Better decision making within teams, employee well-being, engaged workers—those are just a few of the many benefits of a workplace that embraces diversity and inclusion (D&I).
Welcome employees as they are and realize the benefits: their best efforts.
Laura Sherbin and Ripa Rashid write in their Harvard Business Review article, “Diversity Doesn’t Stick Without Inclusion,” that “In the context of the workplace, diversity equals representation. Without inclusion, however, the crucial connections that attract diverse talent, encourage their participation, foster innovation, and lead to business growth won’t happen.” Diversity expert Vernā Myers explains it thusly: “Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.”

Despite the recognized benefits, companies are not moving the needle enough on D&I. That’s what many have argued, including Pat Wadors—then chief HR officer at LinkedIn—who said that and much more in her presentation, “The Power of Belonging,” during Talent Connect 2016. It’s a point well taken.

While organizations need to move the needle on D&I more readily—and doing so is an important starting point—it’s not enough. They need to change the conversation beyond D&I in the workplace to belonging. According to Wadors, belonging is the state where “I can be authentic, I matter, and am essential to my team.”

The state of belonging goes well beyond checking the box for female, LGBTQ, Asian, Muslim, person with a disability, and so on, explains Anjoli Walker, talent management program lead at the credit union BCU, which serves nearly 250,000 members in the United States and Puerto Rico. Walker describes belonging as feeling that there is truly a space for you in an organization and that there’s value to your being there. That means a company must build a welcoming work environment and create psychological safety. There has to be a mutual exchange of trust, acceptance, and people not having fear. When employees feel valued and included in the workplace, they are more engaged, productive, successful, and loyal.

But how do you get your organization to that place? How do talent management professionals build that space?

**Taking baby steps**

Walker grew her role from, as she describes it, a rather traditional talent management position in which she conducted onboarding programs among other things. Walker also managed BCU’s relationship-driven development by facilitating the individual mentoring program as well as the group mentoring program that focuses on a single topic for six-month periods.

One group of employees involved in those topical conversations focused on women in leadership. The group comprised different levels of experience, but they were all great leaders in their own way who were very energetic and dedicated, Walker says. At the end of the six months, this passionate group of women didn’t want to stop meeting together, and thus BCU’s first employee resource group (ERG) was born: Women Engaged in Leadership. Moving forward from there, however, was uncharted territory.

It was about that time that Walker attended an Association for Talent Development conference and heard trainer and leadership consultant Nicole Price speak. Listening to Price talk about leaning in to understand and explore her own biases—which everyone has—and her authentic way of describing it, Walker says it “lit a fire in me. Diversity and inclusion work, done in an authentic, intentional, and vulnerable way. That was the special sauce, and I needed to bring it back to the office. I was resolved that this is how we treat people at work. How we are going to attract—and keep—good employees.”

Returning to her office, Walker conducted some research and ran across Wadors’ concept of moving beyond D&I to belonging. BCU already had a strong sense of family, and because there is an abundance of research into the reasons and incidences of D&I not working, Walker was rightfully concerned about the potential for things to go wrong.

Their initial steps were cautious, Walker explains. She and others needed to make sure that employees were prepared for the journey beyond D&I to fostering a sense of belonging.

**Providing the tools**

Building on that sense of family meant giving employees both tools and programs to grow deeper in their sense of belonging.

BCU employees were assigned an introductory unconscious bias e-learning course as a kickoff to their D&I journey. Additionally, 80 percent of leaders to date have undergone an experiential, live program called the Power of Leading Inclusively. BCU has started the second phase of that initiative to provide this half-day training program to all 500-plus employees. “Progress happens in action and implementing the things you learned,” says Walker. “We have dedicated ourselves to moving forward with action, knowing that we all have the potential to lead inclusively—professionally and in our personal interactions.”

But taking action involved risk. Walker opines that people tend to be tentative in the postpolitical-correctness world. Individuals, including leaders, are cautious about being personal with employees.
But Walker emphasizes that leadership is supposed to be personal.

Another facet, and a critical one at that, of the belonging process was developing a forum for conversation. “I think it was our first learning,” Walker notes. Leaders reached out, wanting more tools to implement change. “As ‘numbers people,’ leaders wanted a formula to help their people. But creating a belonging space is a feeling, not a formula,” she adds.

One example of how leaders may help build belonging is to provide a voice to employees who may not otherwise have one. Leaders should invite non-leaders to the table to ensure diversity of thought and experience. If the discussion is going to be around mortgage products, invite those not directly involved with mortgages to the table—for example, from consumer loan sales or a frontline representative to get a pulse of what members are saying. Even within the department, create avenues to collect input from the people in the trenches, doing the work every day. Among many benefits, this strategy has helped BCU develop new products and processes.

**What does belonging feel like?**

There are, of course, many obstacles to D&I, let alone belonging. That’s why there hasn’t been enough progress. One of the challenges is that companies haven’t made much progress beyond diversity as it is defined in terms of just looking different.

It’s easy to think about D&I in terms of checking the box, focusing on race-related, gender, or sexual orientation representation, for example. Beyond that is where the rubber meets the road: “I am African American, but I am more than that,” Walker asserts. “I have extensive background in psychology. I have lived and worked in urban and rural areas. My favorite StrengthsFinder’s top five strength is WOO [winning others over]. My relationships and work are more meaningful and productive when I can leverage my strengths and experiences. I don’t want a seat at the table just because I’m African American. I hope my leadership sees and values my whole package, including me being an African American woman. And once I feel that my leadership knows and values me, that’s where I know I belong. Then I’m going to be able to deliver my best for my leaders and my organization.”

A sense of what belonging feels like can be ascertained from an initiative that BCU undertook during LGBT Pride Month. Posted to the organization’s intranet was a simple fill-in-the-blank phrase: “Love is ....” The company invited employees to post what love meant to them, what it looked like. “We created this trusting space in the center of our intranet. It received phenomenal engagement the entire week, with employees learning about the families of colleagues,” Walker explains.

**Additional initiatives**

Another Pride Month activity, with BCU’s company partner Baxter, was participation in Chicago’s Pride Parade. The effort was one of several that seeks to move beyond the company to the greater community. Walker and the Inclusion Network—BCU’s D&I
committee—posted on the company intranet resources, information, and links to local activities in their area, encouraging employees to take part as a member or ally of the LGBTQ community.

As part of community efforts, different ERGs participate in various giving-back initiatives. The Women Engaged in Leadership group contributes to A Safe Place, a domestic violence shelter. Each year, the ERG coordinates a drive to help provide the shelter with toiletries, sanitary products, and supplies for children. The Inclusion Network and Early Career Professionals ERG also contribute to efforts within the communities they serve.

Two additional nonprofit endeavors that BCU supports are Habitat for Humanity through employee volunteerism and the Special Olympics, one of four charities supported through employee fundraising.

**Best practices**

Whether your organization has an established D&I program or is just looking to start out, Walker encourages constantly evaluating your efforts. Getting feedback and acting on it is critical: Are the actions you’re implementing meaningful to people? You are not going to get the progress you want if you’re doing things just to do them.

Each employee can help an organization become more welcoming of the whole self. Walker recommends that employees make it a point to get to know others outside of their usual circle. Break down silos that foster exclusion. Managers and leaders can demonstrate value of the whole self by understanding the strengths and values of their direct reports and leveraging that in decision making, recognition, and evaluation—leading in a personal way.

Further, leaders need to demonstrate what belonging looks like. “They can’t just talk about being trustworthy in business actions, about professional integrity, about relationships with their teams,” Walker advises. “They have to walk the walk. Leaders have to bring their whole self to work as well. Be authentic. Get personal.”

Talent management professionals can help leaders tackle what may feel like a huge undertaking—diversity, inclusion, and belonging, Walker notes. Help leaders understand that this is not a task to add to their day jobs but rather a way to do their jobs even better. Help them recognize their own biases and have the strategies to move past them. Talent management professionals can assist by providing specific D&I resources, mentors, and coaching opportunities.
From her own experience, Walker has grown her role in promoting a culture of belonging. “I’ve been able to experience leaders here as authentic people, witness their vulnerability, and, through their supportive leadership, write my own story at BCU,” she says.

**It’s personal**

David Donaldson’s *The Mandarin* article “Making the Case for Diversity: What Is the Evidence?” summarizes findings from a Public Service Commission report that examined New South Wales public servants and included case studies on Australia Post and New Zealand Police. Themes that came out of the studies include that D&I is personal, that everyone in the workforce can benefit from greater D&I, and that “everyone has a role in building a diverse and inclusive workplace.”

The report recommends being willing to talk about the hard topics, and it suggests incorporating D&I concepts in workshops and meeting agendas, and continuing to challenge individual biases and assumptions. The report also notes that employees should “share and be proud of your own story of diversity and encourage others to do the same.”

Walker likewise spoke to having courageous conversations at every level. To move the enterprise forward, employees and leaders alike should exhibit a sense of vulnerability. It’s not critical that you get those discussions right every time, notes Walker, but together you can help each other grow, understand, and get it right eventually.

**Patty Gaul** is a senior writer/editor for ATD; pgaul@td.org.
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