource, enabling leaders to continually reassess their efforts and make adjustments as necessary.

In addition to the responsibilities of leaders, Martínez stressed that everyone

plays a crucial role in embodying DEI to create a sense of belonging in daily interactions. Being intentional in these efforts involves extending a welcoming hand to new team members and actively integrating them into the team's culture. These actions can be undertaken while recognizing and appreciating the unique perspectives that each individual brings to the table.

Overall, the webinar highlighted diverse approaches to not only form diverse teams but also to genuinely embrace diversity within those teams. The role of leaders was emphasized while recognizing that ensuring equity and inclusion is the collective responsibility of every individual. I leave you with this question to ponder: What is my role in creating a sense of belonging for myself and others?

Endnote

1. J. Bourke, A. Titus, "Why Inclusive Leaders Are Good for Organizations, and How to Become One," *Harvard Business Review* (March 29, 2019). <https://hbr.org/2019/03/why-inclusive-leaders-are-good-for-organizations-and-how-to-become-one> □