Are you ‘covering’ your identity at work?

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Look around at your desk. Do you have a picture of your partner, your children, or your pet? Does it tell your colleagues a little about you and your life outside work or is it a neutral, blank canvas?

While there is much talk about ‘bringing your whole self to work’, what does it really mean? For many, it’s not possible to be as open and honest as they would like in the workplace, particularly if it goes against the perceived culture of an organisation.

According to a recent UK poll, 77 per cent of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) respondents said “they felt uncomfortable about being their true self in public,” compared with 23 per cent of the general population. 74 per cent also said they “felt the need to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity.”

How comfortable and safe do diverse groups feel in bringing their whole self to the workplace?

‘Covering’ is a strategy often used when individuals will downplay a stigmatised identity, for example a woman not wanting to be called out as a female on a job site or a gay employee avoiding dancing with their partner at a Christmas party. For many, covering is detrimental to an employee’s sense of self and can reduce morale.

In meetings with executives and companies, I often witness these norms, called the unwritten rules of behaviour, first hand. Many times, these organisational unwritten rules are created by the dominant group. These ‘rules or norms’ are not in the company manual, but they, too, will dictate how to get on and advance in an organisation.

Unwritten rules can enhance the culture of an organisation positively, but if they cause individuals to hide parts of their identity to fit in then they can be detrimental, not only to innovation, but also productivity and how they work in a team. We describe this as feeling like the ‘other’, i.e., like an outsider, who does not belong in the dominant majority and who does not feel valued for their difference.

We can all feel like the ‘other’ depending on the circumstances. Perhaps you did not go to the ‘right’ school or university, or are from a different ethnic group or your sexuality or gender puts you at odds with a ‘laddish’ culture in an organisation? Any number of factors can lead to an individual withdrawing into, and perhaps separating

themselves from opportunities and the power structures at the top. This exclusion can have a devastating effect on an individual's advancement, and on their contribution to the organisation.

To change workplace culture it is critical to have people who value differences and can act as champions for 'others'. At Rockwell Automation, a traditional male-dominated company, steps have been taken to address these issues. Jeff McGee, Rockwell Automation's channel sales manager, describes how having honest conversations about differences has changed him and his company:

"There's always been an 'old boys' club' mentality at Rockwell Automation. Teams often gathered after work at sports bars and other places where women wouldn't necessarily feel comfortable. In meetings, women's ideas weren't always acknowledged. And often sales leaders (usually white males) would present projects to senior management, instead of letting their team members do it. We weren't intentionally leaving others out—it's just that we never thought of doing it any other way.

"Now I suggest lunch meetings instead of drinks after work. I make sure that everyone's ideas are heard in meetings. And I recently supported our mostly female operations team as they presented their great work to sales management."

Change can only be made if organisations start to listen, understand and devise solutions that will address the barriers that women and other minority groups face. Leaders need to learn inclusive behaviours to draw on the talents of people of all backgrounds, and make employees feel both a sense of 'uniqueness' together with a sense of 'belongingness'. These two ingredients, which Catalyst research has tied to feelings of inclusion, show employees that they are both valued members of the team and appreciated for their unique perspectives.

Our research shows that practising the art of inclusive leadership can boost innovation and drive team performance. This link between inclusion and innovation may also help to explain why studies show that gender-diverse companies outperform those with few or no women on their boards or in senior leadership roles.

Inclusive workplaces, where everyone has an equal chance to succeed and thrive, are more successful in every sense of the word, experiencing improved financial results, increased innovation, and higher employee retention.

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Allyson Zimmermann is Executive Director of Catalyst Europe leading the non-profit organization's strategy to create inclusive workplaces where women and all talent can advance.