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Press Release:

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Discovering the key to the 'boys' club'

Issue: Not in the club.

The scenario: African American female executive in a large company. Can't break the boy's club attitude of boss and co-managers, who are all white males. Afraid of being overlooked for promotions. Looking for a way to get noticed before considering leaving the company.

It seems like a double whammy doesn't it? Your instincts could be on target and the situation untenable. That being said, I've also spoken with 55-year-old white guys who feel like outsiders in their companies. Gender, race, age, cultural backgrounds, geographic origins and even how good-looking we are all factor.

I tell these clients, "Don't sit on the sidelines." Before you walk away from the company, do two things: Develop a plan to proactively build relationships with key players and be your own best advocate.

Step 1: The best way to impact a group like this is to divide and conquer. And let me add this: engage, engage, engage. Start with your boss. When was the last time you asked him how he was doing or if he needed your help? Have you discussed input on a challenging problem, or invited him to be part of a client call? Have you ever initiated coffee or lunch?

Make a purposeful effort to build the human connection. Try this with the others, too. Not in a group, but one-on-one. Do this on neutral turf outside the office. Without the security of their buddies around you stand a better chance of creating some kind of alignment. Keep the conversation to business, then look for ways to find personal commonalities, whether it's family activities or eBay or a mutual love of mocha soy lattes with whipped cream.

Step 2: Be your own best advocate. There are several angles to this.

- Don't assume your expertise is self-evident. Find subtle ways to let colleagues know your notable accomplishments, projects or similar problems you have tackled in other companies and how these skills can benefit current work issues.
- Remember that "self talk" works. When you are feeling most insecure in their presence, silently give yourself a laundry list of your strengths, talents and triumphs.
- Look for opportunities to excel and be directly involved with your boss—or your boss's boss.
- Let co-workers and clients sing your praises. If you are complimented on your professionalism or resolution of a problem, ask the client to put it in writing and provide him or her with your boss's e-mail address. Afraid of seeming like a braggart? Companies love to know their clients are happy.

Could all this hurt you? Aren't you already thinking about leaving the firm? Mark Twain said, "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did." Find the ways to help your co-workers help you unlock the boys club.

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