

Belonging in the Workplace: A Guide for Employers

ELECTION YEAR EDITION



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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
What Is Belonging in the Workplace?	5
The Business Case for Belonging	6
How Did We Get Here?	8
Five Steps to Cultivating Belonging in the Workplace	10
STEP 1: Identify and Live Your Corporate Values	10
STEP 2: Create a Culture of Respectful Communication	11
STEP 3: Empower Your Workers	14
STEP 4: Integrate Belonging Into Company Structures and Policies	16
STEP 5: Measure Your Progress for Continual Improvement and Accountability	17
Bottom Line	19
Acknowledgments & Resources	20

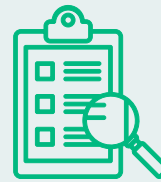


INTRODUCTION

The One-Minute Read

- Amid a contentious election season, Americans feel less connected and more divided. This climate of loneliness and polarization appears in the workplace as heightened stress, diminished engagement and increased absenteeism.
- As one of the nation's most trusted institutions, employers are in a unique position to counter loneliness and polarization, increasing employees' connections with each other and helping them work together more effectively.
- By developing and implementing a **strategy for belonging**, employers can realize business benefits. Fostering belonging enhances employees' feelings of security and value and has positive effects on retention, innovation, productivity and more. Intentional belonging is the next step in the evolution of a company's diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) journey.

Informed by business leaders and public health research, this guide is designed to help you:



Understand the current state of belonging in the workplace



Build a business case for developing a strategy on belonging



Take action to foster belonging and measure your progress



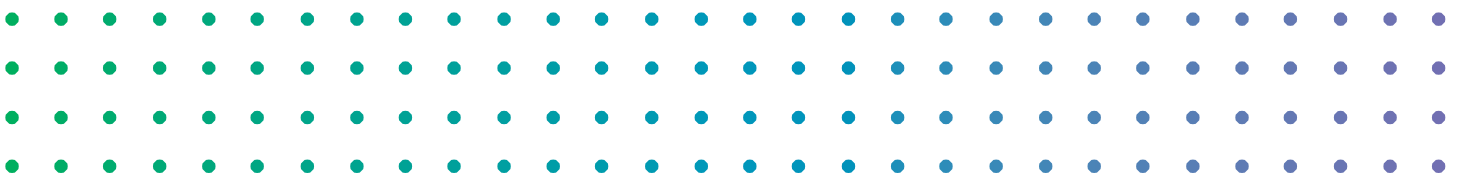
The five steps detailed in this guide offer a roadmap for employers to cultivate belonging in the workplace:

- 1. Identify and live your corporate values:** Take actions to bring your organization's mission statement to life, allowing employees to experience your stated values in consistent ways.
- 2. Create a culture of respectful communication:** Feeling secure enough to speak freely is a sign of psychological safety and belonging. Invite bold conversations at work, even about non-work topics. Modeling vulnerability and continually incorporating the language of belonging is fundamental to establishing a safe environment and facilitating difficult conversations.
- 3. Empower your workers:** Go deeper than annual surveys and your existing demographic data; enlist employee resource groups (ERGs) and allies to develop programming. Pay attention to frontline workers, get feedback from all worker communities, and champion employees' sense of self.
- 4. Integrate belonging into company structures and policies:** Belonging begins with hiring and onboarding and should extend to employees of all seniority levels through purposeful connection, mentorship and workstyles that play to employee strengths.
- 5. Measure your progress for continual improvement and accountability:** Once you have a plan for increasing belonging in the workplace, it's important to set transparent metrics. These targets should incorporate feedback from all employee groups, be reflected in individual performance objectives and be considered for public disclosure.

Thanks to the trust workers place in their employers, the diverse makeup of the workplace and the unrivaled capabilities of the private sector, companies have a distinct opportunity to foster belonging and decrease polarization, all while improving employees' mental health and boosting the bottom line.

By downloading this guide, you've taken an important first step. You can use this resource to learn more about belonging and help you create an action plan for your workplace.

And if you need additional coaching or support, reach out to us at: hello@healthaction.org



What Is Belonging in the Workplace?

Belonging is a core human desire, a need to connect with others and to feel accepted by them. Belonging is about authenticity, not conformity. When we feel a sense of belonging, we can show up as our authentic selves and know we are welcomed and valued. In the workplace, employees who feel they belong are healthier and more engaged, as well as better able and more willing to contribute to the organization's goals and mission.

The Belonging Barometer, a resource from the Center for Inclusion and Belonging and Over Zero, measures 10 elements of belonging in the workplace, including emotional connection to co-workers; feeling included, valued and equal; and the ability to influence decisions and show up authentically, among other factors.

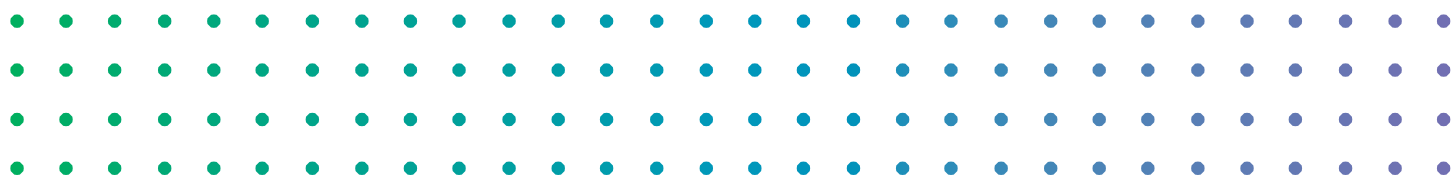
Loneliness Drives Polarization

The nation is increasingly lonely and polarized. Half of Americans report experiencing loneliness, and two-thirds believe that democracy is at risk in the upcoming election.

It's not a coincidence that feelings of loneliness and polarization are both running high at this moment. Research shows that, because we are social beings who evolved to rely on each other for survival, feeling isolated threatens our health and hinders our social abilities. In addition to negative health consequences and premature death, loneliness also closes people off from each other. When we don't feel like we belong, we're only half as likely to engage with people who have different backgrounds and beliefs, for example.

That reluctance to engage has political consequences. Recent studies have shown that loneliness contributes to people adopting radical or extremist views, and weak social belonging also decreases voter turnout.

Businesses rely on healthy, productive employees and a strong and stable democracy. Fostering belonging and reducing polarization helps achieve both goals.



The Business Case for Belonging

Businesses have a strong interest in enhancing belonging; there is a direct link between belonging and employee retention, engagement and performance.

A lack of belonging hurts employee productivity and innovation. Employees who don't feel a sense of belonging in the workplace are more likely to experience mental health problems that have costly implications for businesses. The Belonging Barometer indicates that lower employee engagement, loyalty and creativity are all also associated with a lack of belonging,

The Cost of Loneliness in the Workplace

\$154 Billion Loneliness can cost employers \$154 billion in absenteeism alone.
Cigna's Loneliness Index



Lonely employees miss about one week more work per year than other employees
Cigna's Loneliness Index

2x Lonely employees are twice as likely to consider quitting.
Cigna's Loneliness Index

12x

Employees who feel they don't belong are 12 times less likely to recommend their job to a friend, harming recruitment.
The Belonging Barometer



At the very core, it's a business problem. If you have employees who don't have a high level of health and well-being, then they're not going to be able to bring their best selves to the workplace.

Dr. Sohini Stone, Chief Medical Officer for Global Employee Health, Google



Conversely, creating a workplace environment that fosters belonging can yield many direct and indirect benefits, from increased productivity to healthier employees.

The Business Benefits of Belonging in the Workplace

Organizations that address the full spectrum of belonging are:



3x as likely to be high-performing



6x as likely to be innovative and agile



8x as likely to achieve better business outcomes

Deloitte

Belonging is a key factor in attracting talent. Employees don't just perform better when they belong — they actively seek belonging in choosing a workplace. We know that 93% of Gen Z believe that feeling like they belong at work is important, a noteworthy finding considering that this younger generation is set to overtake Baby Boomers in the workforce next year.

Polarization is a barrier to belonging. Polarization builds walls between employees, preventing them from experiencing the belonging they desire. During the 2020 election, for example, over a third of employees reported that they avoided talking to or working with a coworker because of their political beliefs, and a quarter said that the election had a moderate or big impact on their ability to do their jobs.

Focusing on belonging makes DEI applicable to all employees. The experience of wanting to belong is universal. When you place belonging at the center of your DEI policy, you make that mission meaningful to everyone, engaging even skeptical employees in the effort to form stronger connections, support organizational values and contribute to a healthier culture.

Experts at Coqual, a nonprofit DEI think tank, say that focusing on one identity group can lead others to feel left out or even threatened. Instead, they say, centering belonging in DEI efforts can create a culture in which all employees are welcome — a feeling of connection that can spread to life outside the workplace.

“ *In times of heightened social division, it's so easy to allow our differences to completely rob us of opportunities to find common ground and support one another in the ways we need it most. Employers have the platform to remind their workforce that regardless of where different peoples' political beliefs sit, they all share some common forms of struggles and stressors from daily life. Encouraging employees to connect during times of difference is one of the best things they can do to promote belonging and, hopefully, some empathy.* ”



Melissa Doman
Organizational
Psychologist and Mental
Health at Work Specialist,
Melissa Doman LLC

“ *Everyone focuses on diversity, equity and inclusion, and all of these pieces are all critical parts, paths and programs to progress, but the outcome is belonging. We're going to have all of these things to make sure that, in the end, everyone can show up as they are and as they choose to be. And when we can curate workplaces that facilitate that, then people bring their best selves to work.* ”



Kim Dabbs
Global VP,
ESG + Social Innovation,
Steelcase



How Did We Get Here?

THE STATE OF WORKPLACE BELONGING IN AMERICA

The loneliness crisis was exacerbated by the pandemic. Americans were feeling lonely even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Three in five workers in the U.S. considered themselves lonely in a [2019 survey](#) sponsored by Cigna, part of a decades-long decline in community activity that covers everything from attending religious services to social club membership. Additional [research](#) shows that loneliness increased as a result of pandemic shutdowns and isolation — and remained high even as restrictions were relaxed. In 2023 the U.S. surgeon general declared a [loneliness epidemic](#), and in 2024, a quarter of Americans [say](#) they're lonelier than they were before the pandemic.

A charged political climate intensifies polarization. In 2024, polarization is near record highs and climbing, according to the [Vanderbilt Unity Index](#). The convergence of a turbulent presidential election, international conflicts, and societal discord has left Americans feeling anxious and driven toward unprecedented ideological extremes. In 2023, the [percentage](#) of people identifying as strongly liberal or strongly conservative rose by four points, and a recent [Associated Press poll](#) found that majorities of both Democrats and Republicans believe the fate of democracy is at risk in the 2024 election.

Polarization drives us apart and prevents us from engaging with people we don't already agree with. Members of polarized groups imagine that their opponents hold [more extreme views](#) than they actually do — and our tendency toward [confirmation bias](#), the choice to only pay attention to information that supports our views, makes us unlikely to empathize and connect with others. Worse, [research shows](#) that the effects of confirmation bias are exacerbated when trust in government is low.

In the workplace, political polarization [decreases trust](#) in coworkers and reduces teams' abilities to reach their objectives. A [Gartner survey](#) conducted in 2020 shows that during contentious political periods, workers disengage from each other and experience negative impacts on their work performance.

Civic Participation Improves Health

When people are active in their communities, they improve their own health and that of everyone around them. Engaging in clubs or volunteering doesn't just encourage physical activity; it also builds crucial social capital, or the connections through which we help each other to thrive. And the [Health & Democracy Index](#) shows that when we take an active role in civic life, by voting, for example, community health outcomes improve.

That's why civic participation is now recognized as a social determinant of health by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' [Healthy People 2030](#) program and why [health funders](#) are increasingly making civic engagement a priority.

Belonging is a systemic issue. Some groups report lower feelings of belonging in the workplace, research for the [Belonging Barometer](#) shows. For example, older workers — who helped create their organizational cultures and are more [likely](#) to have positions of power — experience [more workplace belonging](#) than their younger colleagues. And nonbinary people experience more exclusion than workers who identify as male or female. Additionally, socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of belonging, with those who are financially better off feeling greater belonging. Business leaders' efforts to support belonging need to take into account the ways that workers' backgrounds and experiences impact their feelings of connection.

The Importance of Employers

Employers are a last source for trust.

Following a global pandemic and years of misinformation and political volatility, trust in institutions has declined sharply. The Edelman Trust Barometer puts it in even more stark terms: “There is a collapse of trust in democracies.”

But as trust in government, media, non-governmental organizations and the business community wanes, “My employer” [remains](#) the most trusted institution in the U.S. — and that trust is growing. In 2024, 79% of Americans reported trusting their employer, up seven points since 2021.

The workplace is a space for connection.

Having positive social experiences with those who are different from us increases empathy and cooperation between groups, but in America today we are less likely than ever to be exposed to those unlike us.

However, the [Belonging Barometer](#) reveals that jobs offer a unique opportunity to bring people of different backgrounds and perspectives together. In the workplace, Americans exhibit greater diversity in their relationships compared to non-work contexts like family and friend groups. For example, in the workplace Americans are:

- about twice as likely to have a relationship with someone of a different race or who supports a different political party
- more than twice as likely to know someone of a different sexual orientation
- almost three times as likely to have a relationship with someone of a different national origin

Employers can leverage this built-in advantage to cultivate belonging, helping to build healthy, productive communities.



Five Steps To Cultivating Belonging in the Workplace

Only one in seven companies report feeling prepared to cultivate belonging, even though they embrace it as a priority. Fostering belonging requires commitment, leadership and careful listening and communication. It also calls for input from diverse voices from across the organization.

Remember that belonging isn't about conformity, it's about creating an environment in which everyone feels safe to show up and voice their opinions. Your job is to establish this culture of connection and respect. With structures in place to make sure everyone is heard and ground rules for tough conversations, you can harness your employees' diverse skills so they can better work together.

These five steps offer a roadmap to cultivate belonging in the workplace.

STEP 1:

IDENTIFY AND LIVE YOUR CORPORATE VALUES

Implement actions that bring your organization's mission statement to life.

- **Communicate your company values.** That mission statement you worked so hard on and the values that guide your business decisions should be the touchstones that unite your employees, regardless of their backgrounds and beliefs. Make sure your company values are communicated at every level from the C-suite down, and in onboarding materials, on your company website, via social media and elsewhere.
- **Establish psychological safety.** Google famously studied 180 teams from across its company for over a year, enlisting its top statisticians and researchers to find out how to build the perfect team. They found that psychological safety, a key component of belonging, was more important to a team's success than any other factor. To create a strong culture of belonging, make sure your employees know they won't be punished or humiliated for making mistakes or speaking up with ideas, questions or concerns.
- **Emphasize cooperation over competition.** Collaborative team assignments give workers a reason to come together for a common goal despite their differences. You can foster this cooperation by praising the work of the team and its individuals, as well as by implementing rewards or bonuses based on teamwork.

“

If we are going to spend a third of our lives in this place, I am not going to be anybody else. If we are choosing to be here, you are choosing to opt in to know me, and I am choosing to opt in to know you as a person. That's what makes the difference to actually have an authentic workplace.



Jon McLeod

ESPN Communications
Co-Founder/Co-Chair,
ESPN T.R.U.S.T.
Mental Health Advocate/
Public Speaker

- **Be generous with praise.** The [Harvard Business Review](#) reports, “Across industries, every measure of morale, productivity, performance, customer satisfaction and employee retention soars when managers regularly provide recognition.” Acknowledge employee contributions and successes regularly. If employees are uncomfortable with public recognition, make sure they hear meaningful appreciation one-on-one.
- **Start meetings and huddles with an intentional practice of belonging.** Just as checking in is valuable for mental health, it is highly effective for workplace belonging, too. [Research](#) from Ernst & Young shows that employees value regular check-ins more highly than being recognized publicly, receiving feedback, being invited to out-of-office events or being included in discussions with senior leaders. In team settings, friendly icebreakers — about anything from favorite TV shows to family traditions — can open conversation, build personal connections and surface universal experiences.
- **Create nonpartisan civic participation opportunities to deepen employee engagement.** Company-led efforts to increase participation in democracy, through activities like voter registration, voter education and recruiting poll workers, have been [shown](#) to deepen employee engagement and create purpose. Participation in civic life and community-building activities — from voting to playing recreational sports or joining a gardening club — can also [improve mental health and personal resilience](#). The Civic Alliance’s [Civic Journey Guide](#) offers companies specific, nonpartisan actions they can take to bolster a culture of civic participation.



Belonging doesn't happen by accident. It's something that is engineered by each of us.



Christina Rivera Glennon

Sr. Director of Global DEI Programs and Operations, Levi Strauss & Co.

STEP 2:

CREATE A CULTURE OF RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION

Feeling secure enough to speak freely is a sign of psychological safety and belonging. Here’s how to keep even difficult conversations productive.

- **Have a policy.** Especially during times of particular polarization — like an election year — it’s important to create an environment in which employees can productively express opposing views while maintaining mutual respect. Show employees how your policies [align with](#) your mission and business goals, and consider letting team members co-create the rules to reflect their needs. [Gartner’s Election 2020 Survey](#) found that when employers had political expression policies, over 75% of employees agreed with them.

Examples of [guidelines to help get you started](#) include creating conversation ground rules such as giving others the benefit of the doubt, using “I” statements instead of speaking for others and treating all opinions as legitimate, even if you don’t agree with them.

- **Invite bold conversations about work.** Since part of psychological safety is feeling free to speak up, encourage challenging conversations around work topics. If this feels daunting, start with regularly scheduled sessions where teams are assured they can speak candidly, then build out from there.

- **Allow difficult conversations on non-work topics, too.** Respectful discussions, even around controversial topics, can foster belonging. Research has shown that banning talk about politics at work is not an effective strategy. In fact, employees want the support to have bold or challenging conversations. When software company Basecamp reportedly banned discussions about social and political issues, some 30% of their employees resigned.

The key is to establish guardrails that prevent the conversation from veering into harassment. Ensure insulting or dehumanizing language is clearly off-limits, and set ground rules that require mutual respect.

General Mills, for example, hosts a Courageous Conversation series that features an expert speaker followed by facilitated, small group discussions to ensure that employees' perspectives are heard. Nonprofit organizations focused on bridging ideological divides, like Braver Angels and Essential Partners, can also help facilitate difficult discussions.

- **Acknowledge conflict and lead with empathy.** Employees might feel afraid to speak up about a political conflict — a fear that might be heightened for those who have a personal connection to a current issue. In these times, it's especially important for leaders to acknowledge the conflict and model empathy. Organizations can emphasize the need for an inclusive, understanding workplace through a message from the CEO or a company-wide staff meeting
- **Promote safe social media practices and media literacy.** With misinformation prevalent, especially on social media, employers can be a trusted source of information and model information practices that support employees' mental health. Employers should be extra vigilant to fact-check and vet information released to employees and should share resources like the News Literacy Project's Guide to Navigating Misinformation in the Israel-Hamas War as a way to promote media literacy and social media hygiene.
- **Lean on the professionals.** Consider coaching your teams in civil dialogue. Here are tools you can reference to build your plan:
 - The Better Arguments Project is a national civic initiative created to help bridge divides — not by papering them over but by helping people have better arguments. They offer free trainings, webinars and resources.
 - The Dialogue Project, a research effort to explore what role business can play to help improve civil discourse and reduce polarization, provides recommendations to help companies lead bridge-building conversations.
- **Use the language of belonging.** The language of belonging is fundamental to establishing a safe environment, and incorporating this language is the next step in the evolution of a company's DEI journey. Your DEI team or employee resource group (ERG) leaders can help inform your company's word choice across internal and external materials to ensure your employees and clients feel valued. For example, including pronouns (she/her, they/them) during introductions, on name tags or in email signatures can help LGBTQ+ workers feel accepted. A 2020 study by McKinsey & Company showed that workplace training on inclusion and bias made LGBTQ+ employees 1.3 times more likely to feel included.

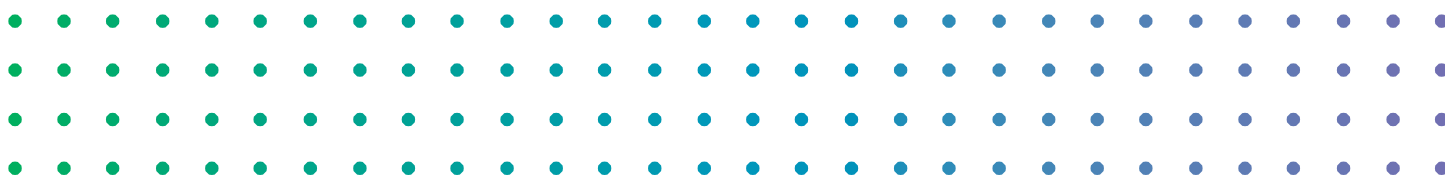
For a deeper dive, consult the American Psychological Association's Inclusive Language Guidelines.

Supporting Employees Amid Global Crises

The Middle East crisis and the war in Ukraine have profoundly affected the emotional and psychological well-being of many employees. News and images from these regions can leave employees feeling saddened, shocked and powerless, triggering trauma and stress. This is especially true for those with family and friends in the affected areas, as well as veterans, immigrants and refugees who might experience post-traumatic distress. Employers can take the following steps to support employees:

- **Acknowledge and communicate support:** Clearly communicate that your organization recognizes the conflict's impact and is committed to supporting employee well-being.
- **Facilitate constructive dialogue:** Create a psychologically safe space for employees to express their feelings and discuss the conflict. Set clear guidelines for respectful communication and remind everyone of the anti-discrimination policies. Encourage understanding and reflection rather than immediate reactions.
- **Contribute to relief efforts:** Show solidarity with affected employees by contributing to humanitarian efforts in the conflict zone. Engage employees in selecting the organizations to support, potentially with a company-matching scheme, to foster a sense of agency and collective action.
- **Educate people leaders about signs of distress:** Encourage managers to check in with their teams regularly and offer support or adjustments as needed. Train them to recognize signs of distress among colleagues, such as changes in behavior, mood or performance.
- **Support from management:** Provide managers with resources to support their teams effectively. This includes being flexible with workloads and understanding the personal challenges employees might be facing.
- **Leverage employee assistance programs (EAPs):** Highlight and utilize your EAP to provide additional support and resources tailored to those affected by the conflict. Distribute self-care tips, stress management resources and guidance for discussing sensitive topics with children.

For more ways to support the mental health and well-being of employees affected by the crisis in the Middle East, see [HAA's resource for employers](#).



STEP 3:

EMPOWER YOUR WORKERS

Go deeper than annual surveys, and enlist ERGs and allies to develop programming.

- **Don't forget about frontline workers.** Workers who earn less are half as likely to feel they belong and three times more likely to experience exclusion. Pay special attention to the needs of hourly and frontline workers who might have a very different workplace experience than salaried employees. Make sure they are represented in your feedback and community-building and included in the development of your belonging work.

COMPANY IN ACTION

Capital One creates space for belonging and leadership through an upward mobility program that allows associates to shadow corporate workers via internal internships designed to help create a pipeline from frontline jobs to careers in corporate headquarter locations

- **Gather feedback from across worker communities.** Whether through anonymous surveys or town halls, you need to know whether employees from across worker communities feel engaged and supported. Because employees may have ideas before the next quarterly survey, consider options for virtual comment boxes or open-door availability.

COMPANY IN ACTION

Thermo Fisher Scientific leverages technology to address their employees' needs at scale. To understand a large, distributed workforce, the company encourages employees to submit anonymous questions for a regular "Ask Me Anything" webinar series. Their team also analyzes medical and disability claims for high-level trends, which provides even more data to develop solutions.



I call it getting into the needs and the weeds. When I look at the full spectrum of our colleagues and how to best reach them, we need to look at the needs.



Aimee Hollis
Director of Global Wellbeing,
Thermo Fisher Scientific

A MESSAGE FROM ONE MIND AT WORK

Is your workforce mental health program working for you?

At One Mind At Work, we're translating science to build workplace best practice that drives measurable impact on workforce mental health. We partner with leading global employers to build mentally healthy cultures, assess the maturity of their mental health programs and strategy, and engage in innovation. Join the movement today: inquire about membership at onemindatwork.org/become-a-member.



onemindatwork.org

- **Make sure you have robust demographic data.** To draw statistically meaningful conclusions about the opinions of employees from historically marginalized communities, you may need better data. Consider implementing self-ID, which allows employees to self-define and disclose demographic information you may not otherwise have (e.g., LGBTQ+ identities, veteran status, neurodivergence or disability status). A sense of trust, built on belonging, will help your employees feel comfortable opting in to such disclosures.
- **Support employee resource groups (ERGs).** ERGs can be your biggest assets in fostering belonging. Work with them to help you identify the needs of their representative communities, create programming, host candid conversations about their lived experiences, and take the lead on company-wide diversity and heritage celebrations. ERGs can be especially important for women, who report lower feelings of belonging in the workplace and can feel even lonelier as they advance in their career.
- **Encourage ERGs to work together.** Collaborations between ERGs reflect people’s intersecting identities and build new connections between groups of employees. During turbulent political times, it might be especially important to bring identity-based ERGs together as a way to ensure that they don’t become sources of polarization.

PRO-TIP

Launch or engage a civic-focused ERG. Rallying around an inclusive, nonpartisan topic, like voting registration or volunteering in the community, can help unite employees around a shared goal while also increasing understanding among diverse colleagues.

COMPANY IN ACTION

For Pride Month 2020, **Walmart’s** Pride and Faith employee groups partnered to host a program acknowledging the overlap and intersectionality of their members. Following this example, its Women and Asian ERGs collaborated on creating a mentorship program, recognizing that people hold multiple identities that can be better reflected through connecting ERGs and building allies.

- **Provide opportunities to create allyship.** Partner with ERG leaders to build connections and alliances across ERGs and the company. Frame discussion of ERGs in terms of affinity so that they’re seen as ways of networking with people of different backgrounds. Sharing information about all ERGs with all employees may help them feel more accessible to allies.

PRO-TIP

Providing outlets for all employees to connect around their interests is a great way to build connections. Consider creating dedicated communications channels to allow employees to share stories and pictures and get to know each other.

STEP 4:

INTEGRATE BELONGING INTO COMPANY STRUCTURES AND POLICIES

Belonging begins with hiring and onboarding and should extend to employees of all seniority levels through mentorship, purposeful connection and workstyles that play to employee strengths.

- **Hire with belonging in mind.** Don't just consider whether a potential employee fits in at your company; actively seek out candidates who bring unique perspectives and experiences to the table, enriching your team and contributing to a culture of inclusivity. In the interview process, ask about their experience bridging differences, acting as a mentor and involving others in their work.
- **Make the most of onboarding.** Practices like co-worker shadowing, "speed-friending" to meet others, introducing ERGs, showcasing your mental health offerings and planning in-person social events can seed positive bonds and inspire belonging.
- **Allow for workstyles that fit individual employees' strengths and needs.** Ask your employees how they work best and collaborate with them to build an ideal work environment. Adjust workflows to allow employees to do their jobs more effectively and have autonomy over their work hours. This extends to technology, too; for example, workers who feel like they use communication tools like instant messaging or video calls either too often or not enough are more likely to feel lonely than those who use these tools with the frequency they prefer.
- **Connect remote and on-site employees.** Working remotely shouldn't come at the cost of inclusion. Create regular opportunities to bring employees together, whether in person or virtually, to foster team alignment. To help remote workers feel connected, you can encourage or facilitate activities like virtual coffee breaks. Plan activities that allow employees to build relationships outside of their current circles. For example, consider offering opportunities to help office and frontline workers from different backgrounds connect.
- **Curate meaningful in-person moments.** All-staff conferences, retreats and conventions are already valuable for fostering connection. Go further with thematic programming aligned with belonging. For instance, invite guest speakers who can inspire employees to consider what they can achieve together through their unique skills and passions.

PRO-TIP

The presence of neurodiverse employees can make teams 30% more innovative. These workers sometimes have sensory sensitivities or find social situations challenging, but you can support their unique belonging needs by offering flexible remote work arrangements and making onboarding activities like icebreakers optional.

PRO-TIP

If informal social events feel forced or contrived, consider professional team-building. **HBO, Nike, Salesforce** and **SpaceX** have utilized The Go Game. And **Sony, eBay** and **Southwest Airlines** are among those that have built relationships using Late Nite Art.



- **Establish mentorship programs.** One-on-one rapport may be a welcome option for employees who feel uncomfortable in group activities. Even better, mentorship has been shown to lead to higher retention rates for both mentors and mentees, with women and employees of color likelier than others to credit mentorship for their career development. Mentorship has also been shown to overcome exclusion, especially when mentors have relevant experience. That could make it particularly valuable for employees from Gen Z, who reported some of the highest rates of mental distress and disconnection during the pandemic.

STEP 5:

MEASURE YOUR PROGRESS

Once you have a plan for increasing belonging in the workplace, it's important to set transparent metrics. There's a role for all employees to play.

- **Set metrics for engagement, psychological safety and belonging.** It's crucial to know whether you're building a culture where people of all different backgrounds want to come and stay. Retention rates, especially among underrepresented groups, are a great indicator. Also consider metrics that can show workforce engagement, connectivity and belonging, like employee participation in volunteer programs or civic activations.
- **Make belonging a performance metric company-wide.** At every level of your company, consider asking employees in their performance reviews how they have fostered belonging. For departmental leaders and others, you may want to set goals around inclusive leadership and mentorship activity. Senior leaders should share their personal and departmental belonging goals with all employees to be transparent and accountable for cultivating belonging.
- **For publicly traded companies, consider including belonging in human capital disclosures.** The human capital disclosure requirement on Form 10-K in public companies' annual filings can be an opportunity to share measures of your company's progress on belonging and engagement. With many companies already reporting on gender and racial representation or efforts to support underrepresented groups, actions your company is taking to improve belonging may appeal to shareholders with an interest in stakeholder capitalism.

A MESSAGE FROM TWILL

Medical costs are 149% higher for people with unrecognized depression*

Twill finds your employees **where they are**

and guides them to **the right type of care**

for their **mental health and well-being.**



To learn more, visit twill.health/employer

*Source: Mohandas, A., et al. (2021, November). The Economic Burden of Depression with Concurrent Anxiety in a General Population of US Adults: Data from the National Health and Wellness Survey.

twill™

PRO-TIP

Survey employees on the different elements of belonging.



You might ask employees to anonymously rate their sense of belonging using the Belonging Barometer, a tool developed by the American Immigration Council and Over Zero to measure the many facets of experience that contribute to a sense of belonging. The Belonging Barometer items are listed below; for more information or guidance, contact [Over Zero](#).

1. I feel emotionally connected to my co-workers.
2. Co-workers welcome and include me in team activities.
3. I am unable to influence decisions at my workplace.
4. I feel unable to be my whole and authentic self with my co-workers.
5. My team values me and my contributions.
6. My relationships with co-workers are as satisfying as I want them to be.
7. I feel like an “insider” who understands how my company/organization works.
8. I am comfortable expressing my opinions with my co-workers and superiors.
9. I am treated as “less than” other employees.
10. When I’m with my coworkers, I feel like I truly belong.



Bottom Line

Following a global pandemic and years of political turmoil, America has become increasingly polarized and lonely. Without social connections, people are more likely to hold extreme views, walling themselves off from coworkers and neighbors and growing more isolated than ever. In an uncertain election year, employers are understandably anxious about division and conflict within their workforce and among their customers.

However, belonging is an antidote to loneliness and polarization, and companies see direct benefits from fostering safety and connection among employees. When workers feel they belong, they're healthier and more engaged; they show up more often and with more to give. And because belonging is universal, it can be the core of your DEI efforts, making your goals resonate with all employees, regardless of identity.

Employers are the most trusted institution in America, and the workplace is where individuals are most likely to connect with people of different backgrounds and perspectives. As a result of this workplace diversity and the unrivaled capabilities of the private sector, businesses are uniquely positioned to foster belonging. The tools presented in this guide can empower leaders to drive cultural change in the workplace, helping employees embrace empathy, shift their perspectives and seek common ground.



Acknowledgments & Resources

Our Communications Toolkit for Fostering Belonging in the Workplace

- [Communication Guide for Managers](#)
- [Sample CEO Letter on Belonging](#)
- [Messaging Prompts for Communications Professionals](#)
- [Communication Tips for Employees](#)

Related Resources

- [Belonging Begins with Us Campaign](#)
A national initiative by the Ad Council and American Immigration Council designed to drive belonging for everyone by promoting connection to create welcoming communities.
- [Center for Inclusion and Belonging](#)
- [Corporate Civic Playbook](#)
- [Health Action Alliance's Mental Health Playbook](#)
- [Fostering Belonging for Public Sector Employees: A Guide by Accenture](#)
- [Belonging Begins With Us Community Toolkit](#)
- [Health Action Alliance's Tackling the Loneliness Epidemic at Work](#)

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The Health Action Alliance is the country's largest corporate coalition operating at the intersection of business and public health. We help employers navigate evolving health challenges, improve the health of workers and engage with public health partners to build stronger, healthier communities. Learn more at healthaction.org.

EDITORIAL NOTE: The Health Action Alliance is solely responsible for and maintains full editorial control of the content of this guide.



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