



**CAPACITYCANADA**

# Creating A Culture of Belonging & Inclusion

April 2026 Ideas Conference

# About Capacity Canada

Founded in 2009, Capacity Canada is a registered charity that helps non-profits leverage their strengths by allowing them to exercise new ideas to fill unmet needs in their communities.

We have worked with over 1,000 nonprofits – providing resources and professional supports that enhance leadership skills, stimulate cross-sector collaboration, promote knowledge sharing, and encourage social innovation.

## THEORY OF CHANGE

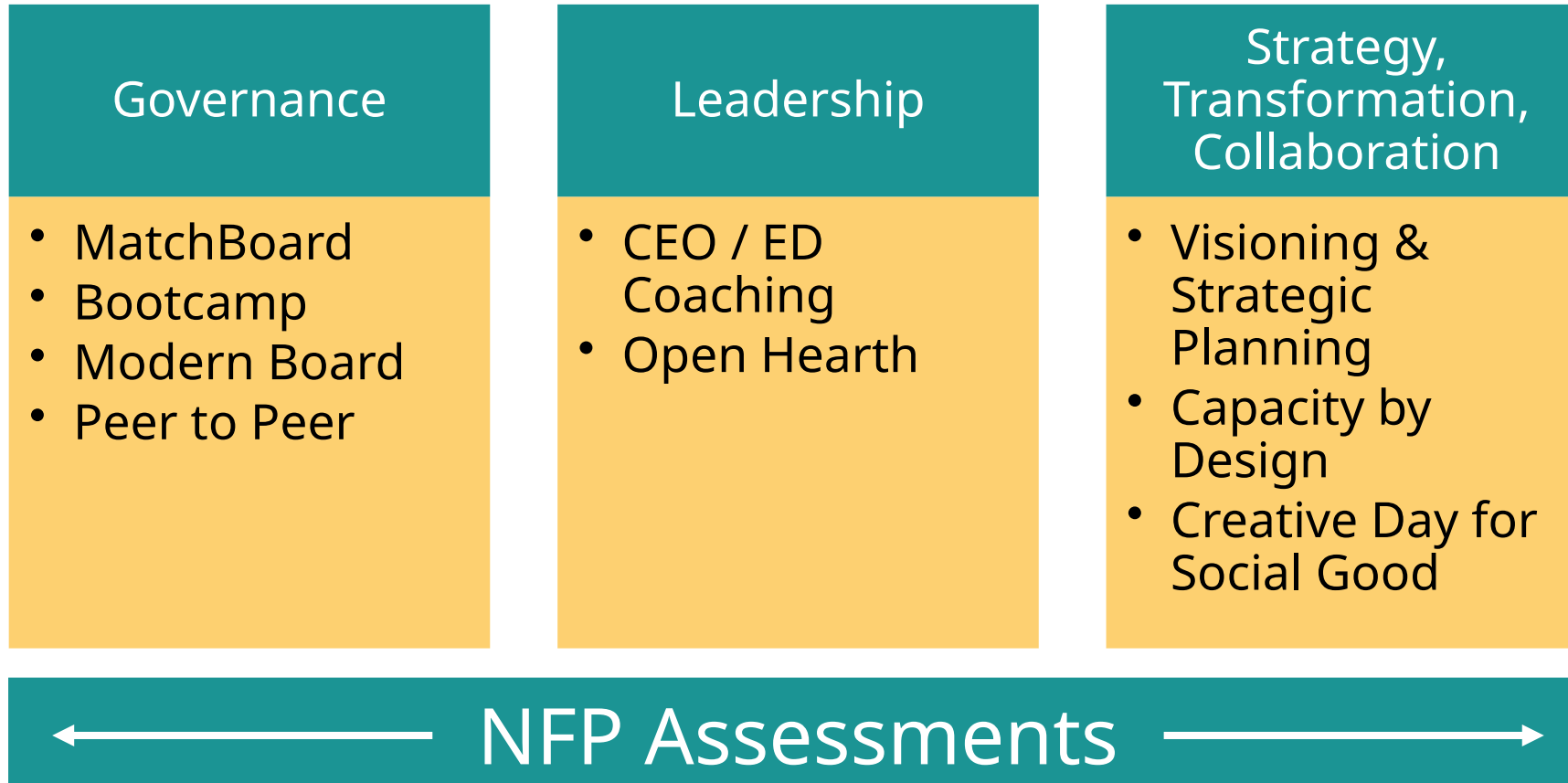
If we bring together the ideas, people and resources that fuel social innovation

We expect to build capacity to be more strategic, courageous, and innovative

So that together, we can build solutions to complex issues and do more social good



# NFP Programs & Services



## INTRODUCTION

# About Us



**LIZ DENNIS**

Executive in Residence, Human Centred Design

✉ [liz@capacitycanada.ca](mailto:liz@capacitycanada.ca)

- 20 years in the nonprofit sector
- Led regional capacity building initiatives in evaluation, information & referral and volunteer recruitment
- Runs a small business; volunteers for the arts community

*Executives in Residence* = Cadre of folks with a range of skills & expertise who are ready to help.



**HUGH MUNRO**

Executive in Residence, Human Centred Design

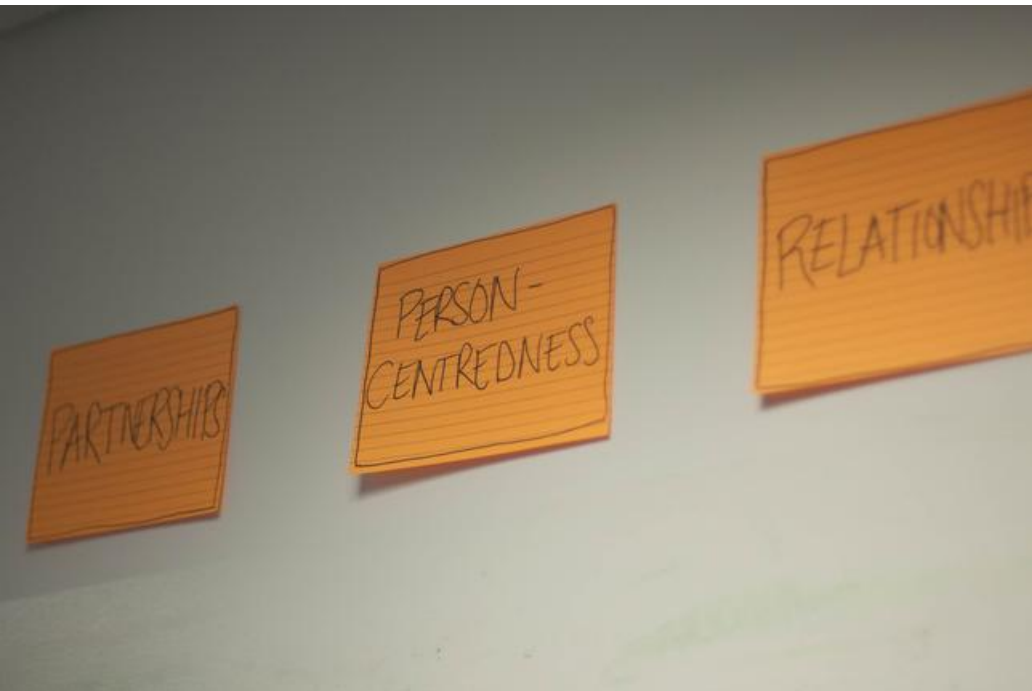
✉ [hugh@capacitycanada.ca](mailto:hugh@capacitycanada.ca)

- Long career in higher education as professor of marketing with Wilfrid Laurier University
- Continues to teach and consult in marketing and strategy for the private and public sector
- Serves as marketing director on the board of Kitchener Blues Festival



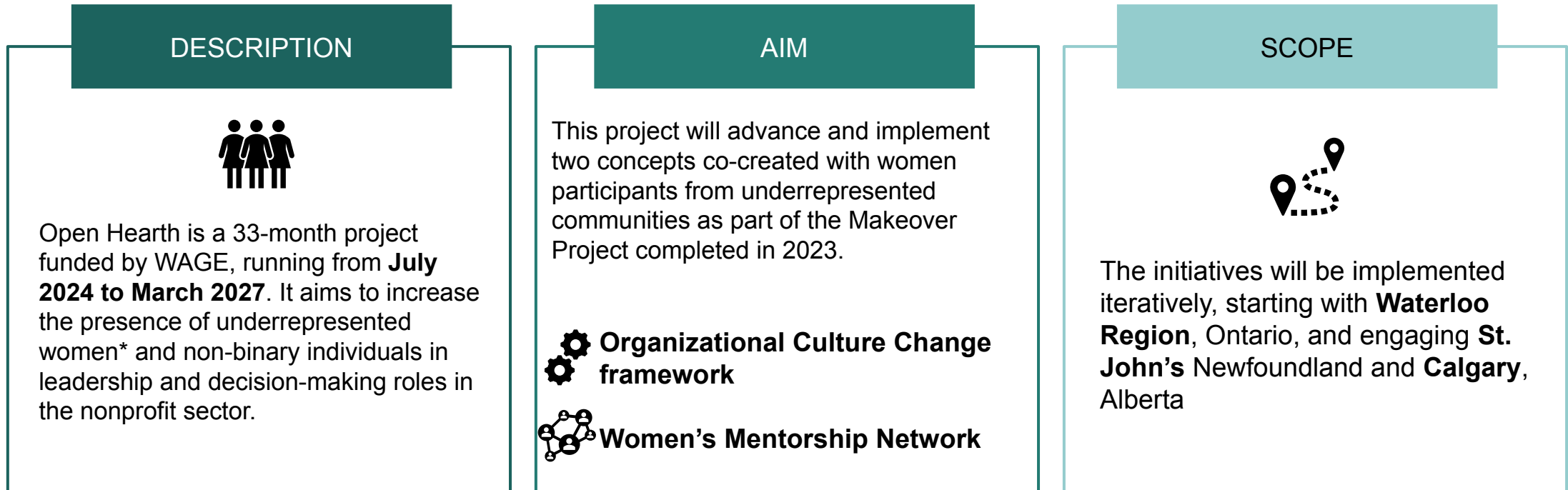
# What is design thinking?

- Human centred
- Iterative
- Collaborative



# About the Open Hearth Project

Women make up 80% of Canada’s non-profit workforce, but they are disproportionately concentrated in non-leadership positions given their employment share. Immigrant and racialized women, and women with disabilities face unequal job opportunities and glass ceiling. Women face systemic challenges in reaching leadership positions in the non-profit sector.<sup>1</sup>



*\*underrepresented women – Indigenous; living with disabilities; members of 2SLGBTQI+ communities; newcomer, Black, racialized, and migrant women*

<sup>1</sup>Ontario Nonprofit Network

# Agenda

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- What is Belonging & Why is it Important?
- How do we get a sense for belonging in our organizations?
- How do we organize around change?
- An invitation





**CAPACITYCANADA**

# Toward a Culture of Belonging & Inclusion



# Organizational Culture Change

## Why Belonging Matters

A culture of belonging is not a side initiative; it's a foundation for long-term success.



### Internal Impacts

- Stronger workplace culture and more engaged staff – increases employee satisfaction and loyalty.
- Leadership development – helps remove invisible barriers to advancement.
- Stronger collaboration and better problem solving.
- Attracting and retaining top talent – younger generations prioritize inclusive, values-aligned workplaces where they feel they belong.
- Making an adaptive and future proof organization – belonging fosters psychological safety, which is key to navigating uncertainty, change, and crisis.



### External Impacts

- A culture of belonging leads to better understanding of the communities served – especially if the staff reflects those communities.
- Communities are also more likely to trust and partner with organizations whose internal culture reflects the values they promote externally.
- Positive brand perception
- Aligning with evolving funder and policy expectations – culture of belonging signals that the organization is serious about its values and well-positioned to evolve.



# Reflections

- How would building a culture of greater inclusion and belonging benefit your organization?
- What's pushing you forward & what's holding you back?



# From Diversity and Inclusion to the Lived Experience of Belonging



## **Defining Diversity**

Diversity involves who is present in an organization, including differences in identity, background, and lived experience.

## **Understanding Inclusion**

Inclusion focuses on fair access to information, influence, and opportunities within organizational systems and processes.

## **Experiencing Belonging**

Belonging captures the emotional experience of feeling accepted, valued, and safe to contribute authentically every day.

## **Bridging Intention and Impact**

Centering belonging helps leaders identify gaps between policies and real experiences to improve workplace culture.





Together, they  
create a culture of  
belonging.

# Inclusive Organizations



# Dimensions of Inclusive Practice

*How inclusion shows up everyday decisions, behaviors, and systems*



Inclusive practice is not what we say we value -it's how we work, decide, and relate every day.

# Everyday Culture Signals That Shape Belonging

## **Impact of Meetings**

Meetings send strong belonging messages through invitations, agendas, and acknowledgment of contributions.

## **Decision-Making Transparency**

Transparent decision-making fosters inclusion, while closed-door decisions can cause exclusion and mistrust.

## **Feedback and Accountability**

Timely, respectful feedback signals care and growth; inconsistent feedback creates fear and withdrawal.

## **Workload and Flexibility Norms**

Normalization of overwork and penalizing boundaries can alienate those with caregiving or health needs.



# We are noticing



## **Policy to Practice Gaps**

Embedding accountability and action into policy. Leadership owning the change and accountability being shared across the organization.



## **Divided Culture – Hybrid workplaces**

Multi site, different work preferences, different working conditions depending on roles that support efficiency and accuracy. Even front-line staff need quiet spaces and documentation time..



## **High Workload & Emotional Strain**

Increased demand for services, uncertain funding, pressure to do more than ever before.



# Equity and Inclusion Opportunities

## **Making a Commitment**

Commitment to using an equity lens in organizational decision making, with a focus on deepening shared understanding and systematic application.

## **Inclusion Practice**

Moving from awareness to consistent inclusion practices. Example: ensuring religious accommodation practices are included in policy documents and clearly communicated to staff.

## **LGBTQ2S+ and Indigenous Inclusion**

Ensuring DEIA efforts address LGBTQ2S+ inclusion and Indigenous reconciliation through authentic engagement and welcoming language.

## **Belonging and Client-Centered Practice**

Clear inclusion fosters staff belonging and strengthens client-centered service in diverse environments.



# Practical Tools to Make Belonging Visible and Actionable



# Using a Belonging Lens to Observe Patterns and Gaps

## **Belonging Lens Purpose**

A belonging lens helps organizations observe how different groups experience inclusion and identify patterns and gaps.

## **Key Domains for Belonging**

Important areas include voice, influence, access to opportunities, fairness, workload flexibility, growth, and psychological safety.

## **Shifting Focus to Systems**

The lens shifts focus from individual behaviours to systemic patterns affecting participation and belonging.

## **Encouraging Reflection and Dialogue**

Using this lens promotes curiosity, open learning, honest conversations, and shared language for cultural change.



# The Belonging Heat Map as a Conversation Starter

## Purpose of the Heat Map

The heat map visualizes belonging patterns across domains and groups, highlighting strong and fragile areas without a single score.

## Domains and Groups Representation

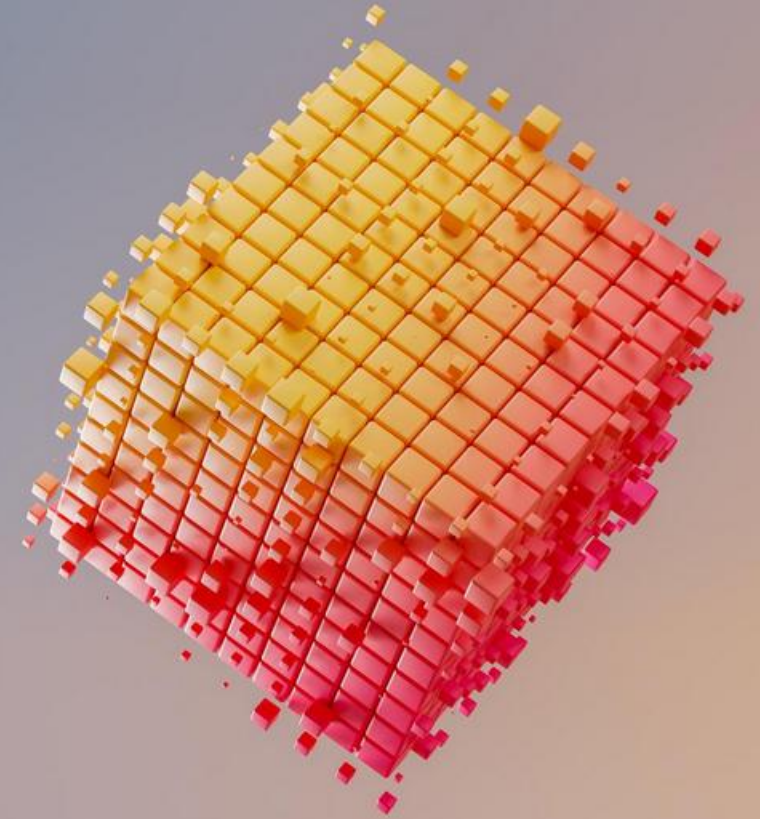
Rows represent domains like voice, fairness, care, growth, safety; columns represent roles, teams, or demographic groups.

## Facilitating Shared Sense-Making

The heat map surfaces differing perspectives in leadership and staff, prompting questions to bridge perception gaps.

## Starting Point for Action

It serves as a starting tool for identifying priority belonging areas, supporting psychological safety and learning.





# Choosing Lenses and Moments That Matter

## **Role Level Lens**

Role level distinguishes experiences of frontline staff, managers, and leaders, revealing different belonging dynamics across responsibilities.

## **Tenure Lens**

Examining belonging across tenure highlights new employee uncertainties and long-term staff fatigue or frustration in evolving systems.

## **Moments That Matter**

Key lifecycle moments like onboarding, performance feedback, and promotion impact belonging and identify areas for culture improvement.

## **Intentional Lens Selection**

Choosing lenses based on real organizational questions ensures the heat map is actionable, safe, and meaningful.

# Collecting Data: Surveys and Listening Circles

## **Concise Surveys for Patterns**

Short surveys with focused questions identify belonging patterns efficiently and reduce participant fatigue.

## **Listening Circles for Depth**

Listening sessions capture stories and examples behind data, providing essential context to survey results.

## **Data Triangulation**

Combining survey and listening data increases confidence in findings and highlights areas needing further exploration.

## **Transparent Learning Cycle**

Sharing results and action plans builds trust and reinforces the heat map's role in genuine improvement.



# Belonging Heat Map (Illustrative)

| Perspective                | Meetings               | Decisions               | Feedback                 | Workload Norms     | Recognition               | Onboarding          |
|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Roles</b>               | Inclusive facilitation | Decision clarity varies | Inconsistent use         | Burnout risk       | Role-based recognition    | Clear expectations  |
| <b>Groups</b>              | Who gets airtime?      | Informal power          | Low psychological safety | Uneven norms       | Some contributions unseen | Strong peer support |
| <b>Tenure/<br/>Moments</b> | Remote-friendly        | Transparency gaps       | Manager-dependent        | Flexibility uneven | Perceived bias            | Welcoming entry     |



Positive



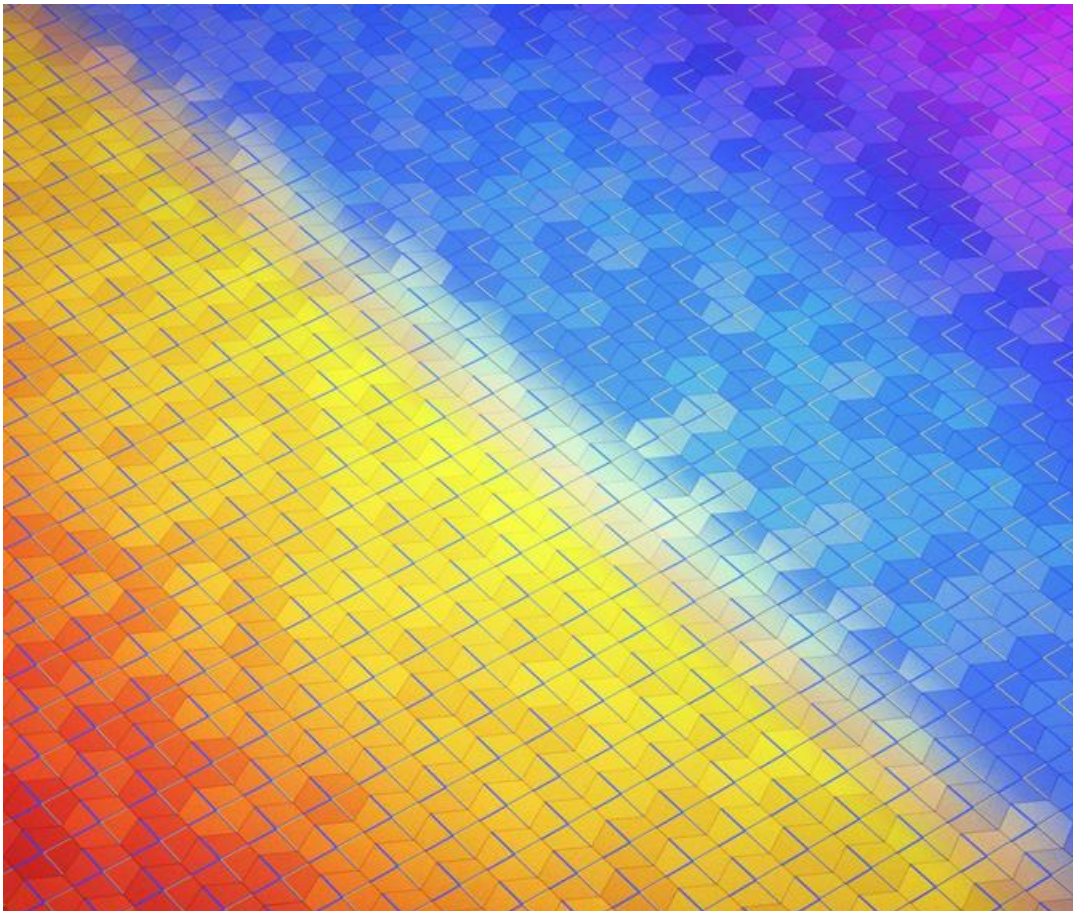
Caution



Hot Spot



# Belonging Heat Map Insights



## **Mapping Inclusion Experiences**

The heat map displays how inclusion is experienced across key organizational touchpoints, helping track progress and gaps.

## **Role and Group Perspective**

Rows show roles and groups, revealing different perspectives and experiences of belonging throughout the organization.

## **Colour Coding for Insights**

Green shows strengths, yellow signals caution and red pinpoints hotspots, guiding improvement and spotlighting challenges.

# Design Levers: Turning Insight into Practical Change



## Roles

Roles can be a way to shift group dynamics or be developed to solve a problem. Consider unconventional roles: detective, concierge, leader for a day, etc.

## Communications

Crafted so a wide range of people see themselves invited in and participating fully.

## Rituals

Offer a chance to focus on personal, interpersonal or communal meaning making. Successful rituals have a beginning, middle and end.

## Incentives

Designed specifically to build belonging and signal you care about their needs. Examples can be tangible or non-tangible: sending care packages to team members before a large project; an invitation to meaningfully help shape a future gathering.

*Respectfully adapted from: Susie Wise, Stanford d.school; Design for Belonging: How to Build Inclusion and Collaboration in Your Communities.*

<https://www.designforbelonging.com/>

# Design Levers: Examples



## **Leveraging Meetings and Participation**

Small changes like rotating meeting facilitation boost voice and increase participation across teams.

## **Clarifying Decision-Making**

Clear decision rules reduce confusion by defining who is consulted versus who decides in processes.

## **Effective Feedback Practices**

Shifting to regular coaching conversations promotes growth and signals care within the organization.

## **Workload and Recognition Norms**

Setting workload boundaries and recognizing behind-the-scenes efforts enhance well-being and value perception.

# From Reflection to Micro-Commitments That Stick

## Concept of Micro-Commitments

Micro-commitments are small, specific actions individuals commit to, allowing gradual and feasible cultural change in organizations.

## Feasibility and Learning

Micro-commitments respect organizational capacity and foster learning by allowing teams to experiment and adjust small changes.

## Shared Responsibility

Micro-commitments distribute change responsibility across all levels, encouraging shared ownership in building belonging.

## Reflection and Reinforcement

Regular reflection on micro-commitments embeds new practices and sustains belonging-related change over time.



# The Role of Leadership at Every Level in Fostering Belonging



## **Broad Leadership Influence**

Leadership extends beyond titles, involving expertise and relationships that shape organizational culture.

## **Key Leadership Behaviours**

Noticing, inviting, and responding are essential behaviours that foster belonging and psychological safety.

## **Humility and Accountability**

Leaders foster belonging by acknowledging mistakes and modeling openness to feedback and repair.

## **Creating Inclusive Culture**

Consistent leadership behaviours build a culture where all feel respected, supported, and heard.



# Shared priorities for strengthening organizational culture

- What are the transformative opportunities for us?
- Where do we start (impact/effort)

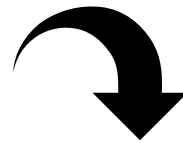


# Open Hearth Framework

## The Spark



It begins with purpose – why this matters now



Culture change happens around shared purpose.

**Design For Belonging** Application form: <https://capacitycanada.wufoo.com/forms/w1k6vgzd0ej3yuc/>



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# Open Hearth Elements & Organizational Culture



Spark – motivation, purpose, intent of the cultural change – Why?



Fuel & Air – nurture & sustain the cultural transformation



Shelter – protect those orchestrating the change, learning journey with risks & mistakes



Firekeeper – responsibility for orchestrating the change, task force, everyone



Water – control that it doesn't get “out of hand”, flexibility & adaptability



Ashes – legacy outcomes, intended and unintended, foundation for what's next



# Sustaining the Work Through Community and Shared Practice

Launch of Capacity Canada's **Design for Belonging** program



# Why a Cohort Model Supports Sustainable Culture Change

## Shared Learning and Support

Cohort models unite organizations to learn and experiment together, building mutual support and shared insights.

## Structured Flexibility

Guided sessions provide tools and frameworks while allowing flexibility for real-world application and innovation.

## Accountability and Progress

Commitment to small actions and sharing results fosters accountability, increasing the likelihood of sustained progress.

## Psychological Safety and Community

Cohorts normalize uncertainty and prioritize curiosity, creating a safe environment and lasting support networks.



# Our Cohort Model for Fostering Belonging Through Inclusive Practices

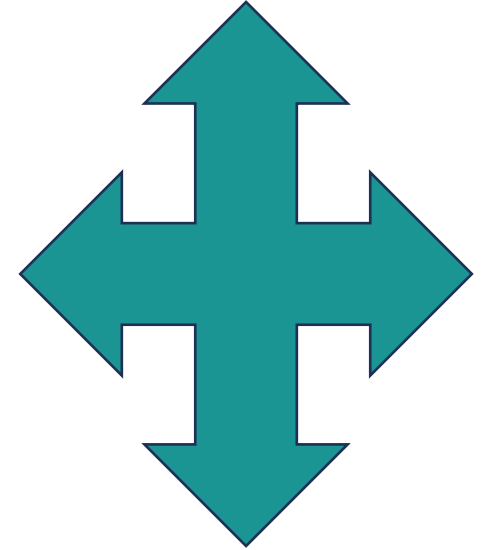
- 6–8 organizations
- A pair from each org (leader + program / people manager)
- Format: Four cohort learning sessions online (once/month), two peer consult labs, optional office hours
- Guided tools: Heat Map + Design Levers + Change Framework
- Light application between sessions
- Peer exchange: what's working / what to try
- Optional for each participating organization: ½ day workshop facilitated by Capacity Canada to prioritize and plan change initiatives



# Cohort Outputs

At the end of the cohort, organizations will have:

- Belonging journey map (baseline & endline)
- Clear insight into what drives or inhibits belonging
- Two tested practices ready to scale
- A 90-day action plan
- Materials suitable for leadership or board discussion





# An Invitation



If you're curious, connect  
after the session



We'll share cohort details  
post-conference



Invitation to explore fit—  
no pressure



# Wrap Up & Q&A

- Belonging isn't built by slogans
- It's built by small design choices, consistently applied
- Progress you can sustain
- Our Offer : to be intentional fire-builders, and responsible fire-keepers—together.



# Resources

- <https://ccdi.ca/en>
- <https://imaginecanada.ca/en/research/equity-guides>
- <https://theonncanada.ca/decent-work-pathways/decent-work-and-actuating-equity/>
- <https://hrintervals.ca/hr-resources/equity-reconciliation-and-anti-racism/>
- <https://heller.brandeis.edu/iere/pdfs/dei-organizational-assessment-tools.pdf>
- <https://www.cultureamp.com/blog/heatmapping-your-engagement-results>





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# Thank you

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