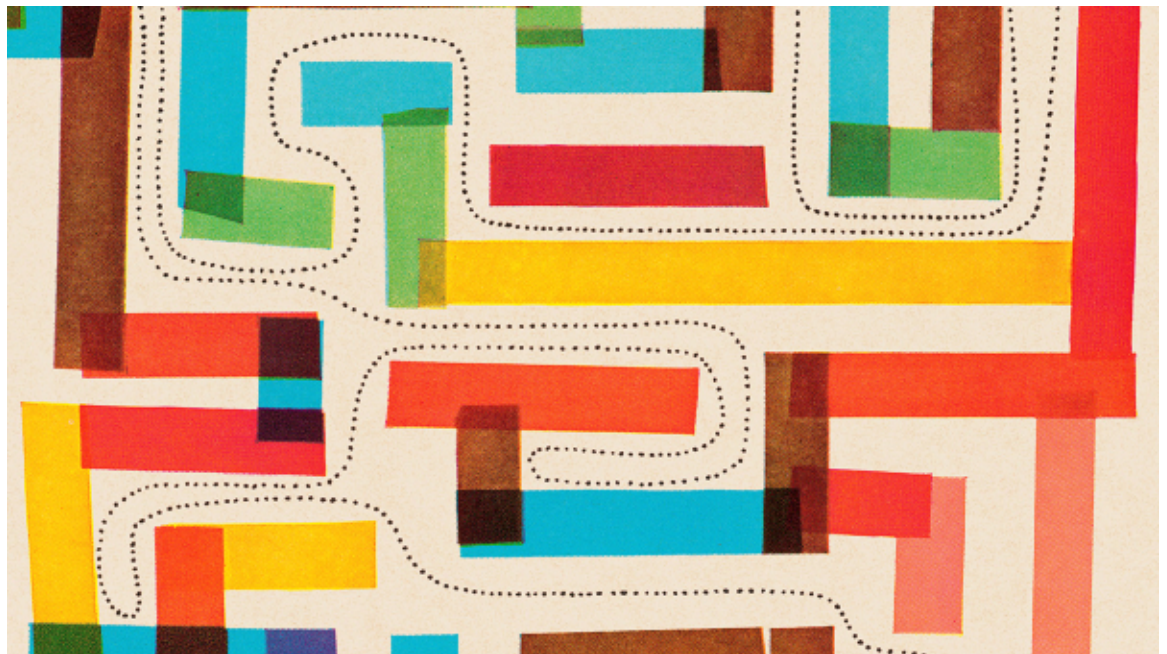


RACE

How Black Women Describe Navigating Race and Gender in the Workplace

by Maura Cheeks

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A few years ago I started attending classes for my part-time MBA. What I noticed almost immediately was that my experience in the classroom largely mirrored my experience of close to a decade in corporate America: I'm consistently one of very few black women and black people in the room.

In September, Ellen McGirt published an article in Fortune exploring why there [are zero African-American women](#) running Fortune 500 companies. This lack of female leadership is important to explore, but what are the experiences of black women in the workplace *before* they make it to the c-suite? I wanted to find out how other black women navigate the [intertwined](#) barriers at the intersection of race and gender.

Over the course of a year I worked with Professor Elizabeth Morrison, Vice Dean of Faculty at NYU, to interview 10 women of color in order to understand the challenges they face in the workplace, how they cope with those challenges, and how those coping mechanisms affect their chances of long-term success.

Here are the highlights of what I learned about their experiences at work in corporate America:

“Your work is judged plus other intangible things”

A lot of women told me that they [code-switched](#), which involves embracing the dominant culture or vernacular among certain groups (like co-workers, for example) and switching to a more authentic self when around friends and family.

One woman I spoke with, a successful entrepreneur who was interning at a tech startup before going to business school, excitedly described her most recent position where, for the first time in her career, she reported to a black woman. She said she, “performed better” and was “a lot more comfortable and confident.” She described what it might have been like if she had to code-switch instead: “Being judged on your work versus mentally performing well would have been more taxing. Your work is judged plus other intangible things. You second-guess yourself and that affects your confidence.”

She wasn't the only woman to mention the mental strain associated with trying to live up to a professional ideal originally created to stifle, rather than support, diversity. Another woman passed on an opportunity for a full-time position at the Obama White House because she felt inhibited by stereotypes. “I was given opportunities to stay at the White House but I didn't because I felt like people were very judgmental of my race, and my gender, and everything. My ideas weren't getting traction that I feel like others from white guys were.”

A twenty-something woman at a top-tier consulting company described the first time she worked for a client team that included other people of color. The client was a prison and her team was making recommendations for how to group specific inmates together. “I said, ‘You wouldn't put Nicki Minaj in a cell with Remy Ma.’ Everyone [instantly got it](#) and it was a beautiful thing. I wouldn't be able to make that analogy on another team. It was the project I performed the best at. That partly had to do

with the fact that your clients look like you and it's easier to build that relationship." Because she performed so well on the project, she gained [social capital](#) with her supervisor. It's a direct example of how working with people you can relate to can positively influence your career.

There was a general disillusionment among these women about how their colleagues view the world versus how they experience it. One woman described crying in her hotel bed after reading about a police officer killing a person of color. She had been traveling with coworkers for a business trip and they were all on a text chain to coordinate logistics. That same day a Hollywood couple had also broken up and the conversation on the text chain focused on the Hollywood gossip, never addressing the shooting. She said, "I remember watching [a shooting] and crying in my hotel bed. And then having to go to work. And no one checked in for your wellbeing." This is the reality for many black women at work in America. They care deeply about the issues affecting the black community but that feeling isn't generally supported or acknowledged in the workplace.

"We are tied to other people of color"

Each interview revealed just how much these women's experiences at work are viewed through a larger filter of race and class.

"I can go into my office right now and meet five people, out of that, four will be white," described one woman I spoke with. "Out of those white, their whole family might be of generational wealth. That one black person they can more than likely identify someone in their family who is living in the projects, living in poverty or doesn't have education beyond high school level. That is the experience of black people in general — that we are tied to other people of color who are in poor situations."

This isn't to say that every white person in corporate America comes from generational wealth. It is to say that it's impossible to divorce current statistics about race in this country from black women who have to go to work every day. Black women in corporate America aren't immune to the realities facing black people in general or the historical relationship between race and resource access in this nation. Instead, they're forced to put that aside when they sit down at their desk.

This forced separation between hardships facing the black community and the institutional whiteness of the white-collar job can be mentally taxing and make it harder to perform well at work.

"My mentors talk to me about dimming my light"

It's not uncommon for black women to feel like they have to make others feel comfortable when they're in a group (especially if that group is made up of people who look nothing like them).

The women I interviewed talked a lot about having to dampen aspects of their personality to feel like they could fit into the culture of their workplace. One woman told me, "My mentors talk to me about dimming my light. I always thought I had to bring that down to make people comfortable." These women tended to feel that their organizations "weren't ready" for them and they felt like they

couldn't be their authentic selves in the office at the risk of making others feel uncomfortable or hurting their chances of professional advancement.

These sentiments echoed similar things I've experienced. I've been told to smile in the office and, at the risk of coming across as too aggressive, I tend to wait until everyone else has spoken before choosing to weigh in. Part of that is simply because I'm an introvert. But another part is because I've been conditioned by society and its predominantly white institutions to feel that as a black woman I come across as aggressive, bossy, and selfish when I speak my mind compared to a man or white woman making the same statements. Many people feel as though they can't be their [true selves](#) in the workplace at the risk of seeming unprofessional. These interviews made it clear that for the most part black women don't expect to be able to bring their full selves to the workplace and still get ahead.

“If you have no one in your corner you get weeded out”

Almost every woman I interviewed touched on the idea of needing to find sponsorship in the workplace — the idea of finding someone at your company who can advocate for raises, projects, and promotions on your behalf. One woman who works as a consultant put it like this: “Sponsorship is very important. The black community where I work we have a hard time finding that. It's not a formal program but it's part of the review process. People ask who was in this person's corner? You need sponsors to get projects. Staffing is really anxiety-driven. You interview for every project. If you have a sponsor you might not need to interview. If you have no one in your corner you get weeded out.”

Black women often find sponsorship challenging in their organizations if they have trouble relating to those whom they work with. Because of this, they may often attribute their lack of advancement in the company to a lack of sponsorship.

“You can't be what you can't see.” These are the famous words by Marian Wright Edelman and they are as much true for children dreaming of becoming rocket scientists or astronauts as they are for black women climbing the corporate ladder.

Aside from not seeing professional role models, there are real business consequences to consistently being in the minority at work. Differing from the majority at work creates what Katherine Phillips, Nancy Rothbard, and Tracy Dumas call [status distance](#), that is, how far away you are from the perceived norm and power structure in your company. When you know that you suffer from status distance, you'll seek to conceal status-confirming information about yourself. Exclusion forces people to deviate from their authentic selves. And authenticity is integral to well-being.

And beyond the emotional and mental toll, homogeneity and bias can have real career consequences for black women. Researchers found that when a group is shown photos of different people, [black](#)

women's faces were least likely to be recognized out of a group of white men and white women. Statements said by a black woman in a group discussion were also least likely to be correctly attributed compared to black men, white women, and white men. Black women in leadership positions are also more likely to be criticized or punished when making mistakes on the job.

While I tried to limit my own bias as much as possible by interviewing only women whom I did not know and sticking to the same set of questions for every interview, it was impossible to completely remove my own personal experience from this project. Without it, I wouldn't have been driven to undertake it in the first place. This is also a small sample size which makes it impossible to draw sweeping conclusions. Though the fact that consistent themes emerged and that out of 10 black women, 0 regularly work with other women of color, means that if true equality in the workplace is what we're after, then sooner or later we'll have to address the issues that are unique to women of color — and black women in particular — in the workplace.

For black women it's not just a pipeline issue. Once they are in the door, they need to feel supported in ways that are specific to being a woman of color. So that even if they are alone on their team, they will realize they're not alone at all.

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