

## Episode 1 — Carolyn on defining "covering" at work

Sarah Kaplan: This limited series podcast is from GATE Audio. GATE stands for the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, and I'm GATE's director. Our goal is to engage current and future leaders in rich conversations around inequities in our society and how we might address them. In this podcast series one of GATE's MBA Fellows, Narjis Premjee, explores the different ways that people cover and uncover their identities at work. Through interviews, first-hand accounts, and rich storytelling, Narjis ventures into the world of covering, why it happens, and what employers can do to make workplaces more inclusive. You'll be moved and inspired by her deeply personal takes on these issues, as was I. So up next, listen to what Narjis has to say.

Narjis: Welcome to covering in the workplace, a podcast from the Institute for Gender and the Economy or GATE. I'm Narjis Premjee, in each episode I will be interviewing one individual on how they have covered in the workplace, or perhaps never felt the need to do so. But before we begin, you may be wondering, what do we mean by covering? To answer that question, I am joined by Carolyn Lawrence, who is an inclusion leader globally across Deloitte and within Canada. Carolyn, thank you for being here today. So, the first time I heard the term covering was last summer when we were working together at Deloitte. You are the expert when it comes to inclusion in the workplace so would you mind telling our listeners what we mean by the term 'covering' in the workplace and what it could entail?

Carolyn: Absolutely. And thanks for asking, cause it's an important topic and affects so many more people than we actually think in the workplace. So essentially covering is hiding a significant part of who we are. And covering is a way that we actually find that many groups are being held back today. It holds us back from human connection with our colleagues, but in the workforce, it also holds us back from reaching our potential. And so, this is something that we look at as individuals, as leaders, but also as organizations, and how we want to advance our organizations, how we want to advance our people, and how we want to show up and truly reach our potential is going to be hindered if we are covering a certain aspect of our personality, or if we're not being our authentic self.

Narjis: Would you mind telling us a little bit about the different types of covering?

Carolyn: Absolutely. So, there's four different types of covering that we find in our research appearance, affiliation, advocacy, and association. So, I can explain a bit about each of those four different types and how those show up. So, appearance-based covering concerns how individuals alter their self-presentation to blend into the mainstream. So, for example, with regards to a particular race or ethnicity, such as black women might not wear their natural hair at work, they may feel like having curly, frizzy, big hair is not going to be acceptable in the workplace. So, they'll spend so much time combing and flattening and straightening in order to fit in with their appearance. And there's some other ways too, specific to religion. Muslims or Jews or other religious groups who choose not to engage in religious practices or wear religious clothing or accessories in order to fit in. And then there's some other ones like marital status. Women who may not wear rings during interviews at work, or some women who may wear rings who aren't married. You know, there's so many different ways that this can show up but this one is really about altering your appearance to not show who your authentic self is. The second one is affiliation-based covering, and this concerns how individuals avoid behaviors widely associated with their identity to negate stereotypes. So, for example, with regards to gender, this might be mothers who don't talk about their family commitments such as picking their son up at camp or having to make it to a doctor's appointment or a sports game. In order to make sure that they're still viewed as committed to their job. And similarly for fathers, they may not bring up family commitments in order to fit into the boy's club culture and stay within their prescribed gender norms. Another topic around affiliation-based covering is sexual orientation. This is a very common one where individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ may not choose to talk about this. They may not talk about their partners and what they've been doing over the weekend. And they may leave off personal

pronouns when they're discussing their weekend or what they've been doing. And then there's age. So younger employees may feel they can't take time off or they have to stay late or pass when their boss is at the office because they haven't earned the right to leave or earned their flexibility. The third type is advocacy based covering this concerns how individuals stick up for their group. Let's talk about mental health and disability in this regard, individuals who choose not to advocate for mental health causes or disability accommodations in fear of being seen as mentally disabled or mentally ill or disabled or even weak. You know we often work in a culture that is very high demanding, and if we're seen to not be able to cope with that, we don't want to share it. And then there's citizenship. Newcomers to Canada who may be afraid to advocate for diversity and inclusion to avoid appearing as they are advocating for themselves or being a cause for the burden to the company. And the last one I want to talk about is association-based covering which concerns how individuals avoid contact with other group members. So, talking about race and ethnicity again individuals who choose not to socialize with others from their own ethnic group to avoid being defined by that group. Or for example, with regards to gender-men who choose not to sponsor or mentor women. And then there's another one around how some people who choose not to drink but cover that aspect of their either personal or religious or cultural reasons by joining colleagues for after work drinks. So those are the four different types. And as you can imagine spending that much time in your day covering some of these things about yourself that are truly not changeable. These are either things that you were born with in most cases they are things that are an important part of who you are and how you show up. It actually takes we think roughly about half of your energy in order to cover these things. So, we think about it as almost like having a second job. You have your first job, which is to come to work and do what you have been hired to do. And your second job, which is spending so much energy trying not to talk or show any of these things. And that takes so much energy. You truly cannot perform at a hundred percent if you are spending that much energy trying not to show something. There are so many reasons why covering is going to be a hindrance to people that feel they have to do this.

Narjis: Thank you so much for that wonderful introduction of the topic of covering. I know that Deloitte distributed a survey to diagnose the prevalence and impact of covering in the workplace. Can you please share some insights from the results?

Carolyn: Absolutely. So, let's talk about the mechanics of the survey first. We distribute a survey to over 3000 respondents across 10 different industries and there was a mix of ages, genders, race, and ethnicities and orientations. Let's talk about now some of the results and this one is the most amazing to me, 61% of respondents admitted to covering on at least one axis. So, if you remember what I just said about how much time that takes out of our ability to perform and show up as a whole person, and yet the majority of people are covering on at least one thing we saw that which you may be able to guess, covering occurred with greater frequency within groups that have been historically underrepresented. So, 83% of LGBTQ+ individuals reported covering, 79% of black individuals, and 66% of women. And interestingly 45% of straight white men who've not been the focus of most inclusion efforts also report covering. What I think the silver lining is in this which we may not see right away but I think is an important lever for us to talk about how we actually solve this is that we all take cues from leaders on what behaviors are okay in the workplace. And historically, leaders have in many ways asked us to conform by sharing with us what behaviors are okay and what dress is okay, and what kind of social activities are okay. But if we flipped that thinking and think about "wow what about the power that leaders have in order to shift and actually enable us to show up as whole people." That can be a truly powerful thing for them to be able to say "we want people to show up as their whole authentic selves and they can do that by showing up as whole selves every day", they can tell personal stories, they can be themselves, they can show vulnerability and fallibility, and that will make it okay for everyone else too. And so we hope that, and certainly at Deloitte, we do a lot of work to teach our leaders to do that and to recognize and respect that every person is a unique individual. And that they will have things that are going on and if they are able to be authentic, it's so much better for the firm, for ourselves, for our clients, we can't have innovative ideas or delight our clients if we're so worried about our hair or being associated with a group or the stigma of a mental illness or a disability that you can't see, we just truly can't perform at the top. There's one other thing I haven't mentioned yet that I think is really important to business leaders everywhere, which is that those people who cover are 27% more likely to have considered leaving the organization in the last 12

months compared to those who don't cover. So, I think that the way we've operated as organizations recently is that this has been okay. We have been able to survive with this, but I think with the new generations and increasing diversity of talent that are coming into the workforce, this is going to be an increasingly bigger issue. People don't want to have to cover anymore. People want to show up and be recognized, respected, feel valued and belong to an organization who respects them for who they are, truly. And so, I think that this number is only going to get bigger. If we don't learn to solve how to get people to feel included as a whole person, as their unique self.

Narjis: So, we know that many organizations have inclusion as one of their values yet only if you live up to them. So, what is one way of bridging this gap between organizational values and practices?

Carolyn: So, one approach to bridging the gap between our organizational values and how we live those in our practices every day is to encourage uncovering through the sharing of personal stories. This is something that we teach to our clients and we teach to our leaders, is the ability to simply start a meeting by telling a personal story and not necessarily of a win or something positive that would be further endorsing your covering, but actually a personal story about what you did on the weekend and not hiding any of those details, actually sharing what family life is like and what your group is doing and sharing the details so that you show up as a whole person. I've seen a few leaders who previously have shown up as almost robotic or stoic and distant, which is something that I think many leaders grew up thinking that was the right way to be a leader. We don't think that anymore. We think the right way to be a leader is as a whole person and the best way to get the most out of your team in the most effective and the most satisfactory way to engage a team is to have them be whole people also not just employees and workers. So, sharing that story opens the door and sets the cue for everyone else to say, "oh, it's okay. I can be myself. I can show up as who I am and that's acceptable because they know I'm going to actually be better as a result of that."

Narjis: Thank you so much for starting off this podcast with such an in-depth introduction of the topic of covering. I think you've brilliantly set the stage for the episodes to come. So, in the following episodes, we will be hearing from individuals who have either uncovered in the workplace. Or have never felt the need to cover. We will learn about how their personal values as well as their leaders and organizational cultures encouraged or discourage them from bringing their full selves to work. We will hear stories of how individuals uncovered their religious beliefs, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, and other appearance-based aspects of their identities. The hope is for such stories to encourage others, to bring their full selves to work if or when they feel comfortable doing so.

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