



The Path to Well-being Starts with Belonging

Posted by Joe Fournier

This week, NASA mathematician and Presidential Medal of Freedom honoree Katherine Johnson passed away at age 101. Thanks to the book and movie *Hidden Figures*, many people know her courageous story, celebrate her talents and benefit from her vital contribution to the space program. Her experiences at NASA also require us to remember how important belonging and inclusion are in the workplace.



Hidden Figures introduced audiences to a group of African American women mathematicians who were at NASA during the heart of the civil rights movement during the 1960s. It is an authentic story of empowerment and overcoming biases; it is a tale of friendships, family and faith. Katherine was brilliant and passionate for her work, and yet, she lacked a “seat at the table” because of her race and gender. She asks why she can’t attend pre-flight meetings from which she (and all women) had been excluded. When Katherine joins in, she demonstrates her prowess by calculating flight trajectories in real time. This is one moment that underscores how belonging and inclusion are critical to making a company successful.

Beginning with Belonging

At the heart of both well-being and engagement is the universal need for every person to feel a sense of belonging in their company, work area and peer groups. Put simply, there is symbiotic relationship between total well-being and belonging. They must work together for employees to achieve total well-being. When people feel a sense of belonging, they can truly engage and embark on a personal and collective journey toward total well-being.

As humans, we are hardwired with a desire to belong to groups of other people—friends, families, co-workers, clubs, neighborhoods, interest groups and larger communities. The authors of a recent Harvard Business Review article, [“The Value of Belonging at Work”](#), noted that, “Our data showed that belonging is a close cousin to many related experiences: mattering, identification, and social connection. The unifying thread across these themes is that they all revolve around the sense of being accepted and included by those around you.” That said, how does a company steward a culture where workers experience a real sense of belonging? Moreover, how do companies establish well-being programs that foster inclusion such that all workers have the same opportunity to experience total well-being?

Fortunately, there are a few clear, actionable and measurable steps that companies and their leaders can take to create and steward environment where belonging and total well-being thrive. I believe three actions can lead to healthier, more productive and more engaged workers:

Ask Hard Questions and Take Action: Do we actively create a sense of belonging for *all* workers through our words and actions? Do our strategies, operations, programs and policies create an inclusive setting for *all* workers? Answering these questions can be difficult because they require a thoughtful, transparent, and even critical review. Think deeply about your organizational values, collective actions, personal routines and leadership behaviors and policies. Remember, there is no ideal answer or perfect solution—yet, there can be a universal commitment to belonging and inclusion.

Lead by Example: Cultures are shaped every day, every minute, at every interaction. Make no mistake; everyone is watching to see how leaders model the behaviors they talk about. Workers serve as mirrors of good (and bad) behavior at the senior level. It means that as managers, individually and collectively, we are responsible for creating positive and safe environments where people can thrive. When it comes to belonging and total well-being, the same principles hold true. It

is more than trainings, teambuilding exercises and talking points about the importance of respect, belonging and well-being. Employees must *see and feel* an authentic and enduring leadership commitment.

Involve Everyone: As we focus on belonging, it may seem obvious that *everyone* needs to be involved. However, it is easy to overlook many people – third shift crews, work from home colleagues, returning to the workforce hires, new parents, those who changed industries – anyone who doesn't hold a traditional (or majority) employee profile. Creating a sense of belonging means allowing every worker to "*come as they are*" and contribute their unique gifts to their work, co-workers and company.

In the Harvard Business Review article, the authors advised that "If workers feel like they belong, companies reap substantial bottom-line benefits." As an operating leader, I'm always interested in improving revenue and growth. As a business leader, human capital executive, veteran and dad, I'm even more interested in total well-being for *all*. Thank you, Katherine Johnson, for your contributions to humanity and a life well lived. Your legacy continues on as we shoot for the moon of total well-being.

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