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## **Minority Professionals Sidelined by Hidden Bias**

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

Penny Knoll was platinum grade talent – Columbia MBA, labeled “high performer” in the early stretches of her career. The problem: Her Fortune 500 colleagues are uncomfortable with her style. She gesticulates. She wears her hair in cornrows. And her laugh is a throaty chuckle, earthy and loud. According to her boss, Penny’s appearance and persona distract from her perceived leadership potential. Penny has tried to tone herself down – to no avail. Now years of alienation are catching up with her, jeopardizing her health. Her race to the top arrested, Penny has quit, but stayed on the job.

She is not alone. In corporate America thousands of minority professionals fall victim to an insidious species of hidden bias, according to a study conducted by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Carolyn Buck Luce and Cornel West to be published next month in the *Harvard Business Review*.

White men are 98% of the CEOs and 95% of the top earners in the Fortune 500. This new research reveals that psychological hazards such as “style compliance” are keeping highly qualified minorities out of the executive suite.

- 42% of minority professional women in large corporations feel *constrained by the white male model* – they feel pressure to look, sound and act like white male executives. 34% of minority men feel the same way.
- Nearly a third of minority female executives worry that their *speaking style labels them as lacking leadership potential*.
- 23% of minority female executives fear that colleagues perceive their *animated hand gestures as inappropriate*.
- 19% of minority female professionals *feel that their dress is seen as too ethnic or flamboyant*.
- 25% of minority businesswomen worry about the *perception that they are “affirmative action” hires*.

It’s sobering to realize that 40 years after the civil rights struggle differences as seemingly minor as tone of voice or choice of jewelry are keeping minorities out of top jobs. We need to re-imagine what we mean by inclusion.

The bottom line: 19% of professional women of color experience hidden biases severe enough to *make them think about quitting*. The good news: Leading-edge companies are designing strategies for combating hidden bias. Time Warner, General Electric, Unilever, Lehman Brothers, Ernst & Young, Johnson & Johnson, Goldman Sachs, Booz Allen Hamilton and Cisco, for example, have imaginative new initiatives.

Another interesting note. This study features a company survey which shows that hidden bias is amplified in the global arena. Twenty-one percent of Indian executives and 48% of South African executives *experience slights or snubs based on their race, ethnicity or religion*.

The authors link this new data to two bodies of scholarship. Dartmouth's Ella Bell has analyzed the distress experienced by African American professionals as they struggle (and fail) to conform to the white male model. And Harvard's Mahzarin Banaji has created a diagnostic (called the Implicit Association Test) which reveals that even the most well-meaning of us harbor hidden prejudices.

### **Methodology**

The 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. The survey targeted people equally in four professional areas: medicine, law, education and business professionals or accountants with graduate. 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 with 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.