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Summary

## “Just Be Yourself” Might Not Be Good Advice at Work

Everyone seems to be talking about the importance of always being yourself with everyone. But does that always play out well at work?

“The hype these days in the media and business press is that authenticity is great, and that leaders and employees should just be themselves in the workplace. But authenticity is not equally beneficial for everybody in every setting,” said Brandeis University’s [Sandra Cha](#), lead author of an [Academy of Management Annals](#) article, “[Being Your True Self at Work: Integrating the Fragmented Research on Authenticity in Organizations](#).”

“Research supports that authenticity can lead to psychological benefits, like making people happier and more energized at work,” said Cha, who coauthored the [article](#) with [Patricia Faison Hewlin](#) of McGill University, [Laura Morgan Roberts](#) of Georgetown University, [Brooke Buckman](#) of Florida International University, [Hannes Leroy](#) of Erasmus University, [Erica Steckler](#) of the University of Massachusetts Lowell, [Kathryn Ostermeier](#) of Bryant University, and [Danielle Cooper](#) of the University of North Texas.

The [authors analyzed](#) hundreds of psychological and management research articles on authenticity published since the late 1990s, including 11 from [Academy of Management Journal](#) and six from [Academy of Management Review](#). In describing the recent “surge of public interest in authenticity,” the [authors also pointed out](#) that the belief that people should be authentic has been around for thousands of years, promoted by philosophers from Socrates to Jean-Paul Sartre, and psychologists such as [Abraham Maslow](#).

For some people, authenticity can also improve professional image, career outcomes, and effectiveness as leaders. “People get excited when they meet people who seem ‘real.’ Or when they have a leader who strikes them as authentic and straightforward. We increasingly expect people to be authentic at work, and use authenticity as a standard by which we measure people,” Cha explained.

But when there’s a mismatch between your true self and the prevailing norms, bringing your whole self to work can be difficult and potentially have negative consequences for your image and career, the [authors wrote](#), giving these examples:

- “A retail clerk whose store expects employees to provide ‘[service with a smile](#),’ but who begins the work day feeling sad
- “A doctor at a health maintenance organization who disagrees with the organization’s value of ‘efficiency’ and seeing as many patients as possible each day



- “A lawyer who is gay at a firm in which homosexuality is devalued”

The [authors also cited](#) research on societally “devalued identities” and [stigma in the workplace](#) that can affect women, pregnant women, racial and religious minorities, [LGBTQ employees](#), disabled workers, and workers with conditions such as HIV/AIDS. One study “found that when women wore the hijab (Muslim headscarf), they received fewer job callbacks and greater negativity from potential employers, and experienced lower expectations to receive job offers. Relatedly, expressing stronger ethnic identification is associated with more negative evaluations of ethnic minorities. For instance, black women with Afrocentric [natural, rather than chemically altered or straightened] hairstyles were rated less favorably in terms of dominance and professionalism,” the [authors wrote](#).

“For somebody who has socially valued identities and whose authentic self just happens to fit well with what the organization’s values, authenticity may be a win-win situation. It might seem very natural for that person to encourage other people to also be themselves, because that person’s experiences being authentic are all good. But it’s not that easy for a lot of people,” Cha said.

“We hope that people become more aware of the challenges and the tensions around authenticity faced by a large number of people. Sensitive leaders will create environments where people don’t have to pay those costs to be authentic.”

[Video: “Be real. Take off your mask. Bring your whole self to work.”](#)