

**STAYING
TRUE
TO
YOU**

STAYING TRUE TO YOU

How to Succeed
Without Losing
Your Way

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To Mom and Dad

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INTRODUCTION

WHY IT'S HARD TO STAY TRUE TO OURSELVES

We all want the freedom to be ourselves. For many of us, though, in certain places and situations, we don't feel comfortable enough to do so. Over decades of research, I have observed one phenomenon again and again: We too often silence ourselves. And that silence is driven by fear.

In our places of work, we might inhibit our own voices, sometimes even our identities, and pretend to embrace the organization's culture for fear of being excluded, cut off from opportunities, perhaps even fired. With family members, we avoid topics important to us and allow others' views and needs to supersede ours to avoid conflict. In friendships, we swallow our words to keep the peace and sustain the relationship. Much of the time these fears are about being rejected—by a supervisor, a romantic partner, a friend, a relative. We hide ourselves in order not to be judged and left on our own. Our need for a sense of security and belonging can motivate us to sacrifice our other needs, such as the freedom to be ourselves. We might conform too much in individual relationships or within social

networks. We are afraid we'll alienate or offend people and jeopardize all that comes along with acceptance, from the love and support of family members to the useful information that trickles through school-parent networks or community groups.

I've observed how, externally, many of us might appear to be in sync with the group, but internally we're experiencing an unsettling dissonance. Most of us know this feeling. Whether we're actively stifling our opinions or simulating agreement with someone else's views, we habitually silence our true selves. Often, while we want to advocate for ourselves and show up authentically, we don't know how. How much of our genuine self is the right amount to bring to a given situation? How do we determine if we'll be received well or badly? Might our authenticity bring about negative repercussions, such as rejection? Is being ourselves worth those repercussions?

It might seem counterintuitive, but being authentic can be problematic, too. Some of us, some of the time, overassert ourselves, taking up too much space and leaving little for others. Most of us don't do this knowingly—we don't intend to squash other people or push them out. Maybe we haven't had much practice doing otherwise. Yet we have a nagging feeling that we're alienating others; sometimes we're even told so directly. We want to recalibrate, but we don't know how.

For twenty years, I've conducted research on authenticity and conformity around the globe, particularly in workplaces in the United States, Canada, and Asia. I've taught and consulted thousands of business school students, leaders, and employees at different levels across a variety of industries, encountering practically every kind of personality and innumerable variations of the struggle between independence and interdependence. My research has consistently shown that at least 30 percent of employees report that they "sometimes" to "almost always" hide the reality that they're conforming in uncomfortable ways. I've found that there is often a gap between the person we are at home—our private self—and the one nodding along at work. Presenting a limited version of

ourselves often disorients, exhausts, and disengages us. I saw these adverse outcomes among analysts at financial institutions on Wall Street, actors backstage on Broadway, flight attendants, lawyers, and teachers. Whether we're a CEO or an entry-level employee, we hide because we want to be included. Many of the same unhealthy dynamics exist in friendships, marriages, mentorships, and other relationships. And they occur in cultures all across the globe—from those that place a high value on conformity, like parts of East and Southeast Asia, to those that prize authenticity, like the US.

Moreover, today's social and political climate has placed issues involving race, religion, culture, discrimination, equity, diversity, and inclusion at the forefront worldwide. It prevents employees from feeling safe enough to take chances, such as offering diverse points of view that would help their organizations generate solutions. Members of an organization who hold values and identities that differ from those of the majority are even more likely than other employees to feign conformity in order to be accepted.

It is the most human thing in the world to want belonging and autonomy simultaneously. Yet we clearly have a fundamental misunderstanding of the “true self.” What is it that causes so many people to feel caught between the seemingly opposing forces of conformity and authenticity? I couldn't stop thinking about the persistence of this phenomenon. It seemed to signal that there is a lot at play, and maybe a lot at stake, that our current understanding of authenticity and conformity doesn't capture. Authenticity is a hot topic in countries all over the world as people wrestle with shifting ideas about identity, inclusion, and what it really means to inhabit our “whole selves” at work. Despite all the chatter, however, the way we conceive of authenticity is failing most of us. We've overlooked something vital about how to be true to ourselves: Mutually supportive relationships are an essential aspect of living authentically. By balancing individuality and community, we can live and work with other people in meaningful and beneficial ways.

Staying True to You deconstructs authenticity and conformity as we know them and explores why taking either of them to extremes might make us feel *less seen*, *less accepted*, and more *alone*. In any setting, whether we try to fit in or to claim our individuality, it can feel as though we are swinging wildly between putting ourselves out there and hiding ourselves. Finding equilibrium is difficult. And in recent years, I've noticed people are especially hungry for it, due in no small part to the sociopolitical environment. I've had a significant increase in requests for workshops and coaching that unpack the relationship between workplace norms and authentic expression. People are ever more eager to lead genuine lives while fitting in in different environments. Maybe we're beset by uncertainty about where to land between these two seemingly irreconcilable positions. Maybe we ricochet from one to the other. I know I've often felt depleted by these internal divisions.

Interpretations of authenticity are scattered, even within distinct regions and cultures. These vague conceptions create problems instead of solutions. It's a complicated subject, but in this book, I'll introduce a straightforward take. As a starting point, we can think of authenticity as an alignment between our internal sense of self (i.e., our personal values and beliefs) and our outward behavior. Taken further, it's the assertion of our wishes and sometimes of our will.

We can conceive of conformity, meanwhile, as holding back our perspective when it differs from the norm or, alternatively, expressing agreement when we actually disagree. We also conform when we yield to social and institutional expectations that we would not otherwise consider. For example, to be culturally appropriate in certain situations, we might greet friends with a kiss on one cheek, or both cheeks, or we might even kiss them three times—on both cheeks plus one more! Now, that sort of thing may not cause an internal value conflict or curtail our sense of authenticity, but nonetheless we are choosing to follow a cultural norm that diverges from our own customs. We will learn that both authenticity and confor-

mity exist on a spectrum of choices that can result from extreme, moderate, or even inconsequential factors.

What I've discovered on my own journey, and as I've coached and counseled others, is that staying true to ourselves involves finding the right mix of authenticity and conformity. And getting there is a process; **we won't just light upon a one-size-fits-all solution that works for us in every situation.** Fortunately, we can become sufficiently self-aware, judicious, confident, and flexible to juggle authenticity and conformity differently in different places. As we get to know ourselves, we will begin to leverage our unique strengths and find a path forward, into a new, more deliberate, more empowered way of working and interacting with others, and even a new way of living.

A Dichotomy of Extremes

In North America, we have the idea that happiness and success are linked to unfiltered authenticity. If we're not revealing our "whole self," how can we be fulfilled? On social media and even in professional settings, we are suspicious of people who don't live up to our notion of authenticity; we judge one another as being fake. We judge ourselves in similar fashion. Ironically, the pressure to be authentic can feel a lot like pressure to conform. We end up adhering to what society expects authenticity to look like. But *presenting* as authentic is quite different from *feeling* authentic. My research has taught me that, just as people perform conformity by pretending to go along with others' viewpoints, we also perform authenticity to survive certain spaces—to seem strong and self-assured, to appear not to care what people think of us, even and perhaps especially when we feel insecure and start looking outside ourselves for validation. As a result, we sometimes veer toward the extreme and go all out on being authentic everywhere, bringing our full selves to the table whether we're hanging out

with friends or in a virtual meeting. And we are often surprised when it's dissatisfying or awkward.

In recent years, opinion pieces, blogs, TED Talks, and social media have started to put authenticity on trial, pointing out its futility and potential risks—if we show up as our real selves, we might be devalued or excluded. People have also started to notice that authenticity can be weaponized to suppress others. There is a growing understanding that something about authenticity is not actually working for us. Yet the drive toward individualism persists, and we are forced to contend with the following conundrum: We aspire to live honestly even though we may not benefit from doing whatever we want.

Conforming, meanwhile, has always been seen as weak. If we don't express *all* our thoughts and perspectives in every circumstance, we beat ourselves up, convinced our self-repression invalidates us. Yet, if we're in an important meeting, or on a first date, or at parent-teacher night, conforming might feel like the best way (or the least risky way) to handle the interaction and get the result we want. We often take the path of least resistance, behaving as if we are fine with external expectations, trying to seem like we're part of the crowd. Many of us have hidden behind a semblance of conformity—and it leaves us feeling hollow.

It frequently seems impossible to measure out the right portions of conformity and authenticity. Growing up, I was often told: "Just be yourself." This is perhaps one of the most common pieces of advice given to children, particularly in the United States, where individualism is championed. But the truth is, we're not given any instructions for navigating the many twists, turns, or flat-out disasters that can accompany being our real selves. Then, when we grow up and join the workforce, we're given another piece of deceptively simple advice: "Fake it 'til you make it." But that kind of masquerade can cause us to be misunderstood or unseen at work and in other areas of our lives. "Faking it" also involves a lot of strain. It eventually catches up to us and we become less connected,

less involved, less committed; we experience more and stronger symptoms of depression. In a strange twist, because we're pretending to fit in, we eventually decide we don't want to. Our inevitable inability to maintain the pretense causes us to lose confidence. No wonder we feel lost.

Worse still, the push and pull between conformity demands and authenticity demands can throw us into an existential crisis where we're on the verge of losing our sense of self. Some people are good at code-switching or managing people's impressions, but presenting false versions of ourselves isn't something we can just switch off like a light—it lingers, permeating our days, our weeks, our lives. It's debilitating to live in a constant state of disharmony between how we present ourselves and who we really are. Many of us are desperate to find the right balance between our authentic selves and our need to belong, or even to survive. How can we break free from these competing expectations?

Together, we'll explore how to do just that. Introducing new concepts, my own and others' research, some tried-and-true behavioral science, individual subjects' stories, and my personal experience, I give practical guidance for developing a nimble interplay between self-expression and self-regulation, whether we're in the workplace or at our in-laws' house. *Staying True to You* presents a revolutionary new framework for engaging with the world called the "Middle Self"—and we need it now more than ever.

What Is the Middle Self?

I came up with the concept of the middle self to fill the gap in our current understanding of authenticity and conformity, answering our ongoing questions about why being "real" doesn't always feel right, and why trying to find common ground can make us feel invisible. I conceptualize the middle self as the interior continuum where we move between compromise and

personal liberty. In so many areas of our lives, we struggle to be ourselves and live in community at the same time. We've bought into the idea that conformity and authenticity are mutually exclusive—and that conformity is mostly bad, and authenticity is almost always good. This mindset has obscured the reality that we actually exist between the two.

The idea of the middle self encapsulates the inner tension caused by these ostensibly conflicting forces. When we gain clarity about our inner workings, we make deliberate choices and arrive at that sometimes elusive place: a happy medium. I think of this balance as the middle self. It offers the possibility of comfortably and fluidly reconciling external (imposed by others) and internal (self-imposed) pressure, and it's the key to mastering the daily trade-offs between meeting our own needs and meeting the needs of others. No matter the situation, we can lose sight of ourselves either by conforming perfectly so that others applaud or by prioritizing our individual freedom at the expense of interconnection. Instead, thriving in the middle looks like this: We face pressures head-on. We stop feeding toxic patterns and instead build fulfilling relationships. We live confidently and with peace of mind, and we understand our values. We develop fluency in both honoring ourselves and supporting our communities.

Though it may seem otherwise, authenticity is not a solo act—it is entwined with our relationships and networks at work, at home, and anywhere our decisions impact one another (i.e., pretty much everywhere!). In this book, I draw on ideas from social cognition, motivation research, and positive psychology to demonstrate how connections with others are critical to refining and maintaining our middle selves. We all need what I call a Circle of Champions (COC), made up of people who want us to succeed. Members of our COC give us space to be true to ourselves while supporting us with honest feedback. And as we cultivate our COC, we must be champions for others as well. It may require stretching ourselves, but forging

meaningful connections with people who hold different perspectives enables their growth and our own. Strong relationships help us bring the power of our middle selves to every area of our lives.

The dance between self-expression and belonging can seem difficult, even impossible, to master—but when we do, we claim our own power and help other people claim theirs. It's life-changing.

Unlocking the Middle Self

At one end is the middle self, at the other, the disempowered self. Instead of moving back and forth along that spectrum mindlessly, which robs us of agency, we'll figure out how to make more deliberate moves that will propel us into our middle selves. For now, I'll focus on a few fundamental aspects of it. The middle self comes from grounding ourselves in integrity. When we think about integrity, we think about being honest, living by our principles, and cultivating decency, responsibility, and trust. All those things are certainly crucial for our well-being. I'm also talking about another definition of integrity: the state of being whole, or undivided, from the Latin word *integer*, which means "intact." We want to feel whole in our selfhood and in community, but we've been taught we can't do both. We often address that tension with impulsive reactions and decisions that wind up eroding our integrity and leading us into the disempowered self. When we operate from our disempowered self, we tend to be overly self-protective, driven by fear of losing a relationship, a job, or anything that's important to us. As a result, we feel fractured and confused.

But the sense of wholeness that comes from being our true selves and the sense of wholeness that comes from acceptance by others—they don't have to be at odds. We can weave

together all of who we are into one consolidated identity. This integration of self does away with the discord between our internal and external lives, and with any sense that we don't know who we are. When we are whole unto ourselves, we interact with people in mutually rewarding ways while not hiding our true selves. So how, exactly, do we attain that sense of wholeness? For starters, we'll become more aware of the motivations within us that dictate our decisions and actions.

Perhaps the most essential way to maneuver between conformity and authenticity, and to feel whole, is to identify and mobilize our core values. We'll become more comfortable activating the appropriate values in various milieus without sacrificing what matters most to us. We'll determine how to make concessions from a place of empowerment, choosing where, when, and how to integrate our values—even when we find ourselves at the crossroads of seemingly incompatible ones. To know what we value is to know ourselves. It's specific to each of us—we all have our own priorities, and they have various influences on our emotions, thoughts, decisions, and actions. Understanding our values, their origins, how much they matter to us, and how to live them out consistently allows us to avoid the disempowered self and move toward the middle self.

To that end, we'll get granular about how to support ourselves and others. For instance, I mentioned earlier that we perform not only conformity but authenticity, too—I call it facade creation, and we'll look into the ways we enact it. Maybe we pretend to agree with our employer because we worry we'll lose our job if we don't. Or it might be that we want to seem self-assured and independent even when we feel insecure and lonely. Whatever the case, it's important to make sense of the masks we sometimes wear in order not to be rejected. Additionally, we'll spend time considering our key contexts—that is, the places, situations, groups, and networks where we most heavily invest our resources, including time and energy. Do we

feel comfortable in these environments? Do they make it easy to live by our values? We'll also begin to identify what I call our thresholds for conformity—that is, how much conformity we can tolerate in a given context versus when it begins to disempower us. Further, our thresholds for conformity often run up against our level of safety to be authentic. We know it's easier to be true to ourselves in some settings than in others. It may be a simple matter of feeling out of place socially, or it may be as serious as mistreatment from a boss. Depending on various factors, not all of us have the same leeway to be ourselves. It's clear, for example, that authenticity is riskier for people with lower social status than for people in positions of authority. Whatever our situation, we are often so caught up in the daily frenzy of work, chores, maintaining relationships, and trying to do and be everything that we rarely pause to take stock of our comfort, our discomfort, our safety, or our lack thereof. Any of us who are navigating our values and identity in the world—that is, all of us—can find renewal in the framework of the middle self.

Since so much of my research has been conducted by examining behavior in the workplace, this book is for employees, but I'm also addressing leaders of all sorts. It's a book for parents who want to promote a culture of support and mutual respect in their homes. It's for people who run volunteer organizations or political groups. In order to lift up individuals and communities, it is critical that we engage our middle selves wisely. My consulting work helps leaders understand the correlation between their own authenticity, their own compromises, and the effectiveness of their leadership—a journey that I, myself, have traveled for years. C-suite execs, stage directors, elementary school principals, and grassroots organizers alike have all asked me the same question: "Is it possible for me to be true to my own values while also making room for others to be true to themselves and shine?" The answer is yes! We'll become versed in embracing authenticity as a group

project and harmonizing with the people around us. When we foster our personal integrity *and help others do the same*, we create the conditions for strong, healthy, and sustainable relationships—an essential facet of the middle self. We need new ways to think about how we interact at work, at home, and in the world at large. *Staying True to You* changes the game. It shows us that we can adjust to different environments and manage our identity thoughtfully when we operate from our middle selves. And it shows leaders how to tackle questions about identity head-on and cultivate a workplace culture that allows employees to bring their true selves to work, bolstering their confidence and their enthusiasm for the job. Any of us, anywhere, can thrive in a middle self when we let our values guide our decision-making. *Staying True to You* offers transformative new insights for maximizing our individuality and our relationships at the same time.

Disrupting Our Own Patterns

It is time to break our ingrained habits of self-suppression and unchecked authenticity.

So if . . .

. . . you've been "going along to get along"

. . . you can't be your true self in a certain context

. . . when you're authentic, people react as if you're too much

. . . you're someone different at work and at home or with friends

. . . your employees seem to shrink in your presence

. . . you sense that you're alienating colleagues or friends when you express yourself

. . . you aren't living your values

. . . being authentic might mean you lose out on opportunities

. . . being "real" is starting to feel fake

. . . or the fake you is starting to feel *real*

. . . then you've been experiencing the all-too-human struggle to negotiate the everyday demands of authenticity and conformity. Instead, I want us to balance that tension and move into the middle self.

We don't need to bring our full selves into every setting. Nor do we need to deny who we are to fit into a larger whole. And we don't need to search for a whole new personality to feel real. I want us to move easily between autonomy and interconnection to achieve a tranquil, regulated state. It's entirely possible to free ourselves of both resenting others and stepping on them. That is how we establish peace inside ourselves. When we feel whole and at ease, we will handle almost anything with grace and dignity. And we will take more delight in life.

In this book, I share groundbreaking strategies for protecting our core identities, summoning our values, nurturing our work and personal relationships, and living in integrity and serenity. The twenty-first century is throwing a lot of complexities at us, making it that much more challenging to live in community with one another. The concepts and practices for thriving in the middle equip us to weather those complexities, affording us a strong grasp on who we are in friendships, marriages, mentorships, and any other type of relationship. When we explore our middle selves, we cultivate the self-compassion

and self-trust necessary to take our values seriously. It gives us compassion for other people, so we are less likely to stifle them by imposing our values. This journey even helps us find the people and environments that allow our authenticity to flourish.

Are you ready to meet your middle self?

STAYING
TRUE TO
YOU

1

WHAT WE GET WRONG ABOUT CONFORMITY

*“Hide-and-seek, grown-up style. Wanting to hide.
Needing to be sought. Confused about being found.”*

—Robert Fulghum

I grew up playing hide-and-seek with neighborhood friends in my hometown, Laurelton, in Queens, New York. There was a designated seeker who bore the title “It,” tasked with finding the other players. The seeker would cover their eyes and turn away from the hiders, facing a tree or maybe the wall or stoop of a house, and count to twenty while the others ran and hid. The seeker’s original location was known as “base.” If the seeker found you and you made it back to base before they tagged you, you were safe. The first one tagged by the seeker became It in the next round.

Children around the world play different versions of this game. In Oro, Nigeria, the seeker creates a base by drawing a circle on the ground and stands in the middle of it while counting. As the seeker begins to find the other players, they run from the seeker back to stand inside the circle. Whether it’s a stoop in New York City or a circle on the ground in western Nigeria, *base*

provides safety. The childlike thrill of running from the seeker is soon eclipsed by the satisfaction of getting to base.

Hide-and-seek is a simple but powerful illustration of how people are driven by what the psychologist Abraham Maslow identified as the basic human need for safety. That means we sometimes hide from other people, and other times we seek them out for a variety of safety-related reasons, including to win approval. But it is a constant in all our lives that, just as in hide-and-seek, we run toward safety.

Although I played hide-and-seek regularly and enjoyed running back to base along with my friends, I wasn't actually a big fan of the game. The role of seeker wasn't fun because I didn't particularly like it when everyone hid from me. I experienced anxiety, excitement, and an intense desire to find the others as fast as possible so I would no longer be It! Nor was I an enthusiastic hider, as it gave me an uncomfortable sense of isolation. But I wanted to hang out with my friends, so I conformed to the rules of the game—though not to all its norms. Unlike my peers, I actually wanted to be found. In fact, I would drop clues as to my hiding place, saying, "I'm *not* going to be behind the tree or the house," or giggling loudly once I hid. Of course, by giving those clues, I risked becoming It. And so a good-natured childhood game became a source of a benign internal conflict for a little girl with competing interests—who ultimately just wanted to have fun with her friends. I understand now that providing hints of my location was a way to work around the rules. It helped me deal with the discomfort of conforming to the game. It helped me feel safe.

As I look back through the lens of my current expertise as a behavioral scientist, I recognize that my behaviors were also rooted in another basic human need—the need to belong. Playing hide-and-seek was a way to connect. Contrary to what some people believe, wanting acceptance does not make us weak or needy. In fact, it's quite the opposite. The sense of belonging that is tied to our positive relationships has a critical influence on our health and our overall well-being.

When speaking to audiences today, I often use my experience of hide-and-seek as a metaphor for how we handle conflicting desires. Most of us want to belong to the group, and we gain a sense of belonging when other people “find” us—that is, when they see and understand the personal experiences and perspectives that have shaped us. And yet at the same time, we often hide experiences and perspectives that we think others may view negatively. Hide-and-seek also illuminates the challenge of “finding” others (e.g., colleagues, family members, friends, and significant others) in ways that make them feel understood and seen. Each day, on some level, we contend with a range of interpersonal decisions: to play or not to play, with whom, when, how, and how often!

Similar to the circle in Oro, where the hidere run for safety, we create emotional circles, or boundaries, that delineate our home base or safe place. In our lives, we sometimes limit how much we reveal of our true beliefs and values, our emotional lives, our spirituality, politics, educational background, and socioeconomic status. When the risk is too high—like it was for me as a child, not wanting to miss out on playtime with my friends; like it can seem when we fear losing an important relationship or work opportunity—conformity generally becomes our base. I conformed to the game even though it meant I had to tolerate the isolation of hiding. In order to hold on to people, we might tolerate the discomfort of giving up some of our values. In good ways and bad, compromise is often our default position.

We Conform Early and Often

Think about it. In one way or another, most of us conform daily, with various people in an array of situations and moments in time. We conform in the way we dress, how we present ourselves in meetings and workplace interactions, and in our social behaviors (e.g., do we prefer to hug or to shake hands?). Conformity is often thought of as changing our words

and actions in response to some form of social or institutional influence. However, it can also simply mean following norms that already fit with what we would normally say or do.

It's important to understand that conformity is a natural part of human development that begins in infancy, as cognition gets underway. Even before we can talk, we engage in what scientists call social referencing. Babies and toddlers evaluate how their caregivers and other people around them react to different situations, emulating them when they smile or get upset. They also conform by exemplifying behaviors that get positive reactions, such as attempting to walk independently to draw applause. In the same way, a child may cease doing something when they sense a caregiver's disapproval. We conform to make friends, impress our teachers, satisfy our parents and elders, and more. From childhood onward, we live within and benefit from conformity because it helps us build relationships and get what we want and need. It's a big part of the human social process, and it is amazing how quickly we figure it out!

Most children have strong ideas about . . . everything. Including *how* tasks should be done and by whom. When my daughter was three, she held emphatic opinions about Mommy and Daddy's respective roles in her care, whether it was helping her with her hair, laying out her clothes, or driving her to preschool. Whenever her father tried to comb her hair, she would say in no uncertain terms, "No, Daddy. That's Mommy's job!" Unknowingly, as parents, we had created what scholars call regularities about groups of people, modeling for our daughter that mommies, not daddies, tend to their children's hair. Starting in early childhood, we convert those generalities into rules that shape our perception of right and wrong. We also use regularities to assign traits to different groups of people—i.e., what behaviors and preferences they typify.

In 2016, a team of psychology professors at the University of Michigan illustrated this phenomenon in a series of studies, with the strongest findings among children aged three to four-

teen. The experimenters introduced to the young participants cartoon images of two fictitious groups, the Hibbles and the Glerks, and described the differences between the two groups' preferences when it came to food, music, and toys. Pointing to a variety of images, the researchers would say, "Hibbles only eat these types of berries. Glerks only eat this type of berries. Look, Glerks are eating this type of berry." Their findings showed that when the children observed nonconforming behavior, such as Glerks eating berries that Hibbles typically eat, they disapproved.

The research team also found this negative view of nonconformity across a variety of what experimenters call "conditions." The experimenters assigned the children to one of two conditions—one involving competition and one involving cooperation. Under each condition, the children saw images of Hibbles and Glerks working on teams to build towers out of blocks. The competition condition pitted Hibbles against Glerks, each group striving to construct the tallest tower with an insufficient number of blocks available for both towers to reach the same height. The group that emerged victorious would receive a prize. The researchers found as they'd predicted: The competitive condition reinforced the children's belief that Hibbles and Glerks held different preferences (e.g., associated food, toys, and music), would conform to those group preferences—and further, that they *should* conform to those preferences. In other words, nonconformity was not okay.

In the cooperation condition, the scientists also found a bias toward conformity. In this condition, each team was made up of both Hibbles and Glerks, who joined forces to construct their towers. An ample number of blocks were supplied, ensuring that each group had the resources to build a tall structure. Both groups received prizes to reward their collective effort. Their collaboration fostered a sense of unity and, therefore, the experimenters predicted the possibility that the children would view it as acceptable for one group to conform to the norms of the other group. Yet the study participants still

viewed Glerks and Hibbles as very different from one another, with disparate preferences and behaviors—and they still saw nonconformity to those preferences and behaviors as a bad thing. In other words, they believed Glerks should stick to Glerk norms and Hibbles to theirs, even when the two groups teamed up.

As we develop into adulthood, we knowingly or unknowingly assume certain norms about different groups of people, and more generally, we embrace the belief that it's best to follow the status quo. At our jobs and in other important environments, we heed a wide range of established practices, from appropriate locations for meetings to what time family members arrive for holiday dinners. Every day, we go about conforming to how things are done. And indeed, following norms is often the best course of action. Scholars define norms as agreed-upon standards for behaviors that help us function well in the world around us. Norms, structures, formalities, and informalities facilitate our ability to interact at work, in families, and at the grocery store. I love pajamas, but wearing business attire to an important meeting does not compromise my value system (though it might compromise my comfort). More broadly, adherence to society's rules and structures is the basis for maintaining order, and for cultural, technological, and economic advancement. To perform our jobs, we learn to use technologies and their attendant protocols. We follow linguistic rules and patterns to speak with one another. We write songs according to chord progressions based on music theory. We apply standard scientific methods when conducting experiments. These and many other intuitive acts of conformity are constructive.

What We Misunderstand About Conformity

Despite the fact that we all conform in beneficial ways, conformity consistently gets an unequivocal bad rap. But the truth is, our aversion to conformity is not always based on actual

lived experience. Instead, it's often rooted in the notion that conforming requires the suppression of our true selves. In fact, conformity in and of itself has never been the problem.

Whether conformity is positive or negative is determined by various factors, including our immediate surroundings. Accordingly, it's probably most helpful to see conformity as *neutral*. I like to use the metaphor of a kitchen sponge: When a sponge absorbs water, it becomes full while remaining basically the same in appearance. Whereas when that same sponge absorbs spilled fruit punch, it takes on the color of that liquid. Like a sponge, when we conform, we absorb what's around us, for better or for worse. In a given situation, compromising can be healthy or unhealthy depending on how, when, and to what degree each of us personally engages in it. Honoring who we really are begins with debunking the idea that conformity is always an inferior choice. If we can understand how it has worked for us since our earliest years, we will understand how we can compromise in courageous, positive ways that stay true to our core values.

Brigadier General Allison A. Hickey was part of the first coed class of cadets to enroll in the US Air Force Academy in 1976, after President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-106, which allowed women to attend all-male military academies. Beginning at the academy and continuing throughout her career, she was not only one of the first women to pass career-related hurdles in the military—she also had to prove herself and her abilities again and again, beyond all reasonable expectations.

When the Air Force allowed women to become aviators, Hickey was stationed at the Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota. There, she encountered widespread concern regarding women's physical competence and strength, particularly during combat or any emergency that called for immediate action. These concerns prompted the development of policies such as the Combat Exclusion Policy that restricted women from combat and limited the number of women to one

placement per aircrew. This policy remained until 2013, when the US Department of Defense announced plans to revoke it.

As with all pilots, Hickey fulfilled the requirements to demonstrate she had the knowledge, muscle, and manual agility to land a plane during engine and hydraulic power failure. When that happens, power assistance is lost. The aircraft's foot-operated rudder pedals stiffen and become very difficult to maneuver, forcing the pilot to stand on them to make them move. But even though Hickey had the same training, experience, and credentials as her male peers, every new copilot wanted her to show them she could stand on the rudders to operate them. She took it in stride, saying, "If standing on that rudder time and time again . . . helped them make the leap and the change to know that I could fly that airplane . . . I could stand on the rudder all day long."

In my leadership courses, I discuss Hickey's choice to conform to inequitable job demands, and it always sparks a lively discussion: Was her decision constructive, or did it repress her identity and generally set women back? Hickey's experience illustrates the complexity of motives—her own and those of her fellow pilots. Her copilots would have said they wanted to make sure the flight was safe. However, given that she had already shown herself to be capable and that they didn't ask the same of her male peers, it was plainly unnecessary to make her do it again. Hickey devoted time and energy to proving and re-proving her capability. Her copilots' improper motives aside, her own motive was to create change and blaze a new pathway for women. She took the hits, choosing to conform in the face of blatantly prejudicial and unfair treatment. She looked beyond the personal offense to the larger impact of her actions and allowed that to guide her. Though she opted for conformity, in so doing, she empowered herself as a change agent in the military—and so reinforced her own authenticity.

Hickey's story highlights the very personal nature of our decisions around conformity. There have been times in my life

when I've chosen to conform to the status quo for the "greater good" only to realize the greater good wasn't actually good for me. In those cases, I compromised too much of myself and was left feeling disempowered. But other times, I've *resisted through conformity*, which I believe is a good way to describe Hickey's stance. She resisted the idea that women could not do the job by showing that they could—and she felt that this greater good was also good for her personally.

The Dark Side of Conformity

Remember that bad rap I mentioned earlier? It's not totally off base—sometimes, conformity is the suboptimal choice. I'm sure we all keenly remember times we have relinquished our personal integrity and well-being, whether it was in the workplace, in our families, in our friendships, or in our romantic relationships. Those moments and dynamics left us feeling diminished. Our resulting frustration tends to overshadow times when conformity has aligned with our values. When we make concessions out of insecurity or fear, we hinder our agency and cause ourselves stress and confusion. For example, when we succumb to social pressure and do something that goes against our better judgment, we feel defeated. Moreover, in so doing, we are signaling to others that we agree with them. Yet deep down inside, we don't agree. We are lying to the other party, and sometimes also to ourselves. The precarity of that position begins to erode the relationship. It's hard to course correct once we've headed down a false path, and it can only be sustained for so long. Most such dynamics lead to dissatisfaction and disappointment—our own and others. It is, therefore, critical to consider the "why" regarding our decisions to conform.

At work, for instance, we often submit to rules, policies, and norms when we believe we'll miss out on opportunities for

advancement, or even lose our jobs, if we don't compromise. If our employer attempts to enforce conformity by manipulating and controlling people and events, we will be disempowered. When the pandemic began to subside in 2021 and 2022, some organizations required their employees to come back to work in person full-time after many months of working from home. It seemed to suggest they did not believe their employees would be effective or efficient if they didn't come back to the workplace. It was a dramatic shift from what had become a comfortable new normal. What's more, many of these employers didn't adequately justify their return-to-work policies. As a result, their employees felt they were not trusted. Many viewed the demand as antiquated. Instead of increasing employee engagement, it caused some people to feel dissatisfied with their jobs.

At what point is conformity such an affront to our values and overall sense of authenticity that it becomes unnavigable? Put another way, when does our conformity cause us to swim into polluted waters? Controlling, volatile, or otherwise dysfunctional environments prevent us and others from thriving. They are containers of heightened negativity and confusion that destabilize us, stymieing our rapport with others. We swim in polluted water when we conform to these situations and have to work (or live) with people who actively promote dysfunction.

When I interview students and executives in my studies of the potential dangers of conformity, many say, "I've been there," and share their experiences in toxic workplaces. We use this term to describe workplaces that promote, among other things, fear, exclusion, hostility, and conflict. I'll give the example of a friend whom I'll call Sofia.

She spent a decade as an editor at a world-class magazine with a huge audience, and in many ways she loved it. It was exciting to be part of a publication famous for its rigorous and entertaining long-form articles about culture and politics. She was getting top-notch training and delighted in the work—

lighting upon a great story, finding the right writer for it, weighing in on the layout and the photographs. The magazine received regular plaudits and won many awards, including for some of the articles Sofia commissioned. Her colleagues were smart, she made some good friends, and she had a close relationship with her immediate boss. Often, there was a real sense of camaraderie and support. And she was leading what felt like a “big” life of star-studded parties, industry events, and awards ceremonies.

But when mistakes happened—maybe a crucial half a paragraph somehow got left out of a published article, or one of their advertisers was frustrated about the placement of their ad—the magazine’s executive editor would get very angry and focus her attention on finding out who had messed up. In her bad temper, she would unload on her deputies, and in turn their stress and agitation trickled down to the rest of the staff. Sofia gave a vivid description of trying to stay out of the executive editor’s searchlight as it swept across the office, looking for the guilty party. Coworkers turned on one another, wanting to escape blame. Sofia would try to hide her anxiety from her direct reports to shield them from the noxious environment, but if they were the ones to make a mistake, she couldn’t always protect them from the higher-up’s wrath. A few times, she tried to raise the subject with her immediate boss, but she’d witnessed him flail in the face of the executive editor’s rage and knew he wouldn’t be able to change things.

For the first five years, the job had been more than worth the toxicity. But after a certain point, Sofia started to resent the unpredictability. Even when things were going well, everyone was half bracing for an explosion. The unstable atmosphere was corrosive. Sofia started to experience ambient anxiety for the first time in her life, and more and more often she found herself keeping her head down at work, hoping to stay out of the line of fire, joining the many bystanders who stayed silent as other people were mistreated. It affected her

home life, too. She was eating a lot of takeout and skipping her daily walk. It was hard to leave her stress at the office, and she would lose her temper with her kids. Ten years in, she'd reached her threshold for conformity (more on this in chapter 6) and decided she couldn't stomach it anymore.

That's how toxic environments operate: Suspicion and hostility from the upper ranks spread over the whole office. One person mistreats someone, who then directs their difficult emotions at another colleague, and on it goes. Further, people's anxiety lingers after destabilizing events. They can't let their guard down even during good times because things could get ugly at any moment. The air of general anxiety means people are constantly walking on eggshells. Toxicity is never confined to one incident or one relationship—it harms everyone in the environment and infects every interaction. Faced with these challenges, people experience lower levels of work engagement. To be sure, some people speak up in an effort to create a healthier workplace (and sometimes they are punished for doing so). But most people suffer in silence. That was certainly the case in Sofia's workplace. And she hated being one of those people.

Sofia left her job for a higher-up position at a less prestigious magazine with a reliably collegial atmosphere. It was like day and night. Her new boss was fair and transparent. Her colleagues never seemed to be on the lookout for danger from above. They represented a huge array of different identities having to do with everything from ethnicity to television preferences—and all of it was welcome. No one seemed left out. Gradually, in this nurturing atmosphere, Sofia recovered in body and spirit. Her mental and physical health improved, as did her relationships with her children. And she found the work extremely stimulating, as she was able to use her experience at the splashier, faster-paced publication to raise the quality of her new one. Sophia was happy to conform to the openhearted culture of her new workplace.

Common Factors That Lead to the Dark Side of Conformity

Since the earliest years of my career, I've been interested in when and why employees outwardly agree with policies and initiatives, participate in related activities, and publicly endorse an organization's values, even when they do not truly believe in or adhere to them. Professors Frances Milliken and Elizabeth Morrison at the Stern School of Business at New York University and I conducted a study on the topic of employee silence. When we interviewed people, we found that they stayed silent about any number of difficulties at work: an assistant whose boss doesn't know the job; a coworker who consistently steps over others to get the best assignments, the most face time with the boss, and the biggest opportunities. The participants in our study had experienced these and many other sorts of toxicity. Again and again, they told us they stayed quiet for fear of damaging essential relationships and being ostracized. They believed that speaking up was not worth the potential trouble it could cause.

As I said in the Introduction, my research has shown that when employees stay silent or go against their values, it's out of fear. That's true in other areas of our lives, too. I firmly believe that many of our actions stem from fear, though we're often unconscious of it. Sometimes the fear is warranted, if we're in a bad situation with harmful people or dynamics. Other times, we react to something with dread because of frightening past experiences that primed us to be hypervigilant, constantly on the lookout for danger. Of course, there are dangers out there, and we need to be aware of them. But we should endeavor not to default to fear in situations where we're not actually at risk, or where the risk is small. To live in fear is no way to live. It stifles us, leading us to suppress our values and pretend to embrace the values of the work environment or the social setting; it even happens in individual friendships

and marriages. While it's a natural human proclivity, when we are overtaken by fear, it's disempowering—especially when we react by overconforming. That can mean we hide our genuine selves, our needs, our values.

I have a particular interest in the impact of conformity on our well-being. Although the benefits of conforming may include being perceived as “one of the team,” securing alliances or friendships, and even keeping our jobs, conformity in misalignment with our values puts us on a slippery slope toward compromising our personal integrity. When we're afraid, we are more likely to compromise our values. What circumstances place outsize and damaging conformity demands on us?

Over the course of my work, I've perceived two categories of factors that cause us to surrender too many of our beliefs and needs. For simplicity, I refer to these categories as “external factors” and “self-imposed factors.” As we dig into them, we will see how they can overlap and even reinforce each other, so we shouldn't get too caught up in whether any of these variables is strictly external or strictly internal. Rather, we will look at them to identify how and why conformity pressures come our way, be it from external factors, self-imposed ones, or both. It's important to understand how these forces can solidify outlooks and behaviors that thwart our best selves—the version of us that shows up for ourselves and for others.

External Factors: An external factor that leads to destructive conformity consists of anything that places pressure on us to abandon our values and ourselves. Examples include societal norms, stereotypes, institutional (including workplace) policies and norms, as well as threats such as job insecurity, exclusion from social networks, and more.

One day while vacationing with my family and some friends at a resort in the Caribbean, I was sitting on a lounge chair in my swimsuit, working on my laptop. When a white male, sitting just a few feet away, told his child of around ten years old to ask a server for a napkin, the boy immediately walked over to me and politely asked for a napkin. The pan-

icked parents yelled, “No!” The child ran from my lounge chair, past two other white-appearing hotel guests lying on lounge chairs in their bathing suits, and began to approach my friend, whose ethnic background is Indian and whose skin is dark brown. The child’s parents’ faces flushed red and they stopped him once again with an even more forceful “NO!”

At this particular resort, the majority of the workers were white appearing. They were busily walking around with trays of food and drinks, wearing identical uniforms that were hard to miss. Still, the child approached the only two brown women at the pool, though we wore swimsuits, were occupied by reading and working, and lay on beach beds just like the ones on which his parents were lying. The child clearly lacked exposure to ethnicities other than white, as well as to environments with men in service positions. That implanted a stereotype in his mind that only women, and especially women of color, had service jobs. Later, I wondered whether I would have given the child a napkin if I’d had one. I may have provided it because he was a child looking for help, but in so doing, I probably would have reinforced the stereotype. My value of being kind (particularly to children) might very well have come into conflict with my desire to be respected as a woman and, more pointedly, as a woman of color.

We can only hope that as people mature, they are less inclined to develop assumptions about groups of people based on their own limited exposure. In the Hibbles and Glerks study, it’s notable that the fourteen-year-old participants were not as critical of counter-normative behavior as were the six-year-olds. Nevertheless, abundant research shows the power of expectations in the form of stereotyping others based on their political affiliation, socioeconomic status, religion, level of education and educational institution affiliation, race, gender, and more. For example, there are widely held stereotypes regarding older workers and their competence. The automatic assumption is that they will settle for less mentally demanding jobs and training opportunities, and also for lower pay.

Where and when have we been stereotyped or been the recipient of fallacious assumptions? And what external expectations went along with those stereotypes? Now let's flip the question around and ask ourselves what expectations we've placed on others based on stereotypes about different groups of people. Bear in mind that we are undertaking this self-discovery process not only to flourish in our own authenticity but also to open up opportunities for other people to do the same. To accomplish this, we must identify where and when we push our assumptions on others, unwittingly putting barriers in their way (more on this later in the chapter).

We can see a different sort of external expectation in the famous Milgram experiment conducted in the 1960s. Stanley Milgram's studies of why and how we defer to authority figures actually caused research participants to inflict pain on others (or to believe they were doing so) at the researchers' direction. The study went like this: People were tasked with pressing a button that would fictitiously inflict an electric shock on a fictional learner (played by an actor) whenever the learner answered a memory question incorrectly. The intensity of the shock increased with every wrong answer.

When the participants heard the learners' fabricated cries of pain, some of them expressed concerns about hurting them. But the study showed that many participants continued to press the button when the experimenter prodded them with "You must continue." When Milgram conducted these studies, there was still enormous pressure in American culture to respect authority and follow the rules. That was true even in the face of resistance among the younger generation, particularly "hippies," who were questioning authority at the height of both the Cold War and the civil rights movement. The majority of people had internalized society's conformity demands and still adhered to the norms. If the Milgram study were conducted again fifty years later, would we see different results?

In 2006, Professor Jerry M. Burger at Santa Clara University was interested in addressing this question. In Burger's

study, when the participants pressed the shock generator, which they were told had a voltage of 150 watts, they could hear the learner complain about the pain. They were also told that the learner could request to leave the study. Notably, Burger's studies included women and white and nonwhite participants, unlike Milgram's studies, which had looked exclusively at white male subjects. Burger found that the participants followed the directions at a rate similar to the participants in Milgram's study. Burger's findings thus replicated Milgram's: Behaviorally, participants leaned toward conformity when faced with an authority figure's expectations—probably the most powerful external pressure there is.

Conformity expectations don't arise just between individuals and groups of people. They also show up in policies that affect different segments of society in disparate ways. These policies become institutional forces that perpetuate differential treatment, whether positive or negative. For instance, social scientist Erin Reid's research found that in some work cultures, men feel tremendous pressure to conform to expectations that they will prioritize work over family. Otherwise, they risk judgment or stigmatization from their managers. The tension between their professional and personal responsibilities persists because the assumption remains that all men will naturally prioritize work over family and therefore do not need benefits like extended parental leave. When men conform to this stereotype, more pressure is placed on the mother, and it ends up disempowering both parents. Furthermore, if fathers continue to accept these assumptions, organizations will have little impetus for altering their policies—thereby reinforcing the status quo.

Another example of external expectations has gotten attention in recent years: the perceived correlation between hairstyles and professionalism. Drs. Christy Zhou Koval and Ashleigh Shelby Rosette found in their research that black women applicants are less likely to receive an interview invitation when they wear natural hairstyles such as braids, locs,

and twists. This is an age-old phenomenon. Pressures to assimilate with certain beauty norms have caused many black women to alter the texture of their hair with chemicals and heat to gain access to professional opportunities. As an aside, it is important to note that not all black women who choose straight hairstyles are doing so to comply with Eurocentric standards. Rather, it is simply a preference. In those instances, wearing straight hair is being authentic. But when that's not someone's preference, there is pressure to conform.

In some cases, our choice to conform comes so naturally, due to our lack of exposure to other possibilities, that we don't even realize we're choosing it. Unconscious conformity is quite pervasive, and it can be harmful. I often see it among young people new to the workforce who are unfortunate enough to end up in a poisonous workplace. Uncertain about how to conduct themselves professionally, many entry-level workers unknowingly (and sometimes knowingly, too) absorb the culture of the place, taking cues from their supervisors and peers. My friend's son, Robert, worked himself to the bone at a small, hard-driving investment fund where the custom was to stay late into the night and come in on weekends. Eager to make a good impression and keep his job, he spent so much of his life working that he stopped taking care of himself physically and mentally. He rarely saw friends or family and stopped riding his bike. Robert became so under-resourced that he started having panic attacks. After about a year, at his parents' urging, he left the firm. It was not soon enough—he had an emotional crash, crawled into his childhood bed, and spent a couple of weeks recuperating. He started to process his experience, gaining clarity about the inhumane level of pressure at the investment fund—an external factor—and how he'd succumbed without even realizing it. He thought long and hard about what kind of place he wanted to work and what kind of life he wanted to lead. What had been unconscious became conscious. He soon landed at a midsize bank with a well-established culture of reasonable work hours and an emphasis on em-

ployee satisfaction. Robert knew he would never compromise so much of himself again. Once we understand that we are constantly making the choice to conform or not conform to external factors, we free ourselves to make decisions that encourage our well-being.

Self-Imposed Factors: In addition to expectations imposed from the outside, we often impose expectations on ourselves. There's a fine line between external and self-imposed expectations, and they can operate in tandem. In fact, external expectations from society, family, and friends often lead us to impose conformity demands on ourselves. For instance, when it comes to conforming to what we believe are the norms within our own identity category—political affiliation, social network, gender, race, religion, leadership role, and so on—we'll tell ourselves, *I am a [insert identity group], so I'm supposed to say this and do that*. Certainly, these self-imposed conformity expectations are sometimes beneficial. Organizational leaders, for instance, have to be wise about how they present themselves to employees, versus board members, versus clients. A leader's role requires a certain level of conformity to expectations in order to be effective with these different stakeholders. As Whole Foods CEO John Mackey noted: "So, being authentic is not necessarily an easy thing to do. And I just try to be authentic and careful. Meaning—context, who am I talking to?" Similarly, parents modify their behavior around their children to set a useful example.

Nonetheless, it's easy to take self-imposed conformity too far, limiting ourselves. Over the years, I have often found this to be the case among my students. It shows up with particular frequency when I assign them "The Reflected Best Self" exercise, which requires participants to garner feedback from co-workers regarding their strengths, and only their strengths. When I assign it to undergraduates, most of whom are not yet employed, I expand the feedback pool to include close friends, family members, teammates in their sport, or members of their clubs. Whether one is a full-fledged adult with many working

years behind them, a teenager, or a younger adult, it is challenging to focus exclusively on strengths without giving some attention to growth areas. What's most interesting is how generalities associated with gender, culture, and nationality come through almost every time I give this assignment.

One of the most memorable quotes came from a group of French students as they talked about their parents and the general parenting style in France. Part jokingly and part sincerely, they raised concerns about approaching their parents for feedback. One of them said, "Professor, we are French! Our parents won't focus exclusively on strengths." They expected their parents to emphasize opportunities for development rather than strengths, and most (if not all) were pleasantly surprised by their parents' ability to follow the assignment. On a heavier note, I've found that many of my female students, in many countries around the globe, self-impose the gender norm that women should be humble. When doing this assignment, they downplayed other people's descriptions of their strengths and added statements on ways they could improve upon them versus ways they could build upon them. It's clear that expectations deriving from gender norms constrain girls' freedom to claim their strengths and take credit for a job well done.

The power of internalized expectations is glaringly evident in the results of Professor Philip Zimbardo's notorious mock prison experiments at Stanford University in 1970. Male students signed up to play the role of either prisoner or prison guard over a two-week period for fifteen dollars a day. At the start, the study introduced an element of realism, with actual Palo Alto police officers "arresting" the "prisoners" from their homes. The officers took them to the basement of the psychology department, where Zimbardo and his research team had built a fake prison. Many of the "guards" so deeply internalized their roles that they took the verisimilitude to an extreme via a series of threats and punishments—confiscating mattresses, forcing prisoners to clean toilets with their bare hands, and so on. Meanwhile, some of the prisoners passively accepted

their role, but several rebelled, leading to fervid abuse from the guards. The psychological distress caused some of the prisoners to quit, whereas all the guards remained. The study descended into mayhem and Zimbardo ended it after five days.

Some argue that the experiment evoked extreme behaviors that don't reflect how we act in our day-to-day interactions with people. Others, including Zimbardo, say that the behaviors reflect what Hannah Arendt called the banality of evil, and what others call the Lucifer effect, wherein humankind's cruelty emerges under the right conditions. Scholars have connected the findings from the prison studies to the Holocaust, enslavement, and the detainment of war prisoners. And still another set of researchers say that the behavior cannot be explained simply by the circumstances, nor merely as a banal instinct, but rather by the demands we put upon ourselves to conform. In essence, this body of research underscores the notion that people have a natural inclination toward conformity that is sometimes self-imposed.

In light of this human proclivity, can we identify any of our own trends, i.e., when and where we self-impose submission to norms? No judgment here. This book is filled with opportunities to reflect. And remember, we aren't swimming alone in a sea of self-reflections without solutions. We're all in it together, reckoning with how to connect with ourselves and others. Stay on the journey—it will be worth it!

Enforcing Conformity in the Workplace

I'm aware that even the most toxic workplaces don't come close to the conditions fabricated in Zimbardo's prison experiment. But the findings can be eye-opening for leaders in all sorts of organizations. Those of us who find ourselves shaping the culture of our workplace can look to that experiment to shed light on the atmosphere we've created. It's crucial to understand what conformity expectations we bring to our leadership

approach, and the effects those expectations can have on our employees' motivation. Sometimes we exert so much pressure to compromise that people feel under threat. Any number of things might be on the line—job, health, legitimacy, money, a relationship. The sense of threat can extend to values, beliefs, or rights. As leaders, we have the potential to prevent our employees, students, children, church members, and so on from getting what they need or want. We might even cause them harm.

It's important to remember that although we may be in a position of power now, we haven't always been in that kind of role. In order to put ourselves in our employees'/children's/students' shoes, we should think back to the time before we assumed our leadership position, and what pressures and threats we might have endured ourselves. Our perception of threat is shaped by external factors—what we have seen others experience, beliefs passed on from people close to us, our personal experiences and inclinations. All these forces shape our perspective. Do we believe nonconformity will threaten our ability to achieve our objectives or be included in a group? We feel the heat of the threat when we are powerless to reduce or eliminate it. The greater the intensity of the threat, the more we risk the integrity of our values and identity.

In the workplace, leaders must be aware that it's not uncommon for people to feel out of step with the organization's values or culture. There are various types of person-organization value misalignment, ranging from a company's stance (or the lack thereof) on social justice issues to the best way to enact major layoffs. We might have no idea that our employees feel constrained. The "threat" could be the fear of missing out on a project or a promotion. In extreme cases, people fear they could lose their jobs if they fall out of our favor for speaking up, so they stay silent. And they might take it even further, signaling that they agree with the predominant values and norms in the workplaces, even when they wholly

disagree with them. They suppress the personal values, views, and other aspects of themselves they believe will be rejected. And hiding their real selves hinders their ability to thrive at work.

Dan, a colleague from my banking days, shared with me his feelings about a reorganization process that required him to lay off 10 percent of the people in his unit. Dan had been an employee of the company for close to thirty years and took pride in its “people-first” values, which emphasized what he considered a family-oriented culture with a strong commitment to investing in the employees’ potential. He completely understood the company’s need to cut costs during a time of financial difficulty, but he was instructed to announce the layoffs in a way that felt cold and inconsistent with values he’d embraced in his leadership style. To his mind, the announcement did not convey proper concern for the future of the employees who were about to be laid off, nor were there any employee-centered initiatives to address the insecurities and loss during and after the layoffs. “During that time, I felt like I was living a lie. I didn’t agree with any of it, but I had a job to do, so I went along and supported the way forward. No one really knew that I was struggling inside, but speaking up about it would have only damaged my future. There was no room for opposing voices.”

Dan’s story captures the experience of many of my interview participants when they’ve diverged from their organization’s path. As with Dan, sometimes the divergence happens when the organization no longer lives up to its stated values. It can also occur as a result of changes in our personal lives, as with new childcare responsibilities. Or it could be that, however high we may have risen in the organization, we never fully fit due to our age, religion, race, sexual orientation, or other parts of our identity. This is especially impactful when a worker does not match the identities of the most respected and successful people in the organization—in those cases, whether

we are the employee or the employer, we have to take care to protect ourselves and the people around us.

Some people feel under threat when they express their identity in the workplace, such as when they wear attire that reflects their religion or culture. They fear it might cause others to view them as too radical or divergent. Amid the heightening tensions over Gaza in 2024 and 2025, many Jewish people worried about reprisal for wearing the Star of David necklace, while many individuals of Palestinian descent felt their perspectives were silenced. Research has shown that these sorts of tensions can affect workplace outcomes. For example, during job interview processes, Muslim women who wear the hijab are less likely to receive an invitation for a second round of interviews. People who do not drink alcoholic beverages and choose not to use profanity might worry they'll be viewed as too prudish, weak, or unsavvy to deal with clients or conflicts successfully. For some people, sharing their true views about sustainability, social justice, politics, or their ethnicity could cause them to be ostracized if their opinions are not in line with those of the majority. The decision to share a perspective potentially brings to the forefront negative feelings and stereotypes that can put their professional image at risk. These concerns cause many employees to cautiously select how much of their "true selves" to bring to work. Dr. Rachel Arnett, Serenity Lee, and I found in our research that this juggle of managing one's identity is very exhausting.

As leaders, we can ask ourselves if any of our employees feel under threat because of their identity. If the answer is yes, does our leadership (or lack thereof) contribute to their struggle? Indeed, it's necessary for leaders to ask ourselves numerous hard questions: Are our policies and expectations empowering employees to better serve their clients, or disempowering them so they can't perform their work well? Are we requiring people to conform to certain social and professional norms? If so, is it strengthening workplace relationships? Or is it making some people feel on the outside of things? On the home front, are

our family relationships genuinely cooperative and respectful, or are people performing and hiding behind facades? If we make unreasonable conformity demands, it disempowers and alienates those for whom we're responsible. When people hide parts of themselves or go along with the group when they don't actually agree, it gets in the way of the interdependence and morale necessary for an organization, a family, or any type of group to function well. Leaders of all kinds must be mindful of these dynamics and take an active role in shaping them. By interrogating our behaviors and our motives, we'll push ourselves to consider what we can do not just to improve difficult situations and relationships but also to preempt the same kind of difficulties in the future.

When We Create Facades at Work

No matter the reason we conform, when we do so, it can jeopardize our sense of who we really are. Think back to the hide-and-seek metaphor, with base as the safe place where players can run to avoid being tagged and becoming It. Staying home from work, being silent, and withdrawing are some common ways we try to get back to base. It's true that those approaches can sometimes protect us from harmful people or malignant office cultures. However, in other ways, they're enervating and even self-destructive. That's because, unlike home base in hide-and-seek, which is truly safe and protective, repressing ourselves gives us only a semblance of safety, which is temporary and unsustainable. I began my academic career studying this type of self-suppression. One of its most insidious forms is the phenomenon wherein we hide behind what I call facades of conformity—that is, when we pretend to agree with other people, and maybe even participate in things we don't believe in.

I've spoken with innumerable employees whose perspectives, identities, or backgrounds differ from those of the majority

in their organizations. Many of them told me that, as they grapple with the conformity requirements of their workplaces, they create facades by *demonstrating* alignment with those requirements. Often, they carefully calibrate the degree to which they'll perform conformity. It could be as small as a head nod to signal agreement during a meeting that is promoting values and perspectives that do not reflect their own.

When I was in banking, as a black woman, only one or two people in senior roles looked like me. The models for success were almost all white men with "winning" personalities. The facades I developed included pretending to be interested in topics of little interest to me (I learned a lot about sports in those years!), maintaining straight hair so I'd be perceived as professional, and avoiding political conversations related to race. Additionally, as a woman, I shied away from conversations about building a family, so as not to be overlooked for promotions and other opportunities. All of that to downplay the differences I brought into the work environment to avoid stirring up people's stereotypes about my race and gender. My presence alone created enough of a spotlight. I frequently got double takes when I entered meetings with customers or senior people who had not expected someone who looked like me to be in the room, let alone running a financial center.

Age is another factor that can spur us to erect facades of conformity on the job. I've found in my research with Professors Sung Soo Kim and Young Ho Song that younger workers are more inclined to suppress their values and perspectives than are older workers, who are generally more established in their careers. This finding contradicts the common beliefs that Millennials and Gen Z-ers are outspoken about social issues even at the expense of their careers. Our research showed that younger workers are more concerned than older ones about garnering resources and developing relationships that will help them progress in their careers, and they create facades accordingly. Our findings suggest that as Millennials and Gen Z-ers gain experience and greater security, they'll

create fewer facades and feel free to bring more of themselves to work.

The conflict between protecting our authentic selves from compromise while conforming to the norms for career success is stressful, to say the least. Beyond my own experiences, my research over two decades has consistently shown that emotional exhaustion and anxiety are leading outcomes of suppressing our personal values and perspectives at work and going along with what the organization considers acceptable. And, of course, we might put up facades in any area of our lives, not just at work.

In this book, we'll learn to manage the inner conflicts that induce us to hide behind pretenses. We'll figure out how to preempt the stress and debility that usually precipitate facade creation and other unhealthy ways we compromise. Conformity doesn't have to mean we suppress ourselves or let others suppress us. We can decide when to cede ground to people and when to claim our space. We'll learn when, where, and how to conform in healthy, intentional, and fruitful ways. I, for one, have found that this way of reframing compromise in a positive light is a great relief. I will show you how to adopt this mindset, and together, we'll practice approaching conformity in a way that nourishes our connections with other people, makes room for their concerns, and brings us and others a sense of belonging. We'll learn to live in community without hiding our real selves. We are interdependent beings—we need each other to survive and, beyond that, to flourish.

Key Takeaways

- Conformity is instinctive from infancy, to keep us safe, build relationships, and adapt to new situations.
- Conformity in adulthood is neither always good nor always bad. It depends on the situation and the cause.

- The major causes of harmful conformity are external influences, internal storylines, and perceptions of threat.
- We can learn to marshal conformity in various ways and situations, so we are not suppressing too much of ourselves.
- We can also use conformity for our own and others' enrichment and advancement.

Take a Beat

This chapter may have prompted memories of your own experiences. Here, you can take the opportunity to reflect upon what helps and what hinders your ability to thrive in your professional and personal relationships, including the relationship you have with yourself. There's space for this sort of self-reflection at the end of every chapter. Your continued note-taking and journaling will help you keep track of new insights. Feel free to take a moment and jot down a few thoughts.

Self-Reflection and Thoughts for the Future

2

WHAT WE GET WRONG ABOUT AUTHENTICITY

"I'm taking my talent to Miami."

—LeBron James

Like a bolt of lightning emanating from the stage of the Boys and Girls Club in Greenwich, Connecticut, on July 8, 2010, LeBron James's announcement reverberated with a force unheard of in the history of the NCAA or NBA. He was leaving the Cleveland Cavaliers and joining the Miami Heat. Seven years earlier, he'd signed a \$12 million contract with the Cavaliers and soon became the youngest recipient of the NBA Rookie of the Year Award, at nineteen years old. Corporate endorsements from Nike and others came rolling in. He built a remarkable career, based on his love for the game and core value of excellence: "Playing the game of basketball is what I love to do at the highest level." His years with the Cavaliers, from 2003 to 2010, were nothing short of extraordinary. James achieved remarkable feats, leading his team to numerous victories and solidifying his status as an icon. As his contract neared its end, he was an unrestricted free agent, with the power to select his next team. The days leading up to his decision ignited speculation as to whether he would stay in Cleveland—because