



Carrying MORE THAN THE JOB



When an employee walks into a meeting room or a team lunch, what would they instinctively scan for? For employees who carry a minority identity, that glance often ends with a realization that they are “the only one”. This solo status takes many forms, whether as the only woman in a technical department, the lone representative of an ethnic minority group on an executive team, a neurodivergent employee trying to navigate the rigid corporate structures, or the oldest person at a fast-paced startup.

By nature, people feel more at ease when surrounded by those who share similar life experiences or backgrounds. The absence of that familiar connection puts a minority employee on constant alert. Instead of focusing on their work, their mind keeps reading group dynamics, managing how their differences are perceived, and carefully self-editing every word before speaking. This internal filtering creates a heavy, invisible workload that drains energy and the creative capacity needed to perform their actual role.

Being the “only one” also triggers **the spotlight effect**, where every success is heavily examined, and so is every failure. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company’s Women in the Workplace report (2018)³ documented

that employees in solo status are more heavily scrutinised than their peers, with their successes and failures placed under a microscope. They are also more likely to feel that their actions reflect positively or negatively on everyone like them, creating the constant anxiety that a single mistake will be viewed as confirmation of stereotypes about their group. Solo status also imposes a **burden of representation**: in discussions on diversity, hiring, or cultural matters, these employees are frequently expected to speak as the voice for their identity, regardless of their area of expertise or personal comfort.

To manage these compounding pressures, many minority employees resort to masking or code-switching to blend into the dominant corporate culture. While modifying behavioural traits, language styles, or even clothing choices may offer short-term protection from bias, the long-term cost is significant. McCluney et al. (2019)² found that constant code-switching depletes cognitive resources and hinders performance. Performing commonality with colleagues also reduces authentic self-expression and contributes to burnout.



What the Individual Can Do



1. Code-switch with conscious intention.

Treating code-switching as a deliberate professional choice. Maintaining a clear mental boundary between one's professional persona and authentic self prevents the emotional exhaustion caused by constant masking (McCluney et al., 2019)². When adaptation is deployed as a controlled career tool rather than a daily performance, its toll diminishes considerably.



2. Deploy microinterventions to redirect subtle bias.

When facing an implicit microaggression, a minority employee's responses are not limited to silence or direct confrontation. Sue et al. (2019)³ introduced the concept of microinterventions, a calibrated, low-risk responses designed to return the cognitive load to the speaker without breaking professional decorum. The following clarifying questions illustrate this approach:

- "Could you help me understand what you meant by that comment?"
- "May I ask what led you to that assumption?"

These questions protect personal boundaries, invite reflection from colleagues, and prevent the minority employee from absorbing the full emotional cost of the interaction alone.



3. Build a supportive ecosystem.

Minority employees should not rely solely on an immediate team that may lack the specific perspective to understand their day-to-day experience. Actively building connections through employee resource groups, cross-functional mentors, or external professional networks provides meaningful validation. Restoring a sense of belonging through genuine community is one of the most effective buffers against the burnout that identity concealment produces (Cortopassi, Quinn & Nicolas, 2024)⁴.



4. Shed the proxy burden.

Professionals in solo status must consciously remind themselves that they are not the spokespeople for an entire demographic. Their mistakes do not define their community, and their successes belong entirely to them. Thompson and Sekaquaptewa (2002)⁵ demonstrated that the performance decrements associated with solo status worsen when individuals internalise the belief that they represent everyone like them. When minority employees stop measuring their daily performance against the expectations of their entire group, they free up their mental energy for the work that matters.



Summary

Even though the hidden strain of being the "only one" could undermine professional focus, when minority employees choose when to adapt, establish boundaries against bias, and release the pressure to represent an entire demographic, they can enhance their personal effectiveness by protecting their mental energy, giving them the clarity and stamina to perform at their best.

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