

We must overcome tokenism to achieve real equity



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Tokenism seems to be a topic that folks want to avoid, but the argument against addressing it usually looks something like, “I don’t like that term.” (In fact, that’s an exact quote from the pushback I encountered in one recent experience – and the predominantly white women’s organization that originally invited this article sought to censor it heavily.) But if we are serious about doing the work of equity, we have to talk about and understand tokenism.

Tokenism occurs in a variety of contexts: a lone woman in an office dominated by men; public process committees appointing a single representative from the community. But nowhere is tokenism more common or more problematic than the context of race. It is at work when a person of color is afforded an opportunity primarily (or entirely) to make an organization or system look fair rather than as part of conscientious work to address racial inequities.

The extraordinary underrepresentation of people of color in privileged spaces is the product of structural inequities that are built into our systems, inequities that will not disappear with a few slight adjustments. Yet tokenism quite effectively insulates an organization or system from scrutiny because it is so difficult to name or prove. People in power have no reason to recognize the dynamics of tokenism and no incentive to change them when they do. People of color might more readily identify the dynamics but likely will be reluctant to undermine another person of color who has “made it,” or may be inclined to deny what they see because to believe that tokenism is operating can feel disheartening and disempowering.

However, if we don’t begin to understand tokenism and take it seriously, we undermine the prospects for real and lasting change. As Malcolm Gladwell helpfully illustrates in the first episode of his podcast, *Revisionist History*, any system of exclusion will create exceptions to make the system look fair.

For example, over centuries of anti-Semitism in Europe, in which Jews were regularly driven out of cities in pogroms, exceptions were regularly made for the “good Jews”; the exceptions bolstered the sense that the pogroms were a justified means of driving out a bad element rather than a form of oppression. Likewise, Gladwell examines a brief period when one woman temporarily found success in the English art world (then closed to women); her success quickly served to bolster the view that there were no barriers to true talent there – and soon after, she and all women were shut out of the art world for another 60 years. This pattern of moral licensing is a well-documented phenomenon; the exceptions serve to obscure and strengthen the pattern of exclusion.

When moral licensing is operating, a

system will tend to look for people who make good tokens: that is, people who fit in well with the existing paradigm and are unlikely to challenge the status quo. Often, a person of color is chosen without much attention to whether they are the best candidate for the job (which is not to say they aren’t, but that little attention is paid to examining the question), or they are chosen over other candidates of color who have exhibited some inclination to challenge the system or who show up in more powerful ways or who don’t “fit in” as well.

To take steps toward spotting when tokenism is at work, we must scan for the reasons why some of have been passed over, rejected, released and replaced. The point is not to undermine people of color who have been hired or promoted, but instead to help identify structural oppression that likely is still at work in such circumstances.

Tokenism is an underpinning of systemic oppression; it functions to maintain the overall system even in the face of what seems like progress. As such, it requires “good tokens” who exhibit a willingness to view their success as a sign that the system is fair or that tokenism is normative and necessary for advancement – both being responses that are quite understandable. Often people of color have been passed over many times, or have not been rewarded for their efforts or given a fair shot. When their opportunity finally comes, they are inclined to believe that someone finally recognized their worth, and are not inclined to look around for others who have been left behind or to wonder whether they became useful in insulating the organization or system from scrutiny.

The truth is, most people of color who are allowed into privileged spaces have likely been tokenized at some point. When I look back to some of my own successes or times that I have been offered a platform, I can now see evidence (invisible to me at the time) that I was perceived as more palatable to invest in or listen to than other people of color would be. The question for us is, will we allow ourselves to be used as an alibi to make the system look fair? How can we be honest with ourselves about what has fueled our success or access – especially since we have likely been overlooked and unfairly judged as well – and continue to challenge the systems that have conditionally accepted us? What kind of balance can we strike between navigating systems in a way that furthers our personal success and challenging the barriers that persist for folks at the margins? How can we find that balance?

In order for people of color to answer that question and for all people to resist the problem of tokenism, we need to understand that if an organization or system is really working for racial justice and equity, it will be engaged beyond facial “diversity.” Such an organization or system will not overlook qualified people of color “close to home” in favor of bringing in people from

outside who have not had the opportunity to challenge them. Its leaders will not claim they can’t find good people of color; instead, they will devote energy to building meaningful relationships with communities of color (relationships that those communities would define as meaningful). They will prioritize understanding perspectives that have been underrepresented and will demonstrate progress toward transformational change. The fact that they have hired or promoted small numbers of people of color should not insulate organizations or leaders from scrutiny, or keep the rest of us from holding them accountable for who they undervalue. If we understand how tokenism and moral licensing work, we will be loath to play into the misconception that hiring or promoting a person of color always means that an organization is not also practicing racism.

As for people of color, we must recognize that most of us have gained opportunities due to tokenism because that is how systemic bias works. If we don’t educate ourselves about racism and moral licensing, we will be easy to pick off and to enlist in the service of maintaining the status quo; the success of small numbers of individuals will serve to insulate predominantly white organizations from engaging in the hard work of addressing structural bias.

Promoting one of us does not actually elevate all of us, so we should scan for whether and how choosing one of us made it easier to discount others. We should concentrate more on lifting up others whose value has not been recognized and less on applauding predominantly white organizations for offering opportunities to a few people of color. Our theory of change should include more than our personal success, but rather should include a relentless commitment to lifting up the voices of the underrepresented and marginalized.

No one of us speaks for all people of color, or even all people within our huge demographic (e.g., Black, Latinx, API, indigenous, Arab-American). We should resist being tokenized by refusing to speak or stand for all people of color, and by refusing to prioritize individual success over engaging in the work of lifting up other voices. Doing these things may well compromise our personal success in some organizations, but not the ones who are serious about the work of equity.

Author’s note: “The Lady Vanishes,” Revisionist History podcast, Season 1, episode 1 is essential listening to understand moral licensing and tokenism.

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