



Lydia Shadrach-Razzino

Partner and Co-head of the Corporate/M&A Practice
Baker McKenzie Johannesburg



From onliness to belonging: the DE&I journey

Diversity, equity, inclusion and (my new favourite) belonging - these buzzwords have become commonplace in corporate language and woke culture. But are we focusing on them because it is politically correct to do so and because we must be seen to be doing the right thing, or is it for the purpose of real, impactful change? In other words, are we doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do, however complex and difficult that may be? I challenge you to ponder that honestly.

Let's consider what these words mean on a human level. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, **diversity** is the practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds. In the workplace, I have learnt that it means the inclusion of individuals from different genders, races, sexual orientations, sexual identities, ages, physical and neurological abilities, as well as different educational backgrounds. **Equity** is the quality of being fair and impartial, and in the workplace, this means that each of these diverse employees is treated on a fair and just basis, to the exclusion of conscious and unconscious biases. **Inclusion** is the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who would otherwise be excluded or marginalised, such as those who have physical or intellectual disabilities and members of other minority groups. In the workplace, it is about ensuring that every employee, including those who represent diverse groups, is given the same opportunities. To ensure meaningful

impact, these three components must work together: A diverse group of employees must be treated fairly and impartially and included in the workplace (at all levels) in a manner that provides each one of them with equal opportunities. **Belonging** is an affinity for a place or situation. The test for belonging measures whether these DE&I efforts have been successful in affording a person that affinity. So, to assess if our DEI policies are working, the question we really need to answer in the affirmative is: do I feel like I belong here? Once an employee feels like they belong, they become part of the team in a truly authentic way.

Answering these questions draws from our upbringing and our sense of home, and links where we came from to where we are and where we are going. Where did I first feel a sense of belonging? And is my background very different from that of my colleagues? Is this difference acknowledged and accepted, or do I somehow find myself not mentioning it to fit in?

Employees should feel a sense of belonging within an organisation regardless of their background. I was born and raised in Chatsworth and schooled at public schools near Durban in KwaZulu Natal, a far cry from the bustling streets of global cities like London and New York. The journey from my childhood environment to the big corporate world in Johannesburg, and other major African and global cities in the M&A context of my work has been an interesting and challenging one. To undertake the journey at all, the elements of diversity, inclusion and equity had to be present before my career even started. In the early stages of my career, I certainly never felt a sense of belonging; in fact, it was quite the

opposite. I distinctly felt like I did not belong and that I was crashing the party. I have, however, been fortunate enough to make my space in this world and find that affinity. Now, I feel a responsibility to help others feel like they belong as well.

Feeling a sense of true belonging is the holy grail of happiness in the workplace. It is different from merely fitting in, which requires changing oneself to be accepted by others. Belonging means we get to show up as our whole, full and true selves, all equally proud of our journeys to get to this shared destination or shared points in our unique journeys in the corporate space. Each journey is unique and therefore does not present equal challenges. People born in underprivileged areas will automatically face obstacles that others can't even fathom. To encourage a sense of true belonging for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who have undertaken journeys where inequity has been accepted as the norm will take real effort, and it will test the true strength and impact of DEI policies. For the underprivileged, feeling a sense of belonging in the world of elite university graduates with private school educations is incredibly difficult to attain. How does one feel an affinity for a space that is so far from what they know? It is, however, something that we must ensure is achievable for every child from a township and its many local and global equivalents.

Facing racial and gender differences in the context of an underprivileged background requires DEI policies that are more than tick-box exercises or cool buzzwords that grab attention and seek to show that we have a conscience or are woke. Instead, such policies should focus wholeheartedly on instilling a

sense of belonging in every employee.

There are also other types of diversity that deserve equal attention. For example, one element of diversity that has historically been ignored but has recently received attention is neurodiversity, which fascinates me personally. Neurodiversity is the subject of many new studies, and rightly so. For too long, neurologically diverse employees have felt the need to mask their symptoms. Now, we are discovering that many of our team members are neurodiverse, and therein lies strength. Each of us has our own skills and talents, and neurodiverse employees are often acknowledged for their role in significantly boosting team creativity and productivity. Are we doing enough to ensure neurodiverse employees feel like they belong and that their needs and workplace requirements are being met? Do we even know that there are neurodiverse people in our teams, or are we comfortable letting them continue to mask, thereby aiding our own comfort levels? Do they feel comfortable revealing their neurodiversity to their colleagues?

In Harvard Health Publishing, Nicole Baumer and Julia Frueh defined neurodiversity as "the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in different ways; there is no one 'right' way of thinking, learning and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits." This includes those with conditions such as autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD. Female autism is also a real thing, which we have only begun to scratch the surface of. Around 15–20% of the global population is neurodivergent.

The benefits of having a neurodivergent workforce include that neurodiverse employees are found to be highly sensitive and high achievers, characteristics that lead to great potential for success. For their potential to be reached, they need an inclusive environment that caters to and adjusts to their needs while still providing them with the same opportunities as their peers. Embracing this form of diversity has been shown to lead to

competitive advancements through innovation and efficiency. JP Morgan Chase's Autism at Work initiative, for example, revealed that neurodiverse employees made fewer errors at work and were 90–140% more productive than their neurotypical counterparts.

Further, we must also explore what diversity means to LGBTQ+ communities and what they need to feel included in the workplace. According to a study by Gruber, Mahowald and Halpin - The State of the LGBTQ Community in 2020: A National Public Opinion Study, 35% of LGBTQ+ Americans said their ability to be hired was negatively affected to a moderate or significant degree in that past year due to discrimination, and 53% of transgender individuals said moderate to severe discrimination affected their capacity to be hired.

According to research by McKinsey, LGBTQ+ employees experience a feeling called "onliness," which means being the only one on a team or in a meeting with their gender identity, orientation, or race. McKinsey notes that if employees feel onliness across multiple dimensions, they face even more pressure.

For example, the study shows that LGBTQ+ women of colour are eight times more likely than straight white men to report onliness. This concept of onliness is not limited to LGBTQ+. It is a feeling commonly experienced by marginalised groups but often difficult to express. I find this word "onliness" captures a feeling and perfectly describes how many of us from marginalised groups and/or disadvantaged backgrounds have felt or feel from time to time.

None of us wants to feel that we are the only ones, and each of us requires different considerations to feel that we belong in the workplace. Are we doing everything we can to cater to these differences so that we can feel the full impact of a strong, happy, diverse team of employees? How much more successful could we all be as a collective if we accepted each other's weaknesses, shortcomings, strengths and neurodiversities and fully drew on the strengths of our differences? There is plenty of proof in the numbers (for those who need hard numbers). Forbes shows that truly inclusive teams make better decisions up to 87% of the time and make decisions two times faster in half of the meetings. Further, decisions made and executed by diverse teams delivered 60% better results.

With the challenges the world faces now, we need this mix, this confluence of ideas that come from different upbringings, educations, backgrounds, orientations and thought processes. If we get it right and are able to move the feelings of onliness and masking to belonging, imagine the world that will rise out of that energy.

What will you do today to ensure you take your rightful place, own your differences as strengths and belong in your world? More importantly, what will you do to make others feel like they belong in your world and, equally, that we all belong in this world we all inhabit?

Discovering our differences, whether they are visible or masked, is cause for celebration. These differences mean our teams will be stronger, faster, more innovative and much more productive. Embracing these differences is how we grow stronger, and cherishing these differences in ourselves and in each other is how we find belonging together.

The power to make these changes in our spaces lies in each of us, and as James Clear tells us in his book *Atomic Habits*, small differences and changes applied consistently can lead to phenomenal outcomes. Let's all try. 🏃