Building Inclusion and Belonging with Whistle

A guide to inclusive cultures and an empowered workforce

Introduction

During WW II, The U.S. army was still segregated, and only whites served in combat roles. When there were not enough white men, General Dwight Eisenhower recruited black volunteers to join the ranks. Sociologist Samuel Stouffer, the head of the Army's Information and Education Division's Research Branch, found that white soldiers who had been stationed alongside black soldiers held more positive attitudes towards black soldiers, including a greater willingness to work with them in the future. He concluded that **working alongside one another as equals in combat led white soldiers to begin seeing black soldiers as "ingroup members" as opposed to having their previous "us vs. them" mindset.** This finding was echoed again in the famous Robbers' Cave studies where feuding groups of campers only developed real, voluntary friendships when they were forced to work together on common goals.

When all the science indicates that bringing people together is more effective than telling people how to behave, why are companies still investing so much money on training and so little on programs to build real connection?

This paper looks at new ways to build a sense of inclusion and belonging in the modern workplace and explains why they are more effective than training at increasing belonging and business success.

Psychological Safety

In 1999, Organizational Psychologist Amy Edmondson wrote a groundbreaking article highlighting the importance of psychological safety in the workplace. She defined psychological safety as, "A shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks" and presented evidence that teams higher in psychological safety perform better.

Since then, evidence has accumulated that psychological safety is a critical component of workplace belonging and of corporate success. Numerous studies have found that companies benefit from diversity of thought, and groups of people with different life experiences are better able to recognize problems and offer up creative solutions than groups with similar life experiences.

Teams with high degrees of psychological safety demonstrate higher levels of performance and lower levels of interpersonal conflict. They also demonstrate higher levels of learning behavior[1] and task performance. Google concluded, after an internal study, that **psychological safety was the single best predictor of high performing teams.**

Often, however, some team members don't feel comfortable speaking up, are afraid to share their perspective, raise concerns, or ask challenging questions. They might avoid suggesting new and innovative ideas because of concern about repercussions. According to a 2019 Gallup poll, just 3 out of 10 employees strongly agreed that their opinions count at work.

Members of social identity groups who are often marginalized by society can find it especially challenging to feel high levels of psychological safety in the workplace. For example, a recent survey from Catalyst found nearly half of female business leaders face challenges speaking up in virtual meetings, and 20% reported feeling overlooked or ignored during video calls. Those who are members of historically underrepresented groups may feel this reality even more keenly.

1. Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Colleagues who feel their work environment is psychologically safe are more willing to engage in behaviors that contribute to greater orga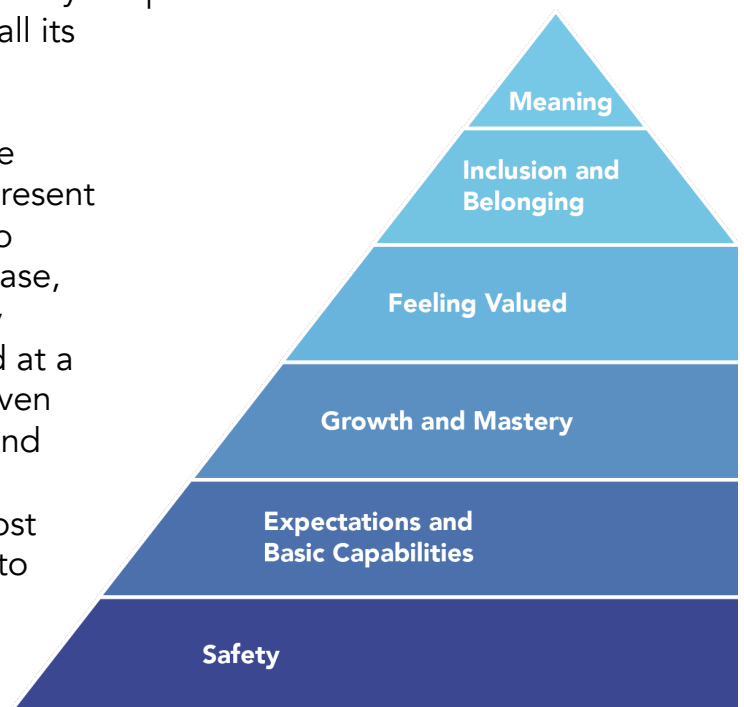nizational innovation — like speaking up, asking questions, sharing unspoken reservations, and respectfully disagreeing. This yields a more robust, dynamic, innovative, and inclusive organizational culture.

When psychological safety at work is low and people are uncomfortable raising concerns, initiatives that aren't working move forward anyway, the organization isn't equipped to prevent failure, and people begin to disengage. When employees aren't fully committed to shared organizational success, ideas aren't stress-tested, processes aren't optimized, solutions aren't vetted, and the enterprise has lost an opportunity to leverage the contributions of all its talent.

Whistle developed the Employee Hierarchy of Needs (*right*) to represent what employees need in order to thrive in their workplace. At its base, the eHON identifies two primary needs, which must be addressed at a minimal level to retain staff for even short periods of time: "Safety" and "Clear Expectations and Tools". These two things provide the most basic support that people need to

show up and do their job at all. Once those are minimally satisfied, a company can focus on "Growth and Mastery" as an important element of staff development.

The most critical aspects of long-term staff retention and productivity are the next ones up:"Feeling Valued" and "A Sense of Inclusion and Belonging". These are both interpersonal by nature, and organizations vary in how much they invest in them. This makes them a good indicator to customers and employees of what a company's culture and values are. These two elements are also the most important in creating a work environment supporting diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. They also serve as the psychological safety foundation required for high corporate performance.

Pyramid levels, top to bottom:
- Meaning
- Inclusion and Belonging
- Feeling Valued
- Growth and Mastery
- Expectations and Basic Capabilities
- Safety

It's heartening to see companies investing so heavily in workplace equity and belonging. The problem, however, is that unconscious bias training- while well intentioned - just does not work.

Barriers to Inclusion and Belonging

Two critical aspects impacting DEI&B include unconscious bias and company culture. These are notoriously difficult to identify and minimize.

▪ Unconscious biases: Many studies have documented biases that are common within organizations that lead to differential and unfair treatment. This includes documented biases in hiring decisions (especially for top level roles), salary negotiations, decisions about promotions, and the content of performance evaluations. Subtle biases, such as a general discomfort in approaching someone who is different, can also chip away at inclusion and belonging.

▪ Company culture: Explicit and implicit preferences toward religious beliefs, political positions, socio-economic strata and many other forms of diversity can repel candidates of differing beliefs or lifestyles as well as "majority" people who truly value diversity. Customers are also showing an increased interest in choosing brands that truly live into DEI&B

In order to combat scenarios where bias or culture is creating challenges, companies turn to change management. Traditional change management efforts often require entire companies to attend long training sessions, engage in mock-activities or other exercises. In 2020, companies spent $7.5B on such efforts, and this number is expected to double by 2026. It's heartening to see companies investing so heavily in workplace equity and belonging. The problem, however, is that unconscious bias training- while well intentioned - just does not work. While people may answer quiz questions correctly in the short term, we do not see long-term changes in behaviors that matter. And, when we do, those effects are often in the opposite direction of what's intended, due to push-back of majority group members.

In hindsight, this is not surprising. Telling people to identify something that is implicit (which is by its very definition impossible to consciously identify) and override a lifelong pattern of assumptions and behaviors that they are unaware of is a pretty serious uphill battle.

Poor Returns on the Usual Diversity Programs

The three most popular interventions make firms less diverse, not more, because managers resist strong-arming. For instance, testing job applicants hurts women and minorities—but not because they perform poorly. Hiring managers don't always test everyone (white men often get a pass)and don't interpret results consistently.

% change over five years in representation among managers

Type of program	White		Black		Hispanic		Asian	
	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN
Mandatory diversity training				−9.2			−4.5	−5.4
Job tests		−3.8	−10.2	−9.2	−6.7	−8.8		−9.3
Grievance systems		−2.7	−7.3	−4.8		−4.7	−11.3	−4.1

Note: Gray indicates no statistical certainty of a program's effect.

Source: Authors' study of 829 midsize and large U.S. firms. The analysis isolated the effects of diversity programs from everything else going on in the companies and in the economy.

▽ HBR

Source: Harvard Business Review

What does move the needle?

What is needed are changes to policies and everyday experiences that will lead to a more organically inclusive workforce. These initiatives should inform managers and employees of core areas of bias and what the known best practices are for preventing them. But more importantly, they should directly facilitate the kinds of behaviors we want to see, such as building relationships with and partnering with others who are different. The Whistle platform dramatically helps address these challenges with an innovative approach.

Capital, or money, is the central defining element of power. Those with the money have the power. While budgets are centralized in the hands of the majority, it will continue to be exceptionally difficult to bring about change. However, when a company decentralizes, or democratizes, capital into the hands of the organization, magic can happen. This is what Whistle enables. The Whistle platform does not require massive change management efforts because Whistle does not require executives to change processes. Instead, Whistle changes the locus of power.

With Whistle, companies can push budgets out to the edge of the company: to the front-line managers and all the way to each and every staff member. This does not require additional budget. Companies spend around $750 per people manager per month on employee perks such as birthday cakes and happy hours (see Whistle research on corporate perks). Using the same funds, companies can create an environment where every staff member is empowered with a budget. Every employee that might have felt marginalized, who might have been uncomfortable voicing an interest, who might have felt self-conscious about suggesting an activity, suddenly is provided the tool, and expectation, along with everyone else, to create the culture of the company, together.

The Whistle approach of increasing people's social interaction and collaboration is not only a more effective approach, but it's less costly. **Companies can incorporate diversity efforts into existing budgets (e.g., culture or team building) rather than having to buy or create an entirely new series of training, which can be very costly in terms of time and money.**

The ways companies live into DEI&B using Whistle are endless. Here are a few examples:

Shift funds and authority from executive HR to front-line managers.

For example, a client pre-approved a list of activities that team leaders could use as necessary such as buying flowers for bereavement or a bottle of wine in celebration. These activities were always approved, but previously required a painful sign off process, which many managers avoided out of fear of being denied.

Shift funds being spent on a team by the manager (for typical "team building activities") to each staff member, with the direction to spend the money on the team.

A recent client pushed team-building budgets out to all staff. Team members came up with fantastic ideas including chocolate tasting, taking a new (diverse) colleague to lunch, bringing in Vietnamese food to share and many more.

Distribute corporate charity dollars from a single check written to the United Way out to each team member.

A Whistle client re-purposes the $100,000 check they used to write to the United Way and now distributes those same funds to each colleague. Staff are asked to donate the money to an organization meaningful to them. Not a single person has donated to the United Way, but hundreds of small organizations, including the school PTA, community groups and local churches have received funds. Now, the culture of that organization is the culmination of everyone's values.

Direct contact with people who are different from us has a much larger impact on reducing implicit biases than does any implicit bias training.

Social Psychological research has shown for decades that the most effective ways to turn diverse "outgroup" members into an inclusive team of "ingroup" members is to increase everyday contact, and to create shared "superordinate" goals that they can only achieve by working together. **Direct contact with people who are different from us has a much larger impact on reducing implicit biases than does any implicit bias training.** It creates an intrinsic motivation to include others, which carries over to behavior naturally and voluntarily. Forcing people to attend diversity training and punishing them for making choices that they believe are correct alienates leaders and has a rebound effect that can leave things worse than when you started.

The best approach is to fuel people's intrinsic motivation to socialize and collaborate with others who are different from them. DEI&B initiatives that lean into and enable people's existing desires in ways that provide personal autonomy are much more effective than those that force a one-size-fits all training. Whistle supports the creation of programs and experiences that lead diverse groups of people to want to work with and support one another.

Clearly, Whistle is not the complete answer to DEI&B. For example, additional efforts are needed to hire a more diverse workplace in the first place. However, **Whistle provides a novel and evidence-based way to support inclusion and belonging once people are in the door**. And we can help companies make large steps in a short period of time with little to no extra expense.

Authors

Drew Carter
Chief Executive Officer

Drew brings a combination of executive leadership, business strategy, technical software experience and data analytics to his work. He has worked in large and small corporations, worked in industry building software products enjoyed by millions and served as a consultant helping companies better compete in the digital age. Throughout his career he has thread a keen understanding of commercial strategy with contemporary technology to deliver hundreds of millions of dollars of incremental value.

Drew@weWhistle.com

Laurel Newman
Science Advisor

Laurel is a behavioral scientist who specializes in creating interventions that help companies to improve the experiences and change the behaviors of their customers and employees. Her experience as a Psychology Professor turned Applied Behavioral Scientist for a B2B company provides her unique insight into the variety of forces that impact people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

Laurel@weWhistle.com

About Whistle

Whistle helps companies create employee loyalty. From culture building budgets to training people managers, to be better people managers – the Whistle platform integrates the key elements that create employee loyalty, and better business outcomes.
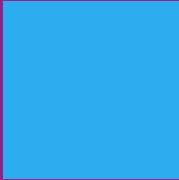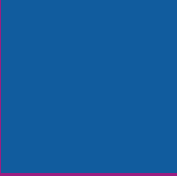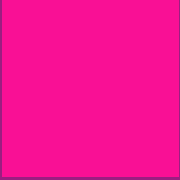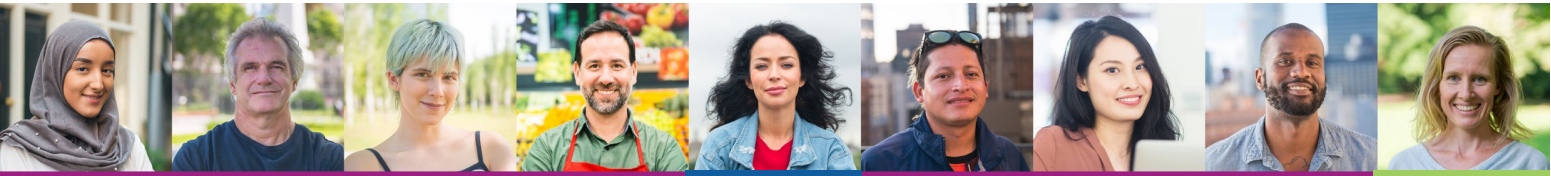
Simple. Easy. Just whistle.
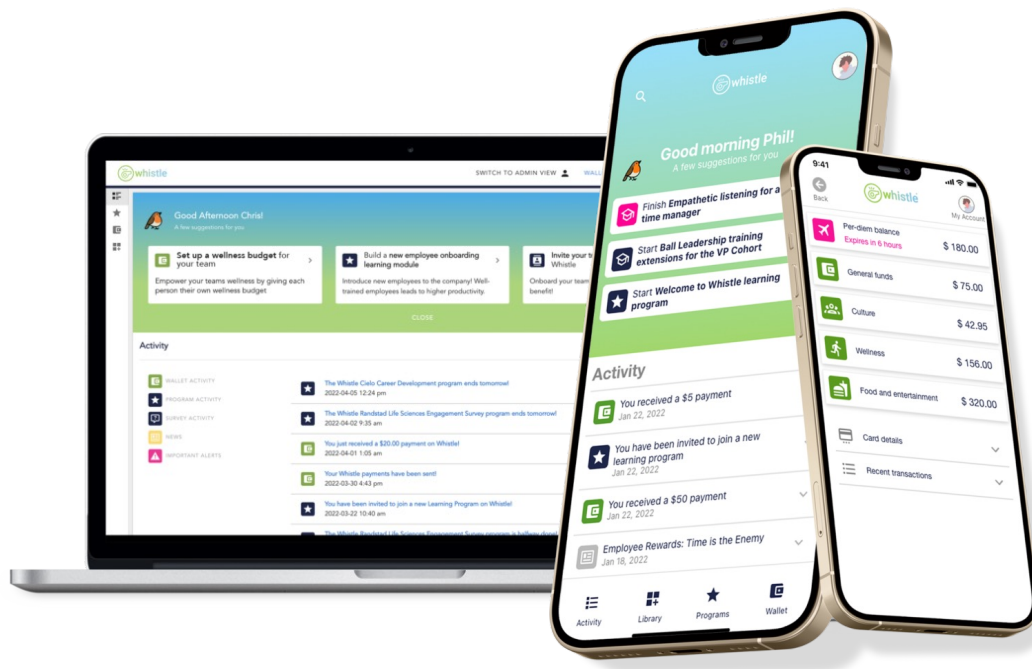
Whistle payments can be integrated into any workflow or technology with the **Whistle Payments API. Adding budgets, rewards and incentives has never been easier!**

Want to learn more?

Or contact us to learn more and how we can help improve your employee loyalty.

www.weWhistle.com

Whistle Systems Inc.
February 2023