



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT R1802L
PUBLISHED IN HBR
MARCH-APRIL 2018

ARTICLE DIVERSITY

Diversity & Authenticity

**Minorities hesitate to share information about themselves at work.
That's a problem for everyone.**

by Katherine W. Phillips, Tracy L. Dumas, and Nancy P. Rothbard

DIVERSITY

Minorities hesitate to share information about themselves at work. That's a problem for everyone.

AUTHENTICITY

ITV &

by Katherine W. Phillips, Tracy L. Dumas, and Nancy P. Rothbard

TICITY

W

IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM

Building workplace relationships across racial boundaries can be difficult. Being one's true self, disclosing elements of one's personal life, and forming social connections are easier within one's own group than they are across a demographic boundary. But employees who hesitate to open up are less likely to build the deeper relationships that lead both to success and to more happiness at work.

THE SOLUTION

Organizations that recognize this challenge can take specific steps to make it easier. Creating structure in social events (such as icebreaker games) may reduce the anxiety associated with free-form small talk. Leaders can model a learning mindset, whereby differences between people create an opportunity to hear something new. And mentorship can be especially helpful to minorities, who may feel marginalized within the organization.

When Marcus (not his real name) joined a leading international bank right out of college, he believed that success would come from delivering solid numbers. "Secure the highest returns, bring in the most clients, keep your head down, and get the work done," he says, recalling his strategy. For years Marcus did just that, receiving awards for his exemplary work on complex deals. But despite earning the best performance ratings in his group, he kept getting passed over for promotion. One day he worked up the nerve to ask his boss why. "You are really good at your job, but the problem is that the partners feel they don't really know you," his manager told him. Marcus acknowledged the criticism. "I was afraid to open up," he says. So he worked to overcome that fear. He began seeking out lunches and other social opportunities with partners and finding common areas of interest, such as children, college sports, fantasy sports, and new restaurants. He began talking more openly about his life outside the office—a key to building relationships. "Once I did that, things started to turn around," he says. Today Marcus is a managing partner.

Nothing in that series of events makes it obvious that Marcus is African-American. He is, and in our experience (backed up by our research), his ethnicity played a role in his discomfort with "opening up" at work. Just like Marcus, many other minority members fail to understand that their career mobility can be affected by their colleagues' feelings of familiarity or closeness with them. And even for those who do understand this, building workplace relationships

across racial boundaries can be difficult. Given the obstacles minorities face in navigating a corporate culture, this may seem minor. It is not. Opening yourself to others requires risk taking and trust, but without it employees are less likely to build the deeper relationships that lead both to success and to more happiness at work. Our research focuses on African-Americans, but this dynamic applies to the acclimation and professional trajectories of all those who find themselves in the minority at work, including working mothers, older employees at youth-oriented start-ups, and people whose conservative political views make them feel like outliers in organizations dominated by liberals or progressives.

Decades' worth of studies have shown that similarity attracts—a phenomenon known as homophily. Our research focuses on a specific aspect of this: That being one's true self, disclosing elements of one's personal life, and forming social connections are easier within one's own group than they are across a demographic boundary such as racial background. This is crucial to keep in mind as companies aspire to become more diverse. Simply hiring members of a minority group won't ensure that they feel comfortable or equipped to build the relationships necessary for advancement. And as companies invest in mentorship and sponsorship programs, making these relationships flourish among workers of differing races may require special effort.

SOCIAL EVENTS CAN CREATE A STRAIN

Out-of-the-office social events are an important venue for building relationships with colleagues. We surveyed more than 300 employees from many racial backgrounds—half of them employed full-time in a wide variety of industries, half of them MBA students—about their participation in such events. They reported engaging in three distinct kinds of work-related social activities: (1) official company events, such as holiday parties, company picnics, outings to sports events, and so forth, which are typically organized by the HR department and open to all employees; (2) informal get-togethers orchestrated by small groups of staffers, such as happy-hour drinks, baby showers, and lunches; (3) professional development activities, such as community service events, team-building retreats, and skill-building seminars. Among the three kinds, ad hoc drinks after work were by far the most common.

The problem is not that minorities fail to show up for such outings. In fact, our research reveals that their attendance rates are similar to those of other demographic groups. However, in our surveys, minorities are more likely than others to report attending out of a sense of obligation or a fear of negative career consequences if they don't appear. Prior research

has shown that this socializing can make people feel closer, and our studies confirmed that—with one important difference: Regardless of race, people who would prefer to skip such events typically come away feeling no more connected to colleagues than when they walked in the door.

One reason these gatherings fail to help minorities bond with coworkers is the difficulty people have making small talk across racial lines. “What am I supposed to say in these social networking settings?” one black female executive asked. “How do I jump into the conversation when I often have no idea what they are talking about? I don’t watch the same TV shows or the sports they are discussing.” When the conversation turns to workplace gossip, minority employees say, they may hold back because they lack the trusting relationships necessary to participate in exchanges that involve discreet backbiting or criticism of bosses. As one black executive put it, “I don’t feel safe sharing information that might later be used against me.” Because making conversation at these events can be challenging, many minorities we interviewed said they intentionally arrive late and leave early—they put in an appearance, but no more.

In a second set of studies aimed at understanding the obstacles to self-disclosure, we surveyed more than 300 young African-American, Hispanic, and other racial-minority professionals who were seeking admittance to an elite MBA program. Asked how likely they would be to disclose personal information to either a white or an African-American coworker at a company social event, these highly educated people reported that they’d be more uncomfortable opening up to a white coworker than to a black one, especially if they felt their work performance was average (as opposed to high). Their responses reflected fear that personal information highlighting their race (termed *status-confirming disclosure*) might reinforce the stereotypes that can undermine performance reviews and prevent progress toward leadership roles.

Consider a woman we’ll call Karen, a well-educated professional working in higher education, who recalls a conversation at a birthday party her colleagues threw for her. A white coworker asked, “What did you do for your birthday?” Karen replied, “I went to a concert with my husband and some friends.” The coworker asked the logical follow-up question: “Who did you see?” Karen had seen Kirk Franklin, an African-American gospel artist who’s quite popular among her black friends. She assumed the colleague wouldn’t be familiar with Franklin, so she mumbled, “You won’t know him” and pivoted to a new topic. This may sound like an innocuous exchange, but years later Karen remembers it as significant: “If I am not comfortable with who I am, the music I like, the places I like to go, how can I expect my coworker to value me for who I am? What is so wrong with being excited about Kirk Franklin?”

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE STRESS

Organizations that hope to increase diversity and promote the careers of racial minorities can benefit from being aware of these challenges—and taking steps to make employees from varied demographic groups feel comfortable engaging with one another. So how can we ensure that racial minorities and majority members do feel that way—both socially and professionally? Our research focuses on understanding the various dimensions of this problem. Drawing on the research of others, we suggest several strategies that may help.

“I DON’T FEEL SAFE SHARING INFORMATION THAT MIGHT LATER BE USED AGAINST ME.”

Structure. First, recognize the role that structure can play in easing the discomfort created by free-form socializing. Instead of the typical cocktail party, where some people (of any race) struggle to navigate the room, introduce themselves, and choose how, when, and with whom to initiate and exit conversations, consider a different approach. Some companies use formal ice-breaker games that create orderliness and purpose, reducing that need to navigate—just as structured speed-dating events can make it less stressful to meet many people quickly. If the gathering is small, have a leader introduce everyone, focusing on the unique talents each brings to the group. In a larger setting, forming teams or introducing a competitive element may create a more pleasant experience, not just for minorities but for everyone who finds it challenging to mingle with people he or she doesn’t know very well. Remember that no matter how diverse the work group, all its members have one thing in common: the work. That means events that celebrate a win or otherwise highlight the collective work itself will help group members relate more easily.

This same sense of structure and roles can be useful back at the office, when managers meet to discuss individuals’ performance. Consider the benefits of appointing someone to keep an eye out for subjective comments that refer to social rather than work performance. Recognize that the best performance conversations are specific and descriptive and focus on work-related actions and behaviors. When remarks

stray toward the personal or the vague, they are often coded and loaded with cultural assumptions. (Comments such as “Marcus just doesn’t fit in” and “We feel like we don’t know him” are good examples.) To be sure, specific, business-oriented criticisms of social behavior may be valid, but often these catchall comments are off base and a way of penalizing someone who avoids the Thursday happy hour because he or she feels different from the majority. Designating someone in advance to throw the flag on such remarks can keep management discussions focused on the most relevant performance dimensions.

ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD RECOGNIZE THAT RACIAL BOUNDARIES CAN BE A REAL IMPEDIMENT TO SOCIALIZING.

Learning. Pay attention to diversity research showing the advantages of adopting a learning orientation: Organizations and individuals benefit when exposed to differences. Although this orientation is typically established at the organizational level—modeled and reinforced by leaders—individuals can speak and act in ways that mirror it. For instance, instead of asking, “Did you watch *Modern Family* last night?”—which puts someone with a different taste in television at an immediate disadvantage—try a gambit like this: “I can’t find anything I like on TV right now, and I want to try some new shows. What are you watching that you really enjoy?” This legitimizes everyone’s choices and reduces the feeling that people may be judged on their answers, or that certain parts of the culture should be universal. Such open and curious questions demonstrate that being different makes someone more valuable—the essence of a learning orientation.

In an organization that takes this approach, people should naturally feel more comfortable opening up. As they do, minorities might consider beginning their self-disclosure by sharing status-*disconfirming* interests that help them connect with others. For instance, if a conversation turns to music, an African-American


who enjoys the opera or the symphony might say so, because that interest runs counter to racial stereotypes. We do not, of course, suggest being untruthful or deceitful but, rather, mindful about sharing information that serves to bridge boundaries. Over time, in an inclusive organizational culture rooted in a learning orientation, an African-American employee may become equally comfortable disclosing status-*confirming* information—such as a love of Kirk Franklin.

Mentorship. Organizations should recognize that racial boundaries can be a real impediment to socializing—and that impediment isn’t going to disappear overnight. They might consider creating a buddy system of informal mentorship, in which more-experienced employees help facilitate social relationships for new hires, particularly minorities who may feel marginalized in the organization. Assigning coaches, mentors, or sponsors levels the playing field and helps people connect across differences. The role should also involve feedback. Marcus’s boss took a risk by telling him that the reason his career was stalling was that he lacked social ties; such risk taking is easier if it is part of an experienced manager’s assigned responsibilities—and an accepted and appropriate part of the feedback process.

All the people involved should go easy on one another, recognizing how challenging these activities can be and giving others the benefit of the doubt. Not only are the social behaviors we describe difficult to master (whether within or across racial boundaries), but merely discussing racial differences can be uncomfortable. It is reasonable to proceed cautiously with self-disclosure; we’ve all experienced instances of “oversharing” or “too much information.” Sharing should be encouraged thoughtfully, with support, and with a focus on small and early wins.

COLOR BLINDNESS IS not an effective strategy for dealing with racial differences in the workplace. Rather, our research suggests that acknowledging and highlighting them, along with the related challenges, can go a long way toward kindling relationships. People don’t need to be “best friends” to work effectively together, but friendships tend to create happier workers and more-effective teams. Bonding around the work itself is powerful, especially for those who are collaborating across racial boundaries. But over time, deeper relationships depend on people’s opening up about their personal lives. For that to happen, colleagues must be intentional about getting out of their comfort zones and connecting with people who are different. That may feel like a risk, but it’s one worth taking. 🗣️

HBR Reprint R1802L

 **KATHERINE W. PHILLIPS** is a professor at Columbia Business School. **TRACY L. DUMAS** is an associate professor at The Ohio State University. **NANCY P. ROTHBARD** is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania.