FOREWORD

BRAVING THE WORKPLACE

Belonging at the Breaking Point

BY **JEAN KANTAMBU LATTING**, DRPH, LMSW

In this heartfelt and illuminating book, Dr. Beth Kaplan shares her personal journey of discovery, guiding us through the vital importance of belonging in our workplaces and personal lives, while offering compassionate insights and practical wisdom for navigating our own paths.

She opens the book with a powerful promise to the reader:

> *"I know what it's like to be unseen, unheard, and unhappy. I know what it's like to feel so much and have so much to say but you can't find the words to express what you are going through. I know what it's like to feel tired, a deep fatigue, preventing you from absorbing joy. It's lonely. But you are not alone. We're in this together. The good news is that you've survived 100% of your toughest days and I am going to get you through the rest."*

Indeed, Dr. Kaplan fulfills this promise. Through stories of her own life and references to both popular and scholarly authors, she explains why she became interested enough in the topic of belonging to commit her time and effort to writing about it. However, most impressive is Dr. Kaplan's groundbreaking academic research throughout the book and how she translates behavioral science into everyday practices we all can use. It is no wonder that she is considered one of the world's leading experts on belonging.

Dr. Kaplan's compelling narrative of her ultimately futile attempts to achieve belonging in an unforgiving workplace resonated deeply with me. It accurately captures what people, myself included, go through in places where they are told in multiple ways that they don't belong.

Like many others, I stayed in a workplace where I felt misaligned, undervalued, and undermined. It wasn't until several friends bluntly told me that I was in an untenable situation that I was able to step outside of myself and realize I had to take a stand on my own behalf.

Dr. Kaplan aims to spare readers this form of self-devaluing and torture. She wants readers in such situations to have sufficient knowledge and examples that they can recognize what is happening to them, and not think a superhuman effort will pull them through – or feel like a failure if despite their best efforts, they are still put outside the insiders' circle.

She explains key concepts such as belonging, inclusivity, bravery, and courage, distinguishing among them and highlighting their importance. She discusses the crucial role of managers in setting the tone and culture of a workplace and how to recognize toxic environments.

Throughout the book, Dr. Kaplan provides questionnaires and tools for readers to assess themselves and determine the level of isolation – or even danger – they might be in. One critical clue is whether the stress is threatening their own mental and physical health. She doesn't shy away from the term "suicide ideation" as one possible outcome if a person submits to an unrelenting work environment.

Toward the end, she offers a framework for deciding whether to stay or leave a job, with the bottom line questions being: Are your values aligned with the organization, or are they misaligned? Is your health being jeopardized if you stay? Are you growing or stagnant? Can you support the organization fully with your whole, authentic self, and does it support you in return?

As a leadership coach specializing in diversity, equity, and inclusion, I found this book truly eye-opening. Before my in-depth conversation with Kaplan and reading her insights, I hadn't fully realized how important it is to distinguish between belonging and inclusion. This book changed my mind: inclusion is something the organization provides, while belonging is the impact on the individual – whether the person feels a sense of connection, acceptance, and being valued.

WHEN WE STAY IN ENVIRONMENTS WHERE WE BELIEVE WE DON'T BELONG, WE PUT OURSELVES AT RISK.

Dr. Kaplan's stance in this book is clear: she understands why people stay in challenging work situations, but her fervent wish is for readers to use this book to reevaluate their circumstances and leave if necessary. To that end, the book provides an opportunity for readers to track their origin story, put their past in perspective, identify what's important to them, recognize their areas of strength, and gain perspective on their current situation.

In essence, Dr. Kaplan's work serves as both a mirror and a guide, helping readers recognize unhealthy work environments and providing them with the tools to make informed decisions about their professional and personal lives. It's a valuable resource for anyone struggling with workplace belonging, offering both empathy and practical advice for navigating your challenging situations.

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