

# Authenticity and its Allies

By Gemma Burgess and Ebony Mitchell

This article is the fourth in a series that will share perspectives on:

- The current state of DE&I within the CRE industry
- How to best accelerate change
- Being one's authentic self in the workplace
- How to be an effective ally
- Advice for colleagues and the industry

A key part of diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) is creating a workplace where everyone feels comfortable being their authentic selves, regardless of their race, sexual orientation, gender identity, life experiences, outlook and any other attribute that makes people who they are. Part of this comfort comes having the confidence that their colleagues will have their backs and act as allies on their behalf.

While it seems obvious that, of course, people should feel free to be themselves at work, the reality is not always so straightforward. Some fear rejection or harm to their career if they do not fit in. And this fear is not limited to just a few people or groups.

Gwendolyn Hatten Butler, an independent director and a senior advisor to Capri Investment Group, recalls a white male colleague who wore a wedding band even though he wasn't married because he thought it would make him appear more stable. Unfortunately for him, presenting something other than his authentic self was more of a hindrance than a help. "If you try to be anything other than who you are, you will not be able to perform at your peak," she says.

## What being authentic brings to the workplace

Authenticity frees people to think creatively because they do not feel the need to conform to the majority. "Being allowed to be one's authentic self in the workplace means not being at a disadvantage when it comes to promotion or compensation just because you don't look or act like the senior people at the firm," says Jeffrey Beckham, executive vice president and head of portfolio management at GID Investments.

People who feel free to be their authentic selves can bring new dimensions to the workplace and what they do. Without pressure to blend in, people feel more comfortable taking risks. "In terms of your character and voicing your

ideas, you shouldn't be afraid to be wrong," says one CRE executive. "In an environment supportive of authenticity, people can push themselves to grow their skill sets and recognize that they can fail without it being terminal for their career."

"Being your authentic self means not assimilating because you want to be liked by the majority," says Tammy K. Jones, co-founder and CEO of Basic Investment Group LLC and chair of the Real Estate Executive Council (REEC). "It is being unapologetically you." That means bringing what is uniquely yours to the table instead of trying to fit in by pretending to be interested in certain hobbies or activities just to be accepted. Authenticity "leads to a much more interesting conversation than you can have if people are all the same," she says.

Fortunately, many are witnessing more acceptance for this type of diversity in the workplace as people are realizing that not everyone has to fit the same mold in order to be successful or to be a part of their organization. "We have all had different experiences that have brought us to where we are in our careers and in life," says Beckham. "Respecting that, and celebrating that, creates a culture that allows everyone's authentic self to thrive."

Nurturing this authenticity can be difficult at first. Butler recalls some important advice she received from a Black executive. "He told me not to internalize the reactions of others when you walk into a room and not to let what

someone might be thinking of you affect your ability to perform," she says. Above all, "find an environment where you feel where you don't have to be anything other than who you are."

### **How to become a true ally**

This type of authenticity can be a challenge to sustain alone. That is why people need allies in the workplace. "Change comes through sustained disruption—not a moment or an event," says Beckham. "Allies can help figure out ways to create that sustained disruption for real change but without inadvertently contributing to the problem."

Allies can also lend support by amplifying and defending your voice in the workplace. Byron Boston, CEO and board member at Dynex Capital, Inc., recalls an ally who defended Boston when another colleague attempted to undermine him. "A real ally stands up for you when you are not in the room," he says.

Standing up as an ally is also about challenging non-diverse peers to contribute to progress on DE&I in the workplace. "Allies are usually in a position to influence offenders of DE&I principles" says Dale Burnett, co-founder and managing director for BIG Equity Investors LLC in New York. "When allies use their position to call out inequities and hold their majority peers accountable, they are advocating for their diverse peers in a way that they often cannot for themselves."

**"A real ally stands up for you when you are not in the room."**

**— Byron Boston, CEO and board member, Dynex Capital**



If managers and executives prove unwilling to become an ally or champion ally-ship, boards can hold CEOs accountable by making DE&I metrics part of their compensation structures.

“Be very explicit that the organization will evaluate progress in hiring and retaining individuals who are different from them,” suggests Butler. “DE&I is not the cherry on top or extra.”

If someone is unsure how to fill the role of ally, they can get involved with trade organizations, like REEC or the New America Alliance, as well as affinity groups. “Look beyond your four walls and into ways you can partner,” says Jones. “Recognize that there is a problem and get involved with a strategy and reasonable goals.” Also, remember that this type of change takes time so be prepared to make a long-term commitment to being an ally.

In some cases, simply being willing to help and share your knowledge is enough to get started. From there, you can ask people about their career goals and look for ways to help them

achieve those goals and gain access to available opportunities. In some cases, this will require you to go outside of your comfort zone by reaching out to colleagues who do not look like you or have the same background.

Just keep in mind what is at stake. For example, one Black executive recalled how an ally helped him move into role that led to an important opportunity to make a presentation to his firm’s top 20 clients. “He vouched for me and was a strong voice to back up my capability” despite the doubts of the CEO and COO, the executive recalls now. “It turned out to be a defining moment for me.”

Ultimately, however, it is up to CRE organizations to make this type of situation more common because it shifts the pressure for change from the individual to the organization as a whole. “It is not for the employees to figure things out,” says Kimberly Brown, managing director of asset services for Cushman & Wakefield. “It is up to organizations to figure out ways to make the environment much more engaging for everyone.”



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