

Rethinking authenticity

Bringing your 'whole self' to work can feel like a risky manoeuvre. Here's why

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These days we're often urged to bring our 'whole self' to work, to be more 'authentic' in how we engage with our co-workers in order to be our 'best self' and make connections with others at work. Be your true authentic self, the idea goes, and you'll be happier and more engaged with your work. You'll waste less energy concealing important parts of your identity and have more energy for work. Benefits flow both to the individual, whose career productivity rises, and to the companies.

To organisations looking for a competitive edge this is an appealing idea: let managers be themselves and watch returns flow. Individuals like the sound of it too: to be fully ourselves at work without the need to hide our idiosyncrasies, quirks and bad habits sounds like a relief. We can stop pretending, stop holding our tongues, and just be ourselves.

Even more, the idea that we should be our authentic selves appeals to our deep hope that we can be fully accepted—warts and all—by our colleagues and bosses, true to ourselves without fear of rejection. But not so fast.

Consider how women are encouraged to 'lean in' to advance their careers. Might this deny what is authentic behaviour for many women, to have balance between their work and their family? Another example: To feel fully authentic at work, LGBTQ employees may wish to display photos of their partners and spouses, or invite their families to client outings. Can they bring their whole selves to work in this way?

And how much authenticity can religious people experience when meetings are scheduled at times when they are observing their religious traditions? Can ethnic minorities feel authentic when they are discouraged from wearing traditional dress at work? Should people who 'code switch' at work abandon this and just communicate in whatever way feels most comfortable?

Is authenticity such a great idea?

Drawing on 50 years of research on person-organisation fit, we suggest that the more your authentic self dovetails with the values and expectations of the office, the more acceptable it is and the more benefits accrue to both you as an individual and your organisation.

But research on identity suggests that expressions of authenticity that deviate from what the majority assumes is typical are riskier. Majority group members whose 'authentic' behaviour is rather closely aligned with the values of Western global businesses will likely experience little risk in being authentic. Others may experience something altogether different.

Social psychologists have proposed that each of us has multiple 'identities' that are connected to the roles that we play. Take a senior marketing manager as an example. Wendi is likely to have multiple identities; she is a marketer and a group head, but also a mother, the eldest child of sick parents, a singer in her church choir and a board member of her local theatre company.

According to identity theory, when we are in situations that cue a particular identity—when she is leading a meeting of her subordinates, her 'group head' self takes over—we behave consistently with the demands of that identity. Most of us struggle to reconcile all of our roles and identities at the best of times—suggesting that work is the place where they will all coalesce and create a coherent 'self' is a tall ask.

Find your fit or try new behaviours

We're not denying that when you can bring more of yourself to work you are likely to feel more comfortable and be more productive – authenticity and workplace connections with colleagues make a positive difference.

But organisations don't always promote the most productive people. They promote people who are productive and represent the core values of the organisation. If you don't 'fit' in the organisation, you are unlikely to gain influence.

This suggests a negotiated process. From the organisation's perspective, does this individual 'fit' well enough to gain acceptance and effectively exercise influence? From the individual's perspective, does this organisation allow me to be enough of myself to be comfortable and productive?

Historically, individuals did all of the adjusting to fit. More recently, organisations have been more willing to adjust to accommodate a more diverse workforce. But workplaces are not infinitely flexible. Values are central to business success, and to attracting the modern worker.

So how do we make workplace authenticity work? As individuals, we should seek out those organisations that represent our personal values. When we do, we can be more of ourselves at work. Look also for organisations that are more open and accommodate a greater diversity of styles and values.

Where the fit isn't perfect, do not let 'inauthenticity' be a barrier to trying new behaviours. Actions that you see as inauthentic may simply be those that are unfamiliar. When you practise these new behaviours, they can begin to feel comfortable and familiar, and thus will come to feel more authentic.

Here are three steps to get you started:

1. See the source of discomfort

Perhaps you are an introvert and this is a place where outgoing, sociable people are more likely to find success. For now, this kind of high energy engagement feels uncomfortable for you, and therefore this kind of behaviour feels inauthentic.

2. Pick two or three high-value behaviours

As an introvert, you might be someone who speaks in a meeting only when you have something important to add, yet you notice that others value people who simply contribute to the conversation.

3. Conduct small experiments in using these high-value behaviours

For the next month, set a goal to make two comments in every meeting. Plan to arrive with a prepared set of open questions that you will raise in the meeting. For instance, "John, before we move on to the next item, I'd be keen to hear your thoughts on this." Or, "Kiki, as our marketing guru, can you give us a sense of what we can expect if we go with the first option?"

The possibilities for open questions are limitless. The point is that you are getting involved in the conversation, building a habit for a new kind of behaviour. With enough practice, what initially felt awkward and inauthentic feels more comfortable and, yes, more authentic to you.

Finally, a word to leaders. Our organisations need to be more flexible on what is a core value tied to creating value in the business, and dispense with historical culture and values that no longer serve a particular purpose.

Organisations can also encourage greater diversity by promoting a growth mindset or learning culture in their organisation. Creating a culture of learning rather than compliance—when people are not scared of what they might lose—they become much more open to the possibilities in diversity.

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