What is
COVERING?

A strategy people use to downplay a stigmatized part of their identity.[1]
The efforts people make to combat and minimize the potential negative effects of bias.[2]

WHY DO PEOPLE COVER AT WORK?[3]

People and groups cover because they believe they need to in order to feel included at work. To fit in with prevailing social norms and to avoid potential stigma, people minimize differences with their coworkers.
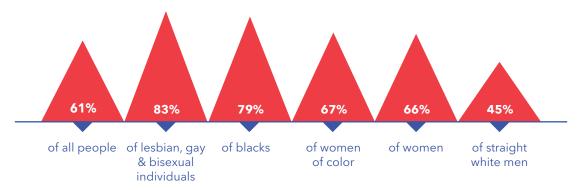
HOW DO PEOPLE COVER?[4]

The 4 Axes of Covering

APPEARANCE-BASED

Individuals alter their presentation—including grooming, clothing, and behaviors—to blend in.

examples

- A woman dyes her gray hair to appear younger.
- A man wears dress shirts to hide tattoos that he believes his colleagues would judge as unprofessional.

AFFILIATION-BASED

Individuals avoid behaviors widely associated with their identity in order to protect themselves from negative stereotypes.

examples

- A man changes his name to hide his class/caste background.
- A Latina never speaks Spanish at work so that her non-Spanish-speaking colleagues do not think she is gossiping about them.

ADVOCACY-BASED

Individuals "stick up for"—or don't stick up for—their group identity.

examples

- A person with a mental illness does not speak when someone makes a negative remark about the company's disability recruiting efforts.
- A Millennial keeps quiet when a co-worker complains that all younger employees don't want to work hard.

ASSOCIATION-BASED

Individuals avoid contact with other group members.

examples

- A gay executive does not bring her wife to company functions so the focus stays on her work performance and not her personal life.
- Asian employees in a Canadian workplace choose not to eat lunch together so they don't get remarks about how they are not friendly toward other groups.
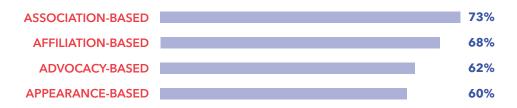
PREVALENCE OF COVERING AT WORK[5]

A majority of people report covering at work on at least one axis:

61%	83%	79%	67%	66%	45%
of all people	of lesbian, gay & bisexual individuals	of blacks	of women of color	of women	of straight white men

IMPACT OF COVERING[6]

For many, covering is "somewhat" to "extremely" detrimental to their sense of self:

ASSOCIATION-BASED — 73%
AFFILIATION-BASED — 68%
ADVOCACY-BASED — 62%
APPEARANCE-BASED — 60%

And, perceiving that leaders expect you to cover leads to negative effects on your sense of available opportunities and commitment to the organization.

NOT ALL FORMS OF COVERING ARE NEGATIVE

Some forms of covering are benign, or even positive, as they help foster a sense of shared identity, community, and belongingness.[7]

Some covering demands are justifiable, if aligned with organizational values. For example, employer demands related to appearance-based covering set appropriate business attire and presentation standards.[8]

Covering that is consistent with personal values—for example, an extremely private person who chooses not to share personal information with colleagues—can also be appropriate.

1. Kenji Yoshino, *Covering* (New York: Random House, 2006).
2. Kenji Yoshino and Christie Smith, *Uncovering Talent: A New Model of Inclusion* (Deloitte, December 6, 2013); Juan M. Madera, Eden B. King, and Michelle R. Hebl, "Bringing Social Identity to Work: The Influence of Manifestation and Suppression on Perceived Discrimination, Job Satisfaction, and Turnover Intentions," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2012): p. 165-170.
3. Ibid.
4. Kenji Yoshino and Christie Smith, *Uncovering Talent: A New Model of Inclusion* (Deloitte, December 6, 2013).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.

CATALYST
WORKPLACES THAT WORK FOR WOMEN

created: 11 December 2014
CATALYST.ORG