TOPIC OF THE MONTH: CODE SWITCHING

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WHAT IS CODE SWITCHING?

Information for all subsections of this newsletter were sourced from the Harvard Business Review *and* yes! magazine

When linguistic scholar Einar Haugen introduced the term in 1954, he sought to describe the fluid nature with which multilingual people moved between languages. Since then, the term has expanded to capture how individuals adjust *all* forms of communication and expression based on their audience.

According to an article written for the Harvard Review, "code-switching involves adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities".

In the '70s, the phenomenon gained traction in African-American spaces—academic and otherwise—to describe the relationships between people of color—particularly Black people—and the colonial other. In the text, *Language and Interracial Communication in the United States: Speaking in Black and White*, George B. Ray describes African-American code-switching as "a skill that holds benefits in relation to the way success is often measured in institutional and professional settings."

WHY DO PEOPLE CODE SWITCH?

EVERYONE DOES IT –

Do you have a "phone voice" or a personality you put on when speaking to customers or theatre patrons? This is a form of code-switching. We all consciously and unconsciously adjust our speaking patterns, slang use, and tone of voice based on who we're interacting with.

WHEN CODE SWITCHING BECOMES A PROBLEM-
While code switching may simply be 'acting professional at work' for some, for minorities the practice of code switching can become necessary for career advancement and a safe work environment. The Harvard Business Review poses the question: "If leaders are truly seeking to promote inclusion and address social inequality, then they must begin by understanding why a segment of their workforce believes that they cannot truly be themselves in the office."

According to a survey of Black professionals conducted by the Harvard Business Review, some examples of code switching in the workplace included:
- Avoiding the stereotype of Black people as lazy by constantly adjusting behavior to 'exceed expectations'
- Tempering reactions to conflicts at work because of concern about being labeled as an 'angry Black woman'
- Limiting relationships with coworkers and censoring views/opinions because of fear of being other-ed as a Black person in an all-white workplace.
- Adjusting hairstyles, names, and speech patterns to come across as more conventionally 'professional' in the Eurocentric definition

WHAT CAN COMPANIES CAN DO TO PREVENT CODE SWITCHING FROM BECOMING A "NECESSARY BURDEN?" -

Evaluate company culture – examine what about a workplace might create pressure for minorities to code switch

Tackle underrepresentation at all levels – part of the reason employees may feel pressure to code switch is because there is no one else there who is like them. If BIPOC and other minorities are represented at all levels, their cultural identities will be more normative and acceptable.

Consider inclusion separately from diversity – in addition to focusing on diversity, companies must seek to create an inclusive environment where employees can bring their authentic selves to the workplace.

SEE/LISTEN MORE:
What is Code Switching? – Video from the Huffington Post's "Between the Lines" series

Sorry to Bother You, black Americans and the power and peril of code-switching – article about the satirical film by director Boots Riley about a young Black telemarketer who adopts a "white voice" that leads to great success, and the relevance of the film to code switching.

What Had Happened Was: Episode 2 – Netflix panel discussing Code Switching (available to watch on YouTube)

How Code Switching Explains the World – NPR article

THEATRE IN ACTION:

We are seeing a strong push for academic institutions and theatres to reconsider the 'neutral voice', or what is often taught as an 'accent-less, acceptable voice' for theatre performers. Canadian actor Andrew Prashad covers this topic in his video blog [“Code Switching: Speaking White in Canadian Theatre”](). Another great discussion about this is the advice column [“Help! Am I 'Too Black' for My Mostly White Theater School?”]()

IT'S YOUR TURN:

Think about the times you've felt pressure to code switch and question why you chose to do that? What are ways that we ask our audiences to code switch in order to meet the standard of traditional “theatre etiquette”? What are ways we can let ourselves, our colleagues, and our patrons bring their full selves to our spaces?

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