

Boosting Belonging in a Diverse Workplace



Exercises

A culture of belonging in any team or workplace is not something that is organic or simply there with the right mix of people. It is built and cultivated, starting with the smallest agent of change – YOU – and rippling out to others that you work and interact with nearly every day. Use the strategies below to help you boost belonging at your workplace.

Assessing belonging uncertainty

Belonging uncertainty is a state of mind in which we have doubt about whether we’re fully accepted (or ever could be) in a given environment. Anyone can experience this feeling, both in and outside of work. Certain groups, like those belonging to non-dominant or under-represented demographic groups, may be more at risk.

Read the questions below and rate how strongly you agree with each statement on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is “strongly disagree” and 5 is “strongly agree.” Jot down an example you’ve observed or experienced in the space.

Do I feel like I belong?	Rating	Example
Do people notice me and what I do?	1 2 3 4 5	
Are there people I feel connected to here?	1 2 3 4 5	
Do I feel valued and appreciated?	1 2 3 4 5	
Does it feel like people like me belong here?	1 2 3 4 5	
Do I feel comfortable just being myself?	1 2 3 4 5	
Do I help others feel like they belong?		
Do I ask for others’ point of view?	1 2 3 4 5	
Do I make an effort to connect with others, even those who aren’t like me?	1 2 3 4 5	
Do I accept and value others’ differences?	1 2 3 4 5	
Do I try to learn and/or appreciate the challenges of others?	1 2 3 4 5	

Identify your core values

We all hold principles that help guide our thoughts and actions towards others. These **core values** come into play both in and outside of work. Getting in touch with our core values can help guide you as you put the strategies for bolstering belonging into practice. Consider the questions below:

- **What kind of colleague do I want to be?**
Write down at least 3 words.
- **What is important to me?** What do you want to bring to the workplace each day?
Write down 3 examples.
- **How do I want others to perceive me,** not just as a colleague, but as a human being?
Write down at least 3 words.

Core values check-in

Try to take time each day to check in with yourself on how you're living by your values. Ask yourself some questions:

- Did you represent your best self today?
- Where did you fall short?
- Where did you do well?
- How can you do better?

Asking these questions is usually enough to “prime” them as we go about our day. You might choose a time to make it a routine:

- In the morning after you wake up
- At the start or end of the workday
- Before or after a meeting

Forging connections at work

Small interactions at work can leave you feeling engaged, motivated, and valued. Use the conversation starters and activities below to forge connections with colleagues. These may be done in person or virtually. Participants may offer encouragement, brainstorm solutions, or share their own stories.

- **Show-and-tell:** Bring or show an object that means something to you and explain why.
- **Team playlist:** Have each person offer a song to contribute to the “team playlist” and share why they’ve chosen it (bonus if you actually make it!).
- **Mini memoirs:** Summarize your life story using only 6 words or less.
- **Life lessons:** An alien has landed on Earth and needs to learn how to live among us. What is one “life lesson” you’d teach them? How did you learn it?
- **Gratitude:** Share something someone (in or outside of work) has done for you recently you appreciated. What was the impact of their actions?
- **Goals:** Share a goal you’re working towards and what you’ve done so far to achieve it.
- **Challenges:** Share the last challenge you had at work and how you overcame it. What did you learn?
- **Mood meter:** Share a GIF or make a facial expression that summarizes your mood right now. What about your mood at the end of the workday? Weekends?
- **Give credit:** Share something positive you’ve noticed about a colleague lately.
- **Workplace rituals:** Create a ritual you can stick to for at least a week (or more if it feels appropriate). Pick a time, place, frequency, and the activity that everyone can agree on.

Our superhero team

Everyone brings something unique and special to the workplace. Review the strengths and skills below. Work your way through each of your teammates, writing their name under their “super strength.” Try to look past stereotypes and reflect on what you truly appreciate about your colleagues. Then, decide as a group on a name for your superhero team!

Personal strengths:

- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| • Humor | • Empathy | • Adaptability | • Creativity | • Honesty |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Confidence | • Ambition | • Patience | • Dedication | • Discipline |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Leadership | • Resilience | • Curiosity | • Enthusiasm | • Flexibility |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Motivation | • Calm | • Humility | • Adventurousness | • Intelligence |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Persistence | • Cooperation | • Loyalty | • Appreciation | • Wisdom |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Open-mindedness | • Authenticity | • Kindness | • Fairness | • Other: |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Workplace skills:

- | | | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| • Listens well | • Punctual | • Critical thinking | • Detail-oriented | • Problem-solver |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Cooperative | • Strategic thinking | • Systems/software | • Negotiation | • Research skills |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Technical skills | • Organization | • Numeric data/skills | • Public speaking | • Conflict resolution |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Calm under pressure | • Simplifying concepts | • Project management | • Time management | • Coaching/training |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Networking | • Inspiring | • Reliability | • Customer service | • Observant |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Crisis management | • Conceptual thinking | • Creative thinking | • Managing people | • Collaboration/teamwork |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| • Writing skills | • Brainstorming | • Design/artistic | • Troubleshooting | • Other: |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Our team's superhero name is: _____

Addressing Offensive Behavior

At work, you may see behavior or hear statements that are offensive, hurtful, or contribute to an exclusionary work environment. Whether or not you are the subject of the behavior, it is important to address this behavior to create an environment where everyone feels welcome. Use the tips below to help you learn how to address this behavior proactively.

Prepare your mindset

Make a commitment to addressing offensive or exclusionary behavior in the workplace. Tell yourself that you are a person who will speak up when you hear or see something that is hurtful to you or others. Addressing others' behavior can be scary. Making a mental commitment is a good first step towards giving you the courage to do so.

Be aware of the risks. Depending on your relationship with the other person, there may be risks to speaking up. You may want to approach your teammate differently than you would an acquaintance. There may be consequences for speaking up when it involves someone in a position of authority. Consider your relationship with the other person before addressing the behavior. It may be advisable to involve a manager instead of directly confronting someone yourself.

Expect and accept discomfort. It is not easy to confront or give tough feedback to someone you interact with most days of the week. This discomfort can be lessened by preparing phrases to use when the behavior occurs. It may also be easier to offer feedback to colleagues with whom you have an established relationship.

Understand that exclusionary behavior stands in the way of feeling a sense of belonging at work. Exclusionary behavior that goes unchecked can make you and others feel ill-at-ease, isolated, maybe even personally attacked: the opposite of belonging. Addressing it proactively, yet gently, helps to create an environment in which everyone feels like they belong.

Speaking up in the moment

Try to address offensive comments or jokes as soon as possible, while it is fresh in the person's mind. But be mindful of how, especially in front of others. Ask exploratory questions to start: "Can you say more about what you meant by that?" Then share your perspective: "I heard that this way..."

Always assume the other person is speaking with positive intent. Don't jump to conclusions about what they meant by the act or comment. Try to recognize when your own biases and assumptions have come into play and bring your focus back to what they are saying. Ask for the meaning behind their words and actions.

Have responses at the ready. Biased or insensitive comments can occur unexpectedly: in a team meeting, the cafeteria, overheard in the next cubicle, in the hallway. It helps to have statements memorized and ready to deploy so you can address it in the moment, when it is most impactful. The words you choose may depend on your workplace relationship. Example statements might include:

- "I don't find that statement funny."
- "That statement hurts me because ____."
- "I'm surprised to hear you say that."
- "It sounded like you said _____. Is that what you meant?"
- "That phrase doesn't help me feel accepted here."
- "I'd like to share with you how I heard that comment."

Know when there is an opportunity to explore a deeper meaning behind the words or actions.

This allows you to build a bridge across difference and come to a mutual understanding with the other person. Respectfully asking exploratory questions allows the speaker to think about the meaning behind their words. It gives you the chance to extend the conversation rather than shutting it down. Example questions include:

- “Can you tell me more about what you mean by that?”
- “Why do you feel that way?”
- “What has led you to believe that?”
- “How might someone else interpret that?”
- “It seems like you’re assuming ____ about that person. Is that how you see it?”

Be mindful of how the message is delivered. Do not shame or lecture. Oftentimes, people may not realize the comment or act is offensive. They may be unaware how they are being perceived. Avoid using labels like “racist” or “sexist,” as they make others defensive and not open to change. Try to tap into empathy for the other person and ask yourself: “How would I want to hear this?”

Don’t be a bystander, be an ally. Speaking up can feel uncomfortable, especially when you are the lone voice in the room. If someone brings up a concern over an offensive comment before you, voice your support. Check in on them after the discussion. Ask them how you can best support them as a colleague and teammate.

If you are the offender...

Keep your emotions in check. It is never easy to hear that we have offended or hurt someone. Try to keep defensiveness at bay. Calm your thoughts by focusing solely on what the other person is saying to you.

Sincerely apologize. Even if you didn’t intend to, the fact is that this person was hurt by something you said or did. Apologizing does not mean that you are “wrong” or that you meant to harm them. It simply acknowledges the person’s feelings. Thank them for letting you know.



Communication style matters

- Speak from your own experience, using “I” statements. Avoid using “we” statements to refer to “people in general,” such as “we were taught to believe...”
- Keep a calm, compassionate tone of voice. Don’t raise your voice, even if the other person does.
- Avoid hostile or aggressive questions, like “What *exactly* did you mean by that?” This can make the other person defensive before hearing what you’ve said.
- Be mindful of your facial expressions. Eye rolls or frowns can shut down a conversation.
- Keep an open and relaxed posture. Avoid aggressive body language like crossed arms or an aggressive stance.
- Give some space. Don’t fill silences that can overwhelm the other person. Allow them time to think and respond. Keep questions simple and exploratory.

Ask follow-up questions to learn more: “Can you tell me more about how you perceived my comment?” Try to learn the context behind their feelings. This helps you internalize the feedback so you’re less likely to repeat the behavior.

Try to let go of negative feelings or defensiveness and move forward. We all make mistakes. Think of your colleagues like a sort of family: you don’t always see eye-to-eye, but you work through challenges and emerge with a stronger connection.

References: Eunmi Haslam, R. (2022). *Interrupting bias: Calling out vs. calling in*. Seed the Way.
http://www.seedtheway.com/uploads/8/8/0/0/8800499/interrupting_bias_calling_out_vs._calling_in_revised_oct2022_2_.pdf