

## Code Switching

By Amber Joiner-Hill, Jan 2020

In a conversation with my [white] therapist, I used the term "code switching" while describing an incident with my employer. She immediately looked perplexed and asked me what I meant. I was happy that she was making an effort to understand, but a bit annoyed because educating white people can be tiring. I had not verbalized the definition before and was a little uncomfortable with coming up with something on the fly, but tried. The best I could do at the moment was to offer examples of how one might change the way they speak and act in a professional setting. I think this satisfied her, but I left unsatiated and wanting to do better.

I looked up several, more polished, definitions and one from Harvard Business Review resonated with me. HBR's definition of code switching is to "*adjust one's style of speech, behavior, appearance, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities.*" What was missing from my initial description was the pressure to meet the needs of your surroundings. When I code switch, I am not doing it because I'm no longer satisfied with all of the things (vernacular, hairstyle, body language, etc.) that come naturally to me. I do it because I don't trust that the people I'm with will value me if they see those things. I do it because I might benefit--personally or professionally--if I don't perpetuate someone's stereotypes or validate their biases about my race, gender, status, age, upbringing, or appearance.

I do not enjoy this at all. Code switching is exhausting. It's as if I'm balancing on one foot for hours everyday and can only let that other foot touch the floor when I'm at home or in a group of all-Black people whom I personally know. Only then do I feel relieved of the responsibility to make other people feel comfortable.

So code switching is much more than just sitting up straighter or using unnecessarily long words when your boss is around. In order to do this successfully, you have to:

- Know How to Compartmentalize: only some parts of yourself are welcome in certain situations (sorry)
- Be Incredibly Culturally Aware: you have to be able to scan the room, assess its culture(s), and then become culturally-compatible with your surroundings
- Be Strong Willed: I've had a lot of people test me and see if I would come out of pocket and feed their need for a stereotype
- Have A Firm Understanding of Your Values and Morals: without this, it's easy to sort of lose your way and true sense of self as you continuously toggle between personas
- Take Care of Yourself: as I said, this work is exhausting and you need to give yourself the time and space to exhale, reset, and prepare for the next charade

If you are a white person and want to make your Black colleagues or acquaintances more comfortable around you, some things you can do include:

- Be Yourself: I can easily sniff out someone who has an act of their own and that can lead to distrust
- Educate Yourself: get a historical understanding of how code switching has been a matter of life or death, job or unemployment, housing or homelessness for Black people

- **Be Uncomfortable:** after learning about the person and their culture, encourage them to spend time with you in one of their natural settings. If you prove to be trustworthy, then you'll likely have the pleasure to see this person for who they are at the core instead of the edited version of him/herself.