

# “Dear White Boss...”

by Keith A. Caver and Ancella B. Livers



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IT'S EASY TO ASSUME that other people experience the world the way we do. More specifically, it's very easy for white managers to assume that their colleagues of color face the same basic set of challenges they do. On one level that's true: The work itself is the same. African-American and other nonwhite managers have to make their numbers, motivate employees, hire and fire, and plan for the future. But on another level, these managers frequently contend with an atmosphere of tension, instability, and distrust that can be so frustrating they lose the desire to contribute fully or do their best work; they may even drop out altogether. Their white bosses and co-workers are simply unaware of the "miasma," as Keith Caver and Ancella Livers call this noxious and tenuous environment. They're often puzzled when their nonwhite colleagues quit, seemingly out of nowhere, or appear to overreact to what seems like a minor incident—but which is really the last straw.

We asked Caver and Livers, faculty and coaches at the Center for Creative Leadership, to write a fictional letter from a black manager to a white boss describing the miasma and what it's like to be different in the workplace. Their letter, with its attendant suggestions, draws on research from interviews and surveys with hundreds of mid- to senior-level African-American managers, as well as long years of personal experience. The point, the authors stress, is not to belabor the lack of people of color in the executive suite or any of the other barriers that limit opportunities in corporate America. Neither is it to extol the virtues and accomplishments of leaders of difference. Instead, their letter portrays the nature of corporate life once black managers are established—the feeling that they leave some part of their identity at home and the sometimes subtle and often systemic racial biases that inhibit and alienate African-Americans. The letter may not apply to every leader, black or white, or to every organization, but these issues are more widespread than corporate America cares to acknowledge. It should be required reading for white executives—after all, companies can ill afford to allow talent to slip through their fingers.

*The Editors*

*What it's really like  
to be a black manager.*

by Keith A. Caver and Ancella B. Livers

# Dear White Boss:

DO YOU REMEMBER that first management-team offsite

I attended shortly after I came on board? You wanted to introduce me to the key decision makers—the people I'd need to know in my job as director of strategic planning. I appreciated the exposure, and, after the introductions and the requisite banter, I settled in to observe the team's dynamics and get a sense of the culture. As a new employee, I didn't expect to participate much in the conversation, although I was prepared to answer the occasional question about a particular strategy or offer any insights from my experience that might be relevant. Instead, I got a barrage of questions about issues related

to diversity – what I thought about some new HR initiatives, why Brian and Matthew can't get along, why Diane left the company, and on and on in that vein.

I answered the questions as best I could – I was a new-comer, after all, and wanted to be polite – but I went home feeling pretty demoralized. Despite my 15 years of experience, despite my solid track record, my new colleagues appeared to have little interest in my business expertise. Instead, they seemed to have assigned me some special role: official interpreter of minority concerns for the organization.

You may be wondering why I'm bringing this up after all these years – years that have been by many accounts rewarding for me professionally and for the organization as a whole. It's because on that day, and on so many days before and since, I've been made to feel that my white colleagues and bosses don't see my talents and accomplishments; they see only the color of my skin. I've wanted to write this letter for some time now, because despite all outward appearances I am not entirely happy, and at times my work suffers for it. In fact, when I look at my experience and that of my African-American colleagues, and then look at my white colleagues in this company and at you, one thought keeps resonating in my mind: It must be good to be king.

OK, that's unfair. I don't mean it as an insult. I'm quite sure you don't feel like a king and may, in fact, think it's misguided or even ungrateful of me to harbor such thoughts. I know you're operating under significant pressures – to keep our division solvent, to stay abreast of current trends, and to be fair and aboveboard in your personal interactions and business dealings, just to name a few. You've been a good boss. I've learned a lot from you, and I've gotten my promotions and raises. And that's the devil of it. Everything looks fine, but it isn't.

Just as members of the royalty in medieval Europe were often shielded from the stark realities outside their castle walls, I believe you are in some ways blind to what is happening outside your office door. I truly believe you don't know how frustrated I often am – how frustrated we African-Americans often are – by the lack of acknowledgment or apparent understanding of how our experience in the workplace differs from yours, and how it affects not just our own morale but the health of the organization overall. Have you noticed that the turnover rate for blacks is significantly higher than it is for our white counterparts? Have you stopped to consider why?

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You and I both want this company to succeed. Therefore, I want to find a way for us to work together better, and I don't think we can do that unless I can be honest with you. Now, I suspect you're thinking that you've got a few honest things to say to me as well. That's fair. If we're trying to create an open dialogue, it's got to be two-way.

But that's another letter. For now, I'd like to describe to you the miasma that surrounds black managers in our everyday work lives and help you understand how it can erode my productivity and our relationship in insidious ways. I'm going to give you some examples, although I'm wary of doing so because each story, taken in isolation,

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may seem trivial. But please understand that I could go on and on. I could give you hundreds of examples – things that happen to me and my black colleagues and friends every single day. It's the cumulative effect that wears us down.

All I ask is that you test your assumptions after you read what I have to say. I promise to test my own. Then, maybe we can start a dialogue. At the very least, we'll understand each other better. And perhaps, with some work, we'll both be able to change some of the behaviors that prevent us from being true colleagues.

## "I feel alienated..."

It may surprise you to learn that I often think you can't see past the color of my skin. We have a good working relationship, so why would I say such a thing? I'll bet you don't remember the time when you pinned me to the wall trying to get an explanation for Jesse Jackson's perceived misdeeds or (much earlier in our relationship) the O.J. verdict. How am I supposed to know? I can't explain Clarence Thomas. By the way, how do you account for some of Bill Clinton's questionable behavior? And what about Timothy McVeigh? I know these questions are unfair; we should be able to talk as two individuals about business, current events, and other topics that interest us, without race-based judgments. And yet, you seem to hold me accountable for explaining the actions of other black people as if I had some personal knowledge or culpability. It makes me feel like you don't see me for who I am; it makes me feel alienated from you, from this company.

It isn't just you. Look back to that day at the management offsite, when the members of the executive team saw me not as a seasoned strategist but as an authority on race relations in the company, even though I had just started and barely knew the players. And do you remem-

ber when you, Jim, and I had lunch in the corporate dining room, not long after the offsite? As I placed my tray on the table, Jim surreptitiously pointed to a table of four African-Americans who were having lunch together and said, "Can you tell me why all of the blacks are sitting together?" I was momentarily taken aback by his question. Not only was I sitting with him, a young black woman was sitting alone at another table. Clearly, all the blacks weren't sitting together. I managed to reply, "I don't know, but I've been wondering why all the white people are sitting together."

It may have seemed like a harmless question to you, but it struck a nerve. If Jim hadn't focused on the few black employees in the room, he might have noticed that the vast majority of the 60 or so patrons eating lunch that day were white, and, with the exception of you and Jim, all the whites were sitting with each other or alone. The blacks were doing the same thing the whites were doing—having lunch with friends and colleagues. We have the same need for socialization and acceptance that you do. Perhaps more, because for us the workplace is often an uncertain and tumultuous place, in ways you don't see. Unfortunately, rather than enjoying real conversations with our nonblack colleagues, we are often taken off guard by awkward jokes or slips of the tongue—leading us to wonder if these comments betray underlying feelings or assumptions about African-Americans in the office.

And I'll tell you another story – an incident I didn't mention to you when it happened, because I was too frustrated and thought you might think I was overreacting. One weekend I went to the office, in my normal, casual weekend attire, to finish up a report you needed to review on Monday. In the lobby, I had the strange feeling I was being watched and turned around to catch the weekend security guard staring at me. Although a few people were milling about and others were going (apparently) to and from their offices, I seemed to be the only one commanding special attention. Before getting into the elevator, I was stopped by an informally dressed young white man who in a stern voice asked to see my identification. This man was not even the security guard. He was someone who worked on a different floor from me, and I didn't recognize him. Please understand, I had worked here for two years, but because I was out of context, he assumed I was a thug. You might chalk it up to an honest mistake, but I can assure you he hadn't challenged any of the white people entering the building, nor had I demanded *his* ID.

Now, when I go into the office on weekends, I make sure to put on khakis and a polo shirt—and when I look at my white colleagues coming in wearing jeans or jogging suits, I feel my resentment growing. What's more, this type of experience is so common that many blacks have nearly given up on getting our white colleagues to see us as nonthreatening. Little wonder so many of us remain

alienated. Little wonder so many of us leave in search of greener pastures – a place where we can be accepted for who we are as contributors and team members.

## "I'm not sure you believe in me..."

I've said that, at times, I don't think you can see past my skin color. To be honest, I also think you sometimes make judgments about me – usually not intentionally – based on a set of historical and cultural preconceptions. Practically speaking, this shows up in the expectations you and other white managers have for black employees. Those expectations aren't just demeaning; they can limit our ability (and our will) to contribute.

Do you remember when Robert, our black marketing director, hired Marie, also an African-American? Marie had worked in the marketing field for more than 15 years and had won three national awards. Her work was innovative and exciting, and she

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was by far the best candidate of the four Robert interviewed. Things became complicated, however, because Robert had also recently promoted a black man into a position of authority. Like Marie, this manager was clearly the best qualified from the field of candidates. After hiring Marie, Robert began to hear whis-

pers in the halls—suggestions that he was building his own little "ghetto fiefdom"—and before long one of his white colleagues came up to him, slapped him on the back, and said with a laugh, "So white people aren't good enough for you?"

Robert did his best to ignore the comments, but what really got to him was that his boss suddenly seemed to take a greater interest in the details of his group's work—asking for reports and updates he'd never needed when Robert's team was primarily white. Subtly, his boss was letting him know that at some level he expected the team's performance to drop. As we talked later, Robert explained that his frustrations came less from being questioned or joked with than from knowing his department's as well as his own credibility was now suspect. Consequently, he said, on top of his ordinary work he was going to have to expend significant energy managing his white colleagues' perceptions if he or his two new managers were to have a chance of succeeding. And the stress took its toll—his group has done outstanding work, but, as you know, Robert recently gave his notice. I wouldn't be surprised if he took Marie with him. He told you he's leaving for an exciting new opportunity; he told me he's worn out by the need to constantly defend his department.

The ribbing that Robert took may have been intended as humor, but it feeds the perception among blacks that our white bosses don't really believe in us. Here's another story for you. A black female reporter told me about a startling but open conversation she had at a convention with the CEO of a news media company. Seeking to gain greater insight into the industry, she queried him off the record about his views and hiring practices regarding blacks. He replied that he was afraid to hire black leaders because, he said, "If I fire them, they will sue me." Do you think people hired under such circumstances are really given the opportunity to succeed? I don't. Do you think our white counterparts are scrutinized for positions based on the preconceived idea that they will fail? No, I don't think so either. How can we possibly succeed in an environment where our new bosses have already thought about what's going to happen when they have to fire us? I think stereotypes based on fear that have festered into "fact" are what's behind this behavior.

And no matter how successful and senior we are, we're never immune to these stereotypes. One of my dear, and very talented, black friends was recently hired as a senior vice president for a major financial institution. With the exception of a few initial interviews and meetings, she did not set foot in the new organization until her first day at the office. As she emerged from the elevator, she was abruptly greeted by a white male who directed her to a small cubicle and asked her to quickly put her things away as they were expecting a new senior officer to arrive shortly. In mock obedience, she went to the cubicle and set her box down, only to return and inquire about the rest of her shipment that had been sent previously. As he stared at her in confusion, she smiled and continued, "Quite frankly, I don't believe all of my things will fit in this cubicle." She told me she almost felt sorry for the man as recognition of his error seemed to be slowly reflected in his face first by embarrassment and then by terror. He launched into an awkward and confused explanation of how they were also expecting a new administrative assistant, and how he had mistaken her...and then he fell silent. Instead of berating him, my friend simply smiled and said, "I understand. However, when the new assistant arrives, I hope that you will be far more gracious in welcoming the new member of our team."

These may seem like extreme examples, but my black colleagues and I run into this type of preconception all the time. Every day. It's discouraging, but it also has practical implications for what I and other African-Americans can accomplish. Research suggests that you're more likely to put me into an assistant director's position, even though I'm fully qualified for the director's role. Research also shows that mentoring is particularly important for blacks, yet people choose to mentor others who look like them, making it difficult for us to find mentors. What am I asking you to do? Consider mentoring me, even if I don't look

like you. Consider me for that vice president's job. Give me a chance at the most technical and operationally critical roles, rather than limiting me to administrative positions. Give me credit for the ability to make good, rational business decisions. And draw your conclusions about my abilities based on my track record, not on the color of my skin.

## **"I don't fully trust you..."**

This might be the hardest thing I have to tell you, because we've worked together for many years and have accomplished a great deal in that time. But to be honest, our relationship goes only so deep because I feel I can't fully trust you. Here's a story for you. A black friend of mine, James, was at a business dinner with a colleague who may have had one glass of wine too many. "Before I knew it," James said, "my colleague was telling me about how blacks get too many breaks and how most of us aren't smart enough to be in executive positions. This is someone who considers himself my friend. This is someone who's dealing with clients, peers, direct reports – some of whom are black or at least not white." At this point in his story James stopped and just looked at me for a moment. "I got through that meal, and I never let on what I thought. I have never forgotten that dinner, though, and I will never trust that man. I'm always professional with him. But I don't share more than I have to, nor do I deal with him if I can get around it."

That story has implications for both of us. The pervasiveness of experiences like James's takes a toll on African-Americans: It slowly eats away at our ability to trust the people we work with. Whether you, personally, exhibit these behaviors or attitudes is less important than the fact that experiences such as this make blacks wary of encounters with our white colleagues. Furthermore, our mutual history in this country and the way our different experiences currently manifest themselves in the workplace often impair my trust in you. Like James, I don't let you know about it – I can't afford to. What's more, James and I aren't alone. My own uncle, who had a long and successful career in corporate America, told me before I started work, "You have to be careful bestowing your trust; your white managers will treat you differently, no matter how well you do." I know times have changed, but I don't know if they've changed that much, as I often find myself being cautious around some of my white colleagues. This feeling that we need to guard ourselves, and the extra work that it takes to discern our true friends, creates significant additional stress for us.

Do you think the impaired trust and chronic stress that African-Americans feel might be contributing to the difficulty of retaining black employees? Because we often don't trust you, or, it seems, you us, is it possible that blacks don't feel free to fully (or openly) contribute? Do

you think James's "friend" will appropriately use or develop the talents of his African-American direct reports? And do you think that our mutual distrust allows us to have solid interpersonal and working relationships? I'd say it means we're not likely to be as efficient or as effective as we could be. I'd say that some of us are reluctant to take risks we probably should take, because we don't think you'll support us if we make a mistake.

### "Race is always with me..."

I suspect that by now you've picked up one of the main points of this letter. Differences really do matter, although they may matter in ways you probably didn't expect. One of the big ways they matter is that race is always with us. As a friend of mine said recently, "I don't think a day goes by that I'm not reminded that I'm black." Another friend once recounted a minor, but daily irritation she had to contend with early in her career. "I used to work in a place that was pretty mono-ethnic," she told me. "And at my job you were expected to wear stockings. But the town I lived in didn't have stockings the shade I needed. I had to have my mother send them to me. I always thought of it as a mini-Berlin airlift." As you read this, you probably think that this is such a small thing it needn't be shared. You might go on to suggest that if that's all the inconvenience race causes, we should consider ourselves lucky. Well, I know it's a small thing. But it isn't something you have to think about. And more to the point, it's just one of many small—and large—things we cope with, day after day.


Difference itself is not a bad thing. Research shows that heterogeneous groups make better decisions than do homogeneous ones. Diverse groups also tend to have better problem-solving skills, are more creative, and deal more effectively with complex challenges. And with the increasing globalization of business, we need to be able to relate to numerous ethnic and racial constituencies. But because so many organizations manage difference poorly, they may not be reaping the benefits diversity can bring. I don't want us to continue making that mistake.

So, what do we do? There's no easy fix. We're confronting deep-seated, complex, and highly personal attitudes and assumptions—but opening a dialogue is a good first step. I think we have to be willing to ask ourselves uncomfortable questions and be prepared to deal with some difficult answers. At my last company, one of the

vice presidents brought the entire senior management team together for a half-day session with five African-American managers, with the goal of putting some of these issues on the table. She stressed that the meeting was to be a safe environment and was respectful and candid throughout. Even with her comments, the meeting got off to an awkward start, but in the end everyone had a chance to ask questions and express their concerns. The senior team came to see that the experience of African-Americans at this company is different from that of whites. And frankly, my black colleagues and I saw that at times we need to drop our guard. We came to see how some of our own experiences and baggage led us to perceive actions differently than they were intended. While I can't say everything was perfect after that meeting, we did arrive at a shared understanding and developed something of a shared language for addressing difficult issues or communication lapses on the spot.

There are other ways to build awareness. My cousin, a product manager for a large manufacturer, told me about a new initiative at her company. Each member of the management team belongs to a racially diverse "learning circle," composed of three or four people who have been charged with studying and exploring issues of difference in the workplace. Periodically, the circle meets to discuss what they've learned and how it might apply to them and the company. It's just a beginning, but at least they've begun to uncover some difficult issues, and that's the first step in tackling them.

...

I like working here. I believe in the company, in our products, and our future. But I have options, and so do my colleagues of color. This isn't a threat; I simply want you to know that I'm here because I choose to stay. I want our company to succeed, and I want to succeed along with everyone else. I'm an invested and involved partner, and I wish you could see that, in the same way that I wish you could see the miasma that muddies the work environment for me and other African-Americans. Right now, you probably can't see it, but I can tell you about it—and I hope you'll consider this letter an invitation to begin a conversation. And maybe in the future you'll see it for yourself. At any rate, thanks for listening. 

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