NAVIGATING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES:
A Guide For Diverse Women and Their Managers

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Katherine Giscombe

While diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs have been in place in many organizations, these programs have not been completely successful at eliminating bias. Major barriers to the advancement of diverse women remain,[1] including a lack of mentors, lack of access to informal networks, and lack of access to high-visibility assignments.[2]

An important aspect of navigating organizations is knowing the "unwritten rules," or implicitly communicated workplace norms and behaviors that are necessary to succeed within an organization. Prevalent unwritten rules, across different types of organizations, include the need to:[3]

- Perform well, and produce results;
- Network and build relationships with mentors, sponsors, and coaches;
- Fit into the corporate culture; and
- Communicate effectively.

To further support successful navigation by diverse women, support of managers and senior leaders in the organization is needed. Inclusion is a function of workplace culture.

Building on work in Catalyst's Diverse Women & Inclusion area and related research, this guide is designed to help individual diverse women navigate their workplaces and assess their own behavior to maximize the likelihood of succeeding in the workplace. It includes a checklist designed to help individual diverse women track the breadth and depth of workplace relationships. The guide also provides managers and senior leaders in organizations with an understanding of the issues facing diverse women so that they can improve the odds of career success by their diverse women employees.[4]

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1. The term "diverse women" in this guide refers to racially/ethnically diverse women in the United States and Canada.
2. Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Law Firms—Women of Color in Professional Services Series* (Catalyst, 2009).
3. Laura Sabattini, *Unwritten Rules: What You Don't Know Can Hurt You* (Catalyst, 2008).
4. This guide sources information from these studies: Katherine Giscombe, *Women of Color in Accounting—Women of Color in Professional Services Series* (Catalyst, 2008); Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Securities Firms—Women of Color in Professional Services Series* (Catalyst, 2008); Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Law Firms—Women of Color in Professional Services Series* (Catalyst, 2009); Sabattini.

White women report more positive experiences regarding navigation of work environments as compared with diverse women, including the existence of those with whom they can have relationships.[5]

(I've) been fortunate to have a wide array of partners who have taken an interest in me and my career, where I am and where I want to be, and [who] reach out to me quite frequently.
— White Woman

Despite the existence of D&I programs in many organizations and a stated commitment to diversity by senior leaders, diverse women continue to find work environments less straightforward and helpful than do white women.

Very seldom am I the only woman, but very often I'm still the only African-American woman and even other women of color—Asians, Hispanics—don't have the same barriers and struggles I have. I'm at the same table but got there a different way. The environment is different. How I support my two pre-teen girls without a nanny is different. How I juggle my responsibilities, who my allies are, is very different, too. How often I have to think about what I'm saying so I don't offend anyone is different. And making sure what I say is not taken as gospel for every black woman is something I have to think about.
— Black Woman

Diverse women continue to perceive negative stereotyping which makes fitting in difficult and poses challenges to advancement.[6]

Asian professionals are seen more as the hard workers….I communicate with my staff, who is Asian…you are not here to be the worker bee. Your role is knowing how to market.
— Asian Woman

"I'm at the same table but got there a different way. The environment is different….How I juggle my responsibilities, who my allies are, is very different, too."

— Black Woman

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5. Giscombe; Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Securities Firms—Women of Color in Professional Services Series* (Catalyst, 2008); Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Law Firms—Women of Color in Professional Services Series* (Catalyst, 2009).
6. Giscombe; Bagati, 2008; Bagati, 2009.

LEVERAGE PEAK PERFORMANCE

Good performance is required for anyone to be successful. It is encouraging to hear success stories of those from marginalized groups who have been able to make their mark with solid performance.

[Successful diverse women] are able to talk about the numbers with a confidence and sophistication, and they are able to really talk on their feet. I would really say the best thing is to almost have your business, the knowledge of what you're doing—whether it's a project or an initiative—under your skin so that you can talk about it at a moment's notice.

—Hispanic Woman

However, a hard reality is that even after many organizations have implemented D&I programs, playing fields are not necessarily level. The more removed one is from the demographic groups that typically have the most power in U.S. organizations—white men—the more likely it is that there will be inequities in work environments and some level of double standards to deal with.[7] Hard work will get a diverse candidate in the door, but it will not necessarily assure her advancement.

When a new recruit comes in, we have a get-real session to let them know that it's different. It's almost like you have to give 200 percent in order to get ahead.…Is it fair? No, but that's the way you have to do it in order to make yourself known.

—Black Woman

Managers can lead the way on eye-opening and consciousness-raising discussions with their diverse women direct reports (see Tips for Managers sidebar).

Tips for Managers

Managers should meet with their diverse women direct reports and discuss the "unwritten rules" that they need to know to become successful in a particular organization. Because unwritten rules are not always equally accessible to all employees, they may create barriers for some. When rules are communicated through informal networks, those with less access to these networks—such as diverse women—miss out on developmental opportunities.

Why is it helpful for leaders and organizations to learn about unwritten rules? Unless challenged, some unwritten rules may be counterproductive to the organization's search for the best fit for talent. Organizations may, for instance, overlook some of their best talent by inadvertently providing opportunities only to those who belong to the most influential networks. The organization can benefit when managers consider and discuss the following questions with their diverse women reports:

- Does everyone within the organization have access to unwritten rules to advancement?
- Are current unwritten rules consistent with the organization's values and with attracting and retaining the best talent?
- Do some rules need to change?[8]

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7. Giscombe; Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Securities Firms—Women of Color in Professional Services Series* (Catalyst, 2008); Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Law Firms—Women of Color in Professional Services Series* (Catalyst, 2009).
8. Sabattini.

MAINTAIN AND CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS TO SHINE A LIGHT ON YOUR PERFORMANCE

For diverse women to best leverage exceptional performance, others throughout the organization need to be aware of such stellar performance. Relationships are a big help in this area.

Aim High and Cast a Wide Net When Developing Relationships

Finding mentors, coaches, and sponsors is crucial to anyone's career development.[9] It is important to have supporters who can help broadcast your achievements. In addition, high performers tend to have relationships with people in many different functional areas besides their own.[10] However, diverse women in professional services firms were found to have the narrowest scope of network, talking to relatively few people within their organizations.[11] As much as possible, diverse women need to interact with many potentially significant players within their organizations to be able to have a large enough number of contacts among whom they can develop significant relationships.

In particular, it is critical that diverse women aim high in cultivating relationships with those who will be in a position to sponsor them. Unlike mentors, sponsors are highly placed individuals within the organization who not only advocate for, protect, and fight for the career advancement of the protégé, but who also have significant enough influence on the decision-making processes or structures to positively impact the protégé's career advancement. Further, sponsors provide sophisticated types of coaching and advice specific to stretching into a role, position, or assignment. They provide actionable and targeted advice, designed to help prepare protégés for the complexities of these new roles or assignments.[12]

Avoid Becoming Too Dependent on One Champion

It is often difficult for a diverse woman to find support, and when she does it may be tempting to maintain one champion or sponsor relationship rather than taking the time and energy to form others. Yet, doing so leaves her vulnerable to suffering a major loss if the champion leaves.

The dynamics change where one's not there anymore and you can definitely feel that void….I didn't appreciate it as much until that senior manager left and then... the climate changed overnight.

—Black Woman

Overcome "Guardedness" to Cultivate Trust in Relationships

Business leaders have stated that in developing solid sponsoring relationships, trust was the defining element, and that it had to be present on both sides of the relationship to make it successful.[13]

Facing double standards and others' low expectations of them in the work environment

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9. Sabattini.

10. Ronald Burt, "The Network Structure of Social Capital," Barry Staw and Robert Sutton, ed., in *Research in Organizational Behavior*, vol. 22, Eds. (JAI Press, 2000): p. 345-423.; Joel M. Podolny and James N. Baron, "Resources and Relationships: Social Networks and Mobility in the Workplace," *American Sociological Review,* vol. 62, no. 5 (1997): p. 673-693; Ajay Mehra, Martin Kilduff and Daniel J. Brass, "The Social Networks of High and Low Self-Monitors: Implications for Workplace Performance," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 46, no.1 (2001): p. 121-146.; Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited," in *Sociological Theory* (New York; Blackwell Publishing, 1983): p. 201-233.

11. Giscombe.

12. Heather Foust-Cummings, Sarah Dinolfo, and Jennifer Kohler, *Sponsoring Women to Success* (Catalyst, 2011).

13. Foust-Cummings, Dinolfo, and Kohler.

can lead diverse women to distrust others and to be extremely guarded about showing any vulnerabilities or "chinks in the armor."

> *Don't let them see you sweat…and I don't sweat. Don't let them see…that they got to you.*
>
> —Black Woman

While it is difficult to let one's guard down in an environment that is less than inclusive, it is also a mistake to be "overly guarded." Doing so makes it difficult for a diverse woman to develop the depth of relationships required to support, guide, and possibly sponsor her.

📌 Tips for Managers

If managers and other senior leaders who interact with diverse women are willing to open up and share their vulnerabilities, such as how they learned from mistakes they made, such colleagues may prove themselves to be valuable allies to diverse women. Further, the dynamic of exchanging sensitive information should build a stronger relationship.

Cultivate Allies Who Will Aggressively Address Inequity

Diverse women must secure the political backing that they require as a member of an under-represented group and that majority colleagues may not need.

Diverse women still encounter offensive remarks and situations in organizations. Typical advice for handling such circumstances involves the person who feels offended using effective communication to foster cooperation and staying within appropriate behavioral boundaries.[14] However, it can be very difficult for an individual diverse woman to decide whether to speak up when she feels that she is the subject of a stereotypical remark or assessment. When she does decide to speak up, it is often burdensome to bear the brunt of correcting someone else's behavior.

Ideally there should be others in the workplace who are willing to intervene, to shift attention from the dynamic involving the "offended" and the "offender," and to take a role in supporting inclusion in the organization.[15] Diverse women should cultivate relationships with people who can potentially be strong allies.

📌 Tips for Managers

In concert with their diverse women direct reports, managers need to help make the women feel comfortable raising sensitive issues. In turn, senior leaders in organizations need to provide adequate training around effective management of diverse teams to managers, so that the managers have the skill to increase comfort in their diverse women direct reports raising sensitive issues.

> *Individual women of color do not feel comfortable raising issues around their own difficulties. Communication does not get to subtleties of talking about race.*
>
> —White Man

Diverse women need to proactively sensitize both supportive colleagues and potential mentors and sponsors to perceived micro-inequities.[16] This will help prime these colleagues to be ready to intervene if needed before such incidents occur.

Beyond isolated incidents, if there is a "theme" of stereotypical or unfair assessments of a diverse woman that may affect her progression within an organization, this is evidence of a larger issue that also can benefit from a third party's intervention.

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14. Katherine Giscombe and Laura Jenner, *Career Experiences of Visible Minorities~ Workplace Fit and Stereotyping* (Catalyst, 2008)
15. Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Moral Responsibility of Bystanders," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 41, no.1 (Spring 2010): p. 28-39.
16. Micro-inequities are subtle messages, sometimes subconscious, that devalue, discourage, and ultimately impair performance in the workplace. These messages can take the shape of looks, gestures, or even tones and are often directed at those who are different in some way from the majority.

TAP NETWORKS, AND DEVELOP BEHAVIORAL REPERTOIRES TO BALANCE DIVERSITY WITH DEMANDS TO FIT IN

Use Your Network as a Guide to Decide How Much to "Fit In"

A challenge heard sometimes from diverse women is difficulty in "figuring out how to succeed in a majority environment without losing myself." Diverse women report feeling pressured to downplay differences in behavior and communication in order to succeed in organizations that tend to reward certain types of people and have a narrow set of acceptable management styles.

For example, diverse women who speak a different language from the language of the business may be reacted to negatively and, thus, feel pressured to not use that language at work.[17]

> I speak Chinese on the phone because my parents understand me better, but colleagues think I am talking about them.
> —Asian Woman

It can be difficult to decide how much one has to "fit in." When someone gives a diverse woman negative feedback, especially about ambiguous issues such as style rather than objectively measured performance, it can be hard to decide how to respond. She should do a reality check to help her decide.

This is where using a "sounding board" to assess and weigh sensitive situations will come in handy. A mentor or sponsor who is tuned in to the political realities of a work environment and, in addition, is sensitive to the pressures and biases facing diverse women, should be able to help them sift through quandaries such as the following:

> I try to behave as American as I can, and I try to hide [my Latin heritage]…Not that I can hide [it], because every time I open my mouth, [it is obvious] who I am…Why do I need to change my personality? [I am] working 15 hours a day and on top of that I have to change my personality?
> —Hispanic Woman[18]

Develop an Extensive Behavioral Repertoire

One solution to feeling that one's style must be modified is to reframe this challenge to one of developing an extensive behavioral repertoire. Given the breadth of customers, clients, colleagues, and stakeholders that many interface with in an increasingly global environment, there may not be one single style that is most appropriate. A range of styles for use in different situations is helpful.

Maintain a Good Balance Between Self-Identity and "Fitting In"

For diverse women to whom racial/ethnic identity is paramount, caution should be exercised in acculturating to the dominant environment. Diverse women for whom such identity is very important need to set boundaries.

> I don't really know who I am anymore. Over the years, I would come home from work and talk to my mom, who is from a different culture. She's like, "Oh, you need to calm down from work. You're still on that stuff. Call me back in an hour after you stop "talking right…." I don't know where I fit anymore, because I've left… my family, in that environment, but I don't belong over here….I'm just kind of hanging out in the middle with a job.
> —Black Woman

Diverse women should do a regular check-in with themselves to reflect on whether they are maintaining a good balance between "fitting in" and being comfortable with themselves.

It would also be helpful to identify role models who have been successful, but who have managed to hold on to who they are, and to determine how they became successful.

> I won't make too many adjustments….I turned into somebody that I didn't recognize anymore. I just made a decision, for myself, that, within reason, I'm not going to alter who I am too much….When I got hired, I just started growing my locks….this is who I am, every day.
> —Black Woman

17. Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Law Firms—Women of Color in Professional Services Series* (Catalyst, 2009).
18. Deepali Bagati, *Women of Color in U.S. Law firms—Women of Color in Professional Services Series* (Catalyst, 2009), p. 21.

SAVVY NAVIGATORS DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Developing and maintaining emotional resilience is foundational for diverse women's ability to deal with the additional stresses involved in politically navigating organizational environments. Emotional resilience is a degree of "toughness" that allows diverse women to feel confident taking risks to achieve outstanding results in a less-than-inclusive workplace without internalizing biased attitudes.[19]

You definitely have to have a sense of self-awareness and being self-confident….It shakes your confidence in yourself, and it almost sometimes belittles you when the client would walk in the room and they would speak to the intern….So if you don't have confidence in yourself, it can really demean you, and you have to have that self-awareness that, "I know what I'm doing."

—Black Woman

Steps for Developing Emotional Resilience:

- Develop core competencies to instill a sense of confidence. Basic core competencies that exist across a range of industries typically include technical knowledge; communication skill, both verbal and written; core knowledge of industry; interpersonal skills, including managing up and down; creativity; innovation; project and time management; and teamwork.

- Be realistic—know that there may likely be some level of inequity in the work environment, without focusing on it to the exclusion of more positive aspects.

- To the extent possible, reframe situations to focus on beneficial aspects. An assignment can be burdensome, but perhaps it allows for cultivation of relationships in other functional areas. Mastering a tough situation can be framed as, "This is what I need to master in order to move up."

- Focus on achieving your long-term career goals.

- Keep active in support systems outside of work.

19. Catalyst, *Women of Color Executives: Their Voices, Their Journeys* (2001).

Avoid Allowing Negatives to Discourage Further Action

To the extent possible, take a positive approach; do not let the negatives of a situation prevent you from finding alternate strategies.

But have I gone to talk to any of the senior managers on the team about it? No, because I don't think they would give me a straight answer, only because of things that have happened in the past on that particular assignment. So just because of things that have happened, I would not go to them to even begin to ask, because I know they wouldn't give me a straight answer.

—Black Woman

One question this woman might have asked was, were each and every one of the managers untrustworthy? Was there another route she could have taken to solve her issue?
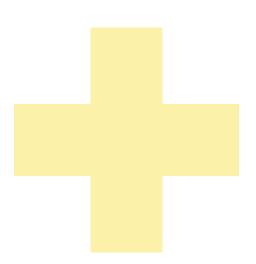
When one avenue to finding a solution to a problem does not work, do not give up.

Everyone brings "baggage" with them into an environment, based on their prior experiences. It is easy to immediately interpret situations negatively. Continually focusing on negatives can be overwhelming and emotionally draining.

Navigating organizational culture can be difficult, but by proactively taking the right steps, you can be successful.

If it's not working for you, you have to voice it. You have to be very proactive I've noticed here. If you want to move into a different area, a different business unit, you have to be proactive. They tell you you can do it, but you have to be very, very, very proactive because nobody's going to help your career like you would.

—Black Woman

Tips for Managers

Both managers and human resources managers need to realize that diverse women at times, due to the differences in the way they experience the workplace environment, face draining circumstances. They need to be on the lookout for such negative interactions. Managers need to take the first step in opening up discussion with a diverse woman direct report on challenges she may be facing related to inequity that she may not be comfortable discussing.

TRACK WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE

Use the Interactions Checklist as a prompt to develop new relationships and assess the breadth and depth of existing relationships you have.

Often, people rely on their memory when they assess how their relationships in the workplace are progressing. However, if you have a number of contacts, it may be difficult to accurately recall your interactions unless you keep track.

Using the checklist regularly will allow you to:

- **Evaluate your progress in forming and maintaining relationships, serving as a "heads up" regarding your interactions.** For example, are there things you actually want from interactions that you are not getting? Have you done favors for colleagues without asking for any in return?

- **Identify key stakeholders in your department and organization with whom a relationship would be advantageous.** As you develop a list, reflect on the fact that high performers tend to occupy networks that bridge clusters of people who themselves may be disconnected from each other.[20] That is, high performers tend to have relationships with people in many different functional areas besides their own.

- **Readily identify those important people with whom you have not interacted recently or often enough.** Once you begin interacting with key stakeholders, be sure to keep it up. Keeping a log of your interactions will be valuable in this regard.

- **Identify patterns of non-substantive interactions.** For example, if you feel connected to one or more networks through frequent attendance at social events, but you do not engage in knowledge exchange or other substantive interactions, that is a prompt to deepen your interactions.

- **Discern, through the use of monthly interaction "tallies," whether you are over-relying on certain types of people.** At the end of each month, do a review of interactions. Over time, if you continually interact mainly with those in your functional area at or below your level, you are not developing relationships with enough breadth to ensure your success navigating your organization's particular culture. You should branch out.

If you use the insights and anecdotes shared throughout this guide, together with the illumination you will gain using the Interactions Checklist, you will maximize your odds of shaping a career path to success.

> **The Interactions Checklist is also available on the *Navigating Organizational Cultures: A Guide for Diverse Women and Their Managers* publication page found on Catalyst's website.**

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20. Burt.

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