

It's All About The Race:

*Four Perspectives
For Success*

Written By

HENRY O. LAMAR, JR.

JAMES E. ROGERS, JR. ESQ

MURIEL D. WHORLEY

PETER CHARLES

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Challenges for African-Americans in the Workplace

MURIEL D. WHORLEY

IMAGINE A WORLD WITHOUT discrimination, racism, insensitivity or retaliation. You are not imagining yourself in this environment in this day and time. You are dreaming of a reality that doesn't exist. Society uses all of the buzz words to ensure that the population believes that there **is** equity in the workplace. We hear "we do not tolerate discrimination," "X organization is an equal opportunity employer," "you are evaluated based on merit," or "pay for performance" and we are deceived into thinking that we will be treated as an equal in the workplace.

It doesn't take long to realize that we have left a university or campus environment and taken a leap of faith into a reality that doesn't exist. We thought that hard work and dedication would lay a foundation for our career—a career that could not be destroyed. What was our mistake?—we didn't factor "people" into the equation.

(Scenario One) Karen, a 22-year-old African-American, graduated from ABC University, magna cum laude, armed with multiple honors, a dedicated spirit, and the will to succeed. Karen goes on an interview with a government agency, convinced she is going to make her mark in the world. What could go wrong? She's a proven commodity and she has the evidence in her portfolio. Karen attends the interview, suitably impresses her interviewers and lands a job as an entry-level analyst. Of course, she passes all of the required security checks and she eagerly begins work on the following Monday.

It doesn't take Karen long to realize that she is given the assignments lacking in visibility or exposure—in essence no one else wants them. However, that doesn't diminish her enthusiasm for a job well done until she realizes that most of her products are shelved. What can she do to make an impact? How does she approach management to let them know that she is capable of so much more?

(Scenario Two) Sam is a 21 year-old applicant of African-American descent, who has multiple degrees in accounting. He is also a Master Public Accountant. Sam is tri-lingual, which is a competency that is sorely needed in today's multi-cultural environment. Unfortunately, he doesn't have any actual experience in the workplace. Sam lands a position at a private corporation as a junior accountant. He is immediately assigned to assist John, one of the corporation's senior accountants. Sam brings organizational skills to the position and a strong desire to succeed. John recognizes ability and competency in Sam and, in a manner that suggests confidentiality, advises Sam that he is going to allow him to make a major contribution to a high-level project that has been assigned to John. Sam naively assumes that this is the foothold he needs to prove his value to the corporation. Sam approaches the task with confidence in his abilities and is not proven wrong. Unfortunately, when it came time to present the results at a meeting with both his and John's executives, Sam was not in attendance nor was his contribution attributed to him.

Sam is disappointed and unsure of next steps. He doesn't want to upset the applecart by voicing his displeasure but neither does he want his significant contribution to the project to go unnoticed. What are Sam's options?

Unfortunately, these scenarios happen routinely to African-Americans in the workplace. In order to pinpoint the problem, we need to look at the root cause. So often, African-Americans have been brainwashed into believing any opportunity presented to them is a gift and should be treated as such. We should thank the donor and be forever in their debt. We should express our gratitude by continuing along a course of action that assures the donor that we are aware that the debt will never be repaid. We have not mastered the art of believing in ourselves and working as a cohesive population intent upon expressing that we bring a value to the situation that would be missing if we were missing. We need to realize our worth, and capitalize on the very real fact that many

of our accomplishments are needed and would not have otherwise been realized. In addition, we have been deceived into thinking that we are unable to make significant contributions without the help of others and if we get too sure of ourselves, we are reminded that we are not in control.

(Scenario 3) Bob achieved a level of organizational leadership that had been unheard of before he took over the reigns as the Chief Administrator for a large hospital. Bob was aware that racism was alive and well but it had not impacted him, therefore the problem must lie elsewhere.

His executives had always treated him with respect, recognized his abilities, rewarded his accomplishments, and valued his ideas. So if they didn't value the ideas or accomplishments of other African-Americans—the problem must be with the other African-Americans. Bob was a witness to the fact that his executives were fair-minded—after all look at where he is today. Sure, he has seen glimpses of inequality throughout the years but, hey, they must have deserved it—it could not be racism or biased behavior. As a matter of fact, just yesterday, Michael, an African-American manager in radiology had submitted a best practice idea that actually had a lot of merit. The hospital board told Michael that while the concept was good, the research, the follow-through and the hypotheses were weak. The board advised Michael that if he were to ever go further in the organization he needed to enhance his skill sets or resign himself to remaining in his current position. Bob didn't agree, he thought the report was well thought-out, well-researched and would save the hospital millions if implemented. Bob did not speak up nor show his support of Michael. Why? Because his judgment may be called into question and he valued his position. Besides, no one helped him get to where he was, and if the board had serious reservations about Michael's report there certainly must be good reason. Bob took one look at Michael's face as he exited the room and clearly saw the words "sell-out" blinking in neon lights. Bob had let a colleague down, but he had to, he needed this job and he valued his authority.

This is another scenario that African-Americans face on a daily basis. Why? Because we do not currently have a strong foothold among society's elite and we unfortunately equate money with power, therefore, we believe that the only way to achieve greatness is through financial achievements.

That is a far cry from the truth; we should equate knowledge with power and richness with health, integrity, morality, fairness and equity. We need to value our families and nurture our religious beliefs. We need to focus on obtaining an education and educating others as opposed to striving to be accepted by people we don't even respect. Once we realize our value, and focus on our goals, we will truly realize that the challenges we face on a daily basis are not insurmountable, merely stumbling blocks that can be overcome by diligence, confidence, fortitude, strength of character, and the ability to realize your personal shortcomings, make them your strengths and, at the opportune time and in a professional manner, vocalize your value.

Being the Only One

HENRY O. LAMAR, JR.

THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT being the only African-American in an organization or a work group in any public or private company. It also addresses strategies and techniques to cope with this potentially stressful situation.

I spent the first 24 years of my life in a Black world—the segregated communities and schools of Macon, Georgia and Fort Valley, Georgia. I have spent the past 34 years under very different circumstances. Upon graduation from high school, I attended and graduated from Fort Valley State College with a bachelor’s degree in education, with a concentration in social science. I received a fellowship to attend the University of Georgia to pursue a Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree. There were few African-American students at the university and fewer still in public administration. Of the approximately 100 men in my residence hall, I was the only African-American. In my lecture classes, which included courses outside of the public administration discipline, all too often, I was “the only one.” As an African-American, I was a stranger in a strange land.

The misfit was complete: socially, psychologically, and academically. The course demands of the public administration curriculum gave me little time to socialize within the small Black student community at school. I was also hampered by the fact that I went home to Macon every weekend. My social isolation and segregated experiences strained interactions on both sides in my dealings with Whites. I was cautious about interacting with Whites in any situation, social or educational, because of fear of reprisal or rejection. I felt that Whites were cautious

because they either didn't know how to react to a Black man in "their" world or they were not sure how I would react. Of course, there were some Whites that didn't want me there and they expressed their views through stares, whispers and other non-verbal communication. There were, however, more Whites than I ever expected who greeted me with apparent open arms. My world, previously viewed in Black and White, was forced open and I began to learn about, accept, and enjoy other kinds of diversity among people. I found that exposure and interaction in living and learning environments could, for the most part, cure what years of separation had produced on both sides. My roommate Henry, who was White, became my friend and mentor. As a math major, he was able to help me successfully complete a Fortran computer language course. I was required to take this course, but my computer and math skills were lacking in some respects. Without Henry's assistance, I would not have passed the computer course and therefore would not have graduated on time with my MPA degree. My perspective on race relations changed dramatically because of my interaction with Henry. Not so much because he assisted me with a difficult class, but because I actually became friends with a White person.

My job search was a defining moment in my life. I was a product of and beneficiary of the civil rights movement. White America was very interested in hiring African-Americans to show their support of the civil rights struggle. Because of their desire to demonstrate equal employment opportunity, many companies seemed eager to hire me because of the color of my skin. I wanted a job to demonstrate my abilities but most of those who recruited me wanted a "statistic." Local community governments were offering me city manager positions and police department positions in small and medium sized towns across Georgia. The job offers were tempting because I wanted and needed a job badly. While the financial support that I received to pursue my graduate degree had covered most of my expenses, I still needed some financial assistance from my parents. I wanted to make my parents proud of me as well. I was determined, however, that the job I accepted would satisfy my personal hierarchy of needs, including a sense of value and an organizational belief in my abilities and capabilities. The job also had to add to my sense of pride and independence in making my career decision. I visited with several local governmental representatives

and several representatives of local police departments before deciding that the jobs being offered were not meeting my needs. I then began to focus my attention on the federal government. Because I had graduated in the top ten percent of my class, I was placed, along with others similarly situated, at the top of agency recruitment certificates. I also passed the Federal Service Entrance Examination and received a very competitive ranking at the GS-5 and GS-7 levels. As a result, I was called for interviews before representatives of two government agencies. Before my first interview I was nervous, of course, but when I saw the members of the interview panel (two Whites and one African-American), my anxiety level diminished somewhat. I then recognized the African-American as the radio personality from my hometown. “Satellite Papa” was an extremely popular “D.J.” and I felt confident that he would provide support during the interview. Man, was I ever wrong! He drilled me mercilessly while the other two panel members had very few questions for me. Needless to say, I did not get that job. I did, however, learn a valuable lesson that day – don’t assume that being interviewed by a person with your racial background gains you any advantages. I let down my guard, assuming that everything would be all right because a popular African-American was on the interview panel. I learned my lesson and was much better prepared and more confident in my own abilities when representatives from another agency interviewed me. There were no African-American panel members and the White panel members were as tough as “Satellite Papa” had been. I applied what I had learned from my first interview to the next interview. I was offered a position as an Administrative Intern. This position afforded me the opportunity to have rotating assignments between the various administrative functions (Personnel, Training, Facilities Management, EEO, and Public Affairs). I accepted the position and became the first African-American Administrative Intern in the agency’s Southeast Region. This was exciting and very challenging to me because I would be a pioneer. I felt that the position would meet my personal needs and I also perceived the work environment to be viable for significant personal contributions to the organization and for appropriate rewards for performance. The interviewers, their description of career opportunities with their agency, and printed recruitment materials all helped to make me feel good about my decision.

Making the transition from college to the working world is always difficult, but it's even more difficult when you are the only one of your kind (African-American). At offices that hire scores of college graduates every year, new employees go through training together, ask stupid questions together, and lament over their lowly status together. But when you are the only college graduate in your occupation and the only African-American, all the normal insecurities about starting a new job in the adult world feel like they're uniquely yours because you can't see anyone else going through the same thing. There was no one else like you available to talk with about issues you faced. Issues like dealing with jealousy and envy from African-Americans and Whites ("I've been here for years and I didn't get that opportunity," "I'm not going to help him with anything, they gave him the job, not me"), dealing with low expectations from superiors and peers alike ("they just hired him because of the color of his skin, he won't make it, he'll wash out just like the others, but they can say they gave him the opportunity"), dealing with the tremendous responsibility of being not just the "only one," but the "first one" as well.

If you're lucky, like I was in my first assignment after graduation from the intern program, you will have a compassionate boss who will offer reassurance and patience with basic questions. In between the time that you're hired and the time you find that compassionate boss, you must succeed by learning to be your own mental cheerleader. You cannot allow isolation to overwhelm you. If you begin the job thinking, "I'm the youngest person here," "I don't know what I'm doing," "these people don't like me"—if you go in feeling overwhelmed—you're not going to get anything accomplished. You have to say to yourself that if the experience is going to be a positive and beneficial one, I must take personal responsibility for my growth and development. During my three years of rotational assignments, I experienced the full range of emotions from fear and trepidation about being the only intern and the first African-American intern, to unspeakable joy over the experience I had obtained. My work experience covered such areas as writing internal management documents for the start-up of a new training facility, assisting in the design of work space at the new facility which also included administrative and operational components, serving as a recruiter,

personnel specialist, training and development specialist, public affairs specialist, EEO specialist, just to name a few.

I experienced a sense of alienation at work at times feeling like an outsider looking in on the agency's network of colleagues. There were times when my co-workers appeared to look at everything they did through a filter of race and were sometimes unsympathetic to the minority point of view. Race only complicates the difficulties an African-American might already face in the workplace. Oftentimes, a White co-worker or boss is insensitive to feelings of their African-American colleagues. Sometimes they may be racist or hold strong prejudices. On the other hand, there was also the tendency by African-American employees to view every piece of feedback to them or any negative action taken against them as racist.

As I began to prove myself in the intern program, I gained acceptance and opportunities for more challenging assignments. In addition, upon graduation from the program my first permanent job assignment was with a wonderful, supportive supervisor who encouraged me personally and professionally.

Since that time, I have learned many lessons about being the only African-American in my work environment. The following are perhaps the most important:

- Don't expect to be loved or accepted as an insider, but give and expect respect. Some may still not like you, but if you demonstrate honesty and integrity in all of your actions, most will respect you.
- Do your job well; do not cut corners. It is always better to over-prepare by broadening your perspective beyond the issue at hand, think about how the next steps should be completed in your function as well as in other parts of the organization. In my case, it was true what my parents and others had told me about having to work twice as hard as Whites to be recognized. Learn what's important to your organization and work to fill that need. You must do your current job well in order to be considered for the next job in your career progression.
- Do not self-promote, but do expect honest recognition for your contributions. I'm sure you're aware of the adage, "If you don't toot your own horn, no one else will toot it for you." It's OK to extol

the virtues of your accomplishments, just make sure that you aren't the only one extolling.

- Dress appropriately for the company's culture, not yours. Honor your heritage but take into consideration the culture of your workplace. Is the dress code casual attire, business casual attire or business attire? It will most likely never be "anything goes." My view as a new employee and as an employee with over 30 years of service was that there was nothing casual about my business. I wore business attire at all times.
- As you do not wish to be judged by the color of your skin, do not judge others in that manner.
- Find your voice, but learn when to speak and when to hold your tongue. Holding your tongue can sometimes get you branded as "quiet and reserved." Even if you communicate as much as you need to and your communication is of high quality and substance, you may still be branded, but the brand won't be a fatal flaw for you in terms of career progression. Keep slang to a minimum.
- Attend the meeting before the meeting. Get there early. "Small talk" before the meeting is not for icebreakers. Power moves often take place before the session begins.
- Network, network, network. Give to others without keeping score. You will be amazed at the amount of valuable information and insight you can and will obtain if you talk to and with your colleagues.
- Attend office parties that occur during the workday and make arrangements to show up at a few after work or weekend gatherings. This will help dispel the idea of you being an outsider. A lot of team bonding occurs during happy hours, golf outings and cookouts. Despite the frivolity, stay focused and don't let your guard down.
- Find out who you are and work toward whom you want to be; do not delude yourself, but neither should you accept others' limited expectations of you.
- Expand your support structures—look to faith communities, sororities or fraternities, minority professional societies, service groups, housekeeping staff, and departmental secretaries. One of my mentors throughout my career was a member of the custodial staff in my first office. She began her mentoring of me when I

began my job as an Administrative Intern. She would speak with me every day and her words were always supportive and encouraging. I began my career in 1971. Even though I moved around the country between 1971 and 2005, whenever I was in Atlanta, we would always talk. She was a major inspiration to me and I was proud to recognize her at my retirement party.

- Learn how to learn and how to solve problems. Be flexible and make adjustments as appropriate.
- Don't jump the gun. Always step back and analyze your interactions with colleagues. In your mind, play back comments or incidents you find offensive to make sure you are not just reacting emotionally to them. Then weigh your options and make the appropriate decision.

Being the only one can place you on an emotional roller coaster if you are not grounded in knowledge, confidence, and the ability and desire to learn more. I knew that I could succeed in the business world. I just needed a chance to prove it. I was given that chance and, as they say, "the rest is history."