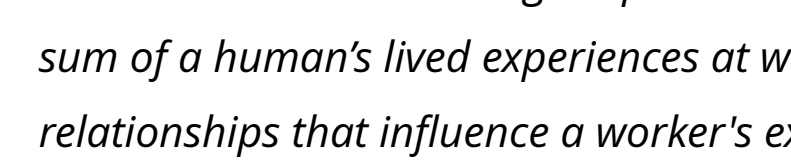


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Elevating the Workforce Experience: The Belonging Relationship

How a sense of belonging enhances the workforce experience



By Colleen Bordeaux, Betsy Grace, and Naina Sabherwal

Deloitte's **Workforce Experience by Design** practice uses human-centered, equity-based design to understand workers like we do customers and design experience solutions that cultivate trust and loyalty. We define **workforce experience** as "the sum of a human's lived experiences at work and how they feel about their organization" and believe there are eight key relationships that influence a worker's experience at an organization—two of which have been newly incorporated into our leading practice perspective. These elements include a worker's relationship with [the work they do](#), [the people they work with](#), [the places they work](#), [the technology they use](#), [the organization they work for](#), their sense of belonging, and [the growth that delivers value to their career](#). A worker's sense of belonging and their growth are two new additions to highlight how organizations can foster diverse, equitable, and inclusive communities for the worker (belonging) and portable value beyond a worker's lived experiences (growth).

The world is constantly changing and evolving. There are many events that are making us feel polarized, less stable, and volatile. External events like climate change, political instability, global pandemic, racial discrimination, etc., are causing a sense of frustration, fear, and disruptions. This is leading to individuals finding solace in everyday life. For most of us, this means turning to the organization to find a sense of meaning and solidarity. However, organizations are going through their own disruptions. Shifts in workforce composition, ways of working, virtual workplace, etc., are leading to changes that leave workers feeling isolated. Today¹, 40% of people say they feel isolated at work and the result has been lower organizational commitment and engagement.

Employees are increasingly looking to work for personal fulfillment and satisfaction, essential to which is a sense of belonging². This article will focus on eight of the core relationship attributes for elevating workforce experience:

Belonging

What is belonging, and what contributes to it?

Deloitte defines a worker's sense of belonging as how organizations can foster diverse, equitable, and inclusive communities for the worker and how they feel like a member of the broader world. This impacts how an employee shows up and feels comfortable being themselves—and how they contribute to an organizations' common goals.

Creating a sense of belonging requires three mutually reinforcing attributes³

- Comfort:** Individuals feel comfortable at work, including being treated fairly and respected by their colleagues and leaders.

"I am valued for who I am, my background and beliefs. I can bring my authentic self to work"

- Connection:** Individuals feel that they have meaningful relationships with coworkers and teams and are connected to the organization's goals.

"I am a part of something larger than myself. I provide support and am supported by my workplace community."

- Contribution:** Individuals feel that they contribute to meaningful outcomes—understanding how their strengths help to achieve common goals.

"I (we) add value by bringing unique skills and strengths to meaningfully contribute to shared purpose and goals."

How can an increased sense of belonging enhance the workforce experience?

Deloitte's Human Capital Trends report ranked 'Belonging' as the top human capital issue that organizations face today. Seventy-three percent responded stated that fostering a sense of belonging was important to their organization's success with 93% agreeing that a sense of belonging drives organizational performance⁴. But why is belonging rising as such an important topic for organizations?

Research⁵ states that belonging is not only good for workers but for business too. Belonging can lead to a 56% increase in job performance, a 50% reduction in turnover risk, a 167% increase in employer net promoter score, 2X more employee raises, 18X more employee promotions, and a 75% decrease in sick days. All this alludes to the positive impact that 'belonging' has on workers leading to employee engagement and enhanced workers' experience.

There are three factors that influence an organization's ability to activate belonging and enhance employees' experience⁶, namely:

- Organizational culture
- Leadership behaviors
- Personal relationships

Organizational Culture: Organizational culture refers to the system of values, beliefs, and behaviors that shapes how work gets done within an organization⁷. Fostering a culture where everyone belongs and can thrive requires a commitment not only to diversity and equity but also to inclusion. Having a culture that encourages workers to be their authentic selves, own their uniqueness, and share their perspectives without any fear increases the sense of belonging. To create a holistic organizational culture:

- Set the expectation that all decisions are made with equitable representation and diversity by building a culture of openness that allows for conversation across differences

- Shape the norm that teams are empowered to collaborate in ways that fit their working styles and needs (meeting norms, etc.) by investing in collaboration tools that promote and enable productivity and ease of connection

- Demonstrate the value of creativity and resilience of hybrid workforce by gathering organization-wide data to measure and understand business impacts of belonging

CASE IN POINT: Culture where everyone feels able to contribute to meaningful work outcomes.⁸

Alibaba's CEO Zhang Yong says: "The essence of Alibaba's culture is that we have faith in each one of us." Alibaba recognizes that making it safe for workers to express their views and opinions is the only way to drive the kind of meaningful collaboration that can translate its workforce's incredible diversity into business value.

CASE IN POINT: "People feel their voice is valued"⁹

Southwest's culture is known to serve customers while keeping employees happiness first. Recently, Southwest airline created a training program for Flight Attendants to better manage in-cabin de-escalation in the face of safety enforcement during COVID-19 pandemic (all while keeping people first). This clearly brings out their priority of keeping "employee happiness even over customer satisfaction."

Leadership Behavior: To embed an organizational culture of belonging, leadership behavior plays a crucial role to reinforce the value of fairness, respect, and safety. This inspires workers to feel united and part of an organization that values them. To instill good leadership behaviors:

- Seek understanding and clarity around what individuals need to feel they belong and respond with empathy. Be mindful of policies and practices that favor certain workforce/people groups and adapt them to be more equitable.

- Establish unity by connecting remote/on-site employees' responsibilities to the collective organizational vision and goals. Mentor colleagues from different backgrounds by sharing your authentic story, empowering them to do the same, and listening with care.

- Champion initiatives by people from historically marginalized groups and communities. Help employees advance by aligning their work to their strengths and interests and removing obstacles.

CASE IN POINT: Instilling a sense of psychological safety through inclusive leadership.¹⁰

The life sciences company Gilead Sciences recently undertook an effort to increase comfort among its teams in Asia and build a culture where workers felt safe to speak up, make mistakes, and be themselves without fear of punishment or judgment. The company worked with its leaders in the region to build inclusive leadership skills and help them understand how to reduce the effects of their own status bias. The objective of this effort is to build a culture in the region where workers can feel empowered to respectfully challenge norms, allowing them to proactively identify issues and opportunities. Gilead is aiming for higher performance and greater innovation by encouraging team members to be different and express divergent views.

Personal Relationships: With work structured around the power of teams, it's extremely important for workers to feel involved and included to facilitate contribution. Having the space to openly bring viewpoints without hesitation, encourage healthy discussion, and feel connected with team members (even at a personal level) fosters a greater sense of belonging. To enhance personal relationships:

- Find meaningful and inclusive ways to engage your colleagues that feel marginalized or excluded. Demonstrate trust and respect for your colleagues by leading with vulnerability and seeking clarity, checking assumptions, and avoiding defensiveness.

- Show that you value and care for your colleagues by taking interest in their stories and well-being. Practice behaviors that promote connection (open door, turned on camera) while respecting various working styles and preferences.

- Frequently celebrate colleagues' successes and offer dedicated support through challenges. Find opportunities to express daily gratitude to those you work with (thank you notes, meeting spotlights, etc.).

CASE IN POINT: Promote importance of inclusive thinking and actions.¹¹

Horizon Therapeutics explicitly promotes "allyship" in the workplace by identifying and supporting workers who exemplify inclusive behaviors in their daily interactions with diverse colleagues and teams. Horizon looks for four characteristics in its allies: "Being good at learning and listening, feeling comfortable speaking up and speaking out, owning and sharing their own story, and modeling positive, inclusive behaviors." These efforts are paying off in terms of workplace culture and global recognitions as a Great Place to Work.

Using human-centered design to create a sense of belonging for the workforce

Human-centered design¹² gets to the root causes of issues of belonging by examining human perspective in each step of the problem-solving process. By using the workforce experience design approach, organizations can cultivate a culture of belonging that is shared by all—whether working remotely or on-site—vital for activating organizations' potential. Deloitte's Workforce Experience by Design practice uses human-centered design thinking¹³, to create opportunities for organizations by taking the following steps:

- Frame the challenge:** Organizations must first understand what does belonging means, what translates to a 'sense of belonging' for their workforce, and how can they use belonging to improve workforce experience. E.g., Does your organization recruit and retain diverse talent, build a diverse workforce, and confront systemic racism within your organization?

- Get to know the workforce:** Consider the voice of the workforce as they manage changes in their personal and professional lives. Gather qualitative, emotional data through psychologically safe interviews, or focus group discussions, or emotional data to identify existing sentiments around influence, trust, and collaboration in your organization. Understand if your workforce feels the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion initiatives are just 'tick the box' activity or are truly engrained into your culture. This will help you find new ways to empathize with and understand the worker's values, needs, and desires.

- Analyze and synthesize the data:** Qualitative and Quantitative data gathered should be analyzed to illuminate areas of opportunity related to workplace interactions, leadership behavior, and culture. Use this data to create the foundation for future efforts and short- and long-term initiatives, but also to understand strengths that are the anchors of your organization.

- Co-create the solutions:** Leverage the data to prioritize key areas of focus to help enhance, protect, and rebuild a sense of belonging for their workforce. E.g., If leadership behavior change is a priority, provide a personalized action plan that guides leaders in uniting colleagues and cultivating an environment of respect and psychological safety. Clearly communicate and involve your workforce in your intended initiative. Your workforce can be your best evangelists if they know steps taken to make them feel included and valued.

- Implement:** While implementation is important, it's equally essential to measure and track progress made toward becoming a more diverse and inclusive workplace. To track progress, organizations should understand the baseline, and measure newly implemented policies on a continuous basis by taking feedback from the workforce. E.g., Gather anonymous feedback from workers on what's working well and what can be improved.

In summary, there is no one size fits all solution to create a sense of belonging. All organizations are different and so are the people within them. What's important is to put your employees at the center and understand what makes them feel valued. Creating an organizational culture of belonging that is backed by leadership support and enhanced individual relationships is the way to elevate workers' experience. Ultimately, when workers feel comfortable being themselves and expressing their true thoughts, the door to improved collaboration, greater fulfillment, and well-being at work is opened.

"If you look out for your workforce, they will look out for you"

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