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Finding Home: A Journey of Belonging

Anne DarConte, CAE

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Finding Home: A Journey of Belonging

Anne DarConte, CAE

For the better part of the past year, I had been thinking a great deal about Belonging. What does it mean to belong (or not belong)? How does belonging impact your confidence and comfort in your professional and personal communities? As a member engagement professional who works daily with trade associations and professional societies, why are some members more satisfied than others?

My curiosity spurred a bit of online research on the subject. I quickly discovered that like most topics, lots is being said and written about Belonging. I was especially drawn to the five pillars of employee belonging as elaborated by David Bator, Managing Director of the Achievers Workforce Institute. These pillars are: Welcomed; Known; Included; Connected; and Supported.

Then, in January at AENC's Winter Conference, Cynthia Barnes presented a session about "Diversity as Power: How Differences Drive Association Excellence." Cynthia used the acronym DEIB, where "B" stands for Belonging. She struck a chord and now had my undivided attention. Suddenly, I saw Belonging in a new light, within the DEI context as well as aligned with David Bator's Belonging Model™ and five pillars.

Pillar 1 is Welcomed: Introduced to and incorporated within the organizational culture and community. For better or worse, first impressions shape judgements that once made are hard to shake. Sometimes a welcome is simply words that check off the box of membership to-do's, timed to say thanks for joining. Whether that expression is authentic or not will quickly become apparent. The odds of sustaining the warm and fuzzy honeymoon phase of membership (or employment) can only improve when first impressions are positive, respectful, and trustworthy, all values that shape organizational culture. We start off belonging, but what comes next can support or erode one's sense of belonging.

Pillar 2 is Known: Understood, motivated, and celebrated as an individual. Now that we have joined, we get to know our members, co-workers, neighbors, and peers, and they get to know us. As self-confident humans, we celebrate our individuality, and we desire to have those around us do the same. If uniqueness (or Diversity!) is valued by an organization, then all those in it sense fairness. They can ease into a level of comfort that reinforces their choice to join and begins to shape their desire to stay and engage. As Cynthia Barnes reminded us, it is critical to know your members and what they want.

Pillar 3 is Included: Valued and accepted without reservation. This is the phase when that new car smell of belonging may begin to wear off. We are no longer the new guy or gal that everyone has welcomed and expressed some curiosity about. I suggest this is the phase when the authenticity of the welcome begins to be tested. If a key characteristic of belonging is acceptance without reservation, then this infers a judgement-free environment. An atmosphere where differences are accepted, and inclusivity naturally flows from such acceptance. When organizational leaders, staff, and members model this behavior and reject anything less, then the organizational culture supports belonging. Projects, programs, initiatives, speakers, vendors and more reflect the diversity of the membership as well as its varied interests and values. When the match between member and organizational programs and benefits is right, these products

and events practically sell themselves, because people relate to them and want to be part of them.

Pillar 4 is Connected: Developing and maintaining relationships across a diverse population. Associations are about making connections for a shared purpose. While being connected comes easily for some people, it can be tortuous for others. Introverts may have greater challenges than extroverts at connecting to those in a group, and resultantly, may feel less like they belong. Those with a physical characteristic or speech impediment might feel less connected to those around them who don't seem to experience similar challenges. Here is a time where we see equity come into play. Regardless of the challenge any of us bring to any situation, we want to know that the experience and opportunity to participate are available and accessible to all. Then we must push beyond our comfort zone so we can make authentic and lasting connections. I believe Cynthia said, "do not close the door on yourself." I took this to mean don't give up and drop out. That's no solution. Think about what you could be missing.

Pillar 5 is Supported: Consistently and meaningfully nurtured and developed. While organizations can implement top notch programs and events, have a team of exceptional staff and volunteers, and be strategically resourced to attain mission and goals to support their members, no two members will respond identically. Support can come from memberships, family, friends, bosses, and co-workers as well as from our random daily encounters such as the dry cleaner or grocery store clerk or utility customer service representative.

I interpret being supported as equivalent to being home. Home is where we belong and can count on being supported, nurtured, and developed. Home is where the good, the bad, the ugly and everything in between collide and are accepted. Home is sanctuary. Home is not simply a location. Home is the amalgamation of the physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, financial, and social elements of our life experiences. And just as no two people have lived identical lives, no two people have the same experience of home, of how we get and provide support, with whom we receive and give support, and the peace of mind, heart and soul that is home.

We each travel a unique pathway to Belonging. From Welcomed to Supported, internal and external factors are at play. Some are controllable while others are not. Along the way we make choices. We attempt to find balance. We stumble, we get back up. And in the end, we find home. However we define home for ourselves, once there we belong.

From: Anne DarConte, CAE

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