

November 7, 2005

Up Front

RACE REPORT

When You Can't Be Who You Are

A new study of minorities in corporations finds that African Americans, Asians, and others are held back by subtle discrimination. Princeton University professor of religion Cornel West and economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett discussed their findings with Senior Writer Nanette Byrnes:

Q: The people you spoke with seem to feel they have to act like white men to get ahead.

Hewlett: There's this great phrase "bleached-out professionalism." That describes this shrinkage of authenticity, which in the end is very debilitating and by definition not successful. You just can't turn yourself into a white guy.

Q: What does it mean to act like a white guy?

Hewlett: A lot of Asian executives we interviewed thought that they were way too quiet. African American executives, on the other hand, often felt they came over as too loud, too brash. They felt this loudness labeled them as potential troublemakers.

Q: Isn't the superficial sometimes important -- the trust inspired by a banker's suit, etc.?

Hewlett: But a lot of the things they're talking about you basically can't change. They feel they're not allowed to bring their whole self to work. A woman who was in one of our focus groups was 32. She had been promoted three times since business school -- a highflier. In her spare time she founded a Girl Scout troop in a homeless shelter. Do you think her colleagues knew about it, or her boss? No. It was kind of her choice, but she said the culture of this company is that if you are on the board of the symphony, it's O.K. United Way is O.K. But the community involvement of minority professionals is often not on the list.

Q: Is it possible white men are getting ahead faster because they're working harder?

West: There's no getting around sacrifice, excellence, and quality. We're talking about style: how one talks, relates, and balances their life. We're talking about a deepening and refining of values.

Q: What shocked you?

West: The most frightening fact is that 52% of the minority folk don't have deep trust in their company and the people who run it. We're already dealing with distrust of the government. We don't need more isolation.