

Episode #92 Creating Authenticity : Connie Almond and Jane Howard-Martin

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Introduction: You're listening to workplace perspective and employment law podcast raising the bar at workplaces everywhere. Workplace perspective is a regular podcast series for employers and employees focusing on education, training, and the law to help organizations of all sizes develop and maintain successful workplace relationships.

The opinions expressed by guests on workplace perspective are their own and should not be considered legal advice. And now, here's your host, Teresa McQueen.

Host: Thank you, James, and welcome everyone to workplace perspective where we are striving to raise the bar at workplaces everywhere. Today, we're talking with attorney authors, Jane Howard Martin, and Connie Almond. Jane and Connie, along with other members of the association of corporate counsels, DEI esquire group have written an article that caught my eye. The article is titled, does your workplace encourage conformity or authenticity? It discusses important issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Faced by those encouraged in the workplace to bring their authentic selves to work. But what is these authors asked? Does that really mean? We're going to find out it's going to be a great show. Don't go away. We'll be right back.

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Host: Welcome back to our listeners and welcome to workplace perspective Jane Howard Martin and Connie Almond. I'm so excited to have you on. I'm loved your article and I can not wait to talk about this great issue. Diversity, equity and inclusion. But before we get started, why don't you tell our listeners a little bit about who you are and what you do. Jane, we'll start with you.

Jane: Well, good morning. And thank you again for having us. I'm an employment lawyer. I've been in the employment law space for over 40 years. And I've actually seen a lot of change during that time period, but there is still so much work to do. And so we found a DEI esquire as an organization that would really keep the conversation around diversity inclusion and equity going and really trying to touch some of the topics that maybe haven't been grappled with as intentionally as they needed to be. All right. Connie.

Connie: Thanks so much for having us Teresa. I am an in-house labor and employment attorney. And before that, I worked at a labor employment law firm for about a decade, but as Jane mentioned, sometimes people think of lawyers as the obstacle or barrier to some of our diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, but really I think as employment attorneys, we can provide a different type of perspective on how we can further those efforts in a collaborative way while also still kind of keeping the law in mind. So excited to have our conversation today.

Host: Well, let's talk about the articles. So I want to talk about what does being authentic from a diversity equity inclusion perspective mean when it comes to a workplace context.

Jane: So it means being who you are, being able to be who you really are. And the reason we thought this article was important because it's because so many people don't feel that way. They engage in what has been termed covering behaviors. And those are behaviors that people

from underrepresented communities engage in just to fit in. It's about modulating your identity to be accepted by the mainstream. And there's actually been some pretty good research on this space. Doctor Christie Smith from Deloitte and NYU law professor Kenji Yoshino published a paper on this entitled uncovering talent and they and that paper identified a new model of inclusion, which really takes into account four areas of four types of covering that people engage in and counting. I will share what they are. The first is appearance. So that is about changing your appearance or your mannerisms, so that you look different in order to get acceptance in the workplace. So for me, that meant relaxing my hair, I have naturally curly hair as an African American, and we used to kind of joke in my community that we would relax our hair so that other people would feel relaxed. But that is an example of covering. People are feeling more free now at where their hair as it grows out of their scalps, which is great. A second example of a covering behavior is advocacy. So that's not speaking up when a slight occurs to avoid being seen as divisive or in my case, perhaps an angry black woman. So really, when you feel you really ought to say something, but a big conversation goes on in your head, should I do that? Should I not? It should be said, but am I the one who can say it? How will it be perceived? So that's an example of advocacy.

Connie: So a couple of the other covering behaviors that Doctor Smith and Professor Yoshino talked about were included affiliation.

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Connie: So that's the idea of avoiding actions that might be associated with certain groups or marginalized identities. A common one would be a working mom who doesn't talk about our kids at work because she doesn't want to appear less committed to her work or maybe an African American male who might hold back constructive criticism because he's

afraid that he's going to be perceived as intimidating. Another one would be association, which would be in somewhat similar to affiliation, but association is actually avoiding contact with your own group. And I have to admit I'm somewhat guilty of this myself. I'm a Taiwanese American and my maiden name is Twang, which I found at growing up. A lot of people in America, frankly, they had a hard time pronouncing and being named Connie Twang when Connie Chung was the only Asian American person on TV that anybody knew was frankly kind of annoying, right? Because I had so many times where people were like, oh, is Connie Chung your mom? Or is Maury Povich your dad spoiler alert the answer is no. He is not my dad. But it was distracting and just kind of it made me feel a little bit more like an outsider. When I married my husband, who's Caucasian American, and he had the last name Almond, which is very easy to pronounce. Nobody really wonders about it. I took his last name, in part because I wanted to have an easier last name that didn't have to have a lot of explanation or conversation around. But that's an example of an association where I didn't choose the last name just because that was a choice I wanted to make, but in part because I wanted quote unquote easier last name.

Host: Provided some statistics in the article that you wrote about how common covering actually is. A bit about that.

Jane: Yeah, it's actually really very common. According to the research, 83% of the LGBT community engages in covering behaviors and perhaps we can understand intuitively why that might be because there's still so much hostility. 79% of African Americans, 63% of Latinos, 60% of women, often that's around children. But what's also interesting is that about 45% of straight white men also engage in behavior. But the reason why they're engaging in this behavior is because they have some other characteristic. It's not their whiteness or their maleness. It's another characteristic that they feel puts them in an out group. So for example,

having a disability or maybe having grown up poor or maybe being an evangelical or whatever characteristic they have, which might not be the dominant characteristic. And so they cover up that part of themselves.

Host: Interesting.

Connie: The fact that the majority of people are engaging in these covering behaviors, one impact it has. If you wonder, why does it matter? Why do we care that people have these covering behaviors? Doctor Smith and Professor Yoshino mentioned in their paper that there's an immense emotional toll that comes with these covering behaviors. So many of us are so used to it that you don't even identify it. You don't put a name on it because you are doing it. Like you mentioned Teresa, that kind of a battle within your own self within your own head. Should I have said that? I said that wrong and you think about it later on. There's just so much energy spent around those covering behaviors. Really, whether people are aware of it or not, those covering behaviors can result in isolation, insecurity, reducing engagement, just less productivity because it's like having a side hustle just to maintain your main hustle. You just spend so much extra energy on those things that you shouldn't really need to. And that means there's less energy on your work, your family, whatever else you want to commit yourself to. I think that so many people in the workforce have come up during a time or an environment where they felt like they had to cover. And there was just mentality that that's what's needed. That's what being professional is. I think it carries on in that they think, well, that's what I had to do. So that's what others should have to do as well. But I don't think that's really being true to inclusion. That's certainly not creating a sense of belonging. And that's not really getting the most engagement in development out of our employees.

Host: Yeah, I wouldn't think so. It is a lot of energy if you think about it. A long way to go just to get through the day.

Connie: Yeah, it's exhausting.

Host: Yeah, and you have to wonder about the number of people who don't realize that that's even what they're doing. How about the end of the day? I'm just exhausted all the time.

Connie: Absolutely. And I think it's, again, it's a little bit of a double edged sword because you're exhausted from the covering behaviors, but to let those go is also scary in its own way, because people feel like those covering behaviors have protected them in a way. And being your full authentic self requires a little more vulnerability and you put yourself out there a little bit more in a different way. So it's scary, sphere of being stereotyped, it's fear being typecast or just judged in different way. And to your point, Teresa, some of that is because of what we've seen and unfortunately some of that's just real. There are people with biases and stereotypes. So to put yourself out there, you don't know if it's going to be safe or not.

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Host: Yeah, absolutely. I do have great hope for the next generations. It truly do. I truly mean that. We talk a lot about that on the show. And I think that I have tremendous hope for the generations that are coming up. They have different viewpoints. They have different interests, different outlook on life than the generations, of course, have come before. And I think that's going to have a huge positive impact on the work.

Jane: We're beginning now to give people permission for what the key employers are beginning to give people permission to be who they who they are. So that gives some hope as well.

Host: Absolutely. All right. Well, we're going to take a quick break, and when we come back more about diversity inclusion and equity in the workplace, we'll be right back. Stay with us.

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Host: Welcome back, everyone. We are talking with authors Jane Howard Martin and Connie Almond. About diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. So we had a little we were talking about being hopeful. And I love being helpful on this show. So when we get back into it, now let's talk a little bit about solutions. How can workplaces create more opportunities for people to really, truly bring their authentic selves to the workplace?

Jane: So it's really important to lay some groundwork first. There are a lot of companies that have jumped on the bandwagon of saying, oh, we want you to bring your authentic selves to work. But are those companies really ready for people to bring their authentic selves to work? As we've said, the first part of the show, this is scary when people come forward and there can be consequences. So we need to really think deeply are the implicit biases of our leaders, contributing to the need to cover it. Have we grappled with that? Is the workforce ready? Have our employees grapple with their discomfort with difference? Because that discomfort is what's causing the underrepresented communities to have to feel like they need to engage in that behavior. But it's really important to do this work. We say we value diversity. But do we really, if a lot of

employees feel they need to suppress who they are in order to succeed. So how do we start to lay that groundwork? I think the first important thing to do is acknowledge that it's happening. Speak to it out, so to speak. Simply putting a label on it, letting people know that this is happening is empowering because that helps employees think I'm not crazy. It's not that I have something weird going on. This is actually a phenomenon that is happening that we need to address. Secondly, living the values, the champions for this type of work need to live the values themselves, be an ally. Speak up if somebody else is authenticity is uncovering somebody else's implicit bias because when you see those tensions speaking up to protect the individual who has been brave enough to be authentic is important.

Connie: One another thing is so many organizations when looking at new candidates, they focus on whether or not this person is a quote unquote could fit or a good cultural fit. And I really don't like that language because it almost suggests that you had to be like us or conform to how we are in order to be hired in order to be successful here. I think if we kind of changed that perception and change it to a cultural ad, can this person add to our culture and what we have here at the organization. Rather than focusing on hiring the familiar, the quote unquote known entity, which can encourage covering, look for people who will add to the culture and maybe bring something different. That will blend assimilation, blunt the conformity that may already exist in the covering that already exists in the workplace. It will help promote creativity and innovation. Another concept I think can help is if organizations and colleagues can really focus on the idea of belonging. So a lot of times in the diversity, equity, inclusion space, we talked about those things diversity and equity and inclusion. But I really like to frame it in the idea of belonging in being very intentional about belonging. Because if you think about the word belonging, when I think about the word, belonging,

it means really being accepted for who you are, feeling ingrained as part of that organization. When someone doesn't have a sense of belonging, it's almost like having a ticket to a football game. And they're there, maybe they're even wearing the team's colors. But they're really just as focused on the nachos as they are on the outcome of the game. They're focused on when can we leave to avoid parking and traffic.

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Connie: But if they have a sense of belonging, they're part of the team, they are hooping and hollering. They are groaning it every time the ref makes a call, their high fiving strangers, they're talking about remember when such and such happened at this game, they are really, truly invested. And they feel like they can make a difference in the outcome of the game that they are all invested in the victories and the trials and tribulations of the outcome. And that to me is a sense of belonging. Different from just kind of showing up and going through the motions. If we really focus on creating a sense of belonging for ourselves as well as others, I think that will help with people being authentic in the workplace. And a part of that, I think, frankly, is what we're doing today is sharing your story, sharing your story with others, being vulnerable. And again, that might be a little bit scary, some people might do that more gradually than all at once. Using the privilege and platform that you might have within your organization or with your colleagues to be a bit vulnerable, because I think that inspires others to be the same.

Host: Do you want to give us your thoughts for the future, cautionary tales, words of wisdom, what are you thinking? Connie, we'll start with you.

Connie: So I would simply just encourage people to remain really open minded and stay curious. Sometimes we default to, oh, I'm accepting of people from all different walks of life, and that means I'm open minded.

But that doesn't necessarily mean that you're open minded to people who may be less comfortable with that or have a different perspective. So I genuinely think that we learn the most from people who are the most different from us. So approaching those conversations with grace, but really with a mind to be curious and learn, I think, can help a lot.

Jane: And I will just say it's so important to do this work, because employees are so much more productive and happier. If they don't have to divert all of their energy towards managing other people's insecurities or discomfort with different, that's not really their job. We've placed that job on them and it's really not their job. And when we talk about equity, this is a classic example. If we can create an environment where people don't have to cover, we're removing a burden that's placed on some groups and not on others. And we're making a big step towards having a truly equal and equitable work environment.

Host: Well, that's awesome. I love that. Thank you both so much for joining us for the work that you're doing through DEI esquire. The article is great. Keep doing a good work that you're doing. And thank you for sharing it with our listeners today. Thank you very much. Thank you. You can learn more about Jane and Connie and DEI esquire by visiting our website at workplaceperspective.com. I want to also thank our listeners, my radio angels, James in the name at night and workplace perspectives team extraordinaire, our engineer and producer Paul Roberts, our associate producer Melissa DeLacey with music provided by the very talented Steven Verceloni. Thank you all for joining us on workplace perspective and until next time, keep raising the bar.