



# Priming the Space for Belonging

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Shani Dellimore Barrax, Aurora Change Agency



# SEAoNY Diversity Committee Grant Received



# NCSEA

National Council of Structural Engineers Associations

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## SEAoNY Mission

To advance the art of structural engineering by:



- Building a **community** of colleagues
- Sharing **knowledge**
- **Advocating** for the profession
- Promoting public **safety**

The mission of the Structural Engineers Association of New York (SEAoNY) Diversity Committee, established in 2018, is to advocate for the inclusion and advancement of marginalized and underrepresented groups by fostering dialogue, raising awareness, and proposing solutions for the betterment of the structural engineering community.

## Volunteer Engagement / Vertical Communication

SEAoNY engages diverse members and volunteers in fulfilling and enriching service, facilitating an understanding of how their work is strategically aligned with the direction of the organization and advancement of the profession.



# Today we will:

- Consider the relationship between belonging, culture add, and psychological safety
- Explore belonging actualization





# What Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging IS...and ISN'T

## *What it is*

**Diversity** brings multiple (including minoritized) identity-based perspectives and lived experiences.

**Inclusion** creates space for multiple perspectives by valuing and affirming them.

**Equity** levels the playing field, taking into account opportunity gaps within systems.

**Belonging** yields psychological safety and allows all to bring their whole self to work and learn through active inclusion.

## *What it isn't*

**Diversity** is not tokenism or simply “diversity of thought.” Say the words race, ethnicity, gender, and other identities. Colorblindness doesn't exist.

**Inclusion** is not tolerance, and requires active understanding.

**Equity** is the platinum (not golden) rule. Fair is not always equal.

**Belonging** can't occur in earnest if you're not seeking and affirming identity-based lived experiences within your organization.

**DEIB ISN'T always comfortable, but it IS necessary.**

# Belonging: The Ultimate Goal



The state of **acceptance and affirmation**

Authenticity is not something we have or don't have. It's a practice -- a conscious choice of how we want to live. Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.

Rene Brown

Typically accompanied by **psychological safety and authenticity**



A culture of belonging makes those feel valued by **welcoming all dimensions** of their identities, experiences, and perspectives



Supported by organizational culture

**Company - Colleague - Leadership**

# Survey Says...

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## What it is

- My company has very well-established DEI initiatives that include access to **ERG groups, community outreach/engagement, annual EDI reports, webinars**, etc.
- Made commitments including release of **yearly report, active employee resource groups with support of leadership, good racial/gender diversity**

## What it isn't

- It's a very diverse workforce but in my short tenure here it's obvious that there's **no active DEIA work**, and there's quite a bit of **racism, misogyny, and other discrimination above the surface**.
- My company has established DEI committees and offers some **periodic programming** relating to DEI initiatives. While it's a good start it feels like it's **mostly talk without concrete action** or planned action.



# Culture Add

## Belonging

## Psychological Safety



Multiple perspectives contribute to valuing broader ways of being, doing, knowing in organization.

<p><b>CULTURE ADD.</b></p> <p><b>INNOVATION.</b> QUICK DECISIONS. <b>CANDOR.</b> <b>FAST GROWTH.</b> PROACTIVE. <b>VALUES-DRIVEN.</b></p> 	<p><b>CULTURE FIT.</b></p> <p>AMBIGUOUS. SLOW-PACED. <b>REACTIVE.</b> INCONSISTENT. <b>STATUS QUO.</b> BASED ON GROUPTHINK.</p> 
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**Multicultural  
(Inclusive)**

**Monocultural  
(Exclusive)**

Easier and safer to do things **one way** – the way it’s been for the *typical* people. **Be THAT way.**

LinkedIn

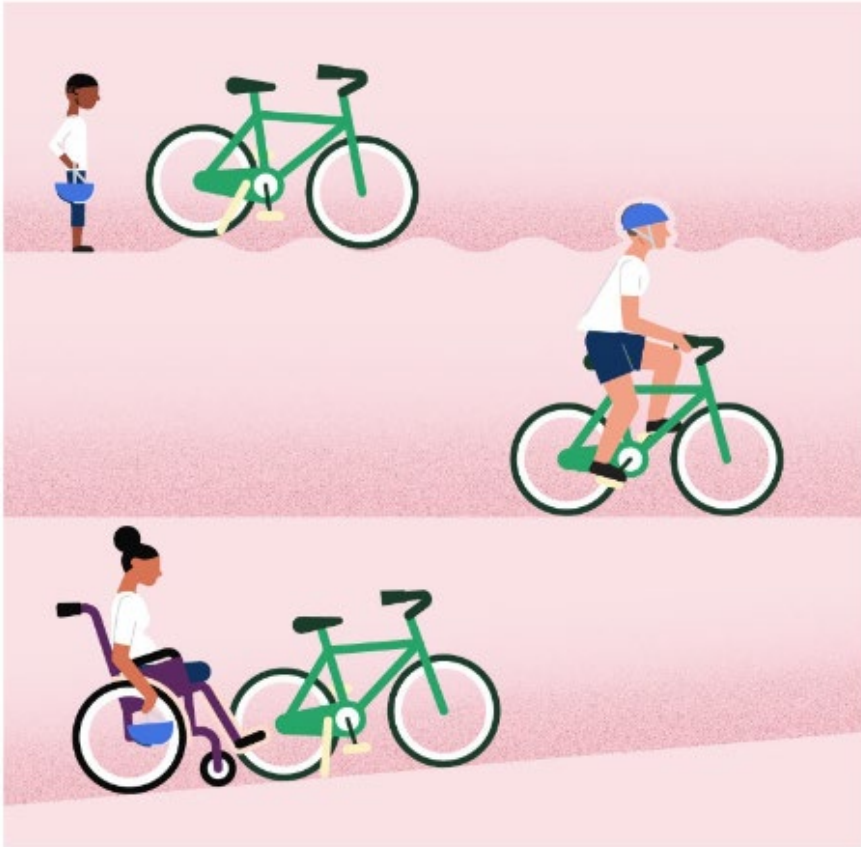


# Fit vs. Add

## Fit (Sameness)

### EQUALITY:

Everyone gets the same—regardless if it's needed or right for them.



## Add (Fairness)

### EQUITY:

Everyone gets what they need—understanding the barriers, circumstances, and conditions.



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# Fit vs. Add

## Fit

- Cultural awareness programs without application to organizational operations
- Organizational culture that accentuates adherence to monocultural mindsets, practices
- Minoritized code switching required for professional safety and advancement
- No support for microaggressions, harassment, exclusion

## Add

- Seeking partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges, Minority Serving Institutions
- Open dialogue re: assimilation and acculturation for existing AND new employees to support new perspectives
- Learning and development engagement re: identity – based intentional inclusion (ex. Safe Space LGBT awareness, ability inclusion and access, anti-racist practices, etc.)



# Survey Says... Culture Fit

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My firm has several people bringing DEI initiatives to the office and firm-wide level, but there are definitely things that can be improved to make it **fully ingrained within company culture**. There are also some **vocal people** who are **opposed to any DEI initiatives**.

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A lot of initiatives in place to **celebrate other cultures** but **representation at top leadership level is lacking**.

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While my firm is fairly diverse in terms of place of origin for employees, my firm does very **little proactive learning about DEI**. I think my firm can particularly **learn more about gender identity** and make a more conscious effort to **respect employees' pronouns**.





*“Psychological safety at work doesn’t mean that everybody is nice all the time. It means that you embrace the conflict and you speak up, knowing that your team has your back, and you have their backs.”*

- David Altman, CCL COO

# *Psychological safety* and why it matters



STRATEGIC EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Psychological safety enables **candor, authenticity, and truth-telling.**


**ALL** can share identity-informed perspectives and **bring their whole selves to work without retaliation.**

## **SPEAK UP**

**ALL** can bring lived experiences, observations, and voice **to shaping organizational culture.**

**Minoritized perspectives** are not vilified, labeled as “aggressive or unprofessional,” **invalidated, or dismissed.**





**Psychological  
Safety**

**Defensiveness  
Denial**

Organizational Culture



Intrapersonal

Interpersonal

Intrapersonal

# Facilitating Belonging

- Facilitating intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational recognition of the role we play in humanizing each other so that people can be affirmed
- Allows people to bring their authentic selves to work, with opportunities to address undesirable behavior that's not punitive, but reflective, awareness-building, and restorative
- Applied through evaluation and adaptation of policies, programs, and practices undergirded by inclusive behavioral change



# Actualizing Belonging

**Intrapersonal  
(You and You)**

**Interpersonal  
(Me and You)**

**Organizational  
(We and Us)**



# Intrapersonal: You and You

**Intentional:** time,  
resources, and  
facilitation

Cultural humility and  
self-reflection

Understanding your  
own identity-based  
perspectives (and their  
limitations)

Privilege, socialization,  
oppression, biases,  
willful oblivion, identity  
development

Should be accompanied  
by cognitive  
dissonance, discomfort,  
questioning

Avoids *delusions of  
thereness* and “trauma  
porn”

# Interpersonal: Me and You

Collective application of intrapersonal perspectives (bonding and bridging capital)



Facilitated and curated safe and brave spaces



Dialogue, perspective-taking, live engagement with others



Shared vulnerability of lived experiences without tokenism or objectification



Exploration of juxtaposed dynamics such as relative privilege, internalized oppression, and “lonely only”



**Role-based:** Staff, board, leadership, DEIB Committees (both within and among)

# Survey Says...Employee Resource Groups

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We have multiple employee resource groups for members who identify with different groups or come from different backgrounds **to connect with and support each other** and put on events **raising awareness and knowledge** about those different groups. Currently we have a group for those who identify as Black, Latinx, Asian or Pacific Islander, LGBTQ+, and others.

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Very high engagement with our women's employee resource group and its initiatives are promoted widely throughout the firm.

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Example: Thornton Tomasetti



# Organizational: We and Us

Co-creation of  
a speak-up,  
calling-in  
culture

Discomfort,  
vulnerability,  
healthy  
conflict,  
cognitive  
dissonance are  
valued and  
normalized

Identity-based  
needs,  
perspectives,  
and  
experiences  
integrated into  
strategy and  
operations

Ongoing  
expectation of  
continuous  
learning,  
accountability

Commitment  
to **ACTION**  
based on  
**ONGOING**  
understanding  
of lived  
experiences,  
limited  
perspectives  
and capacities

Leadership  
engagement  
and visibility

# Survey Says...Organizational Practices

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- Firm provides benefits to try to create a more supportive and inclusive environment, sponsors **regular DEI activities** and makes an effort to **engage the office in DEI opportunities** while also focusing on **expanding the diversity of our team**
- Our firm **regularly surveys employees** for satisfaction with their initiatives. They offer **employee support groups for women and minorities**, as well as **training programs targeted specifically to women** at key milestones.



# Strategies for cultivating belonging and psychological safety

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Consider and leverage supports such as employee resource groups

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Create opportunities for people to share their experiences, **BUT don't ask** minoritized to speak up **without follow-up and action**

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**Discourage fragility and defensiveness** about equity and inclusion, and belonging towards **efforts that seek to understand**

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Ensure **leadership engagement** with belonging considerations and discussions while also ensuring staff at all levels can engage



# Survey Says...The Role of Leadership

- What is lacking is **action by leadership** to recognize the importance of employee engagement (at all levels) for input related to **company policies and employee manuals**.
- There could be more proactive effort and messaging from leadership. It would also be important for the **leadership to demonstrate that words lead to actual impact** on improving DEI at the firm.
- Staff are very engaged with DEI initiatives but **senior support for those initiatives could improve**

# Survey Says...Resources and Engagement

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- We have local DEI committees as well as a regional board that advises the US region leadership. It is loose but **effective when participants are driven**.
- DEI initiatives are most successful when they have **staff support and energy**. Right now there I think there is interest in initiatives, but not a lot of people wanting to lead them. There is hesitancy from staff to get involved because I think they are **skeptical that they will see real change**.



# Strategies for cultivating belonging and psychological safety



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Value and allocate at all employee levels the **time, talent, and resources needed to actualize belonging**; don't see DEIB as “extra” and make it someone's job

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Apply **change management** considerations for sustainable behavioral change leading to **substantive organizational cultural change**

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**Evaluate your existing efforts** towards substantive practices that provide intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational belonging opportunities

# For further discussion...

**How can you begin providing opportunities for intrapersonal-interpersonal-organizational reflection?**

**Is your organization primed for these discussions?**

**Who should be involved with priming the space within your organization?**



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**Shani  
Dellimore  
Barrax**



**Adding  
PROFICIENCY to  
your passion for  
DEIB**

# SEAO NY: Looking Ahead



Ongoing Cross  
Sections Quarterly  
article about DEIB

SEAO NY as  
knowledge hub for  
DEIB resources

Ongoing pulse  
checks/surveys  
with SEAO NY  
members