

# A Human Approach To Change

## An Interview with Brad Deutser

**EDITORS' NOTE** Brad Deutser is the visionary leader behind Deutser (deutser.com) and Deutser Clarity Institute which has leadership learning labs in Houston, New York, Bermuda, and Arizona. He is also the founder of the Institute for Belonging (instituteforbelonging.com). He is a trusted counselor, executive coach and leadership guru for CEOs, Board Chairs, and top corporate management. His unique insights and original approach to affecting a human approach to sustainable organizational change have impacted top businesses, leading universities, professional sports franchises, and cause-based organizations. He is an expert in creating spaces and leadership capacity for belonging and inclusion. Deutser is recognized for his ability to navigate complex, contentious, ambiguous business and people challenges, both inside and outside organizations. He is sought after as an authority and innovative thinker on matters of organizational change, belonging, and complexity in leadership. He is the bestselling author of *Leading Clarity: The Breakthrough Strategy to Unleash People, Profit, and Performance* and *Belonging Rules: Five Crucial Actions That Build Unity and Foster Performance*.



Brad Deutser

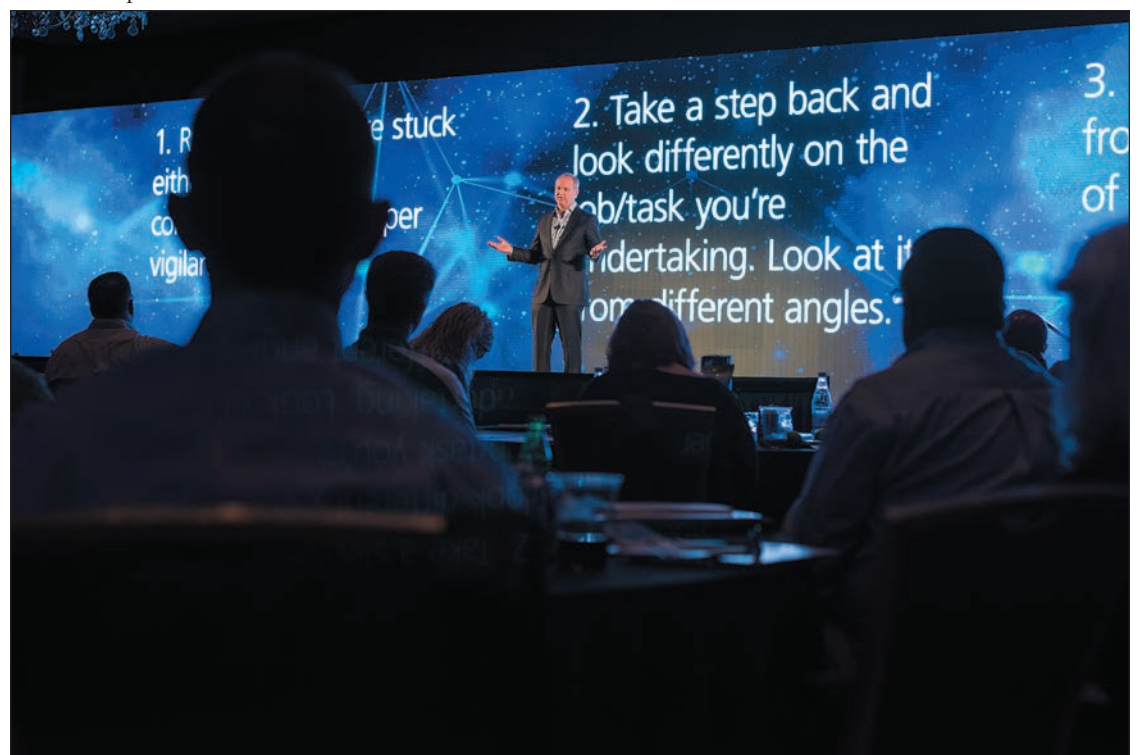
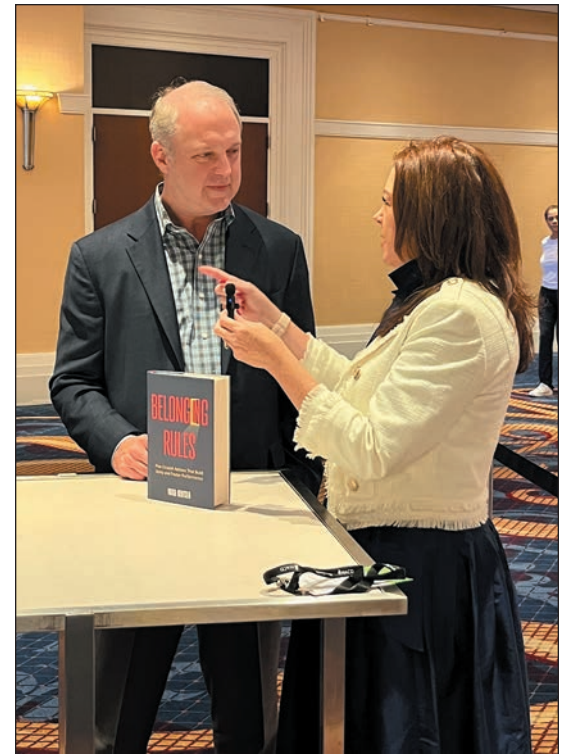
as pieces of a unique and growing puzzle. And, that puzzle continues to expand today. I always wanted to write a book; little did I know I would write two best-selling books, the most recent being *Belonging Rules: Five Crucial Actions That Build Unity and Foster Performance*.

Ringling was foundational for me as a person and a leader. It was here that I first thought about belonging – on the road with the other misfits like me, trying to find my way and fit in. As a regional marketing director (old timey promoter), I worked for \$250 a week and all the circus tickets I could trade while living on the road for a year and promoting the circus in one city after another. Following that experience, I joined a marketing firm (at the time all women) – the inventors of the cause marketing space. To me, it was like going from one circus to another. It was amazing and life changing. I learned so much about being the outsider and about how companies with a corporate soul change the world and their business. I am forever grateful for that experience.

### Will you discuss your career journey?

In a word: unexpected. My journey has been amazing – filled with ups and downs. I never would have imagined being rejected by more than 57 companies as I applied for jobs following my senior year in college, turning down the opportunity to own my dream summer camp at age 27, being fired not once, but twice (the first time for saving a woman from being murdered while working for a low income apartment project), working for a solicitors firm in London, England as the “great American lawyer,” retiring early from law school, shoveling elephant poop for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, and being a token male in an all-female company, all before my career really even began.

The diversity of my career has been a wonderful gift. To some looking in, I was a nomad, wandering from experience to experience. Instead, I saw each of the experiences



Brad Deutser discussing his most recent book, *Belonging Rules: Five Crucial Actions That Build Unity and Foster Performance* (top); and conducting leadership seminars (above and opposite page)

**“In 2001, I began my own company, at first working through complex communications issues for clients, before evolving into where we are today as a firm that focuses on a human approach to change. I have brought in unbelievably talented people – social scientists, creative experts, and business strategists, among other disciplines – to genuinely help clients and leaders change across the world.”**

My journey brought me back home to a marketing and advertising agency, where I oversaw the most complex communication and creative issues for clients. After nearly 10 years, many of which I was the firm’s leader, the owner of the firm passed away, and to my surprise, his family wanted to take the business in a different direction, without me. Fired and with a young family, I was lost. I knew one thing – I wanted to be in a business where I could impact people’s lives. Thus, the journey to where I am today.

In 2001, I began my own company, at first working through complex communications issues for clients, before evolving into where we are today as a firm that focuses on a human approach to change. I have brought in unbelievably talented people – social scientists, creative experts, and business strategists, among other disciplines – to genuinely help clients and leaders change across the world. My business has evolved and expanded in many important and intentional ways, including the creation of “Willy Wonka” styled leadership learning labs (Houston, Austin, New York, Bermuda, as well as a sports lab in Arizona) and the Institute for Belonging.

**Will you provide an overview of Deutser’s services and capabilities?**

Deutser is a consultancy that designs people-focused change solutions. Our team of consultants and creators applies a data-driven, design-focused, and uniquely human approach to solve any leader’s most complex and challenging problems. Our firm helps leaders and teams transform organizations with cultural, strategic, and experiential change initiatives, creative inspiration, and empowered personal growth. We integrate proprietary research, culture, strategy, and design to ignite and feed the flames of transformation, creating positive change that lasts. Deutser’s expertise draws from multiple disciplines, providing an integrated, multi-faceted approach to enhancing performance and harnessing the potential of people. Our process is raw, diverging from traditional playbooks. As such, our work can be hard to classify: we do everything from setting strategic imperatives to designing state-of-the-art spaces to walking leaders through their most challenging crises. But, as we’ve learned over the past 20 years, it always comes back to unlocking the potential of people. Our services include consulting, learning labs, and tools and assessments.

Our consulting work is multi-faceted and deeply integrative, with our primary areas of focus being culture, strategy, research, brand, experiential safety, and coaching and development.

**Will you discuss the opening of the Institute for Belonging and your views on the impact of the Institute?**

This has been a dream of mine for a long time. I have always wanted to marry the best of our research with highly tactile, human-focused experiences. That is what we have created with the Institute. The Institute for Belonging serves as a think tank, idea accelerator, and experiential learning center devoted to advancing the science and practice of belonging – at work, at home, in

our communities, and in our broader society. Its reach is extended as it supports groundbreaking research, transformative dialogue, and science-based leadership development. The work and research are meant to inspire progress on the most complex organizational and societal challenges evolving in our society today.

To extend the reach and impact of the Institute’s research, the organization has put out a global call for fellows, scholars in a variety of fields, who are conducting basic and applied research on human-centered leadership and belonging. The goal is to bring together and collaborate with leading minds in the field and provide financial support for this important



work. We believe that diversity of thought and perspective are vital to advancing the change our societies and organizations need, and bringing scholars, practitioners, and experts together in the spirit of engaging in challenging discourse and applying data-driven, innovative insights will advance this mission.

Within the Institute for Belonging, we have created the Belonging Lab, which is focused on human-centered leadership as experienced as an interactive, intentionally designed space that blends the latest science in groundbreaking form. It features “living exercises” that encourage open dialogue and brainstorming on divisive and complex issues where leaders come together to understand, work and lead through society’s most charged and difficult issues and conversations.

This space is where brave and resilient people, leaders who are tired of avoiding the conversation or allowing polarizing forces to win, can come together in the spirit of creating healthier communities and organizations, leading their people towards a more desirable, united, and empowered future. The space is tactile and memorable, applying Deutser’s Dimensional Leadership Learning Methodology to ensure that the conversations that take place have positive and sustainable implications. The goal is to create an inclusive yet challenging environment where people can come together to transform – themselves, their teams, their organizations, their communities, and our world – for the better.

### **What are your views on how to create a team mentality in an organization from your background with the NFL?**

High-performing teams are high-performing teams regardless of the industry. Our approach is designed around creating spaces of belonging and bridging differences to enhance performance. We infuse the belonging rules throughout the work and mindset: turn into the power, listen without labels, choose identity over purpose, challenge everything, and demand 100 percent of the truth. At the core of our work and teaching is an innate commitment to leading self and others. Our work with teams in the NCAA and NFL (as well as with companies around the world) always begins with shared understanding and the commitment to a shared identity and cultural ecosystem.

### **What is the importance of the “movable middle” in any organization?**

In belonging there is room for everyone and, as such, requires attention be given to the whole. However, those on the extremes are the most vocal, fueled by a surety that they are right, and deeply attached to achieving goals that serve their specific agenda. The momentum generated by the extremes can distract and dissuade us from the real conversations and understandings needed to create community and foster belonging. Effective, sustainable efforts cannot answer any extreme. Real transformation lies in what I call the “movable middle.”

This movable middle is made up of those who are willing to evolve, change, and grow with you. Those in the middle often feel they have

been silenced, overlooked, or underrated so they often are more willing to do the work of listening, learning, and engaging rather than demanding or disconnecting. Those in the movable middle thirst for information and understanding. They do not want to be “advertised to” or told what to think. As leaders, our goal in the middle is not to win over, but simply provide information and perspective and then to trust them to make their own thoughtful decisions. Even if they are different from our own.

Efforts to bring people into the center of discussion with the aim of working together toward desired outcomes give belonging necessary roots. It is in the middle where answers can be vetted. It is in the middle where solutions can be born. The middle is a place where people can come together in a safer place to share – not with the goal to divert or change someone’s thinking or deeply held beliefs, but with the goal to simply talk about, learn more, and share openly from different perspectives. All are invited and equally recruited to join in creating a new reality. And this should be evident in every aspect of the organization. It is in this group where we create the movements to achieve our company goals and change our future.

### **How can an office design impact employee retention?**

Our relationships to our spaces create our experiences. Spaces should tap into the ethos of who we are, what we believe, and how we best work together to facilitate unity, connection, and performance. Space should inspire people, promote access and ease the movement of how work gets done, invite meaningful conversations and encourage natural collaboration. Leaders must invite people in and then create experiences that foster belonging, unity, and performance. Too many high-end offices are sterile environments where employees must work to fit. Or, they are a collection of past eras and outdated features that no longer apply or inspire energy and meaning into the work. Instead, leaders should lean on space as a driver of positive emotions, engagement, meaning, and ultimately, well-being. The design of where you all work together can ultimately foster connection, reclaim or redefine identity, and propel all forward toward newfound and amazing outcomes. Designing the experience of belonging is not a one-time effort, but rather an ongoing process that requires thoughtfulness, attention, and refinement – like any good design.

Designing spaces that meet the needs of the people is vital to the longevity of the organization, and imperative for fostering cultures of belonging. And this effort pays off for ROI from a business perspective. Our research has shown with surveys of nearly fifteen thousand employees across varied industries and across occupational roles that not only is belonging a critical determinant of employee satisfaction, engagement, and effort, it is the most important predictor of these outcomes.

We have seen the impact of space on retention directly in our work. For example, we designed a learning lab for a multi-strategy hedge fund, core to their values of innovation

and mindfulness. We learned that creating spaces like this not only enhances retention, as they had less than 5 percent voluntary turnover, but it also invites meaningful discourse and, challenges people to learn together and support one another in different ways, as colleagues and, more importantly, as leaders and human beings.

Further, we have seen the impact of even simple changes, like placing “collaboration stations” at thruways in offices for collaboration and connectivity. These stations, where employees can come together to dialogue about different types of issues, are intentionally designed for standing meetings, making them spaces where interaction is not only normed but a different type of meeting is encouraged. Standing meetings save time, yielding greater efficiency, but these open and inviting stations also pull people out of their offices and into a different type of meeting space. It lets others who walk by hear the conversation and engage with their ideas. These types of spaces not only enhance retention, but also satisfaction, creativity, and performance.

Whether it is physical space or the expectations and norms that create psychological space, leaders have a duty to consider how people experience the organizational environment, and how they can design spaces that people want to fit in, that they can flourish in and enable creative collisions, intentional connections, and focused work.

### **What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?**

Dream. Do not let today’s constraints limit tomorrow’s vision. If you do not believe in you – then who will. Create your own scoreboard. I have never been driven by money – only by doing good. If I started a company to make money only, I would fail. I have to be me. I want people to think about what makes them happy – and choose that path. I embrace all that it means to be a human-centered leader and to lead with positivity even in the darkest moments – it is my way of life. I also encourage young people to keep learning – always evolving and experiencing different things and perspectives. And choose to take ownership of your own life. Life is not TBD (to be determined) – it is TBD (to be designed) – you have the ability to do great things – be open to what is ahead. Also, embrace the leader in you – you are born to lead – maybe it is one (you) or maybe it is many, but commit to being self-aware and to working on your innate and unique leadership talents. It will serve you throughout your life. And, finally, I encourage people to adopt the belonging rules and work to apply them in all facets of their work and life. It gives a framework to navigate through the chaos and transitions that life puts in our pathways. When we commit to being human-centered leaders, we are more open, more accepting, more vulnerable, and ultimately more able to invite people into our own dreams, hopes and vision for what can be. Go out of your way to create spaces for not only you to belong, but others too. Enjoy the ride – including the ups and downs – it is magical, and it is all yours. ●