# Black Americans feel they can't be themselves at work

## Code-switching often called necessary to succeed

**Jessica Guynn**
USA TODAY

As one of the few Black women in the corporate offices where she worked, Regina Lawless took pains to blend in. She donned conservative blazers and low-wedge heels and tucked her hair in a wig instead of wearing natural hairstyles or braids.

Echoing the speech patterns of her white colleagues, she avoided African American Vernacular English, spoke in a quieter voice and buttoned down her mannerisms. Even in casual moments around the water cooler, she constantly monitored how she carried herself and chatted about the latest episode of "Game of Thrones," not "Insecure."

"I was coming in as a young Black woman and I didn't want them to think of me as unprofessional or ghetto or pick your negative stereotype of Black women," she said. "It was my way not to have people question my competence or my professionalism."

For many Black and Brown workers, this is as routine or familiar as breathing. Lawless was "code-switching," meaning she changed her appearance, speech and behavior to fit in and put others at ease.

"Had I not code-switched and conformed, I would not have been seen as having leadership potential," said Lawless, whose last corporate job was as head of diversity, equity and inclusion at Instagram.

But the mental gymnastics came at a cost.

"I joke with people that I wanted to retire at 40," said Lawless who today runs her own company, Bossy and Blissful, and has a new book coming out, "Do You: A Journey of Success, Loss and Learning to Live a More MeaningFULL Life." "I felt like an 80-year-old because of all the added cognitive load I had to carry on top of just my day job."

Black employees are nearly three times more likely to code-switch than white employees, according to a survey of more than 2,000 full- and part-time employees conducted for Indeed by The Harris Poll.

What's more, nearly half of Black employees see code-switching as a necessity at work.

Diversity experts say the habit is becoming more common as the conservative backlash against diversity, equity and inclusion causes some companies to cut back on initiatives.

Emboldened by a Supreme Court ruling last summer striking down affirmative action in education, conservative activists have filed a growing number of legal challenges advocating for "colorblindness" in the workplace.

Nearly one-third of respondents who said their company has implemented DEI initiatives have code-switched, according to the Indeed survey. Nearly half of respondents whose company is scaling back on DEI investments have code-switched.

Workplaces have become more inclusive since George Floyd's murder sparked a national reckoning, hiring more people from diverse backgrounds and having more open discussions about race in the workplace. But cultural norms – how people are expected to speak, act and dress – have evolved more slowly.

Code-switching is a form of self-protection for Black Americans, who regularly face anti-Black bias on the job, said Darin Johnson, a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication and a member of the Communication Neuroscience Lab.

"At work, Black folks have dealt with a lot of racism and a lot of bias," said Johnson who studies code-switching.

Deep racial inequalities persist at every level in the business world, creating sharply disparate outcomes for Black Americans. But Black women face multiple layers of bias that prevent them from truly being themselves at the office, said Y-Vonne Hutchinson, CEO and founder of DEI consulting firm ReadySet and author of "How to Talk to Your Boss About Race."

"You have all of the biases related to being a woman. You also have the biases related to Blackness," Hutchinson said. "So when I code-switch, I am not just code-switching to fit into a white workplace, I am code-switching to fit into a white workplace as a Black woman."

The term code-switching was coined in 1954 by sociolinguist Einar Haugen to describe how people mix languages or dialects. In the 1970s, linguists began using the term to refer to the dynamics between people of color and the majority white culture.

Some high-profile incidents have raised mainstream awareness of code-switching in recent years.

A video of President Obama in the locker room of the U.S. men's Olympic basketball team in 2012 went viral for how differently he greeted a white assistant coach (a firm handshake) and NBA player Kevin Durant (an embrace and tap on the back). The clip inspired a comedy sketch on Comedy Central's "Key & Peele" with Obama leaving the podium and formally greeting white men but switching gears with a Black man.

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