

**ADVANCING
BELONGING IN
ORGANIZATIONS**

AN EQUITY FLUENT
LEADERSHIP PLAYBOOK



BELONGING DRIVERS & ELEMENTS

PRIMER

BerkeleyHaas **egal**

INTRODUCTION

This primer delves into the five drivers of belonging in organizations to explain more about their background and why they are important for enhancing belonging. It is part of a **playbook** on enhancing belonging in organizations developed by the Berkeley Haas Center for Equity, Gender & Leadership (EGAL).

There are five drivers that lead to belonging:

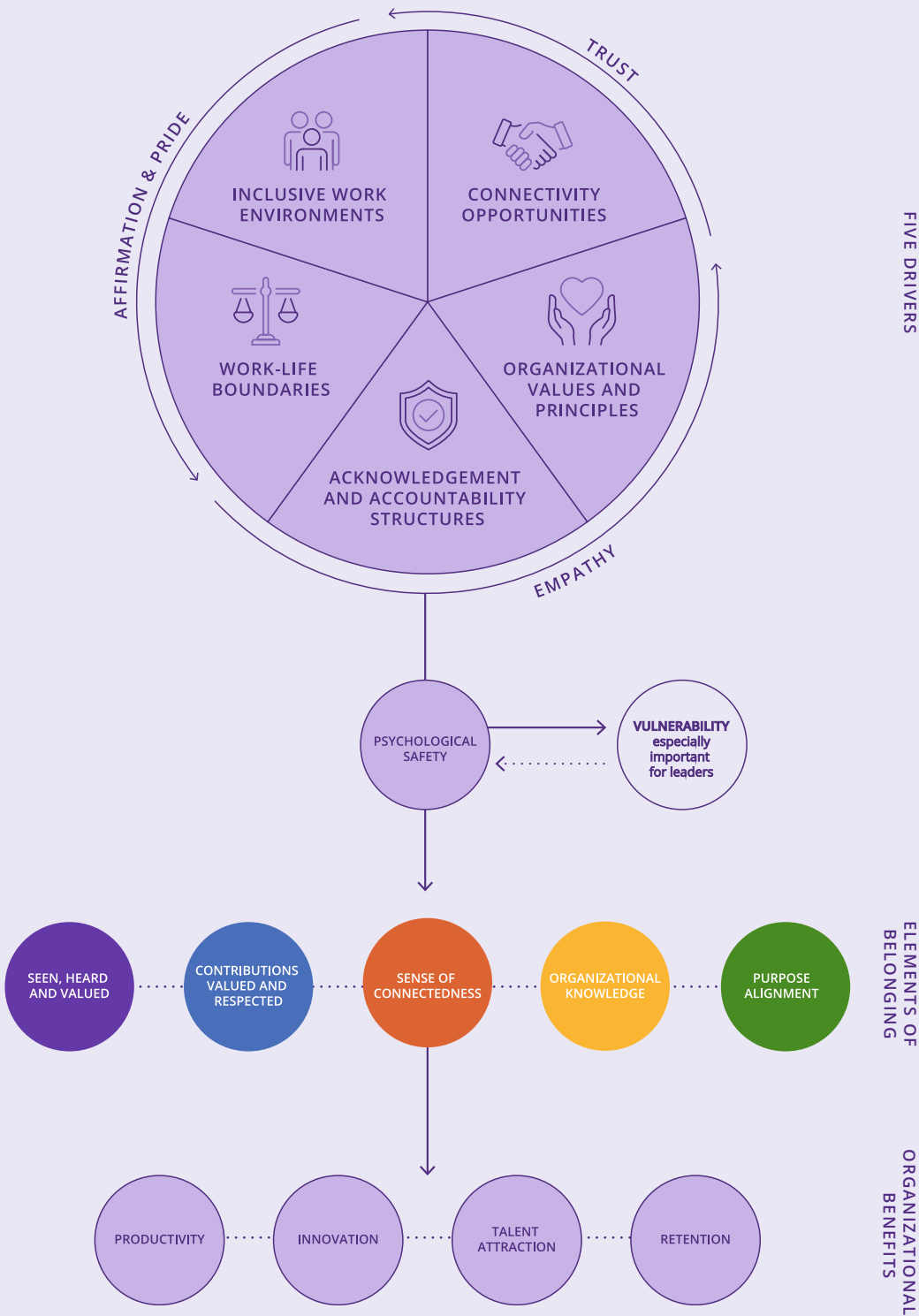
- establishing inclusive work environments,
- creating connectivity opportunities,
- having and executing organizational values and principles,
- solidifying acknowledgment and accountability structures, and
- maintaining work-life boundaries.

These five drivers help create an environment where employees feel affirmation, pride, empathy, and trust. This helps to create a psychologically safe culture and opportunities for vulnerability that lead to the conditions for belonging. Our Belonging Framework (see Figure 1) captures this journey to belonging. Let's dive into each of these drivers.

BOX 1. JUSTICE AS THE NORTH STAR

Justice is our guiding principle or “north star”. This north star guides us to consider how belonging can be supported so all employees are able to grow and thrive. Justice recognizes and considers that there is an unequal distribution of power, privilege, and capital.¹ Centering justice as our “north star” allows us to consider how and in what ways belonging looks different across various demographics and employee communities. Our strategic plays take this into account. For example, by using justice as our guiding principle, we consider structural barriers that make it difficult for people of color and women to build networks and connections within organizations.

FIGURE 1. BELONGING FRAMEWORK



Creating an environment of belonging starts with **five drivers**.

These five drivers lead to an environment where employees feel affirmation, pride, empathy, and trust.

In turn, that helps to create a psychologically safe culture and opportunities for vulnerability.

Finally, we arrive at the **elements of belonging**.

Which results in **organizational benefits**.

BELONGING DRIVERS



ESTABLISHING INCLUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Inclusive work environments are about creating and sustaining workplaces that welcome and respect all individuals.² Inclusive work environments have components that are physical and symbolic (e.g., language, logos, pictures). Open, communal spaces can be helpful for employees to connect informally.³ Organizational symbols like pictures of executive board members or core values decals on the wall can help create a sense of belonging through diverse representation and value alignment. Or they may make people feel like they don't belong if it's not representative of them or the broader workforce.⁴

Language is important for workplace inclusion too.⁵ Inclusive language starts in the hiring process by ensuring job postings are void of language that might dissuade certain candidates (e.g., women, people of color, immigrants) from applying.⁶ Additionally, common workplace expressions like “manpower,” “turning a blind eye,” and “let's have a pow wow” are sexist, ableist, and racist/culturally offensive.⁷ Inclusive language practices can include using gender-neutral language, normalizing employees sharing their pronouns if they desire, and using they/them pronouns instead of defaulting to he/she. Utilizing inclusive tools like closed captioning allows a platform for all employees to have a voice and be heard, including those with differing abilities.⁸

Part of inclusive work environments includes making sure various employees ARE able to speak up and be heard. Research shows that women are often interrupted and spoken over in meetings and women's ideas are

more often listened to when said by men.⁹ Practicing active listening in meetings is critical for leaders. Adopting practices from Agile methodologies such as writing comments on sticky notes and leaving time for comprehension also makes the meeting more inclusive for those whose natural pauses are longer or who are more introverted.¹⁰ Meeting leaders can also incorporate pause points and ask for various people's perspectives and thoughts (not only those who are first to speak up). Further, in virtual meetings, people with differing abilities such as hearing impairments can face extra challenges. Having closed captioning options and using videos while not covering your mouth can help.¹¹



CREATING CONNECTIVITY OPPORTUNITIES

Workplaces that foster belonging have opportunities for employees to collaborate informally and formally through mentorship and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). These opportunities allow employees to build bridges across lateral roles and teams, as well as ladders to organizational leaders above them.¹² This is also important for passing down institutional knowledge. Strategies like peer-to-peer mentoring facilitate knowledge sharing by helping employees learn the ropes and successfully navigate the organization.¹³ Employee Resource Groups allow opportunities for employees from similar demographic/social backgrounds to connect and share informal understandings and guidance that may be relevant to their identity (e.g., racial/ethnic, gender, religious affiliation, LGBTQ+, Armed Forces/Veteran ERG, etc.)

While ERGs have grown in popularity in the corporate workplace, they are not without controversy.¹⁴ Despite ERGs fostering safe spaces of shared identity and community building, there are also concerns that they might further “other” employees¹⁵ or create an “us” versus “them” environment^{16,17}—a less inclusive outcome of

belonging. Given this, practitioners and people leaders expressed in interviews the importance of adequate resources, guidance, and support to provide ERGs with a platform for success.

The shift to remote and hybrid workplaces can make it harder to build organic connections. Challenges can be overcome by intentionally curating virtual opportunities for employees to connect. This can be done through communication platforms like Slack or dedicating time at the beginning of meetings to prompt community and connectivity. Organizations can also set up “virtual watercooler” chats, which are short, informal video chats. A research study on these types of chats between interns and senior managers found that those who got informal facetime with bosses received higher performance evaluations and were more likely to get a job offer.¹⁸ Relatedly, pairing remote workers with mentors outside their department can help them speak frankly without worrying about team dynamics. While the shift to virtual workplaces presented challenges, moving from physical to virtual leveled the playing field by democratizing access to and engaging with colleagues and leaders in workplaces.¹⁹ By normalizing virtual interactions, more connections were possible in the time that would have been spent traveling to in-person meetings. In addition, many historically marginalized people reported feeling relieved that they did not have to submit to micro-inequities that were more prevalent in an in-person setting.

It is important to consider how different people are networking within the organization and with whom they connect. For example, networks women have in organizations tend to be less powerful than those that men have.²⁰ Also, women often end up networking with peers or lower-level employees and can miss out on networking opportunities due to caretaking responsibilities.²¹ Additionally, juggling the competing priorities of the shift to working from home may present challenges for certain employee groups, like parents or caregivers.²²



HAVING AND EXECUTING ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

Organizational values and purpose play an important role in employee morale and connectedness.²³ Value-led organizations have strong core values that drive strategy, employee contribution, and buy-in to those core values, and revisit and appropriately update their core values.²⁴ Employees feel most connected to organizations whose purpose, values, and aims mirror their own.²⁵ A 2019 Glassdoor survey in the US, UK, France, and Germany found that even more than salary, a company’s mission and values matter most in the job-seeking process. This was especially true for millennials and young adults.²⁶

It’s not enough to simply have principles; employees need to see them in action. Organizations that embody and execute their values and principles strengthen employees’ connection to their work and the broader organization.²⁷ Glassdoor data reveals that “Leaders Live the Core Values” ranks third among the top 10 cultural elements that matter most to employees.²⁸ It is increasingly critical for companies to embody their values and principles through leadership actions, consistency, and transparency (e.g., in leader selection processes).

BOX 2. BERKELEY HAAS’ DEFINING LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

Berkeley Haas’ values and beliefs are embodied through their Defining Leadership Principles (DLPs). Haas uses the DLPs to help guide action and decision making—including incorporating them into the student admissions process, faculty and course evaluations, and employee promotions. The Berkeley Haas Defining Leadership Principles are: (1) Question the status quo; (2) Confidence without attitude; (3) Student always; and (4) Beyond yourself.²⁹



SOLIDIFYING ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES

Accountability provides the foundation and structural support for belonging in the workplace. Harmful behaviors like microaggressions and mistreatment at work fail to create inclusive spaces of belonging.³⁰ Organizations and leaders must hold themselves and all employees accountable by openly acknowledging and addressing such issues.

It is also critical for organizational leaders to promote positive acknowledgment of employees' work and behaviors. A Gallup survey revealed that employees who report that they're not adequately recognized at work are three times more likely to say they'll quit in the next year.³¹ Also, women³²—particularly Black women³³—are less likely to receive recognition for their accomplishments at work. Positive reinforcement, praise, and recognition generate employee engagement and belonging, resulting in higher productivity and lower turnover.³⁴ This positive reinforcement can happen in an ongoing manner and be informal or formal—such as acknowledging someone's work and contributions in meetings or through awards. Performance reviews are an opportunity to both hold managers and employees accountable and provide concrete positive acknowledgment.

Related to acknowledgment, organizations and managers must be transparent about the expectations of employees and how to excel in their roles and tasks.



MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BOUNDARIES

Work-life boundaries give employees the autonomy to set a professional and personal equilibrium that works best for them while creating healthy boundaries to leave work at work.³⁵ Not every employee wants to “bring their whole selves to work,” nor should they have to. While the concept of bringing one's whole self to work has been popularized, diversity experts and scholars find it more aspirational than operational. Authenticity often backfires for marginalized employees (e.g., people of color, women, LGBTQ+, etc.) by further disadvantaging them against employer expectations for promotion, fit, and mentorship.^{36 37 38 39} Given this, it's important that employees can create healthy work-life boundaries best suited for them⁴⁰ while not harming their professional opportunities by being seen as not committed or team players.⁴¹ Undoubtedly, setting work-life boundaries has become more difficult in remote and hybrid work environments. Dr. Suzanne Masterson, an organizational behavior scholar, emphasized that virtual work blurs the professional and personal line without the employee's permission.⁴² It is critical for organizations to give employees permission to be segmentors where work is work and home is home. Recent findings from BetterUp reinforce this importance: benefits of belonging in the workplace are eroded if not accompanied by a healthy work-life balance.⁴³

This has been incredibly challenging during the pandemic when physical barriers between work and home were removed. In many cases, people with caretaking responsibilities have not had the opportunity in many cases to create any boundaries between work and home. Organizations can work to purposefully support employees in creating these boundaries and recognize that different employees will have different challenges and needs.

Together, these five drivers engender affirmation, pride, empathy, and trust. This creates the foundation for psychological safety.



PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety is the final key milestone on the journey to belonging. Psychological safety is the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, and/or mistakes.⁴⁴ Organizational leaders and managers play a critical role here. Building a psychologically safe environment requires organizational leaders and managers to model vulnerability and transparency with their teams and colleagues. They can do this by acknowledging when they are wrong, when there have been missteps, and when they need help. Through their actions and this modeling, leaders and managers can create an environment for others to feel safe speaking up, asking questions, and making mistakes without fear of being punished. This is particularly important for historically marginalized populations who face increased risk of speaking up for fear of negative consequences, social exclusion, or simply being misunderstood.⁴⁵ Psychological safety allows employees to be vulnerable with who they are and more easily connect with others, creating a reinforcing loop, which is key to belonging.⁴⁶ The drivers of belonging coupled with psychological safety represent the inputs' of belonging that lead to the elements (or definition) of belonging.

ELEMENTS OF BELONGING

The drivers mentioned lead to the elements of belonging—the emotional outcomes of and set of feelings associated with belonging. These five elements are deeply intertwined. For example, feeling seen, heard, and valued by your colleagues (element 1) can facilitate a sense of connectedness in one's organization (element 3). Similarly, a sense of connectedness (element 3) can lead to increased institutional knowledge building (element 4). The elements should not be viewed in isolation, but as overlapping reinforcements of each other.

SEEN, HEARD, AND VALUED AS AN INDIVIDUAL/HUMAN IN ONE'S ORGANIZATION

The first element of belonging is feeling seen, heard, and valued as an individual. This includes basic human decency and dignity for individuals' complex and intersecting identities. Respectful treatment and job satisfaction are directly linked, particularly for employees from historically disenfranchised backgrounds.⁴⁷

THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS ARE VALUED AND RESPECTED BY THE ORGANIZATION

This element centers on the value and respect of one's professional contributions to the organization. Employees must feel seen for their contributions to the organization professionally. This includes feeling that their work, acumen, education and experience, and creativity are valued.⁴⁸ 44% of surveyed workers globally report being valued for their individual contributions elicited belonging at work.⁴⁹

A SENSE OF CONNECTEDNESS WITH COLLEAGUES

Connectedness has long been recognized as core to belonging, as positive and meaningful interactions are crucial to satisfying humans' need to belong.⁵⁰ In a global survey, 31% of workers indicated having a sense of community and identifying with a defined team made them feel a sense of belonging in their organization.⁵¹ Interview insights from organizational leaders point to managers being key architects of connection among and across teams, particularly given the shift to remote work. Having an established community and team is central to employees feeling like they are a part of something special and meaningful.

INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN ONE'S ORGANIZATION

Sociologists and organizational scholars highlight the importance of knowledge, particularly demystifying the "hidden curriculum" or "rules of the game" as central to belonging.⁵² Institutional knowledge is simply the ins and outs of the organization's operations. This includes the formal policies of the organization, as well as the more informal, unwritten norms and values that guide practices in the organization. Do employees have knowledge of the resources needed to do their job well? Is the organization transparent about its expectations of employees and how to excel in their roles? Are employees aware of the best methods and strategies of action to complete tasks successfully? When employees have institutional knowledge, they feel confident that they can successfully navigate their workplace.⁵³

ALIGNED WITH THE ORGANIZATION'S PURPOSE AND MISSION

Employees feel most connected to organizations whose purpose, values, and aims mirror their own.⁵⁴ A 2019 Glassdoor survey found that even more than salary, a company's mission and values matter most in the job-seeking process. 79% of adults across the United States, UK, France, and Germany reported deeply weighing a company's mission and purpose before applying—this impact was amplified for millennials and young adults.⁵⁵ When employees feel a deeper sense of connection to the principles and values of their employer, they are more likely to be engaged in and committed to their jobs. Additionally, employees whose personal values align with their organizations' are more likely to recruit potential employees whose values also parallel the organization.⁵⁶

With these elements in place, organizations can benefit from increased productivity, innovation, talent attention, and talent retention. See more on the organizational benefits and the plays to enhance belonging in organizations in our [playbook](#).

This tool was developed by Genevieve Smith, Jasmine Sanders, and Ishita Rustagi (2022). It is an accompanying resource of the [Advancing Belonging in Organizations: An Equity Fluent Leadership Playbook](#) of the Center for Equity, Gender & Leadership (EGAL) at Berkeley Haas.

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