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A Time to Belong



T

he pandemic may be easing, but in a world scarred by lockdowns, home schooling, and remote work, people have lost their sense of being connected—connected to work, connected to people, and connected to purpose. People have a basic need and intrinsic motivation to feel a sense of belonging. As the world continues to evolve and more people remain in hybrid or remote roles, many organizations are grappling with how to create a sense of belonging.

A quick Google search defines *belonging* as “an affinity for a place or situation,” with synonyms including *affiliation*, *acceptance*, and *partnership*. Another definition says, “Belonging is the feeling of being part of something and mattering to others.” The concept of psychological safety is also often embedded in the idea of belonging: the confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up with ideas. These

definitions give us some ideas on how we might approach this as employers.

Why is this important? Research has shown that having a sense of belonging leads to greater happiness and overall well-being, as well as reduced feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. It also shows that people who feel they belong perform better, become more resilient, and challenge themselves more. And finally, strong belonging increases job performance by 56 percent, reduces turnover risk by 50 percent, and decreases sick days taken by employees by 75 percent, with the potential to save a large corporation millions annually. People want to feel like they’re a part of something bigger than themselves and that what they do matters. And this matters to employers now more than ever.

What you can do? There is a good deal of research that suggests one key to creating a sense of belonging is effort. The Mayo Clinic says, “You cannot belong if you don’t choose to make the effort to engage with others.” This goes for employers too. In

this ever-evolving world of work, where hybrid and remote work will continue, employers need to make an effort to create and nurture a sense of belonging as well. But that is just the start. There are a slew of other steps to take, including these:

CREATE A SENSE OF COMMUNITY. Identify opportunities to create regular interactions among teams and functions, maintain opportunities for continued collaboration through multidisciplinary projects, teams, and work streams, and find opportunities for colleagues to give back through volunteering or other charitable events.

ENABLE EMPOWERMENT. Encourage colleagues to share ideas, encourage productive feedback, and create a respectful environment where others can feel heard, appreciated, and valued. Encourage kindness, gratitude, and empathy in the workplace.

PRACTICE EMPATHY. This is probably worth a callout, as it has been a topic that has risen to the top over the past two years. With social unrest, political upheaval, and a global pandemic, among other things, understanding where people are coming from, appreciating differences, and acting with compassion couldn’t be more important.

BUILD TRUST. This is foundational—people need to have trust in your leadership, goals, vision, and purpose. Build that trust by communicating often and with honesty and being authentic.

LEAD. Be an active leader, not a passive one. Pay attention to your team members and colleagues. Acknowledge the big and the small accomplishments. Ask your colleagues for input and involve them in decisions that affect their work.

PROVIDE GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES. In this environment, it’s even more critical to ensure that people



see the opportunities for growth and development. And when you have both in-person and remote employees, be sure you include a mix in key projects and opportunities.

This certainly isn’t an exhaustive list, but there are things everyone can do to help create a sense of belonging. As the work environment continues to shift and evolve, so must we as leaders and colleagues. There’s no better time to be intentional about belonging. ▀

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