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DEI

CLOSED

.....
**Coaching,
Antiracism**
and the Backlash
Against DEI
.....

HOW DO I HELP MY BLACK CLIENT WHO FEELS UNDER ATTACK AT WORK?

The Situation:

"I'm coaching a Black executive (the organization's first Black senior leader and the only Black person in this governing body). They have received feedback from their supervisor that their peers find them unapproachable and even intimidating, with a request to work on those relationships. They have shared that they feel under attack in the context of negative comments made in sessions about DEI efforts at the organization, which they have been spearheading. They believe that they have to keep their armor up and be vigilant. How would you coach them?"



By Craig Carr, PCC, CPCC

My recommendation is to approach this situation by embracing the principles of systemic intelligence instead of defaulting to traditional conflict management methods. Your client is involved in a typical power dynamic known as triangulation. This happens when someone (your client) unconsciously absorbs a conflict, leaving them feeling torn, burdened or unsure about their place in the system.

The problem stems from an indirect approach to handling conflict, leading to someone being labeled as the perceived "problem." Unless a master manipulator is pulling the strings, there can be an underlying pattern where triangulation has become more "normal" than directly addressing a systemic dysfunction.

This situation will be particularly charged if it taps into long-standing racialized tropes – such as assertive Black professionals being labeled as "intimidating" or "unapproachable." It's understandable that your client would seek psychological safety and professional self-preservation, thus reinforcing their isolation.

The first step is to help them recognize how they're caught in a triangulating dynamic. Clarify this by asking, "What conversations are happening about you instead of with you?"; "Who is speaking directly to you about these concerns?"; and "Who is acting as an intermediary?"

By identifying the hidden dynamic, executives can shift from internalizing blame to recognizing the systemic cause. This acknowledgment alone greatly empowers a culture that deals with these hidden entanglements and unspoken fears.

Recognize that your client's peers may be grappling with uncertainty about their roles, unexamined biases, or discomfort regarding DEI changes. You might explore questions such as, "What might your peers fear losing in this new culture you're helping to create?"; "Who stands to benefit from maintaining the status quo?"; and "Where do you notice alliances forming?"

With a more fertile landscape for strategy, your client can begin to change the pattern. Encourage them to engage in direct conversations rather than merely responding to indirect feedback, and to invite peers to hold one-on-one discussions. When triangulation is evident and the business fosters a healthy culture through an organizational advocate, this trusted ally can facilitate direct dialogue and stop harmful back-channel discussions.

Identifying triangulation provides individuals with a vital tool for self-advocacy and fostering broader organizational cultural changes. With some focused effort and clarity, your client could transform the current dynamic from isolation to much-needed leadership and influence.

By Victoria Trabosh, CDC, CEC

Coaching this Black executive requires a thoughtful, empathetic and multi-layered approach. Start by creating a safe and nonjudgmental space where they feel heard and valued. Acknowledge the unique challenges they face as the organization's first Black senior leader, particularly the intersectionality of their role and the emotional labor required to lead DEI efforts while navigating an environment with implicit biases and national changes to DEI efforts.

Begin by empathizing with their experience. Affirm that their feelings of needing to keep their armor up are valid, given the context of the negative comments and the broader dynamics they face. Reflect this back to them so they know you genuinely understand. For example, you can say, "It sounds like you're navigating a tough balance between protecting yourself and engaging with your peers."

Help them explore the impact their armor may have on their relationships, without diminishing its necessity. Ask reflective questions such as, "How do you think keeping your guard up affects how others perceive you? And how does it serve or limit you in your role?"

Encourage the executive to reconnect with their intrinsic values and leadership goals. Ask, "What kind of leader do you want to be remembered as? What legacy do you want to build here?" This brings the focus to their aspirations, reframing their

actions as choices aligned with their greater vision rather than purely reactive defenses.

Discuss strategies to balance self-preservation with cultivating relationships. Highlight that building deeper connections may also serve their long-term goal of advancing DEI efforts. For example:

Active Listening: Suggest techniques like paraphrasing or asking curious, open-ended questions that signal approachability without compromising their stance.

Personal Touches: Encourage them to share small aspects of their personal story or hobbies to help break stereotypes and humanize interactions.

Highlight that feedback, even if uncomfortable, can provide an opening to reshape perceptions. Help them depersonalize comments by reframing them through the lens of organizational dynamics rather than personal fault. Together, develop actionable strategies such as scheduling one-on-one meetings with peers to foster direct communication and bridge misunderstandings.

Finally, integrate discussions about self-care and resilience. Acknowledge that this role is emotionally taxing and explore ways to recharge, such as seeking support from affinity groups or mentors. By combining validation with actionable strategies, you can help this leader feel supported, while equipping them with tools to challenge perceptions and strengthen their leadership impact.

By Suzi Pomerantz, MT, MCC

Coach from curiosity, seek to be of service, and evoke awareness. As a white coach, I do not share a lived experience with your client. Do you? Yes, it absolutely is relevant. And don't tell me you're color-blind or you "just see humans - not color" and it shouldn't matter, because that is dismissive of the experience of people in communities who have been marginalized because of their skin color.

As happens all too often in organizations, the Black person is burdened with the extra effort of not only educating and explaining their own experience but spearheading DEI efforts (which in itself is blatant tokenism). Fellow white people, do you really not see the rude inherent racism of expecting the only Black senior leader in an organization to be the one who has to also lead the DEI efforts? Is it not enough that to get to their position of seniority they likely had to literally out-perform their peers by at least three to five times to get half the recognition and opportunities for advancement?

Systemic racism is real. The systems are unfairly rigged for those with privilege, whether it's race, socio-economic, religious, or gender. So, let's start with validating and acknowledging the truth of your client's experience: They actually did have to keep their armor up and be vigilant. It is how they got to their senior leadership role as the first and only Black person to arrive there. Let's recognize and celebrate what it took for them to succeed and help them see that what might be required to elevate

further has less to do with what got them here and more to do with relationships and connection.

We humans fear what we don't understand. If your face is arranged in a way that appears to me to be intimidating and unapproachable, regardless of your intention, I will feel intimidated and probably will not approach. That is on me. That is my truth. Not your problem. Yet, if we were to connect and get to know each other, the next time I encounter you, there would be familiarity and I would be more inclined to say hi, less intimidated and more willing to approach.

Your client has the opportunity as a senior leader to reach out to their peers across the organization and create real and authentic human relatedness. Not from an optics or DEI perspective, and not as a punishment, but from a pure leadership perspective. As a leader, your connections, conversations and collaborations throughout the organization are how things get done. Results move at the speed of relationships. •

Are you grappling with a sticky situation?

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