

Belonging matters at work? Hear us out!

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“Is there something wrong with me? I have a fancy job with a title that many people dream about. Deep down, I feel like I don't belong here in this organisation. I do not share the same vision. What people say and do does not feel authentic to me. It seems like everyone on this executive team is playing a political game at work to look good and protect their own 'empires'. Am I also one of them here?”

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“Oh, they're having a coffee break without me again! Am I really welcomed and accepted here? What did I do wrong to be excluded like this?”

It was not a surprise to me when [Forbes](#) and [Ernst & Young](#) reported that more than half of employees lack a sense of belonging at work. The snippets above are from my inner voices, among others, while I was working at large multinational corporations. Professionally, many people would say I had a fulfilling job. I moved up the corporate ladder, my paycheck got bigger, and my job title got fancier over time. However, I didn't feel entirely happy. There seemed to be an invisible wall inside me. I tried to project myself as confident on the outside, but inside, I felt insecure and doubtful. Tiny things, such as not being invited to a team gathering, an unfriendly look, or a whisper behind my back, could baffle me. I then quit the job and changed my life course.

Intriguingly, since I embarked on the qualitative, interview-based study of **‘a sense of belonging at work’**, I have listened to many rich stories from diverse individuals, who have mostly built their life and career abroad. Despite our differences in age, work and life experience, and origin, we have a common desire: to be heard, seen, and included as who we are as a person in the places we work. Nobody can afford discrimination or exclusion, no matter how subtle. I have learned that it is critical for everyone to build a congruent sense of self and that any unique sense of self is accepted and valued, whether at work or outside of work.

In the context of workplaces, I have identified five key ingredients that are essential for people at work.

1. Everyone needs a sense of **autonomy**, which includes independence, flexibility, and empowerment. No one likes being micro-supervised, managed, or told what to do.
2. Everyone needs **support**, i.e., knowing that people around us are willing to lend a hand when needed.

3. Everyone needs **authenticity**. In the absence of authenticity, things people say or do at work are perceived as artificial or unreal, which prevents organic interactions or lasting connections.
4. Everyone needs **transparency** in organisations. No one values a hidden agenda or political games. Things are expected to be communicated openly and transparently in the workplace.
5. **Psychological safety** is fundamental for healthy team and organisational growth. Everybody at work should feel “safe” to be themselves, to speak up, to “whistle blow” wrongdoings, and to not be afraid of unfair consequences or penalties if they do the right things.

These are, to me, the building blocks for developing trust, respect, and commitment and for fostering a sense of belonging at work. Belonging at work is topical. Indeed, [Coqual](#), a global non-profit think tank, and many consulting firms, such as [Ernst & Young](#) and [Deloitte](#), believe the concept of workplace belonging should be prioritised and deserves more attention.

Reference:

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