

# Bringing it to Life: Culture Architect & Community Activist



**“Belonging is the idea that defines Airbnb.”**

**- Brian Chesky, Founder**

## Summary

“Belong Anywhere.” That is Airbnb’s aspirational mission. While there are now several home-sharing platforms connecting homeowners with short-term renters looking for an alternative to hotels, what makes Airbnb unique is its aspiration to create social belonging. In a [June 2014 blog post](#) for Airbnb “hosts,” “guests,” and employees, founder Brian Chesky described the company’s collective mission this way: “At a time when new technologies have made it easier to keep each other at a distance, you’re using them to bring people together. And you’re tapping into the universal human yearning to belong—the desire to feel welcomed, respected, and appreciated for who you are, no matter where you might be. Belonging is the idea that defines Airbnb.”

While many companies have inspiring mission statements that integrate corporate and social responsibility, what differentiates Airbnb’s purpose is its intention to “break down the walls between “hosts,” “guests,” and employees, according to Head of Employee Experience, Mark Levy. As head of Employee Experience (the function formerly know as “HR”), Levy is accountable for leading the cultural charge to eliminate barriers to human belonging and connection—among Airbnb employees, hosts, and guests.

While most company HR leaders focus almost exclusively on employee connection, Levy’s team works with other Airbnb functions to create connection and belonging across ALL participants in its home-sharing platform.

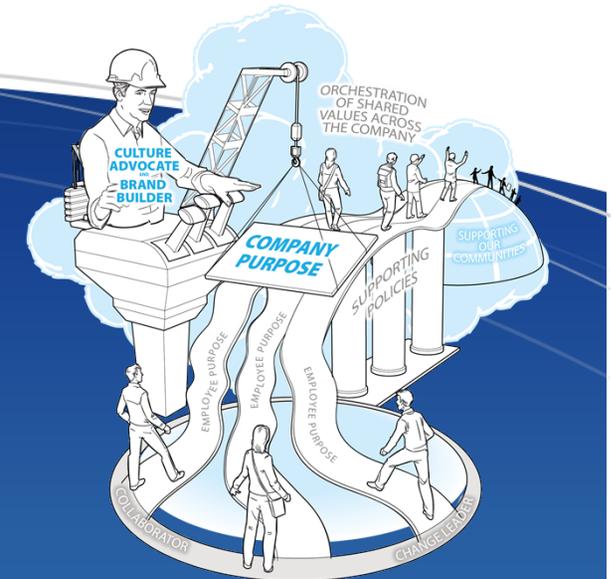
**Industry:** Hospitality

**Ownership:** Private

**Annual Revenue:** ~\$1B

**# of Employees:** ~3,000

**Description:** Airbnb is a website for people to list, find, and rent lodging. It has over 1,500,000 listings in 34,000 cities and 190 countries. Founded in August 2008 and headquartered in San Francisco, California, the company is privately owned and operated.



## Links

[Airbnb’s website](#)

[Airbnb Wikipedia page](#)

[Interview with Head of Employee Experience, Mark Levy on Airbnb culture](#)

[HBR Article on Airbnb “Platform” Culture](#)

[TechCrunch Article on Airbnb recreating listings in its HQ offices](#)

# Airbnb Culture Architect & Community Activist Profile (CONTINUED)



According to Levy, realizing the challenge of creating a “boundary-less” ecosystem in which employees, guests, and hosts are on the same mission to discover human connection starts with the company founders—who insist on keeping Airbnb’s purpose front-and-center. Employee Experience then work with colleagues (as well as guests and hosts) to translate the founders’ vision of “One Airbnb” into operating practices that are scalable, sustainable, and transparent to all. Here are some poignant examples of structures, policies, practices, and activities architected by the Airbnb team to institutionalize the “One Airbnb” culture of connection and “belonging anywhere”:

- [Brand-building and Mission-supporting Facilities](#): Airbnb is famous for the groundbreaking and award-winning design of its facilities. In addition to featuring “open address” seating (no assigned seats) so that employees can literally “belong anywhere” in the Airbnb office, the office space features giant photos of hosts and conference rooms that are literal recreations of host listings from around the world. With this investment, Airbnb goes beyond mere perks like hip modern furniture and free food to create a space that literally brings the organization’s core mission to life every day..
- [Teams Named for Mission](#): Team titles at Airbnb often reinforce Airbnb’s brand and mission. For example, “Ground Control” is an Employee Experience team responsible for curating the “One Airbnb” culture. Similarly, the “Landing Team” is a cross-functional team that establishes new Airbnb city and country offices to ensure the Airbnb culture is effectively established there. Both teams’ names connote Airbnb’s focus on mission and the spirit of adventure & discovery that inform its brand. Similarly, the “Diversity &

Belonging” team within Employee Experience replaces the traditional focus on “inclusion” with the Airbnb brand-enhancing focus on “belonging.”

- Employee Lifecycle Processes Named for Mission: The naming of typical employee lifecycle processes also reinforce Airbnb’s brand and mission. For example, instead of “on boarding,” new employees experience “Check In” at Airbnb. Similarly, departing employees experience “Check Out” instead of “employee exit” processes.
- Employee Guest Program: To encourage employees to connect with hosts and better understand the guest experience, employees are awarded a \$500 stipend every quarter to redeem on the Airbnb platform for the travel of their choice as well as free “Guest Kits.” In addition to providing employees a valuable monetary perk (and encouraging time off), the benefit is intended to enhance employee-brand connection and improve product and service insights.
- Employee Hosting Program: Employees at Airbnb are encouraged to also be “hosts”; that is, to lease out part of their home to guests to better understand the Airbnb hosting experience. To encourage this practice, Airbnb offers free exchange and laundering of linens for employee hosts.
- [One Airbnb](#) Gathering: At Airbnb’s global employee conference, “One Airbnb,” the company encourages employees to “host” employees from other cities/countries for dinners at their homes or a local restaurant, coordinated by the Ground Control team.
- Community Empathy and Superhosts Programs: These programs, operated by Employee Experience, provide employees with the opportunity to get first-hand exposure to guests (the Airbnb “community”) and hosts by either working a shift with an Airbnb customer experience agent or calling new “[Superhosts](#)” (Airbnb hosts who meet high standards of hosting excellence and frequency) to congratulate them on their upgraded designation.
- Core Values Interviewers: This team of high potential employees hand-picked by the founders is specially trained to assess job candidates against Airbnb’s mission and [core values](#), such as “Champion the Mission” and “Embrace the Adventure.” Core Values Interviewers have as much clout as hiring managers: a candidate must have at least 2 “yes” votes from Core Values Interviewers to be hired.

- [Host Open](#): Airbnb invites all hosts annually to participate in a free multi-day event to connect with other hosts, learn from hospitality experts, and live the guest experience themselves. In 2015, over 5000 Airbnb guests gathered in Paris, including 650 One Airbnb employees. This integration of employees and guests supports the company's mission of breaking down boundaries to connect people so they can "belong anywhere."
- "Open Homes" and "Travel for Good" Initiatives: Airbnb's "[Open Homes](#)" initiative works with hosts globally to house people in transition. For example, the program housed newly relocating Teach for America candidates for 2 weeks in Chicago while they searched for a permanent place to live. Similarly, the "Travel for Good" initiatives supports guests in volunteerism during their stays at host homes, including everything from volunteering time at a local non-profit to bringing along a bag of used clothing to leave with the host for donation. Both of these programs are part of Airbnb's effort to fulfill its mission of connecting people and increasing belonging by extending the guest and host experience beyond lodging and into a more intimate connection with the community.

But does all this effort at connection and belonging make a difference?

Judging from Airbnb's designation as [Glassdoor's 2016 Best Place To Work](#), its \$25B valuation in 2015 (second-highest pre-IPO valuation in U.S. history), and its unprecedented success in disrupting the hospitality industry by [booking more rooms annually than the world's largest hotel chains](#), the effort to help employees, hosts and guests "belong anywhere" is clearly paying off.