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The value of belonging at work

New frontiers for inclusion

Belong

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About this study

The Value of Belonging at Work quantifies the tangible value of belonging in the workplace, and conversely, the cost of exclusion for individuals and teams. It also introduces specific interventions to boost resilience in the face of exclusion.

This report is based upon a multi-phase study of belonging in the workplace. The study was led by researchers at BetterUp Labs, a research lab focused on human performance and flourishing in the workplace. The study set out to address the gaps in belonging research to date by answering two critical questions:

• **What is the business case for belonging?**

• **What can we do to prevent the negative impact of exclusion in the workplace?**

The research included a survey of 1,789 full-time employees across a diverse set of industries to better understand the role belonging in the workplace. We also conducted a series of experiments with live participants to observe and measure the tangible impacts of inclusion versus exclusion, and to test the efficacy of multiple interventions.

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Foreward

Belonging in 2020 and beyond.

2020 has propelled us into new frontiers for inclusion as a business critical imperative. From the COVID-19 pandemic to broad awakening to the presence and impact of systemic racial injustice, inclusion, belonging, and social connection have taken on new meaning.

In our initial research examining the importance of belonging during the comparative calm of 2019, BetterUp Labs conducted a multi-phase study of belonging in the workplace. We found clear evidence that belonging supports recruiting and retaining top talent. Employees who feel a strong sense of belonging perform better and stay longer. They are at 50% lower risk of turnover and have 56% higher performance than employees who feel like they do not belong. Employees who feel a higher sense of belonging are willing to recommend their employer to others—seen in organizational promoter scores that are 167% higher, on average, than those from employees who feel like they do not belong.

The significance of these findings take on new meaning within the context of the global pandemic. Consider the implications of our current reality with remote work, social distancing, and widespread isolation that makes it harder for people to build and maintain work relationships and foster a sense of belonging. The behaviors required to build and maintain our relationships are different and our understanding of what a sense of belonging even means when we are not physically present with one another is still forming. These conditions have highlighted the importance of social connection, inclusion, and belonging for all of us—it is a fundamental human need.

This research also opens a door to newfound awareness and understanding of the persistent pain and suffering of marginalized groups. For many of us with privilege, the loneliness and isolation of COVID is acute. The racial injustice protests magnified the long felt exclusion millions of people of color have been living with for their entire lives and generations that preceded them. The social and political unrest within the United States and around the world has raised profound questions on belonging in society and fueled an impetus for justice and change. Systemic inequity and racial injustice are complex and require sustained attention and intention to make changes at every level to improve the structures that hold members of our society back. Improving belonging at work will not resolve

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systemic racial injustice. However, this flashpoint in history has highlighted additional exclusion in workplaces and their impact on the daily lived experiences of marginalized employees. As an example, employees who feel demographically dissimilar from others in their organization experience 27% less psychological safety.

Our latest research gathered from the BetterUp platform reveals the pervasiveness of the problem and the impact of successive trauma from COVID and racial injustice on people. One in four employees feel they don't belong in their organization. Feelings of belonging dropped drastically immediately after COVID-19 was identified as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). These feelings of belonging dipped again in the period following the numerous racial injustice protests in response to the murder of George Floyd. We saw this same pattern for wellbeing, but also found that people with high belonging were protected relative to people with low belonging. When people lack a sense of inclusion and belonging, the cost is deeply personal and widely organizational. The implications of maintaining higher feelings of belonging have a significant impact on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and productivity.

We are in the midst of a period of extreme civil unrest exacerbated by a global pandemic that signals an inflection point in history—one that could create an opportunity to make unprecedented progress. Organizations must act now to capitalize on and maintain the momentum this point in history has provided. Our research has demonstrated at least two critical points: the cost of exclusion is high because it is a violation of a fundamental human need and we can take action to improve belonging and foster inclusion today.

How to foster belonging in 2020.

Using a collaborative virtual ball toss game designed to test exclusion impacts, we uncovered a clear cost in performance for people who feel excluded. They are less willing to work for the team if they do not feel they belong to the team. And the impacts are both swift and long term, as we found people feeling left out from a two-minute virtual game are less productive in the immediate term after the experiment and 25% less productive on future work tasks with the team.

This research quantified the benefits of belonging and costs when it's lacking. But how can organizations increase belonging and inclusion? Using the interventions we found in our 2019 research, we can mitigate feelings of exclusion and prevent further impact from the sense of unbelonging during times of societal crisis.

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We implemented three different behavioral interventions during the experiment, to test performance. Interventions were made to reduce the impact of exclusion and to prevent the feelings of exclusion altogether. All of the interventions we tested were effective in improving feelings of inclusion, but empowerment was the most effective. Interestingly, the most impactful thing a manager can do if they notice someone feels excluded or disengaged and is to ask them to help solve the problem, or empower them to take action. This was even more powerful than acting as a mentor. This represents a huge opportunity since only one-third of employees agree that they have the ability to influence inclusion at their organization.

INTERVENTION	EMPOWERMENT	MENTORSHIP	PERSPECTIVE	ALLYSHIP
ACTIONS	Create new rules for the game in the experiment that would make it more fair, inclusive, and enjoyable. The intervention was designed to offer a measure of control over a situation and would make participants feel less excluded and more likely to re-engage with a team after an exclusion event.	Think of their own responses to help another who was left out. This intervention was designed to spark a "helping mindset" and drive mentorship that could lessen their potential negative association with team experiences.	Read stories and reflections from others' experience in being left out and the coping mechanisms they used to reframe behavior of teammates and their own feelings of exclusion.	Buffer the feelings of exclusion by implementing an ally. The ally operates in a fair manner toward all players, and the presence of this fairness ally prevents the negative consequences of exclusion. Support allies through recognition and encouragement. Have open discussions around those who promote fairness, even in the face of exclusion.
HOW TO IMPLEMENT NOW	Empower every individual to take control of situations of exclusion. Only 27% of employees feel that their organization informs them of opportunities to promote inclusion in their day-to-day work. Make it clear to all team members if they witness exclusion that they have the power to create the change and drive for belonging.	Promote mentorship behaviors both formally and informally to encourage people to proactively reach out and help others.	Share stories of impact from individuals and their coping mechanisms related to racial injustice or the isolation of remote work.	Promote ally behaviors and coach ALL leaders on inclusive behavior to create a culture of allyship. Establish real recognition programs for ally behaviors.

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Managers and leaders play a critical role in supporting belonging and inclusion. In fact, inclusive leaders are 2.5x more likely to have direct reports who feel they belong. Managers are the primary driver of employee experience—directly through their interactions and decisions and indirectly by setting the tone for the team through their behaviors. Building inclusive leadership skills should be central to any leadership development efforts.

Coaching: another method for impact.

Additionally, our data shows that working with a coach is an effective strategy to increase a sense of belonging. For a direct effect, 52% of those who report feeling like they don't belong prior to joining BetterUp achieve a sense of belonging after 3-4 months of coaching. Coachees are able to surface actions they could take to promote feelings of belonging on their own. They learn how to build better relationships, stay connected during remote work, increase self-compassion and adopt tactics for showing up authentically at work through coaching to increase their own sense of organizational belonging. Coaching is also an effective tool to increase employee belonging indirectly, by improving the ability of their managers and leaders to foster a culture of inclusion and belonging. BetterUp drives a 33% increase in inclusive leadership with 3-4 months of coaching and inclusive leaders are 2.5x more likely to have direct reports who feel they belong.

In our 2019 study conclusion, we were confident that uncharted terrain in the frontiers of inclusion and belonging remained. In fact, these frontiers have presented barriers to connection that we could never have imagined, requiring us to continue our research on what impacts to belonging will result from world events and these new ways of working and living. This year has tested us all and made it impossible to ignore what we have always known at some level—that we are people first and employees second. The need to belong is a fundamental human need. As our research demonstrates, when that need is not met, we, and in turn our individual and organizational performance, also suffer. Leaders who want to drive results will prioritize belonging and use research-based practices to cultivate a more inclusive culture.

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Introduction

Belonging is a fundamental human need.[1]

Belonging has long been considered a basic human need. Evidence from evolutionary psychology suggests the need to belong is [hardwired](#) in the DNA of social animals. Cognitive psychologists have shown that the pain of social rejection follows the same neural and physiological patterns as physical pain.[2] Our strong, negative response to exclusion has been called a "[neural alarm system](#)," adapted over millennia to protect against the isolating consequences of social separation.[3]

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If we turn our attention to the modern workplace, we see that these same social needs—and the repercussions of having them unmet—exist today. These themes of belonging and exclusion permeate corporate hallways and play out everywhere from break rooms to the boardroom. Employees cannot simply separate from a long history of evolutionary adaptation, where the need to belong is strong.

Despite the well-established importance of belonging in the psychological sciences, significant gaps remain in the study and practice of belonging within the workplace. As we will highlight below, these gaps—some of which are addressed throughout this report—carry a devastating cost to the personal health and productivity of employees as well as to the culture and fiscal wellbeing of organizations.

Why D&I training isn't enough to foster workplace inclusion.

In the organizational literature, belonging is encompassed by studies of inclusion, which aim to create an environment that fosters belonging for individuals. Organizations today have increasingly prioritized diversity and inclusion (D&I),[4] and with good reason. A 2018 report from McKinsey & Company found that companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are

35% more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians.[5] Despite D&I being top of mind for many of today's business leaders, the tangible progress made towards growing and retaining a diverse workforce at all levels of leadership is underwhelming.[6]

The lack of progress may be disappointing, but it is unsurprising when we consider that many current approaches are not well-founded. For instance, we spend nearly $8 billion[7] each year on diversity training, the most prevalent D&I intervention[8] in the United States. Although diversity training is popular, evidence shows it does little to increase the representation of women and minorities.[9] The first study to measure the efficacy of D&I interventions, by examining more than 30 years of longitudinal data from over 700 private organizations, concluded that diversity training is not only ineffective, but it can also have a negative impact.[10] For example, researchers found that after five years of required diversity training for managers, the proportion of black women actually decreased by 9% on average.[11]

One critical ingredient is missing from D&I interventions: evidence-based approaches that promote a culture of belonging for all employees.

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While belonging is [not a new concept](#) in diversity and inclusion, the evidence is mounting regarding its importance. [A recent national survey](#) found that a sense of belonging in the workplace is even more important to employee engagement than feeling respected as an individual or feeling satisfied with how decisions within a company were made.[12] This correlation was particularly strong for employees from underrepresented groups.[13]

While some might argue that strategies such as recruiting for diversity should take precedence over belonging interventions, even the most effective recruiting strategy won't lead to long-term change if new talent isn't supported to succeed. Indeed, lack of belonging has [been identified](#) as a key reason for voluntary turnover, especially for traditionally underrepresented groups.[14]

A multi-phase approach to understand workplace belonging.

To better understand workplace belonging and exclusion and to push forward new frontiers for inclusive organizations with evidence-based intervention recommendations, our study consisted of three key phases, each focused on a specific goal:

Phase 1: The value of belonging

In this phase, we surveyed a national sample of employees in order to better understand the value of belonging in the workplace. Investing in belonging requires buy-in from diverse corporate stakeholders. Quantifying the value of belonging, and, in turn, the high cost of exclusion, can serve as a call to action.

Phase 2: The cost of exclusion

In this phase, we conducted live experiments[15] to directly observe the negative consequences of exclusion. To date, much of the research on belonging in the workplace relies on survey data alone. Though valuable, such findings are limited because they are correlational rather than causal. In other words, a survey can help us understand the cost and benefits associated with belonging, but it doesn't elucidate the "why." Direct observation allows us to witness the immediate consequences of exclusion, with clarity regarding causality.

Phase 3: Novel interventions

In this phase, we tested new and existing interventions focused on belonging in a team setting. While existing research has identified effective approaches targeting belonging, no studies have focused specifically on a workplace team context. We began this phase of the experiment by applying the best interventions from the research to date and testing them in team settings. We also developed and tested novel interventions to push the field forward into new frontiers for belonging and inclusion.

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Key findings: Belonging at work.

Our research results revealed new insights that prove the business case for belonging in the workplace. Study findings also identified effective interventions that can mitigate, and even prevent, the negative consequences of exclusion for an individual employee and their team.

Key findings include:

Belonging is good for business
Employees who feel a strong sense of belonging, compared to employees with a low sense of belonging, demonstrate a 50% reduction in turnover risk, a 56% increase in performance, and a 75% decrease in employee sick days.

Belonging is the best recruiter
When employees feel like they belong, they are 167% more likely to recommend their organization as a great place to work.

Exclusion hurts teams
Experiments confirm that when individuals are excluded they are less willing to work on behalf of the team who excluded them. This remains true even if the individual's reduced productivity hurts their own financial interests.

Remedies exist
Empirical findings from our study support the capacity of specific antidotes that undo the negative costs of exclusion upon individual and team performance. Of the three antidotes tested, inviting participants to consider new rules of conduct that would make the game more fair for future participants ("Lead the charge") was the most effective.

Investment in belonging pays dividends
For a 10,000-person company, if all workers felt a high degree of belonging, this would correlate with an annual gain of over $52,000,000 from boosts in productivity.

Exclusion hurts performance
Experiments showed a single incidence of micro-exclusion can lead to an immediate 25% decline in an individual's performance on a team project.

Prevention is possible
Experiments showed that the presence of a single ally on the team, someone who demonstrated fair and inclusive behavior amidst exclusion from other team members, prevented the negative consequences of social exclusion.

This report expands upon these findings and provides guidance for organizations, leaders, and individuals seeking to promote a culture of belonging.

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Profiles of workplace belonging.

For the purpose of this study, we define *belonging* as the experience of being accepted and included by those around you.[16]

Based on our survey, we discovered the following demographic correlations:

- Alone in the ivory tower: More education is associated with less belonging.

- It helps to have a tribe: Liberals and conservatives tend towards higher belonging than centrists or extremists.

- On average, managers have a stronger sense of belonging than individual contributors.

- For-profit workers feel a greater sense of belonging than those in non-profit and government jobs.

- Personality has an impact: Those who are more extroverted tend to feel a greater sense of belonging.

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Phase 1:
The value of belonging

Results from our nationwide survey of 1,789 full-time employees across a diverse set of industries showed that belonging impacts employee and organizational performance in multiple ways.

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- **Employees with a strong sense of belonging perform better**

- **Employees with a strong sense of belonging are less likely to leave their company, and more likely to recommend their workplace to others**

- **Employees with a strong sense of belonging show up for work more, taking less sick days than their counterparts who feel excluded**

- **Belonging impacts financial performance and profitability**

While belonging is becoming a top priority for business leaders, particularly within the realm of D&I, some wonder if it is just another passing trend.[17] With evidence demonstrating a direct impact on business outcomes, belonging can no longer be viewed as a nice-to-have nor can it be dismissed as a buzzword. Leaders who want to drive top performance in their organizations will make belonging a key priority in the workplace and use research-backed practices to cultivate an inclusive culture.

Employees with a strong sense of belonging perform better.

Employees with a strong sense of belonging report a 56% higher

level of overall job performance, compared to those who do not feel they belong.

Performance metrics over a six-month period show that people who feel high versus low levels of belonging had twice as many raises. The employees who reported a strong sense of belonging were also promoted 18 times more often than those with low levels of belonging.
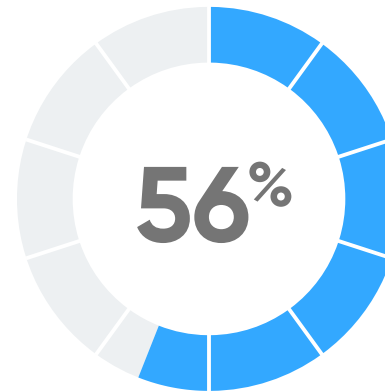
56%

Employees with a strong sense of belonging report a 56% higher level of overall job performance.

Belonging recruits and retains top talent.

Belonging affects how much people are willing to recommend their workplace to others. Employees who feel a high sense of belonging at work report an organizational promoter score that is 167% higher than employees with a low sense of belonging at work.

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50%
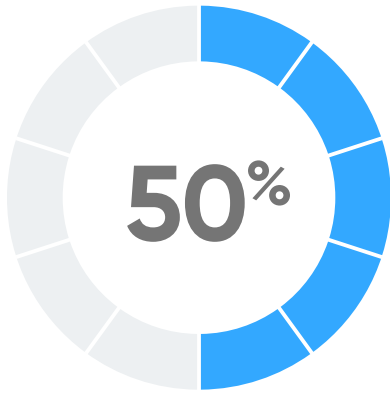
Belonging is associated with a more than 50% reduction in turnover risk.

Employees with a strong sense of belonging work more.

Employees who feel they belong reported taking 75% fewer sick days within a twelve-month period compared to employees who do not feel they belong.

75%
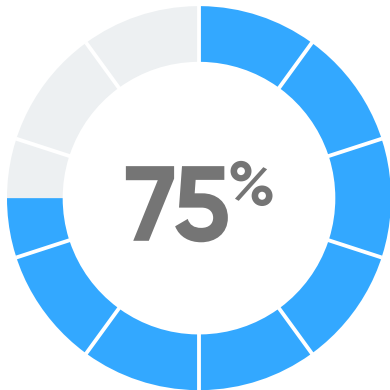
Employees who feel they belong reported taking 75% fewer sick days.

Belonging impacts financial performance and profitability.

Belonging is a boon to workforce effectiveness—increasing productivity, retention, and overall performance. These benefits add up to a tremendous impact on the bottom line.

If all workers felt a strong sense of belonging, for every 10,000 employees, this would equate to:

- An annual gain of over $52 million from boosts in productivity[18]

- An annual savings of nearly $10 million in turnover-related costs[19]

- 2,825 fewer sick days being taken during the year, which translates into a productivity gain of nearly $2.5 million per year[20]

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Phase 2:
Behavioral evidence
for the cost of exclusion

While survey findings showed the high value of belonging in the workplace, this experimental phase of the research more deeply explored the empirical costs of exclusion on individual and team performance.

We observed how individuals respond behaviorally to a team environment that cultivates belonging versus exclusion. Across thousands of participants, our findings provide novel experimental evidence that group exclusion consistently hurts both individual and team performance.

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Experimental design.

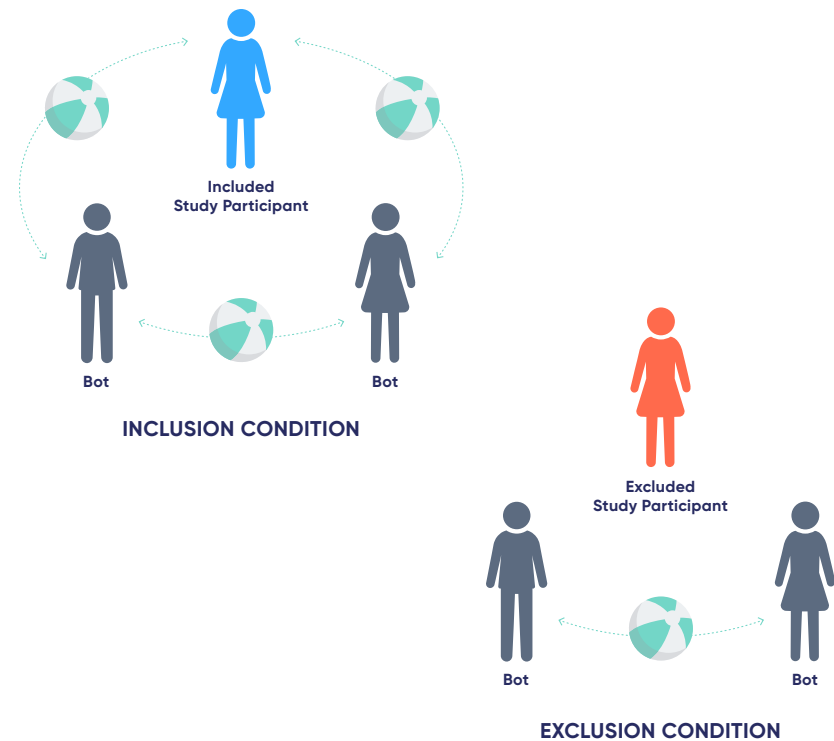*Below is a breakdown of the experiments and the results:*

Step 1: Induce inclusion or exclusion

In order to witness and assess the impact of belonging versus not belonging on the individual and team level, we had to first induce the experience of inclusion or exclusion. In order to do this, we recruited participants and assigned them to ad hoc teams of three. Unbeknownst to participants, two of the three players were actually bots that we programmed to behave in a certain way. The study was conducted online, which made the use of bots possible.

Each team of three played a short collaborative game of ball toss. The bots that were programmed to be inclusive tossed the ball equally amongst participants. The bots that were programmed to be non-inclusive only tossed the ball to the human participant 3% of the time.

Step 2: Observe how inclusion versus exclusion impacts teamwork and performance

We observed how individuals respond behaviorally to a team environment that cultivates belonging versus unbelonging. Across thousands of participants, our findings provide novel experimental evidence that group exclusion consistently hurts both individual and team performance.


Included Study Participant

Bot   **Bot**

INCLUSION CONDITION

Excluded Study Participant

Bot   **Bot**

EXCLUSION CONDITION

Here are the findings based on the behavior of participants:

There is a clear "cost of unbelonging"

The gap in performance between included versus excluded individuals remained consistent across thousands of participants. Below is a visual depiction of this gap. Individuals are consistently and significantly less willing to work hard for a team that excludes them.

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TEAM EXPERIENCE RESULTS
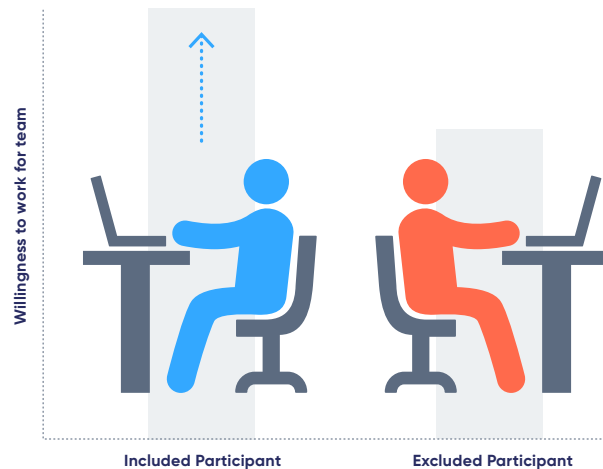
Belonging is most critical for interdependent teams

In the workplace, most success is interdependent. It's rare that an individual member of a team or organization can thrive or falter without impacting others. That said, if an individual is only working on behalf of themselves and their success does not benefit the rest of the team, whether or not they feel a sense of belonging within that team matters less.

Inclusion sets up the individual and the team for success

When all participants were included and had equal turns in the game, the participants worked as hard for the team's success as they would have worked for themselves.[21]

If even one individual is excluded, the whole team suffers

When told they were going to share the financial payment across team members, excluded participants were less productive, and gave up quicker, indicating they were less willing to work for the greater good of the team. Specifically, **the excluded participants were 25% less productive** on future work tasks compared to participants who were included in the initial game.

An excluded individual suffers twice

In addition to the team penalty, we saw that the excluded individual suffered twice. First, they experienced not being included in what was supposed to be a fun team activity. Second, in their understandable lack of willingness to work hard on behalf of the team members who excluded them, the participant also suffered a financial penalty. Because the team was paid based on volume of quality work, the individual participant also took a financial hit from their reduced productivity.

The consequences of exclusion are swift

Within our experiments, the significant adverse impacts of exclusion occurred as a result of being left out from a two-minute virtual ball toss game with strangers. This confirms that even a single, low-stakes incidence of exclusion can have a direct and immediate effect.

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Phase 3:
Testing novel interventions

Given the pronounced and immediate negative impact of exclusion on teamwork and performance, we investigated means of reducing these undesirable consequences.

To achieve this, we repeated the experiment, but with the addition of belonging interventions designed to support excluded participants. These are the interventions we designed and tested.[22]

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Gain perspective

Participants received written reflections from others who wrote about their own experiences of being left out, and how they coped with that exclusion. By reading about the similar experiences and learnings of others, we intended for participants to use those new perspectives to re-frame the behavior of their teammates or of their own experiences of feeling excluded.[23]

Pay it forward

Participants were prompted to think about what they would say to help another person who was just left out. This prompt was designed to get participants into a helping mindset, in which they were asked to care for another. We hypothesized this would push participants to quickly recover from their own bad experience, and extract what lessons could be learned, in order to take on a mentoring role for someone in a similar situation. This change of mindset, in turn, might serve to lessen participants' negative associations of their own team experiences.[24]

Lead the charge

Participants were invited to determine new rules for the game that would make it more fair, inclusive, and enjoyable. The prompt was designed to get the participants into an assertive mindset. By offering the opportunity to regain some measure of control over their situation, we predicted that this sense of increased control would make participants feel less bad, and more willing to re-engage with their team.[25; 26]

What was the relative effectiveness of each approach?

After implementing each intervention, we then tested performance. We found that all three interventions at this stage yielded a significant positive impact upon teamwork and performance. The "Gain perspective" intervention significantly improved team-oriented behavior. The "Pay it forward" and "Lead the charge" interventions were even more powerful. Participants who were excluded and then assigned to these latter two interventions displayed the same, or greater, team-oriented behavior than participants who had been included by their team all along.

Testing the preventative power of allies.

These three interventions—"Gain perspective," "Pay it forward," and "Lead the charge"—are all designed to be put in play after people have experienced exclusion. But we also wondered if anything could be done in anticipation of the exclusionary experience to help protect individuals from the negative effects in a preventative manner, like a vaccine.[27] In this section, we demonstrate how knowing you have an ally in a team setting—someone who acknowledges and includes you—acts as a buffer against the negative effects of exclusion by other team members that may follow.

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You may remember that in Phase 2 of the experiment, we induced exclusion through a simple game of ball toss. The participant assumed they were playing the short game with other live human participants, but in reality the other players were bots. The bots that were programmed to be non-inclusive only tossed the ball to the human participant 3% of the time.

How did we test the preventative power of allies?

An additional team member was added to the team ball toss exercise, making a total of one real human and three programmed bots per team. Two of the bots were programmed to completely ignore the human player, and tossed the ball only among themselves and the third bot. The third bot was programmed to interact an equal amount with all players. This third bot was considered to be the human participant's ally. The ally did not show any preferential treatment towards the participant-player, but rather made sure to pass the participant the ball enough times so that it was clear that, compared to the other two excluders, the ally was making sure to include the human player in the group task.

Bringing in an ally effectively prevented the cost of exclusion. With the presence of an ally, exclusion by other team members failed to have an adverse impact on participants' willingness to work

for their team performance. **This means that not only did we discover antidotes that can be helpful for an individual and team following an incidence of exclusion, but also we discovered a vaccine, which prevents the negative impact of exclusion before or even during an experience of exclusion.**

ADDITION OF AN ALLY

Study Participant

Ally Bot

Excluder Bot

Excluder Bot

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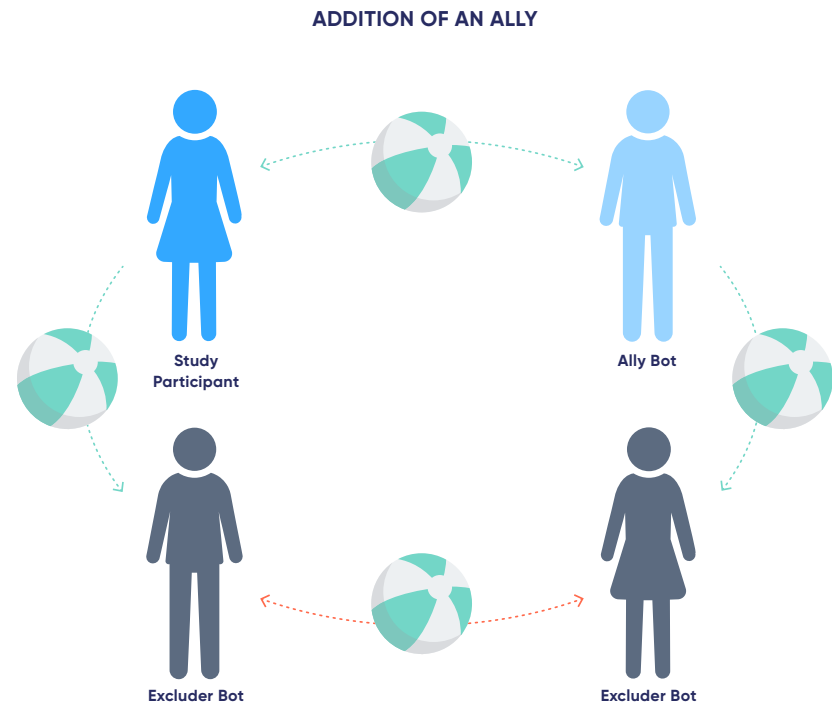
Here are our key takeaways from testing novel interventions.

Remedies exist

We tested three interventions and examined their efficacy for reducing the cost of belonging in the workplace. The three interventions we tested ("Gain perspective," "Pay it forward," and "Lead the charge") all had a beneficial impact.

Prevention is possible

After we tested three antidotes ("Gain perspective," "Pay it forward," and "Lead the charge"), we went on to observe whether we could do something to prevent the negative consequences of exclusion from the get-go. We did this by bringing in an ally to the initial ball toss game. This ally behaved in a fair and inclusive manner, tossing the ball equally to all participants. Even though our live human participant was still excluded by two of the team members, the presence of one ally, or inclusive team member, prevented the negative consequences of exclusion we'd otherwise expect to observe upon future work performance.

Fairness, rather than special treatment, made the difference

In our experiment, prevention required only the presence of a single individual who behaved in a fair manner towards everyone on the team. Even when we can't eradicate exclusion overnight, it's important to remember the power of a single individual for improving circumstances and preventing pain, without requiring any extraordinary effort on their part.

Implications for leaders and organizations.

The proven effectiveness of specific interventions in reducing the negative impacts of exclusion paves the way for leaders to take an active role in fostering belonging within their teams. This also paves the way for organizations to view inclusive leadership as a core competency for anyone who manages a team. Currently, it is standard to expect certain tools within any experienced manager's repertoire, such as giving feedback or delegating tasks. As companies increasingly recognize inclusive leadership as a learnable skill that is critical to maximizing team performance, we will likely see more manager training including specific tools aimed at belonging, such as the ones we used within our study.

To aid this movement, in the next section we share science-backed strategies to help leaders at all levels of the organization, including tools for managers based on the proven belonging interventions from our study

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A roadmap forward:
5 tools to foster a culture of belonging in your workplace

Building on the findings presented in this report, we offer a toolbox of evidence-based strategies that leaders, managers, and individuals can use to ameliorate and prevent the negative impacts of exclusion in the workplace.

Here are five tools based on the interventions that showed a measurable impact in our study, translated for application in the workplace. This toolbox is geared towards front-line managers whose inclusive leadership skills will make a critical difference in their team's overall sense of belonging. That said, each tool can also be adapted for leaders at all levels who wish to use them to support a colleague or even themselves in the face of exclusion.

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Tool # 1: Lead the charge.

If a colleague or direct report shares they felt excluded:

Acknowledge how difficult these experiences can be. Ask if they are open to discussing further. If they say no, it is important to respect this boundary. If they are open to further discussion, try asking the following questions designed to prompt the individual to shift their mindset towards future solutions:

Based on your experience, how would you change the situation if you could?

What would you fix to make the situation more enjoyable? For example, how would you ensure that everyone feels included?

Are there any organization-wide programs that could act as safe resources for feedback? Or are there committees that could be used to drive positive change?

Important nuances to keep in mind

Personalize these questions by adjusting the language to your personal style, and by adjusting the questions to the individual's unique situation. For instance, if you already know there aren't organization-wide programs that could act as safe resources for feedback, it wouldn't make sense to ask about them.

Please also note that this should only be done if you are confident the individual is open to such an exchange. Given how sensitive and difficult these situations may be, even quick and simple tools must be used with appropriate respect and caution. If you do use this tool, you must also ensure you are prepared to receive feedback about how this individual thinks the situation could be changed to help others feel a great sense of belonging.

Finally, this tool should not replace other standard or required practices within your organization.

The research

Our research shows such questions inviting individuals to lead the charge can eliminate the negative consequences of exclusion on performance. Though this does not erase the experience of exclusion, it can absolve the additional suffering caused by a reduction in performance. As a leader, these questions may also solicit great ideas to boost belonging on your team.

Within our study, the individuals were not led to believe the changes would be enacted. In a real-life situation at work, you will want to set clear expectations whether or not it's possible for an individual's suggested changes to be realized. For instance, you might say, "I can't promise I can enact these changes, but I truly do want to hear your ideas."

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Tool #2: Pay it forward.

If a colleague or direct report shares they felt excluded:

Acknowledge how difficult these experiences can be. Ask if they are open to discussing further. If they say no, it is important to respect this boundary. If they are open to further discussion, try asking the following question designed to prompt the individual to imagine using their experience to benefit others:

If you were to talk to someone who has just been excluded in this same situation, what would you say or do for them to help?

Important nuances to keep in mind

Personalize this question by adjusting the language to your personal style, and by adjusting the question to the individual's unique situation.

Please also note that this should only be done if you are confident the individual is open to such an exchange. Given how sensitive and difficult these situations may be, even quick and simple tools must be used with appropriate respect and caution.

Finally, this tool should not replace other standard or required practices within your organization.

The research

Our research shows that helping someone envision helping another individual in a similar situation in the future can eliminate the negative consequences of exclusion on performance. Though this does not erase the experience of exclusion, it can absolve the additional suffering caused by a reduction in performance.

Tool #3: Gain perspective.

If a colleague or direct report shares they felt excluded:
Acknowledge how difficult these experiences can be. Ask if they are open to discussing further. If they say no, it is important to respect this boundary. If they are open to further discussion, try asking the following question designed to prompt perspective:

Do you know of others in the organization who have faced similar situations and found ways to cope?

Important nuances to keep in mind
Personalize this question by adjusting the language to your personal style, and by adjusting the question to the individual's unique situation.

If your direct report is not able to identify someone, you can offer the perspective of someone who's faced exclusion and found a healthy way to cope or overcome. In fact, this is something you can prepare for even now, by generating such examples.

Please also note that this should only be done if you are confident the individual is open to such an exchange. Given how sensitive and difficult these situations may be, even quick and simple tools must be used with appropriate respect and caution.

Finally, this tool should not replace other standard or required practices within your organization.

The research
Our research shows that offering perspective about how others have coped with, or overcome, a similar situation mitigates the negative consequences of exclusion on performance. Though this does not erase the experience of exclusion, it can lessen the additional suffering caused by a reduction in performance.

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Tool #4: Be an ally.

Of all the tools, this one is perhaps the most accessible to anyone, and the most effective. As we mentioned above, promoting a culture of belonging, for better or worse, depends on all members of a team and organization. On the one hand, the consequences of social exclusion, even in a low-stakes situation, are devastating and swift. On the other hand, we know that even one individual can have a tremendous positive impact in the face of exclusion. Further, while we can't control the behavior of others, we can control our own behaviors. It is well within our powers to act in a fair and inclusive manner within the workplace.

Here are some specific tactics that can boost your effectiveness as an ally:

1. Remind yourself of the importance of inclusive behaviors at all times. We can never fully know another's sense of belonging within our team. Including others and treating them with fairness is always a good idea.

2. Reflect upon why being an ally feels important to you. In what ways does being an ally tie to your core values or to your sense of meaning and purpose at work?

3. Consider ways you can proactively support, encourage, and include others. You can do this reflection through thinking, writing, or discussing with someone you trust. Make it specific and actionable (e.g., who, when, where, how often).

An important nuance to keep in mind
Being an ally does not have to mean going out of one's way. In the context of our research, all it meant was including all participants equally within a brief social interaction. While being an ally might connote strong action, in practice it can be simply acting in a fair and inclusive manner within any social context.

The research
This tool is based on the finding that the presence of just a single ally amidst an experience of social exclusion prevented the negative consequences of exclusion on performance. Because this tool prevented measurable negative impacts, we view it as a vaccine that can be administered anytime to buffer against a feeling of unbelonging.

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Tool #5: Promote allies.

Leaders within organizations do not need to wait until there's a problem in order to act. They can instead proactively support allies from the get-go. As a leader, it's important to adjust one's approach to the specific organization.

Here are some specific tactics that may be helpful:

- Verbally compliment fair and inclusive behavior as a way to demonstrate that this is behavior you value.

- Encourage time for team building, which can foster supportive collegial relationships.

- Openly discuss the importance of allies and the positive impact of being an ally who treats others fairly, even in the face of exclusion.

An important nuance to keep in mind

Being an ally does not have to mean going out of one's way. In the context of our research, all it meant was including all participants equally within a brief social interaction. While being an ally might connote strong action, in practice it can be simply acting in a fair and inclusive manner within any social context.

The research

This tool is based on the finding that the presence of just a single ally amidst an experience of social exclusion prevented the negative consequences of exclusion on performance. Because this tool prevented measurable negative impacts, we view it as a vaccine that can be administered anytime to buffer against a feeling of unbelonging.

Conclusion

Belonging is a fundamental human need that extends to the workplace. It is a critical factor in individual, team, and organizational performance. We now have more data than ever to demonstrate the strong link between employee belonging and the overall success of an organization. We are now able to pinpoint the cost of the feeling of unbelonging, down to the dollars and days lost. We have empirically demonstrated the strong, negative, consistent response to social exclusion. Further, we have proven interventions that can reduce and even prevent these negative consequences.

The real value of this research will be measured by the impact it makes on workers' lives. By translating our research findings into direct practice recommendations, we aspire to help our readers close the science-to-practice gap as quickly as possible. Any individual, at any level, may apply these tools and make an impact.

While the study we shared in this report pushes forward the frontiers of inclusion and belonging, we are confident uncharted terrain remains. We hope to encourage and support fellow pioneers in research and practice to continue to develop the insights and practices to create inclusive workplaces for all. We all need to belong. Science shows just how much that matters—for individual and organizational success.

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Report Contributors

Authors

Evan Carr

Gus Cooney

Cheryl Gray

Sarah Greenberg

Gabriella Kellerman

Andrew Reece

Alexi Robichaux

Contributors

Christy Sasser, Editorial

Mark Leary, Editorial

Mark Lawson, Graphic Design

Jesse Sorin, Graphic Design

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Methods: Survey.

This study was conducted by BetterUp, Inc. in the United States in June 2018. BetterUp researchers built and administered a series of online survey questionnaires that spanned six core subjects:

1. Sample demographics
2. Work experience, current circumstances, and referral information
3. Organizational, group, and team identification
4. Social support and close relationships
5. Personality traits
6. Sources of belonging, both in life and in the workplace

Surveys were administered in English. Each survey took 15 minutes to complete, and all respondents were paid for their time, at an average rate of USD $10 per hour. For all company and cost estimates, we apply our findings to a 10,000-person company with an average "span of control" of 1:8.

Analysis.

Sample

The sample used in this report included 1,789 United States residents, ages 18+. Respondents who met each of the following criteria were included in the final sample: (1) Currently employed, or employed within the past six months; (2) Not self-employed; (3) Earning a personal annual income of at least USD $25,000. In the case of having been employed within the past six months, but not currently employed, respondents were asked to answer questions as they related to their most recent employment. All respondents were recruited using a consecutive sampling design. The final sample was not matched or weighted to reflect nationally representative demographic distributions (see later information on sample demographics).

Survey items

Survey items related to demographics, work experiences, and current circumstances were largely adapted from open data resources provided by the United States Census, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Rand American Life Panel.

The following validated measurement instruments were used in the assessment of psychographic, behavioral, and employment-related constructs: [28]

Belonging: Our main measure of belonging was a 4-item scale from Godard (2001); we use this as participants' primary index of belonging in all later calculations.[29]

Group in the self: Adapted from Aron, Aron, & Smollan (1992) for use with groups (see Tropp & Wright (2001)).

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Job and career calling: Job/Career/Calling Questionnaire (3-item) from [Wrzesniewski et al. (1997)](#).

Organizational identification: 8-item measure from [Gautam, Van Dick, & Wagner (2004)](#).

Work group identification: 17-item measure from [Riordan & Weatherly (1999)](#).

Attachment style: 36-item scale sourced from [Richards & Schat (2011)](#).

Psychological needs: 9-item Balanced Measure of Psychological Needs (BMPN) scale from [Sheldon & Hilpert (2012)](#).

Subjective job performance: Self-reports of job proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity at the individual, team, and organizational levels; sourced from [Griffin, Neal, & Parker (2007)](#).

General Social Survey ([GSS](#)): Question regarding individuals over the previous six months with whom they had discussed important matters.

Results

Data were analyzed by researchers at BetterUp, Inc. Descriptive and inferential analyses, were applied to the entire sample, as well as to subgroups. Subgroup analyses assessed differences between demographic profiles (e.g., gender, education, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, political affiliation), employment circumstances (e.g., managers vs. individual contributors, remote vs. in-office workers, industry, company size), and behavioral differences (e.g., high vs. low workplace social support). Significance testing was used to determine whether group differences were statistically significant (at the $p<.05$ level). All results are significant under this definition, except where otherwise noted. Correlation and regression analyses were used to examine relationships between variables and determine direction of relationships.

High and low levels of belonging

Some findings report the differences between employees who score high in their ratings of how much belonging they feel, compared to employees with average or low scores on this measure. References to high and low scores on belonging refer to the discretization of a continuous measurement of belonging into quantile brackets. High (low) belonging brackets may refer to the top (bottom) 10% or 20% of belonging scores.

Limitations.

This report highlights a number of high-value, analytical findings related to the measurement of belonging in the workplace; however, it is limited in important ways:

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1. Sampling

The consecutive sampling method employed does not attempt to account for sample characteristics which may be non-representative of the actual makeup of the American workforce. In some cases, sample demographics were reasonably reflective of the broader U.S. population (e.g., gender, education, and income), but this was not true for all variables (e.g., racial/ethnic composition was mostly White/Caucasian). Caution should be exercised when using the findings in this report to make confident inferences about the American workforce at large. Future iterations of this research can improve external validity by employing weighting schemas and adaptive inclusion criteria to better approximate the true population of the American workforce.

2. Cause and effect

This research used observational data, meaning there was no randomization or experimental manipulation of the variables measured. As such, the relationship between any two variables is just that—a relationship. It remains undetermined as to whether a change in one variable actually caused the change in another. The findings in this report may, however, be used as preliminary indicators to determine which variables may be worth manipulating experimentally to establish true causal relationships.

3. Projection models

Throughout this report, efforts are made to bring specific, concrete facts to light regarding the business benefits of belonging at work. The simplest way to describe benefits to a business is in terms of financial gains; however, it is often challenging to convert improvements in employees' self-reported experiences directly into dollars saved. The specific dollar amounts reported as savings should be interpreted as projections with a considerable margin of error. Actual outcomes may vary widely, due to a number of factors including company size, industrial sector, and existing productivity levels.

Methods: Experiment.

Experiments were conducted by BetterUp, Inc. in the United States between June 2018 and February 2019. BetterUp researchers programmed experimental tasks that were administered online in English. These tasks usually took approximately 10 minutes for participants to complete, and all respondents were paid for their time at an average rate of USD $10 per hour.

We hypothesized that being excluded from a team would result in negative social effects on team behavior. We tested this hypothesis by randomly assigning participants to have inclusive or exclusive team experiences in a simulated collaborative game, after which we observed their behavior in a team-related task. In the first set of experiments, participants were assigned to

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a team with two other "participants" (that were actually bots preprogrammed to act like live humans), using a collaborative game where virtual players threw a ball to one another. In the inclusion condition, the bots consistently threw the participant the ball, but in the exclusion condition, the participant only got the ball a couple times. After this, participants were given a simple task where they could earn money, either for themselves or on behalf of their entire team. The longer participants persisted in the task, the more money they could earn (participants decided how many task trials to complete for rewards, before deciding to end the experiment).

In the second set of experiments, we tested three interventions that could potentially repair the negative effects of exclusion. These interventions included the following (which participants were randomly assigned to complete after their simulated inclusive/ exclusive collaborative game): (1) Gain perspective: Previous participants shared their reflections to current participants on their experience of being excluded and how they coped with it; (2) Pay it forward: Participants were asked to imagine how they would coach someone else through the experience of being left out; and (3) Lead the charge: Participants were invited to plan out how they would restructure the team experience they just had to make it more inclusive and enjoyable.

In the final experiment, we examined another intervention designed to buffer against any negative effects of exclusion

ever emerging. We hypothesized that having an ally during the collaborative game would guard against these antisocial aftereffects of exclusion in the team-based payout task. We did this by embedding an "ally" bot in the collaborative game, which was programmed to signal inclusion (by consistently throwing the ball to the participant), while the other bots ignored the participant.

Analysis.

Sample

The sample used in these experiments included more than 3,000 United States workers, ages 18+. Respondent qualifications for recruitment were similar to the survey. All participants were recruited using a consecutive sampling design. The final samples were not matched or weighted to reflect nationally representative demographic distributions.

Dependent variable

Our main dependent variable in the experiments were participants' willingness to persist in the payout task that followed the simulated collaborative game (which induced feelings of either inclusion or exclusion). This was measured by the number of trials participants completed in the payout task before deciding to end the experiment.

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Results

Data were analyzed by researchers at BetterUp, Inc. Descriptive and inferential analyses were applied to the entire sample, as well as to subgroups (depending on the experimental design). Significance testing was used to determine whether group differences were statistically significant (at the p<.05 level). All results are significant under this definition, except where otherwise noted.

Limitations

These experiments offer critical insights on the effects of belonging and inclusion in the workplace, but there are also some important limitations:

1. Sampling

Similar to the surveys, the consecutive sampling method employed does not attempt to account for sample characteristics which may be non-representative of the actual makeup of the American workforce. Caution should be exercised when using the findings in this report to make confident inferences about the American workforce at large. Future iterations of this research could use weighting schemas and adaptive inclusion criteria to better approximate the true population of the American workforce.

2. External validity

Our experimental tasks were not only designed to draw inferences about the broader population, but we also use them to make conclusions about human behavior. Since we observed our effects with specific settings (e.g., online simulated collaborative game) and specific tasks, it is very possible that these effects will not extend to all contexts or situations. In future research, a variety of experimental designs and manipulations should be used to replicate, verify, and extend the current findings.

3. Data quality

All experiments were conducted online to facilitate rapid data collection and accessibility to workers across the United States. Note, however, that conducting online experiments can sometimes make it more difficult to guarantee that participants are correctly following instructions and remaining attentive to all experimental tasks. Given that we replicated our key effects across many experiments, we are confident that they are real and robust, but participant error and inattentiveness can have a substantial impact on data quality. In the future, additional efforts can always be made in designing experiments and programming tasks to assure that all data is of the highest fidelity (e.g., attention checks, language/instruction probes, IP address checks).

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About BetterUp.

Founded in 2013, BetterUp is a mobile-based leadership development platform used by Fortune 1000 companies to drive high performance amid today's constant and accelerating change. Science-based, AI-powered, and fundamentally human, BetterUp fast tracks leadership development at all employee levels through expert coaching, experiential learning, and evidence-based accountability tools supported by its independent, science-backed institute—BetterUp Labs—to promote lasting behavior change. With a diverse portfolio of customers, including Workday, Genentech, and MARS, BetterUp gives your workforce the personalized leadership development they need to thrive and drive your business forward. To learn more, visit www.betterup.com.

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Endnotes.

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[11] Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2016) point out that the pitfalls of diversity training were not the same when the training was voluntary.

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[15] Experimental protocols were reviewed and approved for ethical soundness by a third-party institutional review board (IRB). Standard research ethics procedures, including informed consent and post-participation debriefing, were administered to research participants.

[16] Survey respondents reported experiences of workplace inclusion and of workplace belonging were highly correlated. As a result, these two terms have the same meaning within the context of this research. It's important to note that, in practice, the terms may connote different meanings, depending on the context.

[17] Beyond Diversity: How Firms Are Cultivating a Sense of Belonging. *Knowledge@Wharton* (2019, March 26). Retrieved from https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/belonging-at-work/

[18] These estimates of annual productivity gains are based on scenarios of increased employee productivity due to elevated job performance, previously established job performance-to-productivity increase ratios, and increased job performance as a result of heightened experiences of belonging at work. The data in these estimates use a scenario where employees who report below average workplace belonging are elevated into the top 20% of belonging scores. These estimates are not meant as predictions, but rather are indicative of our scenario model outcomes. Source: FRED; Griffin, Neal, & Parker (2007); BetterUp Labs.

[19] These estimates of replacement-related cost savings are based on scenarios of decreased employee turnover as a result of heightened experiences of workplace belonging, national salary averages for managerial and non-managerial roles, and common enterprise-scale span-of-control ratios. The data in these estimates use scenarios where all employees are elevated into the top 20% of workplace belonging scores. These estimates are not meant as predictions, but rather are indicative of our scenario model outcomes. Source: FRED; McKinsey & Company; Center for American Progress; Glassdoor; BetterUp Labs.

[20] These estimates of reduced absences are based on scenarios of lower rates of paid leave as a result of employees' heightened experiences of belonging at work. The data in these estimates use scenarios where all employees are elevated to the maximum possible workplace belonging score. These estimates are not meant as predictions, but rather are indicative of our scenario model outcomes. Source: BetterUp Labs.

[21] Another way to say this is that the productivity of the included participants was equal whether they were told they were sharing the financial payment across team members or keeping it all for themselves.

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[22] To ensure the results we saw weren't merely an outcome of participants redirecting their attention, we introduced a "control" version of this intervention, in which participants read others' reflections that were unrelated to experiences of exclusion. If this intervention was effective due to simple distraction, then both versions of this intervention should show similar results. If instead the intervention required reflection on others' experiences that specifically related to belonging, then the control group should see less change than the group which read reflections about belonging.

[23] Here is one example of the written reflections that the participants read in the "Gain perspective" intervention: *I received the ball a few times. The outcome of the game made me try harder to prove that I am worthy later on in the survey. This game reminded me of teamwork situations in real life. When I am dealing or interacting with others, I try to be as fair to everyone as possible.*

[24] Here is the specific prompt used in the "Pay it forward" intervention: *When people play the ball toss game you just did, someone often feels excluded. Imagine you were to talk to someone who has just been excluded from the game. Please write a short paragraph describing what would you say or do for them to make them feel better.*

[25] Here is this specific prompt used in the "Lead the charge" intervention: *Based on your experience playing this ball toss game, please write about how you would change the game if you could? What would you fix to make the game more enjoyable? For example, how would you ensure that everyone feels included?*

[26] Participants were not given the opportunity to actually implement their suggestions, nor were they told their new rules would be enacted in future games. The effectiveness of this intervention relies on a mindset shift, not on the realization of the changes proposed.

[27] Kalev, A., Dobbin, F., & Kelly, E. (2006).

[28] In addition to these published assessments, a number of customized survey items were employed to capture sentiments about workplace meaning and social support that are either missing or poorly represented in existing instruments.

[29] We also measured belonging using scales from Jansen et al. (2014), but ultimately decided to only use the Godard measure for belonging calculations.

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