



SELLING OUT THE DIVERSITY ISSUE WE'RE NOT TALKING ABOUT

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Conversations about diversity in the workplace

tend to center on a few specific areas: employee demographics, policies regarding hiring and discrimination, and in some more evolved workplaces, culture. What we miss, however, is a more in-depth look into how employees—especially those from marginalized communities—relate their identities and values to their workplaces. At work, these employees aren't just thinking about how to get their jobs done. They're thinking about how their work does or does not serve their communities. They're thinking about the type of people they aspire to be versus what their workplace expects them to be. They're thinking about their identities, how these identities are received by their colleagues or clients, and how to represent themselves at work.

In many workplaces, there are few options for resolving such thoughts and concerns, and employees are time and time again put through the painful experience of having to choose work over other aspects of their being. For many, especially those with marginalized identities, this feels like selling out.

When we hear the term "selling out," we might envision the politician who leaves campaign promises unfilled after meeting lobbyists with deep pockets, or the musician who turns their back on their roots to pursue big record deals and corporate sponsorships. Yet, once we started collecting real-life stories about selling out, we found that they tended to be less dramatic and more complex than one would expect.



A Colombian-American environmentalist in a conservative workplace bites her tongue rather than confront racist remarks to keep her job. A lesbian military lawyer hides her identity while prosecuting LGBTQ+ colleagues under Don't Ask, Don't Tell. A loving father toes the line in a well-paying but toxic job to support his family and put his kids through college.

These stories, hidden under the surface of everyday people's work experiences, offer a unique insight into the diverse people who make up the backbone of every workplace. And as each new generation of workers continues to bring their strong identities and beliefs into the workplace, unveiling the ubiquity of selling out grows from a matter of curiosity into a business imperative. What's causing stress and shame? What compels employees, especially women, racial minorities, LGBTQ+ people, and other members of marginalized communities, to stay or leave? And most of all, how do people relate their work to their lives as a whole?

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THE CONTEXT

We can't begin to explore the issue of selling out without first reiterating two of the fundamental assumptions made by those who think and work with diversity in mind:

1. We live in a capitalist society. As a consequence, people feel pressure to do what sells in order to get by, which can impact job choice, how one markets oneself, how one's work is negotiated (e.g., an artist needing to produce work that's appealing to the masses), and also what type of lifestyle is affordable (e.g., we may believe in a completely organic diet, cruelty-free clothing, and walking to work each day, but have a Walmart clothing budget and can't afford to live close enough to work to walk).
2. Our society values some types of bodies, identities, and experiences over others. This means that women, LGBTQ+ people, people of color, people with disabilities, the elderly, the poor, and people with persecuted systems of faith will not have the same access to opportunity than people with more privileged identities. People who hold one or more marginalized identities can find themselves torn between their loyalty to their community versus the freedom and opportunities that come with doing what it takes to get ahead, whether that means distancing from an identity, hiding it, or even using it for profit.

These factors combined create a cultural context in which flexing our values and identities in some form is often necessary for survival, especially for those of us with multiple strong values or with one or more marginalized identities.

Imagine that you're the primary breadwinner for your family and a strong feminist, yet your good standing at work seems to hinge on you playing up your helplessness and downplaying your intelligence so your colleagues and boss don't feel threatened. Or perhaps you're doing groundbreaking research that could change the trajectory of your field in important ways, yet just found out that the organization funding your research has white supremacist ties.

We've all had to make choices in our own lives between two or more things that are important to us. Sometimes these things are the identities that make us who we are. Sometimes they are the beliefs and values that we've committed to. Other times, they are the duties and responsibilities we have to our families, communities, and people we care about.

We've named the feeling of being forced to choose between two or more things we care deeply about the **impossible choice** in order to highlight just how challenging such decisions can be. Of course, few "impossible choices" are literally "impossible" to make. But the struggle that accompanies these decisions is worthy of attention. We call this conflict the impossible choice in recognition of how difficult it can feel at its worst.

On the surface, making a choice that compromises our own identities or communities appears to be a selfish act, a breach of good values. The truth is that it does harm to view selling out simply as a failure of moral character, rather than nuanced decision-making in the context of a seemingly impossible choice. The two stories that follow demonstrate the kinds of selling out decisions—and the thoughts and feelings behind them—that marginalized people experience. During our time listening to and collecting these stories, almost everyone we spoke to had a similar experience to share.

TANISHA

If she changed her name to sound less Black, would her business do better?

Even the thought felt traitorous. Tanisha, an Afro-Latinx woman and born-and-bred New Yorker who uses she/her pronouns, was raised to take pride in her race. “I was Black, first and always,” she said. “It was this foundation of Blackness that stood with me when interacting in mixed spaces. It led me to attend a historically Black college.” But despite her upbringing and pride in her racial identity, Tanisha held a secret: she couldn’t shake the idea that being Black was a disadvantage in the world.

“I was programmed by society,” she told us. “No matter how many Black history classes or homecomings I attended, I didn’t believe that Black people could thrive as business owners or high-ranking professionals in the communications industry unless they compromised.”

Tanisha held this belief for two reasons. The first was that she had a dearth of professional role models. While Black women make up 8% of the private sector workforce, they only make up 1.5% of senior-level executives. (White men make up 33% of the workforce, but 63% percent of executive-level positions.) The second was that she held no delusions about the reality of discrimination in the field, discrimination against Black people not on the basis of their work or dedication, but based on their Blackness alone. “I thought ‘Tanisha’ sounded too Black,” she acknowledged. “People with ghetto-sounding names don’t get as far ahead due to perceptions of what they can provide. If the one thing holding me back is a name, then why not change that name?”

In 2004, economists Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan published the results of their game-changing research, *Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination*. This study, which has since been cited thousands of times, revealed that simply changing the name on a resume from a white name to a Black name reduced callbacks by 30%. Just to close that gap, a resume with a Black name had to have 8 years of additional job experience than the resume with the white name.

When Tanisha started her PR and communications business, she opted to use her middle name, Dariana, which felt more racially ambiguous. But she did so defiantly, both recognizing her desire to avoid discrimination and her unwillingness to pretend to be white. "I didn't change my name to Kate," she pointed out. "I wasn't going to completely change my identity. I just wanted to prolong the game a bit longer." And prolong the game she did. To prevent potential clients from confirming her Black identity, she removed all pictures of herself from her websites, business media, and materials, leaving only the name Dariana to identify her by.

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“Dariana” would be the name she used for six years, but it did not offer her the ease and advantages she had hoped for. Her friends who had known her before frequently slipped up and used “Tanisha,” and even when they got it right and used “Dariana,” it was uncomfortable. “I winced whenever anyone else adopted it because it was a constant reminder of my inner conflict,” Tanisha reflects. Her business hadn’t failed—but the name change hadn’t catapulted her into huge success, either.

It was after delivering a big talk at her HBCU alma mater on authenticity and success, when Tanisha felt a flash of insight.

I did the talk, I was killin’ it, but afterwards I felt this GORILLA on my back. How can you speak so eloquently about authenticity, and how it leads to success, and that’s the only way that you could be successful if you’re authentic, and you’re literally rolling around with your middle name because you were too afraid to use your first name?

The hypocrisy of the last six years stared her in the face, and Tanisha finally relented. “What am I really afraid of?” she asked herself. “If people don’t want to work with me because I’m Black, then I don’t want to work with them.” Tanisha decided, “F- this, I’m going back to my first name!” So that’s what she did.

Looking back, Tanisha has no regrets over changing her name to Dariana and back again. “It was a part of my never-ending quest to find myself,” she says, “And getting comfortable with my name was a major leg of that quest.” In the end, Tanisha feels she had to dismiss her name in order to learn to love it.

LAM

Lam, who uses they/them pronouns, wanted to become a social worker. As a nonbinary Asian-American person in their 20s who had grown up amid discrimination, homelessness, and substance abuse, Lam was fully aware that the front-line workers doing social work often didn't look like the clients they served. To that end, Lam reluctantly made the decision to go to college.

Months into their first year of college, however, Lam was perplexed. People were paying attention to them—a lot of attention. When Lam shared their history around homelessness and substance abuse, people's eyes widened, whether they were students or professors. Students pushed Lam to describe their experiences in the same academic terms they were learning in class. Professors encouraged Lam to identify and even fill in gaps in the academic literature. *Me, contribute research to advance an entire field?* The validation was intoxicating.

Newly emboldened, Lam conducted a major research project that examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ homeless people living in a nearby homeless shelter. "This entire world of research and academia and advocacy opened up," they said. "It was the first time in my life where I felt like I could be myself and proud of who I was and that my experience mattered." As the research project continued, however, Lam started feeling strange about how their interactions with other academics.

When I opened up about them I got a lot of affirmation; I got a lot of understanding—it felt very liberating. And at the same time, there was a strange pressure. Other people

would say, "You know about this stuff; you've been there. Tell us about your experiences being homeless, or with substance abuse, or as a minority member."

Lam increasingly noticed how the peers and professors they told about their work seemed more interested in Lam's relationship to the research topic than the research itself. "It was like I was a spokesperson for these communities, for these groups, in a way that I don't think I ever got comfortable with," they explained.

Lam was uncomfortable disclosing personal details to eager strangers, but hoped that by doing so these people would care about Lam's research findings more. Lam hesitantly told a few individuals about their own LGBTQ+ identities, and about their struggles as a teen. But others didn't react how Lam had hoped. "People weren't asking about the organizations they should donate to, or how to make the problem better, or how they could contribute to the research I was doing. It was more about, 'Let's pat ourselves on the back now.'"

"I mostly felt confused and cheated," Lam told us. "I had been told my whole life that there was this adult/professional world that had answers, and was open-minded, accepting of challenges, and strived as a whole to create a better, more equal and compassionate world. What I saw and learned while doing that research project seemed to me like the complete opposite of what I had been told.

"It made me realize that this adult/professional world that had been lauded to me for so long as the end-all-be-all, was just as much bullshit as the adults, teachers, and students I had been bullied by as a kid. This was earth shattering to me.

“My mental health was affected, my sense of self was affected, and my feelings of self-loathing skyrocketed. I felt caught up in a web and didn’t understand how to untangle myself—I hated these institutions I had participated in and at the same time had such a hunger to be validated by them.”

Faculty at institutions of higher learning heavily skew toward straight, white, and cisgender. As a result, students who identify as queer and/or people of color lack role models and mentors, grant money is disproportionately allotted toward the research interests of the privileged, and classrooms struggle with cultural and pedagogical issues around diversity and inclusion.

Lam gave up on academia. They graduated college and used their degree to start working as a drug and alcohol counselor for their local community, like they had initially wanted. This time, they initially kept their LGBTQ+ identity and their past under wraps with their colleagues.

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As a social worker, Lam connected extremely well with their clients and advocated on their behalf to their coworkers. Now they had a new problem: they were so effective that others become suspicious. "I run into a lot of people who question why I'm saying what I'm saying, or where I get the information I'm getting," Lam explains. They knew the trade-offs here of coming out. Sharing their own identities might help them gain the respect and understanding they needed to be an effective advocate. But their experience in college taught them to be wary of selling their identities, even when the cause seemed justified.

Lam chose to come out. They always did. What they realized after many months was that the "choice" to come out didn't really feel like a choice at all. "In my mind at the time, that was all I had because I consistently had those parts of my identity honed in on by society. There's so much more to me."

As Lam's career has progressed, they've also started trying to be kinder to themselves and make new resolutions, such as finding community with shared identity so that they can be themselves around others with a shared language. "I crave connection," they shared. "But I feel safer making connections within my own communities."

Finding a validating place to be themselves helps Lam resist the pull to performatively share their identities. Even if they aren't always sure whether they're selling out, Lam has become more comfortable with the ambiguity. "Sometimes I occupy a space that can feel nice and terrible. Sometimes I'm able to speak out about a lot of things, and it sometimes crosses into the territory where I'm not sure if I'm doing it for myself or for other people." Lam, however, is working on it. "There's a lot of strength just in being myself," they said.

WHAT COMPANIES CAN LEARN FROM SELLOUT STORIES

1. Marginalized employees often need to code-switch to survive in the workplace.

Code-switching is when we adjust the outward markers of our identities (language, gestures, mannerisms, clothing, hairstyle) according to where we are and who we're with. Tanisha felt pressured to adopt a more racially ambiguous name to succeed as an entrepreneur. Everyone code-switches, and people with marginalized identities perhaps more so to survive in environments that weren't built with them in mind, but it's a strategy that many wish didn't have to exist at all. Tanisha resented that she needed to tone down her Blackness in order to placate her predominantly white clients. "I am going against the authenticity of who I am just to appease and make another group of people comfortable."

2. Marginalized employees often feel pressure to "sell" their identity to succeed.

Those who live in a society that "others" them experience a physical and social world that isn't built for them. Buildings aren't accessible to people in wheelchairs. Automatic sinks don't turn on for darker skin. Workplaces only recognize Christian holidays. Survey options don't include nonbinary gender options. And yet, being "othered" also offers people the unique opportunity to sell their identity or experience in a form of self-commodification. Lam experienced this when they found that their social identities, previously a source of hardship, were valuable in both academia and their nonprofit job. While there were clear benefits to overemphasizing these identities, Lam also felt uncomfortable with the stereotyped and superficial ways in which people chose to interact with them.

3. Marginalized employees are always balancing and managing their identities at work. Marginalized employees are constantly managing their identities between two extremes: becoming subsumed by the dominant culture (acting so white, so masculine, so wealthy, or so straight that one loses themselves) and self-commodifying their marginalized identities (acting so “Asian” or “Native American,” so feminine, so poor, or so gay that one loses oneself). The line between selling out for survival, greed, or something in-between is blurry, and as a result the experience of navigating identity at work is fraught and stressful for many.

THE CHANGE FRAMEWORK

If selling out is often sometimes necessary, how does one sell out...ethically? How does one distinguish between an impossible choice made in difficult circumstances, versus a calculated and selfish act of self-interest? How does one keep ethics and integrity at the forefront of a choice that inherently involves a compromise in values? We quickly realized that there was no easy “Five-Step Plan” to guide decisions such as this. Yet, it was clear that some people’s decision processes differed from others in crucial ways. After hearing dozens of people’s stories, we eventually distilled six individual skills that better equip individuals to sell out ethically.

If selling out is often sometimes necessary,
how does one sell out ... ethically?

Skill 1: Compassion

Our culture teaches us that selling out is greedy, uncaring, and selfish, but in reality those who sell out can be just the opposite: overly self-critical and self-judgmental. Understanding that selling out decisions are both difficult and universal allows us to fight isolation, guilt, and shame, and more resiliently weather the hardship of even the most impossible of choices.

Skill 2: Honesty

Our minds are skilled at making uncomfortable situations disappear, but the path to selling out ethically requires self-awareness. Being honest with yourself allows you to understand how and why we do what we do, and approach our decisions with clarity rather than confusion.

Skill 3: Accountability

Who and what are we responsible for? Every action has an impact, and regardless of our intentions, the impacts on ourselves and those around us are ours to own. Practicing accountability allows us to evaluate the impact of our choices and make things right when needed.

Skill 4: Nuance

The world isn't a simple place, and neither are the ideas in it. Oftentimes existing in the world requires the resilience, foresight, and intuition to navigate uncertainty and

ambiguity. No one is perfect or pure—the real work happens in the gray areas. Recognizing nuance means understanding the full context behind our choices, and challenging black-and-white thinking in our decision-making.

Skill 5: Growth

We get new opportunities to sell out all the time, opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them. Even when we feel comfortable, it's important not to be static. Embracing growth allows you to be more resilient when challenges arise, and approach failure with humility and grace rather than fear.

Skill 6: Exploration

Selling out ethically isn't a one-time achievement but a way of living life actively, continually questioning and renegotiating the world around you. The best antidote to stagnation, inflexibility, and settling is a commitment to continuous Exploration, curiosity, and wonder as we go through life. Committing to Exploration allows us to stay engaged with a changing world, and to welcome our own changes throughout our life span.

The first letters of these six skills spell out CHANGE because for all of us, making the jump from selling out to selling out ethically requires change. Each of these skills represents a path toward navigating compromise and maintaining our integrity along the way. Used wisely in conjunction with each other, these skills can help us better approach impossible choices and center ourselves after the decision is made.



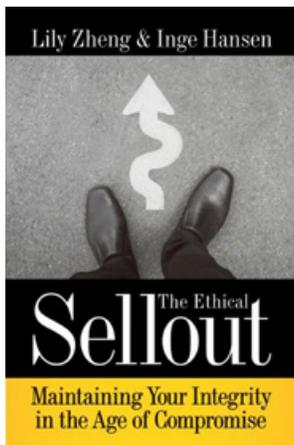
WHAT NEXT?

If you're someone with one or more marginalized identities who has experienced the pressure to sell out at work, know that you are not alone and that many of your colleagues have felt similarly. There is no "right way" to sell out, but the more of the above skills you're able to utilize, the more likely that you will maintain your integrity throughout the process.

If you're a workplace leader or manager who cares about diversity, know that members of marginalized groups are almost always grappling with tough questions around identity, authenticity, and compromise. Think back to the demographics, policies, and culture of your workplace, and how your company addresses diversity issues. How are you creating a hiring and recruiting process in which candidates feel empowered to bring their true selves and not simply what they believe you want to see? How are you supporting the needs of your employees so they aren't forced to choose between two things they need to survive? How are you designing a workplace in which compassion, honesty, authenticity, nuance, growth, and exploration are woven into all employees' daily experience? **The best places to work for a diverse employee population are starting to find their own answers.** 📖



Info



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