Using Communication to Cultivate Belonging

Tips for Leaders and Managers

Creating a culture of belonging requires intention, language and communication. Employers specifically can play a big role at building a culture where all their associates and staff feel welcomed, accepted, included and valued. While words alone cannot create belonging this resource offers five tips to help ensure communication is part of fostering belonging in your workplace.

As managers, cultivating belonging starts with you – in the words you use *and* the behavior you model for your team. Team members interpret your words – and your tone, inflection and facial expressions – as signals to help them decide whether the work environment is safe for them to be themselves. Words matter even more in remote or hybrid environments because other nonverbal cues – like body language, hand gestures, and eye contact – are harder to read in virtual spaces.

So, it's important that you're intentional with the words you choose and the norms you model for team communications. These norms help team members feel like they're part of the group, appreciated for their unique contributions and can bring their authentic selves to work. Team members who feel like they belong are happier, more productive and more collaborative – which helps everyone thrive.

Here are five tips to help you more powerfully use words and communication to cultivate belonging within your team:

1. Do your homework.

Words and actions matter when fostering a culture of belonging, and using the right language is fundamental to establishing a safe environment. It's one thing to say that your workplace is committed to diversity. It's another to actually use language that reflects an understanding of how

words can reinforce racism and other forms of destructive social hierarchies, like sexism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, classism, and political or religious bigotry.

So, before you start talking about belonging, take some time to understand why words matter, and why certain terms or phrases might make others feel like they don't belong. These [Inclusive Language Guidelines](#) from the American Psychological Association offer helpful recommendations to ground you in the language of belonging.

Remember, it's okay to ask for help. Reach out to your company's Human Resources or Diversity teams, or representatives from your company's Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), to help you learn more about inclusive language. You can also ask them to help you practice creating a safe space for authentic, inclusive conversations.

2. Listen more than you speak.

You won't feel like you belong unless you feel heard and seen. It's that simple. So, as a manager, it's important that you learn how to really listen – with empathy, compassion and respect.

Too often in today's hurried workplaces, we forget that listening requires more than just hearing what someone else says. Managers and leaders must create space to genuinely listen to team members. This may mean turning off Slack and email, taking a walk with a colleague or setting aside time for regular check-ins or team retreats.

Create these moments with intention, and let your team members know that you're there to listen. And, be sure to practice *active* listening by avoiding interruptions, keeping eye contact and asking follow-up questions.

You can also summarize what you think you've heard so that your colleague knows that you've been actively listening. This helps them feel heard, and it gives them a chance to clarify anything you may have missed or misinterpreted.

3. Establish shared agreements for group conversations.

Building a safe space for team members to show up authentically starts with creating shared agreements about group conversations. Invite your team members to offer their suggestions to help make sure team conversations are grounded in mutual respect, particularly when there are different views, perspectives and opinions expressed around the table.

By explicitly inviting your team members to create norms for inclusive conversations, every member of the group will feel like they have a say about how to act (and interact) with others. Shared agreements also provide a standard against which members can give each other feedback. In short, creating these norms together makes sure that everyone feels like they belong, even if their background, perspectives or opinions aren't shared by others in the room.

4. Create space for authentic expression.

Not everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves verbally or through other forms of traditional communication. Some of us favor non-verbal forms of self-expression, and still others may be intimidated to speak up if their primary language isn't the same as the rest of the team.

Make sure you consider alternative ways for team members to contribute to the group, especially if you notice that a colleague isn't engaging in the group's traditional dynamics. These colleagues want to make a contribution too, and it's up to you to find ways that they can contribute authentically – in a form that feels more natural to them. Create a variety of opportunities for self-expression on your team and be open to authentic expression in all its forms. Acknowledging and celebrating these differences will help everyone feel like you're committed to a culture where everyone belongs.

5. Be vulnerable and open to learning and feedback.

Like any healthy habit, fostering belonging through words and actionstakes practice. The more you immerse yourself in it, the more fluent you'll become. So, be open to discovery, and give yourself grace if you encounter challenges along the way.

Ask team members to share ways that you can create a more inclusive workplace environment. Use anonymous surveys to better understand whether your team members are feeling connected to the group and feel comfortable being themselves. And, if you receive feedback that there's more you can do to cultivate belonging on your team, use it as an opportunity to have an open conversation about what gaps exist.

While you may not have all the answers, it's important that you signal to your team that you're willing to learn and grow. This honesty and vulnerability will go a long way toward cultivating a culture where everyone feels heard and connected.

Additional Resources and Support

- American Psychological Association: [Inclusive Language Guidelines](#)
- [Belonging Begins with Us Campaign](#)
  A national initiative by the Ad Council and American Immigration Council designed to create more welcoming communities where everyone can belong.
  - [Community Toolkit](#)
- Civic Alliance: [Corporate Civic Playbook](#)
- Health Action Alliance
  - [Workplace Mental Health Playbook](#)
  - [Conversation Guide for Managers](#)

Supporting Employees in Crisis

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline offers 24-hour, toll-free, confidential support for people in distress. The National Suicide Precention Hotline recently updated their number to a designated national three-digit dialing code that will route callers to support.

Call 988
Text TALK to 741741
Spanish: 1-888-628-9454
TTY: 1-800-799-4889
[Suicidepreventionlifeline.org](#)

The SAMHSA National Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or xsubstance use disorders.

Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
TTY: 1-800-487-4889
[Online Treatment Locator](#)

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