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Solutions for Loneliness in the Workplace

RESEARCH FINDINGS | NOVEMBER 2023

Co-Ideation of concept; Research; and Graphic and copy co-development of assets and report was conducted by Benenson Strategy Group

Co-Ideation of concept; Building of speaking, social, PR and content opportunities around idea; Graphic and copy co-development of assets and report conducted by Berlin Cameron

Ideation of concept and building speaking, social, PR, and content opportunities around idea conducted by TheLi.st



Loneliness is a national epidemic



THE U.S. SURGEON GENERAL, DR. VIVEK MURTHY, HAS WARNED OF THE PROFOUND THREAT THAT LONELINESS AND ISOLATION POSE TO OUR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

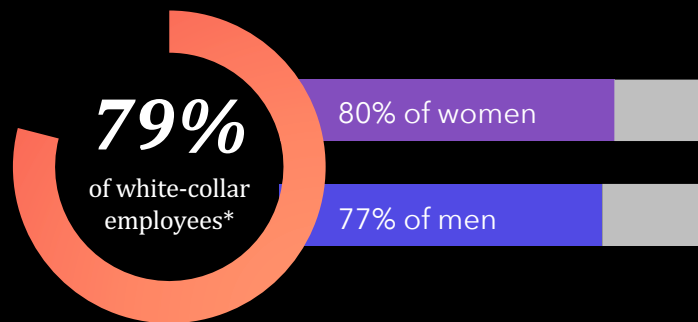
“

Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation has been an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health. Our relationships are a source of healing and well-being hiding in plain sight – one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled, and more productive lives.”

U.S. SURGEON GENERAL
DR. VIVEK MURTHY



Our research shows that the loneliness epidemic extends beyond our personal lives and into our work lives



*Survey conducted nationally among n=2,012 white-collar employees

Say they have felt lonely
as a result of their role in the past month

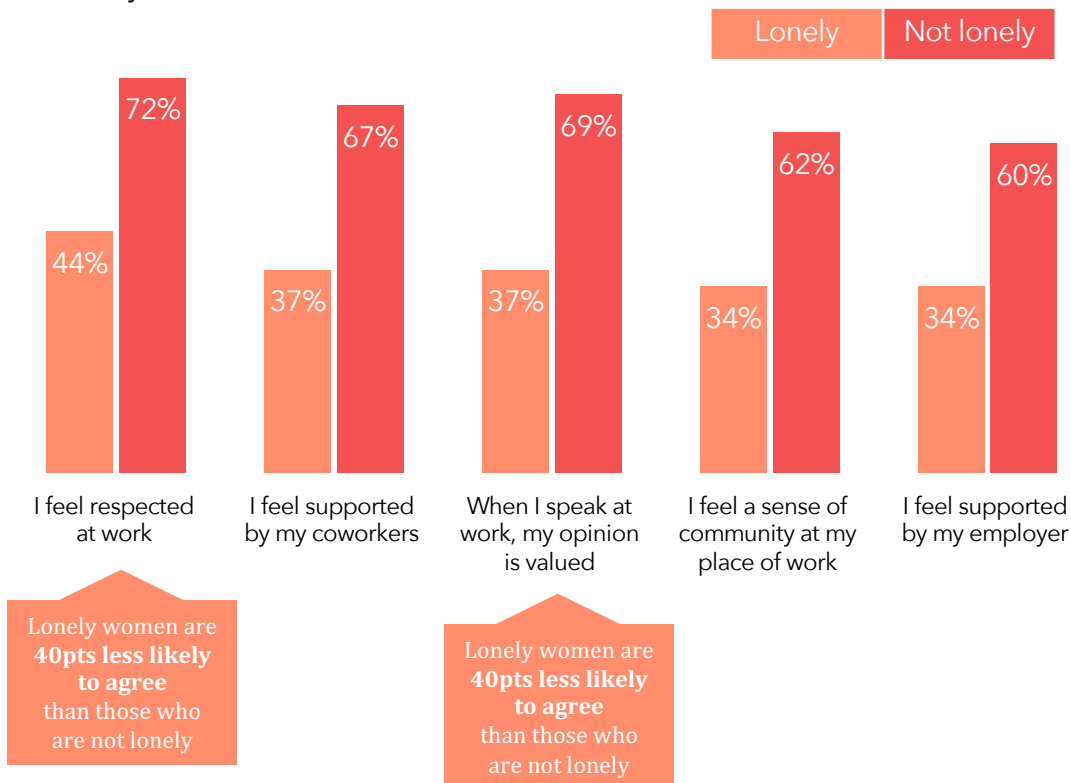
This matters because loneliness affects how people experience work - it increases the likelihood of negative work-related outcomes

Employees who are lonely do not feel supported or that their opinions and ideas are valued at work - they feel socially disconnected and unseen

Lonely employees are **4x more likely** than **those who are not** to feel **dissatisfied** with their current careers

Lonely employees are **3x more likely** than **those who are not** to feel **they cannot be their authentic selves in their careers**

Lonely employees are **only half as likely** than **those who are not** to say **they feel very positive about their future career prospects**



People of color feel lonely in their careers at similar rates to white employees, but the *impact* of loneliness on work experiences and mental health is even **stronger among POC**

Lonely POC are...

9 pts

MORE LIKELY to feel like they cannot be their authentic self at work

11 pts

LESS LIKELY to feel trusted by their managers

8 pts

LESS LIKELY to feel supported by their coworkers

...than lonely white people

Lonely people of color are also **significantly less likely** than lonely white employees to strongly agree...

...My manager is interested in my well-being

...My manager knows me well

...My manager listens to what I have to say

How do we fix this problem?

WE HAVE TAKEN A STEP-WISE APPROACH
TO BEGIN TO FIND SOLUTIONS

1

We have uncovered what is driving workplace **loneliness**

to address those **negative drivers**

2

We have uncovered what is driving feelings of **community** in our careers

to enhance those **positive drivers**

3

We dove deeply into the **sentiments and habits** of those who feel community in their careers

to offer more **practical recommendations** on how to create more meaningful togetherness in the workplace

What drives loneliness?

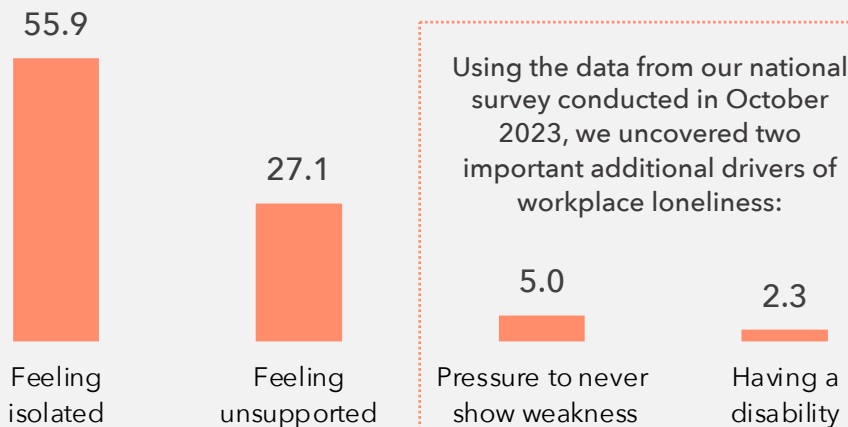
IN TWO STUDIES ON WORKPLACE LONELINESS, WE FOUND THE PRIMARY DRIVERS OF LONELINESS TO BE:



1 Feeling **isolated** in one's career

2 Feeling **unsupported** in one's career

IMPORTANCE OF LONELINESS DRIVERS



Note that there is more to workplace loneliness than these drivers, but these are the strongest, most important ones

Lonely employees are **twice as likely** as those who are not to say they wish they'd had management support when facing a past professional challenge

“

I think my higher up managers could have been far more supportive and helpful both in the current position I am in and for sure in the one I was just at in... no managers cared about our well-being.”

WOMAN, 18-34, WHITE

Interpreting the drivers of loneliness

We can't pass a law that makes us feel less isolated in our careers, or that says you have to support your colleagues at work...

And loneliness and its impacts on our careers are even more pronounced among vulnerable – and already federally protected – populations like people of color and people with disabilities.

Legislating this problem away is not a realistic solution. So how do we create the conditions that encourage this to happen?

Let's look more closely at what drives a feeling of togetherness – or community – in our careers.

What drives community?

USING THE DATA FROM OUR NATIONAL SURVEY CONDUCTED IN OCTOBER 2023, WE UNCOVERED THE KEY DRIVERS OF COMMUNITY IN ONE'S CAREER



IMPORTANCE OF DRIVERS FOR FEELING COMMUNITY IN ONE'S CAREER



Note that there is more to feeling community in the workplace than these drivers, but these are the strongest, most important ones

Community: How do drivers differ between men and women?

TOP 5 DRIVERS OF COMMUNITY FOR MEN	
I feel supported by my coworkers	16.7
I feel respected at work	9.4
When I speak at work, my opinion is valued	8.7
I feel comfortable asking for help at work	8.6
I feel comfortable expressing how I feel at work	7.7

TOP 5 DRIVERS OF COMMUNITY FOR WOMEN	
I feel supported by my coworkers	21.4
I feel respected at work	13.2
I feel comfortable being vulnerable with my coworkers	13.3
I feel comfortable asking for help at work	9.7
I feel comfortable expressing how I feel at work	7.3

More than anything, men and women **both need to feel supported and respected** for community to blossom in their careers.

A key gender difference in top drivers of community? **Feeling that their opinion is valued is a very strong driver for men**, compared to feeling a sense of psychological safety with coworkers for women.

Interpreting the drivers of community

The drivers of feeling a sense of community in one’s career begin to uncover what is needed to address loneliness *beyond the absence of feeling unsupported and isolated*.

Feeling respected and valued at work, being able to show up with the authentic version of one’s self, and feeling like one can trust their employer and their colleagues are the foundations of meaningful togetherness – or community – in our careers.

The drivers show us, statistically, that **workplace policies** and **an employer’s internal culture** matter deeply to individuals’ work life (and mental health).

In other words – there is work to be done on the part of employers (and individual managers) to make community a reality for their employees.

But what can individuals do to create this feeling of togetherness for themselves, even in the absence of changes brought forth by employers?

How can we create feelings of community in our careers?

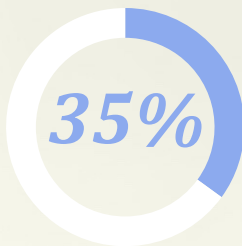
LET'S TAKE A CUE FROM THE PEOPLE THAT SAY THEY HAVE THAT ALREADY

COMMUNITY CULTIVATORS

were identified through a Cluster Analysis (segmentation analysis) conducted by BSG. They are **significantly more likely** than white-collar employees overall to **currently have...**

- 1** A **network** of friends and colleagues they've **built and nurtured themselves**
- 2** Regular **opportunities to collaborate** with others
- 3** **Transparency** around work being done outside of their immediate teams
- 4** Regular **company-wide (all hands) meetings**

This group is unique in both things they are doing themselves AND things their employers are doing for them



of American white-collar employees are Community Cultivators



Nearly two-thirds of Community Cultivators work in a role that is either **hybrid or fully remote**



Community Cultivators offer the rest of us a glimpse into what we can do for ourselves to create a sense of community in our careers

In which of the following ways do you nurture your work relationships?

Total Employees

Community Cultivators

Staying in touch via text

55%

75%

Spending time together in person

52%

71%

24% of Community Cultivators say this is the **MOST** effective way

Collaborating on projects

49%

65%

Supporting one another through workplace challenges

50%

65%



3-in-4 Community Cultivators build their networks of relationships by **collaborating on projects** and **approaching coworkers in person**

Community Cultivators are significantly more likely to spend time nurturing their network of work relationships during their normal workday

Community Cultivators are significantly more likely to include the following in their **network of relationships** in their career:

- ✓ Current direct coworker
- ✓ Current indirect coworker
(*ex: from a different department*)
- ✓ Current manager
- ✓ Previous direct coworker

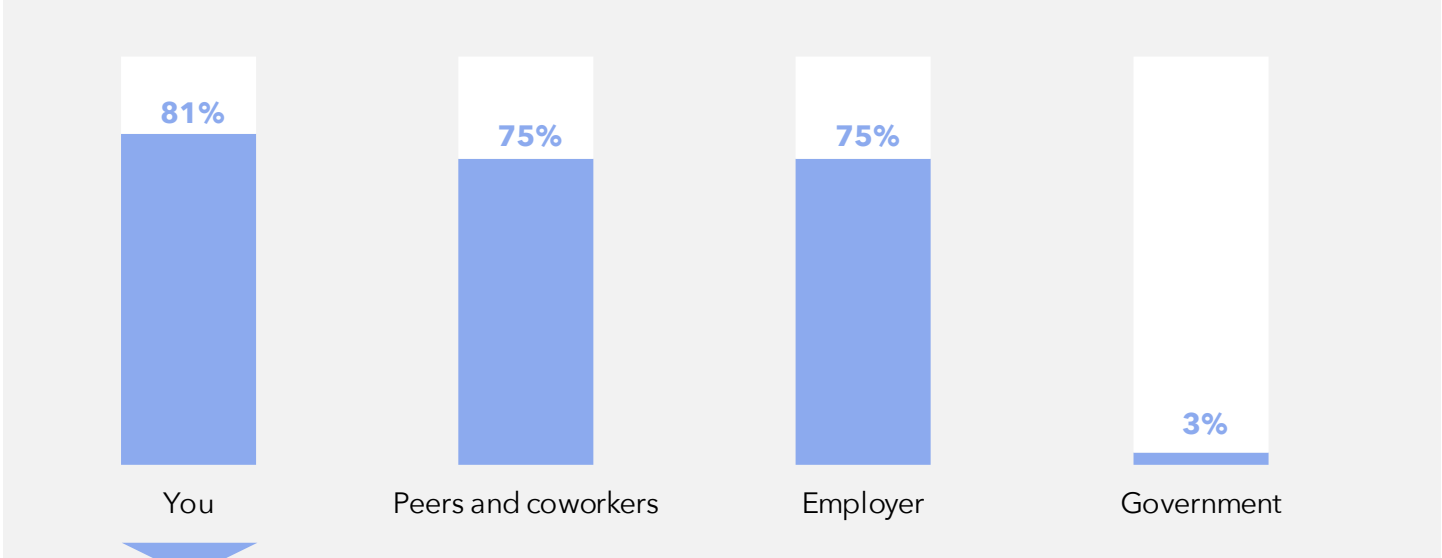
THE MAJORITY OF COMMUNITY CULTIVATORS say they have between

6-15 people

in their network of relationships in their career

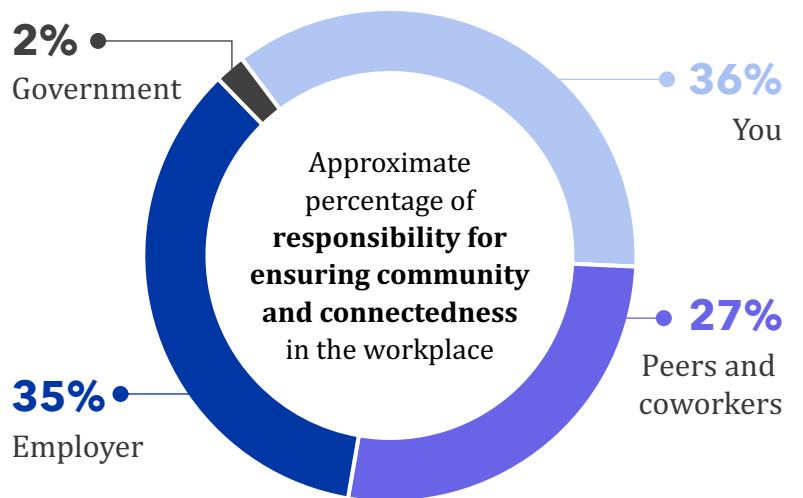
Community Cultivators: We shouldn't be solely responsible for creating community in our careers - we need help from colleagues and employers

Who do you think is responsible for ensuring community and connectedness in the workplace?



When we look closer – even though more than three-quarters say they themselves are responsible, **when Community Cultivators are asked to lay out their “share” of responsibility, fewer than one-in-eight say they should be 100% responsible for building community in their careers**

Share of Responsibility for Building Community in One’s Career
According to Community Cultivators



Managers have a large and important role to play in fomenting community with and for their employees

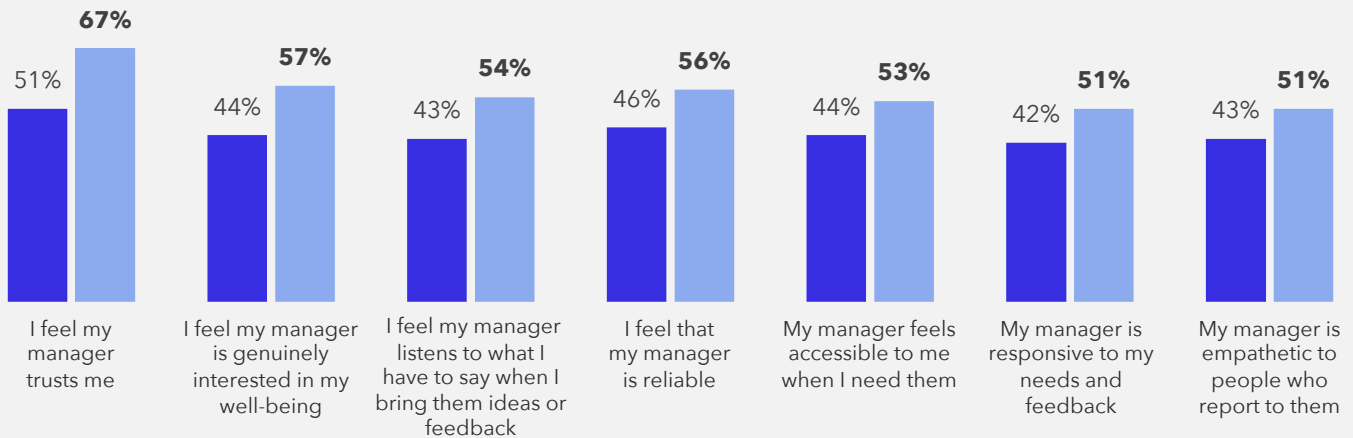
COMMUNITY CULTIVATORS

% Strongly Agree

Ranked by percentage point difference between Community Cultivators and Total Employees

Total Employees

Community Cultivators



It wasn't **personal resilience** that helped Community Cultivators through past professional challenges...

This group is **significantly more likely** than total employees to say a coworker, manager, and/or family/friend **helped them when facing a professional challenge** in the past

Insights from examining the Community Cultivators segment

Workplace **community helps to undo the damage** caused by workplace loneliness: Community Cultivators feel supported, connected socially to their colleagues, seen for their true selves, and that their opinions and ideas are valued at work. To establish meaningful togetherness in the workplace, **a collaborative and transparent environment is critical.**

Opportunities for in-person collaboration or one-on-one connections are necessary to facilitate a sense of community in the workplace – but **this doesn't mean employers must abandon remote or hybrid work arrangements** to help address workplace loneliness.

Now is the time for employers and managers to double down on supporting employees.

Once work relationships have been formed with colleagues – including managers – the **Community Cultivators nurture those relationships over time.** They nurture their networks through SMS, time spent together in person, collaboration at work, and offering (and receiving) support when challenges arise at work. This activity **happens "on the clock"** – **Community Cultivators make a point to spend part of their workday on it.**

But they also know that a workplace community can't happen without combined effort – the **culture and opportunities created, or ignored, by employers will make or break** their ability to build a workplace community.

Our research suggests that there are things that we all need to do urgently to address loneliness in our careers



What can **individuals** do to create a feeling of community in one's career?

- 1 Take the first step** – reach out to colleagues yourself rather than waiting to hear from them
- 2 Routinely set aside time in your workday – even 10 minutes each week** – to actively build and nurture your own professional network of relationships
- 3 Prioritize in-person time** over a text-based or virtual catch-up whenever you can (but virtual time is always better than no time at all!)
- 4 Seek out opportunities to attend work- or industry-related events** outside of the workplace – and **invite a colleague** who shares an interest in it
- 5 Ask colleagues for advice and leverage their institutional knowledge** – in turn, you convey to them that you value their opinion, and lay down a building block for trust
- 6 Occasionally take stock of how many individuals you feel you can go to with a question or issue** within your workplace – if that number is static over time, work more actively on building workplace connections



What can **employers and managers** do to create a feeling of community in their employees' careers?

- 1** **Prioritize opportunities for employees to interact in-person** – both on work-in-common and in less structured and work-related ways
- 2** **Lead with transparency** – employees need to feel confident their employers/managers communicate fully and honestly with them about pay, promotions, and career paths
- 3** **Train managers on leading with empathy and respect**, including how to have difficult conversations with employees who may have critical feedback to share
- 4** **Encourage and respect vulnerability** – in managers and individual contributors alike
- 5** **Nurture a culture that is collaborative and supportive** in nature – create disincentives for toxic competition (when personal gain is prioritized higher than collective success) and toxic resilience (when employees work through unhealthy or harmful work environments, putting their human vulnerability aside, at the expense of their own well-being)
 - ✓ **Examine individual performance metrics** – have they created a culture of “winners” and “losers” within the organization?
 - ✓ Are the **organization’s objectives and targets** mostly individual or **mostly shared**? Shift the balance whenever possible to the latter, rather than the former.
 - ✓ Review PTO policies – are they **supportive of employees taking most/all of their PTO** each year?
- 6** Create formal opportunities for **mentor-mentee relationships**, and provide incentives for the relationships to be maintained and nurtured over time (i.e., fund occasional mentor-mentee lunches or special events without counting that time against PTO or billable hours, etc.)



What can **the US government** do to help employers and individuals create a feeling of community in one's career?

The US Surgeon General has already highlighted how damaging loneliness is to our mental health and the nation's social fabric. We believe that the US government can help create solutions for workplace loneliness in several key areas.

And the Work Opportunity Tax Credit provides a rough framework for incentivizing desired behavioral changes from employers.

Legislative innovation is welcome in the following areas:

1

Funding for providing training to managers, so that they have the tools they need to lead effectively with empathy and vulnerability

2

Incentives for mentor programs – with graduated incentives based on duration of mentor-mentee relationships

3

Incentives for organizational transparency about pay, promotions, and career paths

Methodology

Benenson Strategy Group conducted a 15-minute online survey among N=2012 American white-collar employees ages 23-70 from October 9th to October 17th, 2023. The margin of error for the total sample is $\pm 2.18\%$ at the 95% confidence level.

Our sample included:

- n=1000 Women (MoE= $\pm 3.1\%$ at 95% confidence level)
- n=317 Women of Color (MoE= $\pm 5.5\%$ at 95% confidence level)
- n=1000 Men (MoE= $\pm 3.1\%$ at 95% confidence level)
- n=298 Men of Color (MoE= $\pm 5.68\%$ at 95% confidence level)
- n=12 Nonbinary Employees (MoE= $\pm 28.3\%$ at 95% confidence level)

Respondents were recruited via an online panel. BSG applied weights to gender, age, education, race, job level, and income to ensure they were nationally representative of white-collar employees.

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