



Tasmanian[®]
Leaders

Building Belonging Through Leadership

A discussion paper for Tasmanian
Productivity and Social Cohesion

AUTHOR

Dr Joseph Crawford

NO EXIT

With belonging, organisations can
absorb shocks, adapt to change,
and carry their people with them.

BUILDING BELONGING THROUGH LEADERSHIP:

A discussion paper for Tasmanian Leaders

Tasmania is often portrayed as the most connected of places. Its small size, slower pace, and deeply interwoven communities suggest that belonging should be strong here. Neighbours still wave to each other in the street, weekend markets brim with chatter, and natural landscapes invite people into shared spaces. To outsiders, Tasmania appears to be the island of connection. Yet the reality is more sobering: Tasmanians consistently report some of the highest rates of loneliness in the country.

As our awareness of humanity's connectivity grows, our ability to account for complexity in how individuals form (or not form) leader-follower and belonging bonds becomes more essential to building flourishing organisations and communities.

Belonging and polarisation occupy a curious paradox. Those who belong

deeply may exclude others, holding deeply their values as true; and those with low belonging see the world and those different than them as more threatening. This work is situated as a natural extension of two recent Tasmanian Leaders' reports on polarisation (Campbell et al., 2023), and complexity (Thornton, 2025).

AT A GLANCE:

The Challenge

Tasmania faces its highest digital connectivity, and its greatest social disconnection and loneliness, with workplaces often struggling to create environments where people feel valued, connected, and productive.

The Drivers

Hybrid work, transactional organisational cultures, and limited investment in evidence-based approaches mean that belonging is often left to chance. Leaders report that strategies are fragmented, with little clarity on what belonging really is, or how to foster it.

The Way Forward

Building belonging must be recognised as an essential leadership capability. Leaders can create spaces of psychological safety, support vulnerability, and align people with places and purposes that matter. Practical strategies from redesigned meetings to intentional rituals of care can help Tasmanian leaders embed belonging in daily practice.

This connectivity-cohesion paradox is well-documented in national research. The State of the Nation Report on Social Connection in Australia (2023) found that Tasmanians are more likely than Australians in other states to report feeling socially disconnected. That 37 percent of Tasmanians feel lonely. In stark contrast, the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that Tasmanians have the highest cultural and creative activity participation by state (42%, higher only by ACT: 45%), and higher than average participation in volunteering (18% compared to the 14.1% national average) (ABS 2021, 2023). The island that should be most resilient to loneliness is, in fact, one of the most vulnerable. The question for leaders is why this paradox exists and what can be done to address it.

The answer might lie in the unique features of Tasmanian life. Geography, economy, demographics, and culture each play a part in shaping the lived experience of belonging. Geography isolates as much as it connects, with a myriad of small communities networked across the Island limiting access to relationships and services. The economy, dominated by smaller and resource-constrained organisations, demands that workers do more with less, often at the cost of relational time.

Demographic realities add further pressure. Tasmania has one of the oldest populations in the country, with ageing communities particularly vulnerable to loneliness. Younger Tasmanians frequently leave for study and work opportunities on the mainland, reducing the generational mix that sustains community vibrancy. Cultural norms intensify these dynamics: in a place where “everyone knows everyone”, inclusion is powerful, but implicit exclusion is painfully visible. Taken together, these drivers explain why loneliness persists even in a state that prides itself on community.

THE TASMANIAN STORY OF LONELINESS AND BELONGING

Close, Yet One Step Removed

Tasmania’s geography is both a strength and a limitation. The small size of towns creates intimacy, where people know each other’s names and stories. 56 percent of Tasmanians live outside the State’s capital (ASBFEO, 2022). Yet, it also limits the diversity and breadth of social networks, particularly when relationships fracture or people move away. Once a connection is lost in a small community, there may be no alternative network to replace it. This reality is amplified in rural and remote parts of the state, where long travel times and limited public transport make participation in community events difficult. In a series of interviews with young Tasmanians at King Island, comments like “dating doesn’t exist”, “there’s two people my age on this island”, and “you know everyone here, everyone knows everyone, everyone’s got ex’s here”.

If you live on a tiny island off the coast of a slightly bigger island, off the coast of mainland Australia, dating is really, really hard (McLennan, 2025).

Evidence underscores this challenge. *Ending Loneliness Together* (2023) notes that regional Australians are at greater risk of loneliness than those in metropolitan areas, and Tasmania’s high proportion of regional and remote communities magnifies the problem.

Participants in the belonging workshop pointed to moments of symbolic exclusion, such as when Tasmania was famously left off the map on official Olympic merchandise. This is a reminder that the island can feel one step removed, even from its own

nation. Leaders reflected that this sense of “closeness and distance” defines Tasmanian life: physically near to each other but often cut off from wider networks that sustain belonging.

Small Workplaces with Disparate Connection

Economic structure also contributes to disconnection. Tasmanian workplaces are typically small, with 96.7 percent of Tasmanian organisations employing fewer than twenty staff (ASBFEO, 2024), with a lower than median average Australian wage. In such environments, employees are often required to juggle multiple roles, leaving less time for social interaction during the workday. And the lower average socioeconomic status contributes to greater disconnection and poorer social cohesion (Langin, 2022). Leaders in the workshop observed that survival pressures like meeting deadlines, sustaining cash flow, keeping projects afloat often displace efforts to build belonging. While staff may know each other well in small teams, the pressure of limited resources can undermine the very relationships that should sustain them.

The absence of economies of scale means that tasks and responsibilities cannot easily be spread, and staff face heavier relational and professional burdens. In addition, Tasmania has a significantly higher proportion of government-employed workers in the country, creating environments where bureaucratic pressures often squeeze out the time needed for connection. Leaders described this as a paradox within a paradox: small workplaces offer the possibility of closeness, but they can just as easily become isolating if there is no deliberate effort to create connection. Without strategies to nurture belonging, the economic fabric of Tasmania leaves people exposed to loneliness even when surrounded by colleagues.

The Ageing Island and the Youth Who Leave

Tasmania’s demographic profile intensifies the risk of loneliness. With the oldest median age of any Australian state (42 years compared to 37 nationally: ABS, 2019), Tasmania faces an elevated risk of social isolation among older adults. Ageing brings reduced mobility, shrinking peer networks, and, for some, the grief of losing long-standing community members. Leaders noted that older Tasmanians may remain in their communities physically but become socially disconnected when their participation in the everyday rhythms of clubs and community events is more difficult.

At the same time, younger Tasmanians are leaving. Tasmania experiences net losses in arrivals and departures that only occur between the ages of five and 34, with the largest group 20-24 with a net loss of 721 people (Denny, 2015). This exodus reduces the generational balance that sustains community life.

Workshop participants described this as a “missing middle,” where communities are weighted toward older residents but lack the younger cohort who might otherwise bridge divides, introduce new energy, and sustain institutions. The combination of ageing in place and youth outflow leaves many communities without the intergenerational ties that are critical for belonging.

Familiar Faces and Closed Circles

Culture in Tasmania cuts both ways. Leaders reflected on the familiar refrain that “everyone knows everyone” in the state. For those on the inside, this can be comforting: a sense of visibility, continuity, and security. But for those who are excluded, the experience is amplified. Exclusion in Tasmania is not anonymous: it is personal, enduring,

and often inescapable. Leaders spoke of migrants and newcomers who struggled for years to be accepted, as well as individuals whose identities or values placed them outside dominant norms.

Tasmania has the lowest level of people born outside Australia (13%), compared to the national average (29%), with Southeast Tasmania being the third lowest Statistical Area 4 by net overseas migration (ABS, 2021). Evidence again aligns with these accounts. Ending Loneliness Together (2023) found that people from minority backgrounds are disproportionately likely to report loneliness, and Tasmania's smaller, more homogenous communities might exacerbate this trend.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (2023) highlights that across Australia, 73.2 percent of people are digitally literate with areas like Tasmania (70%) and Northern Territory (69%) lagging behind. In Tasmania, this gap is more prevalent in regional areas like Flinders Island (61.8%), the West Coast (63.8%) and Break O'Day and Glamorgan/Spring Bay (63.9%). Digital ability in these areas is much lower, at 50.9, 55.2, 50.2, and 51.4 percent respectively. People with insufficient skills, literacies, and capabilities (e.g., digital ability) will always have much more difficulty in navigating a consistently evolving digital landscape.

Leaders also pointed to the unwritten cultural rule that it takes "ten years to become a Tasmanian": a reminder that belonging on the island is not always immediately extended. Culture, they concluded, is a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, capable of sustaining belonging, and on the other it is just as capable of intensifying loneliness.

So... What about Leaders?

The Tasmanian story of belonging and loneliness is not simply a social issue; it is a leadership imperative. As traditional institutions of community life (e.g., churches, sporting clubs, associations) fluctuate, workplaces are becoming the most reliable sites of human connection. Leaders therefore find themselves on the front line of belonging. Their decisions about how to design teams, structure meetings, and model vulnerability can either perpetuate disconnection or repair it.

In Tasmania, the stakes are magnified. The scale of the state means that disconnection is felt acutely, but also that small acts of leadership ripple widely. A single organisation's choice to embed belonging into its culture can influence an entire town. Conversely, the absence of belonging can fracture not only a workplace but a whole community. This paper therefore argues that belonging is not peripheral to Tasmanian leadership... it is central to its success, and to the state's future wellbeing. The story of Tasmanian belonging extends on emergent narratives of polarisation and complexity. Social cohesion exists where those of dissenting views share mutual respect and a deep care for one another, irrespective of polarised perspectives. In this whitepaper, building belonging for a more productivity and cohesive workforce and community is explored.

The combination of ageing in place and youth outflow leaves many communities without the intergenerational ties that are critical for belonging.

Leaders also pointed to the unwritten cultural rule that it takes “ten years to become a Tasmanian”: a reminder that belonging on the island is not always immediately extended. The Tasmanian story of belonging and loneliness is not simply a social issue; it is a leadership imperative.

APPROACH

This paper draws on a design-thinking workshop held in late 2024 in Launceston with fourteen leaders from across Tasmania. Participants included managers and board directors from sectors spanning construction, not-for-profit, education, arts, government, and business. Further consultation was held with other leaders in Tasmania to assist in consolidating insights gained in the workshop.

The workshop asked leaders to explore when and where they most felt belonging; what belonging is - and what it is not; and how belonging might be built in workplaces and communities. Their lived experiences and insights were synthesised with contemporary research on belonging, loneliness, and social cohesion.

As a global backdrop, the World Economic Forum (2025) lists societal polarisation as its highest multi-stakeholder global risk, and this alongside declining health and wellbeing and talent and labour shortages underlines this Tasmanian enquiry.

The belonging workshop ran over a full-day and involved:

- **Personal reflection:**

Leaders shared moments in their lives when belonging was strongest, often describing simple, everyday experiences - a family table, a beach walk, a familiar forest.

- **Collective sense-making:**

Participants mapped words and images of belonging, challenged each other's definitions, and worked through the tensions between inclusion and exclusion.

- **Practical design:**

Teams proposed workplace interventions to strengthen belonging, grounded in their own organisational contexts

Leaders acknowledged that belonging is complex. It is not simply joy or comfort. At times, belonging comes with accountability, challenge, and even conflict. While moments of belonging often felt positive (e.g., relaxed, content, connected), participants noted that true belonging sometimes means being held to account, or sitting with tension, in the service of relationships that matter to them.

When asked to define belonging, participants offered three working statements:

- To belong is to be safe to be your authentic self in relationship with others – feeling supported, valued, and curious.
- To belong is to feel connected to a people, place, and/or purpose, where you are welcomed to be your authentic self.
- To belong is to have a deeply personal sense of being where you are meant to be; that is responsive to context.

The process did not aim for a single definition. Instead, it highlighted that belonging is multifaceted (e.g., personal, relational, and contextual) and multi-anchored (e.g., from many places).

A FRAMEWORK FOR LEADING BELONGING

Belonging is not a soft sentiment; it is the architecture that holds people in place. In the Tasmanian context, where communities are tightly bound yet often fractured by geography, industry, and identity, belonging emerged from leaders' reflections as essential and elusive. The *Tasmanian Belonging Framework* below synthesises four dimensions of belonging that leaders in the workshop described and illustrates the realities of Tasmanian workplaces and communities.

Psychological Safety

At its heart, belonging begins with safety. Leaders spoke of the capacity to voice dissent in a boardroom without fear of reprisal, to admit uncertainty in a project meeting without being dismissed as weak. For some,

psychological safety was remembered in small gestures like the supervisor who asked "Are you okay?" and stayed for the answer. Perhaps even probing when an automatic "Yeah, I'm good" appears without thought. It was the teams that shared mistakes at the start of every meeting, signalling that missteps were a part of learning, not grounds for shame, that came to belong most deeply.

In Tasmania, where many organisations are small and reputations travel quickly, this need is magnified. The intimacy of the island makes it harder to separate professional risk from personal consequence. Speaking up at work can strain social ties in sporting clubs or community groups. Leaders recognised that without deliberate efforts to protect radical candour, safety collapses and with it, our sense of social connection.

Unconditional Vulnerability

Belonging also requires the courage to be seen as fallible. Leaders recalled moments when teams drew closer not in triumph but in shared difficulty: keeping a school open during staff shortages, managing fatigue during bushfire season, or admitting the limits of resources in a rural health service.

Vulnerability was not always comfortable. Some described the anxiety of "going first" being the one to admit doubt or to disclose a personal struggle, perhaps a symptom of a pervasive fear of tall poppy syndrome. This remains a particularly important insight in building inclusive and equitable workforces that support productive and decent work, as part of a broader model of sustainable economic productivity (Eccleston, 2025).

Yet in those moments of exposure, belonging grew. A participant described their board pausing agenda items to acknowledge the grief of a member who had lost a family pet; another recalled laughter that broke through tension

TASMANIAN BELONGING FRAMEWORK

1. *Psychological Safety*
2. *Unconditional Vulnerability*
3. *Alignment of Identity and Place*
4. *Boundaries of Belonging*

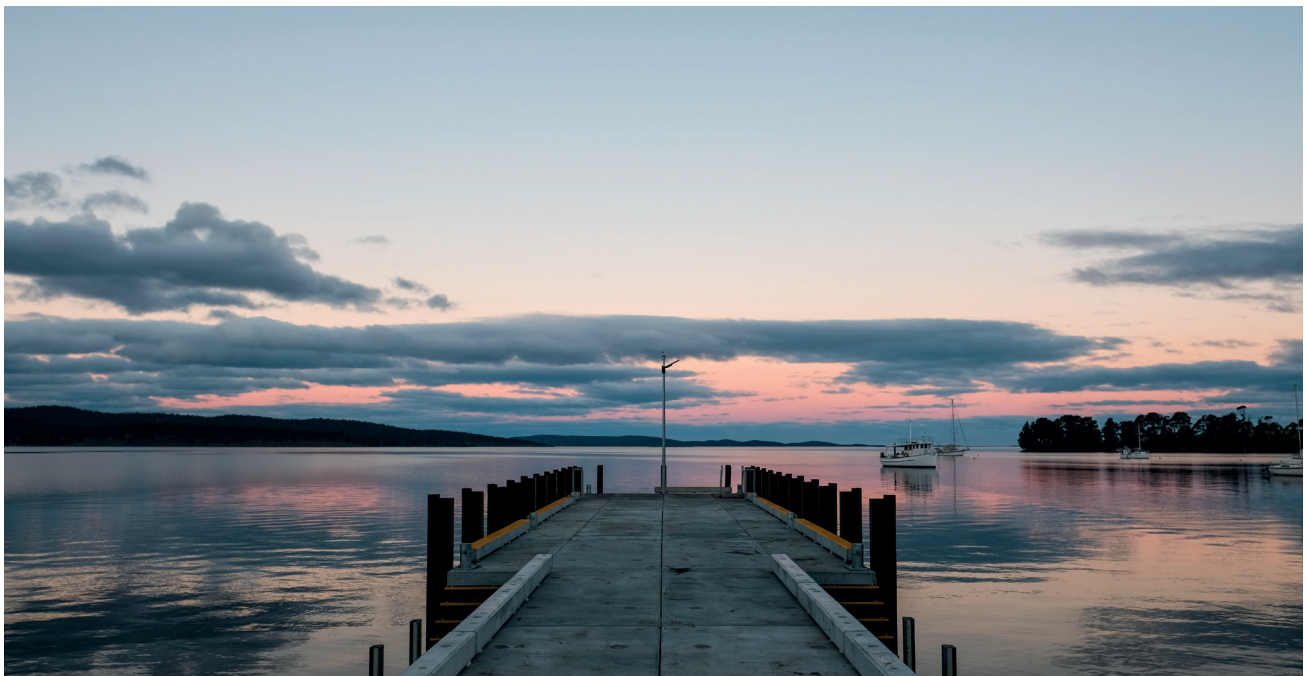


Image: Cement and Water, Prof. Tim Moss GTLP 2020

when their CEO confessed to a simple mistake. These were not grand strategies but acts of humanity. Leaders concluded that belonging depends on spaces where it is safe to drop the armour, even briefly, and trust that others will hold what is revealed.

Alignment of Identity and Place

Tasmanian leaders also framed belonging as a matter of fit between who we are and where we are located. One participant asked bluntly, *“Am I the spatula in the right drawer?”*. The metaphor captured a deeper truth: identity must find its container. For some, belonging came from professional alignment like the engineer who felt recognised not just for technical skill but for their value-alignment of sustainability shared by their firm. For others, it came from place: the professional who felt rooted in their coastal community because their identity as a local was affirmed in their workplace.

But leaders also spoke of misalignment. Skilled migrants described difficulty finding workplaces that valued their expertise. Younger professionals in regional towns spoke of being seen as “outsiders” until years of persistence shifted perceptions. Younger

professionals seen for their age, rather than their skill. Belonging, in this sense, is contingent: it requires organisations and communities willing to widen their drawers, to make room for identities that do not yet “fit” their representation of merit.

Community identity, in the Tasmanian context, was of interests in discussions by leaders. Tasmania despite having a reasonably low level of international migration has a deep and rich Tasmanian Aboriginal community of which conversations about how to welcome new people, and what identity in place means, have been extended and practiced for millennia.

Boundaries of Belonging

Finally, leaders recognised that belonging is defined not only by what it includes but also by what it excludes. Support groups like Men’s Sheds, football teams with gold coin entry, and tight-knit professional associations all create strong belonging for those inside while leaving others outside the boundary. In Tasmania, where populations are small, these boundaries are felt sharply. Even a single decision - whether a promotion denied or a to a committee seat not awarded - can delineate the

line between inclusion and exclusion in ways that ripple through the whole community.

Leaders recounted examples where belonging was fractured by spoken and unspoken divides: north versus south, and long-time residents versus newcomers. The lesson was not that boundaries are bad and sometimes they are necessary to hold identity and purpose. Rather, leaders argued that boundaries must be named and navigated with care. Belonging cannot mean universal inclusion, but neither should it reinforce exclusion that entrenches loneliness or inequity.

Leading Belonging

Psychological safety, vulnerability, alignment, and boundaries form the framework of belonging leadership in Tasmania. Each requires intentional practice: to guard safety in a small state where voices carry, to normalise vulnerability in a culture wary of exposure, to foster alignment between identity and place, and to navigate the boundaries that define communities without hardening them into walls.

Belonging is not a backdrop to productivity; it is the precondition. Without it, people drift. With it, organisations and communities gain resilience, creativity, and commitment.

HOW LEADERS CAN BUILD BELONGING

Leaders in the workshop were asked to design practical interventions for belonging, drawing directly on their professional contexts. And these were diverse among participants, and included not-for-profit managers accustomed to building trust on limited resources, to engineers used to solving problems through creative design, to council staff experienced in fostering community connection. Each of the strategies emerged not from abstract theorising but from the lived expertise of the workshop participants. Each team crafted an idea grounded in what they knew best and then submitted it to a process of peer review, where other groups tested, questioned, and refined the concept. The result was not four isolated tactics, but four strategies shaped by diverse perspectives and stress-tested across sectors, making them both contextually Tasmanian and broadly transferable.

Strategy 1. Care-and-Share Exchanges

Care-and-share exchanges invite teams to share responsibility for nurturing something that is not tied to work performance, such as a plant, a bonsai, a fish, or even a sourdough starter. The premise is deceptively simple: a living artefact is entrusted to the team, and responsibility rotates between members over time. One spoke of a plant watering roster in the office or growing a plant to give to a colleague. Over time, these

Belonging is not peripheral to Tasmanian leadership... it is central to its success, and to the state's future wellbeing.

artefacts become a shared reference point. These become a small ritual that punctuated the routine of work and offered a light-hearted way to notice and connect with each other.

Participants linked this strategy to the deeper role of trust and everyday ritual in fostering belonging. They reflected that it was often not the high-profile events, forced belonging from top-down, or formal programs that made people feel part of a team, but the consistent and almost mundane practices that signalled care. In the plant example, the act of tending something together became a mirror for how people hoped to tend their own relationships. Leaders saw in these exchanges a reminder that belonging is built in the ordinary, not just the extraordinary.

When teams create the trust to care for each other, productivity becomes a natural consequence.

In the Tasmanian context, this strategy has resonance. Many workplaces are small, resources are tight, and staff often juggle multiple roles. Under such conditions, grand initiatives can feel unattainable or tokenistic. Care-and-share exchanges offer a low-cost but high-impact practice, one that is accessible across sectors and scalable in even the leanest organisations. By anchoring belonging in shared responsibility for something tangible, leaders can help foster connection in a way that fits Tasmania's scale and character.

Strategy 2. Redesigned Meetings

Redesigned meetings challenge the default of tightly scheduled agenda-driven gatherings by intentionally creating space for human connection. Instead of rushing from item to item, these meetings reintroduce elements of informality that once came naturally

through corridor chats and early arrivals. A participant shared how they shifted a monthly meeting into a walking loop along a local river. The change loosened conversation, encouraged creativity, and gave participants a sense of being part of something more than a bureaucratic exercise.

Participants repeatedly highlighted the loss of informal connection in a digital-first era. Back-to-back meetings, normalised late arrivals ("let's just wait a few minutes for everyone to arrive"), and abrupt exits had eroded the subtle rhythms that build belonging. Leaders said that by reimagining meetings (whether through setting, structure, or ritual) they could reclaim some of this lost ground. Small interventions, such as beginning with personal check-ins or sharing food, were seen as disproportionately powerful in shifting tone and trust.

A meeting is more than minutes, action items, and motions... it ought to be a regular moment of social cohesion.

For Tasmania, the impact of this strategy lies in how quickly it can reshape culture. Because many organisations are relatively small, changes to meeting norms can cascade rapidly, influencing not just individuals but entire teams. In regional areas, where geographic spread can make connection harder, the deliberate redesign of meetings offers a way to sustain relationships at distance. Leaders saw in this practice a practical way to cultivate belonging without undermining efficiency. This is a reminder that even essential and everyday work can be done differently.

Strategy 3. Blackout Lunches

Blackout lunches carve out dedicated time and space where devices are absent and conversation is the norm. The

goal is to counter the constant hum of distraction that many leaders admitted had become their default posture at work. One organisation trialled a weekly turning of the lunchroom into a device-free zone for a single hour. At first, the silence felt uncomfortable, with staff unsure how to fill the void left by their phones, but soon conversations grew, ranging from family news to favourite bakeries across the city.

Participants described this practice as a direct response to the fragmentation of attention in modern workplaces. Phones buzzing, inboxes never at zero, watches reminding us to stand up, and endless notifications meant that even when people shared a table, they were not truly present with each other. By creating a structured environment where the rules were clear, leaders felt they could lower the barriers to genuine conversation. Several noted that for neurodiverse employees, who may rely on clarity and predictability in social situations, such defined spaces were particularly valuable.

When we set aside the constant influx of device distraction, we make space for our colleagues.

In Tasmania, where organisations are often lean and staff wear many hats, the temptation to “catch up on emails” at every spare moment can be especially strong. Leaders argued that blackout lunches provide a cultural counterweight. That a moment away from the outside is a reminder that relationships are also work worth attending to. By protecting even a short period each week for undistracted presence, organisations reinforce the message that people matter as much as tasks. In a state where community is already a core identity, this strategy offers a way of aligning workplace culture with broader Tasmanian values.

Strategy 4. Shared Play and Laughter

Shared play acknowledges that belonging is created not only in moments of seriousness but also in moments of lightness. Activities that generate humour, surprise, or creativity help people see each other in new ways.

One firm added a five-minute drawing-and-guessing game to their weekly meeting. The results were often absurd. There were stick figures that bore little resemblance to their intended subjects, but the laughter reset the room and carried through the day. Participants linked this practice to the deeper theme of vulnerability. To play is to take a risk, whether it is the risk of looking foolish, of being wrong, or of revealing a hidden talent. They observed that such activities created a levelling effect: the CEO's clumsy sketch was no more or less valuable than the accountant's hidden artistic flair. In this way, play blurred hierarchy and created new avenues of trust.

Shared laughter is not a distraction from work it is a path to building connection through vulnerability and play.

For Tasmanian workplaces, shared play and laughter are more than an indulgence. They are a buffer against the pressures of limited resources, cross-generational teams, and the intensity of small community dynamics. Leaders noted that laughter provided resilience and the capacity needed to carry on through lean budgets, heavy workloads, and persistent uncertainty. In workplaces where everyone already knows everyone, humour can soften divides and make collaboration easier. Far from being a luxury, play emerged as a necessary ingredient of sustainable belonging.

MOVING FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

Future Directions

Belonging must be embedded in leadership development. Just as resilience and systems thinking are taught as core leadership skills, belonging should be cultivated with equal seriousness. Leaders cannot assume that connection will emerge naturally; it requires training, reflection, and practice. By treating belonging as a capability, rather than a by-product, Tasmanian organisations can equip current and future leaders to foster cultures where people thrive, and productivity grows.

This is the challenge and the invitation: to move beyond insight and into action, weaving belonging into the everyday practice of leadership.

Everyday practices are the true building blocks of belonging. Leaders in the enquiry stressed that belonging does not come from glossy programs or once-off events, but from repeated rituals that weave connection and cohesion into daily life. Whether through redesigned meetings, device-free lunches, or small acts of care, these practices establish a rhythm of relational attention.

The strength of belonging lies in its ordinariness, and leaders who model and reinforce these habits give their teams permission to do the same.

Belonging also requires a clear-eyed view of boundaries and barriers. Leaders cannot assume that their workplaces are naturally inclusive, nor that belonging is experienced equally by all. The workshop highlighted that exclusion is often invisible to those inside the circle, but painfully obvious to those outside it. By acknowledging who is

missing or marginalised, and by creating pathways for their inclusion, leaders can strengthen their organisations without diluting their integrity.

Finally, psychological safety must be actively nurtured. Belonging is fragile without the assurance that people can speak openly, take risks, and share vulnerabilities without fear of ridicule or repercussion. Leaders play a decisive role here: their openness signals to others that honesty is not only safe but valued. A culture of psychological safety does not remove tension or accountability, but it ensures that difference is engaged with respectfully, enabling both trust and performance to grow.

Belonging (and Social Cohesion) as the Antidote to Polarisation

Belonging is not simply a matter of interpersonal warmth; it is a critical ingredient in the health and cohesion of communities. When people feel connected, they are more likely to trust institutions, participate in civic life, and engage constructively with difference. This is especially important at a time of rising polarisation, where individuals increasingly retreat into ideological, geographic, or social silos.

The earlier Tasmanian Leaders' Complexity and Polarisation discussion papers highlighted this risk clearly: when uncertainty rises and narratives harden, communities fracture along lines of identity, belief, or belonging. Belonging, therefore, becomes a stabilising force. Belonging is the counterbalance needed for the forces that polarise humanity.

Tasmania is particularly sensitive to these dynamics. The smaller scale of the Island means polarising forces can force divides quickly, but meaningful connection can spread just as fast. While the unofficial separation at the gates of

Oatlands between the North and South of the state remain a commonplace joke, distinguishing small differences, these divides are less contentious than political conversations about an AFL Stadium, a Mount Wellington cable car, or state debt. In communities where people feel they are known, valued, and able to bring their authentic selves, there is less space for mistrust and antagonism to take root.

Belonging gives people a stake in each other's wellbeing, reducing the social distance that fuels conflict. Leaders in this enquiry repeatedly described belonging as "the glue" that allows teams, towns, and sectors to hold together when pressures mount.

This creates a unique leadership opportunity. Tasmania's interconnectedness means efforts to build cohesion need not be grand or centralised; they can begin at the level of a team, a board, or a local workplace. One leader's commitment to inclusive practice, psychological safety, or shared purpose can influence not only their organisation, but the community around it. In this way, belonging becomes a civic asset: strengthening trust, softening polarisation, and reinforcing the broader social fabric that supports collective resilience.

Tasmanian Leaders and its alumni play a distinct role here. As connectors across business, government, community, and the arts sectors they sit at the juncture where belonging can be modelled and amplified. Their practices demonstrate how human-centred approaches to leadership reduce fragmentation, foster collaboration, and deliver more unified approaches to the complex challenges facing the state. In a period of social strain, belonging is not peripheral to leadership... it is its antidote to polarisation.

The Productivity Dividend for an Island of Belonging

Belonging is equally essential to productivity, indeed a recent Relationships Tasmania report highlighted "Belonging is productivity". It is not a "soft" add-on but the infrastructure through which performance, innovation, and retention are realised. Research consistently shows that workplaces with strong belonging see higher engagement, faster problem-solving, and greater creative output. Without belonging, talent disperses, creativity dries up, and organisations lose the discretionary effort that underpins high performance.

With belonging, teams can absorb shocks, adapt quickly, and carry their people with them through changing conditions.

For Tasmania, the productivity case is especially compelling. Our small and resource-constrained workplaces rely heavily on trust, collaboration, and reciprocity; all of which are strengthened when employees feel connected. In settings where every person carries multiple roles, belonging operates as a force multiplier: it reduces friction, smooths communication, and allows teams to work with fewer bottlenecks and less oversight. Leaders in this study described belonging as "removing the drag" from everyday work, enabling people to move from compliance to contribution.

Belonging also enhances innovation and efficiency. Psychologically safe and high-belonging cultures are more likely to generate improvements in processes, services, and problem-solving. These gains directly align with the Tasmanian Government's current focus on productivity uplift, and the University of Tasmania's productivity transitions agenda towards an above average

state productivity level. In sectors central to the Tasmanian economy like healthcare, education, tourism, public service, and small business, belonging is likely to be one of the most cost-effective levers available for improving performance without exhausting staff.

Belonging supports workforce sustainability. In a labour market marked by skill shortages, ageing demographics, and high turnover costs, organisations that nurture belonging retain talent longer. This is especially important in Tasmania, where competition for skilled workers is fierce and mobility is moderate. Belonging becomes both a retention strategy and a productivity strategy, enabling organisations to maintain capability and momentum over time.

Tasmanian Leaders and their alumni can help articulate this connection between belonging and performance. Many community and organisational leaders remain focused on productivity or profitability without recognising that belonging is the mechanism through which these outcomes emerge. By modelling the link between belonging and performance, Tasmanian Leaders can position the state at the forefront of belonging-led productivity demonstrating that connection is not the opposite of efficiency, but its foundation.

AN INVITATION TO CONTRIBUTE

This paper is a beginning, not an endpoint. We invite Tasmanian leaders to reflect on the following questions:

- Which of these insights resonate with your experience of leading in Tasmania?
- What practices in your workplace already foster belonging — and what gaps remain?
- How might you adapt or trial the strategies outlined here?

By sharing perspectives and testing new approaches, leaders across the state can work together to create a more cohesive, connected, and resilient Tasmania.



Image: Carleeta Thomas wukalina walk, Alistair Bett for Brand Tasmania 2021

ABOUT TASMANIAN LEADERS



Tasmanian Leaders is a world-class, place-based organisation with national and global recognition for excellence in high impact leadership development and research. We build leadership capacity and connectivity across Tasmania for positive social, economic and environmental change – locally and beyond. We believe inclusive and purposeful leadership is critical to our collective futures.

No one understands leadership in the Tasmanian context better than us. We deliver unparalleled excellence in leadership development through our high-impact programs, equipping individuals with the skills, knowledge, and mindset necessary to positively influence our future. Our social impact work supports the wider community to thrive. Our influential Network connects current and emerging leaders to foster meaningful change together.

For over a decade, Tasmanian Leaders has championed thought leadership for the benefit of Tasmania. In 2024, under the guidance of Katy Cooper we continued this work through a series of Leadership Labs exploring how leadership is enacted, perceived, and experienced across the state.

Recognising that leaders play a critical role in shaping workplace culture and community, a Leadership Lab led by Dr. Joseph Crawford actively explored how fostering a sense of belonging can help organisations, teams, and communities thrive.

The insights gained will inform future program designs for Tasmanian Leaders, offering practical strategies to help leaders address belonging. We also hope this work sparks meaningful conversations and proves valuable to others in the leader and leadership development space. Our thanks to Nekon, our supporting partner for the Leadership in Action program.

Building Belonging is part of
Leadership in Action, proudly
supported by



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Joseph Crawford is a Senior Lecturer in Management at the University of Tasmania. An award-winning academic and leadership-belonging consultant, he is recognised as a member of the Stanford Top 2%

Scientists List for his research impact. His research focuses on belonging, leadership, and social connection in working, learning, and living. With more than 120 academic and media publications since 2019, Joey has more than 7,000 citations on Google Scholar.

Joey asks what it means to belong. Not as sentiment, but as a social condition that determines how we think, act, and thrive. He studies how belonging is built and eroded across work, learning, and life, and how human connection shapes our capacity to be well and be productive. He explores how these forces influence engagement, wellbeing, and collective resilience in workplaces. Through this work, Joey brings empirical depth to an urgent social question: how do we sustain connection in a world that fragments attention, time, and community?

His doctoral work at the University of Tasmania defined and measured authentic leadership, connecting integrity and belonging to human and organisational outcomes. Joey argues that productivity is not the opposite of humanity but its result. That people perform best when they feel safe, trusted, and aligned with purpose. His work links moral and empirical dimensions of leadership, showing how authenticity and trust create the conditions for motivation, innovation, and sustainable performance.

Joey has been published in key academic journals including *Leadership Quarterly*, *Studies in Higher Education*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *Education and Information Technologies*, and *Business, Strategy, and the Environment*. He champions the public accessibility of knowledge as President of the Open Access Publishing Association and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*. He believes research should circulate openly between disciplines, institutions, and communities to strengthen impact and innovation.

His leadership and research in open science, doctoral education, and research governance reflects a simple conviction: knowledge is most powerful when it belongs to everyone.

 [linkedin.com/in/joeycrawford0](https://www.linkedin.com/in/joeycrawford0)

References

- ABS. (2023). Cultural and creative activities. Australian Bureau of Statistics. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/cultural-and-creative-activities/latest-release>
- ABS. (2021). Tasmania: 2021 Census All persons QuickStats. Australian Bureau of Statistics. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/6>
- ABS. (2021). Migration, Australia. Australian Bureau of Statistics. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/migration-australia/latest-release>
- ABS. (2019). 3101.0 - Australian Demographic Statistics, Jun 2019. Australian Bureau of Statistics. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.sf/0/1CD2B1952AFC5E7ACA257298000F2E76>
- Allen, K., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30, 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8>
- ASBFEO. (2024). Tasmania. Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman. <https://www.asbfeo.gov.au/small-business-data-portal/location-australias-small-businesses-state-and-territory/tasmania>
- Australian Digital Inclusion Index. (2023). Measuring Australia's digital divide. <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/>
- Baumeister, R., & Leary, M. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Interpersonal Development*, 117(3), 497-529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
- Brown, B. (2010). *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are*. Hazelden Publishing.
- Campbell, D., Driver, A. & Adams, D. (2023). *Polarisation and Leadership: A Leadership Scan*. Tasmanian Leaders Inc. https://www.tasmanianleaders.org.au/research-resources/polarisation_scan/
- Chetty, R., Jackson, M. O., Kuchler, T., Stroebe, J., Hendren, N., Fluegge, R. B., ... & Wernerfelt, N. (2022). Social capital II: determinants of economic connectedness. *Nature*, 608(7921), 122-134.
- Crawford, J. (2024). Belonging during University. Universities Accord, Australian Government. <https://www.education.gov.au/download/18232/accord-report-literature-review-belonging/37659/document/pdf>
- Crawford, J., Allen, K. A., Sanders, T., Baumeister, R., Parker, P., Saunders, C., & Tice, D. (2024a). Sense of belonging in higher education students: an Australian longitudinal study from 2013 to 2019. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(3), 395-409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2238006>
- Crawford, J., Allen, K. A., Pani, B., & Cowling, M. (2024b). When artificial intelligence substitutes humans in higher education: the cost of loneliness, student success, and retention. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(5), 883-897. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2326956>
- Denny, L. (2015). ANNEXURE 1: Tasmania's Population Challenge: 650,000 by 2050. Background Issues Paper (March 2015). https://www.stategrowth.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/100376/Background_issues_paper.pdf
- Eccleston, R. (2025). *Improving Productivity in Tasmania: Issues and Opportunities. A background paper prepared by the Tasmanian Policy Exchange at the University of Tasmania*. University of Tasmania.
- Ending Loneliness Together. (2023). State of the Nation Report: Social Connection in Australia 2023. https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ELT_LNA_Report_Digital.pdf
- Gillespie, J., Cosgrave, C., Malatzky, C., & Carden, C. (2022). Sense of place, place attachment, and belonging-in-place in empirical research: A scoping review for rural health workforce research. *Health & Place*, 74, 102756.
- Hawkey, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2010). Loneliness matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 40(2), 218-227. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-010-9210-8>
- Kelder, J.-A., Crawford, J., Al Naabi, I., & To, L. (2025). Enhancing digital productivity and capability in higher education through authentic leader behaviors: A cross-cultural structural equation model. *Education and Information Technologies*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-025-13422-x>
- Langin, K. (2022). In academic, lower socioeconomic status hinders sense of belonging. *Science*. <https://www.science.org/content/article/academia-lower-socioeconomic-status-hinders-sense-belonging>
- MacDonald, G., & Leary, M. R. (2005). Why does social exclusion hurt? The relationship between social and physical pain. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131(2), 202.

McLennan, A. (2025). Looking for love on a tiny island. ABC Hack. <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/storystream/king-island-dating-struggle/104876110>

Newman, A., Donohue, R., & Eva, N. (2017). Psychological safety: A systematic review of the literature. *Human Resource Management Review*, 27(3), 521-535.

Strayhorn, T. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.

Suddaby, R. (2010). Editor's comments: Construct clarity in theories of management and organization. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(3), 346-357. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.35.3.zok346>

Thornton, A. (2025). *Leading in Complexity 2024: An initial enquiry in Tasmania*. Tasmanian Leaders. <https://www.tasmanianleaders.org.au/leading-in-complexity/>

Tice, D., Baumeister, R., Crawford, J., Allen, K-A., & Percy, A. (2021). Student belongingness in higher education: Lessons for Professors from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 18(4), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.18.4.2>

U.S. Surgeon General Advisory. (2023). Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation 2023. U.S. Government. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

World Economic Forum. (2025). The Global Risks Report 2025. https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2025.pdf

Wilson, E. (1984). *Biophilia*. Harvard University Press

Collaborators

This discussion paper was authored by Dr Joseph Crawford with contributions from leaders across Tasmania. We gratefully acknowledge the insights and feedback of participants in the Tasmanian Leaders Belonging Workshop in Launceston (2025). Collaborators included managers and directors from construction, not-for-profit, accounting, engineering, education, arts, and government organisations, and include:

Professor David Adams, Mel Croome, Angela Driver, Stephanie Finn, David Kewley, Matthew Lamprey, David Lietzau, Lisa Lods, Susan Moore, Lincoln Quilliam, Jeremy Ramsey, Maureen Stellmaker and Lissa Villeneuve.

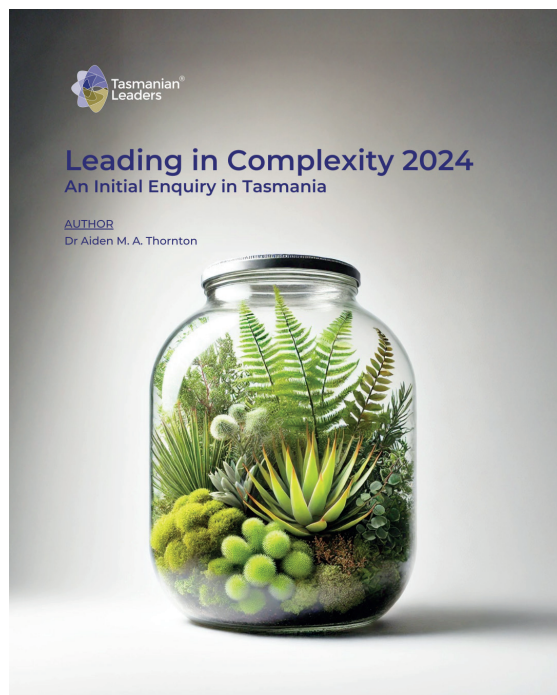
About This Paper

This work is part of the Leadership in Action series commissioned by Tasmanian Leaders. Each paper in the series explores a different capability critical for Tasmania's future. The primary data collected in this study was collected ethically through the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee (H108403).

The *Building Belonging through Leadership* Paper examines how Tasmanian leaders understand and build belonging and identifies practical strategies to embed belonging in workplaces and communities.

RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS TO INSPIRE ACTION

Tasmanian Leaders offers a range of proven social impact initiatives which support the wider Tasmanian community to thrive. In 2024, we launched Leadership in Action, a reinvigorated pillar of our work aimed at generating collective action, and amplifying the adaptive capacity within our organisations and communities, with our graduates leading the charge. It is to help us think and act differently for the benefit of Tasmania.

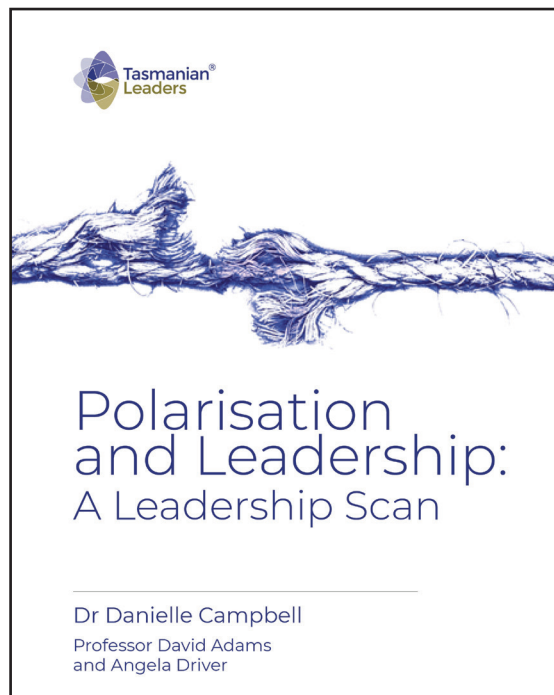


Leading in Complexity 2024 : An Initial Enquiry in Tasmania (2024)

Dr. Aiden M.A. Thornton

Leading in Complexity 2024: An Initial Enquiry in Tasmania by complexity leadership expert Dr. Aiden M. A. Thornton delves into the distinctive challenges and opportunities for developing leadership within the Tasmanian context. Through an in-person workshop and survey, the report draws on the experiences of dozens of leaders across multiple sectors, to illustrate the challenges of leading productively and inclusively in today's environment.

The report explores 14 essential complexity leadership skills ranging from self-awareness and resilience to systems thinking and digital competency. Recommendations include embedding these skills into educational and leadership programs, fostering collective leadership development, and establishing conflict resolution frameworks to address polarisation and competing priorities.



Polarisation and Leadership: A Leadership Scan (2023)

Dr Danielle Campbell GTLP, Professor David Adams and Angela Driver GTLP

Polarisation and Leadership: A Leadership Scan (2023) presents the findings of a scan of members of the Tasmanian Leaders Network, capturing their experiences, observations and ideas about polarisation and how leadership can mitigate its negative aspects.

We believe this is a unique – and possibly Australia's only – exploration of polarisation from within a leadership network to produce location-specific knowledge and insights. Tapping into the knowledge of our graduates and others within the Tasmanian Leaders Network, the report aimed to propose solutions to Tasmania's most intractable issues and motivate and inspire our future leaders to seize opportunities to benefit our island home. These diverse perspectives generate new thinking on the nature, prevalence, causes and consequences of polarisation in Tasmania.



© 2025 Tasmanian Leaders Inc.

All rights reserved.

Cover Image: No Exit, Prof. Tim Moss GTLP 2020



PO Box 1186
Launceston TAS 7250



info@tasmanianleaders.org.au



@TasmanianLeaders



[linkedin.com/company/tasmanian-leaders-inc](https://www.linkedin.com/company/tasmanian-leaders-inc)



www.tasmanianleaders.org.au

FOUNDATION PARTNER

Tasmanian Leaders is supported
by the Tasmanian Government
through the Department of
State Growth



ORGANISATION PARTNERS



PROGRAM PARTNER

