Crafting Belonging at Work:
Six Ways to Include Others

Why should we want to know a stranger when it is easier to estrange another?
Why should we want to close the distance when we can close the gate?[1]

- Toni Morrison

Harry Hutson

Executive summary: This paper builds on a companion piece that urges everyone to become an agent for Belonging—without needing to ask permission or get special training. Here, the author offers six approaches to increase belonging at work as examples of activities that might address the questions, "So what?" and "What next?". The author's intent is to invite conversations that spur action toward increased comity and collegiality.

Not so long ago, I made a sudden move from Massachusetts to Oklahoma to work in the oil patch. I knew as much about the energy industry as I could glean from movies like *There Will Be Blood*, and my appreciation for Oklahoma was shaped by the musical, *Oklahoma!* Remember, "Where the wind comes sweepin' down the plain", and "I've got a beautiful feelin', Everything's goin' my way."? I was hired to be the learning and development lead - more like drilling into the culture than drilling lateral wells into shale formations. Naïve (or overly optimistic?) me!

Toni Morrison's mordant observation about human nature applied to my situation. Typecast as 'not like us' by my background, accent, politics or religion in my newly chosen industry and locale, I felt like a stranger at the gate. Driven by my innate curiosity and how I defined my role, however, I gained admittance to meetings where decisions were made about land leases all over the country, technologies

that I would never understand, and behemothic investments. (The term 'nanodarcy', for example, was in the lingua franca; it is a measure of gas permeability under confining pressure on small rock samples. I use the word to signify my cluelessness.)

I brought attention to the human implications of technical and financial decisions in highly technical conversations. A powerful senior vice president spoke to me after one of these meetings and asked me to stop by his office. He was in the inner circle at the company and well known in the region. I saw him as a charismatic character and understood his role as a cultural icon. I appeared, hat in hand. "Harry", he said. "We don't know what it is you do." Note the "we" in his comment. I must have gulped or inhaled or gone pale—whatever one does in such a circumstance. Then he said, "But keep doing it". A gate had just creaked open. I felt I could be me—and belong.

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[1] This article is the second of a series of two articles on the subject of 'Belonging' published by the author in this journal. The first can be found here:
https://www.ntl-psc.org/assets/Uploads/2024/Hutson-August-2024.pdf

Why Belonging?

Cooperation, whether in hunting, gathering, preparing food, nurturing others, teaching, manufacturing widgets or writing code, requires interactions defined by implicit and explicit agreements: Who are we? Can we get this done together? What do we need to do to make our lives easier and accomplish a shared purpose? Activities to establish belonging or not belonging are routinely performed whenever humans intermingle; they are the building blocks of human civilization. And yet, I believe, 'Belonging' remains a neglected consideration in current organizational life.

Belonging - the drive to form and maintain positive emotional bonds[2] - is vital for people who are working and learning together. When you experience Belonging in a group, you can be vulnerable, you can be more resilient in coping with setbacks or unwelcome news, and you can be more generous in sharing your ideas while expressing gratitude to others for theirs.

The Belonging Barometer: The State of belonging in America, a report produced by Over Zero and the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council, highlights Belonging as a fundamental human need too often ignored by changemakers when addressing "deep fractures" in organizations and societies.[3] Of note, the Barometer study suggests that **when people feel they belong and their group is diverse, it can unleash creativity, welcome curiosity about others, broaden perspectives and build empathy**. Belonging accentuates the value of diversity.

When diversity is narrowly conceived as a hiring practice or representational goal, however, it may not yield Belonging. Many organizations are now adding a 'B' for Belonging to their Diversity, Equity and Inclusion strategies to broaden perspectives. 'DEI+B', as an umbrella approach, intended to increase the psychological safety of everyone, is especially pertinent when difficult questions of equity and identity are being examined.[4] The hope of the many contributors to the Barometer is "to take note of the importance of belonging, take action to foster it in the spaces they lead, and take time to do so thoughtfully and with intention"[5].

The focus of this paper is to present guidelines for Belonging schemes: **Play it Smart**, avoid inconsequential activities or divisive interventions in the name of Belonging; Be Crafty, tailor or craft a course of action to fit the specific situation; **Open the Gates**, and bring Belonging back to who you are and what you need.

Play it Smart

Geoffrey Cohen, a social psychologist at Stanford University, has spent 30 years performing research aimed at achieving measurable and material advances in Belonging. Cohen's approach, employing psychologically "wise interventions", focuses attention on what really works. Wise interventions are simple, subtle and brief, and

they have the power to trigger real transformation when they embed Belonging in the culture. Remedies based on the expression of "thoughtful empathy" for others can "cultivate the confidence and resilience that a sense of belonging builds".[6]

The art of creating and applying wise interventions is contained in another concept of Cohen's, "situation crafting".[7] By this Cohen means that change can be coaxed but not coerced. A crafted situation requires designs that take careful consideration of the context. Using design as an intervention requires being human-centered: elements need to be simple, non-invasive and, following Kurt Lewin, the founder of social psychology, intrinsically participatory.

To be effective, Belonging interventions at work need to begin with the understanding that benefits accrue to all - that equity is not a zero-sum proposition - and that precise activities can be directed at the few without unfairly depriving the many. Director of the Othering and Belonging Institute at The University of California, Berkeley, john a. powell, uses the term "targeted universalism" to explain how Belonging can achieve positive sums for everyone.[8] **Belonging, played smartly, does no harm.**

Be Crafty

The universe of tips and techniques that can be employed in service of Belonging is vast.[9] What follow are six categories of approaches to use in teams, intended to spark your imagination to craft situations and initiate wise interventions. I ask you to think along the lines of "Yes… and….". (If the only thing you take from reading this paper is that you are now thinking of the Belonging overtures you would make, I say "Hooray!".)

1. **Self-Affirmations**

   Self-affirmations are some of Cohen's most easily replicated methods. Their purpose is to firm up, not flatter, the Self. The essence of the technique is to affirm your own values and strengths in a writing exercise - to make positive meaning with written words - with two questions: "What are your values?" and, "Why are these values important to you?". Self-affirmations can immunize you against defensiveness or self-absorption in situations where there is a perceived threat. Because values are rooted in your deepest levels of motivation, the exercise reminds you of your best, most resilient Self, and, as a result, lasting benefits in terms of health and performance accrue.[10]

   How might you encourage self-affirmation in your team?

2. **Origins**

   Owen Eastwood, a psychologist and sports performance-coach of New Zealand ancestry, works with elite international teams. Eastwood

taps his Māori heritage to emphasize the value of bringing stories and deeper beliefs into teambuilding. The word he introduces is 'Whakapapa', which roughly translates to a tribal 'Us' story that may frame the connection to any group you belong to. The 'Story of Us' defines who you are together as a team, why you are on a journey together, and what it takes to be a member.

In 2016, Eastwood was engaged by the English Football Association to capture the 'Story of Us' for a national team that was struggling. He began by researching the meaning of the official English symbol, the three lions. He learned that the three lions represent the animal ferocity of protecting others, and he drew a parallel to how the game should be played. Eastwood crafted a set of team experiences that connected players to higher purposes for themselves, for the sport and for the nation. Together they created an 'Us' story which motivated and inspired them to higher levels of performance while forming lifelong bonds of togetherness and belonging.[11]

In a similar vein, Marshall Ganz's Public Narrative framework, creates stories of "self, us and now".[12]

What is an origin story that can inspire success for you and your team?

3. **Stories**

A simple principle to remember when creating Belonging is: "Take space and make space". Take up more airtime if you tend to be quiet; try more silence if you typically have a lot to say. In that way you beckon every voice in a neutral way. Most tools for Belonging involve revealing more of yourself than is likely to be known by others, but they require a non-judgmental environment.

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, who has alerted us to the perils of loneliness, uses sharing and listening techniques in his staff meetings; they set aside time for people to interview each other about their childhoods and their dreams. This simple activity helps people feel close and changes how they work together.[13]

The Story Exchange technique sponsored by Narrative 4, a global network of students, teachers and storytellers,[14] adds a step that has proven effective in building empathy and motivating action in almost any context. Participants share stories with their partners and then listen while their partners tell theirs. In turn, listeners retell the stories they have just heard - importantly, in the first person, as if they were the original storyteller. Reflection on what is felt and learned comes next, and sometimes there are dramatic increases in empathy for one another. More than 130,000

people have participated in Story Exchange around the world, and inspired civic engagement is just one result.

How can you be intentional in the way you practice sharing stories and deep listening?

4. **Artifacts**

Artifacts can make the invisible visible. In her book Design for Belonging, Susie Wise of the Design School at Stanford University expands awareness of Belonging into such areas as space, roles, events, rituals, grouping, communications and more. Her mental model is belonging + design = new ways of being people together.[15] One of her ideas for space is to send Belonging cues through visual stories using signage and media.

Barbara Perry, an anthropologist colleague, and I have employed a timeline exercise with large workgroups. The timeline is a wall-length construction on flip-chart paper that participants embellish extravagantly with sticky dots, drawings and signatures, memorializing important events in their personal and working lives. The crucial design element is that everyone is given voice, patterns emerge, truths are told, and Belonging is bolstered. Often, the timeline is posted in a public space afterward and preserved as an artifact of group identity.

How might you create or capture artifacts that enable people to feel connected to one another?

5. **Rituals**

The most effective workplace rituals unite a community and have a physical aspect to them. Some manufacturing teams shake hands at the start of each shift. Repeated acts as simple as these can become rituals. Bill Shaninger, a senior partner emeritus at McKinsey, says, "Rituals are what make us us. What we do that you can count on. What matters to us."[16]

The most powerful rituals align with something greater than short-term goals, such as collective purpose. Food can be a central element in ritual—lunch with a newcomer on the first day of work, a celebratory treat when a milestone is achieved, a special dinner to recognize a big win. Work, itself, can be the focus for belonging rituals, like daily standup meetings in technology and manufacturing. Rituals enhance Belonging, but to achieve the most benefit, they must be crafted to highlight a broader 'we' while avoiding in-group localisms or mention of selective affiliations that may exclude others.[17]

What simple rituals might you introduce that can enable belonging?

6. **Hospitality**

In The Art of Community: Seven Principles for Belonging, Peter Block calls attention to hospitality in meetings. "Everything counts", he writes. Begin every meeting with a welcome greeting and restate why people are there. Then connect people, not with icebreakers but with questions that create community. For example, ask, "If you could invite someone from your life, past or present, to sit beside you and support you in making this meeting successful, who would that be?". Welcome late arrivals without disappointment or blame. Acknowledge early-leavers and thank them for coming.[18]

For me, extending hospitality 'at the edges' of a group - not just to those who come and go but to anyone who may appear to be an outsider or a new person - is an everyday practice in support of Belonging. In some meeting or other you, too, have been a stranger, an interloper or a fresh face, and you know how it felt when you were made to feel welcome - or you were not.

How can you make hospitality the norm where you work?

Open the Gates

Toni Morrison observes that 'othering' supposed 'strangers' in your life is a costly self-deception. Strangers are not real people of whom we should be wary, she says - they are unacknowledged "versions of ourselves" who evoke fearsome and powerful emotions.[19] Her insight has relevant implications at work: when you 'close the gate' to others, to defend against your own demons, you place an exorbitant tax on your authenticity. **You run scared - of your shadow!**

Consider a different scenario where you throw wide open the doors in your working relationships. The benefits of Belonging on a team or in a larger organization accrue in measurable forms - greater engagement, retention, morale, productivity, innovation, civility and so on. And there is more. You practice courage, and you exemplify hope. You open the gates to your heart. **And you run toward the light.**

My story of working in the energy industry could be summed up in a comment made by a laconic reservoir engineer in Houston. I was feeling vulnerable and exposed at the end of a contentious meeting, unsure if I had contributed. This is what he said: "Harry, for a guy from Boston, you're not half-bad". I am forever grateful to him for that invitation to belong. I had done the work as well as I could to fit in and to add value as a stranger in what was (for me) a strange land, and now I was being offered half a chance—to be myself and contribute to common purpose. You, too, can open gates for others and be grateful when they are opened for you.

BIOGRAPHY

Harry Hutson, Ph.D., is an organizational consultant and executive coach. His books include *Navigating an Organizational Crisis: When Leadership Matters Most* (with Martha Johnson; Praeger: 2016); *Putting Hope to Work: Five Principles to Activate Your Organization's Most Powerful Resource* (with Barbara Perry; Praeger: 2006), and *Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations* (with Barry Dym; Sage: 2005). He can be found at https://www.linkedin.com/in/harry-hutson-53349/, www.harryhutson.com and reached at harryhutson@att.net.

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NOTES

1. Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 2016* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 38. I want to express my gratitude to two colleagues in Istanbul, **Berat Efe Alkan** and **Betül Çiçek**, for their collaboration and encouragement on earlier drafts of this paper.

2. Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529.

3. The American Immigration Council and Over Zero, *The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America*, 2023.

4. Jennifer Miller, "Why Some Companies Are Saying 'Diversity and Belonging' Instead of 'Diversity and Inclusion,'" *New York Times*, May 13, 2023, updated May 16, 2023.

5. *Barometer* op. cit. 51.

6. Geoffrey L. Cohen, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2022), xiii-iv.

7. Ibid xv.

8. https://soundcloud.com/otheringandbelonging

9. Health Action Alliance, Civic Alliance, Ad Council, and Belonging Begins with Us campaign: C*ultivating Belonging in the Workplace: An Employer Guide, Using Communication to Cultivate Belonging: Tips for Leaders and Managers*, and "Building a Culture of Belonging: Insights from Business Leaders" (video, October 6). To go beyond team building, here is a list of 14 strategies to increase belonging at work:

    1. Inclusive culture: Ensure that policies, practices, and decision-making processes are fair and free from bias.
    2. Effective communication: Encourage open and transparent communication throughout the organization.
    3. Mentoring and coaching: Implement mentoring programs where experienced people can support and guide less experienced ones.
    4. Recognition and appreciation: Recognize and appreciate efforts and contributions publicly.
    5. Employee Resource Groups: Establish ERGs that focus on different dimensions of diversity, such as ethnicity, gender, race, LGBTQ+, or abilities.
    6. Flexible Work Arrangements: Offer flexible work and study arrangements to accommodate diverse needs and responsibilities.
    7. Development Opportunities: Provide opportunities to enhance skills and grow within the organization.
    8. Fair Performance Management: Ensure evaluations are fair and unbiased and provide constructive feedback and opportunities for improvement.
    9. Conflict Resolution: Develop effective conflict resolution processes to address difficult issues.
    10. Wellness Initiatives: Implement wellness programs to support physical and mental health.
    11. Celebrate Diversity: Celebrate various cultural, religious, and other diversity-related events within the culture to promote understanding and appreciation.
    12. Promote Collaboration: Encourage collaboration and teamwork to foster belonging.
    13. Lead by Example: Embody the values of inclusion and actively demonstrate them in actions and decisions.
    14. Follow-Through: Regularly assess and adjust strategies based on changes and evolving needs.

10. Cohen op. cit.136.

11. Owen Eastman, *Belonging: Unlock Your Potential with the Ancient Code of Togetherness* (London: Quercus, 2022).

12. https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/30760283

13. Vivek H. Murthy, MD, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (New York: HarperWave, 2020). Leana S, Wen, "The Checkup with Dr. Wen: 8 ideas from the surgeon general to address loneliness," Washington Post, March 9, 2023.

14. www.narrative4.com

15. Susie Wise, *Design for Belonging: How to Build Inclusion and Collaboration in Your Communities* (California and New York: Ten Speed Press, 2022), xiii.

16. Bryan Hancock and Bill Shaninger, "Workplace Rituals: Recapturing the power of what we've lost," McKinsey Talks Talent podcast, January 25, 2023. Also see: Kursat Ozenc and Glenn Falardo, *Rituals for Virtual Meetings: Creative Ways to Engage People and Strengthen Relationships* (Wiley, 2021).

17. Ibid.

18. Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Oakland, CA: Berret-Kohler, 2018), pp. 153-56.

19. Morrison op. cit.