

Roundtable Session 10 – Table 10 – Challenges and Obstacles to True Belonging in the Workplace

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Abstract:

This paper explores the critical importance of cultivating true belonging within the workplace as a fundamental component for enhancing employee well-being, productivity, and retention. With a workforce characterized by diverse backgrounds—including ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and various personal and professional experiences—creating an inclusive environment poses significant challenges. The study identifies key obstacles to true belonging, such as unconscious bias, stereotypes, lack of inclusion, and discrimination. It highlights essential elements that can foster a sense of belonging, including welcoming behaviors, respect for individuality, psychological safety, transparency in communication, and empathetic workload management. Furthermore, it emphasizes the role of effective conflict management, clear role definitions, honest feedback mechanisms, and regular one-on-one meetings between employees and managers in promoting professional belonging. The research also addresses geographical barriers faced by remote employees and the need for empathy in workplace culture to enhance authentic engagement. Ultimately, the findings suggest that true belonging requires ongoing commitment and sustained efforts from organizations to celebrate diversity and foster an inclusive culture, thereby enabling all employees to feel empowered and valued in their contributions.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do we promote the principles of diversity and inclusion in the current political atmosphere where the term itself is polarizing?
2. Bias and discrimination may take many forms. Are some more significant than others and how can we reduce/eliminate them at the organizational and personal level?
3. Organizations are hierarchical by my nature. How can open and respectful two-way communication be established.
4. Are there workplace norms and traditions particular to Biopharma R&D that might be an impediment to creating an atmosphere of true belonging?
5. How important is Empathy and Psychological safety?

Notes:

Cultivating true belonging in workplace is essential for wellbeing of employees, productivity and retention of good employees. General current workplace includes employees from different backgrounds, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, work experience, life experience, ability and skill set. In addition to this, diversity encompasses vast range of human differences such as diversity of family backgrounds, thoughts, political values, personal values, ethics etc. To fit in this culture of diversified workplace, while remaining true to ourselves can be challenging. Some of the challenges and obstacles to true belonging in workplace environment include unconscious bias, stereotypes, lack of inclusion, cultural misunderstanding, communication styles, resistant to change, discrimination and harassment.

Some of the elements which can foster true belonging at work based on roundtable discussion include welcoming behavior, respect individuality and unique identity of everyone, psychological safety to try innovative things at work, freedom to express themselves, shared problem solving, transparency in communication, leadership feedback from employees, regular one on one meeting with manager, minimizing geographical barrier with managers, empathy in work load assignment, work life balance, feeling empowered to speak up.

Communication Effort: Making a conscious effort with welcoming behavior to make others feel better and positive. Because some behaviors such as crossing personal boundaries, dominating conversations may be comfortable for one, may not be comfortable for others. Developing a friendly positive personality trait is essential in workplace. Transparent communication to ensure all employees have same information on company goals, strategies and challenges. Contributions from employees should be recognized widely without discrimination.

Conflict Management: Rather than agreeing or disagreeing on discussions, think through and go to the root of argument, listen to learn and understand team members perspective. This is especially true in scientific discussions. Biased thinking in arguments can be misconstrued as discrimination and harassment. Because of diverse perspectives, decision making becomes more complex. Also, unconscious bias is deeply ingrained in human brains and hard to identify by themselves.

Professional Belonging: Poorly defined roles and responsibilities in an organization leads to unclear expectations in workplace. Over ambitious employee might overstep boundaries, to gain recognition. Team members without clear direction and knowledge of scope of work, lack sense of purpose and feel disengaged. So, setting a clear boundary is essential for true belonging at workplace. Also, managers should recognize employee's contribution and how they are contributing to organization's mission and goals to develop a sense of purpose.

Honest Feedback: Honest feedback is like an oxygen and is essential to demonstrate value and drive improvement. Feedback can be in many forms such as monthly check in with managers, candid anonymous surveys, open communications. Only just collecting feedback is not enough, implementing changes based on employee's feedback by leadership is essential. Feedback is a gift and should be professional with objective to improve performance.

Regular One on One Meeting: Regular one on one meeting with managers is essential to foster a sense of true belonging. Conversation topics may include personal check in, growth and development, connection with team members, and feedback by both employees and managers. Feedback should be clear,

constructive, empathetic and documented approach. Employee should their perspective on management such that it is a two-way exchange of feedback.

Geographical Barrier: Different work locations and time zones, makes real time collaboration difficult. Most of the employees and managers who are remote may feel disconnected and demotivated. Feeling of isolation and disconnection with team may be minimized by regular virtual face to face video calls. Based on research, managers showing favoritism towards employees who are in close physical proximity than remote employees. Making a conscious effort to distribute task equally between onsite and remote employees may be helpful.

Empathy: Work culture where kindness and compassion are core values creates a sense of belonging at workplace. Studies show that employees likely to bring authentic selves to work where mutual empathy between employees and leadership exists. Efforts should be made to assign workload and type of work based on employees physical and mental conditions. For example, pregnant woman working biopharmaceutical lab, may not be able to work longer hours as regular employees. So, managers should be empathetic and well trained, to distribute work among team members based on employee's capability and emotional conditions.

Feeling Empowered to Speak up: True belonging at workplace is linked to speaking up by employees where all voices are valued by leadership. An inclusive workplace involving employees in decision making creates a sense of empowerment for everyone to contribute. Work culture where employees speak up without fear of retaliation or punishment or embarrassment can build a sense of psychological safety.

Creating a true belonging at workplace is a continuous improvement that requires significant and sustained effort by an organization and its employees. Organization's commitment to celebrate diversity and inclusion is essential to build inclusive culture and develop a sense of true belonging at workplace.