

from the October 31, 2005 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1031/p13s01-wmgn.html>

Is 'white' the only color of success?

Minorities can have their careers derailed by their tone of voice or hairstyle, a new study shows.

By Marilyn Gardner | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

During her years as an attorney for one of the top international law firms in the United States, Angela Williams looked forward to defending clients. But sometimes she was not given the chance.

"When it came time for an opportunity to represent Fortune 500 companies on huge cases, even though I might have had trial experience over and above my white male colleagues, they were chosen," says Ms. Williams, who is African-American.

In an age of diversity, when many companies point with pride to their multicultural workforce, a sobering reality remains: Minority professionals often find their career ambitions thwarted by hidden bias - what workplace experts call the new face of discrimination. "Acting white," they say, can be the price of promotion in a business world where white men account for 98 percent of CEOs and 95 percent of top earners in Fortune 500 companies. Diversity does not always extend to the executive suite.

"Minorities are getting stuck in the early stretches of career structures," says economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett, whose study of minority professionals appears in the November Harvard Business Review. "They are not getting promoted and advanced at a rate commensurate with their weight in the talent pool."

In a survey of more than 1,600 minority professionals, Dr. Hewlett and Princeton professor Cornel West found that sterling credentials can be overshadowed by personal and cultural traits. Everything from cornrows, ethnic jewelry, animated hand gestures, and certain manicures can leave colleagues thinking, "You're different."

Forty years ago, it was very easy to see prejudice, Hewlett notes. "People wore it on their sleeve and enshrined it in law. Today, it's much more subtle, but it's pervasive. Whether it's a tone of voice or hairstyle or accent, the cumulative impact can be brutal and can derail a career."

The study comes just weeks after Neil French, the creative director of WPP Group, reportedly explained the small ranks of female advertising directors by saying that "they don't deserve to make it to the top" because of their family obligations. He resigned over the flap.

While the proverbial glass ceiling remains one obstacle for women and minorities, Hewlett identifies another barrier - a "Jell-O floor" that keeps them mired in negative stereotypes.

Over 40 percent of minority professional women in large corporations say they feel excluded and constrained by "style compliance" - the need to blend into a corporate culture dominated by white men. More than a third of minority men feel the same way.

"The pressure is added for minority professionals because we don't necessarily come from the same background as those in leadership positions, and we haven't had the same experiences," says Williams, a vice president of Sears in Chicago.

A quarter of minority businesswomen worry that they are perceived as "affirmative action" hires. In addition, nearly a third of minority female executives are concerned that their speaking style labels them as lacking leadership potential.

"Asian women executives were convinced that they weren't commanding enough in their tone of voice, and were not assertive," says Hewlett. "African-American managers were quite sure they spoke too loudly, were too threatening."

One woman, a native of India who works as an IT executive at a Fortune 500 company, learned that colleagues regarded her as quiet. "There are people who talk just to be talking," says the woman, who asks not to be identified to protect her job. "That's not my style. People said, 'She's quiet.' Management perceived that I didn't have leadership quality. Eventually people said, 'But when she says something, it's valuable.' The last few years, I haven't heard them talk about this 'quiet' thing."

Both whites and minorities must adapt, she says. "People like me coming to Western society and working here have to figure out that there are certain things you have to do, that you have to project certain things. That becomes part of the norm of being a successful professional leader."

Referring to Americans' views of professionals from India, she says, "There's a stereotype that they're very good technically, you can rely on them, but they're not really the leaders of tomorrow." Yet she is encouraged by changes at her firm. "They're looking for diversity candidates like me who can grow."

Invisibility - not being heard or seen - remains an issue for women of color, says Ella Bell, an associate professor of business at Dartmouth. "If a woman of color speaks up to make her point, it will just plop. A white male will pick it up and all of a sudden it's bells and whistles." White women might have similar experiences, she adds, but not to the same degree.

Professor Bell also notes a reverse challenge: "You become visible when they need an affirmative action poster child to show that they're making a good attempt to connect to minority communities. That kind of visibility doesn't contribute to the bottom line, so it doesn't help when it comes to promotions."

Another form of invisibility occurs outside the office. To a much greater degree than their white peers, minority professionals spend off-hours doing charitable work. One-quarter are religious leaders. Nearly 30 percent are mentors to needy young people. Forty percent engage in a variety of social outreach activities. Yet many remain silent at work about this service.

"The work they do in minority communities, which is leadership, is very important, but their corporate managers never know about it," Bell says. "It doesn't get counted. Meanwhile, John Doe, who happens to be Caucasian, is on the United Way board or the arts council. It's a big deal."

Hewlett tells of a young woman who formed Girl Scout troops at homeless shelters in Washington, D.C. She received an award at the White House for her work but had not told her boss about it.

"She was afraid to," Hewlett says. "She thought it would imply that a homeless shelter was the kind of background she came from, and she didn't want to be stuck with that label."

Being open about outside activities can bring rewards. When Sears hired Williams as chief compliance and ethics officer, she was told that part of the reason she was hired was because she was both a successful lawyer and an ordained Baptist minister. "The general counsel said to me, 'Who better to be

the conscience of the company than a lawyer and a minister in one person?' If people really felt free to let corporate America know the things they are involved with outside their 9-to-5 jobs, that can be an enhancement to their performance on the job."

Williams, who counts fewer than five minority CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, sees progress. But, she adds, "We still have a long way to go."

Eral Burks, CEO of Minority Executive Search in Cleveland, also finds bias camouflaged.

"Companies talk about bringing on more minority board members and senior executive staff, but they're always finding excuses why they won't hire a prospective candidate," he says. "They weren't really interested in hiring, but it looks good that they brought people in. A lot of companies don't think there are qualified minority candidates."

Some firms are designing strategies to combat hidden bias. These include benefits that serve extended families.

Pointing out that minorities have spending power, Mr. Burks says, "They're going to be buying your product or service. They're starting to look at companies and say, 'Why should we spend our money here if your senior staff looks a totally different color?' "

Some CEOs, he adds, "are becoming aware that it makes good business sense to get senior-level staff on their team. They're very positive about wanting to hire more executive minorities and women candidates."