



# HMThinking

## Unlocking the potential of people “not like me”

We shared our recent Belonging Project findings that diverse leaders accelerate the development of diverse teams. But what if you are at the start of the process of finding or hiring more diversity? You know it is a commercial imperative; you know there is stakeholder pressure. Maybe you have never had diversity in your teams or maybe you have seen diverse hires fail in the past. You might have questions about how you will integrate difference to create advantage, especially if your team is successful.

In a business world that needs greater diversity:

How do leaders unlock the potential  
of people “**who aren’t like me**”?

Our Belonging Project research delivers the answer:

# Empathy.



Our answer is drawn not just from our everyday interactions with senior leaders and their teams, but also from the 100+ interviews we have conducted for the Hedley May Belonging Project. **More than 90% of these leaders of functions correlated empathy with fostering Belonging.**

Empathy can be referred to as perspective-taking, or the ability to truly sense others' feelings – 'EQ' or emotional intelligence. Fueling meaningful connection, it is the behavior, more than any response we give that helps our team members feel they Belong. Leading with empathy centers on being in touch with the alternative perspectives within your team, both personal and professional.

Most of our interviewees drew on their own experiences of empathy either being or indeed, not being, exhibited by their bosses to describe strong or weak leadership in this space. This trend was **marked among diverse interviewees, with over 65% highlighting the significance of having an empathetic leader:** someone they felt understood their perspective, regardless of whether this was shared by their boss.

These interviewees pointed to the importance of empathy through listening, vulnerability and encouragement, often surrounded by people who are 'not like me' and where it inevitably feels harder to Belong. Only 25% of interviewees with non-diverse traits made similar references.

### **How do we know if our existing team trusts us to lead empathetically?**

We need to sense-check our perception: for example, is this explicit in our 360 reviews or highlighted by our coach, our boss or from those who have our permission to speak honestly?

A recent HBR article suggested we are in an 'ethical revolution'. Now is a time when leaders are increasingly tasked with connecting the differences within their teams. Our findings recommend the following three cultural building blocks to strengthen our empathy muscle and successfully connect diverse teams to everyone's advantage.

## 1. Active Listening

Listening to understand what others feel and how they may be thinking enables you to understand their perspective to get under the skin of how your team and wider stakeholder groups feel.

This fosters an ability to anticipate both issues and opportunities, a real advantage in uncertain and volatile times. It looks like leading with curiosity rather than judgement or assumption.

■ ■ My boss makes a point of **seeking different perspectives** and you know he genuinely wants to hear every voice. ■ ■

■ ■ ...she wanted to get to know me as a person and followed that through with calls, texts etc. every week. **She took the initiative** to find out more about me. ■ ■

■ ■ Genuine floor walking – making the effort to understand those that are different to them – is rare. **It's energizing to go deeper than a superficial interest** in my role and what I did over the weekend. ■ ■



## 2. Vulnerability

It is unsurprising that the leading writer on vulnerability, Brené Brown, is frequently referenced on empathy. She says, 'Empathy is a vulnerable choice – in order to connect with you, I have to connect with something in myself that knows this feeling'.

One of the interesting Covid-19 outcomes in many of our client organizations is that leaders grew closer to their teams in the March to May period: leaders were giving glimpses (literally through their screens) of their home lives, and this allowed their teams to share too. It was not always pretty but it was authentic and it took vulnerability, and this created Belonging.

Empathy in this context is about more than looking at others' perspectives. We can start by looking inward and ask whether we are making it easy for others to want to share their stories with us in the first place.

Our senior leadership team **set the precedent**. They give us the platform to be authentic as they themselves do not put up a front, which brings a great deal of trust and admiration.

My boss was **very open about his own life and challenges** which really brought us together as a team. He enabled us to appreciate our differences and our own individual strengths.

## 3. Empowerment with encouragement

Good leaders generally empower, but great leaders add encouragement to the mix. Our findings demonstrate that, particularly if the person is the 'one and only' individual in the team with protected traits, then great leaders' encouragement is vital for resilience.

If a team member cannot see others like themselves upwards in the organization, then encouragement is the necessary building block to further development. Empowerment on its own is not enough. judgement or assumption.

My CEO always had my back, encouraged me and challenged me, putting me on the divisional leadership team. I have to attribute a lot to his trust in me and **making sure others knew it**.

**...he believed in me more than I did** but I didn't know how much I needed this. When he proposed I do this job I didn't understand why, but reflecting back, he went for good leadership skills and took a chance on me.

My boss visibly trusts me and values my opinion, I have never had that backing. **deeper than a superficial interest** in my role and what I did over the weekend.



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## Conclusion

It is our view at Hedley May that the most successful leaders over this next decade will rely on the vital leadership behavior of empathy. It will be the difference between those who build diverse cultures that deliver superior all-round performance, and those who do not. It is not a soft behavior; it is a hard one.

As headhunters, we have always identified the importance of empathy in good leadership but as a result of our recent findings we are now prioritising it as the most critical leadership behavior in the context of 2020 and beyond.



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### About Finola

Finola specializes in mandates across our Finance, Risk and Compliance, Board and Legal practices, with a particular focus on financial services institutions, including those projects for organizations in distress and transition.

### Background

Finola is committed to social mobility and the necessity of building and retaining a diverse workforce. She was a lead contributor to the Belonging Project, Hedley May's evidenced research into what makes people feel psychologically safe in the workplace. The findings further Hedley May's efforts to help clients and candidates thrive in a more inclusive future. The Project has proved a vital piece of work for the firm, challenging

and informing the organization, as well as underlining a genuine commitment to move the pursuit of greater representation.

Finola also liaises closely with Hedley May's community partners as part of the firm's commitment to our community, frequently organizing and participating in volunteering and fundraising initiatives.

Intellectually curious and keen to innovate, She has the space to contribute in an environment that values the input of the whole team.

Finola started her career in executive search in tax. She has a BA in Politics from the University of Exeter.

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