



## THE ESSENCE OF BELONGING

### GOAL

To identify a few ways (among many) how behaviors of belonging are an important aspect of establishing and maintaining important aspects of successful living.

### KEYWORDS FOR APPLICATION

Physical Belonging  
Emotional Belonging  
Psychological Belonging  
Spiritual Belonging  
Aloneness  
Loneliness  
Maslow Theory  
Ray Baumeister & Mark Leary Theory  
Reinforcement Theory  
Lee & Robins Theory  
Social Connectedness Scale  
Life-Time Maturation  
Community Sense of Belonging  
Belonging in Relationships  
Workplace Belonging  
High Achiever & Belonging

**Why are feelings of belonging important? Because—our essence related to belonging impacts us physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. The most important connection of belonging ties us to the people and places we love.**

Belongingness is a *human emotional need to be an accepted group member*. Our beginning in our inherent desire to belong started when we became part of a family and our place within the home. It was (and continues to be) a feeling that involves familiarity, friends, and an accumulation of acquaintances.

The most accepted belongingness theory suggests that people devote much of their cognitive/intellectual thought process to establishing interpersonal relationships and attachments—an effort to belong. Because—most of us crave a connection and a feeling that we belong to *something bigger than ourselves*. This connection helps us manage stress, anxiety, health concerns, and behavioral issues.

Sometimes it seems easier to remove ourselves from the supposed support/belonging systems in our lives because it might seem too much to “handle.” It can cause excessive personal inner turmoil. Even

though we are surrounded by behaviors and systems of belonging that remind us of our supposed belonging status, it is amazing how the little covert verbal and nonverbal *innuendos speak louder than any behavior or words to tell a person if they truly belong!*

If *aleness* (resulting in the lack of belonging) were important to humans, we would have been born and immediately kicked out of our homes, resulting in no family ties or organized government. For some society members, however, the human need for support and belonging is not desired, and aleness is preferred—hence, the role of community support services, activities, and resources is unimportant.

The psychology of thoughts and feelings of *loneliness* shows that lonely consumers (a lack of belonging) tend to seek opinions from other people about products and services—and lonely people tend to try to influence others with their views.

The truth is: It is difficult to be totally alone. You are not alone, even though you might sometimes feel alone, as we all belong somewhere and at some time to someone who does or has loved and who cares about us.

## **BELONGINGNESS THEORIES**

Abraham Maslow: The Maslow Theory recognizes that physiological and safety needs must be met first to experience love with someone else completely. The loving ability (once physiological and safety requirements are met) supports the willingness to belong with someone else in a loving relationship.

Ray Baumeister & Mark Leary: Baumeister & Leary (an intellectual duo) reminds us that much of what we do is due to our desired feelings of belongingness. The theory states that all humans need a certain quantity of regular and satisfying social interactions to form bonds of belonging. Our social attachment efforts show our belonging needs as we naturally reach out to others. It is also proposed that the desire for death/suicide is caused by the failed interpersonal process of an unmet need to belong and a sense of not belonging to/with others.

The Reinforcement Theory shows the importance of personal reinforcement of belonging needs as we seek out others during emotional stress. We seek reinforcement of our belonging needs by seeking power, intimacy, approval, achievement, and affiliation.

R.M. Lee & S.B. Robins: Lee & Robins (another intellectual duo) Introduced the 1995 Social Connectedness Scale (SCS)—and has since been revised (SCS-R). The SCS-R assesses the degree to which youth feel connected to others in the social environment—their sense of belonging. The scale reminds us that a sense of belonging evolves through companionship, affiliation, and connectedness from infancy to maturity.

## **LIFETIME MATURATION OF BELONGING**

Early childhood is a time for developing prosocial behaviors and understanding the self in relation to others. In the period of 14-18 months, there is a time of learning the meaning of belonging as a child performs helpful behaviors, gains confidence, and enhances self-identity. Next comes the identification and belonging to family, cultural groups, neighborhoods, and the wider community. Belonging helps shape the maturational process as to who a child is, who they can become, pride in who they are, and respect for the dignity of others. The outcome is strong relationships, a warm and caring personality toward familiar adults, and empathy and willingness to care for others.

As an estranged child from a family constellation through a divorce, death (or any other reason), there is usually a desire by a child to witness and recall family-inclusive behaviors. The belongingness felt by a child within the family constellation is a measure of true and worthy placement within the family. Early family behavior and words (positive or negative) become lifetime reminders of the extent of belonging to the family. A child who senses a lack of belonging experiences a sense of abandonment. If a child is a stepchild, there is already a potential sense for the child to feel they do not belong to the family constellation. Therefore, the smallest negative comment or behavior perceived to indicate a lack of belonging to the family constellation is magnified and reaches the inner soul as a forever reminder.

To encourage a sense of belonging in any child, encourage family unity and personal pride in the child's small accomplishments. This promotes a child's feelings of belonging, parental acceptance, and dignity. Our children should always hear affirming words of encouragement, an abundance of positive familial terms, and experience belonging behaviors and unconditional love no matter the type of family constellation.

## **COMMUNITY SENSE OF BELONGING**

Belonging to a community with members that are welcoming is The American Way! Most importantly, new community arrivals appreciate a "Hello" from neighbors. It doesn't take much to help new neighbors feel they belong. A kind effort is the key to building a sense of community and belonging. Practice your ability to give to others regarding concern and interest for their well-being. Think less about yourself and, instead, the needs, comfort, and intended welcoming of others in the community. The gift of giving yourself results in a shared feeling of community belonging.

## **SENSE OF BELONGING AND RELATIONSHIPS**

The sense of belonging in relationships is tied to identified social identities. People are friends, relatives, husbands, wives—and many other words indicating some ties of belonging. The sense of belonging is evident through behaviors of acceptance, support, trust, and honesty. Personal independence in all relationships is a positive sign of belonging. Mutual respect, acceptance, support, trust, honesty, and recognition of the need for individual differences recognize the need to belong to a realm of personal

thoughts and philosophy. Positive relationships emit a sense of belonging to those who share a close relationship—yet can maintain individual boundaries of disagreement.

Maintaining a sense of belonging in all relationships takes effort. Behaviors that encourage belonging include:

- Small gestures and gentle words of kindness and love
- When you are sorry—be truly sorry—and say so!
- Small tokens regularly and on special occasions

Our ability and desire to have meaningful relationships show our human need to belong to something beyond ourselves. It validates our humanity and sense of belonging to a world much larger than ourselves!

## **BUILDING A WORKPLACE CULTURE-OF-BELONGING**

Effective leaders can build a culture of belonging in the workplace—equally as powerful in the workplace as in our personal lives. All workers have the right to be treated fairly and to participate using their talents.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) increase mutual belonging. Large corporations have reported spending billions of dollars on DEI training, realizing that employees increase their commitment if they feel they truly belong at work. Harvard Business Review says that their studies show 40% of today's workers feel isolated at work. This research demonstrates that DEI efforts increase a worker's connection, commitment, and feelings of belongingness toward the job; however, it noted that there is no promise of success because of DEI efforts. Consider this—If, at least, a leadership effort to promote a culture of belonging in the workplace is not made—you, as a workplace leader, missed the mark of leadership excellence that encourages worker connection and commitment!

Some organizations are truly immersed in the efforts of employees belonging by seeking employee Net Promoter Scores (eNPS). The claim is that this measurement of employee satisfaction, engagement, and ambassadorship results in retention, teamwork effectiveness, and a feeling of happiness score.

Leaders can project a sense of employee belonging through the following behaviors that increase employee trust:

- Finding creative ways to listen to employee feedback
- Asking for feedback in meetings and privately
- Expressing gratitude for a job well done
- Being honest about what is good and not so good
- Listening and watching more than speaking
- Considering the possibility of later-morning meetings
- Providing flexibility in work schedules
- Creating a family workplace (specially to help women participate in the workplace) by providing computers to help children do homework, online classes, or virtual school opportunities

- Developing ways of group interaction
- Sharing impact stories—relating good or bad outcomes
- Considering informal get-togethers
- Participating in online connections (e.g., Zoom)
- Valuing contributions through appropriate responses

The message is clear: Workers who feel accepted, respected, and a part of belonging increase their support for each other and the organization.

### **HIGH ACHIEVER AND LEADER BELONGINGNESS CHALLENGE**

When an organization's leadership strategy needs improvement, the high achiever is there to problem-solve with the existing leader. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for high achievers (regardless of their potential contributions) to feel that they do not belong in an established organizational setting—irrespective of their positive contributions. Constantly trying to achieve an almost unachievable objective, they push through difficulties and continue to try to improve situations despite often being made to feel they do not belong. Therefore, in select settings, high achievers often struggle with social belongingness.

Definition of a High Achiever: High achievers are ambitious, goal-focused, self-disciplined individuals who are driven by a strong personal desire to accomplish meaningful and important goals. They like to be the best at what they do, which helps them stay motivated through hard work. While achievement may be partly due to basic personality, it's also a matter of a perspective related to making a positive difference.

Likewise, leaders not known for high-achieving behaviors might feel disrespected for their expended organizational leadership efforts. If the existing leader is challenged with evidence of leadership incompetence, it can diminish the feelings of belonging as a competent leader. The leader's feelings of intimidation from a high achiever can encourage feelings of non-belonging by an existing leader.

Definition of Intimidation: Words or actions that cause reasonable fear of inadequacy.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is true--we belong to each other as neighbors and community participants. Repetitive efforts of belonging in any situation have shown that who you know (not what you know) too often makes the major difference related to the personal belonging (or not) outcome.

Therefore, the price of listening and understanding positive and negative leadership behaviors and concepts helps toward selecting more positive belonging outcomes. Visualizing possible positive results

by belonging to something bigger than ourselves helps us to perform in BELONGING WAYS for the greater good of all things.

Life is a puzzle of feelings—a merry-go-round of emotional responses. We are free to feel and respond to our liking to all belonging or nonbelonging happenings. However, the goal is to belong and make from our belonging abilities something wonderful, beautiful, and healthy.

The increased awareness of the Essence of Belonging encourages a positive choice of belonging behavior(s).

References: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (numerous illustrations)—online availability

Lee & Robbins Social Connectedness Scale (1995 and Revised)—online availability

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