

Introduction

First, let me begin by saying, thank you for making the decision to purchase this book. My guess is, you are a young minority professional who has career aspirations that have not yet been met, and you are looking for some pearls of wisdom that will help you in your quest. Perhaps you are at the other end of the spectrum, and find yourself a frustrated minority working in the business world, your career stuck in a rut. You can't seem to get promoted, no matter how well you perform. You've tried unsuccessfully to identify a mentor to help guide your career and provide you the guidance you so desperately need, but to no avail. You are beginning to feel like no matter what you do, no matter how hard you work, you are destined to go unrecognized, unappreciated, and unrewarded. Let me tell you, you are not alone. Many years ago I had an idea for a completely different book. Instead of writing a book that focused on how to overcome the obstacles, I found myself in a very different place. Like some of you, I found myself burned out, frustrated, and confused.

The introduction that I had prepared for that yet-unpublished book gives you an idea of how dire my situation was:

Introduction: "What Lack I Yet?"

After much internal debate and rationalization, I have decided that this is a book that had to be written. Not for the sake of adding yet another book dealing with the subject of hitting "glass ceilings" to the shelves of bookstores, but rather as a therapeutic exercise for the author. I have always been a believer that if feelings of anger, rage, or hostility are suppressed and not dealt with openly and honestly, the result can be one of devastation for both the oppressed and the oppressor.

Initially, I felt that the frustrations that I experience almost on a daily basis were mine alone and not representative of what my minority professional brothers and sisters had to cope with. Surprisingly enough, after meeting other minority professionals through the years and being associated with various minority professional organizations, I found that I was not alone. On the surface we all looked successful. Many of us enjoyed the trappings of success—nice homes, nice cars, and the like. But few of us ever really seemed complete. We identified ourselves by our titles and our corporations. "Hi, I'm Stan Young, an accountant with XYZ Company" was a typical introduction. Business cards were passed around like baseball cards and the more impressive the title, the better. However, something happened on the way to the boardroom.

During the economic recession of the late 1980s and early '90s, many black professionals found they had been taken off the fast track, had their careers put on hold, or worse yet, been taken out of the game altogether. They had been invited to the party late, then asked to leave early. Phrases like right-sizing, downsizing and the needs of the business were given as reasons (or excuses) as to why the party was over. At the same time, they watched others within these same organizations not only survive but be given opportunities for success that these minority professionals could only dream of.

Today, the question that thousands of minority professionals are asking both themselves and those who claim to provide them with career opportunities is, What lack I yet? As a direct result of the civil rights movement of the late 1960s, black America has produced its most qualified, educated generation of professionals in modern history. These professionals, armed with their degrees and ambitions, descended upon corporate America full of hopes, dreams, and promises. Hopes of being all that their parents and grandparents could not be, thanks to the limited opportunities provided them by a blatantly racist society. Dreams of sharing the American dream of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Most of , promises of equal opportunity, "careers" versus "jobs," and above all, acceptance.

Now, decades later, many of these professionals (the author included) find themselves angry, frustrated, burned out, and otherwise demoralized. They have played the game, only to find out that the game has been changed, and they themselves have been played. While it could be argued that most if not all of these young minority professionals enjoy a standard of living and quality of life that far surpasses that of their forefathers, they have paid a tremendous price in return. They have been forced to assimilate, hide their blackness, and basically deny themselves for what amounts to the crumbs that have fallen from the table, while still asking, "What lack I yet?" And what we have found is that "selling out" is no guarantee of acceptance. In fact, hopefully, it is not an option.

It is not the aim of this author to present this book as an analytical study of the trials and tribulations of the black professional, or attempt to speak for all minority professionals in general. Rather, this is an attempt to express the feelings and issues faced by many minority professionals in white corporate America.

This book serves to share the concerns of those who tread this lonesome path, to let others learn from their mistakes while at the same time providing a vehicle for self-examination. For many, this was a chosen path. We chose to try and "fit in." We chose to wear the Brooks Brothers suits and the Ann Taylor outfits. We decided to join the "right clubs," to live in the "right

neighborhoods,"and, most important, to say the "right things." We wanted the whole world, and all it had to offer. Some have realized their goals; others are still striving, and many have given up. But all have had to wrestle with yet another question: "What does a man (or woman) profit, to gain the whole world, and to lose his own soul?"

As you can probably tell after reading my thoughts at the time, I was bitter and upset. I was a director of sales, managing a team of sales reps, and had just lost out to a majority candidate hired from outside. This was particularly frustrating because after losing out to an internal candidate for a similar job a short time earlier, I created a development plan with my vice president to better prepare me when the next opportunity became available. After getting the call from my VP informing me that once again I had not gotten the job, I felt betrayed and lied to. I had done everything that was asked of me. I was a top performer, I spent my nights for two years earning an MBA, and I felt I deserved better—better from my manager and VP, better from my company, and better from society at large. I was determined to press the matter, confront those who were blocking my way, and, more important, make my company treat me fairly. However, during a moment of reflection, I asked myself a question: What happens if I take all this frustration and confront my boss and my company about what they aren't doing, and nothing changes? Furthermore, I was forced to consider another question: Even if I left company A for company B, what guarantee would I have that I would not run into the same issues and concerns that I found at my previous employer?

Lastly, I had to take an honest look at myself, not only focusing on my strengths, but identifying areas that needed development. Is it possible that while I did possess skills in one area, I was ill prepared in others? Had I really done all that I could to position myself for

success? Had I made enough of an effort to develop relationships with key senior leaders, or others who could influence the hiring decision? However, my real liberation came when I realized that while there were definitely things my company could do to help me advance in my career, I really had little power to make them do anything. However, I had complete control over what I could do for myself! Armed with a new determination, I set out not to change corporate America, but to understand how I needed to change my behavior, approach, and image to better position myself for success. This began my ten-year journey from director of sales to division president of a Fortune 500 company. This transformation didn't come about because my IQ suddenly jumped to Mensa status. It didn't happen because overnight, senior management decided they liked me. It happened because I came to realize there was a process to getting recognized, rewarded, and promoted. It happened because I came to understand what to look for, and what to avoid when considering a potential employer. And it happened because I took the time, effort, and energy to develop myself in areas that would make me a more attractive candidate for advancement.

This book is my effort to share with others some of the key lessons learned by myself and others who have reached a certain level of success in the business world. Many of these lessons will sound familiar, and a few may offer a unique perspective. However, it is my hope that as the reader, you will walk away with at least one idea, suggestion, or thought that can help enhance your career. And then, after achieving success in your given field, you can take time to move beyond success to significance by sharing your lessons with others.