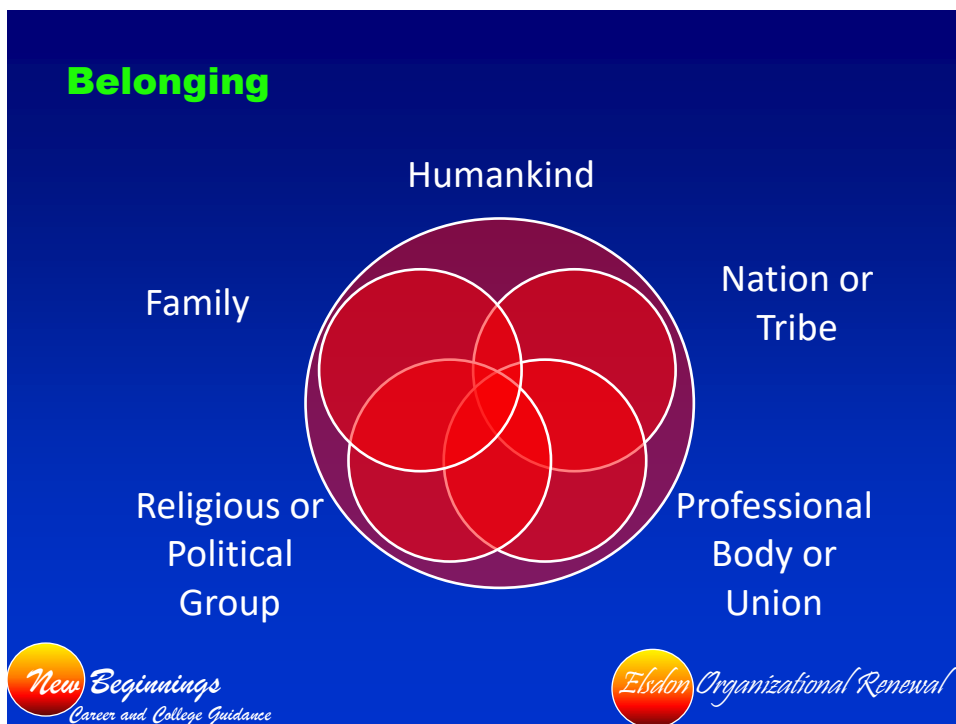
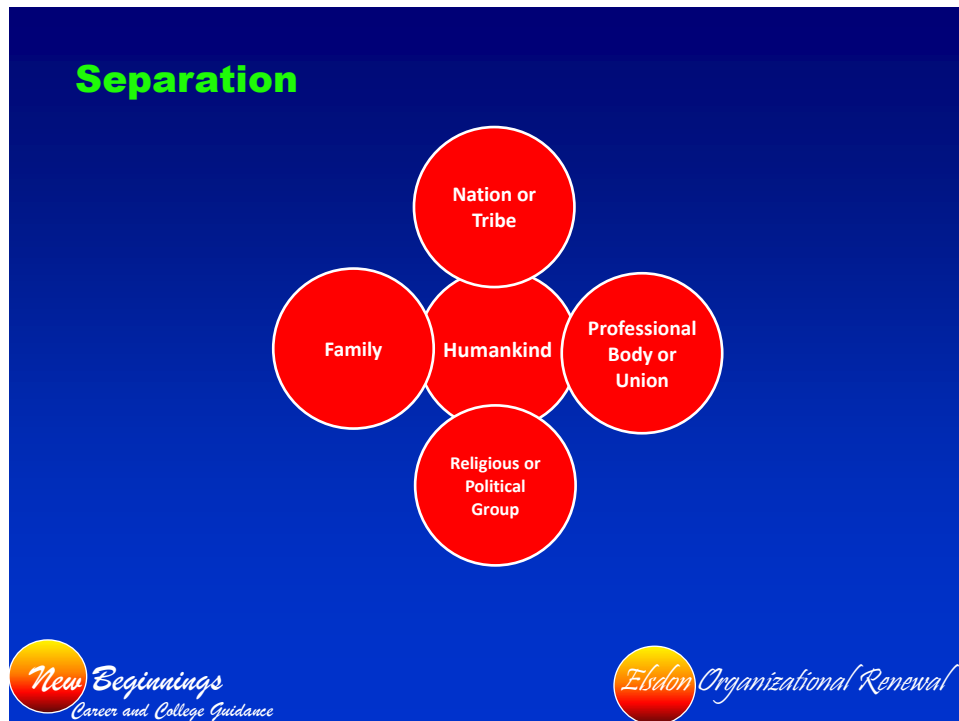


Belonging

A sense of belonging is individually affirming and important for organizations exploring how to strengthen affiliation. We examine both aspects here. A recent New York Times article (A Question About Friends Reveals a Lot About Class Divides by Damon Darlin, September 1, 2016) points out, not surprisingly, that we affiliate in groups with others having similar educational backgrounds, incomes, ethnicities, or political views. It is one way we affirm our sense of belonging. It's easier to be with those like us. These various groups each have particular characteristics, and associated expectations of members. For example, at the broadest level we are part of humankind and can trace our ancestry back to those first intrepid travelers from Africa some 50,000 years ago. At the closest level, we are part of families that live, love, and share together. And there are many groups in between, for example nation or tribe, political group, religious group, organization, professional body, union, trade association, alumni group, or sport or recreational group. Belonging can ennoble us and bring us nearer to others and to our communities. For example, those brave doctors who journey with Doctors Without Borders. We can represent examples of belonging by overlapping circles as follows:



Unfortunately, groups can also exclude others, leading to separation and sometimes physical or psychological violence. For example, war that imposes one group's values on another, or enslaves another. This sometimes masquerades under the euphemism of patriotism. We can represent examples of separation by isolated circles as follows:



Distinguishing among groups where belonging is affirming and inclusive from those that are exclusionary is important and challenging. I recall giving a presentation some years ago to a group in Orange County, California, about my first book *Affiliation in the Workplace*. I had given similar presentations many times before, speaking to the importance of leaders creating a sense of inspiring purpose for those in their organizations. Participants in previous presentations embraced such a sense of inspiring purpose, acknowledging a connection to a common good. For the first time, in this Orange County session, one participant identified greed as providing a sense of personal purpose. It is hard to imagine greed unifying others, though easy to see it dividing and excluding.

How does this relate to organizations? The decision to affiliate with an organization is, at its core, an emotional decision. It is complex, intimately connected to finding fulfillment, and unique for each of us, building on a fundamental human need for belonging, despite difficulties, tensions and ambiguities. Organizations engage in conversion processes that generate a combination of economic, social, and community value. In times past conversion processes were largely physical, for example iron ore into steel, or natural fibers into yarn, fabric and garments. Today information and service delivery dominate in developed economies, for example in the creation of software, visual images, textile designs or leadership development processes. This usually requires an extensive and growing body of knowledge, and frequently involves complex relationships both within and outside organizations. People gain in effectiveness with time and experience, in turn generating more organizational value. Continuing to secure this productivity gain also means re-energizing the relationship over time through growth and development. Economic value is enhanced through extended rather than transient relationships. Extended affiliation both enhances individual fulfillment and organizational value creation and it is built on a sense of belonging.

Affiliation at its core is a two-way relationship, supported by both individuals and organizations. In the emerging work world both parties have an equal say. Such a two-way relationship is strong when both parties willingly participate without one being coerced by the other. The emerging approach contains the following elements:

- Understanding individual needs
- Providing options and choices
- Fostering learning
- Supporting breadth in development
- Engaging individuals as if they were volunteers

Strong relationships of individuals to organizations reflect each person's individual needs rather than a “take it or leave it” proposition rolled off an organizational assembly line. Strong relationships are one-to-one not one-to-many. They require enhanced interpersonal skills from those in the organization. They also require deep knowledge of organizational direction and opportunities, as the relationships build and grow around the provision of options and choices. These choices include practical aspects such as time flexibility, structural aspects such as the nature of management relationships, and content aspects such as project areas of interest. However, when employment relationships are tenuous and transitory, as they are increasingly becoming, internal connections create limited value for the organization, and they are not portable, which is a problem for individuals, given frequently limited tenure with an organization.

These concerns are addressed by a nontraditional, entrepreneurial career path, which is tailored by each person to his or her individual needs, while addressing societal and market needs and opportunities. A nontraditional career path often contains more than one source of income and is strengthened by long-term relationships that are not dependent on a single employment connection. Such relationships include giving and receiving, personal development, and connection with others who affirm a sense of belonging. These relationships include family and people close to us, a broad work and social community, team members, partners and investors, customers and clients. A nontraditional career path is an opportunity to engage others as employees or contractors creating a shared sense of meaning and being, a shared sense of belonging. This leads to strong affiliation, excellent service to customers and differentiation from large organizations where employee engagement levels are typically much lower. A nontraditional career path is also an opportunity to partner with others, building on cultural alignment, alignment of objectives, mutual respect, and mutual benefit, all leading to a shared sense of belonging.

We can create belonging through the individual paths we take and the bonds of affiliation we foster. This may be a result of an employment relationship or a nontraditional career path. Belonging brings personal affirmation. And it carries with it understanding and honoring of community well-being, supporting the needs and growth of others, and reaching out to those who

may otherwise be excluded. The form this belonging takes will evolve as we mature from dependency as children to interdependency as adults. This is reflected in our work lives whether, in a nontraditional, entrepreneurial career path, as described in *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path*, in our relationship with organizations as described in *Affiliation in the Workplace* and *Building Workforce Strength*, or in our relationship with our communities as described in *Business Behaving Well*. Indeed, this sense of belonging speaks to our core humanity and our sense of purpose in our work lives and in ourselves.

Parts of this article are extracted from, or based on concepts from, *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path* (Praeger, 2014), *Business Behaving Well* (Potomac Books, Inc., 2013), *Building Workforce Strength* (Praeger, 2010), and *Affiliation in the Workplace* (Praeger, 2003).