

Bringing your full self to work

**An unsolicited workbook
by Sophia Luu**

A short guide that shares the joys and hardships of bringing your full self to work, and how you can help to make the workplace somewhere where everyone feels comfortable to be themselves and perform at their best.

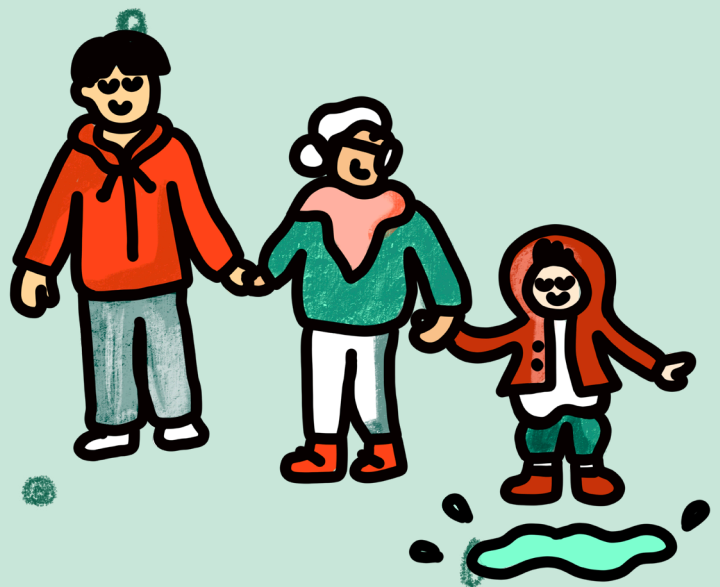
What is bringing your full self?

'Bringing your full self' means to feel just as comfortable being yourself among work colleagues as you would around close friends and family. It doesn't mean that you need to tell everyone everything about your life (I'm sure there's a few things we would hide from our parents, for example!). It means that you feel comfortable enough to tell people things which might affect the way you work and how you feel in a work environment.

Some examples:

- Feeling comfortable and supported enough to tell your colleagues that you are on your period if it is affecting your day.
- Speaking in a way you would normally speak at home around your colleagues.
- Feeling as though you can go to pray without needing to explain yourself or remind others
- Not feeling pressure to be 'high energy' and happy all of the time

"I remember the best and most productive team I worked in was where I was completely myself. The jokes we made were actually funny, we met up outside of work... we shared our life experiences and we challenged each other. We were so happy and it showed in the work."



Why should I bring my full self to work?

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- We all know the research: Happier teams work better together
- Higher chance of approaching problems from diverse perspectives
- We create environments where everyone can feel comfortable and enjoys going to work
- You inspire those around you to do the same.
- There is a whole new generation of coming to the world of work. This generation is much more open to having frank and honest conversations about identity. To retain the best new talent, we need to make sure those new talent feel comfortable at work.

What are some of the dangers of not being able to bring my full self to work?

- Some people are much more comfortable bringing their full self to work than others, for multiple reasons. It's about creating a workplace culture where everyone feels heard and understood.
- Less authentic relationships with colleagues
- Difficulty retaining people

"It feels like I speak a different language to the rest of the team. I get so frustrated because I know that I'm great at my job, but if I can't communicate to the team in a certain way then I'm valued less"

"I'm caring for my dad at the moment. There are moments in the day where I need to help him with medication or when he needs my help. I have told my team this, and everyone is sympathetic, but no one has reached out to me to see how I can actually help. It's making me feel like I need to sanitise what's going on in my life for the benefit of the team, but not for myself"

I've pulled together a set of exercises to help you redefine professional in your own way, and understand what it means to bring yourself to work in a comfortable way. You don't have to do all the exercises and remember – this is just my advice. It may change as I learn and grow too!

Exercise 1: Question what it means to be professional.

“Professional” simply means ‘anyone who earns their living from performing an activity that requires a certain level of education, skill, or training.’ But there are certain behaviours socially attached to being professional. Some people feel they have to hide elements of themselves to fit into the workplace and adapt to a certain way of communicating. Considering that we spend most of our time at work, this is an unhealthy place to be.

Activity: How was your weekend?

Step one: Describe your weekend. Write down everything you did on Saturday. Be completely honest and include every detail.

Example:

I cooked a massive fry up

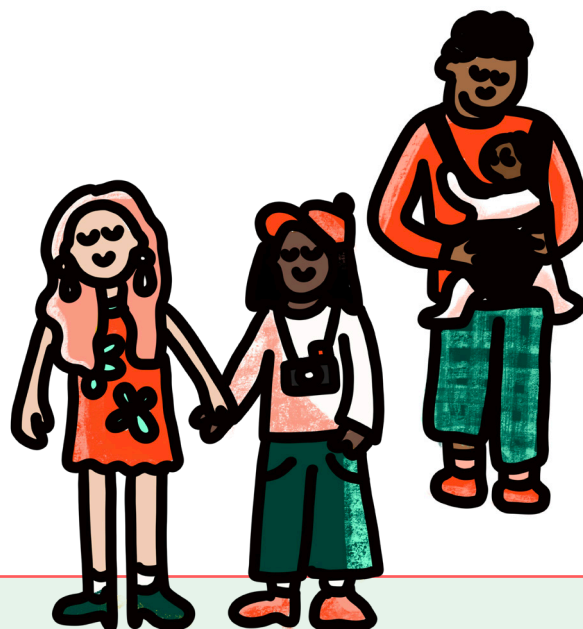
I did a Pilates work out

I did gardening

I had sex

I ordered a dairy-free curry

I sat in front of the sofa and watched all episodes of Glow up: Britain’s next Make up Star



Step 2: Now cross out the things you wouldn't feel comfortable telling your colleagues. Ask yourself- why is it that you feel uncomfortable telling people this? Is it because you don't want to burden others, or is it because you are worried about how others will perceive you?

Example:

~~I cooked a massive fry up~~ – I don't want colleagues to think I'm unhealthy
I did a Pilates work out

I did gardening

~~I had sex~~ – This is inappropriate because I don't want to force my ideas of intimacy onto others, who might have different situations and attitudes

~~I ordered a dairy-free curry~~ – I just don't think anyone would care about what I eat, though it would be nice if people knew I was dairy-free for team events.

~~I sat in front of the sofa and all episodes of Glow up: Britain's next Make up Star~~ – This feels inappropriate because I don't want everyone to think I'm lazy. Other people's hobbies feel more productive than mine.



Step 3: Challenge your assumptions. Reach out to colleagues or team members and discuss if there are ever situations where it is acceptable to tell your colleagues everything that happened in your weekend. Will it affect the way you perform normally?

Exercise 2: Know your roots. And never forget them.

Our differences shape us and massively shape the way we think. It can be easy to capitalise on this, and we must be careful of the way we use our differences. I have been guilty of using my roots to justify speaking for 'my people' in the past. For example, I used to be the first to talk 'on behalf of' a working-class state-school experience, without acknowledging that my family are now middle class and I went to Cambridge! The important thing here is to acknowledge any privileges you have alongside celebrating your differences.



Activity: Who are you?

Use the table on the next page to write down 10 aspects of your life which shape who you are, and how this sets you up differently in the workplace. Then ask yourself: Is this an experience you share with others at work? What might be missing from your knowledge? (See the example below)

Aspects of my life	Why does this shape what I bring to the workplace?	Does this make me different to others I work with?	Gaps I might have in my knowledge
I earn more than most people my age who work just as me.	I don't have financial anxiety that could distract me from my work tasks. I don't have to spend my weekends doing extra work to make money.	No	Understanding decisions I might make about spending when being in my overdraft etc.
My family was working class... but now we are middle class	In my design synthesis work, I am careful about stereotyping people into boxes and acknowledge that experiences shift over time.	Yes I think so	I need to understand that experiences of being working class have changed since I was working class.
I have trouble hearing in my left ear	I prefer watching movies with subtitles now, and I always make sure to add subtitles to my client videos.	Yes – though this might be something others are hiding.	Hearing fully, especially in large crowds. Sometimes people assume I have understood something but I didn't hear them.

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Ask yourself: Would you have known that?

For your next project kick-off, bring this completed activity sheet and share it with your colleagues. Make sure to share one way where your uniqueness adds to the workplace, and one thing that you think is a gap in your knowledge. Would you have known these things about your colleagues if you hadn't done this task? How will this contribute to the team task at hand?



Exercise 3: Challenge workplace jargon

We tend to accept a lot of phrases used in professional settings without questioning why they come about and what they imply. This can result in people not having the choice to speak more freely and openly.

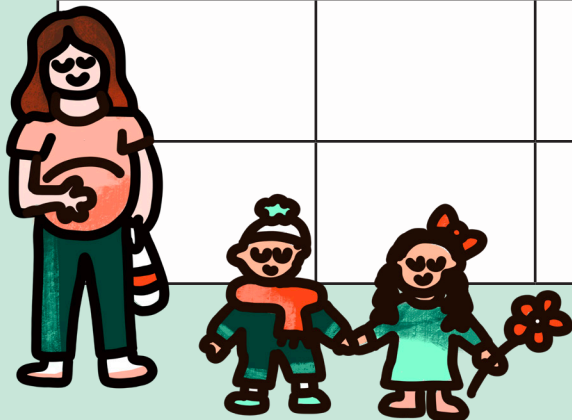


Activity: Say whaaat?

Write down a list of common phrases used to communicate with you in one week. Ask yourself: Why has this become a commonplace saying? What implications could this have? How did it make you feel? (See the example below)

Phrase	Context	Why it is questionable	An alternative I'd like to see
"She is an expert at D&I"	When a team needs D&I support for a study	I have a deep interest in D&I, but I am not by any means an expert. Introducing me as such unplays the many years of hard work and lived experience that it takes to be a trusted expert.	She has a deep focus in D&I
"Tell me how best I can support you"	When I have told leadership or a team that I am struggling with something in my personal life	As someone who is junior, it is hard to know what support is available. Sometimes, I don't know what I need myself, or what is acceptable to ask.	Here are the ways that the firm can support you (X...Y...Z) are there any things that you think might be missing that you need?
"A superstar"	In everyday introductions, including from people who haven't worked with me!	As flattering as it is, phrases like 'superstar' diminish the extent of your impact when spoken by others who haven't worked with me. It can feel fake.	I have heard great things from people who have worked with her.

Phrase	Context	Why it is questionable	An alternative I'd like to see



Final Thoughts: A bloody case study

It's very likely that if you feel uncomfortable being yourself, there are others who feel the same way.

A few months ago, I told 11,000 people that I was on my period. It's normal for me to throw up from pain on my period and I found myself uncontrollably cramping during meetings. I had just come back from being ill, and worried it would look like I was 'slacking'.

I didn't feel comfortable starting this conversation in the team room, so I used a red drop emoji and set it as my 'Slack' status. It was my way of saying "I'm in pain, please be mindful and recognise that I might not have the energy to deal with some tasks." For me, this was essential information for me to do my job, but it's a very personal choice.

It ended up sparking many conversations across the company, with some colleagues expressing they too had the same experience, some who were unsure about the approach, and others who didn't have periods wanting to know how best to support. The conversation also expanded into thinking about other hormonal changes, such as IVF and menopause.

Responses from Colleagues:

Thank you, [@Sophia Luu](#) for starting this conversation. I've thought a lot about the need for these types of conversations at the Firm, but have never seen them in practice. It is so important for us to understand that on any given work day, not all of the members of our teams are on a level playing field in terms of physical / emotional well being. The sooner we can normalize these conversations, the better our teams will be at load balancing and supporting one another appropriately!

Lool love the period teardrop... you're actually built different 🖐️



just wanted to say thank you for your wonderful post. This could be revolutionary for women at McK and Corporate America in general. Thanks for your honesty and transparency.

Interesting points made above, thanks Sophia for starting the conversation! I personally don't really want to communicate when I am on my period but I would like to be able to communicate when hormones are playing a role in my reactions - I just went off birth control and was VERY sensitive to feedback and stress which often resulted in a lot of tears! I didn't know how to manage myself and neither did my colleagues - it would be helpful if "I'm just feeling hormonal today" didn't make colleagues feel super awkward but rather worked to help them understand the best way to support at that given moment

Bravo! I'll admit, when I read the first line, I was shocked...in a good way. It has never occurred to me to add this status, but as you say, a woman's period can seriously impact her day, mood, productivity etc. And men know this, and are probably very uncomfortable discussing it 😊 So that little drop becomes quite a powerful and positive addition.

Thanks for posting. It's important to understand how hormones affect many, including those going through IVF and menopause. I'm sure there are many other treatments where the side effects just wreck havoc on your bodies ability to regulate their hormones for women and men.

Hey Sophia! First, sorry you're in pain - that sucks especially while trying to work... Well done on the post, always good to normalize these things. While as a trans woman I don't menstruate, I do get PMS symptoms and definitely have felt invisible pressure to not bring that up to teams so they don't doubt my general productivity, etc.

Thank you for posting this. I initially thought "geez, over sharing, that's weird" but on reflection you're right. It impacts people's ability to get work done at the time and is important to factor that in when managing the team. For some people they may be able to and choose to manage any symptoms without sharing, but for those who need some sort of accommodations it should not be taboo to talk about it.

Mental health, chronic disease, chronic fatigue/pain, so many other invisible things affect our ability to perform at our best and the Firm has to find ways to support people to do their best work. And we can't do that without talking about it.

The instinct to see it as oversharing is actually a reflection of the stigma and taboo associated with it. That in itself opens a can of worms, but these worms needs to be released if we ever want to achieve true gender parity. Good on you [@Sophia Luu](#) for having the courage to raise this

I've always wanted to be that level of open

The takeaway? Feeling comfortable to be your honest self at work makes the workplace a more inclusive environment for everyone.

Well done for completing this booklet!

Thank you for working through this booklet!

I would love to hear your thoughts. Please reach out to sophialuu22@gmail.com if you would like to share.

Have a beautiful day and I hope one day you feel happy to be yourself at work.

One thing I learned by completing this booklet was...

One thing I will try differently when working with my teams:

