

## Belonging: A Conversation about Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion



Krys Jan 21, 2019



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Happy new(ish) year everyone! As we kick off the new year, I have been fortunate enough to be thrown in a client space where equity, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I) are constantly at the forefront of our working topics.

I wasn't hired to be the ED&I expert on this engagement, however the work that we do at August often dips its toes into conversations about ED&I because our purpose is, in fact, to create more equitable workspaces where talented people can thrive. So, I've been banging my head against the wall these last few weeks in attempt to understand how can we as an organization focus so intently on equity, yet still struggle to identify and define our point of view on how we speak about diversity and inclusion in the workplace more fluently.

I realized that ED&I gets different definitions depending on the group I'm working with. If you ask a senior executive leadership team inside a wealthy Fortune 100 organization what ED&I means versus an urban community-based nonprofit organization, you'll get strikingly different responses.

The former might think of ED&I as one conglomerate — an ongoing conversation, or series of projects, about how we foster a progressive workplace in the 21st century. Example of these might be improving gender and racial diversity when hiring and promotions or creating more holistic programs that make the lives of our employees better (e.g., better parental leave, work from home days, or improved time off structures). On the other hand, the latter (the nonprofit) might think of ED&I in the same frame of reference on internal topics, but includes the way we connect with our clients/audiences/customers externally as well. In fact, they look at each definition uniquely — equity, diversity, and inclusion — as having different meanings for different issues and groups of people.

In order to help wrap my mind around these definitions, I reached out to a close friend who has spent his entire career on creating programs that foster more equitable spaces for children to learn in our American public school systems.

Here was his response:

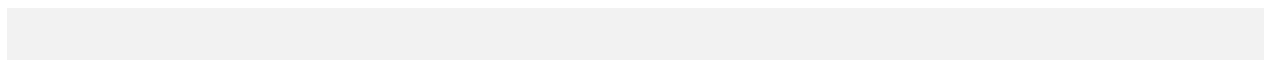
*This is an important question, as these words are used commonly used interchangeably. It is essential to differentiate these terms, to create shared meaning, to achieve a mutual understanding properly.*

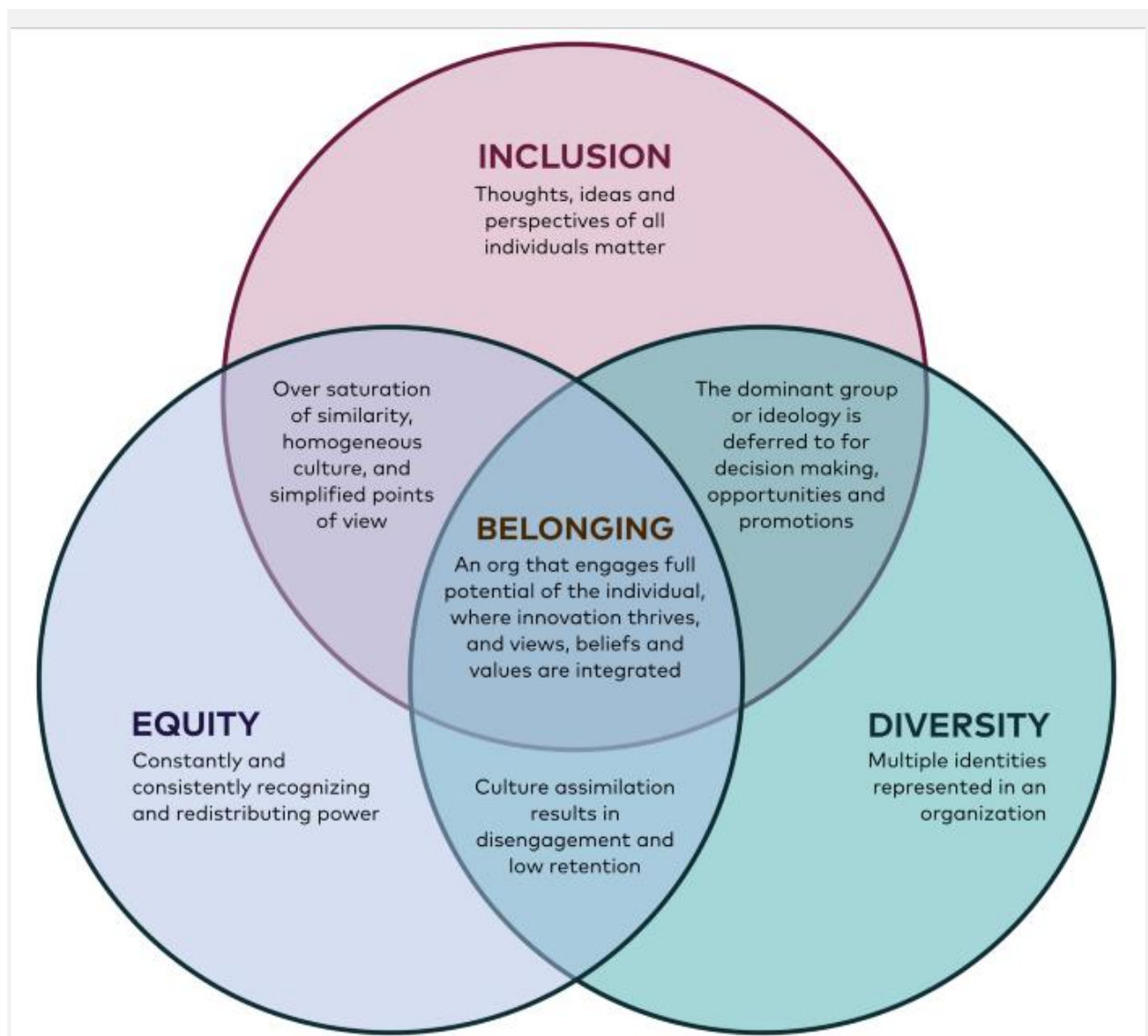
*When thinking of diversity, biodiversity comes to mind: a variety of living organism in a particular habitat or ecosystem. We find this in nature! The term diversity between people can be understood as: the presence of difference. It's that simple. This can refer to people of various races, genders, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religions, ethnicity, or national origins, mental or physical abilities. When applied to an organization, defining diversity should include cognitive diversity (diversity of ideas) and cultural diversity.*

*At the core of inclusion is diversity. Inclusion means that people with marginalized identities feel as if they: genuinely belong, are valued and relied upon, empowered and ultimately matter. Like diversity, inclusion is an outcome and often an actual experience of the workplace, one that holds real potential or implications.*

*Equity, in many regards, are the norms, fundamentals, and/or policies in places that ensures everyone accesses to the same opportunities. Equity requires preliminary work to identify imbalances, loopholes, or unequal starting places.*

So in my attempt to understand how we talk about each of these, I have recreated a diagram that I found from [Turner Consulting Group](#) (a Diversity and Inclusion consultancy based in Toronto), to organize my thoughts.





Each element represents a different piece of the full human experience. Addressing only one or two of these falls short on gaining, what I think is the full human experience — a sense of belonging.

This diagram were the thoughts that I pulled together on a late night in my hotel in NYC. Since then, I've posted this image to twitter to see what feedback or insights I could get from anyone interested in the topic.

I realized, from feedback shared with me, that it is easy to recognize when you are the one left out of any one of these areas; that feeling of being the "other" persists. It might even manifest itself in ways where you have to code switch at work, assimilate to a new culture you wouldn't otherwise, or just say nothing knowing essentially you're voiceless, unheard, not respected in your area of expertise, then essentially left out of career progression and upward mobility.

Some of original feedback I got was, “*it reads a bit negative*” or “*name some of the good outcomes of having at least two.*” I struggled with this because, I believe, two of these aren’t enough and shouldn’t be perceived as a *good* outcome.

Here are a few examples of each “scenario” of having two elements but falling short on the other:

**Situation 1: Equity and Inclusion, No Diversity #somanwhiteguys.** Imagine the boardroom of all white men. This is the extreme example that I think of in this scenario. Sure they all have a seat at the table and the opportunity to share and have their perspectives heard. Assuming decisions are made in the boardroom, those perspectives held make policy and changes to the organization (and sometimes the public and our environment). Great, right? Sure, if you are a company of all white men whose customers are all white men and every policy and decision made only impacts other white men. This is almost never the case. Without diversity no new perspectives are heard. Policies are established and implemented benefiting the interest of those in power. Organizations lose their competitive edge because innovation slows down without diverse perspectives. The result of this is that employees leave because change is too slow. That \$1B new idea just walked out the door because it was just not “core to the business.”

**Situation #2: Inclusion and Diversity, No Equity #powerstruggle.** Imagine the bold, progressive community organization that is excited to advocate for new change and policies or a public school system in an inner city. They pride themselves on diversity and inclusion! It’s part of their mission statement and they boldly represent the voices of the community at large. However, those in positions of power or leadership positions do not represent the diversity of the community; in fact, beliefs held at the top are that of the dominant social ideology. A recent example of this was breakdown of leadership for [the 2018 and 2019 Women’s March](#). In short, the founders were excited to include women of color to bring diverse perspectives to help organize the march, however, those women of color were denied leadership positions until they demanded it. Another example is diverse inner city schools where children of multiple intersectional identities exist yet [Black and Brown students are continuously punished more often and more harshly](#) and [bullying against LGBT, especially trans, students is ignored or rejected](#) compared to their straight, cisgender peers.

**Situation #3: Equity and Diversity, No Inclusion #iheardyoubut.** This is probably my worst-case scenario of all three. The other scenarios are a bit easier to draw attention to. There are hard and cold “facts” for someone to refer to (e.g., national statistics, employee self-identifying questionnaires, leadership demographics, etc). Inclusion, however, is a feeling based on an individual’s experience. This scenario is best described as the “I heard you, but...” or “If I could play devil’s advocate for a minute...” or “I have a friend who is X and they said...” mindset. In short, its erasure of experience and perspective; it’s subtle and dismissive. You are invited into the boardroom, but you are expected to speak for all people like you. You are invited into the boardroom, but your idea isn’t considered until a peer of the the dominant culture recognizes and claims your need for change as their own idea, *even if you’ve pointed it out multiple times in the past*. Essentially, you’re invited to the boardroom, you’re smart and have a fresh diverse

perspective, yet you're ideas aren't heard or are commonly misunderstood. This scenario isn't hard to imagine, many people have been put in this uncomfortable situation. It's exhausting for those who are expected to show up as their whole selves, yet are expected to assimilate to the dominant workplace culture and not be *too* disruptive. As a result, diverse talent leaves from exhaustion and burnout from feeling like they don't truly belong.

In short, none of these scenarios are good. I don't have a positive way of framing either of these. If there is a spectrum from "good" to "great," in my opinion, none of these fit on the drawing board. They're not good and they're certainly not great at creating a sense of belonging on teams, inside our workplaces, or our communities. There are no positive outcomes from only embodying two elements because groups of people are consistently left out.

My hunch is that when the three are able to coexist within teams, and inside of organizations, an individual will feel a sense of belonging. I don't believe it is the responsibility of the organization or managers to ensure everyone feels that they have a sense of belonging. Belonging is the outcome of holding space where everyone truly feels empowered to speak up, make change, and shift the culture. It *is* the responsibility of those in leadership and of the dominant social culture to create these conditions.

Just this week, I saw this tweet circling the internets on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and thought, *everything in this thread totally makes sense to me.*

For the entire thread [click here](#).

Do I truly believe equity, diversity, and inclusion is a scam? Not quite. I do believe that there are organizations that show the value of how these three concepts working together can exist and persist.

I also understand that some people can find ED&I or D&I programs inside their organizations to be a fallacy, for a number of reasons: low retention and turnover of diverse talent, diversity at the bottom and not the top, reprimand for speaking up or voicing concern that is countercultural to the organization, or simply not being listened to or taken seriously.

I want to be clear, **I am not an ED&I expert**, I have years of experience working to improve and change hierarchical systems inside organizations to better adapt to change, and this leans into creating more equitable spaces quite a bit. However, the focus of my work doesn't tackle issues of ED&I head on. I've had experience trying to start an ED&I program at [August](#) and it hasn't come without mistakes, frustrations, and challenges, to say the least. All that to say, there are more highly qualified people who can speak on this topic more fluently and with direction than I.

Although my professional experience on this topic is limited, I do believe I can share some personal observations and lessons that I've learned and from others — the brilliant minds of friends both near and far — that you can add to the conversation about ED&I at your workplace, school, organization or team.



- If the mindsets and the behaviors of leadership don't embody the principles that are to be held by new ED&I initiatives, tools, practices, or policies, the whole thing will fall short. As we know, humans learn by doing and learn by example; if the messaging and examples aren't being held at the top, no one will really care enough to change.
- Organizations must bring ED&I into leadership positions at the highest levels of the organization in order truly embrace policies and operations from diverse perspectives.
- Diversity of gender must include gender non-conforming, trans, or 3rd gender identifying people. The gender "binary" is too narrow minded of an approach to gender parity inside our organizations in 2019 and beyond. — feedback from a close friend and colleague, [Sasha Ahuja](#).
- Always work on building trust. That means being open, honest, vulnerable, and embracing challenging conversations between people (even when it's uncomfortable) so that everyone is always seeking to understand, and to improve when they learn new information. — feedback from a thought partner and friend, [Mike Tannenbaum](#).
- Be open and intentional about ED&I. Consistently communicate the progress and expected outcomes of your approach. Be transparent about the failure the organization has made in the past and the importance of change. The team at [CultureAmp](#) believe the power of openness and narrative (in the form of personal storytelling), especially from leadership, can build trust and foster a sense of belonging.

My hypothesis is that people who feel a sense of belonging at work, or in their organizations, will be more resilient and willing to challenge themselves and others to be better stewards of equity, diversity and inclusion. I also believe that organizations where individuals hold a high sense of belonging will result in more more engaged employees who are energized by their work, team, and ultimately perform with better creativity, execution and productivity. In this scenario, belonging, everyone achieves better outcomes.

*Are you working inside of an organization that embodies these concepts and fosters a sense of belonging? I'd love to hear from you! Contact me at [www.krysburnette.com](http://www.krysburnette.com) or [krysburnette@gmail.com](mailto:krysburnette@gmail.com)*