

*Opinion*   *Opinion*

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## THE FIVE STEPS TO BELONGING AT WORK & WHY IT MATTERS



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By  
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FIONA ROBERTSON (MAIN PHOTO) IS THE FORMER HEAD OF CULTURE FOR THE NATIONAL AUSTRALIA BANK AND A SOUGHT-AFTER CULTURE CHANGE AND LEADERSHIP SPEAKER, FACILITATOR, COACH AND AUTHOR OF THE BOOK *RULES OF BELONGING – CHANGE YOUR ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE, DELIGHT YOUR PEOPLE AND TURBO-CHARGE YOUR RESULTS*. IN THIS GUEST POST, ROBERTSON GIVES EXPERT TIPS ON HOW TO BRING REAL CHANGE TO AN ORAGNISATION WITHOUT UPSETTING ITS APPLE CART...

Have you ever wondered why so many change efforts fail? This is why. Maslow was wrong.

Humans want to belong. In fact, humans want to belong so strongly that they will do almost anything to ensure they do. Recent research by Professor Mathew Lieberman, who heads the Social Cognitive Neuroscience Lab at UCLA's Department of Psychology, Psychiatry and Biobehavioural Science, suggests that Maslow's celebrated hierarchy of needs is wrong. It turns out that belonging is actually more important to human beings than food, water or shelter. How can this be true? Because in a social species, of which humans are the ultimate example, belonging to a group is a precondition that ensured we received food, water and shelter in our distant past – and our brains haven't changed for 80,000 years.

So we are hard-wired to make sure we do what we need to do to belong. As far as our brains are concerned, this is interpreted as literally a matter of life or death, even if food, water and shelter are abundant. And most people have no idea this is going on.

### We behave our way to belonging – there are five steps

When we join a new group or organisation, first we watch. I call this the 'examine' phase (step 1). We watch what others do and say, what they wear, what time they arrive and leave, how they speak in meetings, the kind of work outputs they produce, what they say in front of senior people, how they lead their teams and who they eat lunch with. The better we are at noticing the behaviours of others, the more chance we have of working out which behaviours are important.

After we've watched others for a while, we decide which of their behaviours gains them more status and belonging and which gains them less. I call this the 'evaluate' phase (step 2). We see how those with power react to the behaviours we've been watching. When someone arrives at 7 am do the people who matter admire their hard work and dedication or do they talk about what a 'try-hard' that person is and how neglected their family must be?

When we've seen enough of a certain behaviour to believe that it will be met with approval and will enhance our status and belonging, we try it out ourselves. I call this the 'experiment' phase (step 3). We try it and see what happens. In a culture where a 7 am start gains the respect of the right people, we start arriving earlier and earlier.

If a behaviour we adopt is met with the approval and belonging we hoped for, we will keep doing that particular behaviour. I call this the ‘embrace’ phase (step 4). This is where we slowly adopt a set of behaviours as our own that makes us blend in with the norms of the group we have joined. We start to seem more like ‘one of us’ instead of ‘one of them’ and feel a stronger and stronger sense of belonging.

And, over time, ensuring that we have more and more to lose if the norms of the group were to change.

This is vital. If the norms of the group start to change, then the things that have made us successful, the things that have made us belong and be welcome and accepted here, might start to be frowned upon. If that were to happen, then we may risk losing the belonging we have worked so hard to earn. This is interpreted by our brains as a significant threat to our survival.

New people and new ways of doing things threaten our belonging. They threaten our status and our safety. So, knowingly or unknowingly, we work individually and collectively to ensure that things stay more or less the way they were. I call this the ‘enforce’ phase (step 5). It’s all about self-protection. So it isn’t as simple as ‘people don’t like change’. Resistance to change is actually a perfectly rational response to a threat that feels very real. Culture is the rules of belonging – and cultures fight for their own survival.

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