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A Sense of Belonging

How much does belonging matter when it comes to the workplace? What happens when employees don't feel like they fully belong? I gained insights into these questions on a recent vacation.

My family and I decided to take a day trip to a well known celebrity-studded town in the Colorado mountains, full of high priced stores where t-shirts go for more than my weekly grocery bill. We set out on foot to explore the town, stopping first to visit a turn of the century hotel that was now temporary digs for luminaries and millionaires alike. The lobby was decorated in Victorian plush and true to form, some famous person (but not famous enough for someone who doesn't watch mainstream television or go to current movies to recognize) was being interviewed in the lobby. From there, my family found other things to amuse us--a great local park for the kids, a beautifully restored opera house for my husband the history buff, and rows of women's clothing boutiques for me. But with each store I went into, my inferiority complex was quietly growing, knowing that I could only window shop and playing ever so loudly the tourist in my tennis shoes and denim overalls.

Finally, our family reconvened at a local coffee shop, which had great fruit smoothies but no restroom. My husband had already discovered that the restroom was next door, inside a hair salon, where the receptionist held the key. I decided to use the facilities after my husband explained the roundabout arrangement, with one of my sons in tow. When I entered the salon and asked for the key, the receptionist pointed to the key on the wall and at the same time, one of the stylists declared loudly, "You know, there are public restrooms across the way!" It was as if the Universe had yelled out, "YOU DON'T BELONG! DON'T EVEN TRY TO FAKE IT." Or so it seemed. City Hall across the street was more than happy to accommodate two tourists needing a place to pee.

I returned to the coffee shop, incensed and spouting off to my husband about the whole incident. Thoughts raced through my head—"Who were they to treat me this way? I never wanted to be here in the first place!" My family and I got up to return to our car when we noticed a thrift shop next door to the coffee shop. A thrift shop, across the street from Gucci and Louis Vuitton? I could scarcely believe my eyes. The Universe was trying to tell me something. My heart started racing, for this was familiar territory, and the fellow bargain hunters were people I knew.

Suddenly, my spirits were lifted and my energy surged. I entered and talked with the other shoppers. I made eye contact with the elderly volunteer clerk and patiently waited while she tried to remember the ten dollar bill I gave her for a \$6 purchase. I was in my element. I belonged.

Silly as this experience might seem, it gave me insight into what it feels like not to belong. And the toll it takes. So extrapolating to the workplace, here's what I learned:

- **Feeling like you belong matters.** It can turn a crummy experience into a great one.
- **When you feel "out of place", your own thoughts can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy.** The "I knew I wasn't good enough, smart enough, competent enough" devils start to do their black magic and lo and behold, you find you really aren't good enough, smart enough or competent enough. What we believe, we manifest.
- **When you feel a sense of belonging, it frees up tremendous energy to be yourself and to pursue what you really enjoy.** The energy expended towards "fitting in" gets redirected to productive uses that benefit the individual as well as the company. Don't be surprised if employees become cheerful, courteous, and compassionate where you once saw only "attitude".

The workplace should be a place where anyone who has something to contribute also feels like they belong. In making it so, we create riches in the workplace everyday that money can't buy.

And as for my day trip to that mountain town with the rarified air, my husband and I both concluded that we wouldn't live there even if we had the money. It just wouldn't be worth it...

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