

Belonging



How do we use our new skills to foster employee engagement when the world is in constant flux?

2021 is shaping up to be the year that **flexibility** and **attunement** become our go-to moves. We practiced both those attributes in 2020, in some instances, surprising ourselves with our ability to recognise the need and adapt at speed. This year, those skills are no longer optional; they've become the wrench and screwdriver in our basic tool kit.

Some have called 2020 the Great Reset. We faced a pandemic, deep societal and political divisions, a flashpoint in the conversations around racial injustice and gender inequality, and workplace culture and practices have been heavily affected by those issues. As the folkster and musical poet, Bob Dylan, once declared, *the times they are a changing*.

So now that the training wheels are off on our ability to radically pivot, what ways can we counter the polarities, the disconnection, the distancing caused by so much disruption? And within our organisations, how do we use our new skills to foster employee alignment when the world is in constant flux?

Recent Global studies indicate that the key influence in keeping employees engaged is having **a sense of belonging**. And it's predicted that this marker will not only increase in 2021 and onwards but will significantly reshape the employee experience.¹ This deep need to belong is affected by a number of factors, including²:

- Shifting generational expectations
- Competition for talent
- Rate of change within organisations
- Power of social media to affect an organisation's reputation

What is a Sense of Belonging?

So, what does a sense of belonging mean, and what does it look like in 2021? Decades ago, psychologist, Carl Rogers, described belonging as “a unique and subjective experience that relates to a yearning for connection with others, the need for positive regard, and the desire for interpersonal connection.”³ Belonging, in this sense, is not about participation, but relies on our own perception of the quality of our relationships.

Those perceptions and feelings have their biochemical origin in the production of oxytocin, often referred to as the “love” or “conforming” hormone, which helps us build trust, empathy, and cooperation. When we feel we belong, oxytocin levels increase, and so we are stimulated to conform to our group’s norms.

2020 surveys⁴ from Deloitte revealed that 25% of respondents identified **comfort** as the biggest driver of belonging; 31% said that it was **a sense connection**; and 44% felt they belonged when they were **contributing** and being valued for it. These attributes are interconnected and mutually sustaining.

- **Comfort** encompasses the notion of diversity and inclusion, and a person’s belief that they will be treated fairly, with respect, and encouraged to have a voice. Many organisations have already made significant steps towards fostering this kind of workplace, supported by legislative changes, and an awakened cultural understanding of injustices and biases.
- **Connection**, in this instance, relates to an employee feeling part of both their team and the larger system they work within, and is best expressed by the desire to build a community at work.
- **Contribution** strongly links an individual’s contributions in their role, to their sense that they are allied with their organisation’s purpose and values and actions.

Where in the past employees have sought both comfort and connection at work to feel engaged, this has now evolved into needing to feel aligned and able to meaningfully impact their organisation’s intentions, directions, and actions.

As leaders, 2021 is likely to be a year where our dissolving work silos, flattening hierarchies, and our increased attention to what our employees are saying, will help us to deeply embed our ability to stay flexible and constantly attuned to what our people need.



Enacting the Belonging Factors

While recognising the “belonging factor” is an important step for leaders, enacting it is how we move forward. Here are some suggestions for building upon what workplace studies have shown us is so important.



Be strategic, timely, and specific with employee recognition⁵

Consider “how” your employee is most comfortable receiving positive feedback and use specificity to make it authentic.



Conduct a STAY interview

We all know about Exit interviews, but more organisations are dipping into STAY interviews. Stay interviews explore what will keep an employee at an organisation and can therefore help address turnover issues and replace employee satisfaction surveys. Use this process to commit to positive, actionable changes.⁶



Encourage job crafting

Job crafting is an active and positive way for your employee to reach their potential within the broader parameters of their role. Use your newfound flexible mindset to make this possible.



Be a leader whose employees feel they can ask for help

Show that you value your people by contributing to their holistic wellbeing. The leading cause of struggle in Australian workplaces in 2020 was mental health, and more than half of those surveyed named loneliness as the reason (lack of a sense of connection or belonging).⁷



Prioritise confidentiality

An employee’s comfort is often tied into being able to express their vulnerability. Show them that they are in a psychologically safe environment that they can invest in.



Review Pay structures

20% of turnover is attributed to financial stress. Understand the needs of your workforce. It might be more useful to your employees to be paid on-demand.⁸

References

1. https://www.qualtrics.com/ebooks-guides/employee-experience-trends-2021/?utm_lp=blog-belonging-at-work
2. <https://www.qualtrics.com/au/experience-management/employee/employee-experience/?rid=ip&prevsite=en&newsite=au&geo=AU&geomatch=au>
3. https://www.academia.edu/3191602/Client_centered_therapy_Its_current_practice_implications_and_theory
4. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2020/creating-a-culture-of-belonging.html>
5. <https://www.qualtrics.com/au/experience-management/employee/employee-recognition/?rid=ip&prevsite=en&newsite=au&geo=AU&geomatch=au>
6. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/what-is-a-stay-interview-1917998>
7. https://www.ahri.com.au/media/4655/wellbeinglab_workplacesurvey2020.pdf
8. https://www.ey.com/en_gl/financial-services-technical-resources/payday-pressure-looking-to-flexible-salary-solutions

