

We Keep Building Culture. Why Are People Still Lonely at Work?

A conversation about belonging, relationships, leadership, and the culture people actually experience.

Where is connection in our organization currently dependent upon luck?

Use this conversation to examine what makes meaningful connection more - or less - likely in everyday work.

1 WHERE MIGHT PROXIMITY BE MISTAKEN FOR BELONGING?

Where are people physically or digitally together without necessarily feeling known, included, trusted, or connected?

2 WHAT DOES AN ORDINARY MONDAY TEACH?

After the retreat, event, values exercise, or office day, what do everyday routines teach people about whether they matter?

3 WHERE DOES CONNECTION EMERGE FROM THE WORK?

What parts of the work create genuine interdependence, shared problem solving, reciprocal help, and reasons to rely on one another?

4 HOW GOOD ARE OUR CONVERSATIONS?

Do leaders and colleagues mostly exchange information, or do people have space to ask, clarify, disagree, admit uncertainty, and be heard?

5 WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO BECOME PERIPHERAL?

Which roles, locations, career stages, identities, or work arrangements make it easier for someone to become socially or professionally invisible?

6 WHAT IS LEADERSHIP HERE TO BUILD?

Which routines, relationships, access points, and expectations could make belonging less accidental and connection more reliable?

BEFORE YOU LEAVE

One place where connection is too dependent on luck

One everyday routine we could redesign relationally

One person or group whose experience we need to understand better

Proximity is not belonging.

Audit the Relational Experience.

A 20-minute practice for examining how belonging is built - or eroded - in everyday work.

Do not begin with culture activities. Begin with the experience of the work.

1 WHO NOTICES?

If someone goes quiet, struggles, succeeds, has a new idea, or needs help - does anyone reliably notice?

2 WHO NEEDS WHOM?

Does the work create meaningful interdependence, or can people perform indefinitely beside one another?

3 WHERE DO REAL CONVERSATIONS HAPPEN?

Where can people ask, clarify, disagree, admit uncertainty, and be heard - not just receive information?

4 WHO GETS INCLUDED?

Who receives information, contributes before decisions, gets invited into interesting work, or remains peripheral?

5 WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMEONE REACHES OUT?

Is help available? Does asking create connection - or expose vulnerability without support?

6 WHAT DOES MONDAY TEACH?

After the retreat, staff event, recognition activity, or office day, what do ordinary routines say about the real culture?

THE QUESTION TO LEAVE WITH

Where is connection currently dependent upon luck?

Choose one routine to redesign so belonging is more likely by design, not by accident.

Culture is what people repeatedly experience.

PROXIMITY $\neq$ BELONGING



PROXIMITY

Being in the same place



In the same building



In the same meeting



On the same Teams call



At the same event



BELONGING

Feeling connected and valued



Known



Included



Trusted



Able to contribute



Able to ask for help



Connected to others and the work

Being together and belonging together are not the same thing.



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Better futures—for all.

CULTURE IS EXPERIENCED

*People don't experience culture through the values on the wall.
They interpret it through what repeatedly happens around them.*



WHAT WE SAY



Values



Mission



Policies



Culture
statements



WHAT PEOPLE EXPERIENCE



Who gets
heard?



Who gets
trusted?



Who gets
help?



Who gets
included?



Who gets
information?



Whose
contribution
matters?



WHAT PEOPLE LEARN

*"This is what
really matters here."*



Every decision
teaches.



Every interaction
shapes meaning.



Everyday culture
builds belonging—
or erodes it.



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People. Purpose. Possibility.
That's culture in action.

Why Are People Still Lonely at Work?

Five findings from current research on workplace loneliness, connection, leadership, and culture

Current research treats workplace loneliness as more than a remote-work or proximity problem. Loneliness reflects a mismatch between the relationships people have and the relationships they need. Relational quality, leadership, work design, peer connection, information sharing, and the culture people experience all matter.

1

Loneliness is not the same thing as being alone.

A systematic review and meta-analysis found workplace loneliness associated with lower job performance and satisfaction, poorer worker-manager relationships, and greater burnout. The construct is relational and subjective, not simply physical isolation.

Source: Bryan et al. (2024)

2

Remote work creates both resources and risks.

A meta-analysis found two opposing pathways associated with remote-work intensity: greater autonomy and greater isolation. Changing location alone does not resolve the relational problem.

Source: Gajendran et al. (2024)

3

Leadership and conversation quality matter.

Empowering leadership was associated with lower workplace loneliness, with role-breadth self-efficacy and the quality of leader-member conversations playing important roles.

Source: Hou & Cai (2024)

4

Peer relationships cannot be replaced by brand identification.

High-quality team-member relationships were associated with less workplace loneliness. Identification with the organization did not substitute for the quality of peer relationships in the way researchers hypothesized.

Source: LaBella & van Knippenberg (2024)

5

Culture is learned from repeated experience.

Current culture-climate scholarship emphasizes what people infer from organizational decisions, actions, practices, norms, and priorities - not only the values an organization formally espouses.

Source: Schneider et al. (2026)

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEADERS

Stop using attendance as a proxy for belonging.

Being in the building, meeting, call, or event tells us little about whether relationships meet people's needs.

Design connection into the work.

Shared problem solving, reciprocal help, mentoring, onboarding, and meaningful interdependence create legitimate reasons to relate.

Improve conversation quality, not just frequency.

More messages and meetings do not necessarily create more trust, voice, or understanding.

Look for the periphery.

Newcomers, remote staff, highly independent roles, senior leaders, and people across locations may need different relational supports.

Treat loneliness as organizational information.

Persistent disconnection may signal problems in work design, leadership, inclusion, information flow, or everyday culture.

Proximity is not belonging.

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Build Relational Infrastructure - Not Just Culture Activities.

Belonging becomes more reliable when everyday work repeatedly gives people reasons and permission to connect.

BUILD INTO THE WORK

- Meaningful one-to-one conversations.
- Shared problem solving and reciprocal help.
- Onboarding that creates real relationships, not only information transfer.
- Mentoring and peer support.
- Access to information and opportunities before decisions are final.
- Work that makes people useful to one another.

WATCH FOR THE SUBSTITUTE

- More office days without better relationships.
- More communication without better conversation.
- Social events carrying the relational weight of the whole culture.
- Values campaigns that daily routines contradict.
- Belonging initiatives that place responsibility back on lonely employees.
- Organizational loyalty being mistaken for human connection.

ONE USEFUL LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

Ask two story questions: Tell me about a time you really felt you belonged here. Then: Tell me about a time you felt alone here - even though you were surrounded by colleagues. Listen for the routines, relationships, decisions, and moments that make connection more or less likely.

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