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Cracking the Corporate Code: The Revealing Success Stories of 32 African-American Executives

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Price M. Cobbs
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In a recession, business success is more important than ever. For young African-Americans climbing the corporate ladder, this book provides excellent advice-but its usefulness doesn't stop there. It will be helpful to anyone who has been sidelined professionally without knowing why.

The authors have analyzed the stories of thirty-two African-American executives, and organized them to present a minicourse in how to succeed in the higher echelons of business. These executives know whereof they speak, since they populate such companies as Chrysler, Merrill Lynch, Verizon, BP, and Pepsi. Cobbs is a psychiatrist and management consultant; Turnock is an attorney and civil rights advocate.

Lessons include learning to recognize signals so subtle as to be invisible to many, handling one's own lack of self-confidence, and finding out how to get along with difficult people. The executives share not only their successes but also their setbacks. Learning to network, take risks, create a power base, and use power effectively are concepts that may not be familiar to minorities or to women seeking high places in the corporate world, but these skills are essential to any plan for success.

Examples of prejudice are not solely focused on color, the authors point out, and women of color face a double bias. Female executives offer examples of how they were sidelined, or of how they avoided being shunted off the fast track. Alana Robinson tells of an experience at IBM when she was consistently passed over by a boss who only saw her as a black female.

She turned to a former mentor for advice, and was tipped off by her secretary when her boss tried to keep her from meeting with a senior executive to discuss the situation. In a gutsy move, she met with the executive and discussed her boss's prejudices, providing a record of each instance. The gamble was successful.

The authors offer sound advice on how to ask questions, seek advice, and examine one's own capabilities, motivations, and goals. Learning the ways of the corporate culture requires a delicate balance between personal principle and the rules of the executive suite. These executives' stories of walking the fine line between their beliefs and what companies demanded of them, or of deciding when to give in and when to push back, makes for compelling reading as well as an excellent education in how to rise within an organization.
MARLENE SATTER (June 15, 2003)

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