



WHEN BRINGING YOUR FULL SELF TO WORK IS A HIGH-WIRE ACT

Jenny Vazquez-Newsom

When I was a young kid, the circus was a magical annual event.

Seeing the giant red and yellow tent instantly conjured excitement and a sense of captivation. The awe, spectacle, and humor of a circus event sticks with you well into adulthood. I particularly enjoyed the acrobats and contortionists who seemed to defy all types of bodily convention, wowing the crowd by folding themselves into inconceivable shapes.

None of it seemed possible, yet they bent and stretched beyond flexibility and into ways that appeared unnatural. They delighted the audience when they balanced on each other's toes, shoulders, and hands, creating human structures that not only required perfect balance but also a deep awareness of the other performers and of the overall risk of the act.

In the workplace, leaders of color often flex and contort in ways similar to the performers who impress crowds at the circus; however, a BIPOC leader's contortion is often unnoticed externally. To survive and thrive in the structures and hierarchies that have been established through a white-dominant lens, leaders of color must stretch in ways that are at times not natural.

We have adopted work styles, mannerisms, processes, and language that often feel foreign, but we do so at work out of necessity. We have noticed which actions and approaches are rewarded in our organizations—with more pay, more authority, and more meaningful work—and we adjust and align our ways of operating accordingly.

We avoid straying too far from those explicit and implicit norms because such deviations give rise to potential financial implications and career limitations. To align is to succeed, so we trade the professional costs for the personal toll of continuously self-editing over time.

There is an advanced mental calculus required to find the right balance between existing in alignment with who we are while also flexing enough to remain in good standing within a professional system. To bring our full selves to work would be a risk that could carry consequences, for our authentic, unedited presence reveals the truth of marginalized living to a well-established structure that is not ready to hear the feedback.

Systems are designed to preserve themselves and they work hard to do so. The system requires those working within it to avoid diverging too far from its norms, otherwise, the system is challenged beyond its comfort.

Many of the consequences that leaders of color experience if they bring too much of themselves to the office can bubble under the surface of workplace culture. They often show themselves in indirect ways, such as exclusion from workgroups, limitations in responsibilities, or damaging feedback in performance reviews disguised as constructive communication.

If we are to truly study what leadership looks like—to understand how leadership can be exhibited beyond ways that have been traditionally defined—we must include and value these strategic behaviors and give them the weight they deserve.

AUTHENTICITY, VULNERABILITY, AND RISK

Authenticity and vulnerability have become increasingly popular frameworks for considering how to lead. It is a welcome shift from the more transactional, hierarchical, and prescriptive literature that typically overwhelms management bookshelves. The work of Brené Brown uses a human-centered focus to define leadership that is more connected to elements of the human condition that, in decades past, would be compartmentalized and excluded from the workplace. Brené’s research explores the role of vulnerability in our lives, calling for more of it to be exercised to lead and live meaningfully.

For marginalized leaders, however, the ask is bigger—they have much less room to bring their whole authentic and vulnerable selves to work.

We have a long history of disassociating our work lives from our personal lives, having been taught to check things at the door. The more we can compartmentalize our workdays from everything else, the more effectively and appropriately we can navigate our careers.

Such a design most benefitted those unhindered by societal burdens rooted in marginalization due to race, gender, and other important but ostracized identities. If you didn’t have to worry about how you would be treated based on the color of your skin or if you were not saddled with caregiving duties and outsized household expectations, then the luggage you checked at the professional door (if it even existed) was much lighter.

It is through this unrealistic lens that “professionalism” was defined, and only very recently have we begun to shed the surface layers of that facade.

Given work culture's proximity to white-identified norms and the limited role of marginalized voices in creating the rules of engagement at work, the distance we must stretch to conform is notably farther.

For example, Black women are 80 percent more likely than white women to change their hair from its natural state to fit in at the office. It wasn't until 2019 that legislators introduced the CROWN Act to prevent discrimination against certain hairstyles that affected Black women most significantly. To change how one's hair looks just for the sake of fitting in with workplace expectations is the pinnacle of devaluing the authenticity of some. The necessity for legislation like the CROWN Act to exist in 2019 is our glaring hint that we have a long way to go before Black women and many other marginalized groups can truly engage in authentic leadership.

It's a tall task for anyone to minimize elements of their human selves in any environment; to do that daily at work is an even more significant effort.

The spectrum of contortion extends from physically altering one's appearance to more subtle and unnoticed actions. This includes withholding certain cultural references, selecting more acceptable lunchtime food options, and adjusting word pronunciations and inflections in speech.

It is a consistent and pervasive self-editing that overtakes our professional lives to such a broad extent that it often doesn't require conscious thought. It almost becomes second nature, though not without long-term consequences: muting parts of ourselves simultaneously mutes contributions to our organizations. There is a proven cost to our overall well-being, as well. Nonetheless, in a wide range of ways, marginalized leaders have engaged in this contortion to survive and thrive in professional cultures established by their counterparts who are centered in that same environment.

For people of color to truly lead authentically, that would have to include using their own values, approaches, and experiences, which would undoubtedly result in friction when they diverged from embedded norms.

Marginalized leaders are astutely aware of the complexity of this challenge. They could use their own language and terms to describe the nature of problems and could move at the deliberate pace necessary to meaningfully resolve complexities. They have built the leadership capacity to infuse authenticity at work within the invisible boundaries that others may not even see, given that their version of authenticity is more readily accepted.

The ultimate vulnerability for BIPOC leaders in the workplace is stepping out and naming microaggressions and inequities that they have experienced or witnessed at work. There can be real consequences for sharing the impact of problematic work practices and exchanges, ranging from having others dismiss those experiences as "miscommunications" to formal reprimands via poor performance review ratings for not being a "team player." Research indicates that to challenge a well-established system with difficult feedback—especially in regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion—is to run the risk of being relegated to an out-group or spit out of that system altogether in some cases.

If we want our workplaces to grow in equity—if they are to take any action as a result of 2020’s racial awakening and the virtue signaling that ensued—then these systems need to eliminate the risk associated with this exercise of vulnerability for leaders of color. Without addressing and alleviating that risk, we cannot ask those with marginalized identities to vulnerably lead with authenticity, and as a result, we will forgo their innovative, equitable, and visionary contributions to our organizations.

What answers will we continue to bypass while the fully authentic and vulnerable contributions of leaders of color are subtly muted and edited?

Leading as a person of color comes with an awareness of the many ways we can be misperceived based on biases and stereotypes that are deeply ingrained, pervasive, and persistent. To introduce vulnerability into this equation raises the stakes of potential detrimental impact if the risks are not acutely considered. Such an ask places us atop a tightrope in an uncomfortable position for dangerously too long.

The narrative toward a more openly vulnerable workforce is a welcome shift in how we think about work. However, without naming and extricating the structurally embedded mindsets and environments that made vulnerability so difficult in the first place, the needle will move only moderately.

If marginalized leaders can't access their vulnerability and authenticity, once again we've missed some cracks in the foundation that expose a leadership structure that is sturdy enough for some but not all.

It's a tall task for anyone to minimize elements of their human selves in any environment; to do that daily at work is an even more significant effort. It can be argued that given our historical and present-day perceptions of leaders as ever-unfazed beings, many of us do this to some extent regardless of identity. The need for identity edits is deeper for leaders of color, however, and a direct challenge to the call for authenticity and vulnerability.

A NECESSARY REFRAME

At the circus, contortionists begin their routines by showcasing their unnatural flexibility, essentially a limb at a time, introducing their capabilities to the crowd. By the end of their performance, they have raised the stakes, usually folding into unimaginable forms while balancing atop a tower or a column of other contorted bodies. They have increased the risk and offered the audience proof of what they likely thought was not humanly possible. The audience audibly gasps, applauds, and marvels at the human potential they just witnessed.

The contortion that professionals of color engage in to lead their teams, manage their projects, close their deals, and raise their funds is akin to the grand finale of that circus routine. It is a high-stakes, complex, imperceptible endeavor that happens daily.

Marginalized leaders exhibit the ultimate flexibility and adaptability, adjusting how they present themselves at work in big and small ways in order to succeed.

They assess their environment with perspectives unique only to those who have experienced marginalization, accurately determining how and when to contribute authentically or take a vulnerable risk. They are able to align their communication style with what is commonly expected at work, minimizing cultural idioms or adopting common professional terms, sometimes not even noticing their own self-editing.

Such a flex in communication style is an unnamed asset.

Unlike the contortionists at the circus, however, these leaders' efforts are unnoticed and uncelebrated even though they have resulted in unique leadership expertise that others should note. An understudied depth of perspective and awareness exists among those carrying marginalized identities in the workplace.

Balancing who we are with what is expected is a delicate dance, and there is something to be learned about the leadership that takes place within that dance. We live in a world that requires a readiness for uncertainty. Contortion calls for a steadiness amid that uncertainty. The balance that marginalized leaders engage in almost effortlessly each day positions them to move their teams and organizations forward in the ways we need most.

Our world also requires us to lead with equity at the core if we are to really have an impact. Diverse lived experiences inform the perspectives of those at the margins of dominant work culture, as those leaders have experienced firsthand which workplace practices cultivate inequity. Centering those marginalized experiences allows room for equitable environments to emerge and perpetuate.

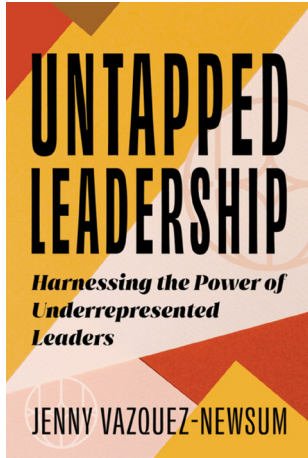
Creativity, innovation, and impact exist in the uninhibited, unedited, and unfiltered contributions to our workforce. Marginalized leaders have not yet had the opportunity to contribute to our world at such a level, leaving us to wonder what we have missed out on. What answers will we continue to bypass while the fully authentic and vulnerable contributions of leaders of color are subtly muted and edited?

These leaders are positioned to lead us into a more open, creative, and ultimately innovative workforce by nature of their full selves being excluded from authentic contribution. By folding in perspectives that have been overlooked, we have our best chance at uncovering solutions we haven't previously discovered.

Leaders of color would not only contribute new ideas and ways of approaching our most persistent work challenges when given the space to do so, **but they will also make room for others to do so as well.** 📌



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenny Vazquez-Newsum, Ed.D., is a facilitator, researcher, and educator with a long-time interest in leadership. As a biracial Black/Latinx woman, the leadership journey has been bumpy, stimulating, challenging, and a life's work. For the past two decades, Vazquez-Newsum has designed and delivered leadership training for hundreds of diverse leaders, from established executives at large corporations to high school students beginning their leadership journeys. She currently serves as the Founder and CEO of Untapped Leaders, a dynamic and diverse leadership community and consultancy specializing in uncovering the untapped capacities of individuals, teams, and organizations.

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