KILPATRICK TOWNSEND

7 KEY TAKEAWAYS

Code-Switching: Shifting the Way We Communicate and Present Ourselves in the Workplace

Kilpatrick Townsend partner Samera Ludwig participated in a panel on "Code-Switching: Shifting the Way We Communicate and Present Ourselves in the Workplace" during CenterForce's Driving Diversity in Law & Leadership Summit in Chicago, Illinois, as part of the Women in Law Series.

Ms. Ludwig provides her 7 Key Takeaways from the panel:

1. Code switching is a strategy in which a member of an underrepresented group consciously or unconsciously adjusts their language, syntax, grammatical structure, behavior, and/or appearance to fit into the dominant culture. It can be a way for people to assimilate so they do not feel "otherized" or "different."

2. Code switching in the workplace happens. We have to recognize and acknowledge it. We all code switch to some degree and all code switching does not have to be negative. Women and people of color are conscious of their surroundings and will take cues from the audience or their own self-awareness. For example, if a woman enters a meeting and all the participants are men, she may feel the need to code switch and discuss topics that are traditionally male. Or she may feel the need to hide the fact that she is a mother.

3. It can become negative when a person feels that they are not presenting their authentic self when they code switch, and it can be exhausting to "act" a certain way. In fact, code switching behavior can become harmful if it is being used to hide cultural identities or ethnic backgrounds.

4. Workplaces should recognize and embrace both diversity and inclusion. When differences are appreciated and the work environment is inclusive, the tendency to code switch decreases. A corollary to the point is to tackle underrepresentation in hiring and recruiting.

5. Think about whether you code switch. Is there an identity or aspect of yourself that you are downplaying at the office? What triggers the need to code switch? How can workplace environments accommodate and appreciate difference? Do we have unconscious biases that contribute to others code switching?

6. And for those who code switch, serving as mentors and sponsors is one way to emotionally combat the negative aspects of code switching. When you mentor, you are being a helpful resource to the mentee, but you also can view it as you are worthy of giving advice and that your advice matters.

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Workplaces that provide affinity groups encourage diversity and employees can find community and support. Happy employees are productive employees, and we should all encourage everyone to be their authentic self.

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