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Is Racial Bias Holding You Back at Work?



Anne Fisher

Many people of color struggle to be recognized for their achievements. That may be true—or not. Still everyone can learn ways to overcome obstacles. — By Anne Fisher

About a dozen years ago, when Cheryl Green worked for a FORTUNE 500 company that shall remain nameless here, she earned outstanding performance reviews and exceeded every goal that higher-ups laid out for her. Yet she kept getting passed over for promotion to vice president. Puzzled, and more than a little frustrated, Green asked her boss why. The answer she got was that maybe she could make vice president, if she went back to school. But since Green, who is African American, already had a master's degree, an MBA, and a Ph.D.—all from topnotch universities—it was hard to see what difference one more sheepskin would make. “That was the wake-up call for me,” she says now. “I understood at that moment that I wasn't getting into the club no matter how many hurdles

I jumped.” Green's solution: She spent a bit more time at that company, picking up as much marketable experience as possible. Then she jumped to a different employer, where she was hired as a VP.

She now runs her own human-resources consulting firm, Green Resource Group (<http://www.greenresource-group.com>) in Bethesda, Md., which advises companies on how they can better promote diversity in their workplaces. Green's clients include heavyweights like Nextel, Merck, Cigna, and International Paper. For anyone who feels that his or her minority status is a stumbling block at work, Green offers some advice:

- **Ask for honest feedback.** “If you don't know why you're being denied a promotion or other recognition, ask,” Green suggests. “Don't assume it's because of your

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skin color, since the problem could be something else altogether.” At the same time, be aware that the unvarnished truth is difficult for most managers to deliver. “People need to know that you aren't going to get angry, or defensive, if they tell you what you're doing wrong,” she notes. “What I have told clients is that if you get negative feedback about your work that you believe is unfair or unwarranted, take 24 to 48 hours to cool off if you need to. Then go back to your boss with a written list of questions about specific steps you need to take to improve, and take them.”

- **Find a mentor.** “There are few unique experiences left in corporate America,” says Green. “Someone else has been in your shoes and has lessons to share. So seek out other minorities in your company, or through a trade association or affinity group, to get a broader perspective on what you're facing.” At the same time, find someone you trust (either a peer or someone higher up) who is a member of the majority culture at the company, and get their point of view too. “Learn the unwritten rules of the game. Everyone who wants to build a successful business career needs to develop his or her political savvy, including negotiating skills, and that's true regardless of race or ethnicity,” Green observes. “Minorities may just have to be a little better at it.” Mentors can show the way.
- **Avoid casting yourself as a victim.** “Blaming others and complaining about what 'they' won't let you do be-

comes self-defeating, and it drains your energy,” Green says. “Instead, focus on your strengths, and on finding opportunities within the company where your unique talents would fit best, and then move in that direction.” If you concentrate on figuring out ways to contribute to the company's goals, it will “take the emphasis off the personal,” she says—and, not incidentally, make you a more valuable commodity on the open market.

- **Be prepared to move on.** If you still hit a ceiling, despite your best efforts, recognize it and look for another employer. Some corporate cultures are more conducive to diversity than others, and it may be that if you just can't get anywhere at one company, you're working in the wrong place. “Getting a fresh start in a new department, a different company, or even a different industry can be a real confidence-builder,” says Green. But, “don't take your problem with you,” she warns. “While it's important to recognize your own worth and seek out opportunities to let your light shine, don't ignore feedback on your way out the door. If you leave in a huff without addressing the reasons people give you for why you weren't getting ahead, you run the risk that some of the same obstacles will just resurface in your next job.” Come to think of it, that's good advice not just for minorities, but also for all of us.

Send questions to askannie@fortunemail.com.