RESEARCH IN ACTION:

Wharton's Rachel Arnett Shows How Sharing Cultural Differences Can Be a Source of Inclusion, Not Division

THE PROBLEM:

The popular advice to "bring your whole self to work" is hard for minority employees. If they share too much about their cultural background, they risk being professionally penalized or socially ostracized by the majority. To play it safe, many minority employees downplay their differences in the workplace. But a study from Wharton management professor Rachel Arnett found that when those workers engage in rich and meaningful conversations about their backgrounds, it can make their majority colleagues more — not less — likely to include them at work. Her study helps reconcile a longstanding dilemma for minority employees who have felt forced to choose between authentic self-expression and professional success.

THE RESEARCH:

It's not small talk about the weather or weekend plans that bring employees closer together, according to the study. Simply hinting at cultural differences doesn't do the job, either. What works is what she terms "rich cultural-identity expression" that moves beyond the superficial to reveal parts of the inner self that are connected to cultural identity.

For example, along with telling her co-workers that she went to an African American festival over the weekend, a Black employee can talk about how the festival made her feel closer to her Nigerian roots. Instead of declining a lunch invitation because he is fasting for Ramadan, a Muslim employee can open up to his co-workers about why the religious observance is important to him. And instead of talking about the latest Oscar-buzz film, a Korean American employee can talk about how it felt empowering to see a predominately Asian cast on the big screen.

Arnett said rich cultural-identity expression increases inclusivity and professional opportunities in three ways:

- It causes people to have more respect for their minority coworkers. By sharing culturally relevant information, minority employees may be able to debunk or reframe stereotypes held by majority colleagues and raise their social worth.
- Rich expression fosters closeness because sharing personal information about cultural differences is an act of trust. It signals to majority colleagues that they are confidants who will understand and appreciate what is being shared.
- When minority colleagues share, they increase the majority group's learning. The more they believe they can learn from a minority employee, the more likely they are to include them in both professional and social interactions, like adding them to a big project.

THE SOLUTION:

Arnett has five recommendations for managers to help create a more open and inclusive workplace:

1. Cultural expression should be voluntary.

Minority employees should not be forced to explain their cultural backgrounds for other people's benefit. Rather, they should open up in their own time and in ways that help them feel more authentic or connected.

2. Create safe spaces

for minority workers to volunteer information about their cultural backgrounds, whether in pre-meeting catch ups, getting-to-know-you sessions, or informal events.

3. Share personal information,

especially in ways that show vulnerability. When managers set that precedent, it helps minority employees feel less marginalized and more empowered to share their own stories.

4. Show engagement.

When a minority employee makes a culturally relevant statement or observation, think of this as an opportunity. Consider asking a question like, "Is that something you feel comfortable discussing further or sharing more about?" This shows a willingness to engage but still gives the other person control.

5. Focus more on listening, learning, and supporting,

rather than passing judgment. Be mindful that your opinions as a listener may be influenced by stereotypes or unconscious biases. Many contentious topics, such as discrimination, are difficult to unpack, but the goal of rich cultural-identity expression is to connect with others.

THE SCHOLAR:
RACHEL ARNETT

Arnett is an assistant management professor at the Wharton School, where she specializes in research on diversity, identity, inclusion, intergroup relations, and intersectionality. She is a Penn graduate who earned her bachelor's degree at the school before completing her master's and doctorate degrees at Harvard University. In 2022, she was named by Poets & Quants as one of the "Best 40 Under 40 MBA Professors."

Arnett is biracial and grew up in Chicago's South Side, where she learned to navigate the social complexities of racially divided neighborhoods. Her life experience motivated her to study how people can overcome differences and create deeper understanding. Yet as an academic studying organizational behavior, she was disappointed to find that an overwhelming number of studies identify cultural expression as a source of professional risk.

"It's hard for me to believe that bringing attention to difference is always bad, and I was looking for ways to debunk this assumption," she said. "If there is a part of yourself that you want to bring to work that relates to your cultural background, there is a way to do that that is synergistic with success."

The Wharton Coalition for Equity and Opportunity (CEO) creates research-driven solutions to help current and future leaders ensure equity in business relationships and leadership. Dean Erika James, who is Wharton's first Black and first female dean, is emblematic of a paradigm shift in executive leadership. She has launched the Wharton Coalition for Equity and Opportunity as the hallmark of her leadership commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The initiative is being led by Kenneth L. Shropshire, Wharton emeritus professor of legal studies and business ethics. Shropshire is the former director of the Wharton Sports Business Initiative and former CEO of the Global Sport Institute.