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The face behind the mask: re-thinking authenticity at work

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*Bias towards a narrow selection of characteristics, that are supposedly professional, limit the number of people who can be truly authentic at work, resulting in code-switching, assimilation, and self-segregation. **Odessa Hamilton and Teresa Almeida** discuss why representation alone cannot address this. Organisations must foster an environment where difference is valued through reflective leadership and colleague reinforcement.*

Authenticity is a peculiar phenomenon with multiple dimensions. Definitionally, it is the extent to which one believes one may candidly and transparently express a true inner self – behaviourally, verbally, moralistically – in the presence of others without fear of reproach. It is thus unique to the individual. The ideal of authenticity has been considered a major life goal throughout history and continues to be of great importance in modern society (**Lowney, 2009**). With a

surge in public interest, it finds itself increasingly on the business and scholarly radar, said to typify a uniquely powerful movement of modern life (Potter, 2010). Its permeation into the workforce is, therefore, unsurprising. Fundamentally, authenticity at work means feeling able to express or operate in accordance with one's genuine values, beliefs, motivations, culture and personality, among colleagues, managers, clients and other stakeholders equally (Hewlin et al., 2020).

From psychology to performance

Existing research has successfully shown the relationship between authenticity, wellbeing and work-related outcomes (Cha et al., 2019). Authenticity at work and healthy psychological functioning are known to be mutually reinforcing; synergistically leading to more favourable performance-related indicators (Emmerich & Rigotti, 2017). By contrast psychological strain, distress, and maladjustment can stem from an incongruence between one's self-concept and external experiences (Cha et al., 2019), and this level of inauthenticity can become cognitively laborious, depleting personal resources (Boyratz et al., 2014). The absence of authenticity at work can further lead to a disconnect that primes individuals toward negative outcomes, such as presenteeism, boredom, or worse, indifference – dynamics that could ultimately lead to absenteeism, conflict, mistakes, and general dysfunction. By contrast, an organisation with a climate of authenticity offers a self-regulatory break from the emotional toll felt by inauthenticity, such that it replenishes personal resources while buffering against strains that derive from cognitive overexertion (Grandey et al., 2012). The freedom to be one's true authentic self at work can, thus, be beneficial to psychological health, as compared to those restricted by self-regulation. Equally, career prospects tend to be greater, since those who feel able to be authentic at work, tend to be appraised higher for selection, promotion, and opportunity (Cha et al., 2019; van den Bosch et al., 2019).

Authenticity for all or some

Through an inclusive lens, the question arises as to whether authenticity within corporate settings is possible for all employees, or whether a bias exists towards a specific type of authentic expression. Commonly held characterisations of what

it means to be professional can skew perceptions of how individuals believe that they must act and present themselves while at work. These characterisations are typically guided exclusively by dominant group values and norms. Consequently, those who do not belong to the dominant group tend to assimilate more seamlessly when they adjust their self-presentation and actively manage perceptions of their stigmatised identity (McCluney et al., 2021). At the individual level, the desire to 'fit in' and 'act professional' in such a narrow way can contradict an innate need to be 'real'.



[There is often a felt obligation] to conform to majority group social norms for acceptance and opportunity. This strategy can be seen through the adjustments of outward presentation toward more Eurocentric standards of beauty



Inauthenticity can present in a number of ways. One such way is *codeswitching*, which originally stemmed from the field of linguistics to define and understand the cognitive consequences of switching between languages in a single setting (Woolard, 2005). More recently, it has taken on a broader meaning: adjusting personal qualities to fit the set of rules of a social context. This may include the use of visual and behavioural strategies that outgroup members use to avoid negative stereotypes (McCluney et al., 2019; Wingfield, 2015). This arises out of a felt obligation to downplay certain aspects of one's identity, or a requisite to conform to majority group social norms for acceptance and opportunity. This strategy can be seen through the adjustments of outward presentation toward more Eurocentric standards of beauty, through simulations of the local accent, or minimising the use of colloquialisms. Congruent with this phenomenon, Brodnock and Lordan's (2021) UK study of professionals in the financial, professional and

technology sectors, revealed that black, female professionals often feel pressure to conform to their firm's standards of appearance, including hairstyles that mimic their white counterparts, to minimise perceived differences. Others may restrict social interactions and keep social discourse shallow to conceal, for example, one's age, one's standard of health, or another personal characteristic not immediately visible (Crittenden & Bae, 1994; Roberts et al., 2008). This level of personal adjustment to manage the biased assessments of others, comes at the expense of well-being, as inauthenticity becomes cognitively exhaustive and detrimental at the individual and corporate level (Boyraz et al., 2014).

A phenomenon known as homophily, meaning that similarity attracts, provides an interesting avenue to address the possibility of a parity of authenticity between employees. Through the disclosure of elements of one's personal life, the sharing of values, beliefs, and the freedom to be culturally transparent, individuals can more effortlessly bond with others, fostering a sense of authenticity (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018).



[Homophily is] generally rooted in sociodemographic similarities



But this tends to occur exclusively between those who share the same values, cultures, ideals, and experiences; generally rooted in sociodemographic similarities (Phillips et al., 2018). Downplaying one's minority identity to parallel dominant group norms may, therefore, be a rational strategy influenced by one's concerns regarding undesirable outcomes, such as being perceived negatively at work (Cha & Roberts, 2019), or as a way of fostering similarity and positive evaluations from others (McCluney et al., 2021).

Flight, fight or follow

According to the SAFE model, the safety afforded by a state of authenticity explains why members of marginalised groups self-segregate, which in many ways, bolsters ingrained, negative stereotypes that perpetuate social inequality. Self-segregation arises out of diminished psychological safety, which can occur even in the absence of felt prejudice or discrimination (**Schmader and Sedikides, 2018**). Arguably more menacing is that inauthenticity can reveal itself through the acquiescence of values that are not one's own or at the expense of one's belief system. Even more menacing, is when employees are expected to follow job requirements that fit in with the authentic archetype of the dominant group, but are incongruent with their own values, beliefs or motivations (**Emmerich & Rigotti, 2017**).



Representation alone is not enough.... Individuals must be encouraged to draw on their distinct experiences and idiosyncratic strengths



As a central social paradigm, our intrinsic affinity toward conformity is well established, but effective group dynamics within an organisation require dissent and divergence, otherwise groupthink sets in and corrodes decision-making and problem-solving processes. This is why representation alone is not enough. When members of diverse teams are unable to be individually authentic, they may assimilate to the dominant position in that environment. Novel perspectives then become lost to collective opinion, with innovation lost to compliance. This promotion of unilateral thought and behaviour diminish the benefits of a diverse workforce as diverse voices remain unheard. These together undermine individual creativity, productivity, and innovation, such that organisational dynamism and effectivity is substantially attenuated, while organisational efforts to establish a climate of authenticity are frustrated. For organisations to benefit from diversity,

individuals must be able and encouraged to draw on their distinct experiences and idiosyncratic strengths.

A collective effort

While authenticity at work should be feasible for all, irrespective of one's sociodemographic characteristics or personal values, it being set as the ultimate goal at work might create an unattainable standard. Particularly given the pervasive and often invisible barriers for equitable expressions of one's authentic self. Demanding people to be authentic or vulnerable does not inevitably build psychological safety. Instead, by deliberately building an environment that encourages differences of opinion, while being psychologically safe, individuals are more likely to express authentic behaviours, take risks and suggest new ideas that can breed creativity and innovation. This calls for effective leadership: leaders who are sensitive to group dynamics; leaders who elicit trust among teams; leaders who cultivate a spirit of respect; and leaders that ensure diverse voices have an opportunity to be heard. This lays a foundation for more equitable working environments and parity in authentic expression among employees.



Being open to hearing views that contradict our own gives liberty to authentic expression among all groups



The ability to be authentic at work cannot, however, be solely laid at the feet of leaders. There must be a collective effort among employees. Ultimately, fear of rejection deters authentic expression, so observed differences, seen or heard, should be acknowledged, and embraced by colleagues. After all, aside from the organisational benefits of diversity, there is much value from a personal standpoint in understanding views that dissent from our own. Being open to

hearing views that contradict our own gives liberty to authentic expression among all groups. It need not always be a zero-sum game and it, clearly, does not sanction discriminatory diatribe, but rather a safe place for all to be respectful. This approach can facilitate a safe environment for groups with differing views to be independently authentic, without fear of reproach or judgement.



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