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# Creating a Welcoming & Engaging Conference Experience

Attending a conference is an opportunity to build connections, share knowledge, and ensure that all participants feel valued and engaged. Thoughtful planning and awareness help create an environment where everyone can fully participate and enjoy the experience.

Consider these best practices to ensure everyone can fully engage and contribute.

## Mindful Seating and Navigation

- **Respect Reserved Seating:** Seats designated for specific needs should remain available for those who require them. Avoid occupying seats reserved for people with disabilities or their companions unless permitted.
- **Preserve Room Arrangements:** Avoid moving tables or chairs or adding extra seating. This may block pathways and reduce seating options for those with mobility devices.
- **Keep Pathways Clear:** Ensure hallways, doors, and gathering spaces remain easy to navigate by stepping aside when having conversations and keeping personal belongings out of walkways.

## Personal Space & Preferences

- **Ask for Permission:** Do not touch mobility aids, service animals, or assistive devices without explicit permission.
- **Be Mindful of Personal Space:** Respect individuals' comfort levels with physical proximity and social interactions.

## Food & Dining Considerations

- **Be Mindful of Dietary Needs:** Avoid taking food labeled for specific dietary restrictions if you have other options available.
- **Make Shared Items Easy to Reach:** When bringing food or materials to share, place them in locations that are easy for everyone to access.
- **Plan Meals with Everyone in Mind:** When planning group meals, ensure the venue can accommodate a variety of needs, including mobility devices, and specific dietary choices, so all participants can fully enjoy the experience.



## Designing for Belonging

Belonging goes beyond access and inclusion. Belonging is the feeling of being a valued, recognized member of the community whose presence and voice matter. The spaces we host and facilitate can signal belonging through what may seem like small cues, including who is represented, how people are invited to participate, and how power and decision-making are shared. Here are some tips for designing for belonging:

- **Co-create the experience:** Invite participants to shape discussions, norms, and session formats so people experience agency in their participation.
- **Signal “everyone belongs”:** Use visuals, language, and stories that reflect many identities, roles, and experiences.
- **Name and adjust power dynamics:** As facilitators and hosts, pause to invite in quieter voices, share microphones and airtime, and respond when someone names a barrier or harm.
- **Prioritize relationship-building:** Build in moments to get to know one another, such as small-group dialogues, reflection pairs, and informal gathering spaces, so people can connect beyond their titles and backgrounds.

## Encouraging Engaging Group Discussions

- **Encourage Participation:** Give everyone a chance to contribute by avoiding interruptions, particularly for those who may need more time to express themselves.
- **Minimize Distractions:** Avoid side conversations that can make it difficult for others to hear or focus.
- **Use the Microphone:** Always speak into a microphone if one is available. If a microphone is passed around, wait until you have it before speaking, even if you think you have a "loud voice."

Creating an engaging experience takes a collective effort. By keeping these considerations in mind, we create an environment where all attendees feel welcomed, engaged, and able to participate fully in the conference experience.

