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Further Reading, Belonging Cues, 'The Culture Code' (extract: p10-) – Daniel Coyle

Summary:

1. 'Belonging cues' are signals to our unconscious brains that we are **safe** and belong with a group of people
2. They are vital for establishing **Psychological-Safety**, when our brains are freed to switch from worrying about threats to meaningful interactions
3. The **amygdala**, a part of our brain that has worked to keep us safe for millions of years, can operate in two ways in social situations: to move us into 'fight or flight', or to build and sustain social connections
4. Because the **first five minutes** of an interaction have a powerful, determining impact on the success of the interaction, successful groups focus on '**Threshold Moments**' to help people feel welcomed into a group on their arrival

The proto-language that humans use to form **safe connection** is made-up of '**belonging cues**'.

Belonging cues are behaviours that create safe connection in groups. They include, among others, *proximity, eye contact, energy, mimicry, turn taking, attention, body language, vocal pitch, consistency of emphasis, and whether everyone talks to everyone else in the group.*

Like any language, **belonging cues** can't be reduced to an isolated moment but rather consist of a steady pulse of interactions within a social relationship. Their function is to answer the ancient, ever-present questions living in our brains: **are we safe** here? What's our future with these people? Are there dangers lurking?

"Modern Society is an incredibly recent phenomenon," Pentland says. "For hundreds of thousands of years, we needed ways to develop **cohesion** because we **depended** so much on each other. We used signals long before we used language, and our **unconscious brains** are incredibly **attuned** to certain types of behaviours."

Belonging cues possess 3 basic qualities:

1. **energy**: they invest in the exchange that is occurring;
2. **individualization**: they treat the person as unique and valued;
3. **future** orientation: they signal the relationship will continue;

These cues add up to a message that can be described with a single phrase: **you are safe here**. They seek to notify our ever-vigilant brains that they can stop worrying about dangers and shift into connection mode, a condition called **psychological safety**.

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“As humans, we are very good at reading cues; we are incredibly attentive to interpersonal phenomena,” says Amy Edmondson, who studies Psychological Safety at Harvard. *“We have a place in our brain that’s always worried about what people think of us, especially higher ups.* As far as our brain is concerned, if our social system rejects us, we could die. Given that our sense of danger is so natural and automatic, organisations have to do some pretty special things to overcome that natural trigger.” (p12)

‘Belonging’ needs to be continually refreshed and reinforced... If our brains processed safety logically, we would not need this steady reminding. But our brains did not emerge from millions of years of natural selection because they process safety logically. They emerged because they are *obsessively on the lookout for danger.* (p24)

This obsession originates in a structure deep in the core of the brain. It’s called the **amygdala**, and it’s our primate vigilance device, constantly scanning the environment. When we sense a **threat**, the **amygdala** pulls our alarm cord, setting off the **fight-or-flight** response that floods our body with stimulating hormones, and it shrinks our perceived world to a single question: *what do I need to do to survive?*

Science has recently discovered, however, that the **amygdala** isn't just about responding to danger - it also plays a vital role in **building social connections.**

It works like this: when you receive a **belonging cue**, the **amygdala** switches roles and starts to use its immense unconscious neural horsepower to build and sustain your social bonds. It tracks members of your group, tunes into their interactions, and sets the stage for meaningful engagement. In a heartbeat, *it transforms from a growling guard dog into an energetic guide dog* with a single-minded goal: to make sure you stay tightly **connected** with your people.

On brain scans this moment is vivid and unmistakable as the **amygdala** lights up in an entirely different way. “The whole thing flips,” says Jay Van Bavel, social neuroscientist at New York University. “The moment you're part of a group, the **amygdala** tunes into who's in that group and starts intensely tracking them. Because these people are valuable to you. They were strangers before, but they're on your team now, and that changes the whole dynamic. It’s such a powerful switch - it's a big top-down change, a total reconfiguration of the entire motivational and decision-making system.”

All this helps reveal a paradox about the way belonging works. *Belonging feels like it happens from the inside out, but in fact it happens from the outside in.* Our social brains light up when they receive a steady accumulation of almost invisible cues: we are close, *we are safe, we share a future.*

Cohesion happens not when members of a group are smarter, but when they are lit up by clear, steady signals of safe connection. (p26)

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... and the findings are that **the first five minutes** of sociometric data strongly predict the outcomes... in other words, the belonging cues sent in the initial moments of the interaction matter more than anything else that's said. (p13)

SO...

Capitalise on **threshold moments**.

When we enter a new group, our brains decide quickly whether to **connect**. So successful cultures treat these **threshold moments** as more important than any other... the successful groups I visited paid attention to moments of arrival. They would pause, take time, and acknowledge the presence of the new person, marking the moment as special: We are together now. (p86).

... Jeff Polzer, the Harvard Business School professor who studies organisational behaviour traces any group's cooperation norms to two critical moments that happen early in a group's life. They are:

1. The first vulnerability
2. The first disagreement

These small moments are doorways to two possible group paths: are we about appearing strong or about exploring the landscape together? Are we about winning interactions, or about learning together? ... What happens in that moment helps set the pattern for everything else that follows. (p163)

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