



IN THE KNOW

Your Monthly Newsletter from The Black Exec

The Mutuality of Belonging

“Exploring How True Belonging Is Shaped by Signals, Recognition, and Mutual Trust”



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In our inaugural issue, we focused on leadership. This month, we are concentrating on belonging, a term that, in the 2020s, has been elevated in popular culture and thrust into the corporate vernacular.

You may hear people refer to close associates as part of their “village” or “tribe” describing the intimacy of connectivity.

Deloitte, and other organizational effectiveness consultancies, suggested belonging was a key indicator of efficacy in workplace DEI practices.

The theory is that diversity is evident, access is equitable, and inclusion is normative when there is a broad sense of belonging across the organization. Many organizations added the “B” to their DEI acronym making it DEIB. For this discussion, let’s double click on belonging and explore what I call the “Mutuality of Belonging”.

The Mutuality of Belonging – A Two-Way Street?

The individual must know they belong in the larger group and the group must know the individual belongs with them. This mutuality is very important. It is much more than a set of feelings. To this end, I suggest both the organization and the individual focus on recognizable signals which can be sent and received between the parties. There are numerous signals of belonging. Although there are many, for the sake of this article, let’s explore just two examples of how belonging can be signaled: permanent artifacts and temporary ambassadorships.

The Permanent Artifact. Have you ever paid close attention to the language on your academic diploma or degree? The institution confers upon you an official credential with “all the rights, honors, and privileges appertaining thereto.” Appertaining is a synonym for belonging and it carries the idea of “being connected as a rightful part” of something. The conferring organization “signals” to you and any interested party that you are an alumnus—a rightful part of their family of graduates. Such a signal becomes a permanent artifact which verifies individual membership in the larger group. Other permanent artifacts include professional skill certifications like cyber-security certifications and electrician’s licenses; or simpler, such as an employee identification badge.

The Temporary Ambassadorship. Another type of signal is sent with temporary action. For example, an individual may be asked to represent the larger group. When one speaks on behalf of the group, it signifies organizational trust. When done well, individual and organizational trust is reinforced and that mutual trust is “signaled” to the audience. There may also be a sense of mutual pride. For example, if you were first from your neighborhood to attend a prestigious school or to work at a major company, then your village might join you in being proud of your accomplishment and lift you up by claiming you as their own. Your success might even be viewed as their success because if you can do it, then maybe they can too.

The Importance of Mutuality of Belonging

Why should you care about the mutuality of belonging? Because if the signals of belonging can be easily recognized, then it may indicate you have found your tribe. There can be many signals of mutual belonging. We looked at two types and whether they are temporary or permanent, these signals should be present. As an individual, you need to know you belong in the larger group, and the group needs to know you belong with them.

As always, I welcome your thoughts. Feel free to connect with me on [LinkedIn](#) to share your comments.

Barron Witherspoon Sr.

3 Ways to Build a Sense of Belonging in the Workplace

Building belonging into the workplace is not overly complex. As this article from Gartner shows, it can be done in three easy steps. Take a look and let me know your thoughts. The link also includes a podcast and self assessment to enhance your reapplication of this work.

[READ MORE](#)

WORTH LISTENING TO

Here are some interesting talks centered around leadership from leading voices.

Carin Taylor is the chief diversity officer at Workday and her TedX talk goes into a deep, insightful discussion on the importance of belonging. The talk begins on a masterful note involving storytelling and throughout, Taylor is engaging, interesting and honest. It will also be a light bulb moment for many. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.



ROUND AND ABOUT

November is shaping up to be a pretty busy month. I will be in Alabama for homecoming at my alma mater at Tuskegee University. Up next, I will be at another horse show, this time in Tennessee. Then back to Florida, my new home state, where my lovely wife and I will celebrate our anniversary. And throughout the month, I will be planning and prepping for an equally active 2025 schedule for speaking, media, writing and, of course, horse shows.

Please feel free to connect with Barron Witherspoon on LinkedIn and Facebook.



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