



Uncovering culture

A call to action for leaders



"Early in my academic career I was warned not to write about anything that touched on personal characteristics, such as my Asian American or gay identities. Unfortunately, race and sexual orientation were the topics I most wanted to pursue. Yet because I was untenured, I initially took this advice. I ultimately decided that I would rather risk not getting tenure as my true self than get tenure presenting a false one. However, I still look back on those early years with regret that I wasted time in avoiding the topics of greatest interest to me."

— *Kenji*

"I started my career in a 'buttoned-up' corporate environment, and I wasn't sure how my colleagues would feel about my sexual orientation. While I never pretended to be straight, I nonetheless tried to deepen my voice, downplayed any hobbies or interests that seemed 'too gay,' and rarely talked about my partner or invited him to work functions."

— *David*

"As a second-generation Haitian American, I was always very conscious of the differences between growing up in a Caribbean household and an African American one. Our food, our language, our traditions. Whenever there were conversations about 'our' culture, I avoided mentioning anything I thought might be perceived as different and therefore require explanation. I didn't want to answer the inevitable questions on when and how my parents came to the US, where I was born, what languages I speak, or respond to stereotypes about our culture and religions. Whatever my colleagues' preconceptions about Haiti and Haitians, I didn't want them associating those thoughts with me, or to stand out for anything other than my work."

— *Joanne*

"As a working mom, I always worried that I did not 'fit the mold' of what a high performer looks like. Until recently, my age and my caregiving responsibilities were topics that I carefully measured in the workplace. In an effort to not be seen as 'too old' for a role, I actively avoided any conversation that might reveal my age, the year I graduated from school, and even my husband's age. As the mom of two sons, I never wanted to be seen as not fully committed to my career or unable to travel for an assignment, so when they were little, I didn't have pictures of my family on my desk or share stories about my children."

— *Heather*

"The intersections of my identities as a Muslim Pakistani woman profoundly inform who I am, how I show up, and the work that I do. And while I am now able to honor and not hide these parts of me, I have since childhood learned to successfully navigate the complex web of stereotypes and misconceptions that would 'other' me in certain spaces. Early on, I quickly learned that professional success required ensuring that the way I dress or speak or act feel familiar and not foreign, and that my ability to minimize difference and present myself in ways that defied those prejudices would be rewarded."

— *Sameen*

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A covering culture

What pressure might your organization impose on people to minimize their identities? What does it mean for an organization when workers spend so much energy managing their identities alongside their job responsibilities?

This report opened with examples of how the authors have engaged in behavior called “covering.” **The term covering refers to ways in which individuals downplay known disfavored identities to blend into the mainstream.**¹

In 2013, Deloitte and Professor Kenji Yoshino published a landmark study, [Uncovering Talent](#), to explore covering within corporate America. The study found, based on survey data, that covering imposed substantial costs on organizations and employees.

Specifically, 61% of workers across a range of industries reported engaging in covering. Of those workers, 60% to 73% experienced such covering as detrimental to their sense of self. In addition, 53% of survey respondents stated their leaders expected employees to cover. Of those, 50% said this expectation diminished their commitment to the organization.

Ten years after publishing the first study, Deloitte and the Meltzer Center for Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging at NYU School of Law (which Professor Yoshino directs) collaborated again to refresh and expand the covering research. We surveyed 1,269 full- and

part-time adult (18+) workers from companies with a minimum of 500 employees in the US, across five industry categories.

The findings in the 2023 study are sobering. Despite the increased attention paid to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion over the past ten years, covering is ubiquitous and continues to have a significant negative impact. **A decade after the release of our initial research, 60% of US workers report covering at work in the last 12 months.**

The good news is that organizations have an opportunity to address this widespread culture of covering and foster instead what we call an uncovering culture—a workplace environment that not only calls for greater authenticity and belonging, but makes it possible. In this report, we will:

1. Revisit the concept of covering with the benefit of new quantitative and qualitative data;
2. Explore the critical role of leaders in either perpetuating or challenging a culture of covering; and
3. Outline three practical solutions that leaders can implement immediately to help build an uncovering culture.

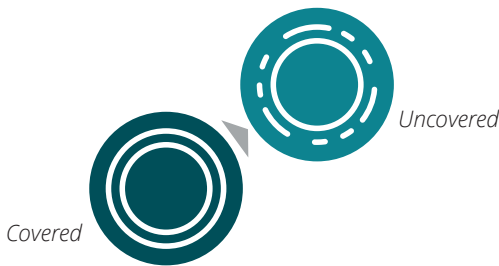
Covering vs. passing

Covering differs from the more familiar term “passing.” When someone is passing, others do not know that the individual belongs to a particular group, because it is not readily apparent to others and the individual passively or actively acts to hide their connection to that group. When someone is “covering,” others know that the individual belongs to the group, because the person is unwilling or unable to hide it. But the individual nonetheless tries to minimize the identity—whether readily apparent or not—in interactions with others. Both passing and covering are forms of forced assimilation, and in some instances, the same behavior could be covering or passing depending on the literacy of the audience.

For example, a gay couple that doesn’t hold hands as they walk down the sidewalk could be passing vis-à-vis strangers who don’t know they are gay, and covering vis-à-vis acquaintances who know they are. Whereas passing only applies to certain kinds of identities, covering is a truly universal phenomenon.

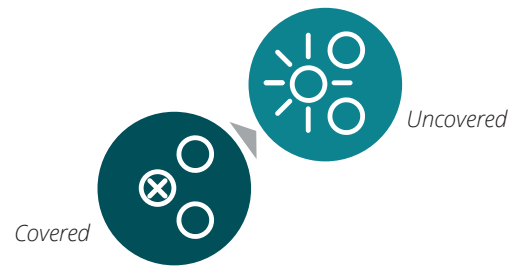
The incidence of covering

Professor Yoshino developed the term covering in his 2006 book *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*,² which describes four axes along which individuals cover:



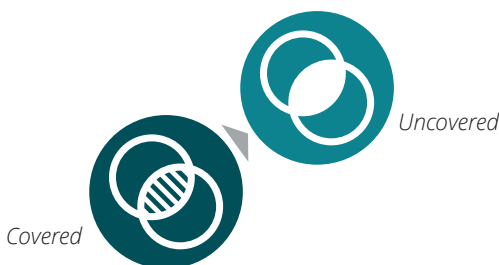
Appearance-based covering

Altering self-presentation—such as grooming, attire, and mannerisms—to blend into the mainstream. For example, a worker who uses a cane to assist with their mobility might not use it in the office to avoid drawing attention to themselves.



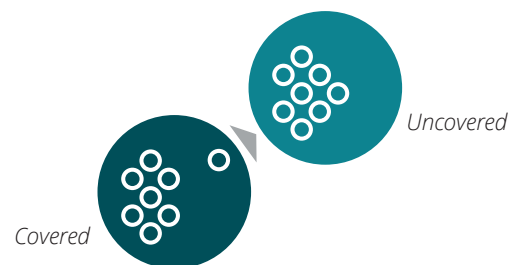
Advocacy-based covering

Not defending or promoting the interests of one's group, such as when a biased or stereotypical comment is made. For example, an immigrant might refrain from challenging a xenophobic joke to avoid being seen as "difficult" or "humorless."



Affiliation-based covering













Minimizing behaviors widely associated with one's identity, often to negate common stereotypes. For example, a mother might avoid talking about her children in the office to signal commitment to work.



Association-based covering

Avoiding contact with other group members. For example, a gay individual might not bring his partner to a work function so as not to draw attention to his sexual orientation.

Our 2023 research confirms that workers continue to cover along all four axes with regard to a plethora of social identities such as those based on age, disability, gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In this study, we additionally surveyed respondents with respect to other identities such as those based on caregiver status, education, immigration status, mental health status, military status, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic status.

Identity	Examples of respondents' covering experiences (with corresponding axis) (2023)	
Age	<i>"Being in my 50s, my field of work is primarily younger. To avoid being thought of as the old guy in the group, I keep up with recent terminology and dress of the younger generation."</i> (Appearance)	
Caregiver status (dependent adult or child)	<i>"I've covered the fact that I'm a working parent at work ... having to spend mindshare on kids (and parents as a caregiver), might give the impression I'm not fully committed to the work at the office. I don't want to miss out on promotions or a chance to lead, so I downplay my roles at home."</i> (Affiliation)	
Disability	<i>"[I] keep [my] hearing aids covered."</i> (Appearance)	
Education	<i>"I try to avoid conversations about education because I'm the only person I work with who doesn't have at least one degree."</i> (Affiliation)	
Gender	<i>"I often cannot express gender equity advocacy at work because clients and some other staff members are very conservative."</i> (Advocacy)	
Immigration status	<i>"I avoid conversations about travel and country because, due to my immigration status, I can't travel outside of the US."</i> (Affiliation)	
Mental health status	<i>"I try to look fairly put-together (pomaded hair, cohesive outfit, etc.) particularly when I'm struggling with my mental health. I don't want to look depressed."</i> (Appearance)	
Military status	<i>"I don't talk about being a veteran even though the company is a veteran-friendly employer. I work with many veterans, and we share stories with each other, but not often with or around non-veterans."</i> (Affiliation)	
Race/Ethnicity	<i>"As a Black woman, I don't want to be seen hanging out with a group of only Black women. It would seem 'too Black' if we were all seen together."</i> (Association)	
Religious affiliation	<i>"I don't talk about [my] feelings related to rising antisemitism."</i> (Advocacy)	
Sexual orientation and gender identity	<i>"I don't bring 'same sex' or agender/nonbinary/genderfluid partners to work functions."</i> (Association)	
Socioeconomic status (current or childhood)	<i>"Oftentimes when coworkers make jokes about immigrants, I refrain from interacting. The same goes for mentioning people who come from low-income households. I have triumphed over those hurdles; however, it is still uncomfortable to hear about at the work setting."</i> (Advocacy)	

While most respondents described covering on their own behalf, some also shared examples of covering on behalf of someone else, which we call covering by proxy:

"This is tough to admit but I do this on multiple fronts. I have one child that is multiracial and outside of work, I am very vocal and supportive of the issues faced by being a minority, but I tend to only listen and not vocally support the same view at work. This is also true for my transgender child. Again, away from work I am very supportive but I fear that sharing my family struggles with this will isolate me and damage my potential for growth at work."

"I don't ever mention the religion of my husband as people always have something to say about it. Or they feel it is ok to make religious jokes that are inappropriate."

"I avoid going to work functions when spouses are invited because I'm in an interracial relationship."

"My husband has bipolar disorder and is on meds, but you cannot talk about that or try to help others; people judge you and stop talking to you once they find out. And if you advocate for someone else, it is the same result."

"Within the last 12 months I worked within a company whose employees were very religious. My religious colleagues always expected a certain social norm from other people (e.g., do not live with another person if you're not married, an unmarried couple should not have children)... While I am not married and do not have kids, I avoided my brother's social situation (he is unmarried and has kids) so that my colleagues would not be judgmental about him and by extension about me, since that could affect my chances for a promotion down the line."

Covering by proxy is an important phenomenon because it underscores how individuals who are not the direct targets of pressure to cover can still be affected by it.

In the words of our respondents: Examples of covering by age

"I have to be more flexible and willing to make more sacrifices to my personal life in order to gain the same respect as other coworkers due to my lack of experience and my age." (Affiliation)



"I work at a company with an older employee base. I look younger than I am, and worry that I will be taken less seriously, so I try to connect more with the older employees than younger." (Association)



"I am an older person and fully support elderly causes, but don't want to speak out for such causes in case it endangers a job opportunity. I have found that any public advocacy for myself is neither safe for social or job opportunities, nor does it advance my standing with others. Mostly, I just don't say anything." (Advocacy)

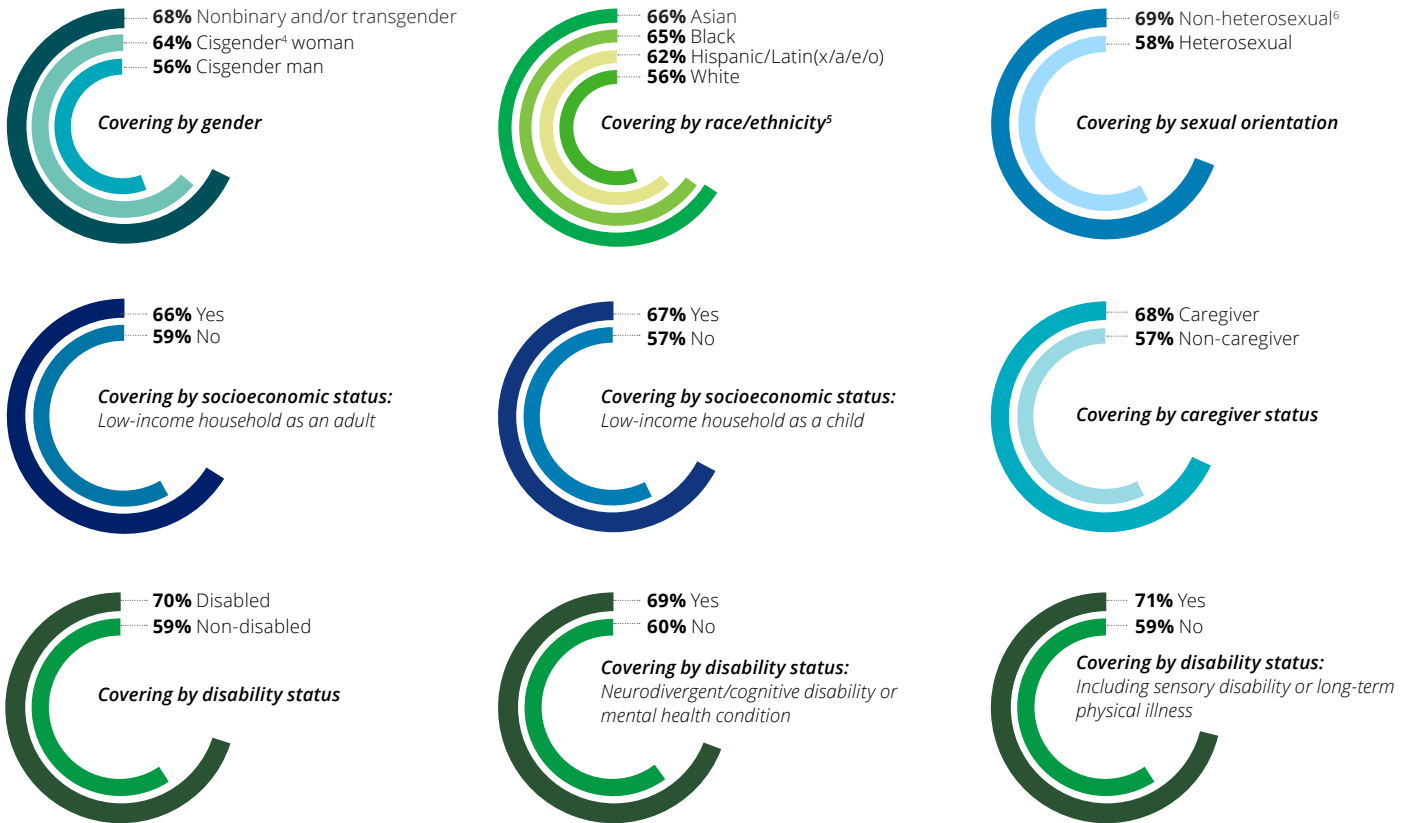


All groups cover, but some cover more

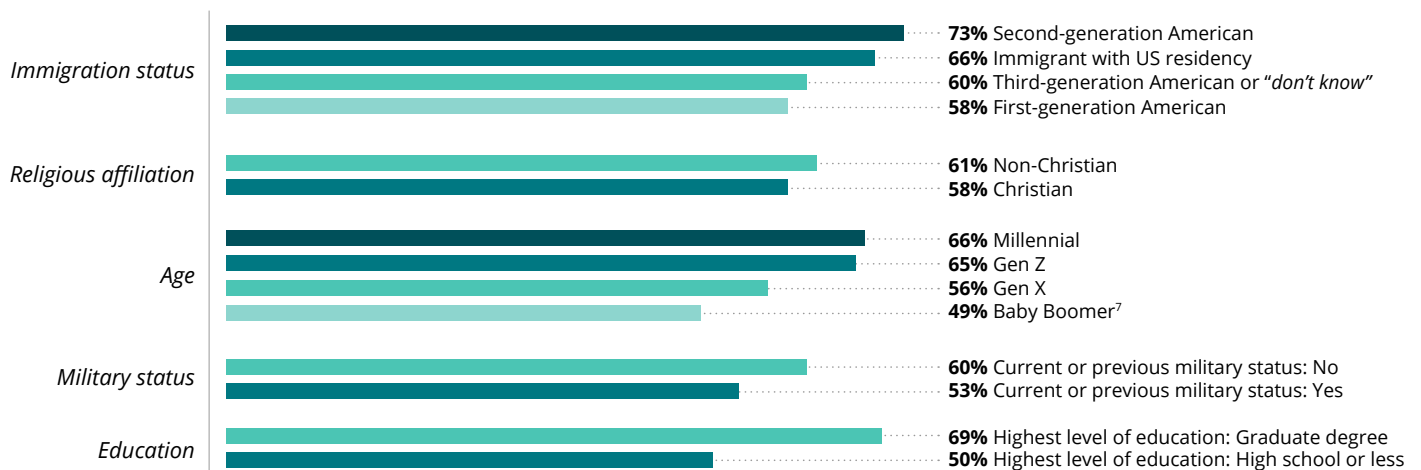
Because covering is, by definition, an attempt to downplay an identity to blend into the mainstream, it is not surprising that survey respondents from non-dominant groups in the workplace generally reported higher rates of covering than those from majority or dominant groups. After all, organizational covering culture often reflects inequities in broader society.

As such, in the qualitative responses, respondents described attempting to assimilate to identities that are, among other characteristics, American, cisgender, heterosexual, male, non-disabled, and White:

Percentage of respondents reporting covering, by identity cohort³



However, in some instances, reported rates of covering did not neatly follow this pattern, as it was unclear which (if any) dominant norm may be driving workers to cover:



The effect of multiple identities

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality”⁸ to refer to the distinctive experiences of individuals who belong to more than one marginalized identity group. Crenshaw gave the example of Black women, who she argued experience not just race discrimination or sex discrimination but also distinctive forms of discrimination specifically as Black women.

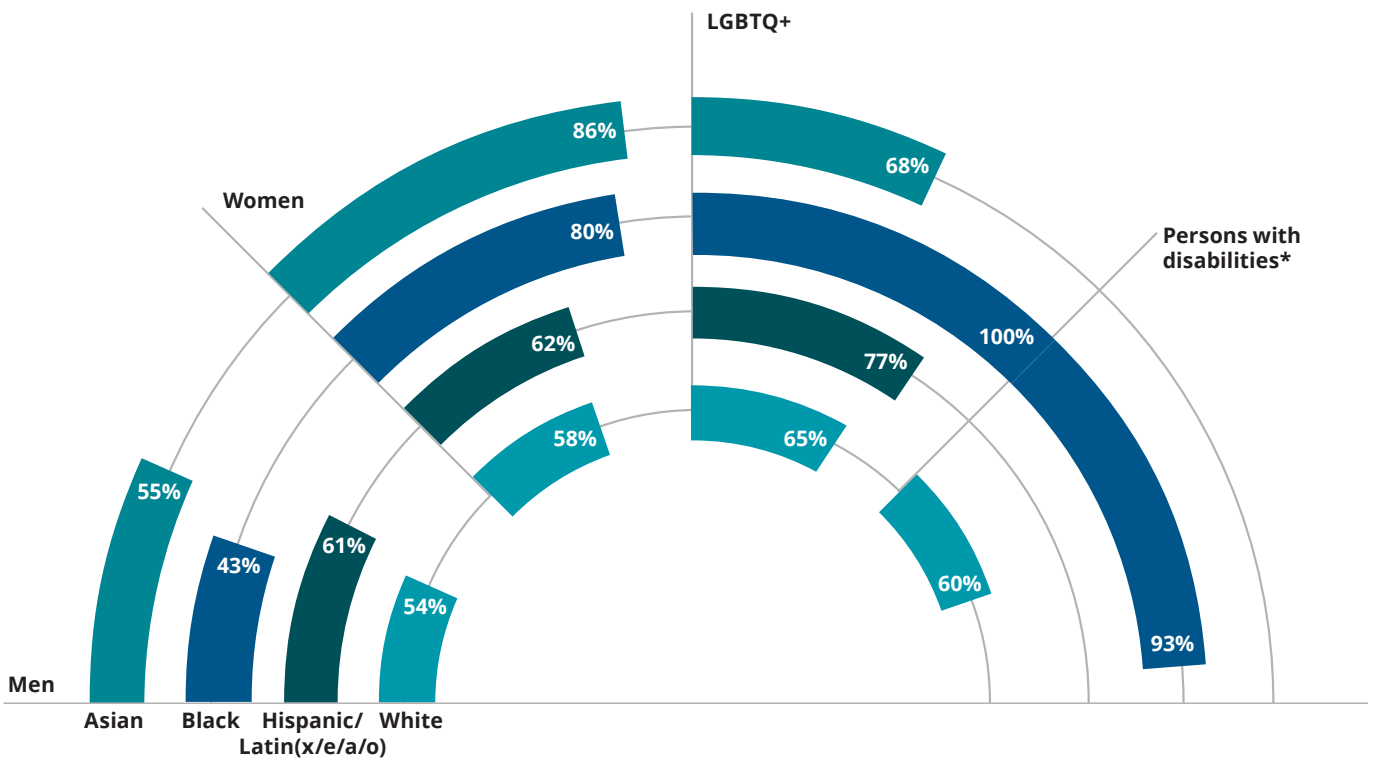
Our survey analyzed the impact of having more than one marginalized identity.⁹ Our results showed that as the number of marginalized identities increased, the more likely respondents were to report that they covered at work in the last year (see figure at right).

Drilling down into how race, gender, LGBTQ+¹⁰ status, and disability intersect, the survey found striking interactions.¹¹ First, all Black LGBTQ+ workers in our sample reported covering, as did 93% of Black workers with a disability. When it came to gender, a much higher proportion of Black and Asian women reported covering compared to Black and Asian men (see below).

Percentage of respondents reporting covering by number of marginalized identities, identified by respondents



Intersectional analyses (covering by race/ethnicity and gender, race/ethnicity and sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity and disability)



* For Asian and Hispanic/Latin(x/e/a/o) cohorts: Sample size n equal to less than 10; results cannot claim to be representative of these cohorts in the general population.

However, our survey also found an anomaly: White men reported covering at a higher rate (54%) than would be expected from an intersectional analysis.

While any explanation is admittedly speculative, the qualitative data suggests reasons for the high reported rate of covering for White men.

Consistent with the 2013 survey, some White men in the 2023 survey reported covering along traditional lines of marginalization in several areas, such as sexual orientation, mental or physical disability, age, and socioeconomic status:

"I refrain from talking about topics that are stereotypically 'gay' such as pop music. I avoid talking about my personal romantic life/history with my coworkers so as to prevent any possible discomfort they might feel about talking about homosexuality."

"I bury a lot of my emotions and act happy so that coworkers are not reminded of my depression."

"Since I'm older in IT, I rarely bring up that I'm 62 and near retirement. I don't want to end up laid off because of ageism."

"I don't want people to know I was poor growing up, so I try not to talk about my childhood at work."

However, what stood out was the extent to which many White men reported covering along historically advantaged social identities:

"I try to avoid associations with the stereotypical, straight, cisgender, male archetype."

"I am White, straight, Christian, and male. I can be fired for anything despite being the most competent employee."

"As a White man, I try to avoid sharing any 'struggles' as they would likely be put down/belittled."

"I avoid discussing religion unless I'm certain the other person shares the same faith, values, and practices. I appear agreeable to others' value statements even if I disagree so as to avoid appearing like a stereotypical middle-aged White male."

In the words of our respondents: Examples of covering by gender

"At times, I don't take lunches just to try and prove that as a young woman, I am dedicated to my job and am a hard worker, and not just a pretty face." (Affiliation)



"[I] don't participate in the women's EIG [Employee Inclusion/Impact Group] to avoid seeming like a man hater or a woman that's not strong enough to succeed on her own skills." (Association)



"I tend to downplay my femininity, even as a cisgender woman, due to working in a male-dominated field (IT and Utilities). I avoid wearing dresses or makeup." (Appearance)



"At work I avoid talking about my weekend and hobbies because I fear being labeled a bigot for being religious. As a White man, I work extra hours in order to put myself in a position to be promoted. My company has many DEI initiatives to focus on promoting every race and gender but me. White Male is the only group that does not get preferential treatment, so I must work harder."

"The public perception of older White persons, especially those that have worked hard and saved their earnings, keeps me from discussing money, economics, etc. with the younger generation."

These responses suggest that some White male respondents minimize or downplay their race, gender, or other historically advantaged characteristics based on a view that such identities are now disfavored.

This perception may emerge from a historical comparison of advantage. White men continue to hold many advantages: the senior leadership ranks of corporate America are still disproportionately White and male relative to that group's share of the population. For instance, in 2023, 74% of the CEOs at the top 50 companies in the Fortune 500 are White men,¹² despite that group comprising just 30% of the US population.¹³ Yet this statistic represents an improvement over earlier decades. In 1980, *all* of the CEOs of the top 50 companies were White men.¹⁴ As organizations work to address root causes of inequities, some White men might experience this decline in advantage as a disadvantage.

The reasons for covering

Workers engage in covering for a variety of reasons, some having to do with broader social or familial dynamics rather than the culture of their workplace. In fact, our survey data reveals that the majority of workers who cover (63%) began to do so before starting their job at the organization.

Nonetheless, many of the top reasons workers gave for covering referred to the judgments or expectations of others around them:

- So that others don't think less of me
- To avoid negative stereotypes
- To avoid the judgment of others
- For the convenience or comfort of others
- To be seen as competent and/or valuable
- To advance in my organization
- To keep my job

Such responses suggest that covering behavior is often a response to covering culture—an environment in which workers feel they would be penalized for displaying greater authenticity. Covering culture consists of a set of covering demands—the pressure imposed on others to downplay aspects of their identity. These demands may be communicated in a variety of ways: explicitly through requests to cover, subtly through penalties for uncovering or rewards for covering, and sometimes through an ambient workplace environment that simply feels unwelcoming toward people who do not conform.

In the words of our respondents: Examples of covering by **socioeconomic status (current or childhood)**

"Growing up in a Third World country in a poor household meant I did not share the toys/TV programs/activities that kids here grew up with. I often will make up that I also played with video games, for example, when I actually did not have access to any. Or that I would also go to after-school activities. In reality, that was not an option for me." (Affiliation)



"[I have] not talked about my low socioeconomic upbringing because I work with high-net-worth people who don't empathize well with the situations of poor people or [who] write off poor people as not willing to pull themselves up." (Affiliation)

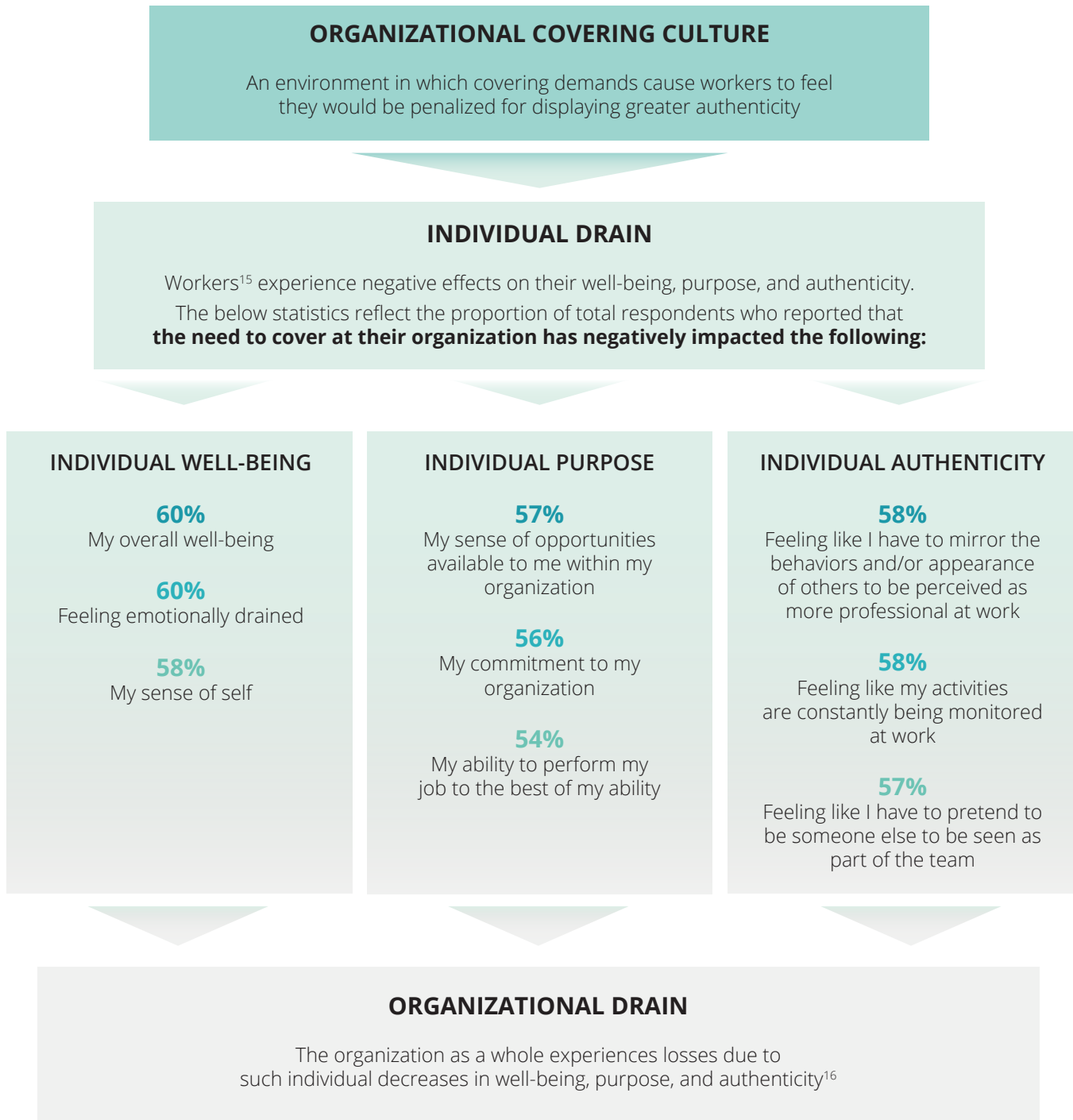


"[I'm] surrounded by people who are much wealthier and more educated, so I ensure I'm dressed well when going into the office." (Appearance)



The costs of covering

A covering culture can have harmful effects on individuals: **74% of workers report being negatively impacted in some way by the need to cover at their organization.** Such consequences include negative effects on well-being, focus, and sense of self; negative effects on performance and commitment at work; and a general feeling of needing to sacrifice authenticity to succeed.



Our survey results showed that Black and Latin(x/e/a/o) workers, and workers with low incomes or a high school education or less, were more likely to experience negative impacts of a covering culture than the median respondent in our survey.¹⁷

If anything, reported levels of individual drain may underplay the costs of covering in two ways.

First, covering behavior is often so ingrained that workers may not be aware of its full effects. For example, an employee who resigns because an organization was not a good “cultural fit” may not always examine whether the mismatch arose from an unjustifiable covering culture or from a more neutral source.

Second, even where covering does not negatively affect a particular individual, that person’s covering may have negative spillover effects on others. For example, former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously modified her working-class accent and lowered the pitch of her voice¹⁸—this might be considered a form of appearance-based covering. As far as we know, Thatcher never complained about having to undergo this transition. Yet by engaging in covering, she reinforced it as a

norm for others, some of whom may have experienced it as more harmful than Thatcher herself did. This is not meant to imply that Thatcher had a duty to behave differently. It is simply to say that her own willingness to cover did not make the covering demand legitimate or just.

Importantly, research supports the conclusion that the costs of covering extend beyond the individual, preventing the organization from realizing the gains that a culture of authenticity and belonging provides. These include reductions in turnover risk and employee absenteeism; increased job and team performance, innovation, and engagement;¹⁹ and higher profits when teams are more engaged.²⁰ The lower the demand for covering, the greater authenticity and more energy workers can expend toward creativity and productivity, thereby allowing organizations to realize significant value.²¹

In the words of our respondents: Examples of covering by **disability status**

“I don’t immediately disclose that I am neurodivergent and have attention deficit disorder. When I struggle to gather thoughts, or when someone is moving too quickly between ideas and I am struggling to follow along, I don’t always speak up and ask for them to slow down or indicate that I am having trouble following along with the conversation.” (Affiliation)

“I will advocate for the disabled and mental health care, but I will not identify myself with either group.” (Association)

“[I] minimize chances for people to see me walk.” (Appearance)



The critical role of organizational leaders

Our research indicates that covering culture will likely endure without active intervention on the part of the organization. **Of workers who have been at their organization for at least five years, 85% report that the need to cover has either stayed the same or increased during this time.**

It may seem as if the solution to covering is simply to encourage more workers to “uncover” and “bring their full selves to work.” This approach, however, places the burden on the shoulders of individual workers, putting them at risk of experiencing the penalties that cause them to cover in the first place.

The focus should not be on fixing workers’ covering behavior, but rather on addressing the covering demands imposed by organizational culture. Simply put, organizations cannot expect workers to be authentic at work unless they create the conditions in which that authenticity is valued.

As Deloitte stated in its report *The Equity Imperative*, organizational culture is “the way we do things around here”—the sustained patterns of behavior supported by an organization’s shared experiences, values, and beliefs.²² Culture both influences and is influenced by an organization’s workforce, the marketplace, and society. Organizational culture is always evolving, the result of an ongoing feedback loop between beliefs (unconscious, taken-for-granted assumptions), values (stated strategies, goals, and philosophies), and behaviors (people’s

decisions, actions, and processes). As a result, it can adapt to new needs and changing conditions.

We argue, based on an analysis of opportunity and motive, that leaders are best positioned to foster an uncovering culture.

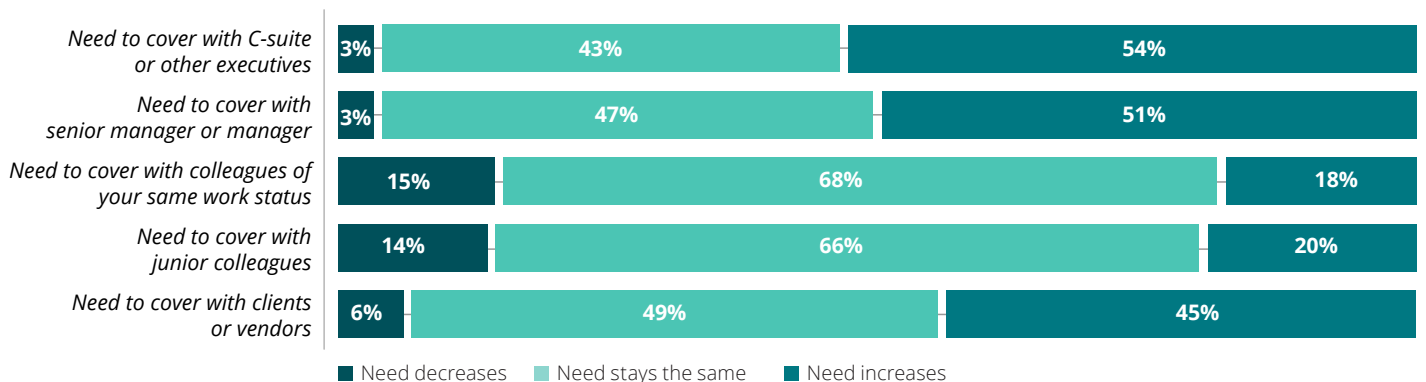
The opportunity

While every individual in an organization can influence its culture, organizational leaders have a crucial role to play, since they hold the greatest authority and set the tone for others to follow. According to our survey, 50% of respondents report their team leaders create the “psychological safety” for them to uncover at work—meaning a “team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.”²³ In addition, 61% of respondents report their team leaders encourage them to be their “authentic selves” at work, and the same proportion believe that team leaders genuinely desire their authenticity. Yet 40% of respondents believe their team leaders consciously or unconsciously expect them to cover.

Our survey also found that workers were more likely to experience an increase in covering demands when interacting with managers and senior managers, as well as C-suite executives, compared to when interacting with colleagues in the same or more junior roles.

As such, organizational leaders have a tremendous opportunity to disrupt covering demands.

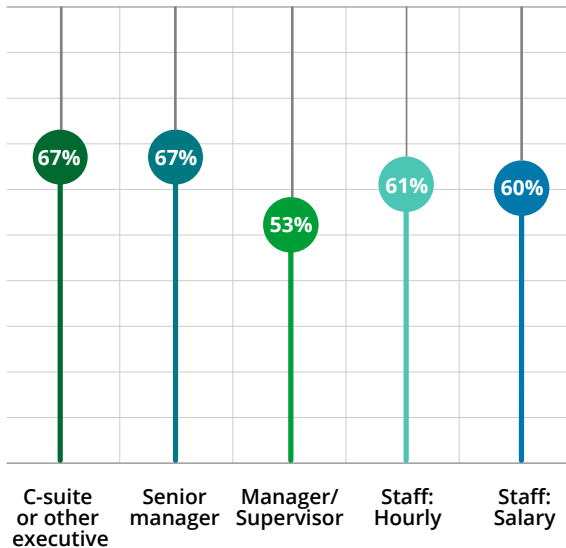
Does your need to cover change based on the organizational rank of those you interact with at work?



The motive

Unfortunately, our survey also reveals that leaders may experience conflicting motives when it comes to building an uncovering culture. Many organizations state that they value an inclusive work environment. Yet our research suggests that leaders often cover more, not less, than those lower in the organizational hierarchy. C-suite (or other executives) and senior managers report covering at the highest rates (both at 67%):

Covering by organizational role in past 12 months, by level at current primary employer



Of respondents who were promoted at their current organization, **96% revealed that their need to cover either stayed the same or increased after the promotion.**

“The higher up you go in management in my company, the more you are expected to conform to a certain mindset. I feel that I need to conform to this if I want to continue to rise up in the company.”


“In a leadership role, I feel it is even more critical to fit in with other leaders. The senior leadership team at my organization is all White, so one would need to make them feel more comfortable in order for a Black person to be fully accepted.”


“I do feel the need to ‘rock the boat’ less as I’ve stayed longer with my employer and been promoted to more senior roles. It’s an unconscious behavior that has more to do with conformity.”


“I now have to set the example. I am forced to cover and show up less authentically.”

In the words of our respondents:

Examples of covering by **mental health status**

“I downplayed my struggle in productivity due to mental health issues to avoid being judged.” (Affiliation) 

“I would never speak of my anxiety at work, and if someone else brought theirs up I would still not mention mine even if they were trying to relate to me.” (Association) 

“My mental health has been poor lately, so I have to keep a smile on my face for the comfort of my team.” (Appearance) 

“The higher you go [in your organization], the more you cover as a rule. More influence, more cover[ing].”


“‘Executive presence’ as I rise in level at my company seems to be code for everyone homogenizing.”


It makes intuitive sense that leaders may feel increased pressure to cover as they climb the organizational ladder. With seniority comes greater visibility to colleagues and external constituents. Many leaders believe that conforming to the perceived organizational “norm” will invite less scrutiny and critique.


Accordingly, leaders may face a conflict between their opportunity to disrupt covering culture and their motive to maintain it for their own advancement. This conflict presents a stark choice for leaders who value diversity, equity, and inclusion. Either they can maintain the status quo with its attendant costs for themselves and others, or they can take some risk—actual or perceived—to create a work culture that invites greater authenticity.

In the words of our respondents:

Examples of covering by **military status**

“I don’t have military-related symbols around my home or office space.” (Affiliation) 

“I try to [not] speak on my military history [for] fear of being judged regarding mental health issues that a lot of veterans experience.” (Affiliation) 

“I don’t want people to know I’m a veteran or disabled. I don’t display anything, not even a handicap placard.” (Affiliation) 

The call to action

The prospects for meaningful reform are promising: **88% of workers claim that actions already taken by their organization have helped reduce the demand to cover at work.** When leaders act, they can and do transform the workplace.

In our survey, respondents cited a range of actions that had helped them reduce the need to cover. Some actions included common practices in the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as increasing diversity on teams, offering well-being programs and flexible work options, and providing DEI training and other programming. Other actions involved more direct, targeted interventions, such as having leaders and teammates who uncover or having leaders and teammates who engage in allyship. When asked for recommendations to foster an uncovering culture, some respondents emphasized that seemingly small actions by colleagues and leaders—such as demonstrating increased openness, dialogue, and understanding—would help.

Drawing on respondents' suggestions and our own experience in the decade since the 2013 report, we offer three specific actions that leaders can implement immediately to start building an uncovering culture: i) diagnose, ii) share your story, and iii) engage in active allyship. We expect these actions to lead to greater authenticity and belonging for everyone in the organization,

whether they belong to more marginalized or more advantaged social groups.

I. Diagnose: Examine covering with your team

Before the term “implicit bias” named subtle attitudes and stereotypes outside our conscious awareness, many organizations weren't as focused on these behaviors. The problem needed to be identified before it could be challenged and made right. Similarly, when individuals lack the conceptual tools to identify covering, they often experience it as a fixed reality to be tolerated rather than a cultural practice to be challenged. No organization can adequately address covering culture unless the term “covering” is embedded into its vocabulary.

We recommend that leaders engage in an exercise to inspire meaningful dialogue with their teams.²⁴ The exercise invites each person to answer three questions:

1. *In what ways do I feel pressure to cover along any of the four axes—appearance, affiliation, advocacy, or association?*
(Attached to this report as an appendix is a worksheet to assist with this component of the exercise.)

You might share your own experiences, and if your team feels safe and comfortable doing so, invite volunteers to share theirs. Otherwise, you may wish to ask a broader question about participants' observations or perceptions of covering demands at the organization as a whole.
2. *Could this demand to cover have negative implications for myself or others? If so, what might those implications be?*
3. *Is this demand to cover aligned with an organizational value? If not, what can be done to reduce this demand to cover at our organization?*

As the above exercise suggests, not all covering demands are inappropriate, as some are backed by an organizational value. An organization may expect workers to treat each other with respect and empathy, even if it requires individuals to downplay aspects of their identity and sacrifice some authenticity. Other covering demands cannot be defended in this way—an organization that touts a commitment to gender equity cannot justifiably expect women to cover their family obligations.

In the words of our respondents:

Examples of covering by race/ethnicity

“I am of Indian origin and sometimes I avoid talking about my heritage for fear of not fitting in with coworkers in social situations and with senior management who do not relate to my background.” (Affiliation)



“I have kept quiet when remarks have been made of my race that are derogatory.” (Advocacy)



“I have tried to dress more ‘White’ and also refrain from growing a beard out or doing things physically that make me appear less ‘American’ in corporate America.” (Appearance)



By engaging in this group-level discussion exercise to diagnose covering demands, leaders can do their own version of what this survey achieves holistically: identify covering behavior on their teams, reflect on the culture that might be driving the demand for such covering, and open a critical conversation about actions that could improve that culture.

II. Share your story: Model authenticity to empower others

When survey respondents were asked to identify interventions that had helped them reduce the need to cover at work, two of the top responses were “teammates who uncover” and “leaders who uncover.” As these responses indicate, workers often feel more empowered to uncover themselves when they observe colleagues doing so.

When leaders share their stories and make space for others to do the same, they demonstrate that they value authenticity. They

also offer a model of authentic leadership that is consistent with organizational values.

We recommend both distinct and diffuse forms of storytelling.

Distinct storytelling is when a leader shares a specific, prepared story about themselves when speaking with internal or external audiences.²⁵ While hosting a meeting, networking at a reception, or giving a presentation, the leader could find appropriate moments to reveal not just their job title or career trajectory, but also information about their personal life.

Such information could include their family background, country of origin, caregiving responsibilities, or involvement in advocacy groups related to their identities. Leaders should adhere to three guideposts (see below).

Share your story: Three guideposts for “distinct” storytelling



Reflect on a covering experience

The story can be your own covering experience or another person's experience that you are sharing with permission. Consider the circumstances surrounding the experiences and the feelings it evoked. Include the decision-making process behind your choice to uncover, as your reasons for doing so might encourage others to do the same.

Ensure that the story includes the impact of the covering experience, but be careful not to engage in false equivalences that suggest a mild experience of covering is the same as a severe one (e.g., “I was a humanities major, so I know what it's like to be an outsider at this tech company”), as this might unintentionally minimize the experiences of others.



Focus on the objective of sharing

Remember that the purpose of storytelling is not to give an inspirational speech or write a memoir, but rather to create greater psychological safety. To achieve that goal, keep in mind that a strong story is *about* you, but not *for* you—it is shared for the benefit of others. In addition, a strong story is for the benefit of others in a specific sense—to help them uncover—not for broader purposes like inspiring or coaching them.

Focus on stories that are personal, but not raw. If the emotions relating to the story are unresolved, or sharing the story will cause you distress, consider another story that you are ready to share.



Share the story with an internal or external audience

If you are worried about saying the wrong thing, consider starting with a small disclosure and sharing with an intimate, trusted audience (such as in a regularly scheduled meeting with peers) rather than in a formal presentation or other higher-stakes setting.

Further, consider acknowledging your fear of uncovering or saying the wrong thing, as it is likely that others will relate to it.

Demonstrating vulnerability will build trust and connection.

In addition to distinct storytelling, we recommend that leaders also engage in diffuse storytelling. Diffuse storytelling refers to the practice of integrating authentic behaviors into daily workplace interactions, rather than waiting for moments to share a prepared narrative.

Examples of diffuse storytelling include:

- Mentioning what you did on the weekend in Monday meetings or sharing your weekend plans in Friday meetings;
- Speaking about your spouse or significant other, children, pets, or other members of your household in casual conversation;
- Talking about your interests and activities outside of work, including cultural or religious communities in which you are active;
- Sharing experiences of stress, anxiety, or other mental health challenges while working on demanding projects;
- Decorating your office or cubicle space with items that are meaningful to you or groups to which you belong, such as artwork, photographs, quotes, or books;
- Participating in events and employee resource groups relating to a variety of identities in the workplace; and
- Presenting yourself in ways that are authentic to your community of origin, including in relation to hairstyle, clothing, and accessories.

These forms of diffuse storytelling are most effective when the leader explicitly encourages (without demanding) similar authentic behavior from all members of their team, such as by creating the space for workers to share their own challenges, interests, and activities.

In the words of our respondents: Examples of covering by sexual orientation

"I'm in a same-sex relationship, which I keep hidden by using terms like 'spouse' instead of 'wife.'" (Affiliation)



"I don't always stick up for the LGBTQ community when I hear something negative said because I don't [want to] stigmatize myself!" (Advocacy)



"I edit the way I talk and act around my coworkers so as to make myself appear 'less gay.'" (Appearance)



In the words of our respondents: Examples of covering by education

"Many of my co-workers went to more prestigious schools than I did and/or received their MBAs. I avoid [discussing] this at all costs so I don't seem lesser than." (Affiliation)



"I do not talk about my lack of college degree or where I went to college." (Affiliation)



"[I've] overcompensated my work to make up for lacking a formal education." (Affiliation)



According to our survey, 35% of respondents took the risk of uncovering an identity in the past 12 months that they otherwise felt a demand to cover. Those who uncovered largely experienced the outcome as neutral or positive, but 16% experienced it as negative. Responses included:

"I uncovered about my mental health issues and felt closer with colleagues as a result. I also gained their respect."

"I wore a [religious] headscarf to work and I got neither positive nor negative feedback."

"I shared my mental health status with my direct boss. He seemed receptive. I will not share my mental health status with his boss as she seems unsafe."


"I felt like I was neither accepted or rejected ... but I wondered what people thought behind the scenes."


"I had a candid conversation with my manager that was a moment of uncovering and it was used against me later."


"[I] was reprimanded for opening up and being vulnerable."

Given the risks of uncovering, it is critical that leaders give signals of affirmation when receiving stories from team members, such as by thanking people for sharing and by refraining from judgment. Demonstrating appreciation, empathy, and curiosity is especially important when stories depart from the organizational "norm," and thus involve greater vulnerability on the part of the storyteller. Doing so signals to the storyteller that their authenticity is valued, and reinforces the likelihood that they, and others witnessing the sharing, will continue to share their stories.

In the words of our respondents: Examples of covering by immigration status

"I try to hide the fact that I am not an American citizen. I try to speak fluently and avoid letting my accent be heard." (Appearance) 

"I am not able to share how my experiences of being a second-generation immigrant and cultural norms impact [my] thinking and don't share experiences because of fear of bias." (Affiliation) 

"As an immigrant I often mask my upbringing to fit in with colleagues. From food, interests, and hobbies, I tend to try and stay up with American sports and culture in order to fit in." (Affiliation) 

III. Engage in active allyship: Leverage your advantage to challenge covering demands

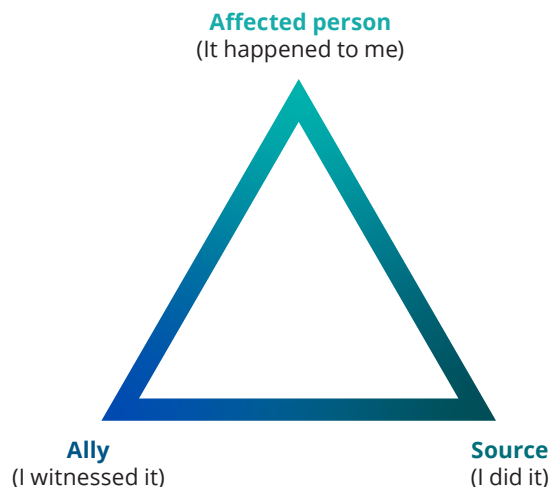
Many survey respondents identified "teammates who engage in allyship" and "leaders who engage in allyship" as factors that have helped them reduce their need to cover.

Allyship requires leveraging one's advantages in support of others who don't have those same advantages. Allyship is a particularly powerful intervention when responding to covering demands, because research suggests that allies are often taken more seriously—and penalized less—than the affected people when they challenge non-inclusive behavior.²⁶

Allyship is also a solution available to all. Since everyone has clusters of advantage and disadvantage, everyone is in the ally position at times, and everyone benefits from the allyship of others. A White woman can be an ally to a Black man on issues of race; he can be her ally on issues of gender. The same Black man might be an ally to a White man on issues of socioeconomic status; the White man can give allyship in return on issues of religious affiliation, for example. Yet while anyone can be an ally, leaders from advantaged social backgrounds have a unique opportunity. By leveraging their advantage, they can support not just people less empowered in the organizational hierarchy, but also peer leaders of less advantaged identity groups who may need support and psychological safety to uncover.

Many people think of allyship as a two-way relationship between an ally and the affected person they are trying to support. We recommend that leaders think of allyship as a three-way relationship between the ally ("I witnessed it"), the affected person ("It happened to me"), and the source of non-inclusive behavior ("I did it").

Three-way allyship relationship





Effective allies reflect on all three points in this triangle when intervening to address covering demands.


Ally

Starting with the bottom left point of the triangle, an effective ally reflects on their own role. Allies often have more power in the situation than the people they seek to support. For that reason, where relevant, they should maximize their effectiveness by considering systemic solutions. As we have repeatedly emphasized in this report, covering is often a response to a cultural demand within an organization that may be unintentionally reinforced through inequitable policies, processes, and practices. Allies, then, should extend their concern beyond the specific colleague they are supporting to explore systemic interventions that will have broader impact.

In the words of our respondents: Examples of covering by religious affiliation

"I go out of my way to ensure my accessories and hair covering do not display my religious view[s] for any on camera or in person meetings." (Appearance) 

"I try not to mention my religion or my country of origin to avoid being stereotyped since my religion is a minority in the US and my country might be labeled as a source of terrorism for certain people in the US." (Affiliation) 

"My manager assumed that I wasn't a part of a particular religion and spoke negatively toward it. I didn't reveal my religion." (Advocacy) 

In the words of our respondents: Examples of covering by caregiver status (adult dependent or child)

"[I wear] looser clothing to hide pregnancy. I work on contract renewal basis and would not be renewed as soon as my pregnancy is known." (Appearance)



"I don't talk about the personal mental struggles of dealing with an aging parent and having a young child. I don't want my competency and focus to be questioned." (Affiliation)



"As a working mom, I try not to talk about my children at work. I do not want people to think I care more about my children than my career." (Affiliation)



Examples of such interventions may include:

- Auditing workplace dress codes to ensure they do not impose unnecessary appearance-based covering demands;
- Hosting standing meetings at times that minimize conflicts for people with caregiving obligations;
- Sending cues of "ambient belonging" in the spaces and symbols of the workplace, such as by diversifying the artwork and portraits on office walls, designing virtual backgrounds to acknowledge heritage months, and distributing pride flags and equivalent paraphernalia to celebrate various identities;²⁷
- Integrating discussions of covering into employee education and training on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues;
- Implementing gender-neutral caregiving leave policies and ensuring their use is not explicitly or implicitly stigmatized;
- Ensuring that company events are inclusive by design, such as by catering for a wide range of cultural and religious dietary requirements and by not structuring all events around alcohol consumption; and
- Setting clear, transparent criteria for recruitment, performance management, and advancement.

Affected person

Next, effective allies move to the top point on the triangle and reflect on whether they are supporting the affected person as the affected person wishes to be helped.

Many would-be allies unwittingly impose their own preferences on the affected person rather than taking the time to consider or ask the affected person whether they want support, and if so, whether the affected person wants the specific form of support on offer.

Suppose that a colleague, Celeste, is repeatedly interrupted in a meeting in a group consisting mostly of more senior men. She responds by remaining silent and not sticking up for herself, i.e., engaging in advocacy-based covering. Rather than invoking Celeste's name in a public callout ("*Imagine how Celeste must feel being treated in such a sexist manner*"), a strong ally would consider how Celeste might feel about such an intervention, recognizing that it could cause embarrassment or derail the meeting in ways she finds unhelpful. Rather, a strong ally might pursue one of two options: (a) speak up in the meeting on the ally's own behalf, rather than on behalf of Celeste ("*I've noticed a lot of interruptions in this meeting; let's allow everyone to speak*"); or (b) wait until after the meeting to approach Celeste, share that the ally was troubled by the behavior in the meeting, and ask how (if at all) Celeste would like to be supported if similar situations arise in the future.

Source

Finally, effective allies consider the bottom right point of the triangle relating to the source of non-inclusive behavior. Where appropriate, allies should consider engaging sources with generosity, helping them grow past their mistakes rather than condemning them.

In the words of our respondents: Other examples of covering

"I wear big loose clothing so people can't see my weight." (Appearance)



"Since I have never been married, and have no kids, I feel that as looked upon differently in regard to my age, being older and living alone, so I try to hide that when having conversations with team members that have families and kids, so as to not be judged." (Affiliation)



"I have never felt comfortable sharing my political activism with co-workers. I often find myself just agreeing with them when I really don't. It's easier." (Advocacy)



"As a recovering alcoholic I avoid discussions about drinking and never mention AA unless I know the other person is also in recovery." (Affiliation)



Instead of shaming someone for imposing a covering demand on another person, an ally might say something like: *"I know you care about inclusion. Can you help me understand what you meant/intended when you said/did _____?"*, to create the space to discuss the non-inclusive behavior without judgment. As psychologist Scott Plous observes, affirming the person but challenging the conduct primes their "egalitarian self-image," often leading them to resolve the dissonance by changing their behavior.²⁸

In addition, effective allies demonstrate that they are learning too. By definition, allies distinguish themselves from others by acting virtuously. Research by social psychologist Benoît Monin suggests that when people compare themselves to such moral paragons, they often engage in "do-gooder derogation" by dismissing what they have to say.²⁹

As such, allies should approach sources as flawed peers rather than as smug superiors, sharing times they have made similar mistakes (*"I think what you did had a negative impact on Huang. Last month I said something that hurt Farah and here's how I recovered . . ."*).

Toward an uncovering culture

A decade after the Uncovering Talent research, this study deepened our understanding of covering in the workplace. It showed that the incidence of covering remains high at 60%, that workers continue to cover with regard to a range of social identities, and that workers with multiple marginalized identities tend to cover the most. Our survey also found that a covering culture has significant costs for individuals and organizations.

Yet despite the enduring reality of covering, leaders can take tangible steps to turn a covering culture into an uncovering culture that truly welcomes and celebrates the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of their workers. They can diagnose covering demands, share their stories, and engage in allyship. These solutions, though not exhaustive, provide a roadmap to address covering culture and build workplaces where everyone can contribute their best selves.



To model authenticity and vulnerability, we opened this report with covering stories from our own lives. As we have advanced in our careers, we have all been fortunate to find role models and allies who have enabled us to uncover more of ourselves and contribute to our organizations. This process of uncovering has been transformative, as it has allowed us to feel like we belong and can contribute to a culture of belonging for others.

Uncovering culture worksheet

Diagnose: Examine covering with your team



Appearance-based covering

concerns how individuals alter their self-presentation (grooming, attire, and mannerisms) to blend into the mainstream.

Example: A worker who uses a cane to assist with their mobility might not use it in the office to avoid drawing attention to themselves.



Advocacy-based covering

concerns how individuals may not defend or promote the interests of their group, such as when a biased or stereotypical comment is made.

Example: An immigrant might refrain from challenging a xenophobic joke to avoid being seen as "difficult" or "humorless."



Affiliation-based covering

concerns how individuals minimize behaviors widely associated with their identity, often to negate common stereotypes.

Example: A mother might avoid talking about her children in the office to signal commitment to work.



Association-based covering

concerns how individuals avoid contact with other group members.

Example: A gay individual might not bring his partner to a work function so as not to draw attention to his sexual orientation.

Additional information

Methods

A third-party research vendor (SSRS) conducted a survey of 1,269 full- and part-time adult (18+) workers from companies with a minimum of 500 employees in the US. Both a probability panel (956 respondents) and non-probability panel (313 respondents) were used to field an online survey in order to capture responses across five industry categories: Consumer (259 respondents); Energy, Resources, and Industrials (250 respondents); Financial Services (257 respondents); Life Sciences & Healthcare (252 respondents); and Technology, Media, and Telecom industries (251 respondents).

At the beginning of the survey, panelists were screened to ascertain if they were US residents, for their age (18+), employment status (full- or part-time), and whether they worked at a company with 500 or more employees in one of the five industry groups. Respondents who failed to meet any of these criteria were screened out from continuing. Qualifying respondents were then presented a screen that explained the purpose of the study and who was sponsoring the survey, and were asked to give their consent to continue. Only those respondents who consented were allowed to continue. Demographic data from the SSRS panel was used to weight the data of those not qualifying to balance the full sample of those qualifying and not qualifying to a general population of employees.

The sample was further weighted to be representative of our target population, allowing us to draw inferences regarding this population as a whole. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is ± 3.7 percentage points. The survey was fielded from February 15 - March 14, 2023.

Our sample was constructed to include participants who are working adults in the US across multiple sociodemographic variables, as well as other characteristics (e.g., organizational role, tenure, work location [remote, hybrid, in-office]).

The online questionnaire asked a series of demographic and firmographic questions to allow respondents to self-identify. Covering behaviors were assessed through questions that asked respondents whether they engaged in covering along each of the four axes or in any other way at work in the last 12 months, and the identity categories along which they have done so. Organizational culture was assessed through questions that asked respondents about covering demands, psychological safety, and supports at work.

Unless another source is indicated, all of the quotations in this paper are from the survey respondents. All reported quantitative data is a representation of those who responded to the specific survey question referenced.

Endnotes

¹ Regardless of the identity, individuals who cover do so because they understand those identities to be disfavored in whatever environment they happen to be in.

² Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (New York: Random House Inc., 2006). Sociologist Erving Goffman coined the term covering in 1963: Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1963).

³ These statistics reflect reported covering by respondents who self-identify as belonging to these cohorts, rather than covering *for* these identities.

⁴ Cisgender refers to a person whose internal sense of gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth. Transgender refers to a person whose gender identity is different from the sex that was assigned at birth.

⁵ We have included here those race/ethnicity categories where we had a sufficient number of respondents to report. Our survey additionally provided the following race/ethnicity self-identification options for respondents to choose from: Indigenous Mexican and/or Central American; Indigenous South American; Middle Eastern, North African, and/or Near Eastern; American Indian, Alaska Native, and/or First Nations; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; mixed-race; not listed; prefer not to answer. Our Asian respondents were able to further self-identify as East, South, Southeast, or Central Asian. Our Black respondents self-identified as Black, African, and/or African American.

⁶ This includes any survey respondents who self-identified as asexual, bisexual, demisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer, or sexual orientation not listed.

⁷ Millennials are defined as those born between 1981 and 1996, Gen Z as those born after 1996, Gen X as those born between 1965 and 1980, and Baby Boomers as those born before 1964.

⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw, [Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine,](#)

[Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics](#), University of Chicago Legal Forum, no. 1, 1989, pp. 139-168.

⁹ In this analysis, we included a broad spectrum of identities based on our demographic questions. As such, marginalized identities include those other than: cisgender man, White, under 50 years of age, heterosexual, third or more generation American, non-veteran, non-military family, non-disabled, Christian, college graduate, non-caregiver, and middle to high income. As per the analysis provided, 51% of respondents who have covered at work in the last 12 months, hold no marginalized identities.

¹⁰ This term includes all respondents who self-identified as non-heterosexual (according to our survey results we had respondents who self-identified as asexual, bisexual, demisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer, not listed), as well as respondents who self-identified as non-binary or transgender.

¹¹ For ease of readability, use of "women" and "men" in this section refers to cisgender women and men.

¹² Qualtrics, [The diversity of the top 50 Fortune 500 CEOs over time](#), 2023.

¹³ Anagha Srikanth, "[New study finds white male minority rule dominates US](#)," *The Hill*, 26 May 2021.

¹⁴ Qualtrics, [The diversity of the top 50 Fortune 500 CEOs over time](#), 2023.

¹⁵ These are overall percentages for the entire sample, not just those who report engaging in covering (as some who did not report covering, nonetheless reported negative impacts from the demand to cover at their organization).

¹⁶ Jeff Schwartz et al., "[Belonging: From comfort to connection to contribution](#)," *Deloitte Insights*, 15 May 2020; Victor A. Terry, "[Allowing Employees To Be Their Authentic Selves: A Business Imperative](#)," *Forbes*, 17 June 2021.

¹⁷ Persons of Black identity are 10.8% more likely to experience negative impacts; persons of Latin(x/e/a/o) identity are 8.3% more likely to experience negative impacts; persons who are of low income are 10.7% more likely to experience negative impacts; persons with a HS education or less are 6.3% more likely to experience negative impacts.

¹⁸ Polly Dunbar, "[How Laurence Olivier gave Margaret Thatcher the voice that went down in history](#)," *Daily Mail*, 29 October 2011.

¹⁹ Jeff Schwartz et al., "[Belonging: From comfort to connection to contribution](#)," *Deloitte Insights*, 15 May 2020; Madeline Miles, "[Why is authenticity at work so hard? 5 ways to be more authentic](#)," *BetterUp*, 14 March 2022.

²⁰ Ruth Gotian, "[The Overlooked Way to Reduce Employee Turnover by 59%](#)," *Forbes*, 19 April 2022.

²¹ Victor A. Terry, "[Allowing Employees To Be Their Authentic Selves: A Business Imperative](#)," *Forbes*, 17 June 2021.

²² Deloitte, [Ready, Set, Activate! Catalyze your culture for sustained results](#), 2019.

²³ Amy Edmondson, "Psychological Safety and Learning in Work Teams," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1999): pp. 350, 354.

²⁴ Consulting with HR prior to engaging in these discussions can help prepare leaders to handle any workplace concerns that may come up or may need to be addressed.

²⁵ While there are many, one example of this is the [Uncensored: Stories of Black professionals at Deloitte](#) series, which provides a platform for Black professionals to share their experiences to foster transparency, facilitate deeper conversations, and drive action toward creating a more equitable community.

²⁶ Heather M. Rasinski and Alexander M. Czopp, "The Effect of Target Status on Witnesses' Reactions to Confrontations of Bias," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 32, no. 1 (2010); Jill E. Gulker et al., "Confronting Prejudice: The Who, What, and Why of Confrontation Effectiveness," *Social Influence* 8, no. 4 (2013).

²⁷ Sapna Cheryan et al., "Ambient Belonging: How Stereotypical Cues Impact Gender Participation in Computer Science," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97, no. 6 (2009).

²⁸ Scott Plous, "Responding to Overt Displays of Prejudice: A Role-Playing Exercise," *Teaching of Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2000).

²⁹ Benoît Monin, "Holier Than Me? Threatening Social Comparison in the Moral Domain," *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale* 50, no. 1 (2007).

Authors



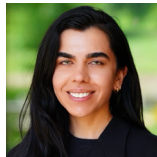
Joanne Stephane

Executive Director, DEI Institute™
Principal, Deloitte Consulting LLP



Heather McBride Leef

Managing Director, DEI Institute™
Deloitte



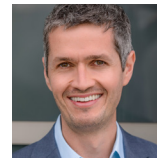
Sameen Affaf

Research Manager, DEI Institute™
Deloitte Services LP



Kenji Yoshino

Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of
Constitutional Law
Director of the Meltzer Center for Diversity,
Inclusion, and Belonging
NYU School of Law



David Glasgow

Executive Director of the Meltzer Center for
Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging
NYU School of Law

Contributors

Kashima Atwood

Leader, DEI Institute™
Deloitte Services LP

Robin Nodsle

Research Manager,
DEI Institute™
Deloitte Services LP

Tyler Wagenknecht

Lead, DEI Institute™
Deloitte Services LP

Suzanne Nersessian

Managing Director
Deloitte LLP

Lindsey Manning

Strategic Marketing Manager,
DEI Institute™
Deloitte Services LP

**Dr. Dhanushki
Samaranayake**

Research Manager,
DEI Institute™
Deloitte Services LP

Christina Brodzik

US Equity Client Services
Leader
Principal
Deloitte Consulting LLP

Briana Thomas

Research Fellow
NYU School of Law

Maria Porras

Communications Strategist,
DEI Institute™
Deloitte Services LP

Dr. Julian Sanders

Research Lead, DEI Institute™
Deloitte Services LP

Devon Dickau

DEI Offerings Leader
Deloitte Consulting LLP

Sam Yu

Research Fellow
NYU School of Law

Data science, analytical, and survey support was provided by **Dr. Paula Payton**, **Dr. David Levin**, and **Sameen Salam** from Deloitte Insights' Data Science and Survey Advisory Group.

Contact us

To discuss any of the ideas presented here, please send an email to:

Deloitte's DEI Institute: USDEIInstitute@deloitte.com

The Meltzer Center for Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging: belonging@nyu.edu

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