

BATTLING BIAS

> IT'S STILL ABOUT RACE. BUT IT'S NOT IN YOUR FACE

The new pattern of discrimination at work can be difficult to discern, tough to navigate, and even harder to prove. In this special report, Black women share how they've beat bias on the job, and how you can, too BY T. SHAWN TAYLOR

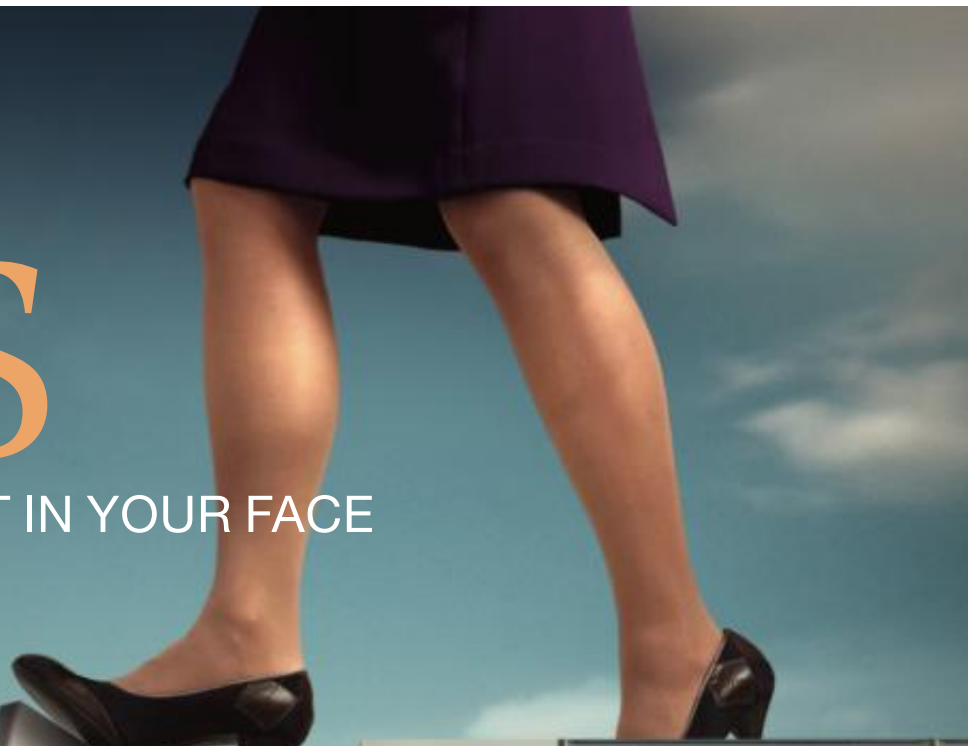


PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS, C.J. BURTON

Westina Matthews Shatteen, managing director, community development, at Merrill Lynch in New York, says that throughout her career, people have presumed that she's everything from a secretary to a server at corporate luncheons—anything but the high-ranking senior executive she actually is. “I walked into a meeting, and one of the clients looked at me and said she wanted coffee, please,” she recalls, describing an experience she had while working as a senior program officer for a foundation in Chicago. “People don't assume I'm a senior manager if I'm with a colleague who's White. I laugh about it now.”

Janet Moss* had an equally challenging situation, but hers was with her supervisor, an Asian woman. Once, during a project team meeting, Moss suggested the group make a decision to advance a time-sensitive project; the supervisor turned and said, “Sometimes people need to shut up.” Resisting the urge to “go Omarosa,” Moss says she held her tongue, but admits, “I was embarrassed and humiliated.” A week later Moss orchestrated a transfer to another department. But that didn't fully resolve matters. Eventually she grew tired of being repeatedly told to dial down her personality to conform. So in 2001 she left corporate America and now owns a life- and leadership-coaching firm.

THE NEW BATTLEFRONT

Witness the twenty-first-century version of workplace discrimination: subtle bias. Unlike overt acts of bigotry that are punishable by law, subtle bias wends through workplaces like an odorless vapor that, when left unchecked, stirs up feelings in Black women that range from frustration to apathy to anger.

“Subtle bias is far more pervasive than overt discrimination,” says Freada Kapur Klein, founder and chair of San Francisco's Level Playing Field Institute. Last year the organization conducted Corporate Leavers, a study to identify the reasons different groups exit corporate America. The No. 1 culprit, according to the results: bias.

A 2004 survey by Catalyst, a New York nonprofit research and advisory firm, bears this out. Catalyst's research found that Black women's authority and credibility in the workplace are challenged far more than those of their White peers. In a separate survey of women of color, 32 percent of Black women, compared with 22 percent of Latinas and 14 percent of Asian women, said they believe their White colleagues perceive them as underqualified. “The African-American women we surveyed said they did have to outperform their White peers, and their credibility didn't travel with them to other departments,” says Katherine Giscombe, senior director, research, and head of the Women of Color Practice Area at Catalyst.

The most prevalent forms of prejudice that Black women face at work include the absence of mentors and sponsors, lack of access to social networks, stereotyping and challenges to their authority. Examples range from being confused with other Black women in the office (when they look nothing alike) to fielding questions about ethnic hairstyles (“Do you wash your braids?”) and skin tone (“I didn't know Black people could tan”) to addressing assumptions about family life. One professional Black woman, a single mother of three, laments that she was once asked by her supervisor if all >

her children had the same father. Over time, such microinsults—insensitive comments and assumptions based on stereotypes—have the same impact as a more dramatic event, says Klein, author of the forthcoming book *Tilt: What a Level Playing Field in Business Might Look Like* (Jossey-Bass).

Camille Walton, 33, knew she had reached the tipping point in her job as a management consultant when her White male manager insisted she fly from Atlanta to North Carolina to make photocopies at a client site. She reasoned that an administrative assistant could do the task and that her skills would be better used on strategic planning. But her boss wasn't having it. "How could you let an administrative assistant make copies of important documents?" she recalls him saying. Walton, stunned, took a deep breath. "I thought, *Is he serious? How hard is it to make copies?* I had to get on a plane, rent a car, make copies, and fly back that same day," she says.

"I never saw him treat White colleagues that way," adds Walton, who was one of only three Blacks in a 75-employee company. "I think he believed I was incompetent." Six months after this incident, Walton quit. She now works as an associate brand manager for a consumer health-care firm in Pittsburgh.

Things aren't much better for Black women who work at companies that promote diversity programs of inclusion, says Price Cobbs, M.D., a San Francisco psychiatrist, author and expert on

management and diversity issues. Most diversity initiatives, he says, do not drill down deep enough to address the long-held beliefs and attitudes people use to rationalize whom they view as different and therefore worthy of exclusion. "Being a woman can make it more difficult," says Cobbs, "not only to join the old boys' club, but also many times just to pick up the signals, the language, the imagery and the communications styles of the old boys' club."

All this makes it particularly frustrating—and somewhat damaging to the soul—when Black women perceive a built-in double standard around getting promotions and obtaining better assignments. It's as if you're trying your best to play the game, but the game is rigged against you.

HOW TO FIGHT BACK

Experts say that most Black women will encounter some form of subtle bias in their careers. Those who are most successful in dealing with it say they had to learn how to recognize the signs *and* how to confront the problem without seeming overly defensive or confrontational.

It was a tough lesson for Chinwe Onyeagoro. The 28-year-old from Chicago graduated magna cum laude from Harvard University with joint bachelor's degrees in economics and East Asian studies. She also speaks fluent Japanese, Spanish and Igbo, a language of her ancestral homeland, Nigeria. In short, her résumé had "high achiever" written all over it.

But in her second job out of college, as a business analyst with a global management consulting firm, her efforts to go the extra mile were interpreted as insubordination by a White female midlevel manager. The woman went to an associate partner in tears after Onyeagoro excitedly disclosed she had spent the weekend doing man-on-the-street interviews for a retail project.

"The manager said that I had been way too aggressive and had tried to push my views on her," says Onyeagoro, who at 6 feet 1 inches tall stood nearly two feet over the woman. The incident earned Onyeagoro an unflattering remark on her performance evaluation. "They take you in because you're the best and brightest, and then they try to fit you into a round hole when you're a square peg," she says.

Onyeagoro discussed her frustrations with two of her mentors—both Black managers at the firm—who told her not to waste her time trying to persuade people not to be intimidated by her. From then on, Onyeagoro reported directly to the associate partner—who remained neutral in the conflict—instead of the midlevel manager.

Klein thinks Onyeagoro's decision to discuss her angst with her mentors rather than complaining to her manager or human resources department was a wise move: "If it gets interpreted by human resources or by a manager as a potential allegation of racial

bias, it turns into a formal investigation." Klein adds that at some firms, racial allegations are exempt from confidentiality rules. Her advice? Weigh the potential fallout. "Unfortunately, people who bring formal complaints get labeled as troublemakers," she says.

THE BEST DEFENSE: A GOOD OFFENSE

Lakiba Pittman, 55, and a White female colleague, both internal audit associates at a large information technology firm, were on the same career track and received the same raise, even though Pittman says she far exceeded the coworker's performance. She worked faster and implemented more new programs successfully. Pittman, who lives in Palo Alto, California, even took night courses to become certified for the company as a trainer in communications and working effectively in teams.

When Pittman learned that managers had been coaching the White woman to outperform her, she was completely outdone. "They would have meetings and talk about how she should become more like me," says Pittman. "They would discuss her goals. But they never had that conversation with me. It turned my stomach. I was really upset and shocked."

Pittman complained about the raises to her manager, pointing out areas in which she had exceeded standards. It paid off: By speaking up to her boss and having documented proof of her accomplishments, she negotiated a higher increase. That success set a new tone for her, both in the workplace and in how she dealt with future incidents of unfair treatment. Pittman remained at the company, in various departments, for 18 years.

Experts say Pittman was smart to take a stand on the raise but might have benefited even more had she taken a similar approach to accessing leadership training. "Some of my protégés will spend out of their pocket to get development opportunities instead of insisting the company send them," says Linda Parker Pennington, a leadership development and human resources consultant in San Francisco. "I'm not sure if that's the company saying no or our refusal to make the request."

Today Pittman is an executive business consultant who helps companies and nonprofits develop strategies around organizational development, human resources and global diversity. In fact, she teaches the accelerated leadership program at her former employer that her previous manager wouldn't let her attend.

Black women can defend themselves against ignorant and insensitive barbs by using humor, Pennington suggests. "If you can diffuse a potentially tense situation through humor, you have a great deal of power to shift people forward," she says.

Even when a situation is blatantly unfair, try to set aside the anger and work on relationship-building. "If you're going to be successful, you can't walk around feeling as if you're being victimized," says psychiatrist Cobbs. If possible, try to have lunch or socialize after work with the person in question so you can be seen in a different environment. And when speaking to the person, refer to a specific incident rather than just talking about a general feeling. As Cobbs says, "People who are upwardly mobile figure out ways, both direct and indirect, to handle a situation so they can be more comfortable in that culture." □

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*Name has been changed.

IS IT BIAS OR A BAD FIT?

Whether a supervisor's actions are driven by subtle bias or just poor management skills, this checklist can help you determine your next moves

Before you take the job:

PICK A FIRM WITH COMMITMENT FROM THE TOP ON DIVERSITY ISSUES. Make sure the company has a neutral, confidential source with whom employees can air their concerns, like an ombudsman or diversity officer who reports to the CEO.

Once you're on the job:

ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS WITH MENTORS. They can offer advice on how to navigate the corporate culture, talk you off the proverbial ledge, or pull you out of an emotional slump. And it's best to have a range of mentors, not just Black ones.

If an incident arises:

IDENTIFY THE ISSUE. Did someone's actions make you feel disrespected? Is bias or poor management to blame?

WEIGH THE POTENTIAL OUTCOMES of a complaint. Will it hinder your effectiveness or upward mobility? Will it affect how you are evaluated? Ask yourself: *Could I be part of the problem?* If you have performance issues (for instance, poor attendance or failure to meet deadlines), clean up your act before claiming bias.

MEET WITH YOUR MANAGER. Don't try to address the issue at the time unequal treatment occurs. Make sure it is a conversation, not a confrontation, and focus on specific behaviors and incidents, rather than a general feeling.

If your boss is unreceptive:

SEEK OUT A NEUTRAL, CONFIDENTIAL SOURCE within the company who can enforce solutions, such as a human resources director.

As a last resort:

CONSIDER A LAWSUIT CAREFULLY. You may be able to file a lawsuit under federal anti-discrimination laws. Document incidents of bias that establish a pattern of mistreatment. Include the date, time, place, and the name and title of the individual(s) involved. File a discrimination charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (eoc.gov) within 180 days of the alleged violation, depending on the state. Check this Web site for important guidelines. —T.S.T.

Isolation from coworkers—even employees of color—can make you feel small.

