



Where your work meets your life.

**Harvard
Business
Review**

Inclusion And Belonging

A Sense of Belonging Starts with Self-Acceptance

by DDS Dobson-Smith

August 08, 2022



HBR Staff/Getty Images/Diane ADAM/500px

Summary. Humans have a deep seated need to be liked, respected, and accepted. But sometimes, that need is so strong that it drives us to alter our behaviors to feel like we belong, especially at work or in social situations. The experience of belonging is unique, in that... [more](#)



Where your work meets your life. See more from Ascend here.

Humans are social creatures. We have a deep-seated need to be liked, respected, and accepted by our peers. Sometimes that need is so strong, it drives us to alter our behaviors in exchange for approval. At work, school, and other social institutions, this happens every day. People whose identities don't conform with the dominant group are often pressured to present disingenuously to "fit in." Under these circumstances, a sense of belonging is hard to come by.

As an example, let's say that you work at an organization that hires and creates products representative of predominantly white, straight, cisgender, male, able-bodied, middle-class, and thin men. Let's say that you have few of these qualities. Do you feel comfortable walking into the room? Probably not. In fact, you probably feel that you should hide certain parts of yourself to appear less "different." A mother walks into this office and doesn't talk about her children because she thinks it will limit her growth opportunities. A queer person walks into this office and hesitates to mention their same-sex relationship to avoid judgment. A Black man walks into this office and hides how scared they are by another racially driven murder in the news because who will be able to relate to and understand that feeling?

If you look, sound, love, or think "differently" than the majority in the spaces you occupy, then you already know this. You also know that it comes at a cost — emotionally, physically, and mentally.

While the issue here is systemic, and ultimately needs to be solved at the leadership level, you don't have to sit by until change knocks. The experience of belonging is unique in that it

doesn't only come down to your organization, your manager, or your teammates. You have a role to play, too, and that role starts with self-acceptance.

Discover your power.

Every one of us has the power to accept and honor who we are at our core. This looks like owning our qualities, values, and choices regardless of how we think others will perceive us. This looks like showing up for and believing in ourselves first.

Self-acceptance happens through the process of self-discovery and self-awareness. It's a state we experience when we welcome, include, and take pride in all that we are and all that we're not yet. When we welcome every part of ourselves, the pressure to perform or suppress our true characters lifts. We create more space to exist comfortably within and can give more — to our work, to our customers, and to our relationships — in that space.

It's only when we *like* ourselves, and care for ourselves like we would a loved one, that we begin to feel that we deserve to be visible and feel we belong.

What gets in the way of self-acceptance?

While society is one factor that gets in the way, we do, too. Self-acceptance may be essential to our well-being, our happiness, and our work, but it's not something we can conquer overnight. It requires regular practice to overcome the biases many of us have been taught to hold against ourselves since childhood. To understand why this is, we have to go back to the beginning.

Most infants and young children are developing at lightning speed — faster than our adult brain can imagine. As babies, basic connections are made in our brains, synapses are created, and we absorb information indiscriminately and without discernment. The majority of this knowledge arrives through interactions with our immediate caretakers, family, and friends.

As we grow older, that circle expands to our schools, religious institutions, workplaces, communities, and the media — pop culture and the practices, beliefs, and objects trending at any given time.

By adolescence, most of us have learned (subconsciously or consciously) what our society promotes and favors. In most cultures, this manifests as a set of inborn characteristics or identity markers. For example, right now, and for centuries in the U.S., the dominant group identity markers include white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied.

When you consider that, from the start, we're trained to believe certain characteristics are "in" or "out," good or less good, favorable or unfavorable, the battle with self-acceptance becomes easier to understand. This training is further compounded by the way historically marginalized identities have been portrayed in mainstream media: the Asian person as the underdog, the Black person as the criminal, the trans person the lovesick loner, the gay person as the drug-fueled partygoer, or the disabled person as the butt of the joke.

For anyone who is not a member of the dominant groups — and sometimes even for those who are — we internalize these messages when we are young and create beliefs about what is and what isn't good, right, and likable. Inevitably, we end up projecting those biases onto ourselves, creating negative self-images, and low expectations of our capabilities. These projections, or internalized prejudices, become calcified as our personal truths. They are weapons we unknowingly use against ourselves, causing us emotional pain, holding us back from achieving our full potential, and suppressing our experience of pride.

This is the source of the oft-talked about, and universally experienced, phenomenon known as imposter syndrome, the cause of many derailed lives and careers. This is also why, as adults, we need to do the work to unlearn our own biases, especially the ones we have against ourselves. That work isn't going to be easy. It's going to be very hard.

While I agree that this is a societal problem at large, know that we have the tools to thrive under the circumstances we find ourselves in. Here is some advice on how to take back power by rewriting your individual narratives and beliefs, and developing the kind of thoughts and habits that will create change for the future.

Start by learning to love yourself.

If you have at least one identity marker that comes from a marginalized or underrepresented group, it isn't so much a case of *if* you have internalized sexism, racism, ableism, transphobia or homophobia, but more a case of *how* it shows up and impacts your inner and outer worlds. The good news is that it's possible to unlearn your biases and relearn to love all the parts of who you are, despite what the dominant discourse would have you believe.

Based on my experience as a licensed therapist and executive coach, here are a few tips to help you get started:

Breathe.

The idea that you might be holding yourself back due to internalized prejudice is a challenging concept to get your head around. Sit quietly and breathe deeply and consciously as you let your thoughts surface into awareness.

Focused breathing will keep you grounded instead of getting lost in your thoughts or becoming dysregulated emotionally. Your deep breaths slow your active mind and allow you to look more

deeply into what you're feeling. Connecting with your breath and your body is important when confronting internalized prejudice and beginning a process of self-discovery.

Do a life audit.

Internalized prejudice is caused by the environment that you're in — the books you read, the TV shows you watch, who you follow in your social feeds and the people you hang out with. So, do an audit of your environment. Are you surrounding yourself with people and things that validate your identity? Does your environment make you feel inferior or powerful?

Make it a priority to fill your life (at work and at home) with influences that are supportive of you. At work, get in touch with your organization's employee resource groups (ERGs) to connect with people who represent your intersectional identity. If your employer doesn't provide ERGs, then undertake a search in your local area for peer support groups, clubs, or associations that are devoted to people like you.

At home, look at your friend groups, the content you're consuming, and the experiences you're seeking on social media. Make sure these areas of your life are abundant, energizing, and affirming — not draining.

Educate yourself about yourself.

When you internalize myths and misinformation about your identity, you may (often unconsciously) feel that you aren't as worthy as people in the dominant group. You may act in ways that reinforce this belief and hold you back from being yourself in uncomfortable spaces, like work. Hence, awareness is essential.

To unlearn the biased lessons imposed during your upbringing, you need to reteach yourself the truth about our (and your) history. Learning more about the societal structures that uphold

oppression and exclusion will help you reframe your internalized prejudice through uncovering their origins. Further, learning the history of your communities, and how the people who came before you fought the odds, is the first step to gaining self-awareness, which leads to empowerment and acceptance.

For example, everything we have learned has been subject to the bias and perspectives of the lesson-giver, whether that be a family member, a teacher at middle school, a book we borrowed from the library, or a YouTube video we watched. In the process of educating yourself about yourself, you must be willing to unlearn and you must be willing to be uncomfortable; allowing truths to become untruths in the process of expanding your map of the world isn't always easy. My advice here is simple: Don't believe everything you think. Learn to question your own opinions by challenging where and who they come from, and asking yourself what evidence you have to prove or disprove them.

Some people choose to do this work with a therapist who can provide you with a loving, supportive, and objective space. Other people choose self-reflective journaling as a way to track their thoughts and emotions over time, and many people choose to do both. To open the door to unlearning (and relearning), I recommend three great podcasts from the Scene on Radio series — Seeing White, Men, and The Land That Has Never Been Yet — as informative, factual, and powerful sources of insight and learning. Another great podcast from NPR, Hidden Brain: “Man Up” is also worth checking out.



Subscribe to our Weekly Newsletter

Ascend

Career and life advice for young professionals.

Sign Up

Be kind to yourself.

Unpacking and exploring your internalized prejudice may surface unpleasant memories or associations; it can be hard and lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment. To that end, please do this work with self-compassion and empathy. Know that your difficult feelings are valid and are a part of your healing and self-acceptance process. Don't run away from them. Instead, get curious about how and why they've developed. This is the only way to grow and be kinder to yourself in the future.

Belonging is an archetypal experience that all humans seek, whoever they are. It transcends geographies, generations, and genotypes. When we recognize that we're not alone in our desire to belong then we can live with greater empathy — empathy not only for others, but also ourselves. And it is with that spirit of empathy for ourselves that we can gently and kindly dismantle any internalized prejudice and open up into greater levels of self-acceptance.

DDS Dobson-Smith is a licensed therapist, author, executive coach, speaker on leadership and growth and Reiki master — all in service of helping others grow and become who they are. They are the Founder and CEO of SoulTrained, an executive coaching and leadership growth consultancy, and the author of the forthcoming book ***You Can Be Yourself Here: Your Pocket Guide to Creating Inclusive Workplaces by Using the Psychology of Belonging***

Recommended For You

PODCAST

ADHD Is Different for Women



Why We Want to Be Liked: Our Favorite Reads



What Does It Take to Build a Culture of Belonging?



The Value of Belonging at Work

