

the executive

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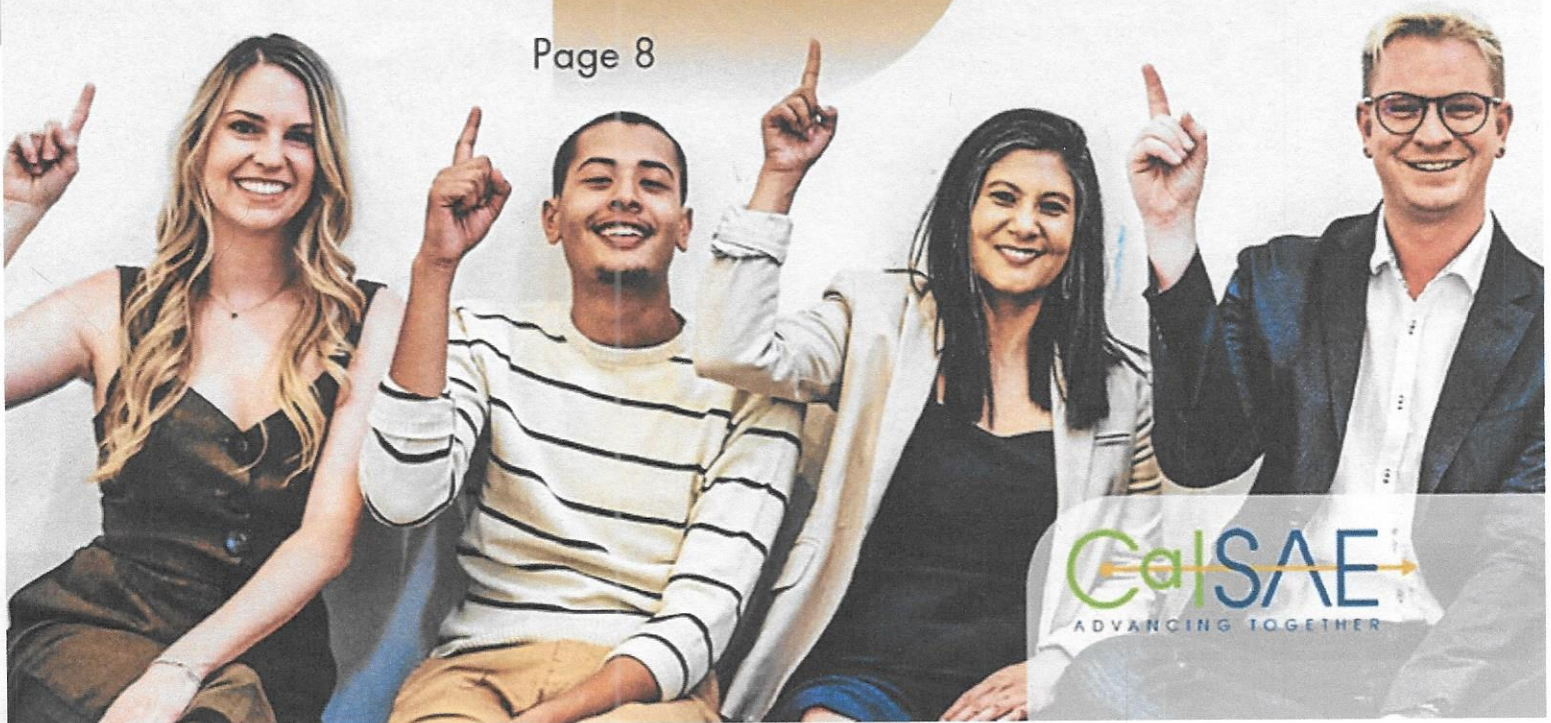
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CalSAE
ADVANCING TOGETHER

FEATURE

This DEI Article Is Brought To You By The Letter "B"

BY CHRIS LOCKE, SAMPE



During CalSAE's Seasonal Spectacular, I had the privilege of participating as a speaker on a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) panel with some very talented association professionals who brought a fresh, new perspective to DEI and what it meant to them and their organizations. Their points of view were delivered with antidotes and tips for audience members to take back to their associations in preparation for the year ahead. The biggest takeaway? DEI is evolving. The very *name*, DEI, is evolving. As panelists, we agreed that we needed to adjust the name of our

panel to include another letter to the DEI acronym; a "B" for belonging. Isn't that beautiful? I know of absolutely *no one* who hasn't ever felt the sense of not belonging and how awful it made them feel.

I was on my second temporary assignment for the Air Force. My squadron was participating in "war-game" joint exercises with the Army. I was getting my C-141 aircraft ready for flight while a group of Army Infantry sat on the tarmac watching their Air Force cohort's work. Out of nowhere, my work buddy ran up to me and said that one of the Army guys said he'd cut off a certain part of his anatomy if I, a "girl," could push a 10,000-pound pallet onto the plane by myself. My friend was mad enough for both of us. I told him not to worry and went on with my work, putting that 10k pallet, and many other bits of gear, onto that aircraft by myself. Hours later, this soldier and his first sergeant met my first sergeant and me in our breakroom. This suddenly sheepish tough guy apologized and lost a rank for his actions. What struck me, though, was that my peers and first sergeant were more upset about the event than I was. Afterward, what caught me by surprise was the sense that I belonged to this great group of folks who had my back.

By now, most of us know what DEI stands for, but the "B" is a little more than the obvious definition of "belonging." Being part of a workplace team implies a sense of value, that every team member thinks that their perspective is appreciated and that they are adding something useful to the organization. Just as DEI takes work, so does the B to be successful. It requires intentionality, training and perseverance. It means checking in with staff regularly, making sure everyone has a voice in meetings and utilizing hiring practices that go above and beyond the old ways of hiring to ensure that an organization's staff are a beautiful reflection of their membership and that new hires feel welcome to the team.

Feeling welcomed to a group when you're a new hire is a challenge, especially in this age of telecommuting and hybrid workplaces. Much has been written about how to work through the trials and tribulations of the post-pandemic workplace dynamic, and I'm not going to write about it here. Just know that as part of this new way of leading people in the workplace, providing that sense of belonging is tougher than ever and more important than ever. As leaders, we've likely heard our staff talk about their feelings of exhaustion, being overwhelmed and drowning in work. Heck, you probably feel that way

yourself. What separates leaders from managers is that even with these feelings of being overwhelmed, our team members know that they belong and that even during the tough times, we are all in this together. We belong together.

A few years ago, I took a class to become part of my local *Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program*. It's a program offered through my city's police department, in collaboration with the fire department, and prepares normal citizens on readiness, people helping people, rescuer safety and doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Today, I help teach in these classes and help make our newest CERT members feel like they *belong*. I want these newbies to know they are appreciated, not just for the practical skills they are learning but for the basic human needs they will bring back to their community. In one class, a volunteer introduced himself to the group and said he was "on the spectrum." When we had a break in the training, I introduced myself to him and learned that he is proud of his differences and sees them as an asset to the work our program provides. He explained that he knows our community has members with special needs and wants to reach out to them when there's an emergency so that they know they are not alone. My heart was full.

While having a happy heart is great, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) is also a smart business strategy. According to [Deloitte](#), when employees feel appreciated for contributing to advancing company goals, they are more likely to be engaged, more motivated and more likely to perform at a high level.

When I first took a job in the non-profit sector, my colleagues were professional, but some were not as welcoming as others. There was a strong faction of the "old school" folks who had been with the organization for 20-plus years and had zero interest in making this "newbie" feel like I belonged. If I had a nickel for every time I heard some iteration of "this is how we do it," I'd be retired. I swore I'd do everything possible to ensure everyone who followed me felt welcomed and that they most certainly belonged. For the folks who had been there long before I arrived, I worked hard to prove that I was not a threat to "their ways" and wanted everyone to thrive. It took a few years and a few staffing changes, but based on the results of staff surveys, it's clear that our work paid off. Our staff, the long-term folks and the newer ones, are all getting along very well.

Harkening back to that DEIB panel I was on, another useful piece of advice from our discussion was that moving from *talking* about DEIB to *doing* something doesn't have to be hard. Take baby steps. As [DEEL.com](#) reports, there are many small steps that

organizations can take to advance this important work. A few inclusive behaviors to incorporate in the workplace include:

- Listen for those who *aren't* talking and pull them into the conversation
- Ask questions regularly, especially of those who aren't typically in the spotlight
- Create a system for resolving disagreements with all levels of your organization
- Emphasize transparent dialogue
- Provide an environment for employees to feel heard and respected
- Support cross-departmental mentorship programs
- Celebrate multicultural holidays
- Regularly assess hiring requirements and the pay structure
- Be conscious of biases

My most important advice is to start small and keep your foot on the gas pedal. DEIB is not hard and is a wonderful tool in your leadership toolkit. I've found that recruiting DEIB advocates on my executive cabinet and the board has allowed staff and volunteer leadership the time and energy to make wonderful inroads in DEIB. In fact, with the support of our leaders, a small DEI task force has evolved into a permanent DEIB committee with long-term goals. This committee has made impactful changes, including implementing a DEI awards program that just launched a little over a year ago. We regularly have panels and networking events at our conferences that welcome women and minorities into a traditionally male-dominated industry.

Leadership brings with it many joys and opportunities to help those around you. Just as Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) has evolved to its current form of DEIB, your leadership style, and how it pertains to DEIB, must evolve as well. I cringe when I think about how managers thought they had to do business in the 90s compared to the current servant-leadership skills of the 20s. Today, leadership needs to be nimbler than ever, meaning that there must be a coherence between what organizations *want* to change and *how* they plan and execute that change. Leaders must look for DEIB opportunities in everything they do, and always be vigilant in the current culture's evolution of diversity,

equity, inclusion and belonging. The good news, as reported by [Forbes](#), is that highly inclusive companies are more likely to hit their financial target goals by up to 120%.

Be that agent of change in your own organization. Be the person who makes the quiet ones feel included. Insist that DEIB be a part of your life *outside* of your work as well: where you volunteer, where you spend your time and money and with whom you spend your free time. Belonging begins with you.



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