



TALENT, ORGANIZATION & PEOPLE SOLUTIONS

# The Belonging Dividend:

The Strategic Imperative of Belonging  
and How to Unlock Its Full Value

In today's hyper-competitive world, fostering a real sense of **workplace belonging** isn't just a feel-good effort; it's a hard-nosed strategic imperative. Yet, if you're a C-suiter, you're likely scratching your head. You've poured serious resources into "belonging programming," but employee satisfaction has barely budged, and crucial metrics like innovation and customer satisfaction haven't moved.

Erin Gore, a Managing Director in A&M's Talent, Organization and People (TOP) Solutions practice, observes that, "This deceptively anemic ROI often leads to executive skepticism, strategic sidelining, and, ultimately, the gutting of budgets."

But the data doesn't lie. Research consistently proves that a powerful sense of workplace belonging correlates with a jaw-dropping **56 percent increase in job performance and a 50 percent reduction in turnover risk.**<sup>1</sup> Workplace belonging is a magnet for A-list talent, ignites cross-functional collaboration, sparks fresh ideas, and ultimately delivers more value.

So, where's the disconnect?

After analyzing dozens of companies, four critical roadblocks to effective workplace belonging consistently emerge. Visionary leaders are already deploying surprising, battle-tested fixes — and you can too.

Workplace belonging is a magnet for A-list talent, delivering value through cross-functional collaboration, creativity, and improved retention.





## Roadblock 1: The ROI Black Hole – Spending Millions, Proving Nothing



Companies today pour vast sums into “belonging programming.” Yet, these significant investments often vanish into a “belonging black hole.” They can’t definitively link programs to tangible business outcomes, let alone prove positive ROI.<sup>2</sup>

This isn’t merely a tracking oversight; it’s a fundamental strategic failure to measure belonging’s profound impact. As Teal Reamer, a Managing Director in A&M’s TOP Solutions, noted, “Standard ROI frameworks can’t capture how belonging translates into financial value. Without connective tissue between these programs and desired outcomes, organizations fly blind, struggling to justify continued investments.”

Consider this scenario: A global financial firm spent \$25 million on a “belonging transformation” but failed to establish quantifiable linkages to critical business drivers. They couldn’t demonstrate, for instance, how enhanced belonging impacted customer satisfaction, or if reduced attrition correlated with decreased cost-to-serve. They were left with generic “employee engagement scores” that didn’t hold up under immense budget pressure.



## The Fix:

### Precision Measurement and Data-Driven ROI



Smart companies build sophisticated, data-driven measurement frameworks that connect belonging directly to hard business numbers. This includes:

- **Leveraging advanced analytics:** Using tools like machine learning to pinpoint which belonging interventions correlate with specific business KPIs (e.g., reduced turnover, increased innovation, improved customer loyalty)
- **Establishing clear baselines and control groups:** Setting measurable starting points and using control groups to isolate true impact
- **Implementing a unified “Belonging ROI Index”:** A single, dynamic dashboard providing C-suite visibility into tangible business gains directly tied to their belonging strategies

This approach transforms “feel-good” into quantifiable value, making the business case for belonging undeniable.





Organizations quickly declare their commitment to belonging, splashing statements everywhere. But too often, their actions and strategic decisions contradict these stated values.<sup>3</sup> This creates a “say-do” gap that employees, ever vigilant, spot immediately. It’s like a company billboard proclaiming, “We value our people!” while simultaneously cutting healthcare benefits.

When leaders fail to systematically evaluate how decisions impact belonging, it signals a superficial approach and lack of commitment. Employees don’t just see a lapse in judgment; they see a betrayal of trust.<sup>4</sup> As Matt Campbell, Managing Director and A&M’s TOP Solutions leader, noted, “This gap leaves employees — especially your highest performers — cynical, disengaged, and looking for the exit. The fundamental issue here is the absence of belonging as a true factor in executive-level decision-making.”



Establishing real belonging takes the commitment of leaders to integrate belonging into a coherent ecosystem, where all parts work together to foster connection and inclusion.



### The Fix:

#### Embedding Belonging into the Strategic Operating System

Top organizations aren’t just talking about workplace belonging; they’re operationalizing it, embedding its values deep into their corporate DNA. For these companies, belonging isn’t a separate HR program – it’s a fundamental decision-making framework, backed by integrated tools such as:

- **Standing agenda item:** Belonging becomes a nonnegotiable, standing agenda item in every leadership meeting. Every major strategic decision is rigorously assessed for its impact on belonging.
- **The belonging filter:** New ideas or initiatives must pass through a dedicated “belonging filter” to proactively assess their impact on the belonging environment.
- **Rapid response protocols:** “Say-do” gaps are met with swift, visible rapid response protocols. This isn’t about cover-ups; it’s about transparently acknowledging missteps and visibly course-correcting, building trust through accountability.
- **Performance evaluation imperative:** Commitment to belonging is a key component of every individual’s contribution and a significant factor in performance evaluations.
- **Executive compensation link:** Crucially, executive compensation is directly tied to measurable belonging metrics, ensuring clear rewards and direct consequences for fostering or failing to foster workplace belonging.

By integrating belonging into the actual operating system of strategic decision-making, organizations transform it into a powerful, quantifiable driver of value.



Belonging efforts often remain isolated, standalone programs — at best, “add-ons” to core business operations and, at worst, “distractions.”



This prevents sustainable cultural change. These initiatives run parallel to established structures and processes, creating inconsistent employee experiences. Belonging becomes a fragmented collection of “nice things” — from book clubs to ice cream socials — that never truly coalesce into a unified, impactful system. The core issue here isn’t just about embedding in systems; it’s the fundamental lack of a coherent belonging ecosystem, where all parts work together to foster connection and inclusion.<sup>5</sup> Without this integrated approach, efforts are diluted, and their impact remains scattered.



### The Fix:

#### Weaving Belonging into an Integrated System

Successful companies deeply integrate belonging principles directly into daily workflows and organizational systems. This starts with a comprehensive, organization wide systems audit to map process and technology touchpoints that impact belonging. They systematically redesign core processes — like project assignment, hiring pipelines, promotion criteria, and even meeting structures — to ensure opportunity for belonging. They embed belonging “checkpoints” and considerations into every stage of project management workflows. Belonging considerations can’t serve as an afterthought; they must be integrated into HR technology platforms and enterprise software. Crucially, ongoing training empowers managers and employees alike to fluidly apply these principles, making belonging a seamless part of “how we do things here.”

Leading organizations are:

- **Conducting organization wide systems audits** to map every process, policy, and technology touchpoint affecting employee belonging
- **Redesigning core processes** — like project assignments, promotion criteria, and recognition programs — to ensure equitable access and representation
- **Embedding belonging checkpoints** into project management workflows, such as requiring teams to reflect on psychological safety and inclusion during retrospectives
- **Integrating belonging considerations into technology platforms**, such as collaboration tools that prompt inclusive behaviors or HR systems that flag potential equity issues
- **Providing ongoing training and resources** to managers and teams on how to apply belonging principles in daily decision-making and operations

The breakthrough approach? Build a belonging ecosystem by intentionally embedding belonging principles into core operations rather than treating it as an add-on.



As Chief Experience Officer of A&M's Public Sector Practice, Tracey Walker shares that organizations “have an untapped opportunity to systematically support belonging without making it feel forced, performative, or inauthentic. Ultimately, they struggle to align effort and investment with results.”

This paradox arises from the inherent tension between scalable, top-down approaches and the deeply personal nature of authentic belonging. A one-size-fits-all approach inevitably alienates diverse employees. Overly structured interventions or mandatory “fun” feel artificial and condescending, while a complete lack of organizational support leaves employees without the necessary resources to build connections organically. The core issue here is the inability to foster authentic, individualized belonging at scale without sacrificing genuine connection.<sup>6</sup>



### The Fix:

#### Empowered Co-Creation and Dynamic Responsiveness

Top-performing companies navigate this tightrope by empowering employees to co-create and drive their own belonging experiences through localized ownership and continuous, responsive feedback loops.<sup>7</sup> They establish employee-led **Belonging Councils or task forces**, giving employees real authority and resources to design and implement tailored solutions that resonate with their unique needs. They offer **modular, customizable belonging programs** — toolkits, frameworks, and curated resources — that teams and individuals can adapt to their specific contexts. Continuous, anonymous feedback via pulse surveys, sentiment analysis, and active listening sessions is critical. Managers are rigorously trained not just to administer these mechanisms, but to deeply understand and leverage insights to adjust approaches on an ongoing basis.

Leading organizations are:

- **Establishing employee-led Belonging Councils or task forces** at both enterprise and local levels, empowering employees to identify issues and implement tailored solutions

- **Offering modular, customizable belonging programs** — such as toolkits, workshops, and digital resources — that teams and individuals can adapt
- **Facilitating continuous feedback loops** through pulse surveys, anonymous suggestion boxes, and regular listening sessions focused on belonging and psychological safety
- **Training managers to use feedback mechanisms** to adjust approaches and recognize when individualized or less prescriptive solutions are needed
- **Encouraging affinity groups and employee networks** to co-create DEI strategies, ensuring authentic representation and buy-in

The winning strategy? Create modular belonging program designs that allow employees to select and sequence development activities based on individual needs while providing organizational guidance and support.

To promote co-creation and responsiveness, monitor efforts with continuous, anonymous feedback, sentiment analysis, and active listening sessions.

The evidence is clear; organizations that navigate these four roadblocks are gaining significant competitive advantages. They move beyond superficial “belonging programs” to deep, structural transformation — leading to enhanced employee attraction and engagement, supercharged collaboration and innovation, dramatically reduced turnover costs, and a customer base that’s more satisfied than ever.





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