



Diversity And Inclusion



# What Does It Take to Build a Culture of Belonging?

Four concrete actions leaders can take. **by Julia Taylor Kennedy and Pooja Jain-Link**

# What Does It Take to Build a Culture of Belonging?

Four concrete actions leaders can take. **by Julia Taylor Kennedy and Pooja Jain-Link**

Published on HBR.org / June 21, 2021 / Reprint [H06F20](#)



Andriy Onufriyenko/Getty Images

**As we continue to adjust to [Covid-19's disruptions](#) and see [Black Americans killed by police](#), [hate crimes against Asian Americans surge](#), and people in Georgia [fight for equal voting rights](#), the question of what “belonging” means in American society is reaching into the workplace as it never has before. CEOs, corporate boards, investors, consumers, and employees continue to demand action against racial injustice and movement toward more-equitable workplaces — ones where all employees belong, regardless of their racial or ethnic identities. Against**

this backdrop, business leaders no longer require a “business case” for a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I); they are well aware. Now they need corporate leaders and advisers to help them keep the ambitious promises they made over the course of the past year.

To impose the sweeping change needed to realize those promises, CEOs need all hands on deck: senior leaders, managers, and employees at every level of the company.

But widespread support for any effort can be difficult to garner. And as we’ve seen over the past year, DE&I work can be particularly divisive. At Coqual, a nonprofit global think tank in the DE&I space (formerly the Center for Talent Innovation), we’ve long heard the refrain, “What about *me*?” A focus on one identity group, such as Black employees, can feel to others as though it comes at the cost of their own group’s career interests and workplace well-being. A crucial way to galvanize support and manage complex change is to create a culture where every employee, regardless of their background, feels that they *belong*. It’s a lesson companies can teach U.S. society as a whole.

After all, belonging is essential to humans. Psychologists rank our need to belong on par with our need for love. Because the need to belong is universal and fundamental, focusing on it has the power to draw in the whole workforce, even those who might feel excluded from — or threatened by — current DE&I conversations. When companies emphasize a culture of belonging, they call everyone in, creating space in the conversation to address our shared humanity and build a bridge to greater empathy and inclusion for the groups that are the most marginalized in the workplace today.

To build a culture of belonging and reap the many benefits for employers and employees, leaders first require a clear understanding

of what it means to belong at work. Informed by existing measures and extensive research by Coqual, we developed a quantifiable definition that states we belong at work when we are:

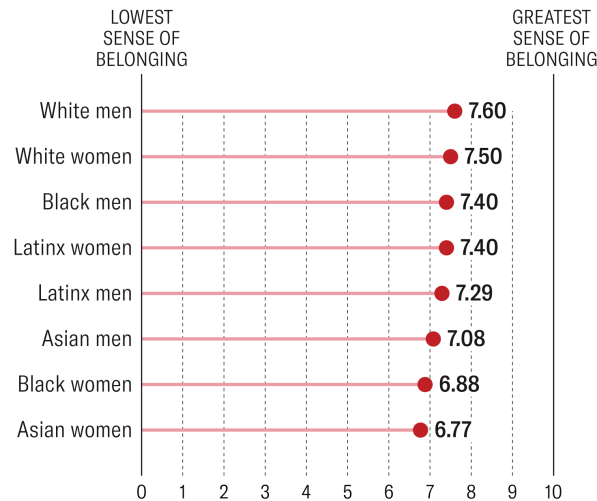
1. **Seen** for our unique contributions
2. **Connected** to our coworkers
3. **Supported** in our daily work and career development
4. **Proud** of our organization's values and purpose

In February 2020, we fielded a nationally representative survey of thousands of college-educated professionals and held focus groups and interviews with hundreds more. With the onset of the global pandemic, we fielded a second survey in May 2020 to capture of-the-moment employee attitudes. In analyzing the data, we found that belonging yields a competitive edge for employers: Compared to employees who score low on our 10-point belonging scale, those with high belonging scores are far more likely to be engaged and loyal and to promote their organizations as good places to work.

We saw notable variations in belonging scores — demonstrating that there is a lot to do to build work cultures of belonging for all, not just for some. White men and white women have the highest median scores; Asian and Black women have the lowest. Recent hate crimes against the Asian community demonstrate the devastating consequences that can result from humans' tendency to "other" — to make individuals or groups feel that they are outsiders. (We have yet to see the depth of the workplace toll that the racial and gender inequities exacerbated by the pandemic have taken on employees' sense of belonging.)

## Professionals' Median Belonging Scores

The results of a survey of college-educated professionals conducted in May 2020 show that white men and women have the highest median belonging scores compared to those of other races and ethnicities; Asian and Black women have the lowest.



Source: Coqual

HBR

The good news is that while a lack of belonging is the challenge, building it is a crucial strategy for healing — and for galvanizing support for all DE&I work. As organizations map ways to meet their commitments to racial equity and justice, closing these belonging gaps will help them join employees in a common mission — and retain and engage employees of all backgrounds. Indeed, we find that men in the majority group at their companies (generally, white men) who believe in DE&I have far higher belonging scores than their peers who don't. Getting engaged in the work of including others seems to foster a strong sense of citizenship and connection to one's employer.

We can all take steps to foster belonging, at every stage in our careers. We examined what employees with high belonging and those with low belonging are likely to get from their workplace cultures. On the basis of those findings, we outline concrete actions leaders, managers, and colleagues can take to drive belonging for those around them:

- **As an organization, put a spotlight on role models.** Employees feel seen, supported, connected, and proud when they can identify with their leaders. The phrase “representation matters” gets a lot of use because it’s true. Focus on diversifying your leadership, and highlight the diversity you have. Ensure that senior leaders are talking about things that make them interesting, that set them apart, and that employees can identify with.
- **As a senior leader, be inclusive.** Embody the organization’s values of inclusivity by building diverse teams and setting the tone across the organization. Share personal stories about how cultivating a diverse range of perspectives has helped you grow as a leader. Model inclusive behavior by being empathetic and listening to all voices on your team, including those who may feel “othered.” Be transparent about your values and seek to connect with employees across the organization, including junior staff. For example, establish Zoom times during which any employee can schedule a quick chat.
- **As a manager, be responsive, appreciative, and empowering.** Managers carry the culture of an organization. Praise employees’ good work, give them honest feedback, and respond to their concerns. For instance, carve out time to send a rapid feedback email to each team member at the close of a project, letting them know their work is valued and how they can improve going forward. That goes a long way toward helping them feel seen and supported.
- **As a colleague, be respectful and supportive — and give feedback.** Coworkers are more likely to feel high belonging when their peers respect their nonwork commitments. But they also



get a belonging boost from coworkers' feedback. It's helpful to communicate openly about the substance of one another's work, and it's crucial to ask those around you how you can support their needs, especially in a time of great uncertainty and increased caregiving responsibilities.

In polarizing, confusing, and often isolating times, it's easy to keep our Zoom calls focused solely on getting work done. But our companies have made commitments to change, to make the future of work more fair and equitable for all. Some employees are eagerly awaiting these changes; others are wary. To bring everyone on board, we must tap into each employee's need to belong — and encourage them to create that same sense of belonging for those around them. Pulling together around belonging can then keep us on track to do the hard work of adjusting processes and attitudes to improve equity as well.

*This article was originally published online on June 21, 2021.*



**Julia Taylor Kennedy** is executive vice president at Coqual, a global nonprofit think tank dedicated to workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion. She is the lead researcher of Coqual's four-part study, *The Power of Belonging*. She also co-led research on Coqual's *Being Black in Corporate America* and *The Sponsor Dividend*, along with several other studies. Taylor Kennedy works with Coqual's advisory clients to design and implement leadership development programs related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.



**Pooja Jain-Link** is executive vice president at Coqual and secondary lead researcher on Coqual's four-part study, *The Power of Belonging*. She co-led, with Taylor Kennedy, research on Coqual's *Being Black in Corporate America* and *Wonder Women in STEM and the Companies that Champion Them*, along with several other studies. Jain-Link also works with Coqual's advisory clients on strategic action planning, culture audits, and other diagnostics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.