

00:11

So picture this. Your friend calls to invite you to a party this Saturday. They say, "Yes, I totally understand that Saturday is Halloween, but trust me, it's not a Halloween party. October 31 just happens to be the best day when everyone is in town. No, no, no, no. You don't have to wear a costume. It's not going to be like that at all. Just come as you are." A party with your friends on Halloween, without having to go through all the trouble of finding a costume, a costume, mind you, you'll never wear again. Oh, you will be there. So Saturday is here. You head on over in your favorite faded jeans and the stylish enough top, quite frankly, you've been lounging in all day. You knock on the door.

01:04

Out steps these bright red boots, the perfect accessory to your friend's Wonder Woman costume. Wonder is the exact description of the look on your face. As you enter the house, your eyes dart across a number of cartoon characters, uniformed professionals and some unfortunate impersonations of the latest celebrities. You look to your friend for answers, but they're gathering the final votes for the costume contest. The costume contest. You, of course, receive no votes. Do you feel that? That feeling that you have right now? The anxiety, the upset and bewilderment as to how you came to be the odd one out for just doing what you were told. To come as you are. That's exactly how I feel when I am told to bring my full, authentic self to work.

02:04

"We want people of color to feel like they belong here," they say. "We're looking for passionate people who can bring a fresh perspective to challenge our way of thinking," they say. "Our diversity is our strength," they say. "Come just as you are," they say. Recruiters, managers, executives, CEOs -- all those responsible for making decisions. They say quite a lot. And perhaps for good reason. It's long been the expectation for people like me who have been grossly, often intentionally, underrepresented at work to contort ourselves into this caricature of what some call professionalism, and what we call a distorted elaboration of white cultural norms and the standards that meet the comforts of those who hold social and institutional power. That's professionalism.

03:10

The invitation to bring our full, authentic selves to work signals that this place could be the place to safely shed the guise. We could collect the parts of ourselves we've compartmentalized and trust that our differences will be seen as assets, not liabilities. Seeded in this call for authenticity is this idea that those who don't have to spend all their energy hiding parts of themselves could find more fulfillment at work. The expectation is that the more we could just be ourselves,

perhaps, just maybe, others will follow suit. The hope is that soon enough the culture of the entire organization will shift, becoming more inclusive and welcoming of difference. My type of difference.

04:03

So I show up to work as I am, with my Afro, my family photos, my disability accommodation needs, my questions, my pushback, my perspective, grounded in the lived experience of all my identities. I show up with this full, authentic self to perform my job with excellence. But when the time comes for the stretch projects, the promotion, equal pay, recognition, mentors, sponsors ... I'm overlooked.

04:44

"You need to work on being more of a team player," they say. "Your approach makes it difficult to work with you," they say. "Try to help others feel more comfortable around you," they say. "You are hurting your relationships at work when you talk about racism," they say. No promotion, no mentor, no votes. We cannot compete in the costume contest without a costume and expect to win.

05:25

The call to brave work with more authenticity undeservedly disadvantages people of color. Those of us who are already burdened with the task of chronically battling bias. With precision, the work to shift culture is designed to cost us our own mental and physical health. If who we are makes us as difficult as they say, then this demand for our authenticity compromises our careers. Listen, the fact is this: one person, or even a few people coming just as we are, cannot change company culture. How would change happen alongside rewards for coded definitions of "fit"? What difference would it make to allege a value for diversity without sustaining evidence of that value in any meaningful way? We know what we're up against.

06:34

Authenticity has become a palatable proxy to mask the pressing need to end the racism, ageism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and the like that run rampant throughout our professional lives.

06:53

Without accountability to examine these systems of bias and power, the call for authenticity fails. It fails to question who is in the room, who sits at that table and who gets to be heard. It fails to demand that we reveal the truth about how racism impacts decisions about who's in the room, who sits at that table and who gets to be heard.

07:30

What many people of color find is that even when we are in the room, sitting at that table, stating firmly, "I am speaking," very few people are actually listening. It starts to feel like our bodies are wanted in the room, but not our voices.

07:54

Look, I know what that's like. A couple of years ago, at the end of the senior leadership brainstorming meeting, I was called into an unscheduled check-in with an executive. She sounded enthusiastic about how my contributions helped move the project forward, so it surprised me when she then suggested that in future meetings, I should try to be more agreeable to help give others a win. If I did have feedback, she advised that I send it over email instead. Honestly, I was taken aback. Like, here I was feeling like my contributions mattered, that my seat at that table had proved pivotal to the success of our work together. Excitedly, I felt a lightness, ideating alongside my colleagues without reserve. The work was riveting. So I opted outside of my usual guardedness. I stopped hiding my opinions. I worried less about those constricted norms of how I should express myself. For the first time, I felt like -- Like I could take off that costume so many of us have to wear.

09:14

Clearly, that was a mistake. At the end of her comments, I tried to keep it real with her. I said, "Your advice is consistent with the way women of color, Black women especially, are treated at work." Her response fit perfectly into this three-step framework I've now come to know as DARVO: deny, attack, reverse the victim with the offender. DARVO sounds like this.

09:49

(Clears throat)

09:51

"Jodi-Ann, this has nothing to do with your race." Deny. "You're just being too sensitive and angry." Attack. "You know, if you're going to play the race card every time I try to give you feedback, it's going to make it really hard for us to work together. I just want you to be successful here. I'm just trying to support you." Who's the victim now?

10:19

Her attempts to gaslight me, to psychologically manipulate me into questioning my own reality was futile. Even then, in that moment, I knew that my experience was not unique. For too many Black women and other people of color, people living with disabilities, nonbinary people, deaf people, LGBTQIA+ people and others among us that are constantly featured on the "Come work with us" section on company websites, we know this harsh reality intimately. Being authentic privileges those already part of the dominant culture. It is much easier to be who you are when who you are is all around you.

11:11

Coming just as we are when we're the first, the only, the different or one of the few can prove too risky. So we wear the costume. We keep the truer parts of ourselves hidden. We straighten our curly hair for interviews. We pick up hobbies we do not enjoy. We restate our directives as optional suggestions. We talk about the weather instead of police brutality. We mourn for Breonna Taylor alone. We ignore the racist comments our supervisor makes, we stop correcting our mispronounced names. We ask fewer questions. We learn to say nothing and smile. We omit parts of our stories. We erase parts of ourselves. Our histories and present reality show this to be the best path for success.

12:17

But now our society is reaching a new tipping point. Inequities, racism and bigotry are finding fewer places to cower. Silences are becoming harder to keep. Our most radical collective imaginations for racial justice are reaching new possibilities. And so I'm asking that we, the people who have and continue to be denied inclusion in that refrain, dedicate the authentic fullness of who we are to that work, the work of making space everywhere for who we are -- to breathe.

13:07

But just for a moment, let me step away from that work to tell the rest of you this. Black people do not need to be any more authentic. So no, this Black disabled immigrant woman will not be

bringing her full, authentic self to work. But she is asking that you, those of you with the power of your positions and the protection of your whiteness and other societal privileges you did not earn, to take on that risk instead. There's an opportunity in this movement for change for you to do just that -- change. Not your hearts and minds. Close the gap between what you say and how we're treated. Change your decisions. Make working effectively across racial and cultural differences a core competency in hiring and performance management for everyone. Define good product design as one that centers the most underserved people. Close the racial gender pay gap, starting first with Latinx women. Build responsive people systems to manage racial conflict with equity and justice. These aren't the decisions that shift culture, but rather a tiny sample of the expansive possibilities of what you can actually do today, in your next meeting, to realize the hope for racial equity. You do the work to make it safe for me to come just as I am with my full, authentic self. That's your job, not mine. It's your party, not mine. You set the rules and rewards. So I'm asking you, what will it take to win in your contest?

15:26

Thank you.