Belongingness should matter to HR managers: lessons learned from outdoor adventure sport enthusiasts

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of cultivating belongingness within an organization. This paper will also indicate ways human resources (HR) practitioners can enhance inclusivity and foster a more diverse workplace.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is written for practitioners who want to create a more inclusive organization. Exploring lessons learned from an environment seemingly disparate from a typical workplace revealed common generalizable themes. HR practitioners can use these themes to better understand the need for an intentionally designed workplace that prioritizes belonging as a means of improving overall organizational efficiency.

Findings – Organizations compete globally for market share and consumers, who are nonhomogeneous. Attracting, retaining and growing a diverse talent pool that is representative of their heterogeneous customers will help organizations better understand and adjust to dynamic market demands. Research shows that promoting diversity, inclusion and belongingness in the workplace oftentimes enhances employee performance, improves organizational culture and increases profitability.

Originality/value – Learnings from outdoor adventure sports are explored to garner insight for HR professionals seeking to enhance diversity and inclusion. This paper proposes three ways HR professionals could foster a more diverse environment where employees will be more engaged, empowered and fulfilled: create safe spaces, open access to opportunities and cultivate belongingness.

Keywords Diversity, equity and inclusion, Belongingness, Employee engagement, Employee inclusion, HR diversity and inclusion, Organizational climate, Organizational culture, Workplace diversity, Human resource management

Paper type General review

Introduction
Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work collectively to support different groups of individuals, including people of different races, ethnicities, religions, abilities, genders and sexual orientations. In understanding the three concepts, diversity refers to representation (i.e. gender and race). Equity ensures fairness for everyone through norms, practices and policies, whereas inclusion creates a sense of belonging, such that employees feel valued, involved and respected for their contributions. DEI initiatives promote representation and engagement across diverse genders, races, ethnicities, religions, ages, sexual orientations, disabilities and classes. It extends well beyond hiring practices to ensure fair access to pay, benefits, resources and advancement opportunities. DEI initiatives should give employees a voice and foster a sense of belonging; there are myriad of business advantages to having a diverse workforce where employees feel valued and heard (Gonzales, 2023).

An article recently published by the Society for Human Resources Management by Gonzales (2022) suggested that belonging takes DEI a step further and examines how
individuals feel as they engage with the rest of the organization. It is a mental and emotional state of feeling seen, valued and supported based on a person’s uniqueness. As employees feel an elevated sense of connectedness, a more positive workplace experience and improved well-being typically ensue; organizations see advantages in enhanced employee performance, heightened productivity, a happier staff and increased profitability.

The focus of this paper is to connect learnings from outdoor adventure sports (OAS) to the workplace. This paper will provide guidance to human resources (HR) professionals seeking to comprehend and improve inclusivity.

Discussion

Outdoor adventure sports

OAS have physical and psychological benefits that enhance emotional stability, stimulate brain growth and promote overall well-being (Allan et al., 2020). In this environment the term “sport” does not denote a structured, competitive and homogeneous setting; instead, it refers to an activity where participants are contending with unpredictable environmental constraints. While OAS provide a low-stress, reflective, motivational and restorative space, some marginalized communities experience inequitable treatment and discrimination, even in this seemingly utopian ecosystem (Allan et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2023). Understanding how DEI measures are often overlooked within the solace of OAS will provide perspective about congruent issues in a more stressful workplace.

Although OAS and a typical workplace have minimal semblance in terms of structure, required deliverables and normative behaviors, there is a great deal of synergy with regards to the need for employees (or outdoor sports enthusiasts) to feel safe, valued and have a sense of belonging. A comprehensive Google, Facebook, Instagram and Meetup search was done to learn about the experiences of marginalized groups in OAS. Six focus groups consisting of people from black, Indigenous, Latino, female, minority, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or gender expansive, queer and/or questioning and disabled communities revealed similar themes; these underrepresented groups were concerned about safety, grappling with the imposter syndrome and experiencing limited access to resources.

Importance of safety, belonging and access

Historically, insensitive rhetoric and discriminatory laws/policies have crippled marginalized communities. In 2023, more than 50 years after Jim Crow laws were overturned and the commencement of the Women’s Rights movements, hiking and climbing routes persist that are associated with colonialism and misogyny (Wigglesworth, 2023). Evans et al. (2023) discussed blatant prejudice behavior aimed at professional female athletes participating in outdoor sports. Black, Indigenous and people of color athletes site their need for an outdoor safe space as the primary reason for creating their own inclusive organizations. The impact of lingering discriminatory relics magnifies the fear some groups have about going into spaces that have historically shunned diversity.

Even outdoor sports enthusiasts need to have a sense of belonging and access. During an interview with ABC News, Ambreen Tariq, creator of the “Brown People Camping” social media campaign, said when she camps or hikes, there are assumptions that she does not belong and feelings of “imposter syndrome.” Fear of being singled out by park rangers, isolated and bombarded with inquiries about their behavior is a barrier that will dissuade marginalized communities from participating in OAS (Ebbs and Dwyer, 2020). Research also indicates that access to safe parks and outdoor sports is linked to socioeconomic class and location. Access disparities are further exacerbated for low-income and minority communities (Williams et al., 2020).
While we highlighted challenges that some marginalized communities participating in OAS encounter, we contend that similar experiences exist for underrepresented groups in the workplace as well; in an organization, these feelings range from not feeling safe (in terms of job security and expressing their individualism) to not having access to career advancement opportunities. DEI initiatives are beneficial for all stakeholders. Whether we focus on DEI in outdoor spaces or in the workplace, there are physiological, emotional and financial incentives to embrace heterogeneity (Allan et al., 2020; Ferraro et al., 2023).

There is little question about the value of DEI initiatives in the workplace. Study after study has shown the bottom-line benefits (Westover, 2021). We argue that organizations should be intentional and go beyond simply having a nonhomogeneous workforce. Merely aiming to hire diverse employees and establishing equitable pay scales, while crucial, is not sufficient. Similarly, involving diverse employees in decision-making and strategy is vital, yet not the ultimate goal. Diversity alone does not ensure exceptional performance. Equity and inclusion demand inclusive leadership – leadership that ensures every team member feels respected, valued and included. What is imperative is leveraging DEI initiatives to establish a lasting organizational culture where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, Evan et al. (2019) summed up the value of belonging at work with the statement, “Humans are so fundamentally social that we can even bond with strangers over the very experience of not having anyone with whom to bond.” In addition, they state: “If workers feel like they belong, companies reap substantial bottom-line benefits. High belonging was linked to a whopping 56% increase in job performance, a 50% drop in turnover risk, and a 75% reduction in sick days. For a 10,000-person company, this would result in annual savings of more than $52 million.” Clearly, a culture of belonging, like inclusion and diversity, helps organizations not only retain great people but also maximize individual and team performance (Westover, 2021).

Three ways human resources managers could improve diversity, inclusivity and belongingness

We use learnings from OAS to provide insight for HR professionals seeking to enhance DEI initiatives. Specifically, focusing on creating safe spaces, cultivating belongingness and opening access to opportunities would foster a more inclusive environment where employees from diverse backgrounds will be more engaged, fulfilled and retained:

- **Establish a safe space.** Ongoing training (with internal and external HR professionals) is imperative. A safe space “audit” by external HR professionals will provide a fresh perspective about the overall company culture. Include underrepresented groups in the organizing and planning phases for DEI training sessions. It is important to understand how inherent, cultural and systemic biases, in addition to insensitive rhetoric, may stymie an employee’s ability to truly thrive. Employees feeling overlooked or as if they cannot express their authentic individuality may be costing large companies millions (Evans et al., 2019).

- **Create open access opportunities.** While it is essential to promote diversity and equity within an organization, there are intrinsic barriers that must be addressed. Underrepresented groups are more likely to feel that a glass ceiling is preventing them from advancing in their respective careers (Kapoor et al., 2021). Access to mentors, knowledge and opportunities directly impacts retention and efficiency (Wilson, 2014). Establish a mentorship/sponsorship rotational program where senior-level executives are paired with a group of midlevel executives and entry-level employees. Also, establish peer learning groups. The goal is to deliberately expose diverse groups to knowledge about the inner workings of the company, opportunities for upward mobility, different departments and people, tips about how to be successful, professional
development training, etc. Organizational productivity, growth and efficiency are impacted by the glass ceiling effect – whether real or imagined (Wilson, 2014).

- **Cultivate belongingness.** DEI is not a passive undertaking; it requires action. Although having diverse personnel is vital, it is equally important to have engaged employees who feel empowered and valued. Witwer (2021) discussed the need for organizational leaders to seek out unique perspectives, encourage individuality and create opportunities to redistribute power. Belonging is fostered through inclusivity and must be engrained in the overall workplace culture. Create quarterly think tanks (with rotating facilitators) where new ideas are encouraged and rewarded (both financially and with recognition); leadership and cross-sectional teams (from different departments and varying work experiences) must work together to address internal and external issues. Give opportunities for others (who may not be in leadership roles) to lead the think tanks. Focusing on DEI initiatives in addition to establishing safe spaces and access opportunities will help cultivate a sense of belongingness (Sehmi, 2021).

**Conclusion**

As organizations cultivate a more diverse, equitable and inclusive environment, a congruent shift in organizational culture must also occur such that differences are viewed as assets rather than deficits (Pennington, 2020). Simply focusing on diversity initiatives, without deliberate belonging components, will make attracting, retaining, empowering and increasing productivity an arduous undertaking for underrepresented groups. Nonetheless, as workplaces become more heterogeneous, prioritizing inclusivity becomes increasingly essential within an organization’s cultural framework. HR professionals should focus on educating employees about the importance of offering a safe space, opening opportunities to diverse groups, promoting cultural inclusivity, and nurturing a sense of belonging; ultimately, an organization’s growth and bottom line depends on these initiatives.

**References**


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