Creating a sense of **belonging** is the first step to moving the D&I conversation forward

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Diversity, inclusion, equity and equality are a binding set of principles organisations use to become aware of different ideas, cultures and lifestyles that people bring to a business.

With the goal of improving company culture and creating a real sense of place and purpose for everyone, businesses that embrace and understand these values can earn deeper trust and commitment from their people.

However, if organisations are serious about wanting to foster a truly diverse and inclusive culture, it is now time to move the conversation on and start focusing on how to help people truly feel like they belong within an organisation.

Natalie Hailey, People Services Director at CAE Technology Services Ltd. (CAE), explains how the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) conversation needs to move forward.

Progress is great - but what next?

Not so long ago, HR professionals had a hard job proving why D&I should be a focus for the organisations they represented.

Thankfully, things have moved on and business leaders now understand and appreciate the importance of a well-thought-out D&I strategy and what it adds to the business and its people.

Why belonging must come first

Great to see progress, but is it now time for the D&I conversation to move on?

The majority of businesses actively strive for diverse representation in their workplace, but to achieve this we need to consider a binding factor that has often been seen as a result of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) rather than a precursor to it – belonging.

But what exactly do we mean by belonging?

One way to view this binding theme is seeing it as the difference between just being invited to the party versus being asked to help choose the music, catering and decorations. Belonging is being a part of the action, being an equal partner – having your opinion sought and being included in the setup of the party, rather than just turning up.

Belonging goes beyond diversity, inclusion, equity and equality and refers to an individual's sense of acceptance, connection, and purpose within a particular group. Belonging is feeling valued, accepted, and supported – which can lead to higher engagement, productivity, and overall well-being.

To embrace a general sense of belonging in a business, you need to build a culture where people can be themselves, have psychological safety, and feel appreciated and valued - whilst feeling that they are achieving something worthwhile, together.

This goes far beyond a policy, procedure or internal marketing with studies showing that employees who obtain belongingness at work reach their potential 3.5 times faster - the value of belonging is plain to see and feel.

Moving beyond box-ticking

Organisations committed to creating belonging amongst their workforce don't see D&I initiatives as tick-box exercises, they view it through the lens of fostering an environment where people feel safe. Not just safe to work, but where people feel safe to bring their whole self to work every day. Where people feel safe to make suggestions for change, to innovate and challenge the status quo – feeling comfortable that they are going to be listened to. Having a sense of real belonging encourages people to add value to the business and their colleagues.

Granted, this is much easier said than done, and in a drive for the perfect D&I programme, business leaders need to be aware that they could be unintentionally isolating employees.

To avoid unintentionally isolating people, organisations may want to consider taking a holistic approach to D&I that goes beyond mere representation.

This includes addressing biases, fostering inclusivity in all aspects of the workplace, promoting diverse leadership, as well as providing equal opportunities for growth and development by actively involving people, regardless of their backgrounds, in decision making processes.

For example, business leaders should involve their people at all levels in the development and implementation of any D&I initiatives. Working to create open dialogue and safe spaces for people to share their experiences, perspectives and suggestions without fear of any consequence.

Providing an environment where it is acceptable to ask 'why are we doing this?' is important to be able to challenge the standard thought processes and look into the desired outcomes of a policy or procedure change.

Through adopting strategies that consider these elements, organisations can develop D&I initiatives that not only promote a diverse and inclusive workplace but also serve as conduits for learning and continuous improvement.

This leads to long-lasting positive change and begins to foster a sense of belonging.

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A fresh perspective

Belonging in the workplace means that people of all backgrounds have a seat at the table and are listened to, understood and have their contributions recognised.

Many organisations work hard to create truly inclusive workplaces that are reflective of the diversity they see, but how do they know when they have achieved their goal? That's where belonging comes in – the output of true inclusion is a sense of belonging for everyone. This requires a reframing of the D&I debate.

Architecting the right culture has to come from the top. Anyone can disrupt the culture, but ultimately it has to come from the leadership team who need to be open to receiving and acting upon feedback. Until this happens, businesses will continue to miss the mark and put up barriers which will only be to the detriment of the business, its people and its customers.

Ultimately, there needs to be a rethink about how business leaders approach diversity, inclusion, equity and equality in the workplace in order to create a true sense of belonging for employees.

True belonging can't be created by simply rolling out new D&I initiatives, it requires active listening from the leadership team and not being afraid of failure. Business leaders might not get it right the first time, but that's OK, because in a business where everyone feels they belong, failing is not frowned upon.

Providing support for employees, at all levels, to learn from their mistakes and do better next time makes the workplace more accepting, supportive and where people can feel that they truly belong.

Bringing this to life at CAE

At CAE, we have recently launched our new value: Advocate Belonging. Advocating belonging and creating a culture of trust and respect has benefits for both our people and our business, as well as creating an inclusive and supportive work environment.

We believe belonging helps us to unbiasedly focus on diversity and equality, which is crucial for ensuring fairness and equal opportunities for everyone. By actively monitoring statistics and implementing fair, transparent, and consistent policies, we can work towards eliminating bias and promoting a diverse and inclusive environment.

This helps us to attract and retain top talent from different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, which can lead to enhanced problem-solving and decision-making processes.

Having the right person in the right job is critical to our success. By creating an environment where everyone feels a sense of belonging, we are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and productive. We will feel valued for our unique skills and contributions – belonging ignites our values and behaviours. By embracing these values, we can all play a role in creating a culture where we can all thrive, add value, and truly feel a sense of belonging.

Having a true sense of belonging is both invigorating and empowering – which in turn allows me to be my best self and perform to my fullest. Creating a sense of belonging is crucial for fostering a positive and inclusive environment where individuals feel valued, accepted, and connected.

If you'd like to learn more about CAE, our values, culture and people, <u>check out our website.</u>

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