

## Episode 5 — Priyanka on covering her gender and ethnicity

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 of 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. Today we will be speaking to Priyanka. Priyanka is a director of DX learning, which is a company that specializes in professional leadership development. Prior to her current role in training and development, Priyanka worked in talent management along with some major financial institutions like RBC and TD. Priyanka's story of covering in the workplace is with regards to her ethnicity and gender. Thank you for joining us today, Priyanka! Would you like to start us off by sharing how you cover in the workplace, if at all?

Priyanka: Well, luckily enough, I never had a challenge to not disclose where I'm coming from. I think I'm heavily influenced by my grandfather, and he always used to tell me as a very young child to never forget where you come from. And I have embraced my gender, my race, and my identity as a whole, when I was a kid, as a student in college and now as a wife or as a mother, and of course, as an employee. So, for me, my gender, my race, my identity is something that defines me, who I am and makes me every day, (inaudible) aspect, whether it's a personal thing or a professional thing.

Narjis: it seems that, you know, you are your full self at work at home, wherever you are. It seems that you are truly authentic. So, in what ways at work are you your true self at work?

Priyanka: As I said I have always believed that when you bring yourself, whether it's in a relationship, whether it's work or anywhere. If you are not showing up a hundred percent, it compromises the way you are. And I have really believed in my past 16 years of my professional life, if I see myself as successful, which is a very relative term, if I have to look back to all the organizations, my teams, people that I worked with, I think the only reason I was able to succeed, again, the succession for me, it's my own personal goal, is because I was able to show up being my authentic self which means you will see me as is, whether it's my office, my home, it's a doctor's appointment. Everybody will know how I feel. And that's how I see myself even today.

Narjis: So, can you elaborate more on a few examples of when you were your full self at work and you felt like "this is truly me?"

Priyanka: I think I had the opportunity to work with many different organizations in Canada. In the past 16 years. Just to connect the dots I was born and brought up in India. So, when I was coming to Canada on a spousal visa, I had a thousand different opinions and suggestions from people. They said, "hey, don't say that don't do that" you know, and then it made me a very biased person for a little while. And by the time I was coming back in the workforce in Canada, on the first week of my job, I wouldn't say things, I was little shy, especially coming across as to where I'm coming from, which part of the family I belong to, which part of the city I grew up in. But then when I was coming back home, I still remember very strongly that I felt sick. I felt sick in my stomach, and I knew this is not how I can work. This is not how I should be working if that's what it is. And if that's how I need to feel every day, I better find another job. I was very clear about that because it doesn't, it didn't feel right to me. And it took me just like less than 10 days. And again, first job in Canada being a new immigrant. New wife on a spousal visa. Something shifted for me right away in week three. And when people were coming and introducing themselves, I think I felt a strong urge to say, "hey, I'm a land immigrant. I was born

and brought up in India.” It didn't make me feel like I have to hide anything. And I think they have embraced me with open arms. And I think that really defined me and not to forget because I was showing my authentic self. It benefitted them, because I still remember the office had a very diverse culture of people there from Germany, Quebec, there were people from Pakistan, there were people from Ukraine. I think the moment they started hearing me, where I come from, within like two weeks everybody was behaving differently. Everybody became natural to their aspect, talking about their local food, local festivals, what they believe in, where did they go for prayers, their friends and everything. And it just changed the way we were coming together as a team. I think that was the biggest change I felt. And after that, again, 16 years of this work life. I always felt that it's always good and very empowered when you show up being your full self.

Narjis: you mentioned that the first time you came to Canada and the first workplace you had, you were a little shy to bring your full self to work. Was there something about the workplace itself that may have encouraged you to maybe cover parts of yourself?

Priyanka: It was not the workplace, I think it's, it's the perception, you know. When you're new in the country and the people who are already living here, they feel entitlement that they have the right to give you their opinions with their suggestions because they left, and they don't want you to feel or learn the hard way. I think it just becomes a personal bias. But then because when, and because you're new, you tend to hear these voices around you and you hear, “oh, by the way, so and so is living in Canada for the past 20 years, I'm sure he, or she must know something that a new immigrant should be knowing to start on some kind of pedestal.” For me that was millions of noises that I encountered but then I think just because I (inaudible) back to my value system. Never forget where you come from. It took me enough time to say, you know what? I heard you, but it's my time to say what's good for me. And I want to show up the way I am. If people have a problem with that, that's their problem, not mine. And that's, that's how I always felt.

Narjis: So, I think having a strong value system is like you said so essential to being authentic and your full self. How have you developed such a strong value system? How have you reached this level of comfort in being yourself?

Priyanka: I think I have developed this really strong value system. I was the first born in my family back home in India. I was the first grandchild and I had ten first cousins living in the same family. I think when you grew up in the large family and you are the eldest one, you, you tend to have this natural expectation from everybody around you. You need to be the role model because all your cousins, your brothers, and sisters are looking up to you. I think I had this instinct that, you know what, I have a responsibility towards my cousins, my brothers and sisters, my aunts and uncles. And for me, because I had the opportunity to live with my grandparents who have migrated from Pakistan at the time of the partition. I think the value system ingrained in me is, again, don't forget where you come from, never be afraid to make mistakes and always show up being honest because no matter who you are outside this house, when you come in, you should feel your natural self. They would say “like if you have a fight at school, if something bad happened, just show up and tell us. And there is no one judging you.” I think that has always instilled a value of confidence in me that no matter what, when I come home, I will not be judged by my parents or my family. And that was my comfort. And that's, I'm still, I'm still living with that today.

Narjis: So, of the three aspects of your identity that we talked about, which one do you think has been a bit more challenging to be transparent about?

Priyanka: I think out of three, I would say gender. Gender being, I think in the past 20 years, I have seen a shift in the way women are showing up just to go back and give you a story. There was a time back home in my family when my mother or my aunts were expected to stay home, look after kids and then dads and uncles go to work. So, you know, there was a strong partition of a job, it was well defined. Fast forward today. I think so much has been shifted. As women we have more liberation. We have freedom of speech, freedom of choosing career, our partners, how we want to live, what do you want to wear. However, I still feel the moment I come across, let's say in a conference room and

we are debating and brainstorming about any company policies and proceeds and I'm sitting with very strong-willed men. If I'm putting across my observation, I am still looked down upon. (inaudible) and I, I used to challenge them, "what if this suggestion came from a man" and they used to give me dirty looks. But my only solace was that my answer was based on, "this is good for business it's not a gender issue. I'm telling you this because I have done my research. This is what the numbers are saying, and this will make more business sense. This will save us a day. This will save us two steps." But just because it was coming from a woman, I think they have not taken me seriously. Fast forward today. I would say I have encountered challenges when they say, "oh, are you fighting? Are you here to break a glass ceiling?" And I said, "I'm not here to break anything. I'm only saying I'm here to create things. So, we can collaborate so we can coexist so we can support each other." That's what I believe in, I'm not here to prove anything. And for me, it was never about men and women. For me, they are two wheels of a car.

They both have to do their work to go forward. It's never like somebody has to be ahead in the race. They have to work hand in hand whether it's work or it's family. If one person, if one wheel is not working, you won't be able to progress or go to your destination. That's what I strongly believe in.

Narjis: I think that's a very powerful story. Thank you. Similarly, to what you just discussed. Have you faced any other professional or personal challenges as a result of being your full self at work?

Priyanka: When I came back from my maternity leave, I came back and week one went by. I was given no task I was given the processes to go through again, but in one year, nothing had changed at the company, but I was given the policies and procedures again. The projects that were coming my way were like below something I was handling before my mat leave. The perception of the people around me changed as if I, I don't even exist. Like my capability to do a certain job was less just because I was away for 12 months. It took me a while to force myself in the same projects because it's a hard task you know. When people look and by that time, I think perception changed so much so fast that everybody, including some of the very strong female leaders in that company at that time. I felt that "you know, because you are a woman, you have kids, you will understand where I'm coming from", but then they were indifferent too. So, for me, that was a learning lesson. You know what, no matter how you're going to show up, no matter how challenging the projects you can deliver faster, it's a perception that you can never fight. You take that as a pinch of salt, and you do what you're expected to do. Took me six months to come in an awkward silence, come in the kitchen and people stop talking. So, it took me six months to bring myself into the conversations because data don't lie, numbers don't lie. Yeah. So, I let my work make the noise. So (inaudible) things have changed because now my son is 11 years old. So, it's been 11 years of me being in that situation. But I still look around, I'm not saying it hasn't gotten better, it has gotten better. I see a lot of my colleagues are going on mat leave. Or they have come from mat leave, but the situation, I would say maybe is 5% better, but the bias still exists. And I have not seen, because now in a progressive country like Canada, where there is a paternity leave too, when dads come back from paternity leave, they don't get those looks. So, you know I'm just saying, we just have to be careful because there are times, we are talking about two moms and two dads. So, you know what the perception needs to be changed. To make it if you're talking about inclusion and diversity if you can't fight these small gender biases, then we are talking about climbing like a huge mountain there, and it's going to be a very big task.

Narjis: I want to move towards a bit more general question. Since like you said, you have a talent management background. So, I know that from my past interviews I've learned that a lot of employees come to HR departments when they want religious accommodations or disability accommodations or nursing rooms or, or such things. How do you think these accommodations are being currently handled by HR departments? And what could be done better?

Priyanka: You know, when you say HR, HR means human resources. And I think, the perception about HR in our industry is very anti. They are always looked down, "hey, you don't listen to me. Da, da, da, da, da." But for me because Canada is now, the way we are blossoming, is we are heavy population with smart immigrants. This will not change. So for me to think about spending the past 16 years in HR, I believe these special accommodations are not special when you hire someone you're

(Inaudible) . Because you need to hire someone for being their authentic self, as you're coming in you say, "Hey, this is your laptop. This is your workstation." At the same time, you have to say, "Hey Priyanka, do you need a special prey room? This is where it is located." It should become an onboarding policy versus a special accommodation that thought process has to change. And when I say it's only, it's not an HR only responsibility. HR can be a gatekeeper. You don't work with HR if you're not an HR skill person, you work with different individuals in the company. A company culture has to be inclusive. It's not HR's job. Because tomorrow, if I'm coming and interviewing with you for a job and say, "Hey, I, I really like you" as my manager it's your duty to make sure when I'm walking in the door, I have everything to do my job. Which means if I need a special prayer room, which should not be special, it's a prayer room. It should be available. Or if, if it's a small company, there are no special prayer rooms it's a manager's duty to say, "Hey, by the way, Priyanka, you know, we don't have special prayer rooms, however, you can use a conference room", you know, like they, he or she should make you feel comfortable in all aspects of your life. Just to give an example, I had an opportunity to speak with a CEO yesterday and this CEO I can't disclose the name of the company, their CEO's company is termed as number one American company for culture. And because DX work is to work with companies all sizes and shapes. And because we work with leadership to say, "how do you assess your culture? Dah, dah, dah, da." so I had this opportunity to connect with the CEO and I said, "you are claiming to be the biggest American culture company all over your website. How do you even define your culture?" And I said, "if I have your permission, Trump is all over the news for all bad reasons. So, you are saying number one, America's culture company, how, I need to know how", and he said "Priyanka, when I'm hiring someone, I'm hiring them for their skills, for their problems, for their issues, for their mental challenges. I hire a person wholesome. I believe in three P's. Which is people process profits, if any company or any HR or any policymaker do reverse, which is profits process and people, they will not stay relevant in the long run." So, coming back to your question is it's not only an HR responsibility to provide you whatever you need to make yourself comfortable in the job. It becomes everyone responsibility. It becomes a company's culture and value system. And if you don't see yourself fitting in, I would recommend finding out. You will hunt. You find somebody who will. There are many companies who are spending dollars, have consultants, research, people that they say, "let's make these accommodations not feel like special things." It should become natural. It should. You know, a default criterion of your hiring practice because in the end, it's Canada, it's flourishing with immigrants and that's what's going to make you relevant.

Narjis: Yeah. I think like you mentioned one of the things that stood out for me was that it, it is a culture company culture thing, but it also starts from the top. I was wondering if you had any advice for those who are considering to uncover in the workplace?

Priyanka: I think my only advice to whoever listening to this podcast is to be never ashamed of who you are, whether this mean for you to come out of the closet and declare "this is who I am." You should take time and do it because one day you're going to feel like you're compromising something, just to pay your bills. It's not how you need to work. Cause you may be able to survive, not thrive for a year, two, or even three. But at the end of those years and those days you you will be killing yourself. You're dealing with mental issues. And when I say work, but you know, there are articles on work life balance, you Google it, and you will get both the thoughts of this and that. My thought process is that there is no work life balance. It's only life you need to see show up. This is your life, which has a component of work, which has a component your family. And you need to be your authentic self. If you have an urge that you need to cover something, it should be a choice. It should not become a pressure. It should not become, "yes, I, I can do this, or I can do that because, so, and so will see or perceive me like this." It should come from you. It should become a personal choice. Not because there's a pressure from an outsider, an external factor. And where I have come from, I will highly recommend show up, be your true self. Anytime you're interviewing talk about your family, where you're coming from, what kind of commitments you have as a brother, sister, wife, husband, if you have a school pickup or school drop-off, if you have an ailing parent at home. Don't talk about your skills. Talk about everything you're bringing on the table for the organization before they make that hire and never give the opportunity for the employer to make a choice. For me, finding a job is like a marriage. As much as they need you or you need them, it should be a compilation of, "yes, I like you. I love you. We can date. We can have a marriage." When I say marriage its if we can work together. And that can be only possible when each body will know everything, which is deep inside rooted,

whether it's a dark secret. I'm not saying you start talking about all your kinky secrets, but like, if it's going to affect you, how you're going to work, it should be open.

Narjis: I think that was beautiful advice. And I hope that everybody listening has the chance to listen to that and consider if they want to uncover in any aspect of their identity.

Priyanka: I'm really happy that I'm able to share my story. And even if one person gets the courage to move from being in a covered situation and get the courage to be uncovered, I think we will make a difference 100% and every drop makes an ocean.

Narjis: We just moved the needle. Great. Thank you so much. This was great.

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