

## How code-switching impacts a company's overall success

More companies are finding ways to foster inclusive work environments. But is enough being done to empower employees to embrace their true identities in the workplace?

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LaToya Evans, principal and chief communications officer of the LEPR Agency in Charlotte, North Carolina.  
Photo credit *Brandon Grate*

Written By Loán Lake

Former early childhood educator Jerry Graham struggled with the need to hide his true identity to advance his career. Graham, who is gay and lives in Virginia Beach, Virginia, first entered the profession as an entrepreneur in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

“In the early years of being a childcare provider, I had to delicately balance the art of code-switching,” Graham said. “It was imperative that my conversations, interactions, and personality met the standards of someone that families wanted taking care of their young children — that is — a heterosexual man or a man that, even if he might be gay, he keeps it to himself.”

He found himself alternating between masking with a heteronormative demeanor and his true identity depending on which clients he engaged with. It was not until he relocated to the U.S. mainland in 2006 that his sexual identity was more readily embraced by others in his profession.

“I found out that it was not necessary for me to code-switch anymore. It was a habit that I slowly learned to walk away from,” he said.



Jerry Graham found himself hiding his true identity depending on which clients he engaged with.  
Photographer: Jermaine L. Stearns

According to the United Language Group, code-switching is when people change their language style and mannerisms based on who they’re talking to and to assimilate into a new environment.

Philadelphia-area construction worker who spoke about her current work environment on condition of anonymity revealed that at times, going to work can be a game of mental tug-of-war. As one of the few female construction workers on her job site, she toggles between expressing her femininity and displaying a tough demeanor in order to be seen as “one of the guys” by her male counterparts. To do this, she has to pretend that inappropriate or demeaning comments about women don’t get under her skin or choose to walk away from the “guy talk” rather than take a position on what is being said.

These are just some of the challenges she faces as a woman working in a predominantly male industry, which prevents her from being her authentic self in the workplace — a woman who embraces her femininity and is as capable as her male colleagues in carrying out her role as a carpenter. Rather than being perceived as weak or someone who would contact HR to complain, the construction worker hides a part of her true nature each day that she comes to work. Her story is not uncommon.

A recent [study](#) published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* cited that Black people engage in a variety of behaviors to avoid stereotyping and promote a professional image in the workplace. The report further describes racial code-switching as a form of impression management strategy — a tactic used by Black people to adjust the way they present themselves to others in order to be perceived as more professional by mirroring the norms, behaviors, and attributes of the dominant group in specific contexts. For employees like the construction worker, it means having to compartmentalize who she is in order to fit in with her peers.

“I knew coming into this industry that I would have to have tough skin. A lot of things (my male coworkers) say can be offensive, so I try to turn off what they say and act like it doesn’t bother me,” she said.

The construction worker is not alone in her struggle. According to a [2019 study](#) by Pew Research Center, 48% of Black adults with at least a four-year college degree say they often or sometimes feel the need to code-switch, compared with 37% of those who do not have a college degree. The research also showed that 45% of Hispanics and 38% of Blacks were significantly more likely than White respondents to feel unfairly judged by others because of the language they use to express themselves.

However, the need to code-switch extends beyond race into cultural occurrences. Ezra Edmond, a Los Angeles-based writer, director, and producer said he was uncomfortable revealing his Jewish identity at work for many years because he did not want to stand out as “different” and have people focus on that as opposed to just being himself. Edmond, who is biracial, identifies as Black and Jewish — or as he puts it, Blewish.



Ezra Edmond is a Los-Angeles based writer, director, and producer.  
Photo Credit: Elizabeth Grebler.

In his newly released animated short film, [“Blewish.”](#) Edmond shares his experiences growing up in a world where being Black and being Jewish are seen as separate and competing identities. “I often feel a need to code-switch, leaning into different aspects of my identity when talking to people who share those same traits — because I want them to see me as one of them, and not different,” he said. “I use different phrases and body language when I talk to different people who intersect with my identity, but I don’t ever

feel like I'm being fake or disingenuous. It's just that different people bring different parts of me front and center. I am always both Jewish and Black, never one or the other, and prefer to just be seen as being 'me.'”

## **More companies are grappling with ways to embrace diversity and create inclusive work environments.**

Before launching her own public relations firm, it was almost second nature for LaToya Evans, an African-American woman, who is the principal and chief communications officer of the LEPR Agency in Charlotte, North Carolina, to alter her speech and mannerisms when conducting business. However, Evans also sees code-switching as a means of strengthening one's communications skills to ensure their message is clearly understood.

“Code-switching has become a part of everyday life because you may not speak to friends the same way you speak to colleagues,” she said. Evans embraced code-switching as a means of ensuring that her message was being delivered in a way that others could easily receive it.

“Spending my 20s in very corporate settings, I never knew there was a professional alternative until I founded my own company. For employers who want to help employees be their authentic selves, I believe it starts with leaders being their genuine authentic selves. When I was most authentic, I saw my employee engagement scores soar. In my own company, the LEPR Agency, I'm proud that I've created a culture that I would have wanted to work in during my days in corporate America,” she said.

According to professional services giant Accenture, Evans' firm is ahead of the curve as it makes inclusivity and equality top business priorities. The [costs](#) associated with dissatisfaction in the workplace due to barriers to authenticity are shown to be in the trillions of dollars.

”The longer we expect people to behave in a certain way based on our own assumptions, the more people will continue to code-switch,” Edmond said. “Instead of risking being judged or limited in their careers and goals just for being their authentic selves.”

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