

# A DIVERSE GUIDE FOR A DIVERSE WORKPLACE

INSIDE CORPORATE AMERICA

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Wilson Simmons III

Mae Jacquet Publishing  
Los Angeles, CA

INSIDE CORPORATE AMERICA  
A Diverse Guide for a Diverse Workplace

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*To the village that shaped me,  
mentored me, and molded me  
into the individual that I have become,  
I dedicate this book to you.*

*It is my desire that as people of color,  
we cherish each day and never forget  
the true meaning of success.*

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## Success

To laugh often and much;  
to win the respect of intelligent people  
and the affection of children;  
to earn the appreciation of honest critics  
and endure the betrayal of false friends;  
to appreciate beauty;  
to find the best in others;  
to leave the world a bit better,  
whether by a healthy child, a garden patch  
or a redeemed social condition;  
to know even one life has breathed easier  
because you have lived.  
This is to have succeeded.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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**PART I**

INSIDE THE DOORS OF  
CORPORATE AMERICA

## CORPORATE CULTURE

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*Be aware of no one more than yourself;  
we carry our worst enemies within us.*

[ Charles Spurgeon ]

CORPORATE AMERICA HAS TWO CULTURES all its own. One you see and one you don't. The culture reminds me of my time in the military, which the Corporate Culture is built on. You have to be very careful how you interact in business, because corporate America is not like war, it is war.

After I had completed basic training in California, the U. S. Army sent me to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, OJT (on-the-job training) to be a part of the 13<sup>th</sup> PsyOps (Psychological Operations). One of my many duties as an offset press operator was to print propaganda leaflets that the Army dropped from airplanes in various parts of Vietnam. You couldn't read the printed material because it was all in Vietnamese. But the photographs appeared to be of high-profile Vietnamese officials, partying on the beach. The print shop had two 30-foot web presses, and they ran day and night printing these leaflets.

My experience in printing and a secret clearance allowed me access to everything that went on in our print shop. We printed everything from formal stationery for the John F. Kennedy Center, to training manuals for the Special Forces.

There were frequent occasions when two of us would be called from the Army print shop to take a jeep to the Green Berets and Special Forces compound. We would take Polaroid snaps of visiting dignitaries, politicians, and businessmen sitting in open-air bleachers waiting for instructions from the host. The Green Berets would take these men on a tour of the compound, showing off their technical know-how and sophisticated weaponry. At the end of the show, the all-male group would be escorted back to the bleachers. They were then addressed by one of the full-bird (colonel) Green Berets. While the colonel was talking, a helicopter would hover about the bleachers and drop leaflets over the heads of the visitors. These men in suits were like little kids when they saw those leaflets with their photographs on them. It was like a game to them. Now everybody has some game in him, it's just the nature of man. And corporate America has plenty of game for you. It's part of the subculture and has very little to do with your being a person of color. That's the tricky part, because the same little games are played on white men and women more than they are played on people of color. Once you recognize the games, you are able to deal with them more intelligently and less emotionally. Because of their abundance, you could write several books just about the mind games.

Consider for a minute a white man coming to your neighborhood basketball court to shoot a little hoop. Unless he is escorted by a brother who is "down" in that neighborhood, chances are he won't play at all. Suppose he does play and he's got really good game. The neighborhood has some rules, and one of them is if you're an outsider, you don't put anything in that hoop. If you're white, you will get fouled for even thinking about bringing anything to the hole. In Compton, California, brothers would not care if it were Jerry West in his prime. You bring that basketball inside and you had best be paid up on your medical insurance. Nothing personal. The dynamics are such that a white man's presence changes the chemistry of everyone's play.

If you're unlucky enough to be guarding a "white cat" who can really play and he is burying jumpers, your teammates will be

on your case like it's the seventh game of the NBA finals. I've had the experience of guarding a white guy who had played college basketball, and he cleaned my clock. And I had done everything, including carve my name on his arms and chest with my nails. To no avail, I might add.

Corporate America views its business domain the same way—nothing personal, it's just the way it is. So it doesn't really matter who you are. The game is tough. Obviously, being a person of difference (another term used in the corporate environment to identify diversity) on the white man's turf makes it tougher. Like hoop, Corporate America has many nuances that are part of the game. The following list is all you need to know:

## | THE DIRTY DOZEN |

1. *Keeping secrets.* As the number-one marketing manager in the country at the time for Polaroid Corporation, you would think that I avoided unnecessary grief. My immediate supervisor had other ideas, and he seemed to have it in for me. He tried everything in his arsenal to force me to resign. Finally, he got his supervisor to join him on beating me up. Two managers playing mind games is no fun. My supervisor's boss just happened to be a brother, but he still bought into the game.

At one of the company's national meetings, I went up to this brother and requested a minute of his time. I asked if he approached our initial meeting with an open mind, or had he formed an opinion before he arrived to work with me? My belief was that if he had prejudged my performance, that he should come back to visit me with an open mind. He found the request to be reasonable and did come back.

After working with me for half a day, he told me that he had seen enough. We stopped and had lunch, and he apologized to me. As a matter of fact, he felt so badly about his part in the game my supervisor was playing, that the brother formulated a plan whereby I could move back to Los Angeles and be promoted all

in the same move. All I had to do was listen to him. He was true to his word—in less than a week, he arranged for one of the vice-presidents to work with me with the understanding that I would be promoted as per his approval. My immediate boss knew that the VP was coming to town, but what he didn't know was that he was coming specifically to be with me.

At the same time, I was being heavily recruited by another blue-chip company. I had initially gone to the interview for my own ego, to see what I was worth. I asked for a ridiculous sum of money, at least in my mind. To my surprise, the blue-chip company said “yes” to everything that I asked for, and the only thing left in the hiring process was a meeting with one of the vice-presidents. It was a cursory interview, because the man I would work for wanted me on his team. (Note: Always go where you're wanted.)

Wouldn't you know it? The very same day that I was supposed to meet with the blue-chip VP was the day that the VP from my company was going to work with me. So I called the recruiter and told him that I could not interview with the blue-chip company, and I was no longer interested in the job. I thought the recruiter had been pretty fair with me so I explained that the VP from my company was coming to town on the same day and I was up for a promotion. The recruiter was furious because he saw his giant commission check going out the window and a lot of time wasted.

That night I received a call from the brother in Los Angeles who was setting the whole thing up. His first words were, “Wilson, didn't I tell you not to tell anyone about the meeting with the vice-president?” I defended myself because I was sure that I had not told *anyone*. And in my mind I had not. While I was defending myself, the brother blurted out: “You told the recruiter everything that I told you.” I was stunned! He followed up with: “If I tell you something and say don't tell anyone, that means don't even tell your Mama!” What a tough lesson about opening your big mouth. Not only did I screw myself pretty royally, but I also compromised my new-found mentor. The end result was I did not get the job in Los Angeles.

Keeping secrets also eliminates gossip, which is another part of the subculture to avoid. You want to be in on the grapevine (or to be in the “know”), but to earn that privilege you’ve got to let those in the know trust your discretion and your ability to keep a secret.

**THE LESSON: Don’t be so sure that what you think is going on is actually going on. Keep your secrets to yourself. A secret told is a secret no more. There is such a thing as too much information.**

2. *Dating on the job.* If you have ideas about moving up the corporate ladder, avoid dating on the job. Very often it is quite tempting, but it almost always leads to a dead end. Let’s face it, being black, Hispanic or Asian makes you stand out, so no matter what you do people will notice it. And they will talk about it. The quickest way to end a career is to have “jungle fever.” Since most of the people you will meet on the job will be white, consider this move a mine field.

Many white men and women have heard all these wonderful and mythical things about African-American and Latino sexual prowess. And there you are in an office, away from the ghetto, dressed up, looking good. That taboo and all those myths will have many of them scheming and planning to get you in bed. Not just African-Americans, I might add—this goes for male and female Asians and Hispanics as well.

**THE LESSON: Don’t date on the job! Don’t even be tempted.**

3. *Drinking with the guys and gals.* Companies always have cocktail parties, receptions, gatherings and dinners. As you’ve probably figured out by now, I have one philosophy about drinking: Don’t do it! As long as you are in the presence of company employees, you are still at work. So it really doesn’t make sense to drink on the job even if you are out of the office. It’s not that you

are being antisocial, it's just that as a person of color, you can't afford to let your guard down. I've observed over the years at quite a few cocktail parties that someone is always taking notes. Invariably, some white person will tell you an off-color joke after their third drink. It is a lot easier to handle this behavior when you are sober.

If you don't want to be obvious about not drinking, you can tell the bartender beforehand to bring you water with lime or lemon. If a person or two teases you about not drinking, say you're allergic to alcohol and drop the subject. Large corporate meetings sometimes end with a cocktail party. While it's important to make an appearance, it's not necessary to hang out all night. So if you would like to drink a couple of beers, do it somewhere other than the cocktail party, and at some other time.

**THE LESSON: Party at home, with friends, not with business associates.**

4. *Politics and religion.* As diverse as our society is in the 21<sup>ST</sup> Century, you can be certain that there are two subjects that people will still disagree on: Politics and religion. These topics carry a great deal of passion, so if you want to turn off a person for life, get on the wrong side of the discussion on either of these issues. It's a no-win situation, because there is no right way of viewing the issues. You can talk and discuss forever and a day, and never change the mind of someone who believes differently from you, particularly if these beliefs are "generational" and have been passed down throughout the centuries.

In the 50s and 60s, corporations' hiring practices started coming under fire, due in part to the preference of hiring WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). If you think this is not true, you need only look at the presidents of America's *Fortune 500* companies. You will see categorical exclusion based on race, religion, sex and in some cases sexual orientation. It was only in 1965 that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act became law, stating that you could not discriminate in hiring.

Religion and politics go hand-in-hand in Corporate America. Keep your opinions to yourself. In the work environment you are a gatherer of information, not a Democrat or Baptist trying to change the world. Corporate America's view of these two subjects clashes with your being where you are anyway, so keep your nose clean by avoiding their discussion.

**THE LESSON: Religion and politics are not topics for conversation with colleagues. Unless of course you are not interested in joining the club.**

5. *Chain of command.* As I mentioned earlier and will illustrate more fully later, corporations are modeled after the military. In the Army, you start off learning to take orders. In basic training, you are broken down both physically and mentally, and then you are built back up to be a soldier.

In military programs you do what you're told. You are trained to react, not to think. The theory is that if you have been trained properly, you will do exactly what your superior requests. Even if the person giving you that order is a jerk. Dilemma: What do you do when the orders you are given don't make sense? I can tell you for a fact that some people followed orders in Vietnam that did not make sense, and that sometimes were even illegal. In many cases, following orders meant losing their lives needlessly or murdering innocent civilians, and they still followed orders.

One of my close friends from college was in Khe Sahn amid some of the fiercest fighting in the war. He was with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division and had the rank of sergeant. He wrote me a letter saying that he and his men were ordered to take a hill that meant almost sure death, for no discernable military purpose. The officer who gave the orders had been in the country for a very short period of time. My friend said that he protested, because he had been in Vietnam for ten months, and he knew the mission to be suicide. The officer ordered him to take the hill at once. What do you think he did? What would you do?

They took the hill, and half of the platoon was wounded or

killed. My friend was writing me from a hospital bed. The officer who had given the orders was one of the casualties. That's how a chain of command works: Orders are passed down and followed.

Corporate America has the same rules, only you won't lose your life if you follow the orders—and you won't get any farther than you are by disobeying the rules. Being right has nothing to do with it. You simply cannot challenge, disobey, overrule, disregard, ignore, leapfrog, bypass, exclude, neglect, slight, or even badmouth your immediate supervisor and not be penalized in the corporate game. It is one of the rules in the game that remains a constant. This rule applies to everyone playing the game, because without this rule there is no game.

The perception must be that you are a loyal soldier who is obedient. Webster's dictionary defines a soldier as an active, loyal, and militant follower. In Corporate America, you are the soldier.

### **THE LESSON: Rank, not the person, is the ruler.**

6. *From anger to sabotage.* Once you're in the corporate world, many things will happen that won't make any sense at all. Some things will have you so angry that you will want to punch somebody out. The dirty tricks, back-stabbing, broken promises, and double meanings are only a few of the things you will run into if you stay around long enough. None of these things will have a damn thing to do with your being black, yellow, female, young, or old. They happen to *everyone*.

Many people try to get back at companies by sabotage. I've seen it happen so many times, and I have been around long enough to know that when you engage in sabotaging the inner workings of an organization, you hurt yourself more than you really hurt the company. Even if you cost the company some money, the company will keep going. Not only that, you'll make the move to another company bumpier than it need be, if you are able to move at all. Most of these companies know one another, and many of them stay in contact. So if you screw up anything maliciously, other companies will know about it. This will block

your path to success. Even though it's against the law to give a bad report about a former employee, it's still done in subtle ways.

Never lose your head—in practice or in the game. As people of color, we may find it easy to lose our heads, because we carry some baggage with us into the corporate world. Emotional outbursts may cause you to be exiled from the corporate inner circle. Don't let fear drive you to hasty actions that you may regret later. Remember: The corporate game is a *game*, and you are a *team member*. The name of the game is to win. Think along positive lines—what you can do to better your situation, not sabotage it.

**THE LESSON: If the situation is impossible, just get out.**

7. *Fraternizing.* In the military there is an officer's club and there is a noncommissioned officer's club. In Corporate America, as in the military, officers are not supposed to fraternize with the enlisted personnel. So by design you go separate ways. Infringe on this principle even if you are invited, and you enter a political quagmire. It doesn't mix. Sometimes you develop a relationship with an officer and everything seems to be grand. Beware of the eyes that look your way while you are fraternizing.

Living on the East Coast and spending 50 percent of my time in New York, I was adopted by one of the vice-presidents of the company I was working for. He brought me to New York from Chicago as his personal project, and he promoted me twice. Many times he would embarrass me by calling me into his office and asking me to close the door behind me. It was no secret that I was one of the VP's favorites. Everything was wonderful until he took another job. He left the company as part of a team to run another company.

I was open game once he left. It took me a while to figure it out, but those in ranking positions who did not share the same admiration for my work took me to task. It was a very nasty position to be in. If you have ever worked in New York as a businessperson, you know that they invented ugly.

**THE LESSON: Everyone is watching with lean and hungry looks. Watch your back!**

8. *Résumé fever*. If you find yourself emailing or passing your résumé around while still working at a company, you should understand that there are a lot of other people doing the same thing. Passing around résumés has been going on for quite some time. One of the problems with being in an industry where there are not that many minorities is that you are easy to pick out of the crowd. And other companies will tell on you.

It is all right to have a résumé on hand, but don't flaunt it. Don't pass your résumé around hoping someone will fall in love with it, and you, because it won't happen. If you don't want the information getting back to your employer, then you must rely on personal contacts. Having a résumé doesn't mean that you are in the email business. It only works for smaller companies. Never mail a résumé from your office, and never have your secretary email a résumé for you. Also, beware of answering blind ads in the papers or on electronic mail—they could be from your own company!

Once you start looking for another job, your behavior changes. You're not as enthusiastic, and your head is somewhere else. Be careful in your personal contacts to let your friends know that you are open to talk, or you are always listening and approachable, but don't appear to be desperate. There is nothing that turns people off more than a desperate person. Believe me when I tell you that when someone finds out that you are desperate, you get nowhere.

Employers seldom hire from a résumé alone. While I agree with the conventional wisdom that you should always have a current résumé on hand, it should not be flaunted or discussed. Remember: Be the best you can at what you do, and people will come to *you*, especially headhunters (see #9).

You should also join marketing clubs, speaker's bureaus, local chambers of commerce, so that you will be close to what's going on in the marketplace.

**THE LESSON: Be visible, not desperate. Keep your résumé filed unless requested.**

9. *In headhunters you trust...not always.* If the job is too tough, or the promotion that was promised is not materializing, you are in the best position possible to make a move if you have been with the company for at least two years. The market loves any person of color who is employed with two years working experience. And a degree to boot! You're hot, and recruiters want you bad. They will offer you the moon, so be very careful in your selection, because the moon ain't theirs to give.

There will be few times in your career that you will have the luxury of being in the driver's seat. Since you are so hot, some companies will lie to you and so will some executive recruiters. In the headhunting business, the description of anyone with two to four years working experience with the same company is an MPA (Most Placeable Applicant). A recruiter will earn anywhere from \$15,000 to \$50,000 off your hide.

Recruiters are trained to manipulate you. Most of what a recruiter says is either rehearsed or read off a paper (see the script which follows). It will take a great deal of discipline on your part to be selective and not rush to the first recruiter or job that comes your way. Make sure that the company you select is a company that you want to work for and that they have a corporate culture you can live with. Yes, it's research time again. But by now, you'll have a better idea of your career path and the places where you can make that career happen.

The good headhunters know when someone has been with a company for at least two years, and they will give you a call. Be ready.

This script is used by many headhunters, and everyone who uses it on a consistent basis is in the six figures. Study the script: It is the best in the industry. It is the creation of Sandy Levy, who presently owns one of the largest employment agencies (DNA) on the West Coast. Sandy has been in the business for more than twenty years and has trained thousands of headhunters.

**FADE IN: (CENTURY CITY, LOS ANGELES) EXT. SANTA MONICA BLVD. AND CENTURY PARK EAST MORNING**

*It is late summer in Los Angeles. Smoggy and hot, signaling the start of football season. The Dodgers are in last place with their worst performance ever. Emerging from the underground parking is a tall black man, walking at a fast pace toward one of the high-rise buildings. Crossing the walkway bridge to his office, he is greeted by all of the familiar faces of the morning crowd. When he walks into the office, the silent whispers of “The Legend is here” travel through the office. The object of all this attention is Lloyd Lindsey, the twenty-six year old “boy wonder” graduate of UCLA, marketing manager in the executive search firm of Ferguson, Jenkins and Hazzard. He is tall, intense, and he looks fantastic in his tailored navy blue suit. He exudes confidence and charisma. Everyone in the office greets Lloyd with a smile, knowing it generates one of his patented smiles and enthusiastic “good mornings” in return.*

LINDA FERGUSON: Good morning, Lloyd.

LLOYD: Good morning, Linda. How is the firm’s most valuable person?

LINDA: Wonderful, since you have been here.

*Lloyd enters his office, which has a view of Beverly Hills. He hangs up his coat, puts on a headset, and pulls out a list of clients to call. He stares at the small sign just above his desk that reads:*

*“Smile, it can be seen through the phone.” He remains standing and dials a number.*

LLOYD: Hi, Simret. My name is Lloyd Lindsey. How are you today?

*Lloyd speaks in a conversation tone, but the words never change, especially at the beginning. This is the first checkpoint. Lloyd finds out where the person is. If he gets a negative feeling or if the person is in a meeting, he asks when he can call back.*

SIMRET: Fine, what can I do for you?

LLOYD: I know you don't know me, I'm calling for an unusual reason. I'm a headhunter.

*Pause...Another checkpoint. How do they respond? Negatively? Positively? If no response, Lloyd moves on to force a response. Otherwise, he continues in a conversational manner.*

LLOYD: I take it you know what that means?

SIMRET: Yes, I do.

LLOYD: I specialize in medical sales and marketing professionals, and my client has retained me to find a particular kind of individual. Your name surfaced as a very sharp and well-informed person in our industry.

*Pause...Another checkpoint. If no response, Lloyd forces one.*

LLOYD: Is this true?

SIMRET: I've been around awhile.

LLOYD: I'd like to borrow upon your expertise for a moment and describe what I'm looking for, to see if you have any recommendations for my search. Do you have a minute now?

*Another checkpoint for Lloyd. Is Simret's boss standing over her shoulder while she is talking?*

SIMRET: I can't talk now.

LLOYD: Would it be better if I called you at home this evening? What is your home number? (Pause.) Would it be better if I catch you at another time? (Pause.) When would be good? If I'm out at that time, is there a number where I can reach you this evening?

*Lloyd follows his instincts. He respects her time and privacy. That's how he wins her trust and gets her home number. If she has been responding positively, Lloyd continues in his conversational manner.*

SIMRET: I have just a minute, so talk to me.

LLOYD: My client is one of the top five hospital supply companies in the industry. (Sizzle.) They're looking for a top-notch salesperson that is good with large hospital chains like Kaiser. A degree is required and their compensation package is second to none. Who do you who might fit that bill?

*Lloyd is now selling the job. Waiting to get a name. If he gets a name, he will ask whom else she knows. Brother Lindsey is awfully shrewd, and he knows that the minute Simret inquires about the position in question, it's a buy signal. She may be asking for herself. So he answers the question and asks another question.*

SIMRET: Lloyd, let's not diddle. What does the job pay?

LLOYD: Simret, it pays a base in the seventies, plus commissions of twenty to forty thousand. Do you think that's competitive?

SIMRET: And where might this territory be?

LLOYD: The territory is in Santa Monica. Is that the territory you cover?

SIMRET: That is my territory. OK, now give me the name of the company. I might have some interest if it's who I think it is.

LLOYD: I can't give you the name of my client because they've retained me to do the search in confidence. How do you like it at (her current company)?

SIMRET: I have no complaints.

LLOYD: You have a very good background. If I had a good position with XYZ or ABC (the best two companies), would you want to learn more about it?

*This is a closing question. If Simret says, "yes" then Lloyd starts getting the specifics on her background, from where she went to school to her current pay. He follows up with a phone call that evening at her home. If she says no, you just know that Lloyd has some ammunition left.*

SIMRET: I'm pretty happy where I am.

LLOYD: Obviously you're very happy at (her company)—it is known to be a good company. What do you like about it? (Pause.) What else? If there were one thing you could change about your current position, what would it be? Anything else?

*Lloyd is finding out what Simret's hot buttons are. He listens to them instead of selling the current opening. He is winning her over. If she has loosened up, he will ask if there are any openings in her company.*

SIMRET: The only thing I would change about my company

is a company car. I'm tired of wearing out my own car running around.

LLOYD: If I had a position that provided a company car and was in Santa Monica, would you want me to call you about it?

*Another closing question. If she says, "yes," Lloyd gets her number.*

SIMRET: Lloyd, I'm not really sure.

LLOYD: Well, I'd like to send you my card so you'll know where to reach me if you think of someone. You know how things pop up in the shower or driving on the freeway! What's your address at home? And what's your number there?

*Lloyd is persistent. He sends a card and says, "thank you for the help." He is legendary for flattering and pursuing his clients. At the very least, he sends a business card. He has fun, and the person on the other end of the line knows that he is a real person.*

*If Lloyd gets a name from Simret, he would ask questions like these: What hospitals do you call on? Who is sharp at dealing with doctors? Who impresses you calling on major hospitals? Who are your major competitors? Who have you lost business to recently? Who is the salesperson you most frequently lose sales to?*

As you can see, Lloyd has Simret eating out of his hand. If she doesn't want the position, he manages to get another name—and another possible client—from her.

**THE LESSON:** A good headhunter can be your best business asset, but not until you've proven you are something to sell. Then they will be all over you, looking to make a commission and boost your career in the process.

10. *Mentors.* Having a mentor in corporate America is absolutely essential for moving up the corporate ladder. A mentor is an on-the-job teacher, guidance counselor, and career advocate, someone who takes a liking to you, feels you have promise, and is secure enough in their own position not to worry about your making a play for their job.

The only problem is that mentors choose you, you don't choose them. Many people of color within the corporate structure are in positions to be mentors, but are reluctant to choose a protégé—even those who want to take a wait-and-see attitude. Part of it is protecting their turf, and the other part is insecurity. So even if a person of color decides to give you some guidance, he or she won't do anything until you show some promise. If you do get help, you can believe that your mentor will be at least two steps above you. Very few people who are only one step above you will help you get where they are, for obvious reasons. In fact, beware of the would-be mentor just above you who promises to give you the shirt off his back. Ask yourself why he wants out of his job so badly that he's willing to teach it all to you.

There are occasions when you will have a white man or woman as a mentor, but they are few and far between. Having a mentor is obviously a big advantage, because you are not only exposed to the fine nuances of the corporate game, but you have someone behind the scenes looking out for you. Otherwise, you are like a bull in a china shop. Parts of the corporate game are so incredibly wicked there is no way that you could possibly understand them on your own (see Chapter 7). You have to have a guide. It would be like a white man walking in the “hood” during the day—it might *look* peaceful, but we know better.

So if you are lucky enough to attract a mentor, hold on for dear life. They are like gold and they choose you because they like you. And they are concerned about your growth in the company. They also see you as a good soldier. Apart from that, they get very little from it.

**THE LESSON: Become a good soldier and keep your eyes open for possible mentors.**

11. *Burnout.* If there is anything that will bring you to your knees, it's burnout. And if you're in Corporate America for too long, you will burn out and that's a fact. It is pretty frightening at first because you're not quite sure what to do. Do you seek

professional help? Cash out and live in the mountains? Burnout by definition is physical or emotional exhaustion, a result of long-term stress.

When you reach that point, it is very difficult to listen to anyone because no one really knows what you are feeling at the time, and your judgment is haywire. No one understands how you can be in a funk and want relief when you seem to have it all going for you. I have talked to several businesspeople about burnout and what they have done to prevent or overcome it. The answers are as varied as world cultures. The following are some responses:

Take stock in whom you are and what you want to accomplish. Ask yourself: If I could wave a magic wand, and I could do anything I wanted to, what would I be doing? What would be my title? Where would I be working? What would I do in the next year? If I only had six months to live, what would I do? What dream do I have that I pushed aside because I felt it was too unrealistic? In other words, reevaluate your goals.

The answers to these questions will give you the true power, because the fact of the matter is, you have the power to choose what you want to do with your life. Don't let life happen while you are making all kinds of other plans.

My favorite quote from the *Bible* is: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you/For everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened/Or what man is there of you, whom if his son asks for bread, will he give him a stone?" (Matthew 7: 7-9)

**THE LESSON: If a little time off doesn't heal the burnout, maybe you are doing the wrong thing. Reevaluate your goals.**

12. *Racism*. There is absolutely no way to avoid racism in Corporate America. It's there and it's going to stay there. The question is, what can you do to minimize its effects on you? How do you make an intolerable situation tolerable? How do you keep

in check the built-in rage that is so much a part of growing up black or different in America? What is the solution when statistics say that homicide is the leading cause of death for black and Hispanic males ages fifteen to twenty-four?

Every black person in Corporate America pays some serious dues. And my hat is off to anyone presently working in “Corporate America.” You are a pioneer for people of color, and you have a responsibility to leave a path for those that will follow you.

When I started working in Corporate America, there was very little diversity, and thirty years later the entire world is diverse—however, not much has changed in how people of difference are treated. Women fall into a similar category. The issue is a mixed bag, and is so subtle that in some cases, you are left befuddled and confused. Only through education and understanding will we remove the blatant racism that exists.

I had a strange suspicion that racism would swagger into the twenty-first century; it is “alive and well” and continues to rear its ugly head. This also brings to mind the fact that many times we can find ourselves as scapegoats. You may recall that before Arthur Ashe died, a reporter asked him whether AIDS was the toughest thing he’d ever faced. Ashe replied, “No, racism is. Nothing has been more difficult than dealing with being black in America.”

We have to get past going off on someone because they call us a derogatory name. It is not easy to do, but the remarks are designed to make you lose your focus. It’s small-time, and there are so many other games going on that you can’t afford to waste your time on stupid, ignorant people. Try to keep in mind that part of the locker room mentality of Corporate America makes everyone fair game when name-calling starts. If it’s not race, it’s religion, or politics, or body shape. And small-minded people are everywhere. You have a responsibility to rise above the little people. They are much like the basketball player that hardly plays and whose only job is to come in and use up his fouls on you. And if he can get you thrown out of the game, so much the better.

Arthur Ashe was playing in a tournament against Ilie Nastase, and Arthur was winning big, and Nastase got frustrated and blurted out, “Bloody nigger!” Arthur was near the net. He walked back to the baseline without the slightest hint of acknowledging what he had heard. Nastase roared back and ended up winning the match. When reporters asked Arthur about Nastase’s abusive remark, Arthur replied, “He didn’t mean anything, that’s just Nastase.” I remember thinking to myself at the time, “Arthur, you should have verbally assaulted that no-talking Romanian.” It is only in recent years that I’ve developed an understanding. Arthur Ashe was dealing with the bottom line. At that time it was winning, and though he lost the match, he took full responsibility for losing. He had programmed himself to deal with it as an issue that would not stop him from reaching his goals.

Racism in Corporate America, like society, is so pervasive that everybody in Corporate America, just like everybody in society, is going to have to deal with it. That means, if you are going to stay in Corporate America, you are going to have to learn to deal with it. That doesn’t mean that you can’t fight it; you just have to fight the smart fight. Never bring up racism. When meeting it head on, don’t lose your head. If you lose your head, you lose your job. If you challenge racism, you bet your job. In most cases, racism is the last card that you play. You will deal with elements of racism many times a day. It is wise to ask questions, and ask questions, and ask questions. But it is not wise to make accusations. Keep your head about you. Challenge everything by asking questions and demanding answers (see *Sales Training*, Chapter 3).

Keep in mind that racism is so pervasive that most people are not even aware of it, even though there are two sides to it: The people whom it’s being perpetrated against, as well as the people who are the perpetrators. Frankly, the perpetrators usually don’t view what they are doing as racism. Racism is so ingrained in us that we just assume some things about other races just as we erroneously make assumptions about men and women.

The assumption is that all people of color are in Corporate America because of affirmative action, that generally, minorities

are not as qualified as whites. Black people as well as white people make these assumptions. We assume that Asians are smarter than other races. These are some of the stereotypes in our society, and we just deal with them on a day-to-day basis.

So what you may view as racism in certain situations may be viewed by another party as something that is just accepted. So to quickly cry “racist” is to challenge somebody who is probably unaware of what he or she is doing. Corporate America is generally so competitive that people use every edge, every advantage that they might have to get ahead. And frequently we are working beside them. So many of the things that happen they do not view as being racist. That does not mean that they can go unchallenged. You can ask questions. You can ask questions as to why things were done, why decisions were made, why strategies were employed, why you may have been left out, why you may not have been included—and there is absolutely nothing unacceptable about that.

But remember: If you bring charges of racism to any situation, then you will have to prove it. If you ask questions and racism comes up as a result, then *they* have to prove it. Which is the best strategy to employ? If you want your job, you are going to have to deal with elements of racism. That doesn’t mean that you have to accept it. It means that you have to work longer, harder, and smarter to disprove the ingrained stereotypes that people of other races have. When you make charges of blatant racism, you bet your career. And when you bet your career, you’d better be right, and you’d better be able to prove it, and you’d better be willing to go the distance. If you want to work in Corporate America successfully, you are going to have to know that racism is there. Just be aware and get on with your business.

Another strategy to employ in dealing with racism is to make as many friends as you can in high places or decision-making positions. That way, you will have somebody with whom you can consult when the need to ask questions arises. That’s a game that you should play for many reasons. As you continue your career, the old adages “never burn bridges” and “make as many friends

as you can” become important because over time your contacts are going to go places throughout the company and they may take you along. But even if they don’t, you need people who can answer questions, explain situations and bring some leverage or influence to bear on certain situations that you might view as racist. The one thing you don’t want to do prematurely is make that charge outright. Because once you do, you’ve played your trump card.

**THE LESSON:** Obstacles are the frightful things you see when you take your eyes off the goals. Keep your eye on your goal.