

The Whole Self Dichotomy in Libraries: A Panel Discussion with WILR, LAMS, REMCo, and the DEI Committee

ABSTRACT

The concept of bringing one's whole self to work draws a range of reactions and sparks difficult conversations; but the operational definition is neither widely understood, nor consistently applied. When workplaces attempt to move this idea from the conceptual to the concrete, there is a great deal to address regarding identity, equity, culture, workplace environments and interpersonal relationships, policy and procedure, employee safety, work/life balance, the role of leadership, and the differences between philosophy and practice. To explore this topic further, a panel discussion was planned and executed by members of the North Carolina Library Association's Women in Libraries Roundtable, the Leadership and Management Section, the Roundtable for Ethnic and Minority Concerns, and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee. Areas of focus for this discussion included research and definitions related to the "whole self" conversation, historical perspectives, the role of leadership, and operationalization.

KEYWORDS: *bringing one's whole self to work, work environment, workplace culture, leadership*

The concept of bringing one's whole self to work draws a range of reactions and conversations; but the operational definition is neither widely understood nor consistently applied. When workplaces attempt to move this idea from the conceptual to the concrete, there is a great deal to address regarding identity, equity, culture, workplace environments and interpersonal relationships, policy and procedure, employee safety, work/life balance, the role of leadership, and the differences between philosophy and practice. To explore this topic further, a panel discussion was planned and executed by members of the North Carolina Library Association's Women in Libraries Roundtable, the Leadership and Management Section, the Roundtable for Ethnic and Minority Concerns, and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee. This discussion was held virtually on December 11, 2024.

In approaching this discussion, panelists sought to share their experiences and what they had learned within their organizations, and to create a space for the audience to interact with panelists and share their own experiences. When attending sessions regarding workplace dynamics, panelists noted that attendees were often most invested in practical applications. Staff in the field were eager to learn how to transform takeaways into best practices, build functional procedures that would serve their organizations, and

create sustainable systems that could benefit a range of employees. In designing this session, the goal was to focus on "how" rather than "should," and not to dictate courses of action, but instead to highlight practices and procedures that had worked well, and engage audiences in a dialogue about potential applications and ideas in various settings.

Literature Review

The concept of bringing one's whole self to work has existed for quite some time. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact genesis of the phrase, but a Harvard Business Review collection entitled *Harvard Business Review on bringing your whole self to work*, published in late 2007, collected articles on the topic dating back to the 1990s. A study conducted in 2009 analyzed results from a large-scale survey of American businesses and concluded that workers who equally prioritized their work and non-work identities had "(1) greater overall satisfaction, (2) higher work-life balance satisfaction, and (3) less emotional exhaustion" (Bourne et al., 2009, p. 389). The study also outlined how managers and organizations could benefit from this approach, recommending that "[c]ompanies should illustrate the 'bridge' between employees' work and non-work roles, whether that entails supporting caregiving responsibilities, encouraging volunteer efforts, offering time away from

work, supporting health and wellness, or any other dual-centric program” (Bourne et al., 2009, p. 396).

In 2018, management consultant and author Mike Robbins published a book entitled *Bring your whole self to work*, reigniting widespread discussion around the concept of bringing one’s authentic self to work. Robbins (2018) conceptualizes the “whole self” as rooted in authenticity and vulnerability, framing it through five core principles: being authentic, utilizing the power of appreciation, focusing on emotional intelligence, embracing a growth mindset, and creating a championship team.

The idea of bringing one’s whole identity to the workplace regained prominence alongside the significant workplace transformations prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As remote work became mandatory, employees were compelled to integrate elements of their personal identities into their professional lives. And later, as organizations began transitioning back to in-person work, many embraced the idea of employees bringing aspects of their personal identities into the onsite environment as a way to ease the adjustment. In “13 Effective Ways to Bring Your ‘Whole Self’ to Work” (Expert Panel, 2022), a group of business, career, and professional coaches outlined strategies for displaying authenticity and vulnerability within in-person work environments. These strategies ranged from aligning personal values with organizational values, to observing established workplace norms and etiquette, to cultivating awareness of one’s own potential blind spots, among others.

Since bringing one’s whole self to work demands authenticity and vulnerability, many employees—especially those from marginalized groups—experience this expectation as a risk not worth taking (Cain et al., 2023; Eigenheer, 2023; Harkema, 2023). In 2023, a study published by Deloitte and the Meltzer Center explored ways in which employees, particularly those from stigmatized backgrounds, downplay elements of their identities to assimilate into the workplace mainstream. According to the report, 60% of the respondents reported having hidden aspects of their identities at work in the previous 12 months. These aspects included age, caregiver status, disability, education level, mental health status, military or veteran status, race or ethnicity, and religious

affiliation, among others. The reasons respondents cited for engaging in this behavior varied, yet the motivations most frequently mentioned centered upon perceived judgments and expectations from others in the workplace (Stephane et al., 2023).

Literature suggests that employees’ willingness to bring their authentic selves to work depends largely on organizations’ ability to foster an environment of psychological safety. Leadership scholar Amy C. Edmondson defines psychological safety as “a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves” (Edmondson, 2018). Similarly, Charles Duhigg defines psychological safety as a set of conditions that allow individuals to express themselves without fear of recrimination and retribution (Duhigg, 2016). Both authors outline the benefits of employees feeling empowered to take interpersonal risks such as speaking up, admitting mistakes, and requesting help, training, or support.

Historical Overview

An examination of what is considered acceptable in the workplace, particularly regarding cultural identities, is essential to understanding the concept of bringing one’s whole self to work. The American workforce has a long and complex history shaped by migration, colonization, and labor exploitation. From the inception of the thirteen colonies, immigrants arrived seeking new opportunities and religious freedom, fully aware that labor would be essential to their aspirations. Simultaneously, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade forcefully relocated millions of Africans from various kingdoms, countries, and tribes for the direct purpose of labor exploitation. Indigenous Native Americans also endured a geographical, economic, and spiritual upheaval as colonization imposed indentured servitude and plantation slavery, drastically altering their way of life. These historical processes created a labor system that defined who would benefit from work and who would be exploited by it.

As the American workforce evolved, so did the social identities associated with labor. Over time, one’s work became a reflection of status and social capital. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 reshaped the workplace by enabling greater inclusion of African Americans, immigrants, and women. The Equal Employment

Opportunity Act of 1972 further expanded these protections, prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (American Library Association, 1973). These legislative changes required employers to consider diverse backgrounds during hiring processes, slowly shifting the labor force toward greater inclusion.

To fully explore what it means to bring one's whole self to work, it is necessary to reflect on how nonwhite individuals have historically been perceived in educational and professional settings. What does it mean to be culturally accepted in spaces that have long excluded or marginalized certain groups? For many individuals from stigmatized backgrounds, entering the workplace often meant suppressing aspects of their identity to conform to dominant norms. This is a phenomenon known as code-switching. It involves modifying behavior, vernacular, or presentation to appear more acceptable or "palatable" in predominantly white or Eurocentric work environments (Cain et al., 2023). Historically, members of underrepresented groups have had to rely on code-switching to secure employment, avoid conflict, and survive workplace hostility. This practice is deeply entwined with broader discussions about authenticity and the challenges of fully expressing one's identity in professional settings.

Cultural Representation in the Workplace

In 1974, Dr. E. J. Josey, in collaboration with the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA), investigated the racial demographics of librarianship in the United States (Josey, 1975). The study concluded that Black professionals were grossly underrepresented in all types of libraries. Josey disaggregated data from a BCALA survey intended to investigate minority representation in the field and found that Black librarians were even more underrepresented than initially reported (Josey, 1975).

Research indicates that when minorities work in predominantly white environments, they often experience pressure to present versions of themselves that are perceived as more agreeable, professional, or non-threatening (Cain et al., 2023). In extreme cases, these pressures result in the suppression of cultural expressions or the adoption of behaviors intended

to counter harmful stereotypes. A parallel appears in Percival Everett's novel *James*, in which enslaved characters deliberately conceal their intelligence, performing ignorance as a strategy for survival under antebellum slavery. Everett's novel, however, is not the first work of fiction to explore the topic of code-switching. The concept can be traced back to African American Literature of the 19th Century, demonstrating that "Black intellectuals have been conceiving of language as a tool to carve out agency under slavery—regardless of status as free or enslaved, educated or illiterate—for over a hundred years, and likely longer" (Reagan, 2025). In contemporary workplaces, code-switching can function in a similar way, forcing individuals to leave essential aspects of themselves, particularly their cultural identity, outside the work setting.

Given the complexity of America's labor history, fostering inclusive work environments in which employees feel safe bringing their authentic selves to work requires intentionality, sustained reflection, and structural change. Creating spaces where employees feel seen, heard, and valued depends on leadership that actively dismantles and confronts harmful stereotypes and outdated practices.

Education and professional development grounded in the history of libraries—and the broader American labor system—are essential to this effort. As political and institutional forces increasingly challenge historical truths, information professionals must cultivate supportive environments not only for the communities they serve but also for their colleagues. Library leaders, in particular, bear responsibility for proactively reshaping workplace cultures and challenging persistent misconceptions, including the harmful notion that minority professionals cannot thrive in spaces of learning, authority, and leadership.

Operationalization

In order to operationalize the idea of bringing one's whole self to work in ways that are equitable, knowing that employees' backgrounds and experiences are different, organizations must carefully identify and address factors that can influence employees' ability—and desire—to share aspects of their identity in the workplace.

There are strategies, both conceptual and operational, that can help organizations foster a work environment where employees can feel comfortable presenting their authentic selves. It is important though, that organizations approach these strategies in ways that are inclusive, empowering, empathic, and holistic.

Conceptual Strategies

To nurture a work environment where employees can effectively bring their whole selves to work, organizations must clearly articulate what they are trying to accomplish by creating such an environment. Why would the organization want employees to bring their whole selves to work? What are the benefits, disadvantages, challenges, and risks? How would this premise align with the organization's missions, values, and core commitments? How would internal expectations of what constitute professional behavior affect the organization's perception of employees' productivity, professionalism, and overall performance?

The answers to these questions vary from organization to organization, and from individual to individual. It is critical, then, that organizations that wish to foster an environment where employees feel comfortable expressing their authentic selves establish a clear vision. This vision, built collectively and inclusively, should articulate a common understanding of what bringing one's whole self to work means in the context of the organization's culture and strategic agenda. It should also acknowledge past and present challenges, outline current objectives, and describe long-term aspirations.

Operational Strategies

From an operational perspective, there are major aspects that need to be addressed in order to build a work environment where employees can bring their authentic selves: Leadership, expertise, support, and capacity. All these aspects play a key role in creating such an environment.

Leadership

The role of leadership is to provide the tools to support and maintain a work environment where employees can express their authentic selves. This

includes not only providing the necessary tools and support, but also legitimizing the work required to establish and maintain such an environment. In this context, "legitimizing" refers to articulating and reinforcing a common understanding across the organization of the initiative's importance.

Leaders should take ownership of setting overarching priorities through strategic alignment and goal setting. Different departments often operate with competing demands, and it is leadership's responsibility to unify these efforts under common organizational goals. This also involves allocating appropriate resources and implementing policies that facilitate progress.

When developing policies to foster a work environment where employees can express their authentic selves, leadership must ensure that these policies clearly define expectations, boundaries, and accountability mechanisms. Given that every organization has its own culture, mission, and operational realities, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective. Instead, policy development should be tailored to reflect the organization's unique context.

A common misstep organizations make when seeking to create a work environment that empowers employees to express their authentic selves is delegating this responsibility to individuals, committees, working groups, or other entities that may have relevant expertise, but lack the authority or organizational reach to establish cross-departmental priorities. While their input is of paramount importance, it is ultimately up to leadership to ensure that such efforts are integrated, supported, and prioritized at the institutional level.

Creating the conditions for a work environment where employees feel empowered to bring their whole selves to work requires intentional, organization-wide commitment. To this end, leadership bears responsibility for several key strategic and operational aspects, including:

- **Aligning organizational values:** If an organization seeks to encourage authenticity and vulnerability, it is essential that this commitment is clearly aligned with the organization's mission, vision, and core values. Accordingly, it is leadership's responsibility to review—and, when necessary, update—the organization's aspi-

rational principles to ensure they meaningfully support the structures and practices that empower employees to express their authentic selves at work.

- **Setting the tone:** Bringing one's whole self to work requires authenticity and vulnerability, expectations that can feel burdensome for many employees, especially those from traditionally underrepresented or marginalized groups (Cain et al., 2023; Eigenheer, 2023; Harkeima, 2023). If an organization seeks to encourage this practice, it must ensure that it applies equitably to all employees, not only those in supportive and frontline roles. To that end, leaders are responsible for modeling authenticity and vulnerability through their management and leadership practices, sending a clear message that these behaviors are valued, supported, and safe.
- **Practicing inclusive leadership:** To encourage employees to bring their whole selves to work, organizations must cultivate environments in which individuals feel empowered to share their ideas, perspectives, and lived experiences. One effective approach is the practice of inclusive leadership, which "promotes participation of others beyond administrators in governance processes and advocates for leadership approaches grounded in the principle of inclusion" (Ryan, 2007, p. 93). Accordingly, leadership holds responsibility for modeling inclusive leadership by implementing strategies that foster open dialogue, recruit and elevate diverse voices, establish policies to mitigate systemic biases, and create meaningful opportunities for employees to participate in decision-making processes.
- **Fostering psychological safety in the workplace:** Psychological safety is critical for creating a work environment where employees feel empowered to show their authentic selves. Psychological safety, according to Charles Duhigg, allows individuals to "talk about what is messy or sad, to have hard conversations with colleagues who are driving us crazy" (Duhigg, 2016). Leadership plays a critical role in enabling open, safe, and productive dialogue among employees by setting clear expectations, implementing supportive policies and accountability mechanisms, and championing initiatives such as employee resource groups, training programs, affinity groups, and other learning and networking opportunities that promote understanding, respect, and inclusion.

- **Removing Barriers:** Fostering a culture of respect and acceptance is essential to empowering employees to be truly authentic at work. Leadership plays a key role in identifying and dismantling barriers to authenticity, including implicit bias, outdated practices, and narrow definitions of professionalism. By clearly defining, modeling, and enforcing expectations for professionalism, leadership can foster a work environment where employees are enabled and encouraged to show their authentic selves.
- **Embracing Diversity:** To foster an environment where authenticity and vulnerability can thrive, organizations must embrace diversity and recognize the value that different backgrounds, experiences, and identities contribute to the workplace. Leadership plays a critical role in this effort by implementing fair and equitable structures that support the recruitment, retention, and advancement of diverse talent. This includes championing policies and practices that ensure all employees feel seen, respected, included, and valued. Examples include inclusive professional development opportunities, transparent hiring practices, flexible work modalities, open and transparent communication channels, and opportunities to recognize team achievements, cultural observances, and holidays.

Expertise

Given the diverse backgrounds and experiences of employees, organizations that aim to foster a work environment where employees can bring their whole selves to work must be prepared to navigate the complexities of cultural nuances, values, traditions, and protocols. This requires specific expertise to assess the current organizational culture, identify needs and priorities, define goals and objectives, select training and educational opportunities, and establish best practices.

The role of those who provide expertise is different from that of leadership. Experts are responsible for planning, coordinating, and guiding the efforts towards building and maintaining the desired work environment. Leadership, by contrast, is tasked with enabling this work by providing the necessary resources and implementing the strategic foundation that empowers experts to succeed.

Organizations can develop this expertise internally through education and training, or engage exter-

nal specialists. In either case, they should consider investing in both broad educational initiatives and targeted, role-specific training to equip the organization with the necessary expertise to support an environment where employees feel empowered to bring their whole selves to work.

Support

Bringing one's whole self to work means different things to different people. Research suggests that individuals whose personal image and presentation do not align well with the more traditional perception of professional appearance and behavior may feel less comfortable bringing their whole selves to work (Pillemer, 2024). Similarly, individuals whose identities align well with the traditional perception of professional appearance and behavior may need support navigating an environment where the notion of what constitutes professional appearance and behavior is being redefined. It is important then, that when organizations attempt to create a work environment where employees feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to work, they provide their employees with support in two distinctive areas: Personal support, and training and educational opportunities.

Personal support refers to tools and methodologies for employees to navigate their work environment and develop a sense of belonging. Affinity groups, counseling sessions, advocacy groups, and opportunities to safely engage in dialog are examples of initiatives in the area of personal support organizations can make available to their employees.

Training and educational opportunities address the knowledge and skills needed to build, support, and effectively navigate an environment where employees can bring their whole selves to work. In order to meet employees' collective as well as individual knowledge needs, organizations should invest in general educational opportunities as well as in group-specific and role-specific training.

Capacity

In order to foster an environment that empowers employees to display their whole identity, organizations must give employees the time and resources to participate in initiatives that are conducive to achieving this goal. Considering that all units within an

organization have different responsibilities, timelines, priorities and stressors, it is important that the time employees allocate to activities intended to nurture the desired environment is standardized and formalized. This can be achieved by framing this principle as a job responsibility, with clear objectives, expectations, and accountability mechanisms.

Conclusion

Navigating the complexities of bringing one's whole self to work requires support on multiple levels for employees, as well as functional systems for organizations to define and operationalize the concept within their specific environments. Research suggests that no single approach fits all organizations; workplace contexts vary widely, and fostering spaces that encourage authenticity and vulnerability demands systemic investment in cultivating stronger, more supportive cultures.

Equally important is the development of operational definitions for commonly-used terms and concepts, along with policies and procedures that are grounded in historical and cultural context. These factors can shape employees' perception of the psychological safety and autonomy organizations provide, which in turn influences their willingness to express their whole identities. Because each employee is unique, the level of comfort with self-expression will naturally vary.

Organizations aiming to support authenticity and vulnerability should develop systemic structures that align with their values. Leadership plays a central role in this process, as they bear responsibility for setting the tone, fostering and modeling psychological safety, and promoting inclusive practices across teams. Effective leadership can strengthen workplace culture by embracing diversity, removing barriers, encouraging open dialogue, and ensuring that organizational values are reflected in their actions.

Creating the conditions that allow employees to bring their authentic selves to work requires attention to leadership, expertise, support, and capacity, along with an ongoing commitment to learning and adaptation. By intentionally addressing these elements, organizations can build sustainable systems that empower employees and foster environments where authenticity can thrive.

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