Creating a Connected Culture: Strategies for Enhancing Inclusion and Engagement
This Q&A with Amy Ihlen, vice president of global talent products, delves into how cultures of connection can add significant octane to engagement, inclusion, and purpose in organizations as the “quiet resignation” movement continues and talent markets remain tight. Ihlen shares insights on how connected cultures create new opportunities for teams, break down silos, and ensure that everyone feels heard and involved. She also discusses the role of data in building stronger connections and describes how advanced analytics can measure cultural impact.

MIT SMR Connections: Engagement and inclusion have been major corporate agenda items for several years. How well are companies addressing these today?

Amy Ihlen: Employee engagement is often high on corporate to-do lists, but in reality, many enterprises delve into engagement in a piecemeal way. It’s common for companies to measure engagement with only a question or two and to do so only periodically. In addition, the questions asked don’t provide actionable intelligence that leaders can leverage for change. That means businesses only see engagement at a particular moment in time, often without enough context to spur improvements.

Another top priority for many corporations is the measurement of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). DEI goes hand in hand with engagement; they fuel each other when companies have thoroughly connected cultures. Data from the ADP Research Institute indicates that more than 75% of workers surveyed will consider looking for a new job if their company lacks DEI initiatives. That tells us that workers want to feel heard and seen and valued. They need to know they’re a part of things. Addressing these needs will put a company on much firmer ground when driving engagement and inclusion.

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Q: What is a “connected culture”? How does it improve upon traditional approaches to engagement and inclusion?

Ihlen: A culture of connection allows people to be their whole selves at work and not feel that they must conceal many of their ambitions, challenges, and opinions. That approach is a must-have for younger generations. But these expectations are also building among older generations who are joining the ranks of the “quiet resignation” or sitting on the labor market sidelines, unsure about whether or where they’ll return to work.

Again, people want to feel like they are part of something. They crave the ability to freely share thoughts and ideas with like-minded individuals and those with similar backgrounds. They also want candid dialogue with managers about their ambitions, and what they are good at and like to do. Businesses that ignore these trends are putting their ability to attract and retain talent at risk.

Q: What does a ground-level view of a connected culture look like?

Ihlen: Hyper-frequent check-ins are a building block. Originally, managers and HR professionals used to advocate checking in with employees once or twice a year, which was then occasionally increased to four times a year. But research by the co-head of the ADP Research Institute, Marcus Buckingham, revealed that the two most powerful questions driving employee engagement were “Do I know what is expected of me at work?” and “Do I have the chance to use my strengths every day at work?” That, in turn, led to the discovery that the best managers are addressing these issues at least once a week, asking questions such as:

- What did you love last week?
- What did you loathe?
- What can I do to help you?

Regularly asking these types of questions can make people feel heard and included. Their answers also start to paint a picture of who someone is and what they’re feeling. That information can be critical when developing retention- and performance-improvement programs.

Foundational to a culture of connection is emphasizing the importance of understanding what your people need right away and their aspirations for the future. As a leader, I know it’s important to know my people, to help focus them and help them grow in their roles. Doing that pushes us beyond engagement into something far more personal and rewarding by enabling deeper connections between employees and leaders, between peers, and throughout the entire organization.

Some simple ways to undertake that approach include listening to your people and responding to their input, respecting the desire for job security and growth, and having leadership demonstrate that culture of connection.

Q: How can organizations drive the type of change needed to build deeper connections?

Ihlen: Creating a culture of connection is a major change effort and must be driven from the top. The good news: This doesn’t require a massive mindset shift in the same way that a major strategic or structural change does. Typically, it’s something that the majority of people want but are often uncomfortable initiating themselves.

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Most people will gravitate to a new set of behaviors once corporate leaders demonstrate by example that doing so is OK, even desirable. For example, one of our former CEOs launched a town hall meeting by saying “I love you all.” It put him on a much more human level and paved the way for more emotionally intelligent comments and observations.

A colleague of mine once mentioned that a fellow employee was running late to a Zoom meeting with some 30 attendees. The employee apologized and said she was having a really lousy day. But she also said being with her colleagues would help cheer her up. People feel connected when they believe they can openly share the bad as well as the good.

Creating cultural safety, where people can speak their minds, is a bigger challenge. Here, we can take a page from the leadership playbook — feeling comfortable in showing vulnerability. For example, leaders can share about times when they made mistakes, talking not only about what they learned from the experience but how it made them feel. When leaders do this enough, others will be willing to do the same.

In addition, managers can share something with a team that is controversial or critical. When employees see that there aren’t any repercussions, they’ll feel more comfortable chiming in.

Q: Can you recommend techniques for including shy and introverted people?

*Ihlen:* People who tend to be more introverted gain energy from being able to reflect on their own versus problem-solving in a group. So don’t put them on the spot, especially not in large groups.

A friend showed me a great example. She was giving a talk at an annual event celebrating Grace Hopper, who was an American computer scientist, mathematician, and U.S. Navy rear admiral. My friend’s presentation focused on introverts in technology. After her talk, she asked whether anyone had questions. She was greeted with complete silence. As an audience member, I was initially puzzled by that response — or lack of it. Then I thought the audience was probably mostly made up of introverts, so of course there were no questions. But then as my friend was leaving, a huge line of people formed to ask questions individually.

The moral of the story is to assume there are introverts in the mix and manage with that in mind. For instance, managers can send out discussion topics for a meeting a few days in advance. That gives everyone an opportunity to put their thoughts together beforehand. Equally important, it gives introverts time to reflect and prepare to avoid feeling like they’re being put on the spot.

It’s also important to advocate for individuals who are being shut down or talked over. Make sure you draw them out. A simple way to assess how well introverted types feel they belong is to ask during individual check-ins whether they feel that their teams have their backs.

Q: How can data help spur deeper connections?

*Ihlen:* Given the explosion of data and system integration challenges, we advocate for what we call oversimplification of data collection and use in these initiatives.

For example, we collect data when someone joins an organization. Then we derive data on performance, engagement, development, compensation, and other areas from business practices during the employee life cycle. As the workforce demands change, we need to also discover people’s skills, strengths, experiences, interests, and aspirations from a variety of data sources. Doing that provides us with personalized, unique profiles of our employees that establish a true connection throughout their employment journeys.

Most organizations today are amassing and analyzing large amounts of talent data to craft and implement effective talent strategies. But they aren’t making significant progress in capturing enough human data. We do this by asking the same questions in a consistent manner and analyzing the results, and demonstrating what’s in it for the employee if they share their full selves with us.

Q: What role do teams play in a connected culture, and can such cultures help overcome silos?

*Ihlen:* Companies offer both organic and inorganic opportunities to serve on teams. Organic opportunities are often voluntary and emerge as needed. One group may come...
together informally to prepare for a conference or other major event. Another may band together to perform a service in the community. Businesses that want to develop more connected cultures should increase the number of these opportunities. For example, consider hackathons. Participation is usually voluntary, and these events draw people from different parts of the company. They band together and bring cross-functional knowledge to bear on operational problems and innovation challenges.

Inorganic opportunities are the other side of the coin. They’re created as official entities with a clearly defined remit. As organizations seek to overcome internal silos, they often turn to cross-functional teams to manage a process such as customer experience across divisions and functions. When incentives are tied to team performance rather than individual performance, standing cross-functional teams ultimately create more fluid organizations — and more connected cultures.

Q: How do business leaders know whether a connected culture is paying off and whether there are any performance gaps?

Ihlen: Advanced analytics can show the impact of a culture of connection. A few notable examples include:

- Achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion goals by enabling C-suite and HR leaders to estimate and plan the workforce needed and understand how well your culture welcomes and appreciates differences.
- Improving workforce retention by elevating performance and compensation insights across the talent life cycle to provide visibility and guidance on how to move people and the organization forward.
- Capitalizing on attracting new talent by understanding what your current employees value about their work and their sentiments about leadership and the organization — and what they’re telling others about it.

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