



The Rules of Engagement

A Sistah's Guide for Navigating Corporate America

Amber Wynn, MSPA

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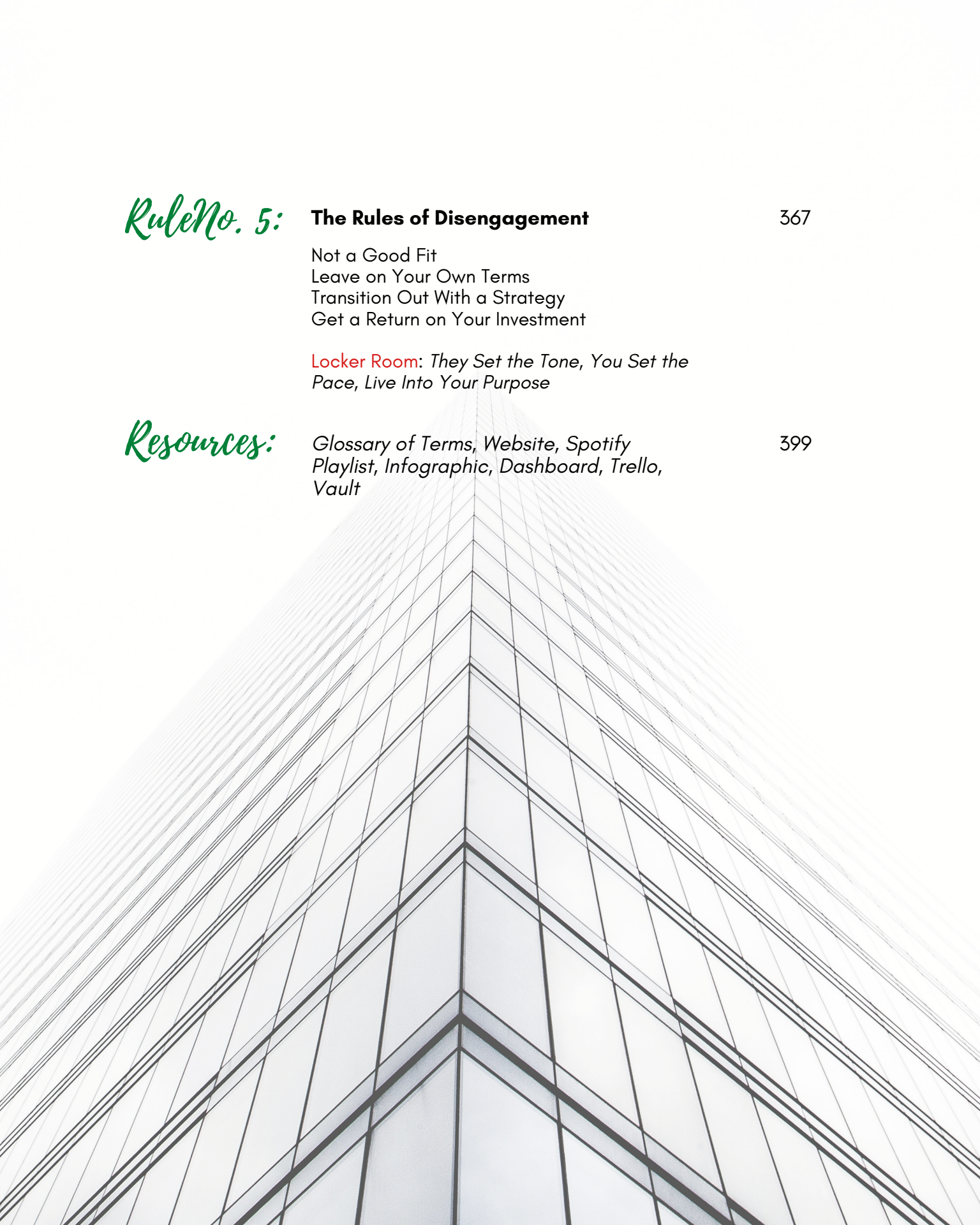
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Introduction Amber Wynn



It sounded so simple. Get your education. Become successful.

That's what I was told growing up. My parents didn't know. My mother graduated high school; and despite being the first African American welder to own a business in the Valley, my dad had an eighth-grade education. They told me what they believed: Education was the key to success. Nothing else seemed to have worked for them—not faith, hard work, integrity, nor good character. So, education must be the golden ticket.

So, I set out doing as instructed. Believing what I was told. Work hard—10 times as hard. Get that degree, girl! Open those doors. Make that money.

And work extra hard I did. I achieved. I obtained that degree, and another one after that. I permed my hair and slicked it back into a conservative style, donned my navy Tahari suit, and strutted into that corporate building ready to take on the world.

But, when I landed that job, I had no idea what lay ahead of me. To say I was unprepared would be an understatement. Nothing I had learned in those classrooms or textbooks helped me navigate the landmines and quicksand in this world.

I was never handed the playbook for how white corporate America works. “Is anyone handed the manual?” you ask.

No, they are not handed a physical book. But they spend their lives being socialized, gaining insight, learning the social cues—verbal and nonverbal—and how to translate and navigate the cultural constructs that are foreign to those of us who are raised with a completely different set of values. They also have backdoor access to key decision-makers who look like them and think like them, and so, by default, have access to the next five plays before we do.

At graduation, they’re handed Dr. Seuss’ “Oh, The Places You’ll Go!” because their parents know the system has been rigged for them to succeed. They can be whimsical and focus on winding roads, where they wait for things to happen.

But for us, the workforce doesn’t come with a safety net. We walk a tightrope, balancing all the unknowns on one side and all the unspoken rules on the other side, all the while eyeing that concrete ground underneath a looming 20-foot drop.

The workforce is where we’re starting to create our legacies. For them, they are the legacy. Over several generations, the road has been traveled, roadmaps have been created and if they stray along the way, there are safeguards in place to course correct.

For us, the transition from college to work is the prize.

But for them, work is an option. Their pathway has been cleared and explained. And even if they haven’t quite decided what they want to do, doors are opened for them to figure it out. A call. A conversation over 17-year-old Scotch or tea and biscotti. And, *snap!* An opportunity is created.

Equality is being able to land a corporate job. Equity is having access to the decision-makers in the corporation. That’s not our world. Our parents have no clue what we’re walking into. We have no clue.

So, there I was, trying to figure it out. Because it wasn’t as simple as showing up with the knowledge and skills required for the position. I learned quickly that what they said definitely was not what they meant. I observed the double standards, the setups, and then the letdowns. I was smart and educated, so I recognized the underhanded and deceitful moves of the key players. I just didn’t know what to do. I had no idea how to fight that fight and win because I did not understand the Rules of Engagement. What I didn’t realize was that there was a distinct difference between them and us. To be clear: The THEM are the white people.

Too many times I sat in my office, frustrated, angry, defeated, and in tears, trying to figure it out. *What did I do wrong?* Scared that I had done or said something that would cost me my job. And lord knows I couldn’t afford that.



”

Too many times
I sat in my office, frustrated,
angry, defeated, and in tears,
trying to figure it out.
What did I do wrong?

But I hadn't done anything to deserve being fired. Yet, my stomach was in knots, my head pounded, and I was consumed with this real sense of fear.

I did everything I was supposed to do, based on the knowledge that I had. Yet, that meant absolutely nothing in the scheme of things. If I'm playing football without understanding when I'm on the offense or defense, or which end of the field is my goal, then I will struggle to score—but more to the point, I will never win that game. Running to my opponent's end zone time after time puts points on the board for them, not me.

I believe in winning. To win, you must understand and then master the game.

In this guide, I will provide you with the rules as I have come to understand them. You will hear from sistahs at all levels of the game who willingly share their knowledge of the rules as they have mastered them.

Here's the caveat: "Once they know we've shared their plays, they will change the rules of the game." Trust and believe!

But for now, while the secrets are still ours to share, we are happy to help our sistahs live their best lives and become successful professionals in corporate America—or any sector.

Let's pause a second and define the term corporate America. Corporate America gets its name from the mainstream, usually high-profile corporations that are behind much of the United States economy. The definition, however, is looser than just the Fortune 500, 1000, or 5000 and more accurately includes all businesses—public or private—that exist and operate for a profit. This guide is really about learning how to navigate the process of upward mobility. It's about being in a position of power.

Having a corporate job means you work for someone other than yourself. It means that your income is based on your performance in the context of a company's performance. Typically, this is as an employee, although some independent contractors or even Limited Liability Corporations (LLCs) might fall into corporate territory.

Most corporate jobs are considered "white collar" and require, or highly prefer, a college degree, with some exceptions for sales and customer service. In order to move up the corporate ladder, many big businesses require you to have, at the minimum, an undergraduate degree. That's where you come in. Fresh out of college, ready to take the workforce by storm. Without knowing the rules, you can never win the game.

It's never been easy for African American women in America. It does not change when you step into corporate America. But know that you're not going into the battle alone. Black professional women share with sistahs coming into the workforce behind them what they were never privy to.

My hope with this book is that, finally, young Black women will be able to go into corporate America understanding the unwritten rules and expectations that level the playing field.

If you know where the landmines are hidden, can accept the parameters of the game, and can strategically map out a plan, perhaps you can thrive. Or, you can make an informed decision not to play the game at all.

Either way, this guide provides the next generation of Black professional women with guidance, support, and sisterly love to help you with powerfully mapping your own course.

Your sistahs have got your back!



“

The first week is usually a barrage of information coming at you from all angles.

First Week on the Job

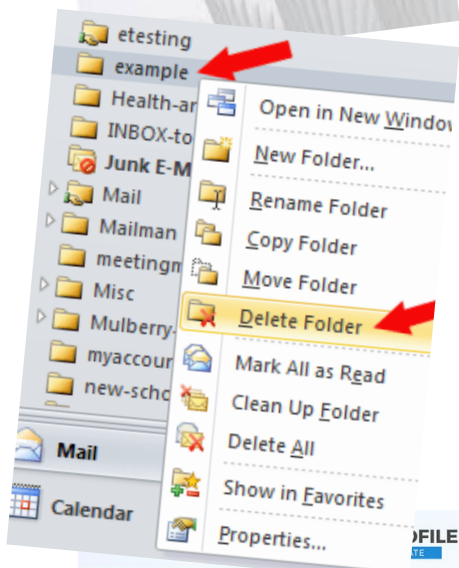
Task # 1

Week One on the Job

Your first week on the job will likely be stressful. You will go through a series of onboarding events, like new employee orientation, both at the company level with Human Resources (where you will complete tons of paperwork) and your department (where you will meet your teammates, connect with IT as soon as possible to get your space set up, passwords, equipment, etc.) But take it in stride. The first week is usually a barrage of information coming at you from all angles.

You have four tasks to accomplish on your first week on the job and before you get swept up in the information overload:

1. Secure a hard copy of the company's most recent version of the Employee Handbook.
2. Set up your email folders.
3. Secure copies of the company and department-branded PowerPoint, Office Memo, Reports, and Budget templates.
4. Pick out your war song.



Task # 1

Secure Employee Handbook

Most likely you will be given a copy during your new employee orientation, as the handbook is often used as an introduction to the company for new hires to understand its mission and values. But, if you don't receive one from HR, make sure you secure one.

Check to see if your company has an Intranet (an internal computer network for sharing information, collaboration tools, operational systems, and other computing services within an organization). It's like an internal internet for employees only. It is possible that the employee handbook may be stored there, along with other useful information such as the annual report, company holidays, payroll schedule, employee birthdays, affinity group meetings, internships/apprenticeships, and volunteer opportunities. Be sure to carefully review the Intranet during the first few weeks on the job.

The employee handbook gives a detailed overview of policies that are specific to the organization along with other key procedures, guidelines, and benefits. It sets clear expectations for employees while also stating the company's legal obligations and defining employee rights.

The employee handbook is often used to help protect companies against employee lawsuits and claims, such as wrongful termination, harassment, and discrimination.

But used correctly, it is the most powerful tool in your arsenal for establishing grounds for a justified complaint and/or lawsuit as it details the company's position on policies that are essential to creating transparency and consistency across the organization; and therefore, the perfect source for demonstrating how a company is in violation of its own policies.



Task # 2

Set Up Email Folders

As soon as your computer is set up and you have access to your email and passwords, set up your email folders.

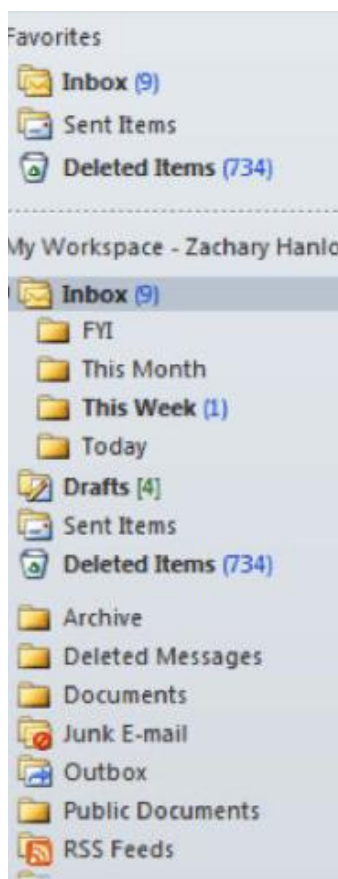
Preparation is key to your success. I will explain later why you will need this information, but right now, I need you to set up your email folders so that you can easily move information quickly from your office systems to a safe location off-site.

You are setting up your email folders so that you can quickly locate information. Creating a system on the first week will help to keep you organized and structured. After the first month or two, you will likely modify the folder labels to better reflect the buckets you need. But for now, just know the purpose of this exercise is to keep you two steps ahead of the game.

The folders should be used to sort emails that come into your inbox so that you can easily retrieve them. Having 380 emails in your inbox means you have to either scroll, sort or filter the box to find the information. Sending emails to their appropriate folders after you've read them will help you keep your inbox emails down and organized for quick retrieval, which is crucial.

But also, using folders will help you store important information. If in the event you have to file a claim against your employer, the key to winning is documentation. Get everything in writing, then get everything to a safe location.

Your email, equipment, and software system at work is company property. That's why it is important that you either photograph the document, email it to a private email at home, or save it on a flash drive. Sometimes you will be in situations where you cannot whip out your cell phone or flash drive to save the information. In those instances, you will save them to a folder until you can safely transfer them to your personal email or flash drive.





Copy these folders and pathways.

Company

- Executive Leadership
- HR
- Operations
- Events
- Announcements
- IT
- Marketing
 - Templates
 - Newsletters
 - Brochures

Department

- Supervisor's name
 - Projects/Assignments
 - Decks
 - Budgets
- Coworkers
 - Name
 - Name
 - Name
- Events
 - Assigned
 - Volunteer
- Marketing
 - Team
 - Bios
 - Resumes
 - Photos
 - Templates
 - Data/stats
 - Newsletters
- Your Name
 - To Do
 - In Progress
 - Completed
 - Atta gurl
 - SGN
- Misc

It should be a folder that is deeply embedded and does not have an obvious label.

Company > Marketing > Templates > Brochures

Embed the folder under an inconspicuous heading called "Brochures." In the event that your supervisor has IT administer a sweep of your folders, they will be looking for labels that suggest they contain personal files. The label "Brochures" would not raise flags, unlike the label "Documentation," potentially saving your documentation from being deleted without your knowledge. In emergency situations, save the documentation in the Brochures folder, but as soon as it is safe, either email it to your home email or save it onto a flash drive.

You also want to keep in close reach your Atta Gurl Folder. This folder is where you keep every "Thank You," every "You Are Amazing!" Every praise, accolade, and accomplishment. These written expressions of gratitude will make the difference in your Performance Evaluation scores or if ever you are placed on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP). We'll go into more detail later, but this folder is very important in your arsenal of weapons. Label this folder "Newsletters."

Right up under your Atta Gurl folder is your Sistah Gurl Network (SGN) folder. Label it "Lunch Menus." This is where you save information, resources, and communication to help your network of sistahs; things like job announcements, emails that detail insider information, or useful information that someone in your network might need or find helpful. You want a single location where you can turn to in order to retrieve information.

Task

4

Select Your War Song

Pick out your war song. Yes, I said war song. One of the most difficult times countries and individuals go through is war. A war song is a song or chant raised by warriors about to engage in warfare, or at a ceremony that represents actual warfare, especially among indigenous tribes.

Music was used during wars dating back thousands of years as a way to help soldiers cope and deal with the trauma, stress, and issues brought on by war. While the instruments and tools may have changed, the message of music during the wars itself has remained the same.

Your war song is what you will play before entering a challenging situation, be it a high-stress presentation or an average day on the job. Your war song will pump you up and put you in the mindset for battle!

I had two. The first was “Everything is Everything” by Lauren Hill. These lines from the prolific L-Boogie cemented my belief about corporate America.

*It seems we lose the game before we even start to play.
Who made these rules? (Who made these rules?)
We're so confused (We're so confused). Easily led
astray.*



This joint right here?! If I had this joint as a vinyl record, ALL the grooves would have been worn out! It gave me life because it kept me grounded. Every beat confirmed me, my existence, my frustration, and validated my experience. I played this song so much during my time in corporate America because it spoke to everything I was experiencing as a Black woman in a toxic environment: the rules, them being afraid of losing power, them playing Jedi mind games trying to gaslight me.



I couldn't do more than what I was doing, they'd never be satisfied, they'd always find something to criticize, and at the end of the day I knew why: they were insecure and filled with fear. It was because I was powerfully and wonderfully made, and they would always hate on me.



I believed that change would come eventually. And it did, just not how I had expected. This song got me through every presentation and every confrontation, and often soothed and calmed me when I wanted to go old school and take it to the streets.

My second song was “Hate on Me Haters” by Jill Scott. Unlike L-Boogie’s song which got me riled up and wanting to smear war paint underneath my eyes, Hate on Me calmed me down and put me in a cocky kind of head space.

I played this song when I needed to stay calm and in control, expressionless, and on point. This song emphasized the point that I couldn’t do more than what I was doing, they’d never be satisfied, they’d always find something to criticize, and at the end of the day I knew why: they were insecure and filled with fear. It was because I was powerfully and wonderfully made, and they would always hate on me.

These words right here...

*In reality, I'm gon' be who I be
And I don't feel no faults for all the lies that you bought
You can try as you may bring me down when I say
That it ain't up to you, go on do what you do*

This was my anthem. My doubt-remover. My credo. These lyrics gave me life. And reminded me that no matter what I did, how hard I worked, delivered on time, or above expectations—they would always be this way. It would never be enough or good enough. So, my resolve? Go on, hate on me hater...now or later. My mind is free because there was nothing else I could do but be me. So they would just have to feel my destiny because it was gon' be what it was gon' be!

The first few bars on each of these songs always shifted my mood. If I was struggling during the day, often I’d leave the building, sit in my car, and play my war song to help adjust my attitude. It always worked. *Find your war song.*





What to do to prep for game time:



- Go onto the field prepared to play. Do your research.
- Learn as much as you can about your opponent so that you can form a sound strategic plan based on accurate information.
- Set up your internal system: email folders, templates, etc.
- Know the players.
- Don't start green. Go in with baseline information.



Early is On Time, On Time is Late,
and Late is Unacceptable



The Locker Room

ALICIA B., DIRECTOR
10 YEARS IN PR AND ADVERTISING

Candace was a sistah who couldn't be on time if Jesus came down from heaven himself and asked her. And here's the thing, it wouldn't have mattered IF what she did didn't reflect poorly on the rest of the sistahs struggling hard to make a good reputation for themselves at the company. There were no people of color in leadership. Director level was the highest any of us had ever managed to advance.

So, Candace showing up late made the rest of us (three in total) seethe. Of course, I was the one nominated to "Have the Talk" with her. It went something like this:

"Hi Candace, are you available for lunch today? We haven't connected in a while, wanted to see if you have time—if not today, let me know when. My treat, of course!"

"Oh well, if it's your treat, then yes I'm free today."

At the restaurant we caught up about work, our personal lives, and all that. Then I just came clean.

"Listen, I wondered if I could talk to you about something?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"I've been in a couple of meetings with the Executive Team and they've made some not-so-flattering comments about your *chronic tardiness*." Her head snapped back.

"Who said that?!"

"Doesn't really matter. What matters is the perception that's being floated out there about you. I didn't know if you were aware, and I thought you should be."

"I want to know who said it!" I placed my napkin on the table.

"So that you can do what? Confront a member of the Executive Team? C'mon now."

"Yes! Whoever it is needs to be checked. Smearing my reputation—"

"Is it true?"

"What?"

"Is it true that you're chronically late?"

"No!"

"You were 5 minutes late for the team meeting Monday."

"That was just 5 minutes. The meeting hadn't even started."

"The meeting start time was 8:00 am. You arrived at 8:05, and everyone watched you come in."

"Yeah, well I couldn't find parking, and—"

"You were late for the Company Earnings Call."

"I couldn't find the dial-in number. I wasn't reporting out on the call anyway—" Candace shifted in her seat.

"Rick was the one who called attention to your chronic tardiness."

"Rick?! He's late every day!"

"He's also a Senior Vice President. He's already paid his dues. And you have no idea how late he's staying or what other things he's doing."

"He's supposed to set the example."

"No. You're an adult. Responsible for your actions. You're supposed to manage your brand Candace." She folded her arms across her chest. "Here's the thing. Your actions impact the rest of us."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, when you're late, you make the other Black employees look bad. We can't afford to give them any reason to question, doubt, or second-guess us. Being late is a stereotype that they're quick to point out and use against us."

"Why is what I do impacting the rest of you guys?"

"Seriously Candace? How many times have you been called Alicia? I can tell you I'm called Candace or Tanisha or Lisa at least twice a day."

"*You all look alike.*" She mumbled.

"Exactly."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea people were watching me so closely."

"You had no idea?" I say. "Not only are they watching you, but they are documenting everything you—we—do. Trust and believe." Her eyes widened. "What can we do to support you? You've got to change the narrative about your brand."

"The narrative about my brand?"

"Yes. We need the Executive Leadership team to see a stark change. We need to rebrand you. What do you need from us to help?"

"Nothing. I can—"

"Then why haven't you?" I look her in the eyes. "If you can."

Silence. "If I can make a few suggestions...Things I do to help me." She nods. "First, your new motto is early is on time, on time is late, and late is unacceptable."

"I—" I hold up my index finger.

"You must arrive at meetings 10 minutes before start time. That means if it takes 30 minutes to get to the meeting place, you leave an hour before. Now you have 30 minutes for drive time, 15 minutes to park, and 5 minutes to walk to the meeting to arrive there 10 minutes before the meeting starts." Candace sighs. "It means you put the dial-in number on your calendar and dial in 10 minutes before the conference call is scheduled to start. No more cutting it close Candace. Best practice: Arrive early so that they see you arriving early. That's the only way you're going to change the narrative around your brand."

"Ok. Ok. I can do that. I'm sorry I've put you guys in a bad way."

"It's all good. That's what we're here for. To support each other."

"I appreciate that. And you. And this." Candace drops her head.

"Girl, we all have been through something in this place. Just get your shit together. Before they use it against you to let you go."

"I need my job."

"I know you do. So do what you have to to keep it." I smile. "And don't be catching no attitude if one of us happens to stop by your desk to pick you up for a meeting...or two."

"I don't—"

"Child hush." I roll my eyes. When you start arriving on time on your own, you'll stop getting an escort. But until then, this is more about us and less about you."



We can't afford to give them any reason to question, doubt, or second guess us. Being late is a stereotype that they're quick to point out and use against us.

Fast forward 6 months and Candace made a drastic change. It took a lot of effort on her part. She had gotten used to cutting it close. But I checked in with her the first three weeks and helped her rework her calendar.

"Why are your meetings back to back? This is going to have you running across the building trying to make it to the next meeting. Build in buffers around your meetings. Give yourself 10-15 minutes. If you can, give yourself 30 minutes in between each meeting. If you can't, then strategically plan them. Have them both in the same conference room. That way you don't have to leave."

Candace started arriving at meetings early. Partially because we did swoop by and pick her up. But after a couple of weeks, she got into the habit all on her own. And as promised, we backed off.

Black women are already perceived to be inferior. We have stigmas like "Angry Black Woman" that we have to manage. We can't afford to give them anything to ding us on. Tardiness is an easy one to use against us—and to justify eliminating us. With a little planning and commitment, it should not be an issue. Sometimes things happen when you just can't avoid being late. But those instances should be the exception, not the rule.

What advice would you give a sistah coming out of college about perceptions?

I would reiterate that saying, "Perception is Reality." And in our case, it doesn't take much for them to accept the negative over the positive. Society, the media, white people have laced us with a lot of negative stereotypes that, unfortunately, they believe. So, a part of us having to work twice as hard comes from them believing the negative (those stereotypes) over the positive.

Because we rarely get second chances or any latitude to be human and make mistakes, we have to work hard to build up stellar reputations. Even when we do, they are delicate and easily destroyed. What's that other saying? Your success lasts only as long as your next mistake. In other words, we can't rest on our laurels.

Because they are constantly changing rules to keep the playing field unlevelled and rigging the game to keep themselves in positions of power, it's common for them to inflate our shortcomings to use them against us.

Listen, no one is perfect. We're all human. We all make mistakes. I think what a young sistah coming out of college needs to understand is that she doesn't have the luxury of ruining her reputation over something that can be controlled. You can be on time. There are things you can do to make sure you are not late. That you can manage.

So, don't waste the two get out of jail with bail (we don't get out free) on something that you can prevent.

Build a solid reputation for being trustworthy, working hard, and having integrity, because invariably there will come a time when all of that is put into question. And that's when you want to use that card.

Here's the other thing. If a person in a position of power perceives you negatively, he is likely going to share his perceptions with others. They in turn will look out for those traits/actions to confirm those suspicions. All it takes is one tardy, one absence, and that perception is confirmed. Nine times out of 10 you won't even know about it. It's like you're fighting a ghost you can't even see.

Is it fair? Of course not. But there's little you can do because not enough of us are in those closed-door meetings where we can speak to each other's characters and advocate for each other. So, what happens is the perception is perpetuated and without you even knowing it, you're passed up for opportunities because someone or a group of people believe you're lazy or you lack drive and motivation.

When we tell you to watch your back, get in early, or leave late, it's because we know they are itching to assign one of those negative stereotypes to your reputation.

My advice is to go into your role—go into corporate America—doing all you can to shine. Do all you can to demonstrate the opposite of what the negative stereotypes are of Black people because perception is reality and these white people don't give us the benefit of the doubt. They are quick to slap a label on you that will be extremely difficult to get rid of. That's why a person typically has to leave the company if their reputation has been ruined. For the others, they can sometimes switch departments or divisions. It's a lot more difficult—if at all possible—for us to get a clean slate like that.

No, we've got to work hard to keep a good reputation because once they've decided you're a certain way, it becomes your reality. My advice is not to put yourself in that position to have to try and dig yourself out of that box of quicksand.

War Song: Now, Miguel

