

Identity covering at work—a majority phenomenon

A Jewish employee tells her supervisor that she needs a day off to tend to a sick relative. But that's not the truth. In fact, it's Yom Kippur and she will be fasting and attending religious services. On another floor in the same company, there's a Muslim employee, who finds a deserted corner in his office to pray instead of using a conference room – so that his co-workers won't see him. And across town, there's a Christian employee, who doesn't know what to say when a coworker asks her what she did over the weekend. Ultimately, she says she went to the beach, even though she was really volunteering with her church on a mission trip.

As many Diversity & Inclusion professionals will recognize, these examples illustrate a phenomenon known as covering, a form of identity management where an individual downplays or disassociates from one of their identities.



Covering often goes overlooked in the workplace because it is a subtle experience. Covering differs from “passing,” where someone masks an identity. For example, if someone is not “out” at work, she is *passing* as heterosexual. However, if someone is out at work but distances herself from that identity, by not joining the LGBT resource group or not bringing her partner to office events, she is likely to be *covering*. The concept of “covering” first appeared in Erving Goffman's 1963 book “Stigma,” but the modern expert is legal scholar Kenji Yoshino, Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Constitutional Law at New York University School of Law. Yoshino recently partnered with Deloitte University and produced a fascinating report, “Uncovering Talent: A New Model of Inclusion,” based on a survey of employees at 220 Fortune 500 companies¹. While the study focused on identifiers like race, gender, and sexual orientation, it is easy to grasp how this concept applies to religion as well.

There are four types of covering, all of which can be applied to men and women who are covering a religious or non-religious identity.

“ **75% of participants reported some type of covering at work** ”

While covering may seem like a small inconvenience, it can have a disproportionate impact in the workplace, ultimately sabotaging a company's diversity goals. After all, Diversity & Inclusion efforts seek to ensure that all are respected and that the company benefits from diversity as it creates an environment where all employees are included. For that to happen, employees need to feel like they can bring their whole selves to work. And when they cover, that isn't happening. That's why Diversity & Inclusion professionals need to address covering and identify *why* their employees cover.

- The first is appearance (or, as we might rename it, altering appearance), where a person alters the way they look to fit in.² Examples could include a Wiccan keeping a pentagram necklace hidden under his shirt.
- The second type is affiliation (or, eschewing affiliation), where an individual avoids behaviors that are stereotypically associated with one of their identities.³ For example, a Muslim employee could decide not to sign up to use the Quiet Room on the company intranet because he doesn't want his co-workers to know that he engages in daily prayer.
- The third type of covering is advocacy (or, advocacy avoidance), in which someone avoids standing up for their own group.⁴ For example, a Jewish employee is offended but remains silent, when he overhears a colleague tell another co-worker to "stop being such a Jew" when the co-worker does not want to go to an expensive bar after work.
- The final type of covering is association (or, association evasion), where someone avoids contact with others who share their identity.⁵ For example, a Christian employee decides not to join the company's new Christian ERG because she worries her co-workers will think she's a "fundamentalist."

At first glance, this may seem like a self-imposed issue that could easily be fixed. If no one explicitly told the Wiccan employee he had to hide his pentagram necklace, it's his own choice to do so, right? However, looking at the data from Yoshino's study shows that it's a bit more complicated than that. Overall, 75% of participants reported some type of covering at work.⁶ Furthermore, the majority of participants felt that covering was simultaneously detrimental to their sense of self but nonetheless important for their long-term professional advancement.⁷ Respondents reported that they felt pressure to cover from both company leadership and the office culture.⁸ What this data tells us is that people are not covering at work because they want to but, rather, because they feel they have to. This becomes an issue when you consider that employees are covering the very same identities that many companies are working so hard to include in their Diversity & Inclusion initiatives.

When we look at the Yoshino study and Tanenbaum's 2013 Survey of American Workers together, it becomes easy to see that large numbers of people are feeling marginalized at work because of their beliefs and that many of them are probably covering their faith (or non-belief) to avoid being singled out. As you may recall, in the Tanenbaum Survey, we documented that Americans often see or personally experience religious bias at work. That's a problem for men and women who want to get on in their companies. So it is reasonable to conclude that many are covering.

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In addition, in different ways, both surveys dismantle the traditional notion that Diversity & Inclusion is the province of the minorities. Yoshino's study found that 50% of straight white men cover for a variety of identities, including religion, disability, veteran status, or socio-economic status.⁹ Likewise, Tanenbaum's survey revealed that 48% of white evangelical Protestants witnessed or had personal experience(s) of religious bias while at work. Such data remind us that workplace bias affects not only those recognized as marginalized but also employees who are perceived to be in the majority.¹⁰

Further, Tanenbaum's 2013 survey also found an interesting discrepancy that is explained by the phenomenon of covering. Almost half of all atheists reported frequent workplace engagement with white evangelical Protestants, but only 20% of white evangelical Protestants reported that they had such contact with atheists.¹¹ It only takes a moment to realize that these numbers don't add up. How to explain this disparity? We believe the answer is in covering.



It seems that many more atheists realize that they are having conversations with evangelical Christians than vice versa. Generally, we describe this phenomenon as asymmetrical sharing that occurs because the atheist employees are not making their beliefs (and identities as non-believers) known. They're covering. What we do not know is the extent to which this occurs simply because they are uncomfortable about sharing, or whether they are fearful of reprisal.

(Endnotes)

- 1 "Uncovering Talent: A New Model of Inclusion," by Kenji Yoshino and Christie Smith. 2013.
- 2 "Uncovering Talent"
- 3 "Uncovering Talent"
- 4 "Uncovering Talent"
- 5 "Uncovering Talent"
- 6 "Uncovering Talent"
- 7 "Uncovering Talent"
- 8 "Uncovering Talent"
- 9 "Uncovering Talent"
- 10 "What American Workers Really Think About Religion: Tanenbaum's 2013 Survey of American Workers and Religion"
- 11 "What American Workers Really Think About Religion"

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As Yoshino points out in his report, the corporate world has for years been aboard the Diversity & Inclusion bandwagon. But often, diversity gets all the attention while inclusion is left behind. While employees may not be worried about being fired for their faith, they may still feel that they have to cover for it. They may be trying *not* to bring their whole selves to work. A truly inclusive workplace is one where employees do not feel pressure to cover for their faith or for any other identifier.

To find out the degree to which covering is occurring at your workplace, consider including questions about this phenomenon on your next climate survey. Once you have a better idea of why employees are covering, you can begin to tackle it at the source. And we are ready to help.

