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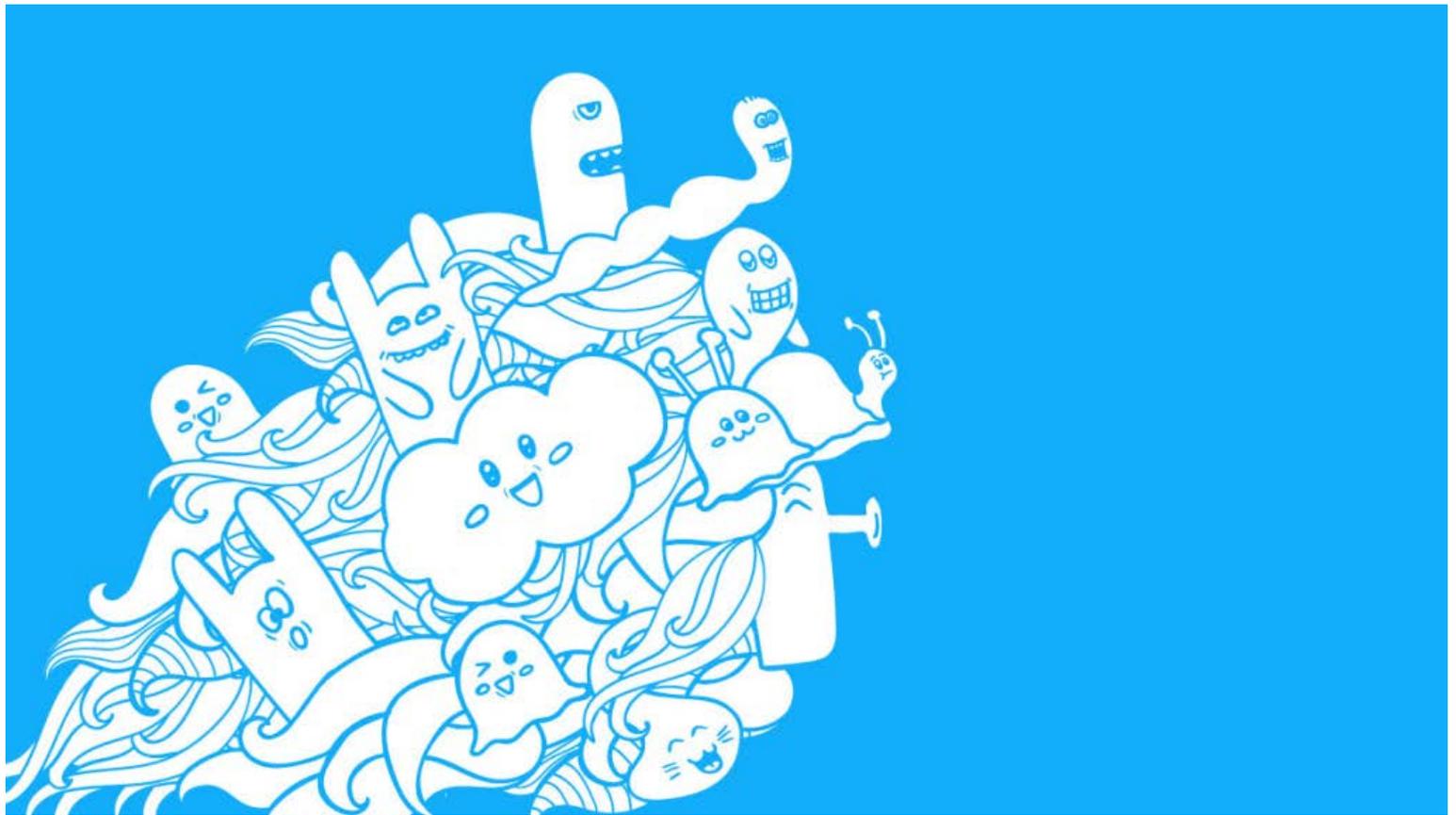
# Diversity Efforts Fall Short Unless Employees Feel That They Belong

by Pat Wadors

AUGUST 10, 2016

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Over the past decade, technology companies and their leaders have launched diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives, hoping to make employees of all backgrounds and experiences feel welcome in our industry.

We failed.

The [data](#) shows that, especially in the tech space, we have not moved the needle on the number of women, blacks, or Latinos in our ranks, despite efforts to do so. Why not? What are we missing?

I have examined this question from both sides, as a leader in charge of building an exceptional workforce and as a woman in a predominantly male industry. Both perspectives came together recently in a talk that I gave at the Professional Business Women's Conference. I was asked to tee up a panel

discussion with a seven-minute talk to describe how I “feel” about the topic. To do that, I had to really think about my own life experiences.

I realized that D&I grabs my intellect — it’s an organizational challenge that must be addressed — but not my heart. D&I initiatives are necessary to win the war for talent, to find and hire a diverse workforce, and to ensure fair practices, but they aren’t sufficient.

What I really wanted was those moments when I feel that I belong to a team, I matter, and I’m able to be my authentic self. I don’t want to be seen as a number, a gender, or an ethnic box. (For the record, I’ve never interviewed a candidate who said “I am your X candidate, I fit that box.”) I also don’t want to be seen only as the role I perform. I’m a woman, a mother, an artist, an HR professional, an athlete, dyslexic, and an introvert. I’m all of that and more — and I want to be able to bring my whole self to work. That is when I have the courage and motivation to speak up, to go beyond my comfort zone. That’s fun.

So during this process of self-reflection, I realized that what’s missing from the discussion is this notion of *belonging*. No matter their background, skin color, or gender, employees wanted what I wanted: to belong. I looked around to my peers and no one was having this kind of conversation. I wanted to start it, to see what happens. To see what I could learn. It felt right.

This led me to coin the term “DIBs,” the combination of diversity and inclusion with belonging. Have you ever called dibs on the front seat of a car? I have. I wanted to call dibs on belonging. When I looked up the definition of dibs, I found it in [Urban Dictionary](#): “It is the most powerful force in the universe”; “to call to oneself.” What better force to change the world?

DIBs — the power of belonging — is backed up by a great deal of research. Even though the conversation at the corporate level hasn't yet embraced belonging, others have begun to notice and measure its impact.

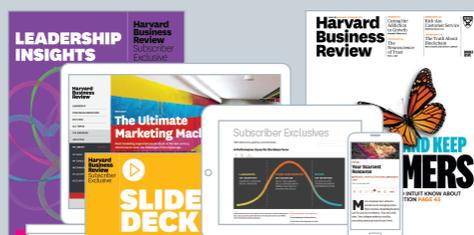
One of the most compelling pieces of research says that we are genetically wired to belong. Our brains are hardwired to motivate us toward connection and belonging — it's how we survive and thrive. In fact, [recent research](#) in neuroscience has indicated that social needs are managed by the same neural networks as primary survival needs such as food and water. And [findings](#) show that belonging and attachment to a group of coworkers is a better motivator for some employees than money.

But one of my favorite pieces of [research](#) is from Greg Walton, a psychologist at Stanford University. His research shows that mitigating threats to a sense of belonging helps minorities significantly reduce stress levels, consequently improving physical health, emotional well-being, and performance. Therefore, creating a wide sense of belonging can become the competitive advantage for any company.

Walton also found that the sense of not belonging is widespread, yet few people openly express that feeling. We think we're the only ones who feel that we don't fit in; in reality, it's a very common feeling.

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At LinkedIn, we are striving to create a culture where everyone can belong. Our head of global solutions, Mike Gamson, shared this at a recent town hall for our Black Inclusion Group: “When I come to work in the morning, I feel like I belong. First of all, I’ve been here for forever. I’ve been able to influence our culture, and decide who works here. Also...I’m a white man.” He recognized that not everyone has that same feeling of belonging where they work, which is a problem. Creating this culture of belonging is necessary for a healthier company, unleashing the very real value of a diverse workforce, and achieving diversity of thought at all levels. Then he continued: “Belonging is an amazing feeling. I want everyone to feel what I feel.”

How can we translate this research, and DIBs, into something people can use? Here are six ways you can create a “belonging moment” for someone and help instill a culture of belonging and inclusiveness:

- **Make introductions.** Show appreciation for the whole person; go beyond their role and responsibilities. Add tidbits that are unique to the individual. Use the language of belonging: “This is Sara — she is part of our research team.” The word *our* really adds the feeling of being on a team.
- **Ask.** Start with a simple, genuine question: “How do you feel? How are you today?” Then listen.
- **Solicit input in meetings.** There are three ways to foster inclusiveness at meetings: Invite someone to the meeting. Ask their opinion, and follow up with questions so they truly felt heard. And when someone speaks, let them finish their thought — do not speak over them.
- **Delegate.** When you as a manager “give” an agenda item to someone on your team, it conveys real ownership, trust, and an opportunity for impact.
- **Pay attention.** Put away devices at meetings. Be fully “present” for conversations with colleagues. Show respect to everyone.
- **Share stories.** An important part of creating a sense of belonging is sharing our stories. Storytelling means two things. First, you, as the storyteller, care enough about your audience’s career journeys to show your own vulnerability and share your mistakes and successes. We can learn from each other. Second, we can begin to see ourselves in someone else’s shoes. We begin to see possibilities. This is even more powerful if the storyteller “looks like you.”

Storytelling is my favorite technique to generate belonging because we, as humans, are also wired to respond to stories. Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist, has [found](#) that hearing a story with a beginning, middle, and end causes our brains to release cortisol and oxytocin. These chemicals trigger our human ability to connect, empathize, and make meaning. It is through our storytelling that we find our way to belong.

These moments of human connection, of belonging, are not that hard to create, and they don't require an organization-wide initiative or policy change. With a few minutes and some level of vulnerability, you can make a huge difference in someone's life, have a positive impact on your company's culture, and change the diversity makeup.

So let's call DIBs. Yes, diversity and inclusion matter, but it's how we help each other feel that we belong on the team, in our community, and in the organization that matters most.

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**Pat Wadors** is the senior vice president of global talent organization at LinkedIn.

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**Ken Schmitt** 3 months ago

These are great steps we can take to be inclusive, Pat. It's a spot on list and I have found all of these to be useful in both the professional and personal worlds. I find it a bit disheartening, though, that we even have to list them because most of them SHOULD be basic skills we naturally incorporate in our daily lives. Introducing people, asking questions, and being an active listener are the makings of a good friend and colleague. Sharing stories and asking for input is how we get to know the people we have in our lives.

One of the reasons I have chosen to keep my executive recruiting firm a boutique rather than going large is that I can utilize the skills that have allowed me to have positive relationships in my personal life to make my business successful as well. I think you summed it up beautifully, "With a few minutes and some level of vulnerability, you can make a huge difference in someone's life, have a positive impact on your company's culture, and change the diversity makeup."

Thanks for the great article.

Ken Schmitt

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