A person with long hair

Description automatically generated with low confidence

Fitting In vs. Belonging

October 10, 2021

Well hello Friends! I hope you guys had an amazing week.

Today I want to talk about BELONGING. And specifically, we’re going to explore the difference between Fitting In vs. Belonging. And how to CREATE a Sense of Belonging during times when you might feel a bit like you’re in a situation or a workplace or whatever where you’re ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN.

This is a super interesting topic and a relevant one, because it affects every person on the planet, regardless of age, gender, education level, culture, country, income or whatever. This is an issue that affects all of us because the need to BELONG is deep-seated and universal.

Because humans are tribal by nature.

For our caveman ancestors, belonging to the tribe allowed us to travel with a pack which gave us access to shelter, food, and protection. It helped us survive the dangers of weather or animals or other outside threats.

And honestly, things haven’t changed much.

In today’s world, this need to belong is just as necessary. And today we have many tribes. Our family, friend group, cultural community, religious group, neighborhood, school, club, and of course, because this is a podcast about your career or business, it’s just as relevant when it comes to work groups.

Today it’s about more than survival. It’s about feeling connected. And it’s through that connection that we get the deeper feelings of purpose, inclusion, and meaning we all want and need.

BELONGING is about natural affiliation or familiarity. It’s about gravitating to or connecting into groups or people who share the same qualities, or goals or whatever that we share. And this natural affiliation is an important part of belonging because while it’s about feeling connected to others, it’s about doing that in a way that’s authentic. That’s about letting yourself be seen and known as WHO YOU REALLY ARE.

But ‘FITTING IN’ is an ENTIRELY different thing.

According to Brene Brown, who’s done some amazing work on this topic, “fitting in” is about assessing situations and groups and then twisting ourselves into a human pretzel so THEY will like us or accept us or whatever.

So, no natural affiliation there. FITTING IN is about MODIFYING OR CHANGING WHO WE PRESENT OURSELVES TO BE so that we can feel accepted by or connected to those around us.

And while on the surface that may seem fine, the truth is that presenting ourselves as something we are NOT takes energy. It takes real effort to consistently hide who you really are. And honestly, it’s soul sucking and exhausting.

Think back over your career or life when you joined a company or club or team or whatever and you instantly felt like you belonged. You just knew that these were your people. Think about how that felt. How effortless. How energizing.

Amazing, right?

And then I want you to think about a time when you felt like you didn’t ‘fit.’ When you didn’t feel welcome or included. Was it something overt? Like not being invited to lunch or happy hour. Or was it something more subtle like not being in on the shared joke or part of the office grapevine or whatever? And think how that made you feel.

NOT so amazing, right?

And think about how you responded to that. Did you change the way you acted or talked or dressed to mirror those around you?

To some extent this is normal. After all, we all want to fit in. And because we find ourselves in so many different situations – not only in our career but in our life – it’s natural that in some situations we’ll fit better than in others. So, we all present slightly different versions of ourselves, depending on the environment.

A simple way to looking at this is this. There’s who we naturally are with friends or family in our personal life, including our preferred ways of talking, acting and dressing. And then we might have a professional version of ourselves that’s maybe a bit more formal. Maybe without the foul language (if that’s something you do) or a different style of dress or whatever. Most of us have to do this to some extent or another.

And as long as the modifications or versions are more surface level, they don’t feel too draining, right? Just feels like something we would normally do. It’s okay to modify some aspects of who we are to be appropriate to the situation.

But the problem comes in when we pretend to be someone else entirely. When we feel like we need to pretend to have different values or beliefs or ways of treating people or whatever that are not aligned to what we TRULY think and feel is appropriate.

And this gets to the heart of what I wanted to talk about today. Because we’re going to probably encounter all kinds of situations in our careers that might make us FEEL like we need to change WHO WE ARE in order to fit in. And I want to talk about those a little bit and specially, what we can do about it.

But before we talk about what you can do about it, I want to talk a little bit about company cultures. Brene Brown describes two types cultures: Fitting In cultures and Big Tent Belonging cultures.

These cultures can exist at the overall company level, business unit level, functional area level or individual team level. Because the culture is created by the leader. So, for example, even in a fairly toxic company culture, a strong and values-driven leader can still create a relatively healthy environment within their team. Granted, the team will have to deal with the bigger norms going on around them but belonging to a team that functions healthfully can make a tough company culture much easier to deal with.

So let’s look at the first one – the **Fitting In** culture. That’s a culture where it’s about categorizing and bucketing people. It’s about liking and hating the same people based on whether you’re deemed “in” or “out”. She calls this Common Enemy Intimacy where the group builds cohesion by targeting, disparaging, and excluding individuals who they deem to be different. This might be about cultural biases like gender, ethnicity, age, education or whatever. But it’s also about ways of thinking.

There are many cultures where dissenting opinions aren’t tolerated. In these cultures, group think is rampant. Being a yes man or yes woman is the most important thing. It’s encouraged or even rewarded. And while this boss or company might SAY they want innovation or change, their actions tell a different story. Prized projects, promotions and rewards go to the YES people. Original thought is not welcome.

Inside these “fitting in” cultures, employees have a choice to make.

They need to decide whether they’ll conform and seek to “fit in” or not. And if they choose NOT to, they open themselves up to being labeled as “different” or “not one of us.”

And this is an important decision because in most Fitting In cultures, the “different” ones are usually not given the plum assignments, they’re not included in important meetings and often, they end up getting the poor performance reviews and might eventually end up on the list when it’s time for a down-sizing.

Have you ever been part of or observed a team or company where this Fitting In culture is alive and well? It’s not pretty. It’s very archaic. And it’s generally full of people who are miserable in their jobs, fearful of being cast out and potentially losing their jobs.

Fitting In cultures are toxic. Even to the people who are deemed a FIT. Because everyone sees what’s going on and those that are outside, feel miserable and scared of losing their job. And many of those that are INSIDE also feel miserable because they know what they’re a part of and they have to live with not only the implication of that on who THEY believe they are but they also have to witness the negative impact the culture has on those deemed to be OUTSIDE it.

On the other hand, **Big Tent Belonging** cultures are about questioning and creating. These places foster an environment of psychological safety, which Harvard describes it as A CLIMATE IN WHICH PEOPLE ARE COMFORTABLE EXPRESSING AND BEING THEMSELVES. According to Google, the single most predictive characteristic of successful teams is psychological safety.

In Big Tent Belonging cultures, people feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear or reprisal or embarrassment. They know they can speak their mind without being targeted. These cultures are about candor, where it’s okay to have healthy confrontation and where issues can be tackled head on. The Big Tent Belonging culture is only possible in organizations that value and practice honesty, authenticity, and differences and create a culture that is psychologically safe.

Most companies today talk like they know embracing differences and fostering a sense of belonging is important. They talk about bringing your authentic or whole self to work. But how many actually have done the work to make the internal cultural and leadership changes necessary to make sure the environment they creates is aligned with that?

Hopefully more and more will break down and reinvent their Fitting In cultures as time goes by. I personally think they’ll be forced into it. After all, the pace of change today is shockingly fast. Any company who wants to stay healthy and on pace with the rate of change is going to need ALL the fresh ideas and different perspectives they can get to fuel the innovation they need.

But here’s the thing. As individual employees, we sometimes find ourselves part of a team or a company where a Fitting In culture is alive and well. And unless we’re a leader inside that team or company, we can’t always impact the change we’d like to see. But that mean we have to just deal with it. Or even worse, change who WE in order to fit into something we don’t agree with.

As we always talk about on this podcast, we can’t always change our situation or circumstances, but we can change what we THINK, FEEL and DO about it. And as I promised at the beginning, I want to leave you with four things you can do when you find yourself in a FITTING IN situation from Brene Brown’s book, Braving the Wilderness.

1. **Connect to people you disagree with**. And here it’s important to not judge people from afar but to get to know them as people. People are hard to hate close up. In this scenario, it’s about having difficult discussions in a productive way. And that’s about doing more than agreeing to disagree. It’s about probing. Understanding. Asking questions like “tell me more.” And really listening to the answer. This helps YOU understand and the person sharing, to FEEL understood.
2. **Share joy and pain**. Here it’s about connecting on a deeper level during both good and bad times. The good times might be pleasant experiences like team outings, activities, social occasions. And this can’t be about what was called in one of the companies I used to work for “forced fun.” This hopefully builds a true connection on a foundation of joy that can help bridge build during a difficult conversation or experience that might come later.
3. **Speak up (nicely) when you disagree.** This means that when things come up that are difficult, we don’t stay silent. Nor do we just tow the party line. Instead, we respectfully speak up. We probe, discuss, and listen to understand. Because the truth is, most complicated topics are, well…complicated. And when we take a hard stand or stay silent, we miss learning about and addressing the nuances which is usually the pieces where we can find common ground or do some bridge building.
4. **Have a strong back and a soft front.** People with a strong sense of belonging exhibit a mix of opposing traits: a strong back and a soft front. Meaning they have principles and boundaries and aren’t afraid to speak up or how you who they really are – even when it’s hard. But they’re also compassionate and vulnerable and don’t wall off their emotions. This is at the core of what it means to be authentic to who you truly are.

The truth is that you can create your own sense of belonging by simply choosing to be you. To have the courage to stand alone. To not be afraid to rock the boat or express an opposing view. But of course, to do that in a way that is respectful, vulnerable, and compassionate.

If instead, we stay silent or try to modify who we REALLY are in order to FIT IN to someone else’s view of who we should be just so that we can BELONG to that tribe, it can’t work. Not over the long term anyway, because inside, we won’t feel like we truly belong anyway. Because we’ll know that we’re not BEING ourselves.

Fitting In never works. It’s exhausting. Demoralizing. Not sustainable.

Creating your own sense of belonging does. Because when you have the courage to stand alone. To have a strong back and a soft front, you can do the difficult work it takes to belong no matter what is going on around you.

Until next time, make it a great week my friends.