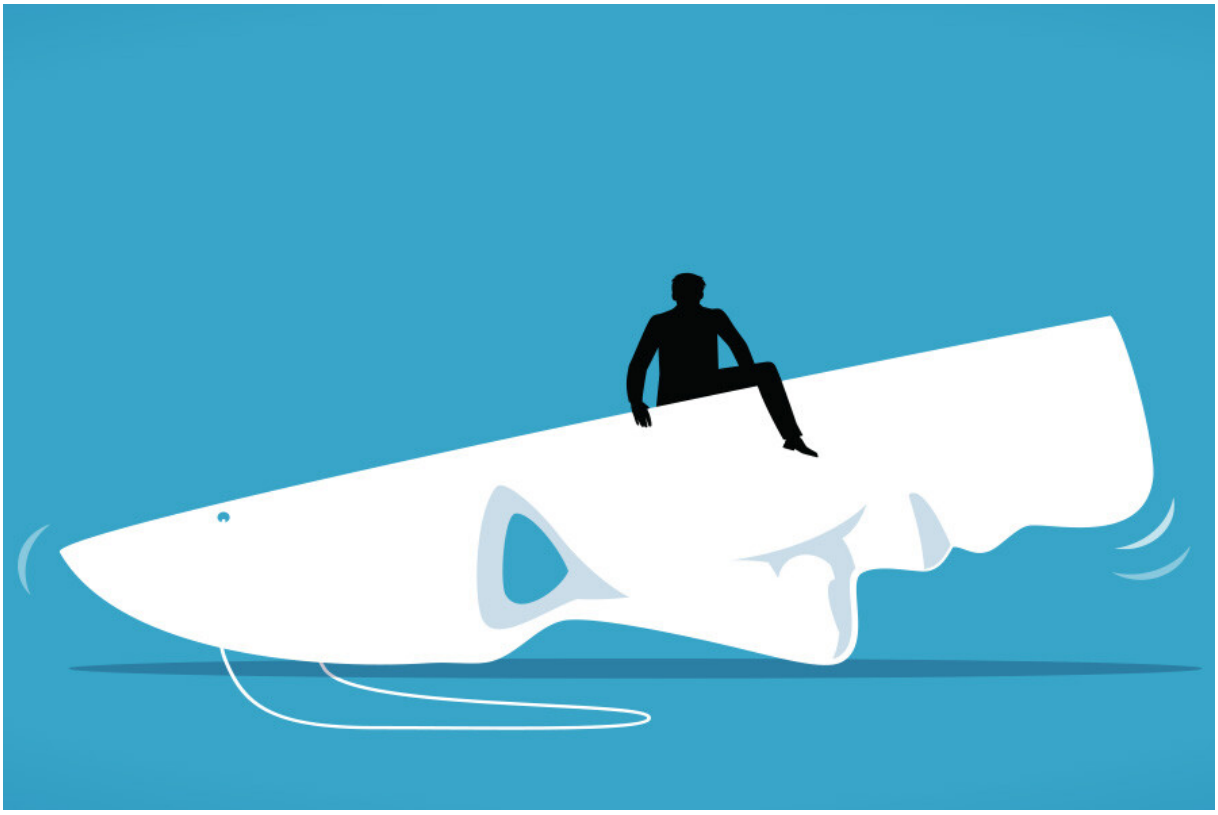
Science & Technology

It’s Easier to ‘Just Be Yourself’ When You’re Popular

Social psychologists at Columbia Business School find that people with higher social status have the privilege of acting more “authentic.”

By
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Just be yourself! The advice echoes through classrooms, workplaces, and therapists’ offices everywhere. And for good reason: studies have shown that being genuine boosts happiness, reduces anxiety, and improves overall well-being.

But authenticity is easier for some people than others. And psychologists aren't entirely sure why. They know that people with high self-esteem are more likely to feel confident revealing their true selves, but they suspect that larger social forces are also at play — factors like power, status, and cultural norms that dictate who gets to be themselves without fear of judgment.

Now social psychologists at Columbia Business School have identified one factor that stands out above the rest: social status, or the amount of respect and admiration that a person commands among their peers. In a series of studies involving thousands of participants, the researchers found that people who are widely admired feel freer to express themselves in a variety of settings.

"Our findings suggest that social status may be as important as self-esteem in increasing authenticity, which is surprising," says Erica R. Bailey '23BUS, who conducted the research with James T. Carter '23BUS and professors Adam Galinsky and Sheena Iyengar.

In workplaces, social status matters even more than formal authority, the researchers found. This was also unexpected, as previous studies had treated power and status as interchangeable. Bailey and her coauthors discovered that while both power and status can afford workers the freedom to relax and be themselves, those who are held in high regard enjoy the greatest latitude. Just think of Jim Halpert on *The Office* — a low-ranking employee whose popularity earns him the freedom to pull pranks, flout the dress code, and generally act as he pleases, while his boss, Michael Scott, is forever putting on airs in a desperate bid for respect.

The good news is that it may be easier to raise your social status than you think. Another recent paper by Galinsky and Maren Hoff '25BUS identifies a surefire way to do it: give credit to others. Across several large studies, Galinsky and Hoff found that people who feel insecure about their standing at work can bolster their reputations by publicly acknowledging how colleagues contribute to their own successes. Such "status sharing," the researchers write, enhances the standing of both giver and recipient.

Of course, inner strength is still essential for authenticity. But Bailey's work suggests that courage alone isn't always enough, and that our social and professional networks can either invite or inhibit genuine behavior. "Ideally, you want to seek out situations where, instead of having to forcibly push your authenticity out into the

world, other people are helping to coax it out of you,” Bailey says.

This article appears in the Fall 2025 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title* "*Rethinking authenticity.*"

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