

Building Organisational Communities in the New World of Work

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper investigates elements of organisational community building, the benefits thereof and the realities of neglecting this human need in the new world of work.

Design/Methodology/approach – The methodology is based on a literature review and a constructivist approach to case study research to investigate how existing theories and elements apply to organisational community building.

Findings - The research reveals three results. First, the need for an importance of organisational community building as mitigation within the new world of work. Second, where employees are permitted to express themselves in a non-judgemental and safe space, isolation can be averted. Third, fear of expression and/or an inability to express due to no appropriate platform will likely result in increased isolation, loneliness, burnout with resultant decreased mental health, performance and engagement.

Research Limitations – A single case was examined, therefore generalisation across different contexts could be limited. The case shows relationships and possibilities.

Originality/Value – These findings contribute to the clarification of the importance of organisational community building, which has several implications.

Keywords: Community Building, Organisational Community, Belonging, Trust, Values, Loneliness, Engagement, Elements of Community

1. Introduction: Organisational Community Building

Community building research mostly speaks of health, politics, social welfare, community organisations or to the bricks and mortar buildings that are required to house some community need [1]. It appears not much research has been done in the field of organisational community building post COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a black swan and a white swan [2,3]. Despite differing perspectives, its unprecedented impact on work and economies is clear. As is the demand for rapid adaptation, flexible resources, accountable teams, decisive leadership, and a strong sense of community in the new world of

work. In many organisations, the entire extended disorder family became part and parcel of organisational life post the global pandemic and has become the daily staple of many teams and individuals. It could be argued that the impact of such disorder and the reality of such major organisational rearrangements on individual level was mostly underestimated.

Within the post COVID-19 reality, organisations also entered an age where three large forces, i.e. technology, the market and Mother Nature are accelerated at once [4]. This creates a transformative impact on many facets of society. Friedman marks the age of acceleration (2007 – 2016) as a major turning point which collided

to a new reality, in our homes and offices.

While COVID-19 triggered a global reset through lockdowns, humans begin to reflect, reconsider assumptions and reconnect with core beliefs when forced to pause [4]. The forced COVID-19 isolation may thus have sparked changes we do not yet fully grasp.

Given these new realities, synergy of teams and normal functioning becomes difficult. conclude that social distancing resulted in distrust and prolonged angst which is driving people apart and increasing loneliness and isolation [3]. The author postulates that the age of acceleration, altered ways of work, isolation and loneliness, and the latent remnants of COVID-19 urge the building of organisational communities.

Boon (1996), founder of Vulindlela, created the “Umhlangano” process (Zulu word for meeting; however, translates as concept into an interactive community-based workplace forum) which has been researched as social intervention within the bigger context of a top-down implemented VUKA program [5]. "Vuka" means "wake up" or "rise" in local languages, and in this context, Boon used it to encourage organisational action toward a better future. The initiative aimed to foster a diverse, unified workplace community and enhance understanding between South Africans from varied backgrounds. Research linked Umhlangano to increased sustainability, leadership, performance, integrity, acceptance, teamwork, change management, solution-driven outcomes, and innovation [5,6]. Notably, Umhlangano is regarded as a business intervention rather than an HR or training initiative [7].

The purpose of this paper is to investigate elements of organisational community building through the Umhlangano process, the benefits thereof and the realities of neglecting this human need in the new, accelerated world of work.

1.1. Problem Statement

Post COVID-19, the world of work changed, resulting in decreased social contact and a lack of social, mental and/or emotional support, coupled with increased feelings of isolation and/or

loneliness and increased demands, expectations and often targets. These widespread socio-economic and social implications could lead to addiction, illness, and mental health issues [8-10].

Liang and Liu, (2020) reminds that perceived scarcity increases risk-taking propensity and risk-taking behaviour in the real world. High risk or unexpected behaviour of employees in turn could lead to failure or business losses [11]. Based on the potential for value socialisation implied in deep, enduring, sudden scarcity situations, as posited by Maslow (1943) and Inglehart (1990), we investigate the building of organisational communities as business intervention, in order to buffer against many of the realities in the new world of work. It is proposed as a business intervention with possible by-product benefits relating to Human Resources and/or Wellness.

The problem being investigated in this paper relates to the impact of deliberate community building interventions. The context is a large organisation in South Africa, where employees have been affected by these new realities. The problem statement informs the research questions to be answered.

1.2. Research Questions

The research questions being:

- What are the essential elements of organisational community building?
- Are there any by-products to organisational community building? If so, what are they?

There is limited literature on how human communities are built within organisations, thus the researcher intends to define key theoretical concepts related specifically to community building.

2. Literature Review

The literature review covers key organisational human needs that relate to community building.

Figure 1 displays the theoretical framework, highlighting the main constructs and theories.

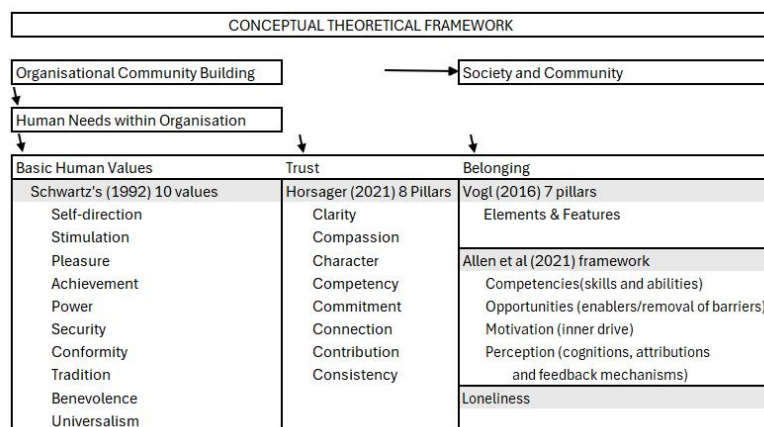


Figure 1: Conceptual Theoretical Framework (Authors' own)

2.1. Organisations – Community Building

Societies are living organisms, living bodies of work and knowledge, “structured around regulating bodies” and thus providing context and social standing [12-14]. Organisations are societies created around specific norms, policies, procedures, governance and health and safety measures and the operations which grants the organisation its reason for existence.

Society is a key concept in various philosophical fields but is often overlooked and challenging to define discuss Industry 5.0 and Society 5.0 which seeks human-centred, sustainable, and resilient industry [15,16]. However, the authors highlight ongoing confusion around these concepts that need resolution.

Re the concept of society, “separation is itself an integral part of the unity” and all of us participate in the social contract every day through mutual obligations among our family, community, workplaces, and fellow citizens [17]. Caring for others, paying taxes, and benefiting from public services define the social contract that supports and binds us together as a society even if we break social contracts through changing roles, technology and new ways of work [18].

confirms the messy history around the concept of community, concludes that a better understanding of community is needed as researchers across various disciplines use the term differently [19,20].

2.1.1. Society and Community

Notes that before the Industrial Revolution, families and communities were closely knit, but consumerism and imagined communities have since replaced traditional emotional ties [21]. Definitions of community vary: cites shared identity and belonging; a territorial group with common interests; people meeting needs through daily interactions [15,22].

Communities typically centred around schools, churches, and clubs, but COVID-19 accelerated shifts to online engagement and decreased trust in institutions [23]. The pandemic also redefined locality, with over 50 million digital nomads globally by 2025.

Society and community are often used interchangeably. *Gemeinschaft* reflects close, sentiment-based relationships; *société* and *societas* indicate partnership or organized groups. Society refers to organized communities with shared structures and values (Britannica). is defined by mutual concern rather than mere proximity or interest [26]. Aggarwal describes society as large and complex, encompassing various smaller communities marked by close ties and shared interests. Society gives structure; communities offer direct, localized experiences.

Advocates for a supportive society where citizens collectively share risks and contribute to fulfil their potential, highlighting interdependence and reciprocal investment [25].

Norms regulate society, community, and organizations, but widespread institutional failures challenge these frameworks. Social bonds foster well-being and cognitive strength, while isolation can lead to health issues [10,24].

Hindsight bias complicates learning from the past. Within organizations, community consists of small groups sharing identity, norms, or interests, connecting physically or online, and prioritizing each other's welfare [2].

2.2. Basic Human Needs Within Organisation

2.2.1. Basic Human Values

Before the Industrial Revolution, people lived within nuclear families which relied upon each other. However, these structures shifted as nuclear families and emotional support from extended families diminished and was replaced by “a community of people who don't really know each other but imagine that they do” [21].

How do we then understand community? The German term *Gemeinschaft* refers to close, organic relationships based on sentiment, kinship, and tradition (Meriam-Webster, n.d.). French uses *société* for both society and business entities, while Latin's *societas* means partnership or alliance. Society and community are often used interchangeably. The Britannica Dictionary defines society as people living together in organised communities with shared laws, traditions, and values.

There are various “traditional” definitions of community as a shared identity and sense of belonging, as a social group with a territorial base and common interests or as people in the same area with daily interactions [15]. describes community as people with mutual care for each other's welfare and Aggarwal (n.d.) describes community as common culture and institutions [26]. However, COVID-19 transformed the meaning of locality through digital engagement [22,23].

The author defines community within organisations as: smaller groups within the organisation, who share the same risks, interests or norms or who are bound together through a team function. These smaller groups have a need to share identity and belonging as well as social needs through reciprocal bonds. Such smaller groups work together or regularly meet online because of common interests, beliefs, or activities and the state of being with other people, regardless of physical location. Most importantly, these smaller groups care about each other's welfare. Feeling connected brings joy and strengthens our thinking and these social bonds are vital [24,27].

2.2.1.1. Schwartz's Theory of Basic Values

Adopted a conception of values that specifies six main features that are also implicit in the writings of many authors before and after his 1992 publication and are features of all values [28,31]:

- Values are beliefs linked to affect and are infused with feeling.
- Values refer to desirable goals that motivate action.
- Values transcend specific actions and situations.
- Values serve as standards or criteria.

- Values are ordered by importance; the importance of multiple values guides action.

Table 1 below indicates Schwartz’s ten values with the defining goal and a brief description [28]. These values are also indicated in Figure 1 above - the Conceptual Theoretical Framework.

Value	Defining goal
Self-direction	Need for control and mastery, for autonomy and independence
Stimulation	Need for variety and stimulation to maintain an optimal, positive level of activation
Hedonism	Need for pleasure and satisfying them
Achievement	Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards
Power	Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources
Security	The goal of security for self or those with whom one identifies
Conformity	Individuals inhibit inclinations that might disrupt and undermine smooth interaction and group functioning
Tradition	Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas of one’s culture or religion
Benevolence	Preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact (in-group)
Universalism	Understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection of welfare of all people and nature

Table 1: Schwartz’s Ten Values (1992)

2.2.2. Trust Definition

Claims trust is crucial in relationships, builds gradually, and is easily lost, with key dimensions of time and depth. considers trust an attitude, closely tied to context-dependent trustworthiness, whether related to individuals or roles [32,33].

Trust is essential for effective working relationships and is closely linked to trustworthiness as an attitude [34]. While some view trust as multidimensional, support its unidimensional definition: a psychological state involving the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of others' intentions or behaviours [35]. Trust also involves being willing to be vulnerable to a trustee’s actions, anticipating the trustee will act as expected without monitoring or control [36].

Confirms that defining trust is surprisingly difficult given that trust is a broad and flexible concept [37]. argues that trust is tangible, learnable and measurable and being trusted is a fundamental key to success [32]. Various authors argued the high cost of low trust [38-40].

2.2.2.1. Trust Elements

Given the difficulty in concisely defining trust, identifying elements relevant to trust seems practical. proposes eight pillars of trust as practical ways to earn trust [32]. These pillars of trust are labelled and defined as clarity, compassion, character, competency, commitment, connection, contribution and consistency. They are further explained in Table 2 below.

Pillar	Why
Clarity	People trust the clear and mistrust or distrust the ambiguous
Compassion	People put faith in those who care beyond themselves
Character	People notice those who do what is right ahead of what is easy
Competency	People have confidence in those who stay fresh, relevant, and capable
Commitment	People believe in those who stand through adversity
Connection	People want to follow, buy from, and be around those who are willing to connect and collaborate
Contribution	Few things build trust quicker than actual results
Consistency	It’s the little things—done consistently—that make the biggest difference

Table 2: Horsager’s Pillars of Trust (2021)

Elements of trust according to is consistency, compassion, communication and competency while Zenger and point out positive relationship, good judgement and consistency [41,42]. These authors find that relationships matter more than judgement or consistency. Thus, to build lasting trust, key elements are clarity in communication, compassion, strong character, competence,

genuine connection, and consistent behaviour.

2.2.3. Belonging

2.2.3.1. Definition

Belonging is described as a personal sense of value and respect from reciprocal relationships based on shared experiences or traits

[43]. differentiates belonging as both the feeling of being 'at home' in a place and as a tool for negotiating inclusion or exclusion [44]. highlights that belonging—a deep connection to people, places, and experiences—is a fundamental human need linked to many aspects of well-being [45].

2.2.3.2. Vogl's Pillars of Belonging

identifies belonging pillars within community which cannot exist without the welfare and connection found within community. The core tenet is that community's function in a sustainable manner when they are helping members to be more successful in a connected world [26]. Success within a growing community will depend on the successful articulation of the elements in table 3.

Pillar	Reason
Gate	New members enter through structured process
Container	A shared space for gathering
Fire	Members engage around common purpose/passion
Story	Shared narrative communicating values and history
Artifact	Tangible objects or symbols as reminder of community identity
Ritual	Repeatable actions and practices create rhythm and shared meaning
Temple	Symbolic or spiritual focus point representing its higher purpose

Table 3: Vogl's Pillars of Belonging (2016)

According to Vogl (2016) the features of sustainable community are:

- ❖ A clear group identity with understood boundaries and purpose.
- ❖ Benefits and costs are proportional.
- ❖ Decisions are made together in a way they recognise is fair.
- ❖ There's effective monitoring of violators or free riders.
- ❖ There are graduated sanctions for those who disrespect community rules.
- ❖ Conflict-resolution mechanisms are inexpensive and easy to access.
- ❖ There's recognition of some sort of rights to organise for their own reasons.
- ❖ Groups that are parts of bigger groups and networks, there must be coordination for relevant groups.

Meaning and interdependence are key. Communities require time and effort to develop, and strong communities promote ongoing learning through shared knowledge accessible only to members. This foster meaning by encouraging self-understanding in relation to others within the group, beyond just the present context.

2.2.3.3. Allen et al (2021) framework of belonging

Identify belonging as a key aspect of human health and behaviour. Noting inconsistent terminology in the field, their research introduces an integrative framework, describing belonging as a dynamic experience shaped by four interconnected components: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions, all influenced by surrounding systems [45].

➤ Competencies for Belonging

This relates to having a set of skills and abilities (subjective and objective) needed to connect and experience belonging [45]. Skills allows relatability through e.g. cultural background while

competencies enable consistent behaviour which are aligned with group social norms, cultural values and respect. The development of these skills and competencies is central to social and emotional learning approaches 46 while deficits in social competencies limit relationship quality, social relations, and social positions [46,47].

Social skills include being aware of oneself and others, emotion and behavioural regulation, verbal and nonverbal communication, acknowledgement and alignment with social norms, as well as active listening [48]. Cultural skills include understanding one's heritage, mindful acknowledgement of place, and alignment with relevant values. Social, emotional, and cultural competencies complement and reinforce one another, and contribute to and are reinforced by feeling a sense of belonging [49]. Competencies can also help individuals cope effectively with feelings of not belonging when they arise while feeling a sense of belonging may assist in using socially appropriate skills [50].

➤ Opportunities to Belong

Opportunities to belong includes the availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur [45]. This ability is useless if opportunities to connect are lacking. This need for opportunities to belong became evident during COVID-19, as social distancing was enforced. In the absence of physical opportunities for belonging, technologies such as social media and online gaming may help meet this need, especially for youth and for those who are introverted, shy, or who suffer from social anxiety [51-53].

Some opportunities for belonging can be motivated by a sense of not belonging [54,55]. For example, those who have been disenfranchised, have suffered abuse or trauma, or have been ostracised or rejected may look for alternative sources for belonging [56]. However, it seems most important to reduce

barriers to enable positive connection and belonging.

➤ Motivations to Belong

This speaks to the need or desire to connect with others [45]. Belonging motivation refers to the fundamental need for people to be accepted, belong, and seek social interactions and connections [57]. A person who is motivated to belong enjoys positive interactions with others and dislikes negative social experiences while resisting the loss of attachments [27].

The degree of motivation may vary and weak motivation to belong could be associated with psychological dysfunction, and weak motivation may, alongside other socially mediated criteria, become a predictor of psychological pathology [57]. However, Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that people can still be driven and motivated to connect with others, even, and perhaps despite the most traumatic circumstances.

➤ Perceptions of Belonging

Belonging emerges from perceptions; a person's subjective feelings concerning their experiences [45]. Thus, a person may have skills

related to connecting, opportunities to belong, and be motivated, yet still report great dissatisfaction as most humans evaluate whether they belong or not [58]. Past experiences may inform one's experiences, self-confidence, and desire for connection [27].

Thus, a person with a history of rejection might question their belonging or engage in maladaptive behaviours to seek approval from peers [55,59]. These subjective experiences and perceptions of those experiences thus act as feedback mechanisms that increase or decrease one's desire to connect with others [45].

➤ Summary

As illustrated in Figure 2 the four components are:

- competencies for belonging (skills and abilities);
- opportunities to belong (enablers, removal/reduction of barriers);
- motivations to belong (inner drive); and
- perceptions of belonging (cognitions, attributions, and feedback mechanisms – positive or negative experiences when connecting).

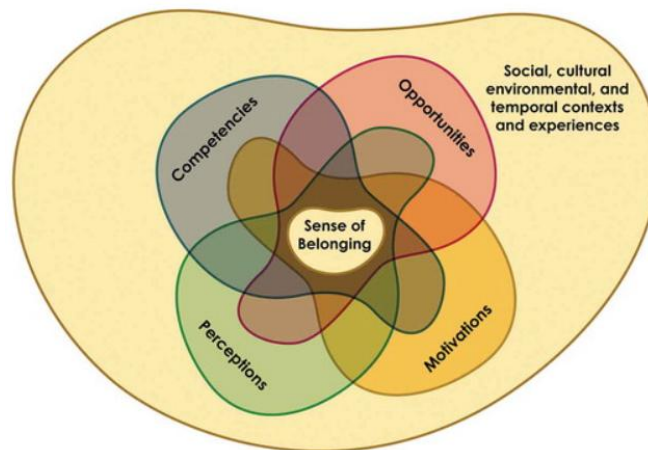


Figure 2: An Integrative Framework for Understanding, Assessing, and Fostering Belonging (Allen *et al.*, 2021)

As can be seen in Figure 1, four interrelated components (i.e., Competencies, Opportunities, Motivations, and Perceptions) dynamically interact and influence one another, shifting, evolving, and adapting as an individual traverse temporal, social, and environmental contexts and experiences [45]. These components reinforce and influence one another over time. The narrative of how these components interconnect results in high levels of belonging, which in turn, supports positive life outcomes.

2.2.3.4. Loneliness

Gleitsman and Velasquez (2025) observe that loneliness is reshaping workplaces by undermining trust and team cohesion—crucial drivers of performance, innovation, and resilience. Therefore, connections become a strategic responsibility. Managing and/or leading teams effectively in this context requires attention to social

cohesion, belonging, and meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Loneliness is a subjective feeling of being alone and is distinct from social isolation, though both negatively affect health [60]. Research links loneliness to poor sleep, depression, reduced quality of life, suicide risk in older adults, and higher chances of dementia [61].

Before COVID-19, loneliness and social isolation affected 10–40% of people in Europe, the USA, and China and was called a "behavioral epidemic". Restrictions on controlling the virus worsened this problem [62–65].

Maintaining social connections through technology, daily routines, and physical or mental activities reduces loneliness [60]. Times of

crisis increase social isolation and undermine psychological safety, negatively affecting value systems that influence behaviour. Values guide what matters to us, so when they are overlooked, feelings of isolation rise. Social connection is essential infrastructure, not optional [66].

2.2.4. Summary

The constructs and elements from the theoretical base and theories in the abovementioned literature review have been used to draw the Conceptual Theoretical Framework shown in Figure 1 above and to explain the results and discuss the findings.

3. Methodology

The researcher examined the research problem and questions through a constructivist approach to case study research [67]. Thus, assuming that reality is constructed intersubjectively through meaning and understandings developed socially and experientially, assert that when information is plentiful and concepts abstract, using a process that helps to interpret, sort and manage information is important. This research utilised a qualitative case study to investigate how existing theories and various elements apply to community building within organisations and within the new world of work reality [68].

Scant literature is available on community building post COVID-19. Therefore, answering the research questions are important to create and establish necessary knowledge. This study followed a qualitative approach through humanised organisational conversations. As such these were not seen or positioned as interviews per se, rather as conversations around topics such as values, trust and belonging which are presented in a case study [68].

Research vignettes will be used as descriptive, realistic scenarios to display beliefs, attitudes and behaviours allowing participants to define situations in their own terms. These vignettes allow actions to be explored within context, to clarify people's judgements and to provide a less personal and therefore less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics [69].

4. The Case Study

4.1. Setting the Scene

Vuka began in late 2018 as a management initiative at CompanyX to improve team cohesion and shared values. The initial phase involved a 5-day immersion for management, followed by a planned 2-day staff session focusing on value creation and teamwork. The Umhlangano process was to be introduced later for sustainability. However, COVID-19 lockdowns halted all workshops, prompting a shift where Umhlangano became central and highly valued by staff.

COVID-19 impacted South Africa and like many organisations, CompanyX adapted its business operations, implementing remote work across thousands of employees [70]. Five years post the pandemic, CompanyX continues to emphasise organisational community and employee wellbeing, relying on the Umhlangano

process to foster connection, team cohesion, and improved business outcomes.

4.1.2. Business Challenges Faced by CompanyX

CompanyX faces industry challenges such as high turnover, burnout in a high-pressure setting, and limited career advancement. Organisationally, prioritising profit over people has been common, but resource limits, communication issues, growing technology dependence, and rapid AI development highlighted a changing environment. The shift to digital during COVID-19 reduced face-to-face interactions and lowered engagement. CompanyX noticed that an "always connected" culture led to more loneliness, less belonging, increased burnout, and poorer mental health.

4.2. VUKA Program/Addressing Challenges

The VUKA program is a business initiative that centres on personal growth and community. It differs from HR programs by fostering open discussion to unlock human potential and challenge biases. VUKA promotes diversity, teamwork, and leadership, leading to shared values and stronger commitment. This results in improved communication, trust, empowerment, and collaboration, boosting job satisfaction and business outcomes. By encouraging engagement and inclusion, VUKA helps reduce turnover and supports ongoing development.

By focusing on people, these conversations promote belonging and wellbeing by prioritising mental health and work-life balance. Barriers to connection are addressed through:

- ❖ Structured feedback that reduces isolation and boosts engagement;
- ❖ Transparent communication for trust-building;
- ❖ Empathy-driven leadership that increases emotional intelligence;
- ❖ Mentorship and leadership development encouraging personal growth.

4.3. Umhlangano

Umhlangano was set up as a space for people to connect, share, and listen with respect [71]. Its aims are to build an inspiring workplace community, to foster authentic conversations, to strengthen trust, to give everyone a voice in shaping the community and to continuously discuss and agree on shared values. Four guiding principles were honoured during each Umhlangano session, namely:

- Everyone is equal here; all voices are valued.
- No one faces consequences for sharing ideas or opinions.
- Discussions remain confidential and everyone is responsible for privacy.
- The community openly discusses and resolves issues, assigning responsibility as needed.

Umhlangano sessions are online via MS Teams, with up to 20 participants and professional facilitators. Meetings are agenda-, presentation-, and rank-free, maintaining strict confidentiality to build trust and psychological safety. Business needs may take

precedence over conflicting suggestions.

Participants join in natural teams alongside relevant managers and may include Human Capital or Learning & Development. Both external and internal coordinators manage session rollout and

scheduling. Sessions occur every six to eight weeks. Over time, a human community develops, enhancing understanding of the sessions' purpose, the importance of participation, and the impact of attendance. illustrates the process in figure 3 below [7].



Figure 3: Umhlangano Process - Community Building as Pathway to Engagement and Organisational Success (Boon, 2025)

4.4. Umhlangano Case Study: Overcoming Burnout Through Open Communication

Sarah, a long-time mid-level manager at CompanyX, has recently started a travel-heavy role to stay connected with her team across multiple locations. Now, she feels burned out and disengaged, struggling with guilt over not being home or helping her child with homework. Her initial excitement turned into despondency.

The Challenge: Sarah, an accomplished manager at a top organisation, started feeling overwhelmed by her increasing workload. She handled staff scheduling and customer service at several locations, and faced ongoing pressure to meet sales goals, leaving her emotionally exhausted.

Sarah, usually resilient, began showing signs of burnout: fatigue, irritability, and low motivation. She became detached from work, which affected her family, and her performance and stress levels worsened.

The Response: Mental Wellness In-House - After noticing symptoms of burnout, Sarah reached out to her company's mental wellness program, which offered counselling and stress management workshops. Although she was advised to take two weeks off work, Sarah hesitated, worrying that time away would only add to her stress. She feared returning to a larger workload and feeling even more overwhelmed.

Sarah's burnout stemmed not just from personal pressures, but also from insufficient support and communication with management. Taking leave seemed likely to increase her sense of isolation and detachment from her job and colleagues, rather than helping her

recover.

The Solution: Open Dialogue Through Umhlangano - Instead of accepting the mental wellness referral, Sarah chose a more collaborative approach—one that would involve the team. She used the Umhlangano process and raised her situation with her team in this safe, authentic, non-judgemental space where open communication is valued and fostered. Sarah believed that having the space to explore the root causes of her burnout with her team would not only resolve her personal challenges but also create a supportive work environment for everyone.

“When transparency, trust and fairness become the culture, politics lose their power...”

Some of Sarah's reflections included:

“The past is not a ceiling. It is just a floor”.

“This session gave me courage. It is a safe space”.

“I needed this reflection time for myself”.

Umhlangano: A Collaborative, Open Dialogue approach - The Umhlangano session provided a relaxed space for Sarah to express her challenges without judgment. She discussed feeling overwhelmed and unsupported, which contributed to her burnout. The team responded with practical solutions, including delegating tasks, establishing regular check-ins, and fostering a more supportive environment.

Sarah also proposed redistributing some of her responsibilities to maintain her work quality and prevent further stress. This open dialogue gave the team leader insights into underlying issues and highlighted the need for improved collaboration and support

throughout the team.

The Outcome: Renewed Engagement and Leadership Growth - The Umhlangano session marked a significant milestone in Sarah's professional journey. By addressing her experience of burnout collaboratively with her team, rather than opting for external mental wellness programs or a leave of absence, she re-engaged with her role and renewed her motivation. This open dialogue fostered a supportive environment, enhancing her sense of value and connection within the team. Key outcomes achieved without a leave of absence include:

- **Reduced Stress:** The redistribution of workload and delegation of tasks within the team substantially alleviated Sarah's stress.
- **Restored Trust:** Transparent and sincere discussions reinforced trust between Sarah and her colleagues, reducing isolation and empowering her leadership.
- **Enhanced Leadership Skills:** Through openness and collaboration within a supportive environment, Sarah demonstrated effective leadership qualities, emphasizing the importance of seeking support and maintaining clear communication.
- **Strengthened Team Cohesion:** The process promoted stronger interpersonal relationships, resulting in improved teamwork, greater accountability, and a heightened sense of shared responsibility.
- **Sustained Engagement:** By addressing the root causes of burnout and isolation, Sarah restored her enthusiasm for her work and was better equipped to guide her team toward achieving their objectives.

Verbatim responses:

Below are some verbatim responses captured during this conversation:

"We want to be heroes at our own expense"

"There are people I can talk to"

"Let's continue to have time for each other. This is my brother/sister"

"How we think, we expect others to think. Yet, how I see the world is not how everyone sees or experiences the world"

"We carry so much. Don't doubt your own strength"

"Our words are so powerful. We have to live one day at a time. We also have to speak to people who care"

"I can use my mistakes as stepping stones"

"This was such an important conversation in my journey of life"

I learnt a lot. We need spaces like this"

"What stood out was that I was not dictated to or told what I need to do. I could freely say what matters to me. We all yearn for time to engage, firstly with ourselves and then with others who care"

"I belong"

"I am the master of my destiny"

"We love our jobs. But we need to offload, find perspective and recharge. Otherwise, the wheels come off. Today I could do just that"

Conclusion - Although the mental wellness program was well-intentioned, it risked isolating Sarah from her team and complicating her return. Instead, the Umhlangano process encouraged open dialogue, enabling Sarah to connect with her colleagues, share challenges, and find practical solutions together. This case highlights how human interaction and communication help resolve personal and leadership issues, building a supportive team culture. In today's workplace, collaborative problem-solving and open communication are vital for employee well-being and leadership development.

5. Results and Findings

The case outlined above demonstrates several advantages, including improved retention and employee satisfaction. In the absence of this dialogue, an alternative scenario might have involved unresolved challenges leading to resignation, subsequently triggering a vacancy freeze or the initiation of recruitment processes—both of which can generate significant stress within the team. The collaborative strategy of fostering open dialogue among all levels of staff empowered individuals to actively contribute, rather than simply participate. As a result of renewed engagement following these discussions, there has been a notable increase in belonging and wellbeing, contributing positively to a supportive and satisfying organisational culture.

Furthermore, the role of community in providing identity and belonging while meeting social needs is crucial. It is important to recognise the significance of community in this context, highlighting organic social relationships (*gemeinschaft*), the experience of connection and safety, and the reduction of isolation. Such a community environment enhances clarity of thought and opens pathways to new perspectives. Ultimately, connection and safety are fundamentally incompatible with isolation.

5.1. Basic Human Values

This case shows how socialisation influences values by providing a safe environment for survival needs and open conversation. Within organisations with shared values, communication helps members understand each other and current issues, enabling both overt and covert exploration of values and shifts in perspective. Connecting this case to Schwartz's ten values, Sarah experienced:

- Self-direction: fulfilled need for control and mastery
- Stimulation: exposed to new viewpoints
- Achievement: recognised competence and created actions
- Power: gained social esteem
- Security: felt safe to express herself openly
- Conformity: managed stress without disruption
- Benevolence: supported team well-being through collaboration
- Universalism: fostered empathy and mutual care

5.2. Trust

Trust is crucial in relationships [33,35]. This case illustrated how Umhlangano promotes consistency, compassion, communication, and competency alongside positive relationships, conflict resolution, honest feedback, and good judgment [32,42]. Improved relationships enabled exploration and cooperation [72]. Linking

Umhlangano to Horsager's eight pillars, Sarah experienced:

- Vulnerable conversations which brought team clarity.
- Understanding which fostered compassion.
- Addressing challenges openly which built character.
- Admitting difficulties and seeking support showed competency.
- Open, safe discussions, demonstrating commitment and driving connection, contribution, and consistency.

5.3. Belonging

This case shows the importance of belonging, of feeling at home and deeply connected and the resultant mental, physical, social, economic and behavioural outcomes.

The case illustrates that the Umhlangano functions in such a manner that the process helps members to be more successful in a connected world where mutual concern for each other's welfare is shared. Through the Umhlangano process, this case linked many of the belonging pillars within community, namely shared values, membership identity, boundaries, initiation and ritual, temple or in this case the Umhlangano space, stories/shared conversations, symbols/shared representations and inner rings/growth pathways.

Belonging is shaped by personal feelings and social forces that include or exclude individuals across multiple domains. Connecting four components to the case study highlights safety as a fifth essential aspect—belonging requires feeling safe. This additional component has been incorporated into Figure 4.

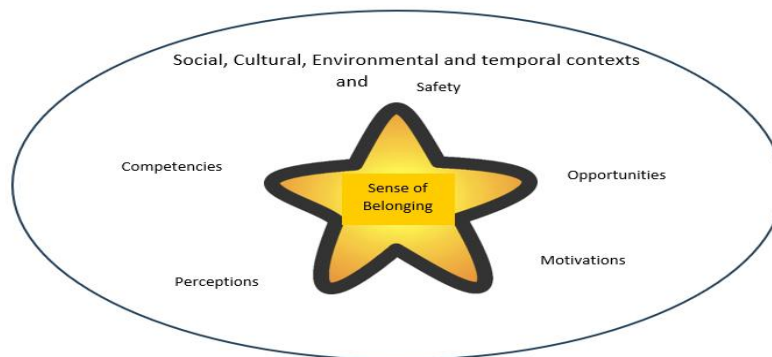


Figure 4: Adapted Integrative Framework for Understanding, Assessing and Fostering Belonging (Authors' own)

5.4. Loneliness

Umhlangano helps people share values and feel psychologically safe, fostering engagement—a key factor in organisational success according to [73]. The case demonstrates that open communication and collaboration in Umhlangano improve performance, strengthen commitment, and empower stakeholders. This leads to higher morale, trust, retention, and better results.

5.5. Integration

Analysis of the results in relation to Figure 1 underscores the significance of intentional organisational community building, alongside core human needs such as values, trust, and belonging within organisations. Focusing on these elements contributes meaningfully to inclusivity, wellbeing, and ongoing improvement. Furthermore, it fosters an engaged, empowered, and participative workforce. reports considerable gains associated with high workforce engagement: increases in profitability (23%), productivity (14%), sales (18%), wellbeing (66%), and a notable reduction in absenteeism (81%) [74].

The four guiding principles of Umhlangano also appear particularly impactful. Although somewhat dated, the findings of Gray and McNaughton (1996) remain pertinent. Their research demonstrates that low serotonin levels—linked to mood regulation—can lead to hyperactivity, while higher serotonin levels mitigate fear.

Additionally, social environments that limit dominance hierarchies elevate the status of subordinates [75]. A structure devoid of rigid hierarchy or retaliation, combined with confidentiality, creates an environment where hyperreaction is diminished and individuals feel safe to express their perspectives. This, in turn, enables issues to be discussed more constructively through open dialogue [76].

Given today's rapidly evolving business landscape, it is essential to reconsider traditional leadership approaches. Effective leaders foster psychological safety and cultivate environments grounded in trust. Modern leadership necessitates strong soft skills and an ability to nurture communities defined by shared values, trust, and belonging. reinforce this perspective, emphasizing that genuine connection serves as critical organisational infrastructure, not simply a "soft" attribute. The Umhlangano model illustrates a successful approach to establishing this infrastructure, promoting connection, engagement, belonging, and trust within the workplace [77-79].

5.6. Conclusion

This first part of the conclusion will be on answering the research questions posed

- What are the essential elements of organisational community building? This question was answered in the results and findings section on basic human values, trust, belonging

and loneliness. This paper researched various constructs relating to organisational community building and the author postulated that organisational community building is becoming essential in the new world of work, in terms of personal and group welfare and wellbeing, continuous improvement and productivity. When an employee feels safe, experiences a sense of belonging and connection, engagement and participation becomes the norm [80-82].

- Are there any by-products to organisational community building? If so, what are they? Yes, engagement, participation, continuous improvement and increased performance. We all need to belong and feel safe [83-85]. When external influences and/or powers seem out of control, the individual needs to take back personal control. Where this is possible, through self-direction, stimulation and interest, (psychological) safety can be achieved because of a sense of connectedness and belonging. Where self-direction is not possible, feelings of isolation will increase [86-89].

When employees are allowed to share their thoughts freely in a supportive and judgement-free environment, feelings of isolation can be prevented. If there is fear around expressing oneself, or a lack of suitable platforms for communication, individuals are more likely to experience loneliness and isolation, which often leads to lower levels of performance and engagement.

The study highlights how social interactions shift human dynamics, offering clear managerial insights for the workplace [90]. The findings demonstrate the value of building organisational community and the benefits it brings. Specifically, the research presents Umhlangano as both a method for cultivating organisational community and to boost engagement, foster connection, promote belonging, and enhance psychological safety [91,92].

Leadership and Managerial Implications

Modern workplaces are marked by uncertainty, change, and unpredictability, challenging traditional management approaches. Leaders must embrace adaptability, flexibility, and empowered teams with end-to-end accountability. Volatility within organizations should be addressed openly in safe environments that foster connection and shared participation [93-95].

Building intentional communities at work—centred on values, trust, belonging, and engagement—supports psychological safety and trust through open communication. Without this, organisations risk disengagement or burnout [96-98].

Team engagement has a multiplicative effect: one disengaged member can impact the entire group, while full engagement boosts team outcomes exponentially [99-101]. Platforms like Umhlangano help create safe spaces for honest dialogue, reinforce values, and encourage learning through reflection, leading to more supportive and open organisational cultures. This is illustrated in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Participative Engagement and Lasting Learning resulting in cultural change (Authors’ own)

Community building can be represented by a mathematical formula, where it is the sum of engagement components such as safety, values, belonging, and trust [102-104]. Each element acts

as a multiplier, meaning if any one of them is zero, the result is also zero. Figure 6 demonstrates that without positive levels of safety, values, belonging, and trust, engagement cannot occur.

$$\text{Community Building} = \sum [\text{Engagement (safety x values x belonging x trust)}]$$

Figure 6: Mathematical Equation of Engagement Though Community Building (Author’s own)

In this new reality, building community lays the groundwork for psychological safety and open conversations, allowing people to share what matters most—whether it's shared values, behaviours, or habits [105-107]. Such an environment fosters both effectiveness and excellence, helping everyone actively live out the organisation's vision while engaging fully—not just focusing on profits but also embracing our shared humanity. Without true engagement, meaningful progress cannot happen. Limitations and Future Research.

Future Research

Future research could expand the depth of the data through a qualitative study and in-depth interviews and/or focus group sessions across all job levels and categories to add value and richness to the topic. Future research could investigate the loneliness/engagement construct in greater depth. Exploring mental health within organisations against the constructs of safety, values, belonging and trust.

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Statements and Declarations

The author facilitated some groups within the Umhlangano process.

All names were changed to ensure confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

No ethics approval required

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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