

Study Finds Minority Executives Lead Invisible Lives Rich in “Cultural Capital”

*“Leadership in Your Midst: Tapping the Hidden Strengths of Minority Executives”
Harvard Business Review, November ‘05*

Stephanie runs a Girl Scout troop in a homeless shelter. James rides with the rescue squad every weekend. Vicki has a second job as a Baptist Minister. These people’s stories capture some of the ways minority men and women not only reach out and give back, but incubate valuable leadership and professional skills at the same time – skills that go to waste in most workplaces.

Their experiences are part of a new study by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Carolyn Buck Luce and Cornel West that reveals the myopia of employers who don’t understand the complexity and power of minority professionals’ lives outside of work, and the richness of those lives.

All too often the media portrays minorities as “takers” and “victims” rather than “leaders” and “healers” – the problem set rather than the solution set. In the aftermath of Katrina, it seems particularly appropriate to recognize (and celebrate) the ways in which minority professionals are heavily involved in crafting solutions in their communities. To a much greater degree than their white peers, minority professionals lend their energies, perspectives and guidance to activities outside their job.

- 26% are leaders in their religious communities.
- 41% engage in an impressive range of social outreach activities.
- 28% are mentors of choice to needy young people.

The new research (which draws on a survey of 1,601 African American, Hispanic and Asian executives fielded in Feb. '05) describes and quantifies “cultural capital” – the deeply substantive extra curricula of professionals of color.

Despite the heft of these roles, they are largely invisible. They are either ignored by employers or deliberately hidden from view. The fact is, fully 40% of minority professionals do not trust their bosses with information about their private lives. They are fearful that revealing a link with a black church, a homeless shelter or a HIV hospice will reinforce negative stereotypes. “Why give them ammo to use against us,” asked one executive we interviewed.

Some of the most disturbing findings of this research center on the extent to which minority professionals experience “hidden bias.” Whether it’s tone of voice or choice of jewelry, fully one quarter of minority executives have a hard time fitting in. In George C. Wolfe’s 1986 “The Colored Gallery” the main protagonist, “The Man,” talks about how he is only allowed to be a black man on weekends and holidays. Twenty years later, minorities continue to feel diminished and constricted by the need to fit into a white mold.

There’s a strong business case to be made here, too. The *Harvard Business Review* article focuses on what can be done to recognize and leverage “cultural capital.” And at least some employers have figured out how to celebrate the skills and commitments of these remarkable professionals. Time Warner, GE, American Express, Pitney Bowes, Goldman Sachs, Johnson & Johnson and PepsiCo – amongst others – have gone some distance towards making their minority employees feel valued and supported in their community leadership roles.

Today, minorities comprise 29% of the managerial workforce in the US. Creating the circumstances that encourage professionals to share the full round of their lives and “bring their whole selves to work,” not only gives employers access to important transferable skill sets, it strengthens the bonds of loyalty and trust between companies and their minority employees. One interesting note. This study features a company survey which shows how the U.S. findings are amplified in the global context. For example, 38% of South African executives and 27% of Indian executives are involved in a wide range of social outreach programs.

Methodology

The U.S. survey sample comprised 1,601 professionals in the United States ages 28-55 that have a college or professional degree. This included 1,001 minority women (of whom one-third were African-American, one-third Hispanic and one-third Asian), 200 minority men (also equally divided between the three racial groups), 198 white women and 202 white men. Interviews averaged 20 minutes and were conducted by telephone between January 21 and February 17, 2005. The survey was conducted by Charney Research under the auspices of the Center for Work-Life Policy.

The global survey was conducted within a large Europe-based multinational with extensive operations in the U.K., India and South Africa. Targeting midlevel and senior managers, this survey reached 1,912 employees. Interviews averaged 16 minutes and were conducted online by Harris Interactive between July 6 and 19, 2005 using a slightly modified version of the U.S. survey.

Center for Work-Life Policy

The Center for Work-Life Policy (CWLP) undertakes research and works with employers to design, promote and implement workplace policies that enhance personal/family well-being and increase productivity. CWLP is committed to promoting policies that enable individuals to realize their full potential across the divides of gender, race and class. The CWLP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization based in New York City.