

BELONGING

creating spaces of inclusion

We arrive in this world wired for connection. From our first breath, we seek the gaze that affirms we are seen, the touch that tells us we are held, the voice that says we matter. This longing to belong doesn't diminish as we grow. It simply takes new forms, weaving through every aspect of our lives, shaping how we show up in our communities, our workplaces, and our most intimate relationships.

Belonging is perhaps the most fundamental of human needs, yet in our increasingly fragmented world, true belonging has become elusive for many. We find ourselves in spaces where we can participate but not fully contribute, where we are tolerated but not celebrated, where we are present but not truly seen. We learn to navigate these spaces by compartmentalizing, by covering aspects of our identity, by making ourselves smaller or quieter or less disruptive. We convince ourselves this is enough: to be included, to be allowed in the room. But deep down, we know there is a difference between inclusion and belonging.

There's a particular irony in how often I've witnessed organizations proudly announce their cultures of belonging

while maintaining systems that require people to cover who they truly are. The diversity statement on the website sits alongside unwritten rules about professionalism that penalize cultural expressions outside the dominant norm. The celebration of Pride Month coexists with subtle expectations that LGBTQ+ employees won't make others uncomfortable by being "too out." The commitment to racial equity coexists with promotion practices that reward those who assimilate to leadership styles defined by and for the majority culture.

These contradictions aren't always malicious; they often stem from an incomplete understanding of what belonging truly requires. We've become adept at the language of inclusion without fully reckoning with how our structures, practices, and unspoken expectations continue to demand conformity rather than celebrating authenticity. We've mastered the art of inviting diverse people to our table without considering that perhaps the table itself—how it's structured, who built it, what behaviors are rewarded at it—might be the very thing preventing true belonging.

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I think of all the rooms I've entered throughout my life where I carefully calibrated what parts of myself to reveal. As a woman in predominantly male spaces. As a queer person in environments where heteronormativity was the unquestioned default. As someone navigating the complexities of multiple

identities in a world that prefers simple categories. I became skilled at these calculations, such as how much of myself could I safely bring forward? What aspects needed to remain hidden to maintain acceptance? What would be the cost of complete authenticity, and was I willing to pay it?

The exhaustion of this constant calculation is something many of us know intimately but rarely name. We develop a sixth sense for the unwritten rules: which topics are too political for the workplace, which personal stories are acceptable to share, which parts of our cultural heritage, gender expression, or family structure might make others uncomfortable. This vigilance consumes enormous amounts of energy. Energy that could otherwise fuel creativity, connection, and meaningful contribution.

What I've observed over decades of working with organizations is how often leaders underestimate this cost. They wonder why engagement surveys show disconnection while failing to recognize how their cultures subtly signal to many that complete authenticity is risky. They create "belonging initiatives" that exist alongside evaluation systems that reward those who most closely resemble the existing leadership in style, approach, and background. They express frustration when certain groups remain underrepresented at senior levels while maintaining narrow definitions of "executive presence" that effectively require covering from anyone outside the dominant group.

True belonging isn't about finding places where we can fit in by making ourselves acceptable to others. It's about creating spaces where we can all show up in our fullness without fear, spaces where dignity is not something to be earned but recognized as inherent to our humanity. Where our unique perspectives aren't merely tolerated but understood as essential threads in a richer, more vibrant tapestry. Where we don't

have to leave parts of ourselves at the door but can bring our whole, integrated selves across the threshold.

Creating such spaces requires more than good intentions or inclusive policies. It requires a fundamental willingness to examine the disconnect between what we say we value and what our systems reward. It means asking uncomfortable questions: Whose comfort are we prioritizing when we establish norms around communication, conflict, or collaboration? What assumptions about “the right way to be” are embedded in our criteria for success? Which expressions of identity do we celebrate and which do we subtly suppress?

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This examination isn't about blame or shame. It's about honest recognition that most of our institutions were designed by and for a relatively homogeneous group of people, not out of malice, but from the limited perspective any homogeneous group naturally has. The structures they created inevitably reflect their experiences, preferences, and blind spots. Acknowledging this isn't an indictment of individual intentions; it's simply a necessary starting point for meaningful change.

I've witnessed the profound difference when organizations move beyond superficial inclusion initiatives to this deeper work of systemic transformation. When they commit not just to diversifying who sits at the table but to reimagining the table itself. When they create spaces for honest conversation

about the gap between stated values and lived experiences. When they're willing to be uncomfortable, make mistakes, and learn continuously from perspectives they previously overlooked.

In these spaces, something remarkable begins to happen. People stop spending energy managing impressions and start investing it in genuine connection and creativity. They bring their full intelligence—not just the analytical kind but the emotional and intuitive kinds as well—to solving problems and generating new possibilities. They build relationships based not on superficial similarities but on authentic sharing across differences. And as a result, they discover capacities for innovation, adaptation, and meaningful work that were simply unavailable when everyone was trying to fit into a predefined mold.

But let me be clear: creating cultures of belonging isn't just good for organizations or communities in some utilitarian sense. It's fundamentally about honoring the dignity inherent in each human being. It's about recognizing that when anyone feels they must diminish themselves to be accepted, something essential is lost, not just for that person but for all of us. Each time someone cannot bring their whole self into a space, we all miss out on gifts that might have been shared, insights that might have been offered, and connections that might have been formed.

This loss is especially acute in times of uncertainty and change. When we face challenges that have no precedent, when we navigate terrain for which we have no maps, we need the full spectrum of human experience and perspective available to us. We need people who think differently, who see what others miss, who bring varied lived experiences to the questions before us. Yet these are precisely the moments when the pressure to conform, to cover, to present only the most acceptable parts of ourselves often intensifies.

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What would it mean to move through the world with an awareness of these dynamics? To enter each space, whether a meeting room, a classroom, a community gathering, or a family dinner, to notice not just the spoken values around belonging but the unspoken signals about who truly belongs? It would mean developing a new kind of attention, one that observes the gap between what we claim to value and what our practices reward. Who speaks and who remains silent. Whose ideas are built upon and whose are overlooked. Whose comfort is prioritized and whose is compromised.

It would mean cultivating the courage to address these contradictions, not with defensiveness or denial, but with genuine curiosity and commitment to change. To recognize that creating cultures of belonging requires more than good intentions or beautiful language. It requires the willingness to reimagine systems, to redistribute power, to reconsider what we've always taken for granted about how things are done. To understand that our intent, however noble, doesn't negate the impact of our actions or the structures we maintain.

And perhaps most challenging, it would mean embracing the vulnerability inherent in acknowledging that our organizations, and we ourselves, may be participating in the very dynamics we claim to be dismantling. That despite our best intentions, we may be asking people to cover in ways we

don't even recognize. That our own comfort with the familiar may be limiting our ability to create spaces where others can truly belong.

I've experienced both sides of this equation: being the person required to cover essential parts of myself to be accepted, and being the person whose unexamined preferences or assumptions contributed to others feeling they couldn't fully belong. Neither role is comfortable to acknowledge. But I've found that this discomfort is precisely where the possibility of transformation begins. When we can hold both our genuine desire for inclusive communities and our participation in systems that undermine that desire, we open space for authentic change.

I believe this tension between our aspiration for belonging and the reality of our structures is not a reason for despair but an invitation to deeper work. Not an indication of failure but a natural part of the messy, imperfect process of human community evolving toward greater wholeness. What matters is not whether we've achieved perfect alignment between our values and our systems, but whether we're willing to continuously examine the gap and take meaningful steps to narrow it.

In the end, belonging isn't something we find; it's something we create together, moment by moment, choice by choice, relationship by relationship. It emerges when we dare to show up authentically and to create conditions where others can do the same. When we recognize that safety doesn't come from controlling what's allowed to be expressed, but from creating cultures where every expression is received with respect and care. When we understand that we don't need to be the same to belong to one another, we need only to recognize the dignity that lives in each of us and to commit ourselves to honoring it.

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This is the work before us in these uncertain times: to move beyond the rhetoric of belonging to the reality of creating spaces where covering is no longer the price of acceptance. To recognize the contradiction between claiming to value authenticity while maintaining systems that penalize it. To have the courage to examine not just our intentions but the actual experience of those we invite into our communities. And from that honest examination, to begin the patient, imperfect work of aligning what we say with what we do.

May we find the courage for this journey. May we embrace the discomfort it inevitably brings. And may we discover, through our commitment to authentic belonging, not just healthier organizations and communities, but a more whole and human way of being together in this beautiful, broken world.