

The Insightful Leader Podcast Transcript

Sure, Take That Zoom Call in Your Sweatpants. It Might Make You a Better Person.

Jessica LOVE: Just a month ago, a lot of people likely would have said that their workplace expects them to compartmentalize. While you may be a mother or a husband or an aspiring chef on your own time, you might have felt obligated to leave those parts of yourself at the door when you walked into the office, and became an employee.

But now, as we continue adjusting to life with the coronavirus, many of us are finding that our various identities have shifted and merged.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: When your kids sneak into the frame of a video call, there's no longer much distance between your 'mother' identity and your 'worker' identity. And when you're sending emails from your kitchen while making lunch, the aspiring chef in you suddenly becomes intertwined with the employee in you.

So what are the stakes of this shift in work-life balance? Could bringing these different parts of ourselves together lead us to act differently? Rima Touré-Tillery has been thinking about this very question for a long time. She's an associate professor of marketing at Kellogg. And a while back, she wanted to know if compartmentalizing our identities, or not compartmentalizing them, could lead people to make different choices. Specifically...

Rima TOURÉ-TILLERY: How does that influence people's ethical decision making?

LOVE: Welcome to *The Insightful Leader*, from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. Today on the podcast: some encouraging news for anyone who now finds themselves working from home, and for the organizations that employ them. It turns out, this sudden merging of identities is likely to lead to more ethical behavior. We hear about a series of studies Touré-Tillery did, and what the findings can teach leaders about keeping employees—and themselves—on the straight and narrow.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: There's a lot of prior research exploring how people form their various identities. But Touré-Tillery and her colleagues were interested in a slightly different question.

TOURÉ-TILLERY: How do these different identities relate to each other?

LOVE: That is, in what ways do a person's different identities overlap versus diverge? Take someone who's both a mother and a teacher, for example. Both of these identities might be similar—say, a nurturing, loving mother, who was also a nurturing, loving teacher.

TOURÉ-TILLERY: And that person would be an example of somebody who has a high overlap in a sense that they think and behave the same way, whether they're at work with their students or at home with their kids, right?

LOVE: But some people have less overlap. For instance, our hypothetical person could be a warm and loving mother, but a very strict and serious teacher.

TOURÉ-TILLERY: This is a person who behaves very differently with their students than they do at home.

LOVE: And this overlap, or lack thereof—the researchers already knew that it has real stakes. Previous studies have shown that people who really compartmentalize the different parts of lives react to things differently than those who don't compartmentalize.

TOURÉ-TILLERY: They tend to be less likely to become depressed after adverse life events. So if something really bad happens in your identity as a teacher, you say you lose your job. If those two identities were not completely merged, your teacher and mother identity, then you probably will do better. You will have something to fall back on in your mother identity when you lose that teacher identity.

LOVE: But if both identities overlap a lot—say, you're a nurturing teacher and a nurturing mother—you no longer have that distinct, compartmentalized part of yourself to fall back on. So it'll feel more like your whole self has failed. And in just the same way, Touré-Tillery thought that this overlap between our identities might have implications for the decisions we make. Specifically, for ethical decisions. She suspected that compartmentalizing might make it easier to justify doing things that we know are wrong.

TOURÉ-TILLERY: The thought was that if you're able to compartmentalize, you might be able to separate yourself from that, and be able to say, "You know what? I did it here and I had good reason to do it. It doesn't mean that I'm a bad person."

[musical interlude]

LOVE: Touré-Tillery conducted three studies to see how compartmentalizing changed people's ethical calculus. In the first study, she started by having participants list their identities and describe each of them with traits. For instance, "I'm a collaborate project manager," or "I'm a fearless rock climber." From that, she determined how much overlap each person had. If they listed similar traits for multiple identities, they had a lot of overlap, and vice versa. Then she had them take a quiz asking how they'd respond to certain ethical quandaries.

TOURÉ-TILLERY: They're really small, everyday ethical transgressions. So you accidentally gain access to a buffet without paying, do you eat there, right? You accidentally walk out with merchandise and, and realize, "Oh my gosh, I haven't paid for this one." And it's something

pretty substantial that you want. Do you just leave and say, “You know what, this store makes a lot of money. They don’t need my \$50”? Or do you go back and pay for it? So these sort of small things. And so some people answer more ethically and others answer less ethically.

LOVE: When the researchers looked at how answers to the ethics quiz correlated with the amount of overlap... you guessed it!

TOURÉ-TILLERY: It was a positive relationship. How much overlap you had across your identities predicted whether you would engage in the unethical behavior or not.

LOVE: In other words, if you had a lot of overlap between your different identities, this sense of cohesion made you less likely to do unethical things. And on the flip side, compartmentalizing really *did* lead to more bad behavior. To confirm this, they ran a second, similar study, but this time they actually tried to control each person’s amount of overlap. So before taking the quiz, they had half of the study participants list what their various identities had in common, and the other half list how their identities were different.

TOURÉ-TILLERY: And then we found again that that had an effect. Those who talked about how their identities are overlapping tended to be less likely to endorse the unethical behaviors.

LOVE: Which, again, supported Touré-Tillery’s theory. But what people say on a quiz about ethics is very different from how they act. So in her final study, she actually ran an experiment to see if manipulating people’s sense of overlap could lead them to act more or less ethically in the real world. In this experiment, the researchers once again primed participants to feel either more or less overlap. Then, they had both groups flip a coin. Participants knew that they would get a monetary reward if they guessed the coin flip correctly. But the key was, the experiment let people self-report whether or not they had guessed right. Meaning, they had the opportunity to lie.

Guessing a coin toss is 50-50 odds, no matter which group you’re in. So overall, the high-overlap and low-overlap groups should have guessed right equally often. But that’s not what happened.

TOURÉ-TILLERY: What we found was that when there was a reward, people lower in overlap were significantly more likely to report that they had a match than people high in overlap.

LOVE: Meaning, the low-overlap group was lying about their correct guesses more often! And, as predicted, this only happened when there was money involved. When they ran the same study with no money on the line as a control, low-overlap people’s magical ability to guess correctly suddenly disappeared. The takeaway...

TOURÉ-TILLERY: If I’m low in overlap and I’m able to compartmentalize then I can say, “You know what, I did something bad here and that, that’s fine. I’m just going to ignore that.” And I can spare that part of myself and focus on something else. But if you’re high in overlap, then

you have no selves to spare. Because all of your selves are interconnected. And so you're really much more careful about what you do.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: So what does this mean for leaders? Touré-Tillery says it's worth keeping these findings in mind when you think about work-life balance, especially in the wake of a crisis that is rapidly shifting this balance. The research suggests that working from home, or helping your kids with homework between meetings, or even wearing your "at-home" outfit on that conference call—these things could spur good behavior, since they create more overlap between people's work and home identities.

TOURÉ-TILLERY: And based on our research, that should reduce the tendency to engage in unethical actions when the opportunity comes up.

LOVE: But beyond merging your home and work identities, there are some other practices that also might help you nudge yourself towards better choices, by bringing different aspects of your identity together. For instance, self-reflection exercises, like writing down the things that you've done that day that you're most and least proud of, can help keep you accountable for your actions.

TOURÉ-TILLERY: Because you're essentially saying, "Well, am I going to write this down in my journal at the end of the day, what I'm about to do?" And so I could see how people who engage in this practice would be more thoughtful about what they do.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: This episode of *The Insightful Leader* was written by Morgan Levey and edited by Jake Smith. It was produced by Kevin Bailey, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Jake Smith, Michael Spikes, and Emily Stone, and mixed by Michael Spikes. Special thanks to Rima Touré-Tillery.

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We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of *The Insightful Leader*.

