WHAT'S YOUR ECCENTRICITY QUOTIENT?

How weird/different/unique can you be in a major corporation and still keep your job?
Kathleen McDonald, organization development team leader who was responsible for a project on managing diversity at Exxon, devised an eccentricity model to help employees answer that very question.

According to McDonald, the employees' goal is to balance their perceived competence with their perceived eccentricity (PC = PE). She defines perceived competence as how you and your job performance are seen by others in your organization. But note that this perception can be different from reality: perceived competence is how good others in the organization "think" you are.

Perceived eccentricity refers to those parts of you or your actions that do not fit neatly into the profile of the "ideal organization person" as defined by your organization. As McDonald describes it, perceived eccentricity refers to the corners of the square peg as you work in an environment that rewards round pegs. Obviously, some of those corners can be worn down, while other, are difficult, if not impossible, to remove. In the higher realms of most Fortune 500 companies, anyone who is female, foreign born, or a person of color is likely to have a higher perceived eccentricity score than a WASP male. Likewise, people with different lifestyles, vocal religious beliefs, or a unique style of dress, mannerisms, or speech may also be perceived as eccentric in some organizations. In technical environments, perceived eccentricity can also relate to the degree of risk and innovation you display.

How you manage the perceived eccentricity side of your equation has to do with how much acceptance you seek and what that acceptance represents. How much of an insider can you be? How much of an insider do you want to be? How much of yourself are you willing to leave at home or to censor at work? These can be tough issues, especially for minorities who feel the strain of struggling to fit an "ideal type" that bears little resemblance to them.

McDonald described the experience of a white man who moved from a plant to a technical service position. At the plant he and just about everyone else wore jeans. For his new job he upgraded his wardrobe to wear a sport coat with his jeans. Eventually word drifted back to him that the salespeople did not want to take him with them on customer calls because of his "eccentric" dress. He had a choice to make: he could work at raising his perceived competence so that his new colleagues would see him as an invaluable resource even in a burlap sack, or he could invest in a new wardrobe and decrease his perceived eccentricity. He went out and bought suits—a quicker if more expensive route to correcting an imbalance in the eccentricity model.

However, it's easier to change clothes than skin color. The African American female, who entered a predominantly white company and was assigned to a supervisor who was also brand new, had more difficulty in overcoming the perceived eccentricity of her race. Because the new supervisor couldn't inform her about the company's norms early on or interpret her competence to others in the organization, it took longer for the African American to establish her perceived competence.

McDonald says that you can be as eccentric as you are competent. And it's usually a good idea to establish your competence before you test the company's tolerance of eccentricity. How do you scope out your perceived competence and eccentricity?: from performance appraisals, the rewards that come your way, and from feedback. And you may have to take an active role in seeking out feedback so you can decide how to manage yourself in the workplace. McDonald's eccentricity model is a good barometer for figuring out the consequences of your choices.

Examples of employees whose perceived eccentricity far outweigh their perceived competence come readily to mind. These are folks who are no longer around to tell their tale or who are continuously passed over for promotion. The danger of that kind of imbalance is clear. However, McDonald sees no advantage in the opposite kind of imbalance, even though there are typically many people in organizations who are perceived to be more competent than they are eccentric. The danger here is that employees will lose valuable opportunities to grow, both personally and professionally, by playing it safe. And organizations won't learn how to live with and profit from the diversity of their employees. So if your organization perceives you as more competent than eccentric, even up the equation and break out a little. Let those at work know how wonderfully weird or innovative you can be. You'll be doing everyone a favor.