



# THE SELF-IDENTITY HOW AWKWARDNESS BENEFITS OUR WELLBEING

GAP:

**One afternoon,** I scoured Nordstrom Rack in hopes of finding new dark-wash, high-waisted jeans (or as another mom friend and I call them, Jeans of Generosity). My husband was out of town and my parents were watching the kids, so I was walking fast in hopes of keeping this trip quick.

As I squeezed by a rack of blazers, looking out toward the register, I whacked my shoulder against one of the metal rod corners.

Rather than screaming obscenities and rubbing my shoulder like a normal human, you know what fresh nonsense I did? I rubbed the metal rack. Like it was a puppy. As though my not-remotely-rock-hard shoulder muscle might have caused injury to the rack. As though this whole thing was premeditated in my mind. “There, there. Nice coat rack. We’re still friends, right?”

The cashier saw me whack my shoulder and immediately shouted, “Whoa, lady, are you okay?!”

I lied my very best Pinocchio lie and said, “I’m all good, thanks!” The reality was my shoulder hurt like hell and I needed an ice pack.

A primary reason we struggle to tolerate awkwardness is because instead of managing one version of ourselves, we find ourselves managing two: who we see ourselves to be, and the person we believe others see on display. At that moment, I wanted to be a fashionable mom who didn’t just bruise myself on a stationary object. I feared that the cashier saw a clumsy dork.

To embrace awkwardness rather than avoiding it, we need to shine a brighter light on this gap that exists between our two selves, develop a deeper understanding of what we feel inside of these walls, and build a strategy for how to bridge them.

### **To Feel Awkward Is Human**

Throughout our lives, we're influenced by our caregivers and peers, by marketing and media giants, and even by that outspoken girl in middle school who smoked cigarettes in the bathroom and was kind of a jerk who we didn't even like that much but wanted to impress anyway. We get these messages about who we should be, how we should act, and what we should do—all day, every day.

From a young age, we learn that there's a massive difference in the way we see ourselves and the way others see us. And as social beings who innately crave belonging and acceptance from our communities, we don't want to be judged, shunned, or ignored, so we learn to hide the parts of ourselves that don't match others' expectations.

In a 1950s-era book called *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Dr. Erving Goffman uses the metaphor of a theatrical performance to explain how this works. We often separate our "backstage" and "front stage" lives, whether we realize we're doing it or not.

That difference between the "backstage"—the way you see you—and the "front stage"—the way others see you—is what Emory University psychologist Philippe Rochat calls "the irreconcilable gap." Because that's a mouthful and I'll refer back to this phrase again, I prefer to call it the Self-Identity Gap.

In the early days of the pandemic, we confronted this gap in new, unexpected ways: Staring at our own image on Zoom for what felt like hours on end (“Do my baby hairs always stick up like that?”), having a tough feedback conversation without the benefit of subtle physical cues, or negotiating for a raise after not seeing your boss in the flesh for months.

In these situations, the version of ourselves that we believe we’re showing people—our internal identity—is forced to directly face the version people are seeing before them—our external reality. Sometimes those two versions are the same, but often, they’re not.

**Awkwardness is the feeling we get when our “front” crumbles and seems to be incompatible with reality.**

Here’s what we humans have in common: We’re either occasionally awkward or we’re performing. That’s it. There’s no in-between or middle ground. To feel awkward is to be human, and to avoid it entirely is a lie. The people who seem to skip over it or convey unreachable levels of confidence all the time aren’t immune. They’ve merely perfected the art of performance.

Professionally, you might see yourself as a strategic visionary, but your boss still sees you as a hands-on executor. You are convinced you’re critical to the project’s success, but

someone else sees you as a helping hand while they take all the credit. We think we had a breakout year worthy of five-star performance reviews, but our leadership assesses us as “meeting expectations.”

Being inside the walls of the Self-Identity Gap can feel jarring. We desperately want people at work to see the version of ourselves we see, or at least the version we’re trying so hard to present in the moment, and sometimes we bridge that gap in funny ways.

I’m reminded of a favorite Ellen DeGeneres joke about how people will sometimes break into this awkward little jog for a few seconds after they’ve tripped. “It’s like they’re saying to anybody watching, ‘Oh, I was going to start running anyway.’”

DeGeneres goes on to point out another odd human behavior, one that might explain why I started rubbing a stationary object in the middle of the Christiana Mall: Even if we hurt ourselves, in most moments it doesn’t matter. We’d rather dismiss the pain and laugh it off.

Awkwardness is the feeling we get when our “front” crumbles and seems to be incompatible with reality. When we put on an “I meant to start running!” version of ourselves, what we’re really doing is putting on a performance with the hopes of winning the Double Grand Prize: Temporary social approval and an escape hatch from the discomfort of being stuck between the walls of the Self-Identity Gap.

At Nordstrom Rack, the version of myself I needed the cashier to see was the cool and calm Enthusiast of Fashionable Mom Jeans. And while she likely knew it was a lie (the thud of the collision was not quiet), she played along because she wanted to be seen as the Helpful-But-Not-Pushy Nordstrom Rack Cashier. Win-win.

## Authenticity Improves Chances of Success

Over the years, some of us have become really talented performers. Putting on a performance will help you fit in, and plenty of previous books and articles will tell you the way to reach your goals faster is to change yourself to cater to the interests and expectations of others.

Catering is when we intentionally use the words, gestures, cues, and behaviors that we believe will match other people's interests, preferences, and expectations rather than our own. In other words, we act in the ways that give us the best chance that other people will approve of us. It's something we've learned to do to close the Self-Identity Gap early and often.

To be fair, there's evidence to support that early research. We've been taught that making a positive impression during an early encounter influences important long-term outcomes, like getting the job, inking a deal, or negotiating the higher salary. It makes sense that it's become a common practice.

When over 450 employed adults were asked to imagine a risk-taking moment at work, such as interviewing for a dream job, negotiating a salary or deal, pitching an idea to investors, or presenting to a high-profile client, 66 percent said they would cater to their audience instead of being wholly themselves. A full 71 percent reported believing that catering would be the most effective approach in the situation.

But here is the truth: Fitting in and catering to others is not only overrated, but it also diminishes your performance. "Fake it 'til you make it" had its moment in the sun, but it never felt sustainable or made taking the next big risk feel any easier.

In a National Geographic interview, Melinda Gates revealed how this strategy failed her. “I spent my first few years at my first job out of college doing everything I could to make myself more like the people around me,” she shared. “It didn’t bring out the best in me. [You have to] seek out people and environments that empower you to be nothing but yourself.”

Oprah Winfrey agrees with her. She quit her job at the prestigious news program *60 Minutes* because its reserved tone and style clashed with her more emotional, organic style. “It was not the best format for me,” she explained. “I think I did seven takes on just my name because it was ‘too emotional.’ I go, ‘Is there too much emotion in the ‘Oprah’ part or the

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‘Winfrey’ part?’ They would say, ‘All right, you need to flatten out your voice, there’s too much emotion in your voice.’ So I was working on pulling myself down and flattening out my personality—which, for me, is not such a good thing.”

Newer research confirms scientifically that Gates and Winfrey are right: Being yourself at work will make you more successful. The study, led by Francesca Gino, a Harvard behavioral scientist, and her colleagues, ran several experiments that all pointed to similar results.

One experiment, in which they tracked 166 entrepreneurs who fast-pitched their ideas to potential investors, showed that catering to the investors harmed their evaluations, while being genuine and authentic—stumbles, fumbles, and all—made them three times as likely to be chosen.

They also found that people experience measurably higher levels of anxiety when they try to cater to someone else's preferences rather than behave like their authentic selves. This adds up. When we're trying to hide our true selves from the person we're trying to impress, it's tiring!

I remember being in my first few weeks at a new job. I was trying so hard to impress my new boss that I physically fell into bed at the end of each day—I was pooped. Constantly policing myself also ate into the energy I had left to do my actual work. It felt like wearing a heavy mask on my face all day, except this one didn't have those cool LED lights that are supposed to make my wrinkles disappear.

Gino's team discovered that trying to hide our true self is not only cognitively and emotionally draining, but since we can't know other people's preferences and expectations for sure, no matter how hard we try, it just makes things feel worse and makes us feel even more like a phony—all of which hurts our performance and psychological well-being at work.

To be clear, it's not that we shouldn't try to make a positive impression on other people. Sometimes superficial changes, like trading in your hoodie for a suit, is wise. And sometimes leaving our jobs, like Gates and Winfrey did, isn't an option due to larger, systemic circumstances and obstacles, so we make the best of it.

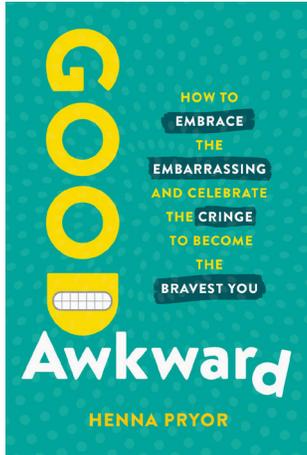
But the idea that we must cater to others to achieve successful outcomes needs to shift, because the opposite is actually true. Shapeshifting your way through courageous moments is less effective than being your awkward, perfectly imperfect self.

When you find yourself facing a moment of courage at work, please remind yourself that **performing to meet others' expectations smothers your potential and is more hype than substance.** 📖

Adapted from *Good Awkward: How to Embrace the Embarrassing and Celebrate the Cringe to Become The Bravest You* by Henna Pryor, published by Ideapress Publishing. Copyright © 2023 by Henna Pryor.



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Henna Pryor, PCC is a highly sought after Workplace Performance Expert and an award-winning 2x TEDx and global keynote speaker, virtual presenter, team facilitator, and professional executive coach. She’s known for her science-backed approach to improving the performance, habits, and actions of hungry high achievers—in her fun, no-nonsense, no-jargon way—to move them from their first level of success to their next one. As someone who has pivoted her career twice and will try almost anything once, Henna shares her work from the stage and screen as CEO of Pryority Group—a fast-growing performance growth firm—to expand on her belief that the key to most people’s success is embracing the bumpy edges in order to be braver in the work that we do.

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