

The Power of Belonging: A Guide for Employees and Leaders

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Belonging Is Everyone's Job: How to Build a Culture Where People Feel They Matter

October is Healthy Workplace Month, a time to reflect on the practices and values that help us thrive at work. One of the most powerful drivers of well-being is a sense of belonging. When we feel included for who we are, our engagement is stronger, our stress is lower, and our resiliency improves.



Why Belonging Matters

Belonging is a fundamental human need. Psychologists recognize that feeling connected to a group is essential for mental health. In workplaces, employees who feel they belong are more likely to collaborate effectively and demonstrate loyalty. By contrast, employees who experience exclusion are at higher risk of stress, anxiety, and burnout.

More than one in four of Canadians report experiencing discrimination at work, with Indigenous, racialized, and disabled employees reporting higher rates. Legislation requires employers to remove barriers for designated groups, such as women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and racialized employees.

Additionally, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action highlight the need for workplaces to create culturally safe spaces for Indigenous employees. By integrating Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (EDI-B) principles into EAP services, organizations can ensure that support is equitable, culturally responsive, and accessible, reinforcing a workplace where everyone can thrive.

How Employees Can Foster Belonging

Employees play a vital part in fostering a true sense of belonging in the workplace. Individual everyday actions that can strengthen inclusion and improve wellbeing include:

- **Practice active listening:** When coworkers speak, listen attentively and validate their experiences to build belonging.
- **Be inclusive:** Be mindful of how you refer to others; avoid assumptions about culture or identity. Also manage your non-verbal communication including turn-taking in conversations and inviting quieter people in.
- **Connect across differences:** Reach out to people whose backgrounds or roles are different than yours. Learn how others experience your workplace. This helps break down silos.
- **Be open to feedback:** When someone gives feedback about something you said or did that made them feel excluded or unheard, listen non-defensively and adjust. We all make mistakes; what counts is a willingness to learn.



How Leaders Can Foster Belonging

Leaders carry a unique responsibility to set the tone of workplace culture and play a critical role in creating belonging by modeling inclusive behaviors and setting equitable practices.

Through their decisions and actions, leaders can help employees feel psychologically safe, valued, and supported. Leadership behaviours that foster belonging include:

- **Model psychological safety:** Encourage people to speak up, admit mistakes, give honest feedback—all without fear of negative consequences. Make it clear that vulnerabilities are part of growth.
- **Ensure fairness, equity, and transparency in decisions:** Make sure performance, promotions, rewards, resource allocation are fair; make criteria visible; avoid opaque processes.
- **Actively solicit input and feedback—and follow up:** Use surveys, listening sessions, one-on-ones. Importantly: act on what you hear or explain why some things can't be changed. Loop back so people know they were heard.
- **Recognize and celebrate diversity:** Celebrate different cultural events/holidays, share personal stories, mark the diversity in the team so that people feel their identity matters in the organization.
- **Provide opportunities for growth:** Ensure that people from underrepresented groups have pathways for development. This helps them believe that the organization invests in them.
- **Design inclusive policies, practices, and environments:** Review onboarding processes, flexible working, benefits, meeting norms, physical/digital accessibility. Adjust so that all employees can thrive.
- **Train people (including leaders) to be culturally competent:** Provide training on unconscious bias, inclusive leadership, intersectionality, inclusive communication, etc. Leadership should be accountable for EDI-B work.

"Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice be heard."

Liz Fosslien

Belonging is a shared responsibility.

Leaders set the tone by embedding EDI-B into organizational practices and creating spaces where everyone feels psychologically safe.

Employees reinforce this culture through everyday actions and bringing their authentic selves to work.

Together, leaders and employees can cultivate a workplace where everyone belongs and can reach their full potential.

