

Employee Belonging in Zoos, Aquariums, and Cultural Institutions

A Critical Influence on Engagement, Wellbeing, and Inclusion

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“Belonging is a fundamental human need, hardwired into our DNA” (Harvard Business Review, Dec 16, 2019). This is a bold statement but, based on our experience and analyses, we agree and see belonging as even more relevant today than in 2019. Belonging is center stage as leaders and their teams continue to adjust to seismic events, including the pandemic, social justice, and political and economic uncertainties. Coming together and feeling connected to others seems timely and particularly important. The “good news” is that three-quarters of zoo and aquarium employees report feeling like they “belong”. However, this leaves roughly a quarter of your employees wanting more belonging and connection. And as you will see, feelings of belonging can vary significantly from department to department.

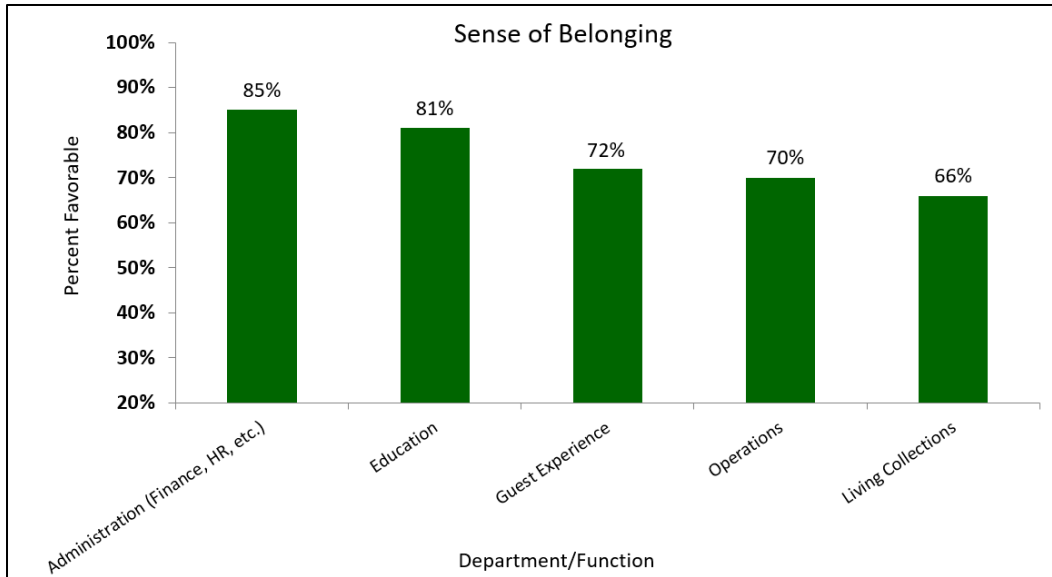
Belonging’s Linkage to Important Outcomes

Belonging is related to several organizational outcomes. According to the Harvard Business Review article, belonging was linked to a 56% improvement in job performance, a 50% decline in turnover risk, and a 75% reduction to sick days.

In Global Aspect’s ongoing study of employee opinions from across zoos, aquariums, and cultural institutions, we find compelling linkages to a number of important factors. Specifically, feelings of belonging are significantly correlated with **Employee Engagement** (Correlation = .70), **Commitment to the Organization** (.57) and **Employee Wellbeing** (.63). Data from our industry study also shows a significant correlation with **Diversity & Inclusion** (.58) and with **Trust** (.56). Finally, we find that belonging scores significantly lower (i.e., employees report feeling less connected) in cases where employees describe their organization’s culture in negative terms (e.g., toxic, paternalistic, old-school). When belonging is stronger (i.e., employees report feeling more connected), teams tend to describe culture using positive terms (e.g., family-like, supportive, inclusive).

Belonging varies by Groups

One powerful application of Global Aspect’s norms is to explore and reveal differences across departments/functions in the how employees respond to questions. Understanding where employees feel more or less connected is a crucial step in understanding where to focus attention. The figure below clearly shows how employee feelings of belonging varies by department/function.



Levers to Promote Belonging

If you understand the conditions and behaviors that foster belonging, you can target those elements to drive belonging higher. To understand what factors contribute to creating a sense of belonging, we used Relative Weights Analysis (RWA) to determine most significant drivers of employee belonging. The table below contains the primary factors that we identified from our database of employee opinions. The results suggest a couple primary themes. The first set of survey items focus on respect and fair treatment. The second set of items focus on connection and contribution (i.e., making an impact, leveraging one’s skills). Organizations that deliver on these elements (across departments/functions) should find that their employees not only feel a strong sense of belonging, but also engagement, commitment, and wellbeing.

Two Tracks for Building Belonging	
Track 1: Respect and Fair Treatment:	
Our organization ...	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a climate that values diverse perspectives. • Is committed to providing equal opportunities for all. • Values diversity and inclusion. • Shows people treating each other with trust and mutual respect. • Is a place I feel safe at work to do or say what I think is best for this organization. 	
Track 2: Connection and Contribution:	
In this organization I ...	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel like my work gives me a sense of personal accomplishment. • Have a job that makes good use of my skills and abilities. 	

• Have heard our Senior leaders communicate a motivating vision of the future.
• Understand how my work contributes to the success of our mission.
• See that satisfying guests is our highest priority.
• Am given a real opportunity to improve my skills.

Summary

If your organization has a strong record of creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for all, it is likely your employees would rate you high on employee belonging. However, these data show there is nearly always some room for improvement. Our normative data reflects the opinions of employees from a sizeable cross section of zoos, aquariums and cultural organizations. This illustrates that roughly **one** in every **four** employees are not feeling high degrees of belonging, and that this, in fact, varies by department/function.

If you are not sure how your employees feel today, you might consider adding a belonging item like the one that we use (*I feel like I belong here*) to your next all-staff survey. Segmenting responses by different groups (e.g., function, job level, gender identity, race/ethnicity) can help uncover areas where employees feel more or less included. If belonging is low overall or in certain segments, the drivers of belonging provide potential areas of focus (e.g., communication, trust and respect, connection, and growth) in order to enhance employees' sense of belonging.

If you would like to learn more about this research or what actions can be taken to elevate belonging (or other areas – engagement, psychological safety, etc.) using a data-driven approach, contact Dr. [Kyle Lundby](#).

Global Aspect Human Capital Advisors has been providing customized employee listening systems since 2012. We offer hands-on support through every phase of a survey program, actional feedback, and intuitive tools to help leaders translate data into insight and action. To learn more, contact Dr. Kyle Lundby at info@globalaspect-hca.com. You can also follow us on [LinkedIn](#) or visit our [website](#).

