



# Creating a Culture of Belonging: Invitations & Growth

By [Charles Vogl](#)



*also featured on Psychology Today*

A few years ago, Twitch.tv co-founder Kevin Lin and I had lunch at a taqueria in downtown San Francisco. I didn't know this at the time, but later that year Amazon would buy Twitch for just under a billion dollars. Kevin told me that 50 million users came to Twitch every month to share and watch videos of online game play, talk about games and create connections around the world. He knew the number of online gamers in the world and knew that Twitch could connect millions more. (Today, Twitch serves more than 200 million users a month.)

In addition to growing user numbers, Kevin wanted to build a stronger community among its current users. He knew that many users felt disconnected to the people physically near them and stigmatized for their gaming enthusiasm. Twitch was creating a community and culture unprecedented in kind and size in history. He wondered how to build a feeling of belonging among his users.

Listening to Kevin, my head almost burst with possibilities. In that moment, I saw that while he had spent years building a billion dollar tech company and I had spent years studying spiritual communities that have remained connected for over a thousand years, we both understood the importance of creating belonging. Now there was an opportunity to connect the pieces.

At home I began writing down core principles that spiritual groups have used throughout history to create connection, community and belonging. I hoped that Kevin could use them in serving tens of millions. When I had learned more about disconnection and loneliness in our generation, about how tech companies like Twitch are bringing people together in unprecedented ways, and about the unfulfilled longing to belong professionally, spiritually, politically (and in many other ways) in this age, the writing became a book.

*The Art of Community: 7 Principles for Belonging* (Berrett-Koehler) supports leaders like Kevin as they strive to create cultures of belonging in their organization, field or movement.

### **Americans are Lonely**

We may be living in the most lonely time in American history. Massachusetts General Hospital Doctor Dhruv Khullar wrote in a recent New York Times article that “Social isolation is a growing epidemic — one that’s increasingly recognized as having dire physical, mental and emotional consequences. Since the 1980s, the percentage of American adults who say they’re lonely has doubled from 20 percent to 40 percent.” The American Sociological Review states that the number of people who say that they have no one to talk about difficult subjects has tripled in the last few decades. and the size of the average person’s social network decreased by one-third in the last generation. There are a number of factors that may have gotten us here. Famously, Robert Putnam has written about the dissolution of social clubs that served previous generations. We know that Americans are leaving their

religious institutions at unprecedented rates. Access to social media has allowed many of us to avoid speaking in person. But still, Americans are desperate to connect and belong.

As Americans leave spiritual institutions, they may leave behind ideologies and theologies that no longer fit them, but they have also lost the communities that have centuries of experience connecting people with shared values so they feel connected. My work includes helping leaders create a culture of belonging so that members and future members know that they belong and feel the connection in their relationships.

In my work, I define a “culture of belonging” or “community” as a group of people who perceive mutual concern for one another. Many managers and leaders simply declare their group to be a community, but this doesn’t make it so. There are principles that leaders can use so members can see that others care about them, and they can make known their own concern for others.

## **Invitations**

Explicit invitations are important. While this sounds obvious, it is shocking how many opportunities for invitation are ignored. I recently spoke with some student religious leaders at Harvard, and a Catholic student leader explained to me that he knew how many Catholics were in the school. While many of them attended mass, very few showed up for non-mass events. He wondered how Catholic leaders could boost involvement and connection among Catholic students. I asked, “In any year, how many phone calls would a Catholic student receive inviting them to a hosted event?” The answer was, zero. There was no planned in-person outreach either. All the Catholic students were on a blasted email list. Mass emails are not very welcoming and are never a strong way to invite. Personal invitations give future members concrete proof that they belong. Receiving nothing more than an email blast tells them you don’t really care.

How much easier it would be if we could “mail merge” belonging! A few keystrokes and people would connect with us and become our friends and colleagues. Unfortunately, this doesn’t exist. Anything valuable and durable takes time and investment, and belonging is no different. Members and future members want to understand that someone cares if they participate and contribute. If we want to build powerful and effective belonging, then we have to invest in powerful, clear, and often-repeated invitations even if most are rejected or ignored. Like casting a fishing line, we never know when we will catch something, we simply know that casting is the only way to success.

If you are working to create belonging in your organization or movement, when are you making specific invitations and are you allowing for repetition until success?

### **Growing Externally & Internal**

The most powerful cultures help members grow into who they want to be. Part of the growth may include discovering how they want to grow. There are at least two kinds of growth: external and internal.

External growth is usually easier, simpler to identify and includes skills, personal connections, and acquiring relevant knowledge. When I was a young New York City documentary filmmaker, several organizations helped me meet successful filmmakers, understand media law, and complete funding applications. These were all really important in my formation as a filmmaker and were all part of my external growth.

The internal growth is far more crucial to connecting members and creating belonging, and cannot be learned from books, videos, or panel discussions. This growth can be described as a form of being: being aware, discerning, committed. To grow as a filmmaker, for example, meant learning to be brave enough to ask for

money, patient enough with the slow birth of a film, and focused enough to complete the tasks ahead. We may simply grow internally in relationships with other members or in the experiences other members encourage us to consider and then support us to complete. Whatever the case, it takes time to build that growth with other members who share their stories and their commitment to our success is imperative.

This past fall I was invited to join an authors' group. For many years, a number of new and young authors had declined to participate, which wasn't promising for the future of the group. Several current members asked me to help them understand how to make the group more attractive to new authors. In my first weekend with the group, I saw that the existing members preferred to hang out with old friends and drink wine. There was no apparent interest in supporting the new authors, to help them develop stronger voices, reach new audiences, or manage new opportunities. Given the attitude of the older members, it wasn't surprising that new authors passed up this membership, failing to see any potential for internal growth.

### **Next Steps**

There's much more to developing your own strengths in creating belonging than making lots of invitations and offering members a way to grow, however, these principles are important first steps. If you are struggling with creating a belonging culture or you are starting out from scratch, consider clarifying (in your own mind at least) who is getting a clear invitation so they know you actually care, and how are you inviting them to grow in ways they'd like to.

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