The emotional cost of not being you

You don’t feel safe revealing the real you, so you pretend to be someone you’re not. It’s exhausting. And tough on your mental health. How do you help someone get around that? How do you create an environment where people feel safe being their authentic selves?

“To me, being your authentic self means the person you are inside – the self that you experience – is the one you share with others,” says Microsoft VP Lorraine Bardeen. “If you don’t do that, it can tax and negatively impact your mental health because you’re expending all this emotional load representing a different you.”

Lorraine says she’s dealt with the issue many times in her career as a manager of people, even as it relates to wearing clothes.

“What you wear daily may sound like a small thing but to many people it isn’t,” Lorraine says. “I’ve had people ask if it was okay to wear a fraternity shirt to work. I’d say of course it is. People sometimes feel they have to show up in a cookie-cutter way. That’s not healthy.”

To illustrate her point, she tells a story from the time she led a relatively large engineering team at Microsoft.

“I was standing at the coffee machine one day wearing a dress when an early-in-career engineer came up and said, ‘I’ve never talked with you before, but I have to tell you seeing you wear a dress has made me feel safe. If a leader can do it then I can; I felt I had to dress like all the guys around here.’”

But what if you’re not sure your environment is safe to express who you really are?

“Check with others to see what their experience has been,” suggests Lorraine. “But if it clearly isn’t a safe environment, your HR team is there to help and make sure you have the support you need.”
In addition to protecting your mental health by expressing your authentic self, Lorraine believes you can grow it and become more resilient by trying things that are somewhat uncomfortable, such as public speaking, and then building from there. She says rewarding the right behavior also plays a big role.

“It’s important for managers and leaders to reward those who support mental health and find the right balance for themselves. The opposite would be saying you support mental health but reward those who work themselves to burnout and have absolutely no balance.”

For more of Lorraine’s thoughts on creating a safe workplace and the importance of being your authentic self, tune into the latest edition of the Powered By The People podcast hosted by Zach Xu.