

Missing Your People: Why Belonging Is So Important And How To Create It



Tracy Brower

Contributor

[Careers](#)

I write about work-life happiness and fulfillment.

-
-
-



Belonging is a fundamental human need.

GETTY

The pandemic has played havoc with our mental health, and a significant factor in our malaise is that we're missing our people—terribly. We long for friends, family and colleagues. We are hardwired for connection, and with the need for social distancing and the reality of being away from the workplace—and everything else—for such a long period of time, we are struggling.

It's all about our need for belonging—but belonging is more than what you might have thought. Understanding it can help contribute to our emotional wellbeing and it can pave the way toward a more fulfilling year ahead. Here's what to know and how to create it.

Engagement and Social Identity

Belonging is, of course, that feeling of connectedness to a group or community. It's the sense that you're part of something. You feel attached, close and thoroughly accepted by your people. But belonging is more than just

being part of a group. Belonging is also critically tied to social identity—a set of shared beliefs or ideals. To truly feel a sense of belonging, you must feel unity and a common sense of character with and among members of your group.

In his book, the *Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt calls this "vital engagement." It is a web of relationships and a sense of community in which you feel connected with activity, tradition and the group itself. Jeanine Stewart, senior consultant with the Neuroleadership Institute, whom I had the chance to interview, says when we share a sense of social identity with a group, we can lean in, use our strengths and be authentically who we are. "Being surrounded by other human beings doesn't guarantee a sense of belonging. Belonging actually has to do with identification as a member of a group and the higher quality interactions which come from that. It's the interactions over time which are supportive of us as full, authentic human beings." All of these are important to fulfillment and to the success of the organization as a whole.

[A study published in PlosOne found](#) belonging was more than just about having friends. Group membership was also important, and it contributed to self-esteem. A large group of friends didn't predict self-esteem but belonging to multiple groups did. Says Jolanda Jetten, the lead researcher, "Groups often have rich value and belief systems, and when we identify with groups, these can provide a lens through which we see the world." One of the reasons work is such a powerful source of belonging is because we typically share identity and goals with our team.

MORE FOR YOU

Why The Office Simply Cannot Go Away: The Compelling Case For The Workplace

For Productivity And Career Growth The Office Is Best: Here's Why According To Science

Change Management Strategies For Getting Back To Work: 10 Ways To Ensure Success

A Fundamental Need

Belonging is a fundamental part of being human: We need people and this need is hardwired into our brains. [A recent MIT study](#) found we crave interactions in the same region of our brains where we crave food, and [another study showed](#) we experience social exclusion in the same region of our brain where we experience physical pain. [Work at the](#) University of British Columbia found when we experience ostracism at work, it can lead to job dissatisfaction and health problems. In a similar vein, a [study at the University of Michigan](#) found when people lack a sense of belonging, it is a strong predictor of depression. In fact, it is an even stronger predictor than feelings of loneliness or a lack of social support.

It's also telling to look at animal examples. According to Stewart, "When something is conserved across species, it's an indication that some elements of our behavior are driven by things that are more basic, and which we can witness." [Research from Florida Atlantic University](#) provides a telling example in beluga whales. Their study found these whales form complex social relationships with close kin, but also with distantly related and unrelated whales. This is mirrored in human behavior as well, in our connections with close friends and family as well as with those who are more distant.

The Impact on Habits and Performance

The human desire for connection also drives behavior. Smartphone design and addiction are a case in point: [A study published in Frontiers in Psychology](#) found smartphones are compelling because they tap into fundamental needs to connect. According to the research, humans have a deep desire to monitor others and to be monitored by them—to be seen and heard and considered by others. It is this alignment with our social needs which makes smartphones especially hard to put down. [Separate research](#) related to teams at work found when people felt a great level of cohesion with their colleagues, they performed better and the desire for acceptance from the group was a greater motivator than money. People have a clear need to identify with a group and be accepted as a vital member of a community.

Creating Belonging

Since belonging is so important—and since the pandemic has exacerbated the need for belonging—we must be intentional about creating it with and among others. We can do this in tangible ways.

- ***Embrace groups.*** Build your friendships with individuals, but also consider joining personal or professional groups with which you feel a common sense of purpose and solidarity. Remind yourself of the identity you share with co-workers and consider joining or creating additional groups with your work colleagues. Join the running club at your company or start a readers group with others who work for your organization. Being part of something—and the coherence and alignment between your goals and the group's purpose will help you feel a greater sense of belonging.

- ***Be authentic.*** According to some experts, trust is built when you are authentic, empathetic and perceived as competent. You can create the conditions for belonging when you are open and vulnerable as well as when you are empathetic toward others. [Researcher John Cacioppo](#) also found when people interacted more effectively with others, it tended to mitigate loneliness and pave the way toward belonging.
- ***Signal acceptance.*** When people lack a sense of belonging, they may feel threatened or alone, causing them to withdraw or hold back. On the other hand, Stewart points out, “When we are feeling a sense of comfort, we are in the best state physiologically to engage.” Colleagues can signal acceptance and help ensure the people around them feel safe, by asking questions, listening and demonstrating focused attention. The start of a meeting can be an opportunity according to Stewart, “Choose to take a moment, if you’re leading a meeting, to ask how people are doing and then really listen. Listening is the new super power,” she says. “If we can’t create belonging through physical closeness in the ways we used to, we can and must think about how we might create that through focused attention and listening.” Creating these kinds of conditions will contribute toward our collective willingness to invest ourselves.

Belonging is a necessary ingredient for our performance—individually, in teams and for our organizations—because we can more effectively engage and [bring our best selves to their work](#). And even more importantly, belonging is good for our wellbeing as humans. It’s important for individual physical, mental and emotional health and it’s critical to the health of our communities.

The pandemic has brought belonging into sharpened focus and our opportunity is to find a way to create it for ourselves and others.

Follow me on [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#). Check out my [website](#) or some of my other work [here](#).



Tracy Brower