

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Building Organizational Belonging at a Time of Separation

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Abstract

Howard Ross presented “Building Organizational Belonging at a Time of Separation” as a keynote address for the White Privilege Conference.

Keywords: unconscious bias, organizational belonging, culture, workplace connection, tribalism

Howard Ross is a lifelong social justice advocate and the founder of Cook Ross, Inc. He’s considered one of the world’s seminal thought leaders on identifying and addressing unconscious bias. Howard has delivered programs in 47 states and over 40 other countries to audiences including Fortune 500 companies and major institutions within healthcare, government, and nonprofit sectors. He wrote the *Washington Post* bestseller *Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives* (2014), and *Reinventing Diversity: Transforming Organizational Community to Strengthen People, Purpose and Performance* (2013). His book *Our Search for Belonging: How the Need for Connection Is Tearing Our Culture Apart* (2018) describes how to bridge the divide in our increasingly polarized society. For more information including the sources referred to in the piece contact him at howard.ross@cookross.com.

It is no secret to anyone that we are living in a time of almost unparalleled polarization. A look at the daily news or social media posts confirms that our need to connect with people like ourselves is increasingly placing us at odds with people we view as “the other.” Now, more than ever, this tendency is causing us to form unhealthy attitudes against those with different political, religious, and cultural viewpoints than our own. This leaves us strongly connected within our social organizations, and yet deeply divided as a society.

It is inevitable that some of this toxic energy comes with us to work every day. For many of us, our work environments put us among the most diverse people of any place in our lives. For that very reason, our workplaces can pose a challenge, but may also have the greatest potential for uniting us across differences.

Don't be afraid to open Pandora's Box

Workplaces tend to represent a microcosm of society where people will naturally gravitate toward and connect with their “tribes.” Companies can find it difficult to avoid the schisms that such segregation creates. In fact, *studies show* that workplace tension causes both general stress and an increased reticence to talk about controversial issues, even when the issues impact the work.

Many employers are hesitant to discuss these issues at work. As one executive said, “Won't we be opening Pandora's Box?” What we can easily forget, in our desire to be comfortable and avoid conflict, is that Pandora's Box is only a problem *because there is something in it*. That “something” will find a way to create challenges, whether we address it openly or not. However, when

companies ignore how the tribalism that's infected our society can spill over to the workplace, it can undermine the work environment and jeopardize the company's goals and objectives.

That's why companies need to take up the important work of addressing issues of diversity, culture, and finding common ground to create a culture of *belonging*.

New research in social, neurological, and cognitive sciences has shown us that the need to belong is fundamental to humans. We are social animals by design, and how we fit in to the groups of which we are a part is one of our prime drivers in life. That means creating environments in which all people feel a sense of connection.

Nurturing belonging, together

African American educator and community leader Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole once described *diversity* as being “invited to the dance,” and *inclusion* as “actually being allowed to dance.” Furthering the metaphor, we might say the *belonging* occurs when “they are actually playing some of my music!” In other words, not only are we included in another's culture, our needs, concerns, and ways of being are also part of the design of the culture itself.

How do we make this happen? Alongside the skills training that they provide, it's important that organizations give their employees training in interpersonal communication, inclusion, and addressing unconscious bias, as well as opportunities to constructively address their issues.

Some companies have instituted training and programs to unite staff across differences. Target and General Mills,

among others, for example, sponsor “courageous conversations” that allow employees with different backgrounds to discuss topical issues, such as race, transgender rights, the travel ban on predominantly Muslims countries, etc.

Kaiser Permanente’s former CEO, George Halvorson, established a successful model for organizational belonging by coaching executives and department heads to act more as team leaders than bosses. Every team was tasked with instituting improvements that promoted the organization’s established values, and they shared best practices throughout the organization. Halvorson explained, “When our organization fosters a culture of ‘us,’ we look out for each other in a different way. It can override our individual and societal belief systems.”

5 Ways to Create a Culture of Belonging

If your company is searching for approaches that can bridge differences and build and sustain a sense of connection, it will serve to explore these strategies:

1. **Communicate a clear vision and purpose.** Set your vision clearly, so that every employee understands and can articulate the company’s purpose and goals. Frequently communicating and reinforcing a powerful and positive organizational narrative around belonging and the value of diversity helps employees to internalize it. Each staff member can then see him or herself or themselves as part of a team, which helps to cancel out polarities caused by differing viewpoints.
2. **Develop systems and structures that promote diversity, inclusion, equity, accessibility, and**

belonging. Work to remove bias across administrative systems — from recruitment to hiring to onboarding to performance reviews and more. It is also important to recognize that diversity involves more than representation. It’s about cultivating open-minded thinking and connection.

3. **Create opportunities for dialogue on challenging subjects.** Create a safe space for conversations that involve different points of view, but make sure they happen as dialogues rather than debates. Set ground rules and ask everyone to move beyond their individual biases. Ask them to resist the tendency to convince others or to win the argument. Learning to listen actively to points of view with which you may not agree can translate to better employee-to-employee relations as well as employee-to-customer relations.
4. **Invite employees to share their own stories.** Sharing personal stories helps in promoting a sense of belonging — of being heard and seen. Sharing stories is a way to learn not only about each other personally, but also about other worldviews. Carve out time for employees to share their stories in meetings, in employee resource groups, in diversity education, or anyplace it may fit into the employee experience.
5. **Acknowledge everyone’s individual contribution.** Organizations function best as a unit when all associates have a stake in the organization’s success. It’s important that employees understand their individual roles in serving the greater

good. Does the person at the front desk understand how welcoming people can affect the experience that follows? Are the people who do administrative work and never see the customer acknowledged for the way they contribute to the customer experience? The acknowledgment of everyone's contribution to the mission keeps people focused on the big picture and sense of being part of a team.

The workplace may be our greatest hope for reestablishing connection between our different "tribes." Bridging divides in our organizational lives creates greater harmony and cooperation. Not only does engaging with different groups promote new insights, encourage innovation, and enhance business success, it also validates the humanity of people on all sides of the issues and, in doing so, can contribute to greater civility in our society.