

How To Cultivate A Culture Of Belonging—And Why It's The Ultimate Competitive Edge

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I write about personal branding.

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You may have seen the letter “B” added to the inspiring three-letter acronym DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion), which has become ubiquitous in the world of work lately. The B in DEIB stands for Belonging, which is one of my favorite words. Belonging is critical for inspiring a productive, engaged culture within any team, and it finally started getting the attention it deserves in 2021, partly in response to the isolation and lack of connectedness triggered by the pandemic.

People are still feeling detached, so it’s not surprising that team cohesion is decreasing as well. The hybrid/remote work environment has diluted human connection and interaction. Consequently, our sense of belonging has diminished. Over half of American employees reported feelings of isolation in the past year, and 51% of people who left their jobs in 2022 did so in search of belonging and connection, according to McKinsey.

Belonging is rooted in feelings. Individuals need to feel leveraged, valued and celebrated for who they are and what they bring to work. Executive Coach Ora Shtull observed, “The addition of B to the acronym DE&I might feel like a spreading wildfire—difficult to keep track of and manage. At the same time, the B adds a critical dimension. It reminds us to recognize that each team member is unique. No one should be expected to change who they are in order to feel seen, heard, and valued.”

According to David Allison, Founder of the Valuegraphics Project, the research backs this up. “We surveyed 750,000 people and built an inventory of the core values that drive human behavior around the world. Of the 56 core human values the most important for the population of the United States is belonging. More than anything, Americans want to belong. Belonging is even more important than family, which ranks second on the list.”

And here's why the B in DEIB is so important to me. Belonging can't happen unless you know who you are, feeling absolutely certain about what makes you unique and ensuring that you are bringing those unique traits to work every day. Of course, you can only do that if you work in an environment where you're acknowledged and celebrated for the distinctive value you deliver. That's what personal branding is all about. The best leaders understand that when everyone on the team engages in personal-brand reflection together, they not only get to know themselves better, but they also get to know and appreciate the superpowers and differentiators of their coworkers. Personal branding becomes the process of unearthing not just how valuable each team member is individually but how powerfully those traits fit together and amplify each other.

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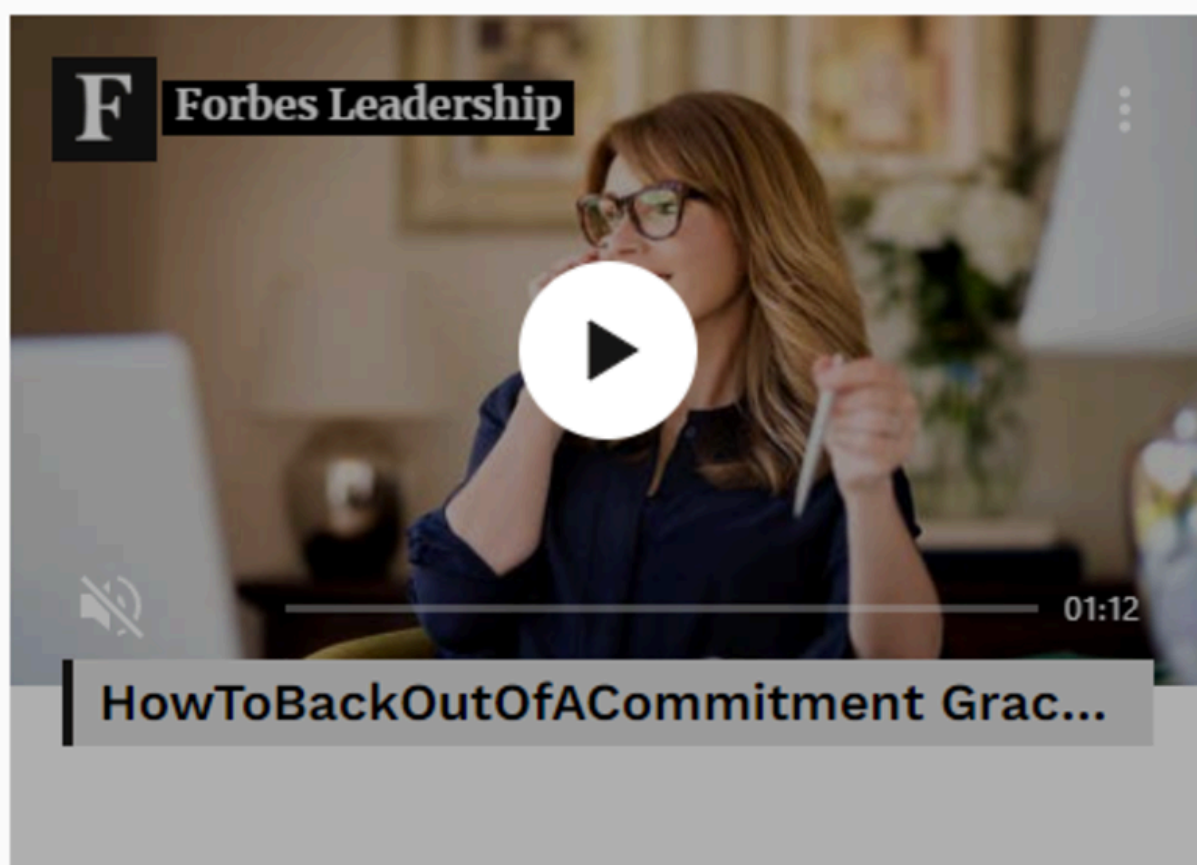
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Great Place to Work revealed that when employees experience belonging, they're three times more likely to say their workplace is fun and five times more likely to want to stay at their company a long time. That shows how a culture of belonging helps companies increase engagement and retention. "When employees feel part of a supportive community, organizations thrive. Workplace belonging improves job performance by 56%, slashes turnover risks by over half, and decreases absenteeism by over 75%" according to a study by BetterUp.

For individuals, a sense of belonging is essential. "We cannot separate the importance of a sense of belonging from our physical and mental health," according to the Mayo Clinic. "The social ties that accompany a sense of belonging are a protective factor helping to manage stress. When we know we have support and are not alone, we are more resilient, often coping more effectively with difficult times in our lives."



As an employee, here's how you can support a culture of belonging:

Make belonging your mantra. Belonging is not something that happens to you; it requires deliberate effort on your part, even if it's intimidating for you to try to connect with others. The more consistently you reach out, the greater your sense of belonging will be. Create opportunities to interact with others on your team and in your company. While it's possible to build a sense of community from a distance, [MIT research](#) shows that face-to-face time is indisputably the most powerful way to improve human connection.

Use empathy. Putting yourself in others' shoes helps you enhance your sense of connection and belonging while simultaneously helping others feel accepted and understood.

Embrace differences. When you understand the unique aspects of those around you, you can appreciate the distinct way they can contribute value to the team or organization. Recognize that others have different ways of being, and those differences can complement yours.

Bring your full self to work. Become self-aware and get clear on the six drivers of your personal brand. You can't contribute your distinctive value if you aren't sure of what it is.

If you're a leader, incorporate these actions into your leadership style:

Establish a shared purpose and vision. Well-defined common goals on a grand scale will unite your people, focusing them on something big that they can achieve together.

Invest in talent development. Sponsor team training and coaching programs on topics like personal branding and emotional intelligence that help employees get to know themselves and their colleagues. [Self-awareness is foundational for leading effectively](#) and inspiring a sense of belonging.

Be collaborative. Being inclusive, collaborative, and supportive builds a culture where everyone feels welcome and valued. Be thoughtful when you're deciding who to include in your communications and meetings, and most importantly in the decision-making process.

Express gratitude. Creating a sense of belonging requires being emotionally intelligent. And leaders with high Emotional Quotient understand that people want to be appreciated for the work they do. [Research from Preply](#) revealed that the most emotionally intelligent phrase at work is "I appreciate you/your work."

Reward those who foster belonging. As a leader you can increase everyone's sense of belonging when you call out others for building an environment that amps up belonging. When your people become belonging advocates, the entire team benefits.

Paired with personal branding as a team effort, these steps can help any organization become a place where people are motivated and dedicated—because they know they're making a meaningful impact.

William Arruda is a keynote speaker, co-founder of CareerBlast.TV and co-creator of the Personal Brand Power Audit - a complimentary quiz that helps you measure the strength of personal brand.

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