Career Compass No. 107: The Business Case for Promoting Workplace Belonging

In this digital age, we are more disconnected than ever. A lack of connection hurts organizational effectiveness. Micro-actions can boost workplace relationships and productivity.

By Dr. Frank Benest | May 01, 2024 | ARTICLE - ARTICLE

In a large suburban city, I serve as the director of the environmental services department, which includes 35 employees. With our hybrid work schedules, I am feeling less connection with my departmental employees. Zoom communications with our different teams seem insufficient. We are still productive, but employee engagement and energy are lackluster and creative problem-solving is hit-and-miss.

To make matters worse, we have lost several good people. To retain talent, the city has increased compensation and enhanced some benefits, but we continue to struggle with vacancies throughout the organization.

I know that working from home allows the flexibility desired by many, including myself. However, in discussions with a few of my trusted colleagues inside and outside the department, some of us feel disconnected from others and sense a certain lack of support for the good but difficult work that we do for the community. People don't seem particularly satisfied with their work. I, too, feel a bit discouraged. In fact, as a top manager in the organization, I feel somewhat lonely.

I'd like to get to know my department employees better and become more connected with others, but I don't want to intrude on anyone's personal life or privacy.

What can we do to enhance our engagement, energy, and job satisfaction?

Response

Organizations face a dilemma. There is much research indicating that productivity is the same or even higher with employees working from home some or all the time. (See [Julian Birkinshaw et al, "Research: Knowledge Workers Are More Productive from Home," hbr.org, Aug 31,2020](#)). As you suggest, people value the greater flexibility and hopefully more autonomy that come with hybrid or remote work. Many employees in all sectors report that they would seek other employment if forced to fully return to the office.

AND, at the same time, a lot of employees feel less connected and supported and even lonely, impacting the ability and capacity of the organization to perform.

I believe that the only way to address this dilemma is by enhancing employees' sense of belonging.

"Belonging"—I like it. What is it?

Let me define what I mean by "belonging." Belonging is when you feel that you matter to others; people care about you (not just what you produce); you feel supported; you have a "seat at the table;" and your opinion counts.

In her book *Never Enough*, Jennifer Wallace defines the closely related concept of "mattering." Mattering means you are secure in your relationships with others and feel seen, cared for, and understood. People are interested in you and what you have to say; they share your successes and support you when you fail; and they rely on you for help.

Disconnection Hurts Business

"Belonging" may seem like a squishy and difficult-to-define term. Yet there is a very strong business case for all organizations, including local governments, that promoting belonging and work friendships matter. Gallup research indicates that having a "best friend at work" is strongly linked to higher levels of engagement, productivity, adaptability, and retention. (See [Jon Clifton, "The Power of Work Friends," hbr.org, Oct 7, 2022](#).)

Americans are now more likely to form friendships at work than at any other place, including at school, in their neighborhoods, or at their place of worship. Work friendships promote social connection and support, better communication, and collaboration, especially during times of change. In addition, the quality of relationships ranks first out

of 12 key factors in terms of determining job satisfaction. Unfortunately, only three out of ten employees report that they have a best friend at work. (See Jon Clifton, "The Power of Work Friends," hbr.org, Oct 7, 2022.)

Top management in most organizations are very concerned about talent retention. The latest Global Culture Study by O.C. Tanner indicates that organizations scoring high on the "Community Index" (where employees feel that they belong and contribute to shared goals in meaningful ways) have an employee-estimated 62% increase in tenure at their current organization. (See Jennifer Moss, "Creating a Happier Workplace is Possible—And Worth It," hbr.org, Oct 2023.) Similarly, Bain & Co. reports that employees who feel that they are included and belong are four to eight times more likely to stay than employees who don't feel they belong. (See Julie Coffman et al., "The Business of Belonging," bain.com, Nov 15, 2023.) Fast.com reports that belonging is more important than compensation in respect to talent retention. (See Brad Deutser, fastcompany.com, Sept 26, 2023.)

Loneliness causes physical health problems.

Finally, many of us at all levels of the organization are feeling lonely. U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy refers to loneliness as a "national epidemic." (See Advisory Report "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023.) In a follow-up essay in The New York Times, he wrote: "At any one moment, about one out of every two Americans is experiencing measurable levels of loneliness." (See "Surgeon General: We Have Become a Lonely Nation. It's Time to Fix That," April 30, 2023.)

Loneliness is especially pronounced among many senior managers. As is often stated, "it is lonely at the top." (See Shea Fan et al., "Workplace Loneliness is the Modern Pandemic Damaging Lives and Hurting Business," theconversation.com, Sept 25, 2023).

Loneliness causes physical health problems, such as higher levels of heart disease (29%), dementia (50%), and stroke (32%). It also has workplace consequences, including reduced productivity and employee absenteeism. (See Lou Fancher, "Disconnected," metrosiliconvalley.com, Sept 20, 2023.)

Beyond Diversity—Why We Need Diversity AND Inclusion

Many organizations, including local government agencies, have begun to commit to diversity initiatives. Employees who feel excluded or not fully embraced perform at less than their full potential. It is also well-documented that diverse teams generate more creative ideas.

Teams that are both diverse and inclusive increased their innovation capacity four times.

To promote diversity, many enterprises have focused on recruiting and hiring employees of historically unrepresented groups (i.e., Black, Latino, Asian, LGBTQ, disabled employees). As many organizations have discovered, there is a strong business rationale for promoting diversity. Bain and Co. research indicates that engaging teams composed of diverse members with diverse life experiences and perspectives increases the organization's innovation capacity by twofold.

Having teams that are highly inclusive without being diverse increases creative problem-solving threefold. However, the teams that are both diverse and inclusive increased their innovation capacity four times. (See Julie Coffman et al., "The Business of Belonging," bain.com, Nov 15, 2023.)

In local government, to maximize our ability to deal with adaptive challenges (for instance, climate protection, homelessness, traffic congestion), diversity without inclusion does not get us as far as we need to go. Diversity may expand the perspectives and ideas of the team. However, inclusion—which gives people more of a voice and a safe place to express themselves—allows the group to challenge the status quo and explore new solutions.

Why Don't Leaders Specifically Act to Enhance Belonging?

Many top managers do not see promoting belonging, social connections, and workplace friendships as a key leadership responsibility and task. Given the strong business case for inclusion and belonging, this is a grave mistake.

Why don't top managers specifically focus on creating a sense of belonging? There may be several reasons.

First, top managers are overwhelmed by ongoing operational demands and the need to push out the work. They are often too distracted to focus on something seemingly amorphous such as workplace "belonging."

Second, many senior managers don't think that the personal lives of employees are any of their business. Managers generally feel that employees should leave their personal lives at home and the organization should just focus on getting the work done. Well, that's impossible. People's personal lives impact how they do their work and how they interact with others.

Third, many managers tend to value and thus focus on work results over work relationships. They fail to understand that we achieve results through relationships. In fact, high-performing teams spend 25% more time talking about non-work personal topics (families, hobbies, sports, weekend activities) than lower-performing teams. (See Ron Friedman, "5 Things High-Performing Teams Do Differently," hbr.org, Oct 21, 2021.)

Finally, as managers move up in their organizations and careers, they tend to become more aloof and disconnected from others. One of my best coaches (and an icon in city management) once told me: "Frank, as a city manager, you should be friendly but not friends with others." I disagree. It is lonely at the top only if we isolate ourselves.

Connection matters.

Focusing on the Business of Belonging

Since there is a strong business case for enhancing the sense of belonging and "mattering" among employees, how do we as colleagues and leaders get started?

As a Colleague

During the COVID lock-down and with the advent of remote work, many of us forgot how to socialize. Here are a number of "micro-actions" that all of us can take as individuals to "get personal" and thereby promote social and emotional connections at work.

Greet everyone. When you arrive at work (or join a zoom meeting), greet everyone by name. And, when you leave, say goodbye.

Arrive early to the meeting. Intentionally, arrive five minutes early to an in-person or virtual meeting so you can chit-chat about non-work topics.

Ask a personal question. Inquire about the other person's weekend, family, pets, sports or hobbies.

Ask the second question. Don't just ask the initial question (such as "What did you do this weekend?"), ask the follow-up question (such as "Why do you enjoy fishing?"). Asking the second and third questions shows genuine interest.

Invite a co-worker to coffee. The mere act of inviting someone for a cup of coffee or tea in the employee lounge demonstrates that you care for the person. Ask non-work questions to get to know the person.

Get away from the office. Even better, invite a colleague to a nearby café for a break. Take a walk with someone at lunchtime, talking along the way.

Share yourself. Model the way—share some of your non-work life and interests.

Assist others in their work. Help your co-worker perform a task, such as providing information, making an introduction to one of your contacts, or endorsing the ideas of the other person. For example, if you say in a meeting "As Jose said, . . .," you are showing support for a co-worker's point and thus amplifying their potential influence

with the group. Because this kind of assistance is discretionary and not part of your job, it demonstrates that you care about the other person. (See [Juliet Bourke, "3 Small Ways to Be a More Inclusive Colleague, hbr.org, Dec 13, 2021](.).)

Create a safe place to vent. Our work (especially team-based efforts) is difficult. Therefore, allow your colleague to vent a bit. Don't try to give advice or fix things—just acknowledge their frustration.

Make a physical connection. You can create a connection by effectively using your body language and by the sharing of physical space. Examples include walking together to a meeting or deliberately sitting next to each other. In a Zoom meeting, you can share your personal background (as opposed to the agency's logo or some generic background) and you can exaggerate positive non-verbal cues such as smiling and nodding.

Break bread. Any time you can connect over food or drink fosters belonging. It doesn't have to be a meal—you can occasionally bring coffee and bagels to a team meeting in order to enhance socializing.

Show some vulnerability. Vulnerability helps build connection and trust. You demonstrate vulnerability if you share a challenge for which you admit that you do not have a solution, or a situation where you made a mistake or something you regret. By demonstrating your own vulnerability, you make it safe for others to express themselves and reveal their authentic selves. (See [Career Compass #32, "The Power of Vulnerability](.")

Express appreciation. Saying thank you for any assistance from a colleague enhances social connection. The key is to express it and to be specific ("thank you for providing the research data that I needed for my report to the board."). You can express appreciation one-on-one or at a shout-out at the beginning of a team meeting.

These kinds of micro-actions enhance the connection that other employees feel with you. In getting personal, they also enhance your own sense of belonging. In the process, they foster higher productivity, collaboration, adaptability, and retention.

As a Formal Leader

If you reach out to colleagues in an effort to relate, build connections, and promote belonging, you are exerting positive influence in the organization and thus behaving as a leader. You can lead from anywhere.

While you can promote belonging as an individual team member, we need managers with formal authority to recognize the importance of belonging and take steps to help create workplace connections. Leaders account for up to 70% of an employee's experience of "safety' and belonging. (See [Wei Zheng et al., "What Makes an Inclusive Leader?" hbr.org, Sept 27, 2023](.).

Here are some actions suggested for leaders with formal authority:

Understand the "why." Given all the distractions, it is critical that you understand the business case for workplace connections if you are to devote the necessary time, energy, and attention to this leadership task.

State your intent. If you are going to devote your time and attention as well as team resources to promote belonging, it is suggested that you explain the why to your team and publicly state your intent.

Get personal. Model the relationship-building micro-actions listed above.

Establish rituals. Rituals are defined as a prescribed set of actions regularly repeated in a precise manner by an individual or members of a group. (See [Francesca Gino and Michael Norton, "Why Rituals Work," Scientific American, May 14, 2013](#).)

Rituals can help build connections by creating patterns of behaviors and habits. For instance, some groups have a "take 5" or "take 10" ritual at the beginning of their team meetings so people can share non-work information. To start meetings, another ritual is to share "one joy" and "one challenge," or institute a shout-out acknowledging an individual or team acknowledgement. Other teams may start a meeting with a connection exercise, such as asking everyone to bring their favorite coffee or tea mug and share why the cup is important to them. (See [Career Compass #99, "Harness the Hidden Power of Rituals](#)."）

Use the onsite as the new offsite. I believe that it makes little sense to require employees to commute to the office to do work that can easily be done at home. Therefore, you should consider making the onsite the new offsite. Just like our previous offsite retreats, onsite work should now focus on team building, collaboration, consensus decision-making, mentoring, and social bonding. To focus on these types of relationship-building activities, it does require leadership intention and advance planning. (See [Erica Keswin, "In the Hybrid Era, On-sites Are the New Off-sites," hbr.org, Jan 6, 2022](#).)

Endorse diverse employee ideas. As a formal leader, consciously be on the look-out for ways to endorse and implement employee ideas. To feel a sense of belonging, everyone wants to "have a seat at the table" and to see that their opinion counts. To demonstrate that people are valued and their opinions count, look for new and diverse ideas to endorse and implement to enhance programs or to improve the workplace. These ideas may originate from one-to-one conversations with employees, team meetings, or employee surveys. You demonstrate that employees are valued by acknowledging where the ideas come from, identifying how you are responding, and encouraging additional ideas.

Support career development. Recognizing our need in local government to grow our own talent, it makes sense to initiate various talent development programs. Such efforts

may include training managers how to conduct development conversations with their direct reports, teaching employees interview skills and how to create a career development plan, conducting new supervisor classes, developing career ladders, providing team leadership and other stretch assignments for emerging leaders, or creating job rotations or talent exchanges among departments.

Surveys indicate that employees are attracted to organizations and stay with those organizations where they can grow and develop. Not only do these career development efforts make business sense, but they also demonstrate that top management cares about employees and are committed to them.

Develop peer support programs. Many organizations have now created a "buddy" program for new hires as part of the onboarding process and even encourage the buddies to stay in contact even after onboarding is completed.

One powerful way to foster belonging is by actively supporting the creation of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). An ERG is a voluntary workplace group that employees join based on shared identities, communities, or interests. Some examples include working parents or vets group, a women's network, moms returning to work, or specific culture or ethnicity groups. (See Meryl D'Sa-Wilson, togetherplatform.com, March 15, 2023.) These ERGs or affinity groups offer forums in which employees can share experiences, information, and resources and in the process create a strong sense of belonging. (See Jennifer Sokolowsky, "How ERGs Create Belonging the Workplace," chonos.com, March 27, 2024.)

Another way to encourage supportive relationships is to create an internal peer coaching program. These coaching matchups would be voluntary and could easily go beyond the typical senior leader coaching an up-and-comer. For instance, younger employees could do "reverse mentoring" by training senior managers on how to use newer technologies or social media. Or, the organization could provide an online marketplace of skills and talents, whereby employees could identify a co-worker who could teach or advise them regarding new knowledge or skills.

Share best practices. As a chief executive or department director, you may wish to start an informal "Office of Belonging." This informal unit could be staffed on a very part-time basis by a few champions who collect examples of best practices in building connections and promulgate these exemplary practices in the organization.

Include relationship-building criteria in manager evaluations. A key way to reinforce the importance of promoting workplace belonging is to include relationship-building as one specific element of manager performance evaluations and reward managers who help create a culture of caring and inclusion.

Frank's Experience in Creating Connections

After my wife Pam died, I of course suffered a great sense of loss. Not only was I stricken by grief and overwhelming sadness, but my performance as a chief executive also plummeted. However, I was fortunate to have family, friends, and colleagues who acknowledged my grief and supported me and my small kids.

Based on this experience, I developed an informal grief support program for our Palo Alto organization of 1300 employees. I asked the department administrative secretaries (who really knew what was going on with employees in their departments) to let me know when an employee lost a partner, other family member, close friend, or even a beloved pet. I then would send a hand-written note to the employee acknowledging their grief, sharing my experience of loss, and hoping that they would take it slow and easy as they dealt with their grief. We also offered some local grief support resources for employees, including grief support groups.

While this grief support effort was motivated by my personal experience with grief and my sense of compassion for co-workers going through the same kind of experience, I soon discovered that it had an unforeseen consequence of building connection between employees and me. Even after leaving Palo Alto, employees still stop me in the street and thank me for acknowledging their loss, sharing my experience, and simply caring for them.

Most importantly, people were more inclined to follow me because they were connected to me. Building these connections allowed me to enhance my leadership capacity.

Take Action in Your Own Sphere

Whether you are a chief executive of a local government agency, a department head, a unit manager or an individual employee, you can act within your own sphere of influence. As a unit manager, you can initiate with team members a ritual or two to promote a sense of belonging. A department director can develop a buddy program to onboard new employees. A chief executive can support the creation of Employee Resource Groups or incorporate relationship-building criteria in manager evaluations. As an individual employee, you can model behaviors to promote connection in the organization.

While anyone can take the micro-actions that I suggest above, formal leaders need to build the organizational infrastructure fostering a culture of belonging and inclusion.

I have emphasized the strong business case for nurturing belonging. However, the little acts that I suggest will also bring more joy to our every-day work lives.

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