



10 WAYS TO Foster Inclusion and Belonging in Teams

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Fostering an environment in which all team members feel valued, included and a sense of belonging takes intentional effort. If we are not thoughtful and intentional about creating spaces where everyone can be themselves, bring their best and thrive, we may end up just doing things the easiest way, our preferred way, or the way things have always been done. While this may work for some, it likely does not work well for everyone. And if this is the case, it means we are not maximizing our potential as teams or colleagues.

The good news is that small and easy steps, taken consistently and with intentionality, can go a long way to fostering the kind of place where we all want to work! Although management and leadership should model and facilitate these behaviors and activities, the only way an inclusive environment can truly be fostered is if all team members make proactive and intentional efforts towards this goal. Here are 10 ideas to foster inclusion and belonging in teams...



1. Provide a warm welcome for new team members!

A warm welcome can start even before a new employee's first day. If there is an extended period between the job offer acceptance and the first day, you can send them a welcome packet with information about the university, upcoming events and other employee resources.

If their first day is virtual, have an all-staff Zoom meeting with introductions. The supervisor/manager/department head should introduce the new person explaining why they are excited to have them on board. Then, each team member can introduce themselves and say a little about what they do.

If their first day is in the office:

- Welcome them with some UMSL swag!
- Arrange for someone to be their guide/buddy for the day who will introduce them to all the team members, help them get their office or workspace set up (including finding or ordering supplies) and give them a tour of the building and main campus buildings (e.g. MSC, Rec Center, library, etc.).
- Have someone (or a small group) take them to lunch, organize a brown bag or order a catered lunch.
- Each team member should reach out to the new person sometime during their first week to schedule a coffee, lunch, walk on campus, etc.
- Supervisors should check in at the end of their first day to ask how it went and see if they have any questions or need anything for their next day.

Whether the new person is working remotely or on campus, each team member should reach out to the new person sometime during their first couple of weeks to schedule a (virtual or live) informal meeting over coffee, for example.

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2. Set them up for success.

Think about what this new person might need to be successful. Do they need additional training? Who should they meet on campus? Are there unspoken norms or expectations they should know about? Where should they go to troubleshoot issues? Share the benefit of your experiences. What do you know now that you wish someone had told you when you started? What did someone do or tell you when you first started that you found helpful?



3. Build team relationships.

Whether there are new people on the team or not, being intentional about creating ongoing opportunities for people to get to know each other and talk about non-work related issues can help build trust and create a supportive environment for everyone. Building relationships can be as simple as starting off team meetings with a check-in. For example, you can ask everyone to respond to a prompt such as: What is one thing you are excited about this week? One thing you are looking forward to this weekend? One thing that you'd rather not deal with? A movie, restaurant or family outing recommendation to share?

You can also have monthly brown-bag lunches, craft hours, campus walks or even take up a collective volunteer cause to support together.



4. Build team effectiveness.

Knowing team members on a personal level is a good start, but it does not ensure an effective team. Take the time to do some type of team building activity, whether it be a work-style or personal assessment (e.g., Strengths Quest, DISC, Meyers-Briggs) or a facilitated discussion about communication and work-style preferences, strengths and areas that need support, etc.



5. Provide professional development opportunities for the team.

A team that learns together thrives together! These learning opportunities not only help enhance the capacity of your team, but also provide another opportunity to connect and learn more about each other. For example, your team can watch or read a resource about a relevant topic on Percipio and have a discussion about it. You can also request training from HR or the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Or maybe a guest speaker can talk about a topic relevant to your area.

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6. Ensure that employee feedback and ideas are heard and valued.

An inclusive and effective team is one in which differing opinions and new ideas are actively encouraged. For example, in brainstorming or planning meetings ask, “Does anyone have a different idea or see this in a different way?” or “What might we be missing?” Understand that not everyone feels comfortable sharing a different perspective or critical feedback, particularly in front of a group. Make multiple attempts to get feedback and input (e.g. asking the group multiple times, asking individuals directly, having one-on-one meetings for feedback).



7. Share information.

Looping people in, letting them know what is going on (even if it does not directly apply to them) helps people feel like they are a part of things. It also sends a signal that they are a valued and important member of the team.



8. Acknowledge and appreciate.

When a team member lends a helping hand, does a good job or just contributes to a positive team dynamic, acknowledge it! You can also start team meetings by asking if anyone has a “shout out” of appreciation for anyone else on the team.



9. Lend a helping hand or a listening ear.

When a team member seems to be struggling (whether at work or in their personal life), let them know that you are there and happy to help or listen. This lets people know that they are seen and that you care.



10. Celebrate together!

Whether it be birthdays, holidays and/or achievements, organize regular celebrations. Be sensitive to the fact that not all people celebrate the same holiday (e.g. Christmas) and that some holidays can also carry a negative connotation (e.g. Thanksgiving). Celebrations can be seasonal without excluding anyone by celebrating what matters most... each other!