

Working in Corporate America: Sink or Swim?

*“America, be placed on notice. We know who we are.
We understand our collective power.
Following today we will act on that power.”*
—Maxine Waters

The term “corporate America” means different things to different people. To some individuals corporate America creates thoughts of multinational corporations housed in sky-high buildings with more employees than can be counted. Others define corporate America by the environment it often fosters: competitive, impersonal and mercenary. Yet to the large majority of African-Americans the term corporate America brings to mind these pictures and more. The truth is that when many of us envision corporate America, we picture a work environment that’s dominated by white people. And we think of it as a somewhat unwelcoming place—a place that has traditionally been harder for us to enter than whites, and harder for us to succeed in.

Nevertheless, as a larger number of companies have begun to embrace diversity, more African-Americans have gravitated towards working in a corporate environment. Working for big businesses can provide more money, more prestige, and more opportunities to have a greater effect in one's chosen industry than working for smaller and less recognized companies. However, despite the positives, there are still aspects of working in corporate America that people of color may find disheartening. The following are issues African-Americans tend to have while working in a corporate environment.

Issue 1—It's a Lonely Place For African-Americans

If you went to a predominantly white college you'll have more of an idea of what working in corporate America feels like than those who attended HBCUs. In 2005, African-Americans made up just 8.1 percent of the management and professional workforce, so just like you'll always find more white than black people at most colleges so will you in corporate America. You may feel very uncomfortable when you walk into a room of a dozen or more people and realize you're the only black person there. And when you finally realize that there's not a single solitary black face in the entire building besides yours, you may start to feel very lonely and out of place.

Issue 2—African-Americans Receive Little Recognition

The thought that African-Americans have to work twice as hard as their white counterparts to be recognized and rewarded for their hard work is considered true in most working environments, but it is considered a fact of life by African-Americans working in corporate America. Many African-Americans also feel that despite their education, having earned a position in the company and doing well there, they still have to continually prove that they belong in corporate America. Unlike their white counterparts, whose work is allowed to speak for itself, African-Americans may find that their intellect and ability to perform is always under question, as if affirmative action or a bad hiring

decision is what landed them the job. Beyond this African-Americans may find that they are slower to get promoted than their white counterparts, slower to get raises, and slower to get work or projects that actually utilize their skills and abilities.

Issue 3 —It Doesn't Embrace Cultural Differences

Because corporate America is largely controlled by white males, they define what is acceptable regarding everything from speech, to dress, to hair styles. Some can appreciate cultural expression, but others feel that if they don't speak it, if they don't wear it, and if they can't comb it that way then you shouldn't either. And when they don't know if something is appropriate they may look at white women to find out.

Issue 4 —It's Too Competitive

Everyone is trying to climb the corporate ladder at the same time, and some people will pull you down to beat you to the top. This can create excess stress among employees who feel like they always have to be ahead of the next person. It's difficult to have camaraderie among employees in an environment that's so divisive. Beyond this, some companies may pit blacks against other blacks as they vie for positions earmarked (openly or discreetly) to minorities.

Issue 5—It Can Be Grueling

Don't expect to work 9-5 everyday in corporate America. You'll be lucky if you don't take work home. Projects come first, not drinks after work, exercise or beauty rest. The long hours can interfere with people's family and social life.

Issue 6—It's Unstable

Because corporate America is so money driven, owners always do what they must to cut costs or make a profit. This can equate to thousands of layoffs at a time among large corporations. It's difficult to work well and enjoy your work when everyone knows you may not have a job unless so much money is earned in a cer-

tain quarter, or your company is about to be bought, again.

Catalyst, a leading research and advisory organization working to advance women in business, revealed in their 2005 report titled “2005 Catalyst Census of Corporate Officers and Top Earners of the Fortune 500,” that African-American women represented only 1.1 percent of corporate officers in the 260 Fortune 500 companies they surveyed that verified race/ethnicity and gender data. African-American men held 2.6 percent of all corporate officer positions.

Catalyst’s 2004 report titled “Advancing African-American Women in the Workplace: What Managers Need to Know,” discussed the barriers African-American women said they faced in the professional workplace. The barriers included negative, race-based stereotypes, more frequent questioning of their credibility and authority, and a lack of institutional support. According to the report, African-American women also reported experiencing a “double outsider” status—unlike white women or African-American men who share gender or race in common with most colleagues or managers—and conflicting relationships with white women.

As a black woman you can’t afford to be oblivious to the fact that corporate America’s environment basically works against you, not for you. This doesn’t mean you can’t climb the corporate ladder, shatter the glass ceilings you may face, and do as well or better than your white counterparts. You can do this and more. You’re just going to have to be prepared for anything as you work your way up.

Swimming in the Corporate Environment

1. Have a Plan: If your goal is to climb the corporate ladder at the company you’re working for then you’ll need to know how to climb it. It may not be a typical straight ladder—parts of it might be broken off and it may zig-zag. So have a plan before you start climbing. You’ll first need to know what rung on the