



# IDENTITY AT WORK

*Exploring intersectionality in professional spaces*

## CREATING SAFE SPACES

The concept of psychological safety has exploded in popularity over the past few years as groundbreaking research from Harvard and Google suggests it is the number one predictor of effective teams.

Yet as more people speak up about inequities in the workplace, it's clear that many organizations have a long road to travel in pursuit of designing an environment where everyone feels comfortable speaking up honestly and authentically.

Source: Google



---

## WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

**“A shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.”**

To better understand what employers can do to create more psychologically safe workplaces, we spoke with over 800 workers from across the country to discuss their experiences and find new ways to make progress creating professional environments that are truly inclusive.



**While many feel physically safe in their workplace, psychological safety is a more complicated reality.**

Our research found that aspects of identity such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation have a strong impact on feelings of psychological safety in the workplace.

A photograph of a person with dark dreadlocks, seen from the back and side, wearing glasses and a light-colored shirt. They are in a library or bookstore, with rows of books on shelves in the background. A teal-colored graphic overlay is on the left side of the image.

# THE INTERSECTION OF IDENTITY + WORK

---

## **MOST WORKERS (88%) CONSIDER THEIR PROFESSION A CRITICAL ASPECT OF THEIR IDENTITY.**

People describe early passions in life leading them to the work they do today. Some even recognize that their work has helped them better understand themselves.

**“Even when I’m not at work, I’m still a doctor answering health questions for family/friends and ready to help anyone who needs it. For example, when a pilot asks for a doctor, I stand up. When someone has a seizure on the street, I step up and evaluate. I don’t leave that professional identity at the doors of the hospital.”**

– **Anonymous (she/her)**, 30, Richmond, VA

**“ I am a professional educator in a public school. I feel deeply about what I do. I enjoy learning and teaching whether I get paid for it or whether I don't...If anyone expresses a need for help in something where I can do so, I am glad to do so whether on the clock or not. I am a teacher 24 hours a day.”**

**– Tad H., 44, Salem, OR**



**“ I believe my profession has been vital at defining my personality. Before I got involved as a researcher in the non-profit world, I was not aware of all the intercultural and humanitarian challenges marginalized communities have to face, and after years working in the space I have decided I only want to work with social organizations.”**

– Anonymous (she/her), 27, Miami, FL

## MORE THAN 1 IN 3

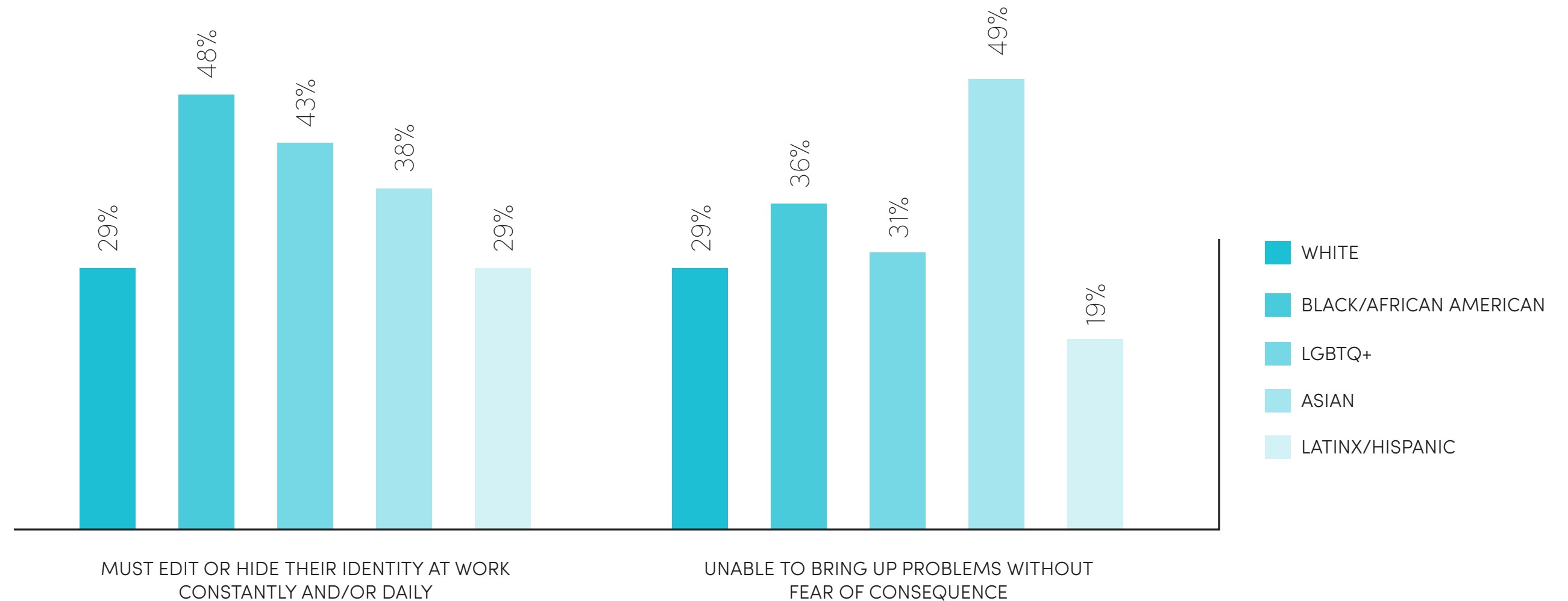
workers edit or hide  
their identity in the  
workplace daily

Despite one's profession playing a critical role in their personal identity, many are uncomfortable living their full truths in the workplace.

51% feel they must edit or hide their identity on a weekly basis or more. This number rises for non-white respondents to 56%, and 62% for Black respondents.

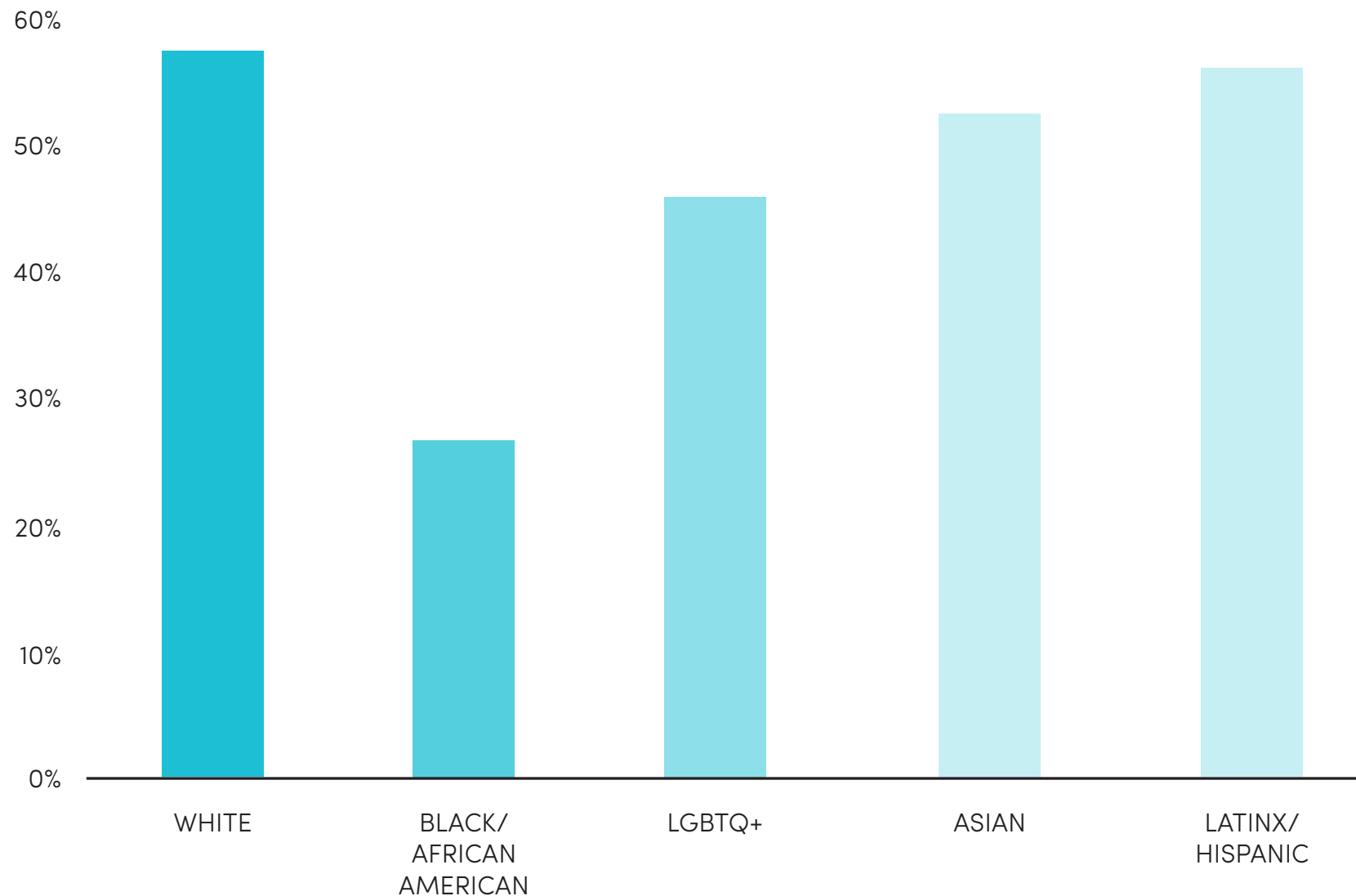
## Black, Asian, LGBTQ+, and Latinx workers in particular are more likely than their white counterparts to edit their identity and fear consequences when bringing up problems

Psychological safety in the workplace



*This study had insufficient representation of Indigenous workers and reflects a gap in their experiences.*

% Agree:  
“My workplace is welcoming for people like me”



## FEELING UNWELCOME

Just over half (53%) of workers agree that their workplace is welcoming for people like them.

Black, Asian, LGBTQ+, Latinx are less likely than cisgender & white counterparts to agree that their workplace is welcoming.

**“I’m an immigrant. I moved to USA 14 years ago. I am a citizen. At work I often hear negative comments about immigrants...hearing this makes me very sad and uncomfortable. These comments are never directed at me, and people are very nice to me, but knowing their attitude towards immigrants in general makes me wonder what their true feelings are.”**

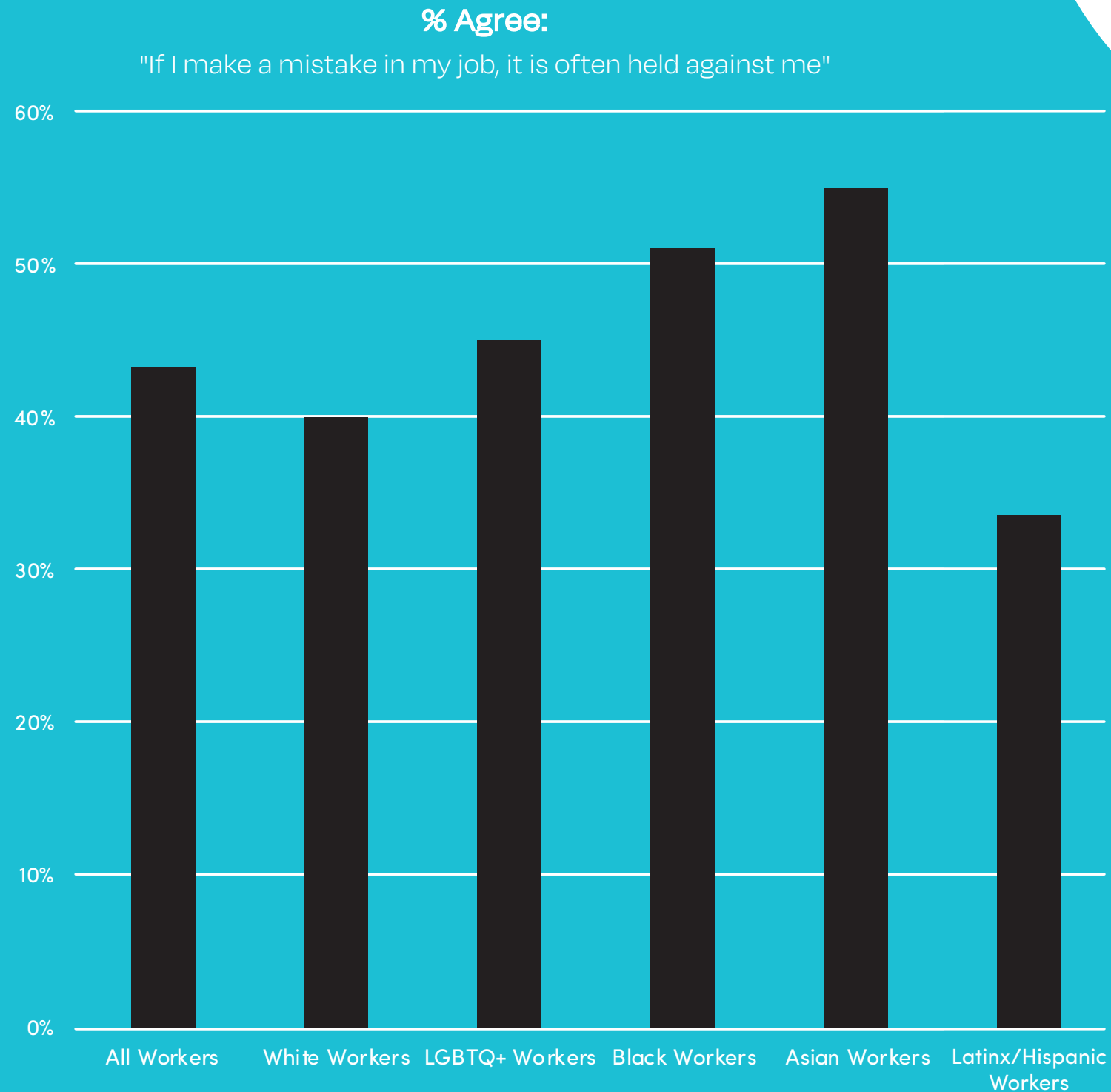
– **Olga B. (she/her)**, 36, Frankfort, IL

**“ I feel that being a Black woman there is a strong frustrating feeling being in a workplace where you are the only person that looks like you. I feel that not many understand me, I also feel like the moment that I use a certain tone I am coined that angry Black woman. This makes it hard for me to speak my truth on what I feel about things.”**

**– Ashley H. (*she/her*), 31, Fresno, CA**

**“ I go by they/them/theirs but I still find people aren’t always respectful of that. I still have some people in my company that refer to me as ‘she’ even though I have specifically asked not to be referred to in that way. I don’t want to look like a ‘snowflake’ so I keep quiet, but I think there is a lack of respect for gender identities at my job and the employees don’t have adequate training in this area. It can be difficult for me.”**

– Dani M. (*they/them*), 28, Harrisonville, MO



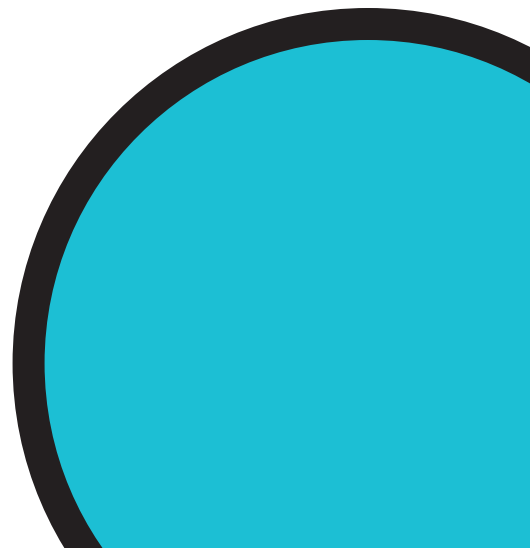
## ACCEPTING MISTAKES

Not everyone feels comfortable making mistakes at work. LGBTQ+, Black, Asian, and Latinx workers are more likely than white workers to agree that mistakes in their job are often held against them.



**“Recently I was pulled into a meeting with H.R. because I was using too much personality and attitude in my emails. I am a proud Black woman and others in the office see me as the angry Black woman. I have learned to ask those I trust to read my emails before I hit send. I have many messages sitting in my drafts that don’t get sent for days that I sit on because I don’t want to lose my job for my personality and attitude, something my white coworkers do daily without even thinking about.**

– Sara C. (*she/her*), 31, Chubbuck, ID





We asked workers to share moments when they felt misunderstood, silenced, disrespected, or uncomfortable.

**Nearly half (47%)** of these reported moments are considered typical of their day-to-day experiences.

**“ I most often struggle with feeling underappreciated or not appreciated at all. Having to deal with little to no recognition is challenging and difficult. I like to be recognized for my efforts and for who I am as a person, the contributions that I have available to make.”**

**– Anonymous (Trans, She/Her/Hers), 39, Edmond, OK**

**“...Understand that people can be hyper-vigilant of their differences from other people... and that vigilance is a profound source of anxiety that often impedes productivity. Contrary to popular belief, people are not separate from their work.”**

**– Hunter F. (He/Him), 25, Portland, OR**




**WE ASKED WORKERS TO DESCRIBE THEIR  
PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE THROUGH  
THE LENS OF A BOOK WITH CHAPTERS.**

**Most describe challenges in their careers, with highs  
and lows and lessons learned.**

For Black and Brown respondents, many of these challenges are described through a lens of race, or feeling the need to protect certain aspects of their identity.


**Here are a few examples:**



**“The title of my book is, ‘Half of Me.’ This title is appropriate because I feel like my professional experiences all hinge on a very thin line I walk every day – Wanting and working to build personal relationships with my coworkers and business partners, but never knowing exactly how much of myself it’s safe to reveal.**


**It’s incredibly difficult trying to build relationships in the workplace knowing there are parts of me I don’t (and may never) feel comfortable sharing with the people I spend 8+ hours a day with. It feels like they’ll only ever know half of me, because I have to keep the more marginalized aspects of my identity hidden for matters of personal safety and comfort.”**

**– Dani N. (*she/her*), 23, Land O Lakes, FL**



**“I’m a Black woman in a workforce that broadly doesn’t identify with my values, culture, and mannerisms... While I think most of us are in constant performance, some of us (Black and brown people) are more aware of the daily practice. From enunciating every syllable so that I can be understood to participating in passive-aggressive “professional” emails, it’s exhausting.”**

– Anonymous (*she/her*), 28, New York, NY



---

**“Racism, misogyny, classism, sexism and homophobia make my professional life difficult as a Black queer person from a low-income background. This is difficult because sometimes people who are well-meaning may not understand how their words or behaviors are violent and oppressive. This is also difficult because when I’m in some spaces I may be a person’s first Black friend and am expected to perform excess emotional labor to help them bridge the gap and be aware of their behaviors.”**

**– Anonymous (*she/her*), 30, Chicago, IL**



**“I’m a half-Hispanic man who can’t really relate to suburban-esque culture.... I feel like our differences aren’t being celebrated, but are instead being used against one another. I feel anger, because it’s not right.”**

– Hunter F. (*He/Him*), 25, Portland, OR



Being able to comfortably and openly express identity in the workplace allows people to take their professional skills to new levels.

**“There are a lot a lot a lot of times when I feel like being Muslim, visibly Muslim, makes Muslim patients feel better. They feel like they are not alone. And when I see other colleagues, doctors, nurses, janitorial staff, who are Muslim, I feel connected. We acknowledge one another. We have to.”**

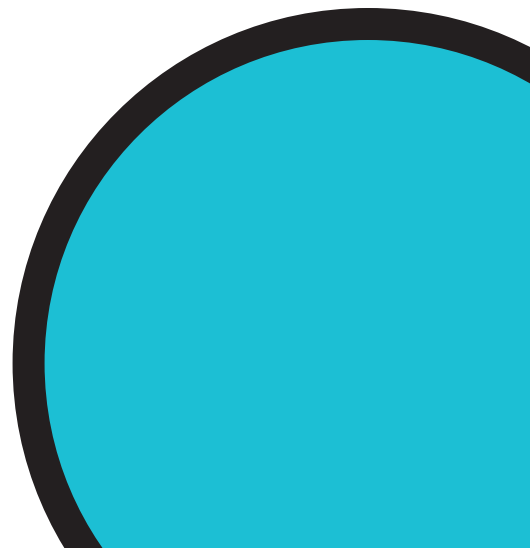
– **Anonymous (she/her)**, 30, Richmond VA

**“By ‘living my truth’ with my co-workers, I felt accepted by my co-workers from the start because they lived their truth with me as well. This level of acceptance has translated across every aspect of my life...Between my acceptance of myself and the acceptance of those around me, there is now more of ‘me’ available to help others and help myself.”**

**– Lauren N. (she/her), 34, Kansas City, MO**

**“My culture, race and age are all identities that make it easier for me in [my work]. My company consults with school leaders and partners in black and brown communities, like myself. We connect directly to the people we serve. It’s always nice to share and learn from what they (our consultants) do to make a difference in our communities.”**

– Anonymous, 30, New York, NY



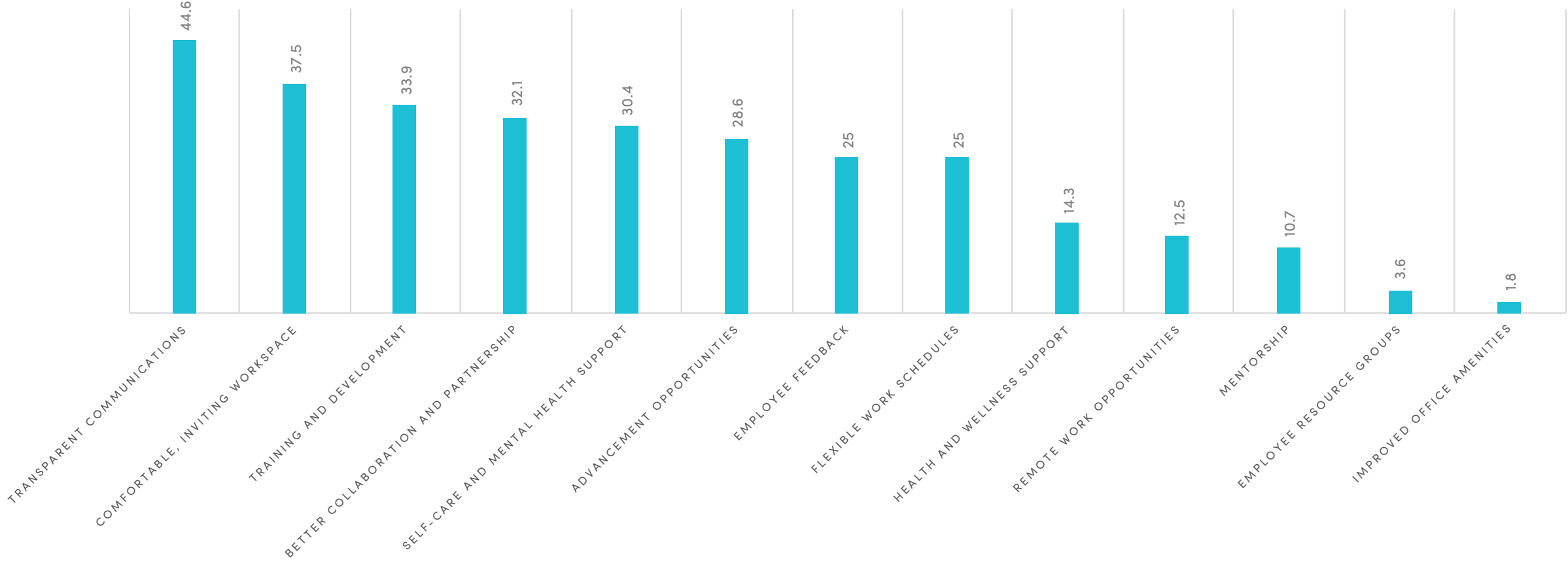
---

**MOST (81%) SAY MOMENTS WHEN THEY  
FEEL VALUED IN THE WORKPLACE ARE OUT  
OF THE ORDINARY**

**We asked for their input on how to make people feel  
more welcome at work.**

# TRANSPARENT CONVERSATIONS TOP THE LIST OF ITEMS WORKERS MOST VALUE

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU PERSONALLY FIND MOST VALUABLE IN THE WORKPLACE?





Most respondents desire a creative environment that emphasizes culture and collaboration (53.6%) or a flexible environment that assumes personal accountability (33.9%).





The perfect work environment is one  
that supports growth and acceptance

“Central in any work environment is going to be cultural competence...engaging with each other using compassion and empathy. Using effective communication and listening to each other’s point of view.”

– **Lauren N. (she/her)**, 34, Kansas City, MO



“I feel like not only should a work environment be diverse because it’s one thing to just put people there, but to also be inclusive to make those people that look like me feel included.”

– Anonymous (*she/her*), 22, Cambridge, MA



A group of people, primarily women, are seated in a room, looking towards the left. The scene is dimly lit, with some blurred lights in the background. A teal speech bubble is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing white text. The people are dressed in casual to semi-formal attire, including jackets and scarves. The overall atmosphere appears to be one of a meeting or a presentation.

Feeling seen and appreciated in your work is a near-universal need.

**“Employees are people and not just a dollar amount. I bring much more to the company than just being a hard worker.”**

– **Anonymous (he/him)**, 29, Atlanta, GA

**“All of my highs have a pattern. It’s being included because it motivates me to actually do more work and it makes me feel valued...When I’m in the know, that feels good because it creates transparency. It allows people to feel human. It promotes productivity.”**

**– Anonymous, 30,** 30, New York, NY



People crave the freedom  
to speak more openly  
without fear of retribution  
or indifference

**“ I would stress the importance of a culture that encourages people to directly communicate and express their needs, desires and motivations in the moment. Create a space outside of the mill of having meetings to allow people to check in on their experiences.”**

– Anonymous (*she/her*), 32, Decatur, GA



**“ I would want a more open door policy where you can talk about ideas or issues and not fear getting ignored or laughed at. Also hold people accountable for when they do wrong. Nothing worse then working hard and seeing people skate through the cracks.”**

– Jason W. (he/him), 47, Charlotte, NC



Vulnerability in leadership helps workers feel more comfortable taking risks

**“Make clear to your employees what behaviors you’ve seen that haven’t worked well with the company culture in the past, and be upfront about where you are as a leader developmentally. This would help develop trust with employees. I think it’s really important to create an environment where mistakes are to be expected.”**

**– Hunter F. (he/him), 26, Portland, OR**



**REPRESENTATION  
HAS A BIG IMPACT,  
ESPECIALLY IN  
LEADERSHIP**

**“ I would first suggest that any literature or videos or podcast have a more diverse group of people. I want people that look like me and who are different from me. I want to see all ethnicities that are represented by my agency spread throughout the department or any literature or news telecast messages that are sent out. It would change my life at work because I would feel as if me and people who look like me are valued.”**


- *Anonymous (he/him)*, 42, Rayne, LA

**“Outward signs of support for the LGBTQ+ community mean more than you know. Small stickers, signs, etc. in offices let queer individuals they’re in safe spaces & help them feel more comfortable in the workplace. Pronouns in email signatures & bios make trans and nonbinary individuals feel more comfortable sharing their own. There are small things you can do that mean so much to queer people & ultimately contribute to a safer and more welcoming workplace.”**

**-Dani N. (they/them), 25, Land O Lakes, FL**

**“For a period have gender specific quotas on promotions to senior management until you reach at 40% representation.”**

– Christina P. (she/her), 52, Campbell, CA

A photograph of four women laughing together in a library. They are standing in front of bookshelves filled with books. The woman on the far left has long blonde hair and is wearing glasses. The woman next to her has long brown hair and is wearing a striped shirt. The woman in the center has long blonde hair and is wearing a yellow cardigan over a grey patterned top. The woman on the far right has long dark hair and is wearing glasses and a grey sweater. A teal circular graphic is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing white text.

Building empathy in teams may  
create stronger bonds and better  
understanding



**“Empathy is important as well. We have had people lose family members and call into work and get treated as if they were a burden. People have had to take time off for very important surgical procedures and they get made of and called names for creating overtime. Losing that demeanor and showing empathy would make more people feel valued.”**

- **Anonymous (he/him)**, 32, Marshall, MI



**TAKING STEPS  
TOWARD SAFER  
WORK PLACES**

## **MOST ORGANIZATIONS HAVE ONLY JUST BEGUN**

In another groundbreaking study we conducted in partnership with BE.MSP, The Coven learned that Twin Cities professionals of color feel their organizations can do more to create more equitable environments. Only 10% of these workers said their employer has measurable, anti-racist outcomes established against a clear timeline to hold leadership teams and employees accountable.





**72% of Twin Cities professionals of color would give their organization a C, D, or F grade related to their management practices in addressing racial equity.**



## DESIGNING FOR INCLUSIVITY

The Coven partners with organizations to identify opportunities and action items for designing inclusive environments. Reach out to our team for more details on how we might work together.

[hello@thecoven.com](mailto:hello@thecoven.com)



## THE COVEN X DSCOUT

We extend our deep gratitude to our partners at dscout for partnering with us on this Identity at Work study.

Dscout provides a versatile suite of research tools for human-insight-driven companies.

[www.dscout.com](http://www.dscout.com)

