Standing out while fitting in.

In my view, the funny thing about fashion is that if it succeeds, it fails. If everyone buys the ‘new look’, the new look will quickly become the ‘old look’ – boring, passé and out. Being out of fashion, or in your ‘own fashion’ is therefore not so un-cool it seems.

Be it your college, your job, or your social circle, there is always a pressure to ‘fit in’. Do you want to fit in? Do you need to fit in? How far will you go to fit in?

I am told that interview panelists frown on male candidates who have beards – apparently it means that the candidate is trying to ‘make a statement’ – a potential non-conformist and trouble maker. Is that a fair assessment? What about wearing traditional Indian dresses for an interview? - What is it likely to say about the candidate and what does it say about the prospective employer? While dress codes are the norm in certain businesses, I believe organizations should carefully examine the purpose of the dress code in their setting, and actively explore the possibility of using a guideline rather than a compulsory code.

We live in an era where the awareness for respecting diversity in workplaces has greatly increased. Yet the pressures of work are such that a friend of mine became a non-vegetarian because she had to attend business lunches regularly, and being a vegetarian led to what she felt were awkward moments trying to find something vegetarian from the menu card in foreign lands.

What about the music you listen to, is your ‘favorite song’ really your favorite song? Or did someone instill in you the idea that it had to be your favorite song for what else could it be?

Some time ago, I was on a panel interviewing students to select recipients of a scholarship. There I met a student who was surprised when asked “What non academic book have you read that inspired you?” There was a sense of disbelief from his side at the idea that we had asked something ‘non academic”. To ease the situation, the panel asked “What about a magazine or a newspaper?” That didn’t ease the situation much.

This is not a new phenomenon. Many years ago I had a roommate who had great difficulty making a phone call to the operator to find out the STD code for his home town. In the end one of us had to make the call on his behalf.

Make no mistake, both these people were academically brilliant.

When you meet such people who seem to have constrained themselves very significantly, you wonder – how come hostel life did not change them?

Yet I have also known friends from school days, who were very pleasant and fun folks to hang out with in school, but turned out to be grumpy folks in college. And you wonder, why did hostel life change them so much?
There are no magic answers on how much we must give in to change and how much we must strive to be ourselves. Status quo Vs change is highly situation dependent and perception dependent. At the same time there are enough real examples where it is not that difficult to make a decision.

We must value diversity in people we meet, and importantly, in ourselves too. There is no need to change quickly, just as there is no adamant reason to be exactly the same forever. To evolve in a well considered manner, makes life an interesting journey.

I read an article on drinking and smoking habits in the US. The study showed that if someone had not consumed alcohol or smoked till the age of 17, chance were high that they would never drink alcohol or smoke, for the rest of their lives. I don’t know what that age might be in India, but I suspect it may be more like 20 years of age for a similar result because most of us experience our first taste of unmonitored freedom in the initial years at college. So perhaps what you do in those years may define you for the rest of your life.

Drinking and smoking, seem to be an activities where more people seem to experience or exert social pressure. During my graduate studies in the US, I never faced social pressure from any American for not drinking. They accepted me as I was without even a hint of discomfort. In fact, in restaurants I got free coffee since the waitresses assumed that I was the designated driver. Strangely, the only ‘pressure’ I experienced was from a small fraction of my Indian friends who seemed uncomfortable with the idea that I did not drink. This despite the fact that I accepted them the way they were and never ever asked them why they drank. I can only conclude that they themselves were uncomfortable with the idea that they drank, and this was one way to show their discomfort.

Conventionally we are tuned to thinking of diversity along religious or regional lines. However the diversity we encounter most often is behavioral diversity, regardless of its origin. Amongst classmates, friends, colleagues, relatives, your spouse – it is easy to encounter and notice. Accepting it gracefully makes it a pleasant experience for everyone. Being inflexible, supercilious and imposing are uncalled for. A healthy curiosity is different from a hostile cross examination.

Be comfortable with who you are, at the same time be open to evolving yourself. When you see diversity, give it space, examine it, discuss in a friendly manner, and assimilate that which your considered thought approves of.

Upon encountering diversity people seem to react in different ways ranging from hostility, scorn, to amusement, to genuine curiosity, to friendly acceptance, to support and understanding, to immediate assimilation. When we encounter diversity, we must realize that we recognize it as diversity because we are ourselves diverse with respect to it. Someone can be different from us only if we are different from them. So by respecting diversity, we are respecting ourselves.
Change is neither automatically for the better nor automatically for the worse. Considered change is usually good, flippant change is typically immature and is indicative of rudderless behavior. Pressurizing people to change is possibly a sign of a complex.

As you move on from your education to your workplace, you will encounter many opportunities where you will observe people responding to your diversity, or will have opportunities to respond to their diversity. As a first step I hope you will recognize what you are doing, and will respond in a mature manner that you will feel comfortable with in the years to come. As you get into leadership positions in your organizations, you will set the tone that others will likely follow. While enforcing order may be the tried and tested route to take, I hope you will instill in your organization the maturity that allows for freedom of expression while maintaining or even enhancing the cohesiveness of the organization.