

## Article

# Community Belonging and Values-Based Leadership as the Antidote to Bullying and Incivility

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**Abstract:** This article examines the role of community as an antidote to bullying and incivility. The question we ask our readers to consider is: Does cultivating a culture of belonging for all acknowledge a most basic human need that members of organizations seek to meet during their day-to-day work lives? Belonging can serve as an antidote to feeling othered, which sows the seeds of separateness, isolation, absence of community, bullying, and incivility. Examples of othering behavior operate along a continuum that normalizes bullying, incivility and can escalate to include racism, sexism, classism, and a range of other non-inclusive behaviors. This conceptual article draws on our collective experience as educators in leadership. With humility, we rely on our efforts to amplify values-based leadership, community belonging, and ways of knowing from long ago wisdom. We seek to cultivate communities of belonging among leaders in education and ultimately in organizations and communities that exist beyond the classroom. We advocate belonging as an antidote to othering behaviors that can include bullying and incivility and draw on literature to support our approach.



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## 1. Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic has created an unexpected experiment in leadership. How leaders have responded to the pandemic has made a real difference in the lives of individuals, families, communities, and whole nations. At an organizational level, leaders have the capacity to create the conditions for enhanced organizational culture, giving rise to greater resilience and the ability to successfully navigate these rapid, unpredictable, paradoxical, and tangled (RUPT) times [1]. Conversely, leaders who respond with increased control can amplify the fear or competition over scarce resources that create conditions for bullying and incivility. As three leadership educators at a Canadian University, we approach our work with a sense of responsibility, knowing that *leadership matters* now more than ever in these extraordinary times.

As authors, we are members of communities, organizations, and educational institutions that have been impacted by bullying and incivility. At a regional level, we also have a powerful role model in Dr. Bonnie Henry, the Provincial Health Officer in British Columbia (BC), Canada, who has guided us through weekly COVID-19 updates and who concludes each briefing with the invitation for all residents of BC to “be kind, be calm, and be safe” [2] (p. 1). With the fear people are experiencing associated with this global pandemic, there have been far too many examples of incivility toward others. This current global health emergency has provided us all with an urgent reminder of the power of community, belonging, and inclusion in face of examples of disconnection, isolation, and incivility. A few local examples included the neo-Nazi graffiti that was spray painted in a forest surrounding the educational institution where we all work and the racist language being directed at members of a local Indigenous community. Our University president

promptly responded to the graffiti, by calling on us to stand together against all forms of hatred and racism while immediately taking steps to remove the paint. Our thesis is that belonging can serve as an antidote to othering, which sows the seeds of separateness, isolation, absence of community, bullying, and incivility.

In this conceptual article, we begin by reviewing the bullying and incivility literature from a range of perspectives: organizational, intersectional, colonial, and national. We then provide two examples from our work as leadership educators and how we support leaders in creating conditions for more inclusive learning and organizational cultures. In the first example, we introduce several approaches we use to cultivate communities of belonging through the values and ethics embedded in our curriculum. These elements are designed to make our approach explicit to cultivate belonging. We also provide working professionals who are leaders with the lived opportunity of experiencing belonging, overcoming barriers to inclusion, introducing the skills to have necessary conversations, and exploring values as a powerful tool for cultivating communities of belonging. In the second example, we draw upon values frameworks to support leaders in understanding the different levels of consciousness that people may be experiencing. Additionally, leaders are offered the opportunity to gain insight into how to shift behaviors through addressing what is important to people. We also actively cultivate communities of belonging within our classrooms, as if they were organizations, to support executive leadership development.

Although we acknowledge that bullying exists at the community, organizational, national, and international levels, and the review of literature reflects this wide scope, we then narrow our focus to reflect our direct teaching experience. Since most leaders we teach are adults who operate in organizational or community settings, we focus specifically in this article on the general leadership strategies these leaders might employ to address organizational culture challenges and enhancements. As a result, we do not focus on literature or practices related to bullying among children and adolescents, nor do we reference specific anti-bullying programs or campaigns. Readers who are interested in this literature might consult Midgett and Doumas or Silva et al. as examples for further reading [3,4].

We conclude this piece with a discussion of how leaders might engage their organizations and communities as a way to move forward from this global pandemic. We suggest that creating authentic spaces for caring engagement—spaces that allow for both self-expression and belonging in community—is one way to shift away from cultures of bullying and incivility. Having provided a review of our position and a high-level overview of our article, we now review key lessons from the literature.

## 2. Bullying and Incivility: Perspectives from the Literature

Walsh et al. provided a comprehensive review of literature related to workplace bullying and harassment [5]. Literature on harassment in the workplace began emerging in the 1970s [6], and the term workplace bullying gained traction in the 1990s [7]. Whereas harassment is defined as “unwelcome or offensive conduct” [5] (p. 72) and is directly related to an individual’s gender, race/color, or religious affiliation, bullying has a somewhat different connotation and is linked to organizational culture [5]. In the United States, bullying on its own is not illegal, unlike harassment. In fact, high-performing bullies often thrive in an organization if their efforts are seen to link to the bottom line. However, researchers have found the collective sales of the team increased once the person exhibiting bullying behavior was removed from the organization [5]. Overall, Walsh et al. suggested that the leaders of bullies must be involved in the solution [5]. Without the involvement of leaders, bullies will not take complaints against themselves seriously until they are held accountable for their behavior.

To add complexity to this discussion, Feijó et al. discussed how bullying can be seen from a relational, systems perspective [8]. They identified how difficult it actually is to determine whether bullying is occurring and then take appropriate action. They suggested that although power dynamics do play a role, “bullying can be directed from a superior

to a subordinate or vice versa” [8] (p. 2). Moreover, bullying behaviors are often unconscious, and both parties will defend their own position. This renders the work of Human Resources staff even more difficult as they are obliged to hear each party out and often empathize with both sides. Although individualized interventions might support behavior change, the complexity of this issue points to a need to focus on organizational structures and culture.

From a feminist organizational development (OD) practitioner perspective, Batliwala summarized, “Deep-seated resistance to organizational change, especially towards more gender equal and just practices, arises from the deep structure” [9] (p. 23). Her definition of deep structure includes the three elements of power, influence, and culture [9]. These elements are difficult to explicitly name, are often hidden, and have significant impact on members of an organization. Deep structure elements have been exacerbated and complexified during the COVID-19 pandemic, with female leaders celebrated for their compassionate leadership approach [10] at the same time as women continue to be excluded from leadership roles, decisions, and career advancement, in part due to the double burden of unpaid care often required of them in the home [11]. With these three elements of deep structure embedded in our organizations and communities, the work of cultivating ethical climates of openness and transparency requires skilled and committed practitioners and leaders.

The presence of multiple differences contributes to additional challenges as leaders seek to cultivate and create environments in which we can all thrive. The concept of intersectionality is useful in understanding how multiple, overlapping social identities create complexity when seeking to honor difference and create welcoming spaces of belonging [12,13]. Examples of layered social identities include race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, different abilities, language fluency, class, and religion, to name a few. Breslin et al. “portrayed how multiple marginal and socially constructed identities (each separate roads) converge within a single social group (the intersection). This often occurs with tragic consequences for those within the intersection—only made worse by the group’s invisibility as victims” [14] (p. 164). As a result, in organizations and communities in which cultivating inclusive environments of belonging is not intentionally acted upon, the deep dominant structures of power, influence, and culture identified above can contribute to acts of incivility and bullying.

Beyond the context of workplaces, and despite considerable efforts to address this troubling phenomenon, bullying and incivility continue to exist at local community and national levels. At a macro level, the colonizing focus on economic growth and individual achievement at the expense of community benefit has fueled bullying and incivility. Author and social activist bell hooks uses the phrase “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” [15] (p. 6) to describe how the focus on economic growth becomes interwoven with other dominating systems [15,16]. The human development index (HDI) offers an alternative approach to measuring achievement, by expanding the definition of development within a country. The HDI moves beyond capitalism and economic prosperity as two measures that, when considered exclusively, are ultimately incomplete.

At a national level in the authors’ country of origin (Canada), the words bullying and incivility do not begin to capture the systemic violence inherent to colonization. In Canada, the effects of colonization have been named “cultural genocide” [17] (p. 1) by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada, the brutal legacy of which continues to this day. Unfortunately, the racist, patriarchal, hierarchical, anthropocentric culture of extractive capitalism, which is inherent to colonization, permeates many organizations and harms Indigenous peoples and descendants of immigrants alike. Naming and transforming this culture becomes part of the work of decolonization, reconciliation, and creating cultures of belonging.

As descendants of immigrants to this land now known as Canada, we feel a responsibility not only to work toward the widespread decolonizing cultural change required to

redress historic and ongoing damage of colonization, but also to learn from the wisdom of Indigenous leaders and Indigenous approaches to leadership.

In education and in communities, we have explored a possible antidote to bullying and incivility. Through our work as educators, we have sought to intentionally cultivate environments of belonging in our leadership learning environments [18,19]. More recently, in organizations, we are observing that both decolonization and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts are further cultivating environments that amplify belonging.

In the sections below, we discuss some of the ways that we, as leadership educators, endeavor to create a classroom culture that supports a sense of belonging and creates curriculum to help leaders to build inclusive organizational cultures.

### 3. Belonging in Community: Antidote to Bullying and Incivility

The three authors teach in a Master of Arts in Leadership (MAL) program at a Canadian University. From its inception, contributors who have worked to develop and refine this program over the past 25 years have understood that people learn better when they feel they belong (for a complete exploration of this topic, see Page et al. [19]). Said differently, community cannot exist without people experiencing a sense of belonging [18]. As such, a learning community includes learning in the context of belonging. For this reason, we have historically placed, and continue to place, a strong emphasis on building community among our students from the start of their program. Recognizing that people respond differently to different scenarios and have different learning preferences [20], the MAL program offers a diverse range of options for experiencing community, with the intention of offering the possibility of belonging for everyone.

In addition, researchers identified, “People have six psychological needs that they expect will be met in the workplace: respect, recognition, belonging, autonomy, personal growth, and meaning” [21] (p. 20). While we aim to meet all of these psychological needs, the focus on belonging to community allows students to (a) understand “that one’s own stories are partial, local, limited, or bounded, and (b) [realize] the value of remaining in the tension between standing one’s own ground and being profoundly open to the other” [22] (p. 55).

As a result, the act of belonging is co-created through sharing stories and understanding oneself more deeply. It is through this understanding of self in relationship to others that we can teach effective and holistic leadership that cultivates environments of civility and belonging.

### 4. Values-Based Leadership: Creating Cultures

Since bullying is linked to organizational culture, as suggested above, one solution then resides in shaping and/or transforming organizational culture. A critical way to transform organizational culture is through the leadership development of senior leaders. Senior leaders are responsible for setting organizational strategy: attending to vision, mission, values, and policies. They also set the tone and direction for culture [23] and model the way [24]. As a result, with a specialized offering of the MAL program, the need for executive leadership education is recognized to strengthen the character and capabilities of senior leaders for purposes of shaping and/or transforming organizational culture. This is done through values-based leadership education.

In 2012, our colleague Dr. Marilyn Taylor started the Values Based Leadership Graduate certificate which serves as the first term of the MA Leadership with an executive leadership specialization. Through succession planning, Taylor transitioned program head duties to Kathy Bishop while still being active in contributing to quality programming [25]. Bishop offers that within this program, values-based leadership is more than identifying values and putting them on a wall [26]. Faculty work with students on a twofold process, namely embodied learning and practice. Values-based frameworks and tools [27,28] are utilized to develop understanding and foster intentionally living values-in-action. In the classroom, Bishop and team create a living leadership laboratory in which students

take responsibility for integrating theory and practice by co-creating their own culture. One of the key theories we draw upon for practice is Barrett's work on values-driven organizations [27].

Barrett offers a values framework that addresses seven levels of consciousness for individuals, organizations, and society [27]. Expanding on the work of psychologist Maslow's hierarchy of needs, who was influenced by Blackfoot teachings [29], Barrett identified the seven levels as survival, relationship, self-esteem, transformation, internal cohesion, making a difference, and service [27] (p. 64). The first three levels are identified as basic needs, the fourth level as a place of transformation, and the final three levels as growth needs/desires. Basic needs center around feeling safe, belonging, and having a sense of self-worth, whereas growth needs/desires address a sense of meaning and fulfillment [27] (p. 8). Basic needs have to be satisfied before a person, organization or society can move onto growth needs [27] (p. 19). The first three levels focus on "I", whereas from level five onwards a shift in focus occurs to "We". This is important for leaders to understand, because often employees may be operating at different levels of needs and in order to mobilize people toward a common goal or mission, the needs/desires for that level of consciousness must be satisfied. For example, if an employee is afraid of losing their job (Level 1 survival) or does not feel like they fit with the team (Level 2 relationship), then they will not be at a place to fully embrace the leader's call for change (Level 4 transformation).

Within each level of consciousness, unique values and tasks are identified [27] (pp. 64–73), which can enable understanding and shifting consciousnesses. In a survival stage, individual values center around health, security, and financial stability. In an organization, this shows up as valuing financial performance and growth as well as employee health and safety. In the relationship stage, individual values of harmony, friendship, and belonging as well as organizational values of loyalty, open communication, and customer satisfaction are key. Considering the levels of survival and relationship, this is why safety is often linked with belonging. People must feel safe. Barrett noted that if survival needs are not taken care of, it can lead to controlling, dominating or cautious behaviors. Similarly, not feeling protected can lead to feelings of jealousy, blame, or discrimination on a personal level. In a group, behaviors of manipulation, favoritism, and internal competition can occur within an organization. These feelings are driven by fear and are an unhealthy way of trying to get individual or organizational needs met. Understanding this, leaders can seek to shift a fear-driven culture to a culture of care [27] (p. xvi) through attending to what is important to people from the level of consciousness that they are operating at, and what they value at any given time. Recognizing that values do not act in isolation and that specific supporting values need to be in place, leaders can focus on key values to create a sense of belonging.

As discussed above, senior leaders need to hold people accountable for bullying; however, this does not mean ostracizing the person who is engaging in unhealthy and destructive actions. Through his work with theatre for community change, Diamond recognized the need for creating a space in which people can be brought into community, not ostracized from it, while having the opportunity to work with stories and play out different possibilities in action [30]. Diamond reframed Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* [31] to *Theatre of the Living* [30]. Given that, as facilitators, we agree we cannot assume what a safe space may look like for all participants [32], we ask participants across all the MAL programs to co-create brave spaces with us [33]. "This acknowledges that at times we may feel uncomfortable or choose to take risks or that we may enable spaces of grace, where we accept people however they show up and trust the process will deepen our understandings and connections" [26] (p. 6).

Within the executive leadership specialization, Bishop and team create the space for leaders to build their character and capabilities by understanding values frameworks and cultivating communities of belonging within the classroom. To this end, leaders need to first develop their own ethical reasoning. Jordon et al. "propose a direct, positive relationship between executives' cognitive moral development and followers' perceptions of their

ethical leadership” [23] (p. 664). Although Kohlberg spoke to higher levels of moral development [34], Barrett recognized the need for all levels [27] and thus called for “full spectrum consciousness” [27] (p. 66). Full spectrum leaders recognize that all levels are important and that in order to live higher level values, the values in previous levels need to be met. By cultivating communities of belonging within the classroom as if the classroom were an organization, students are able to take their lived experience beyond the classroom, and back into their organizations.

### 5. Steps Forward: Community Belonging and Values-Based Leadership as the Antidote to Bullying and Incivility

In this conceptual piece, we have drawn from our teaching experiences with leaders in multiple sectors to offer one possible antidote to bullying and incivility. Above, we have suggested that creating communities of belonging and developing shared values can support a culture of inclusion, thereby addressing the structures that otherwise give rise to bullying and incivility. As we imagine our organizations and communities beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an opportunity to intentionally rebuild our communities and organizations in ways that are more supportive, inclusive, and equitable for all. As we endeavor along this path, we offer the following steps forward.

First, we might consider the words of leadership thinkers such as Margaret Wheatley [35–37] and Peter Block [12]. Wheatley asked, “What would it feel like to be listening to each other again about what disturbs and troubles us? And about what gives us energy and hope?” [37] (p. 7). Similarly, Block called for us to create conversational opportunities to express dissent, doubts, and reservations [18]. Through the conversations of giving voice to dissent and doubt, particularly amidst these uncertain times, leaders can cultivate opportunities for organization and community members to bring their whole selves to their work. In this way, leaders are instilling confidence that dissent is also welcome at work. Block also invited us to transform our understanding of leadership from one of leader as hero, to leader as convener and host [38]. The opportunity for leaders to convene conversations of belonging and connection as an antidote to incivility invites us all to count ourselves into the discussions that reduce isolation, loneliness, and incivility. Wheatley described community as “the web of our interconnections, the safety net of caring that we extend to one another when life is hard” [36] (p. 1). Through the process of dialogue and connection, we can share our stories with one another. We can also identify the spaces in which we can support ourselves, the members of our communities, and our organizations in having the deep conversations of connection and caring.

As we have discussed above, leaders have the opportunity to create space to nurture the leader within each of us and encourage one another to serve the common good of the many communities in our spheres of responsibility. Page identified the collective values that sustained leaders who were navigating the inevitable challenges of their leadership [39]. These values included caring, commitment, courage, and integrity. The leadership invitation is to convene courageous conversations of caring. To encourage conversations that by their very nature also deepen the connection among community and organizational members. Wheatley reminded us, “You do not fear people whose story you know” [37] (p. 166). In seeking to cultivate diverse communities of civility, inclusion, and belonging, we can invite all members of the community to express their caring for themselves and for one another. Furthermore, we can consider Barrett’s values framework for other ways to support caring for one another through full spectrum consciousness [27]. To accept the idea offered by Peter Block of leaders as conveners [18], as we imagine a post-pandemic world, what might we learn by encouraging caring for one another?

More than a decade before the pandemic, Wheatley stated, “Our pressure-cooked lives are driving us farther away from the very resource that could most help us—strong relationships with those in our local communities” [36] (p. 1). As described above, this lack of relationship has created conditions for bullying and incivility. For many people, this pressure has only been exacerbated by COVID-19. As we imagine our way forward, we can heed Wheatley’s guidance on the power of both-and thinking: “Life requires the honoring

of its two great needs, not one. In seeking to be a community member, we cannot abandon our need for self-expression” [35] (pp. 48–49). As leaders consider the possibilities for enhancing care of self, care for others, and care for communities, several opportunities for leadership exist. Specifically, leaders have the opportunity to (a) engage in behaviors that intentionally build trust, (b) strengthen organizational culture by thoughtfully seeking achievements to celebrate, (c) use appreciative language, (d) consider the possibilities of creating both brave and safe spaces for communication [33] as well as spaces of grace [26], (e) become aware of their impact, and, finally, (f) motivate organizational members through the co-creation and sharing of a meaningful purpose.

In conclusion, as Irish poet and philosopher O’Donohue reminded us, “We long to belong because we feel the lonesomeness of being individuals. Deep within us, we long to come in from separation and be at home again in the embrace of a larger belonging” [40] (p. 4). As so many are experiencing profound lonesomeness and isolation, we call upon each and every one of us to play a role to support ourselves and others in moving forward from the pandemic. We are also calling on leaders to convene inclusive spaces in which we can express ourselves, while experiencing a deep sense of belonging in our communities, educational institutions, and organizations.

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