Standing Out While Fitting In

How can you be your authentic self while simultaneously fitting in at a company with a strong culture?

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What should you do when you join your ideal employer only to discover that it's not ideal after all? Even at a dream job, the fit between the person and the organization may need to be fostered. Take a former student of ours, Roberto, who received two highly coveted job offers as a second-year MBA. Both were from recognized financial advisory firms that offered similar compensation and nearly identical paths to partnership. At either company, Roberto would have the

chance to work with bright and dedicated colleagues, help solve challenging problems, and craft advice that would have a real impact on clients' business.

For Roberto, the choice between the companies boiled down to their cultural "feel." One had a reputation for being rather formal and hierarchical; the other felt more informal and free flowing. If the first company were a blazer, Roberto noted, "it would fit, but it would be a size too small." Given his own self-deprecating sense of humor and informal work style, Roberto saw the second company as a better fit and accepted its offer. Roberto did what the management gurus urge us all to do: bring our "whole self" to work. Rather than wasting energy trying to conform to a culture one size too small, he chose the culture where he expected he could succeed as his most authentic self.

Companies are encouraged to create a strong, consistent culture. When an organization's cultural values resonate with people, it attracts the "right" prospective employees. Once hired, employees feel motivated by the values shared with their colleagues and the ease of engaging with like-minded people. Moreover, as research clearly demonstrates, strong workplace camaraderie serves a critical coordinative function.[1] The company can dispose of thick employee handbooks because "who we are and how we do things here" is clearly established.

But as much as person-organization culture fit fulfills our desire to belong — a key psychological human need — a perfect fit is hard to come by, as Roberto quickly learned. His chosen employer had a culture that could best be described as "supportive, high positive energy, and very social." Roberto valued these qualities but also knew that he needed time to himself to produce his best results. This hypercollaborative culture, where teammates were expected to check in multiple times a week, took a toll on the introvert — especially when it crossed over into his personal life. After work, Roberto wanted to retreat home to unwind, but he was expected to participate in post-engagement celebrations and spontaneous get-togethers with peers. Roberto felt pressured to sacrifice his authenticity in order to gain the benefits of belonging at work. And while we acknowledge that individuals have a strong psychological need to feel part of a group, doing so should not come at the cost of authenticity of self.

But dig in further. Do employees actually want to join an organization and blend in with colleagues who think like they do and who share exactly the same values? Taken to its logical conclusion, the idea of disappearing into the group is a long-standing formula for a dystopian future, as in the novel 1984, the film Blade Runner, and the Borg on TV's Star Trek: The Next Generation. The nightmarish

prospect of these stories is of a merging of our individual identities into a collective and losing what makes each of us unique.

Most of us want to have it both ways: We strive to belong and to be valued as individuals, thus achieving what psychologist Marilynn Brewer calls optimal distinctiveness — that careful balance between fitting in and standing out.2 To find this balance, we need to consider not only ourselves but those around us when seeking "the perfect fit."

By embracing his own strengths and priorities, Roberto was eventually able to create a comfortable niche for himself — and to help colleagues feel more comfortable as well. Hailing from Colombia, Roberto was one of only a handful of Latinx employees at his company. "It was evident very early in my career that my heritage was a point of differentiation and a potential way to open and personalize conversations. Rather than retreating from it, I embraced it," he noted. Whereas some non-native English speakers feel uncomfortable with their accents, Roberto put no effort into changing his. Hearing him speak, clients were curious about where he was from, which provided an opening for conversation and offered him an instant point of connection. Roberto's efforts to authentically stand out did not stop there; he founded an organization-wide affiliation group for Latinx employees. Through this self-awareness, hard work, and experimentation, Roberto worked toward optimal distinction in his workplace.

Even in a near-perfect workplace, we will face moments of discomfort that require us to either minimize or embrace our differences in a way that suits our organization. Below are five specific actions to help you move toward optimal distinction — simultaneously standing out and fitting in.

1) **Know yourself and your organization**. To successfully stand out while fitting in, you need to do your homework. What makes you tick on the job? Is it your talent and love for working creatively in teams, your driving ambition and results orientation, or the solidarity born of late nights and deadline pressures? There are many ways to learn about what energizes you, including 360-degree surveys, personality or values tests, or coaching. Treat the exploration of a potential employer like the one for yourself, gathering data from online sources or culture assessment tools, but also draw on your network. You may know people who have connections on the inside or seasoned colleagues who will be great resources. Ask yourself as honestly as you can whether that culture seems like one where you could thrive.

2) **Clearly identify what you will and will not disclose**. Glance in your rearview mirror. When have you been at your happiest and delivering your best performance at work? What was it about you that helped you achieve those outcomes? Perhaps it was your positive energy, your coolness under pressure, or your understated wit. Knowing your strengths and authentically expressing them will help you feel more at ease at work and hopefully stand out for the right reasons. This is your best self. But what about the rest of you? Is there a part of you that you do not want on display? Perhaps a lack of confidence in front of outside clients, your anger at a coworker, your LGBTQ+ identity, or your family reputation as an Xbox mega-champion are not what you want your colleagues to focus on. Be conscious and deliberate about how you want to craft your identity at work to fit in while standing out.

3) **Experiment with how you "show up" at work**. Like an ethnographer studying unfamiliar groups, watch how other employees behave. How does the boss respond? What actions or decisions are celebrated? What choices seem to pose risks to belonging? Identifying patterns will give you a blueprint for fitting in. Once you feel at ease, then you will feel freer to be yourself. Try disclosing things you are unsure about with people you trust first. Another student of ours who worked at a global tech company kept details of his personal life private. After a few years, he found himself leading a team, and he decided to take a risk. One Monday morning, he shared a story of how he and his male partner had spent the weekend. Later in the week, he was surprised when his colleagues stopped by to say they appreciated the way he had revealed a bit more of himself. They gave him credit for being vulnerable and thought he had raised the level of trust in their relationship with him. Our student had experimented with how he could show up at work — with greater authenticity and vulnerability — and he saw a positive change in both his team and in himself.

4) **Confront the challenges to how you fit in.** Inevitably, there will be times, individuals, and situations that leave you feeling less than comfortable. Particularly when you are a numerical minority — due to your race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or physical ability — you are likely to feel the challenge to fit in. It may be tempting to walk away from these situations, but keep in mind that people are often unaware of the challenges they pose to others' sense of belonging. Recent research suggests that a better strategy than walking away is to confront these situations with a growth mindset, believing that people can and do change.3 When your speaking

up prompts people to change their behavior, not only will you experience a better fit, but they will be more aware of what they can do to improve the fit for others.

5) **Pursue projects, partners, problems, and promotions that will simultaneously highlight how you fit in and stand out.** Look for opportunities to stand out, perhaps by taking on a special project or volunteering for an organization-wide initiative. Information about these kinds of opportunities travel quickly along company grapevines, so make a practice of building and nurturing your network inside the company. Doing this will not only alert you to new opportunities but will also serve to further embed you in the organization via your relationships, helping you to fit in.

To be happy, engaged, and efficient at work, you need to be free to be yourself. No one can be at their best when, as Roberto observed, their blazer is one size too small. With a sense of optimal distinctiveness, you can both fit in with the group and stand out as a uniquely talented individual. Organizations change, and so will you: The practice of creating your optimally distinctive self is a dynamic and worthwhile process.

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