



## **Developing a Sense of Belonging for African American Women in the Workplace**

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## Introduction

African American women have encountered problems such as racism, discrimination, and exclusion in the workplace (Settles et al., 2022). While organizations have begun to address these issues and encourage better participation and representation of African American women through their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, more efforts are required to realize fair business opportunities and promote qualified African American women into C-suite leadership positions where they can make executive decisions while embracing a sense of belongingness (Brown, 2021; Leanin.org & McKinsey et al., 2022; Langford, 2017). In the last few years, some progress in DEI initiatives has occurred for women, who comprise 21% of C-suite positions, but only 3% of those women are African Americans (Afsharipour & Rosenblum, 2022). Coupled with this is the immediate and persistent need to address covert, implicit biases such as microaggressions- defined as subtle discrimination against members of a marginalized group- which has brought about more awareness of how microaggressions can be demeaning and harmful in the workplace (Didwania, 2022; Groves, 2021; Kossek et al., 2022). Although this awareness has allowed for open discussions and made individuals more conscious of their attitudes, some have adjusted their mindsets and behaviors. These are small steps toward including African American women in the workplace; however, work remains to help them feel like they belong and earn the promotions they deserve.

Leaders may improve employee feelings of belonging by fostering cultures in which all employees, not just those from dominant social identity groups, can prosper and participate fully (Shore & Chung, 2022). The authors believe that when African American women feel like they belong, they have a sense of connection and feel accepted, which goes beyond inclusion. The authors believe that inclusion is not enough; helping African American women feel a sense of

belonging can be the beginning of pivoting them into leadership positions. This paper examines what needs to occur for African American women to move into leadership roles within their respective organizations and how creating a culture of belongingness using allyships can help them transition into those roles.

### **Background**

Once hired into organizations, many African American women believe they have no power or a real role of authority, and their diverse backgrounds and skills are not considered and respected (Purushothaman, 2022). Instead of creating an atmosphere where African American women feel like they belong, they are asked to fit in, which makes them feel alienated (Rasool et al., 2021). Those who feel a sense of belonging recognize the value of their work and feel connected to and trusted by others while doing it, especially by their managers and coworkers. When there is a lack of a sense of belonging, these women perceive themselves as outsiders who constantly have to prove themselves just to be included (Williams et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2022).

### **Inclusion**

Inclusion implies promoting participation and appreciation for diversity by incorporating and utilizing it into regular work activities. Inclusion means accepting and respecting an individual's talents regardless of race, culture, national origin, or gender (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2021). It does not mean focusing on apparent differences or trivializing the differences between individuals and disregarding their significance. It entails moving beyond differences and establishing common ground to foster harmony and creativity as people work toward a shared objective. (O'Brien et al., 2017). An inclusive work culture is one in which a mix

of people can come to work, feel comfortable and confident enough to be themselves, and work in a way that suits them while still achieving organizational goals.

Often, leaders believe they are more inclusive than they are and are less biased and more inclusive than most (Rayat, 2022). However, research shows that 33% of leaders lack confidence in creating inclusion and do less than they can to make things more inclusive (Myers Briggs, 2021). These examples may indicate why African American women might struggle to advance into senior-level positions because they often face issues their Caucasian female counterparts likely do not have to contend with, such as microaggressions and a lack of inclusion. As a result, African American women are more willing to leave corporate roles altogether or prefer to work for companies that share their values, respect their work ethic, and actively support their desire to advance in their careers (Leanin.org & McKinsey et al., 2022).

### **Belonging**

A complex concept, belonging can vary among individuals, cultures, and environments. Being part of a group or community means belonging; some people may prefer a more diversified and hospitable environment, while others may feel at home in a close-knit group (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Belonging is a basic human urge that must be satisfied for people to feel connected, appreciated, and supported in their work, social, and personal lives. Regardless of the ontological viewpoint, how someone feels valued and supported greatly impacts their well-being and quality of life. Most people want to feel like they belong instead of like outsiders, making belonging even more of a need in a person's professional life since workers who perceive they belong in the organization are more engaged, productive, and likely to remain with the organization for an extended period (Allen et al., 2021; Maslow, 1943; Strayhorn, 2022).

African American women might feel like they belong at work if they have a sense of belonging and do not worry about their talents being questioned or successes viewed as luck (Leanin.org & McKinsey, 2022). These women want to receive promotions based on their qualifications and experiences. Respect and acceptance are what they seek in their respective organizations while freely and comfortably contributing to them. However, many African American women find it challenging to experience any sense of belonging within a work culture systemically designed to keep them out (Rosette et al., 2016). Increasing the number of African American women in leadership positions requires organizational leaders to recognize their high qualifications and continuously strive to overcome unconscious bias.

### **Belonging is Important in the Workplace**

Fitting in does not equate to belonging. A person must give up their unique identity to fit in with the dominant culture (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Shore & Chung, 2022). This type of adaptation stunts African American women's growth because it does not often lead to building enduring bonds. As a result, they experience social exclusion that can potentially cause animosity and aggression toward other people (Jetten et al., 2012; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Belonging means being a part of a group or community where one feels valued, connected, and accepted. Belonging creates an environment where people can be their authentic selves in the workplace. Even though it is subjective, belonging is crucial for psychological health and functioning (Allen et al., 2021; Wilson & VanAntwerp, 2021). Researchers have found that people with a sense of belonging, for instance, have better happiness and life satisfaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, those who do not feel they belong may suffer negative consequences, including loneliness, sadness, depression and worry (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Zambrana et al., 2021).

The researchers assert that when African American women do not believe they are accepted or feel a sense of belonging, they leave organizations that do not value them. When talented employees leave, the organization suffers, especially now during a time when workers' optimism is not centered on their current employer or job but instead on their resiliency, sense of purpose, and adaptability, forcing employers to deal with a "Free Agent" labor market (University of Phoenix, 2023, p. 6). To alleviate the loss of talented African American women, organizations must create atmospheres where these women feel a sense of belonging and are personally fulfilled, so they will have greater self-esteem and life satisfaction and be less likely to exhibit signs of despair and anxiety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, it is crucial for African American women to feel a sense of belonging at work because it significantly impacts their identity, self-esteem, and general well-being. When people feel like they belong, they are more likely to be content, confident, and resilient. While people who do not feel a sense of belonging feel uneasy emotions like loneliness, anxiety, or sadness when they feel isolated or alone. Nevertheless, a person's sense of belonging may significantly impact social issues like diversity and inclusion. People are more likely to accept people who are different from them when they feel a sense of belonging in various contexts (Jetten et al., 2012).

Inclusion means actively hiring individuals from diverse backgrounds. This does not, however, guarantee their full participation in the workplace or provide them with a sense of belonging that is distinct from inclusion. A sense of belonging impacts happiness, professional achievement, and social attitudes toward inclusion and diversity. When individuals feel they belong, they connect with the organizational mission, vision, leaders, and team members. They believe their voice is respected and see themselves as contributing value to the organization. As such, they are willing to go beyond their job description without hesitation. Belonging means one

has a seat at the table and a voice in the decision-making process. For African American women, it means moving into executive leadership roles where high-level decisions are made.

### **What Employers Can Do to Create a Sense of Belonging**

Corporate leaders should embrace the idea of allyship rather than mentorship to solve belonging issues and allow African American women to be heard and respected. It is time for organizational leaders to help African American women become more active and to stop using their business brochures and websites to promote the illusion that they support African American women, which is just window dressing. Instead, they should speak to the issue of how to promote African American women into senior leadership positions within their organizations, publicly praise these women for their skills, and recommend them for promotions (Leanin.org & McKinsey et al., 2022). These women do not want to compromise who they are to be accepted, which would entail fitting in. They want to be acknowledged and allowed to develop as individuals in their environment, with the freedom to be authentic.

Organizational leaders should provide an environment where African American women can be authentic by focusing on skilling, career pathing, mentorship, and allyship in the workplace (University of Phoenix, 2023). Mentorships and allyships can allow African American women to align with senior leaders who help them navigate their career paths (Goods et al., 2023). When establishing these types of relationships, organizational leaders must set clear and quantifiable goals to measure success, such as specifying the number of African American women with whom they intend to establish allyship-based relationships. This can occur by setting alliance initiatives as core business priorities and holding senior-level leaders accountable for favorable outcomes. Additionally, senior-level leaders should be assigned to serve as role models, which sets the precedent for building alliances with and supporting the growth of



African American women into senior-level positions within their organizations (World Economic Forum, 2023).

### **Solutions to Address Belonging**

African American women are still struggling to advance out of middle management positions and obtain promotions into senior-level positions because they face issues their Caucasian white counterparts do not have to contend with and, as a result, are more inclined to leave corporate America. According to the US Department of Labor (2021), African American women in the labor force, including corporate jobs and service jobs, dropped from 60.5% in 2019 to 58.8% in 2020, which is reported as the largest annual decrease for this group. It is anticipated that the decline will continue. The researchers believe a significant contributing element to corporate disengagement is a sense of not belonging, and that allyships for African American women are a conduit for developing belonging within the work environment.

Allyship is a professional didactic interpersonal relationship where an individual in positions of authority courageously leverages their power and privilege to intercede (advocate) for marginalized individuals, challenge the status quo that impedes these individuals' success, and respect their daily lived experiences (Babla et al., 2022; Dickerson, 2021; Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019). When this occurs, leaders create equitable and inclusive spaces for all individuals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or cultural background (Arif et al., 2022). To combat gender inequality in the workplace, allies can functionally battle prejudice and advance equity by being empathetic, sincere, and accountable in their roles (Kim & Choo, 2021). For African American women, having allies in the workplace helps them feel like they belong.

Allyship often exists in organizations focusing on social service, social justice, and varied inclusion levels. In one study, a sample of 185 employees from the same organization

highlighted self-reported ownership of the allyship with several groups that ranged from sexual and gender-diverse people to people with disabilities (Gates et al., 2021). The outcome revealed a culture of alignment that complimented a balance of organizational and personal values. This alignment pointed to an increased connection to the mission and vision of the organization. Additionally, leaders in the healthcare industry recognized the importance of allyship principles and adopted an effective tool to support related efforts (Gates et al., 2021). Allyship can be the foundation of success for African American women in business, even though it has traditionally been a crucial element in the social studies field.

Understanding who is committed to allyship inside an organization is the first step in reducing concerns about exclusion. One study identified the need for Caucasian women to openly endorse the belonging of African American women in the workplace to foster allyship (Johnson & Pietri, 2022). This type of exposure demonstrated that the open support of allies increased the sense of organizational belonging, trust, and identity safety among African American women employees (Johnson & Pietri, 2022). Another study involving the perception of interpersonal versus organizational allyship among men and women revealed the importance of protecting the ally from anti-majority bias (Moser & Branscombe, 2022). These researchers also found that men were more comfortable volunteering for social alliances than feeling obligated to participate due to an organizational gender equality message. Volunteering offered a practical path to promoting equality without alluding to the threat of anti-majority bias. In addition, Babla et al. (2022) and Moser and Branscombe (2022) agreed on the importance of interpersonal allyship to demonstrate authentic advocacy through professional development and self-selection. These studies identify tools that provide education about the realities, experiences, and perspectives of minority groups while teaching new ways to become authentic and promote

positive change. When individuals volunteer to uphold fair treatment and equality, the responsibility is spread across all groups. Allyship from these groups is supported when resource allocation and education are transparent (Balakrishnan & Mohapatra, 2022). Overall, supporting African American women through allyship relationships within organizations and partnering them with higher-level executive confidants they can rely on can help them navigate the corporate world and succeed in obtaining senior-level positions.

### **Conclusion**

Belonging is a fundamental human need crucial to one's psychological and social welfare (Maslow, 1943; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Inclusion is just one necessity for moving African American women into leadership positions. A deliberate focus on belongingness can create a setting where the thoughts and experiences of African American women are appreciated and understood. Moreover, providing allyship opportunities paired with senior-level executives willing to support them in their corporate careers is a major catalyst for changing the narrative and supporting belongingness (Warren & Warren, 2023). In senior-level positions, African American women are underrepresented and often denied opportunities for advancement based on their race. If they are promoted, it is often seen as tokenism rather than a genuine acknowledgment of their abilities and efforts, which can be detrimental to their accomplishments and contributions.

Addressing racism, discrimination, and exclusion in the workplace requires diversity initiatives focused on training in belongingness and establishing allyship relationships (Williams & Sharif, 2021). It is about creating environments that value and respect the contributions of African American women. Allyship is not about perfection, it is about progress to help African

American women feel comfortable in spaces created for them to achieve, thrive, and survive in senior-level leadership positions.

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