

Minority professionals often hold leadership roles outside work, serving as pillars of their communities and churches and doing more than their share of mentoring. It's time their employers took notice of these invisible lives and saw them as sources of strength.

Leadership in Your Midst

Tapping the Hidden Strengths of Minority Executives

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Carolyn Buck Luce, and Cornel West

Included with this full-text *Harvard Business Review* article:

- 1 [Article Summary](#)
The Idea in Brief—*the core idea*
The Idea in Practice—*putting the idea to work*
- 2 [Leadership in Your Midst: Tapping the Hidden Strengths of Minority Executives](#)
- 10 [Further Reading](#)
A list of related materials, with annotations to guide further exploration of the article's ideas and applications

Leadership in Your Midst

Tapping the Hidden Strengths of Minority Executives

The Idea in Brief

A company's leadership talent translates directly into competitive prowess. Yet many management teams are blind to one powerful engine of leadership development that's right under their noses: community work performed by minority professionals in their off-hours. Such work teaches professionals crucial leadership skills such as strategic planning, negotiation, financial savvy, and change management.

So why aren't more companies attuned to the treasure trove of leadership talent in their midst? Many minority professionals, fearful that their volunteer work in religious and ethnic organizations will earn them charges of being "different," hide the work from supervisors. Result? Their talents, passion, and dedication remain invisible—and untapped.

How to leverage the unseen strengths your minority professionals are honing outside the office? Develop an appreciation for community work. Use telecommuting and flexible schedules to ease the heavy burden minority leaders shoulder when they add community work to their family responsibilities. Combat hidden biases—such as disapproval of ethnic dress or mannerisms—that discourage minorities from revealing their nonwork lives. And help minority employees apply lessons learned from community work to your company's challenges.

As blockbuster companies such as General Electric, Unilever, and Time Warner have discovered, leveraging minority professionals' off-hours experience infuses your leadership talent pool with fresh energy, vital skills, and deep commitment to your company.

The Idea in Practice

To leverage your minority professionals' unseen strengths:

APPRECIATE MINORITY COMMUNITY WORK

Support minority community organizations with the same commitment that your company supports other community organizations such as the United Way.

► Example:

Pitney Bowes supports Delta Sigma Theta sorority, a national African-American community service organization. It purchases advertising space in Delta Sigma Theta's fundraising journals and matches employees' donations. The company recruited one of its most talented black professionals through its participation in a leadership development program for minority youth sponsored by Delta Sigma Theta.

LESSEN THE LOAD

A disproportionate number of minority professionals shoulder responsibility not just for their immediate family, but for their extended families, too. Result? An extra-heavy workload that can lead to burnout.

To lessen their load, offer flextime and telecommuting. "Widen the tent" by offering employee benefits that address needs beyond nuclear family.

► Example:

Time Warner changed its Employee Assistance Program policies to extend certain provisions to extended family members at no extra cost. It also extended back-up childcare programs and college planning to grandparents, uncles, and aunts. These relatively inexpensive benefits have spurred a strong positive impact on minority recruitment and retention.

EMBRACE DIVERSITY

"Walk the talk" in your diversity initiatives by evaluating managers on their track record in

recruiting and retaining minority talent—and linking this evaluation to compensation.

► Example:

Lehman Brothers rewards senior managers who meet diversity goals with money from a bonus pool that's divided and awarded at the end of each year. The company's commitment to diversity attracts talented minorities—such as one black Wall Street banker who returned to the financial world after several years' hiatus and accepted an offer from Lehman Brothers because of its diversity policies.

ENCOURAGE "ACTION LEARNING"

Help minority professionals reflect on their off-hours community experiences, extract and generalize lessons, and apply their learning in your company.

► Example:

Goldman Sachs has encouraged one minority investment banker to serve as a board vice-president and fundraiser for the Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center, a nonprofit organization that supports low-income families who share a ZIP code with wealthy families. The role teaches her how to work with diverse individuals and motivate prospective donors to maximize their contributions—skills Goldman Sachs wants her to have.

Minority professionals often hold leadership roles outside work, serving as pillars of their communities and churches and doing more than their share of mentoring. It's time their employers took notice of these invisible lives and saw them as sources of strength.

Leadership in Your Midst

Tapping the Hidden Strengths of Minority Executives

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Carolyn Buck Luce, and
Cornel West

All companies value leadership—some of them enough to invest dearly in cultivating it. But few management teams seem to value one engine of leadership development that is right under their noses, churning out the kind of talent they need most. We're referring to the deeply substantive outside lives of their minority executives.

If you know many minority professionals—particularly women of color—then you know that these are the people who are called upon inordinately to lend their energies, perspectives, and guidance to activities outside their jobs. (We use the term “minority” in the statistical sense to denote people who in terms of race or ethnicity are not in the majority in their corporations or organizations.) Because they have “made it,” and because often they have done so against heavy odds, they are mentors of choice to young people in their communities. Within their workplaces, they serve on numerous diversity-seeking task forces and spearhead minority recruitment efforts. They play high-profile volunteer roles in their towns,

schools, and churches, and the amount of time they invest in these roles is substantial. In the words of Ella Bell, a professor at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business, “They comprise the backbone of religious organizations and provide a significant part of the energy driving community service in the United States.”

For many minority professionals, involvement in such activities is an important, inherently satisfying part of their lives. For some, it's a way of giving back—or, more accurately, giving in turn the kind of help that benefited them early on. But it's also a fertile source of continued personal growth. In these myriad roles, minority professionals hone valuable leadership skills. The problem is that those skills are not properly recognized by their employers. And no conscious attempt is made to transfer them into the corporate environment and develop them further. The disproportionate load of care that minority professionals bear in their extended families is also invisible to employers, and neither acknowledged nor supported by corporate benefits packages. The

result: Too many high-potential employees end up feeling ignored and diminished, overextended and burned out. At the same time, organizations are being deprived of the strong and diverse leadership they could so easily draw upon.

In 2004, the Center for Work-Life Policy formed a private-sector task force called the Hidden Brain Drain to investigate the challenges faced by female and minority talent over the life span. In the spring of 2005, three member companies—Unilever, General Electric, and Time Warner—sponsored a cross-sectoral national survey and series of focus groups to discover the facts about minority professionals' outside leadership work and why it remains unrecognized. (The exhibit "Off-the-Job Leadership Development" describes the research.) A companion study, which targeted the global executives of a large multinational corporation, attests to the resonance of this research in other countries. (The exhibit "Invisible Lives in the Global Context" highlights some of these findings.)

The U.S. research, which we share here for the first time, underscores that the lives of minority professionals are rich with experience that goes unleveraged by their employers. But it also reveals a startling fact: These lives remain invisible largely by choice. For many reasons, minority professionals are reluctant to speak of their outside pursuits and accomplishments to colleagues and managers. We are left with a dual challenge: Companies can't leverage what they don't see—and they can't see what is purposely concealed.

Cultural Capital

One of the impressive professionals we encountered in our research is Sheryl Battles, an African-American vice president of corporate communications at a major global corporation. In addition to her primary responsibility managing executive and investor communications, she coordinates the corporation's communications on issues of diversity and in that capacity supports 30 to 40 events a year. It's a task that constitutes just 5% of her official job description but consumes roughly 25% of her 50-hour workweek. In her personal life, she speaks at community events and career seminars for minority students and is involved in the church that she, her husband, and their daughter attend. She is also on the board of a

local organization for the arts and has been active in its African-American Cultural Heritage Series since its inception a decade ago.

Over the years, Sheryl has accumulated substantial cultural capital, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's term for nonmonetary wealth and relationship capital generated outside the workplace. Cultural capital is impossible to measure with any precision but is undeniably vital for anyone who wishes to exert influence in a neighborhood, a company, or a nation. Everyone accumulates a measure of cultural capital in their lives, but in the case of minority professionals, it is unusually rich. Consider, for example, the value of Joyce's cultural capital. (All research participants referred to in this article by a first name only are disguised at their request.) Joyce is a change agent to be reckoned with in her community. In her church, she was recently inspired by a progressive pastor's vision for transforming the congregation's stance on a divisive social issue. At the same time, she knew he would face resistance—and that the intensity of his enthusiasm was blinding him to the harsh realities of making change happen. He needed a pragmatic strategist, and in her, he found one. Together they guided the church through the transition, crunching the numbers, outlining a plan, initiating a series of meetings with congregants, and evaluating progress. When we talked with Joyce, she reflected on the experience, noting the difficulty of simultaneously unleashing and controlling the energy that flows from transformational change.

Does all this sound like valuable leadership training? The irony is that, despite being a strategic planner at a *Fortune* 100 company, Joyce never heads up such comprehensive initiatives at work. "Sure, I develop strategic plans here," she reflects, "but my hands are tied half the time. [At church] I have an audience that says, 'Yeah, do your thing.'"

Beyond personal stories like these, statistics do even more to make the point. Among highly educated African-American female professionals, 25% are active leaders in their religious communities (compared with 16% of white men) and 41% are involved in social outreach activities (compared with 32% of white men). Most frequently, they volunteer in schools, hospitals, libraries, shelters, and other organizations in their communities. Minority women are also on the front lines helping

Sylvia Ann Hewlett is the president of the Center for Work-Life Policy, a New York–based nonprofit organization. She also heads the Gender and Policy Program at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University in New York. **Carolyn Buck Luce** is the global partner for Ernst & Young's health sciences industry practice in New York. **Cornel West** is the Class of 1943 University Professor of Religion at Princeton University in New Jersey. The authors are founding members of the Hidden Brain Drain task force.

young people in their communities as mentors, tutors, and “big sisters.” A quarter of African-American businesswomen (25%) take on these roles. (The figure for white businesswomen is 14%).

Such substantive community involvement develops strategic and interpersonal skills, hones core values, and builds organizational and communication capabilities—all of which are transferable to and highly valued in the workplace. Yet our research shows that these skills remain invisible to managers.

Under the Radar

Why aren’t companies more attuned to the untapped leadership in their ranks? First, because they haven’t looked for it. Traditionally, to the extent that management takes an interest in employees’ “extracurricular” lives, the focus has been on activities that have long been sanctioned by white male executives and are thought to burnish a company’s image or enhance client relationships: United Way drives, symphony orchestra sponsorships, and sporting events, for example. Most companies do not bother to note the kind of pursuit that Stephanie, a bright, young African-American manager we interviewed, is involved in: running an award-winning Girl Scout troop in a homeless shelter. “These kids are not going to Harvard, they don’t have a place to live, and they don’t know how many times they’re going to eat today,” she told us. Stephanie’s commitment to these homeless girls is expanding her leadership skill set as she navigates public- and nonprofit-sector bureaucracies

while serving a population with myriad needs.

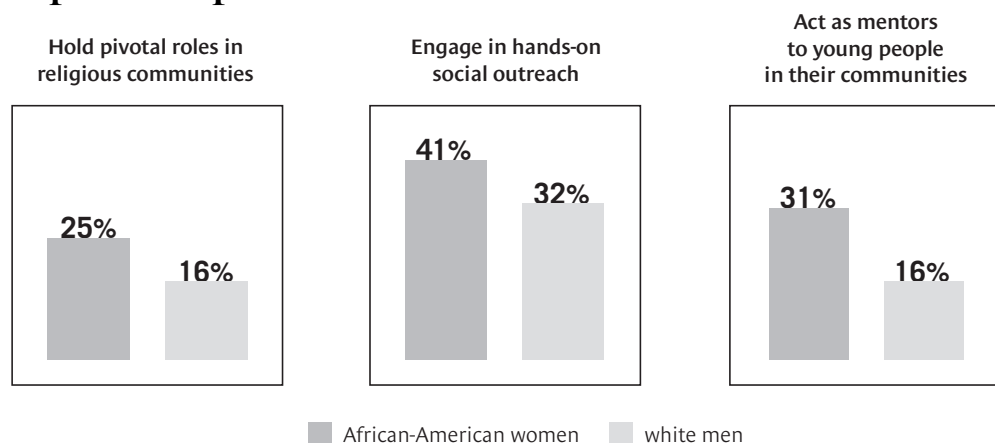
But Stephanie is convinced that her boss disapproves of her involvement in scouting, because it means she must leave work at 5:30 pm a few times a month. Despite the fact that she arrives at 7 am on those days, she is acutely concerned about being thought of as less than fully committed to her job. She refrains from talking about her Girl Scouts program at work—even though this initiative earned her a Future Leader Today award at a ceremony at the White House.

Stephanie’s reticence suggests a second reason that minority professionals’ lives remain invisible to their managers: because they are deliberately hidden. Sometimes this is simply because professionals themselves don’t recognize their outside affiliations as legitimate leadership development venues. One highly accomplished woman we met is on the board of an active and growing nonprofit organization, where she is gaining valuable skills in fundraising and finance. But she told us, “I have not made the choice to share my board involvement at work....I have never found a natural segue to make it relevant to what I do for the firm.”

Sometimes the conversation doesn’t occur because it would necessarily touch on religion, an important part of many minorities’ nonwork lives. Joyce, the strategic planner we introduced earlier, feels she can’t talk about the change effort she managed for her church, which is a different denomination from that of the apparently homogeneous hierarchy of leaders at her company. The same fear makes Michael, an

Off-the-Job Leadership Development

Professional women of color incubate leadership and other transferable skills in their neighborhoods and communities. Specifically, the highly educated African-American women in our study develop cultural capital in the following ways:



Copyright © 2005 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved.

Asian-American executive at a large California-based energy company, reluctant to share with colleagues his involvement on the board of a prominent charity. His reticence stems from the fact that the charity supports faith-based organizations and targets minority families. According to Michael, colleagues are likely to react negatively to his involvement because it raises “the big taboo subjects of the workplace: religion and ethnicity.” In his view, it leads them to think, “You’re *different*. I have always suspected that—and now you’re confirming it.” Michael admits that if people, himself included, talked more openly, then the taboos might be lifted, and his charity work might gain legitimacy and heft. But his short-term view is strictly pragmatic: “Why give anyone ammo?”

The fact that many minorities fear giving employers “ammunition” to use against them is among the most disturbing findings of our research. As shown in the chart below, many minority women professionals feel they cannot trust their employers with even basic information about their private lives. In large corporations, the percentage rises to more than half.

The survey data show that the distrust and reluctance to discuss private lives are deeply rooted in minorities’ experiences of “hidden bias” in corporate cultures. Many avoid discussing their nonwork lives because they don’t want to run the risk of reinforcing negative stereotypes. Latisha, an African-American executive at a global consumer products company, described growing up in the Newark projects, her mother on welfare and both parents eventually succumbing to AIDS. “When I do try and open up personally, people just don’t get it...So you stop trying.” Others worry about a perception that they got their jobs through af-

firmative action rather than on the grounds of merit.

Some feel hemmed in by “style compliance” issues, such as speaking style, hand gestures, and appearance. Nearly one-third of minority female executives (32%) in large corporations worry that their quiet speaking style is equated with lack of leadership potential, while 23% worry that their animated hand gestures are perceived as inappropriate. Fully 34% of African-American women in the business sector believe that promotion at their companies is based on appearance rather than ability.

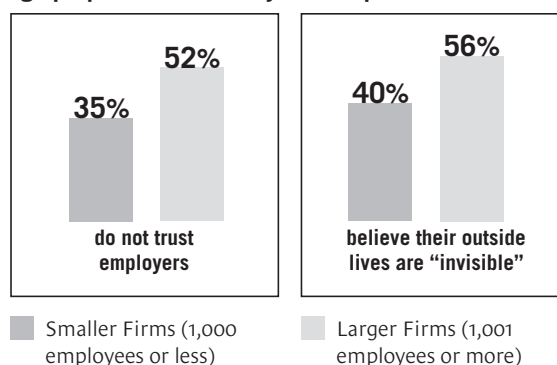
According to Sears executive Angela Williams, hidden biases can be debilitating because they lead minority professionals to “deny their authenticity” in their efforts to fit into the prevailing white male model. Indeed, our research shows that almost one-fifth of professional women of color (19%) perceive hidden biases severe enough for them to consider quitting. Focus group participants talked about “teetering on the edge” (thinking about quitting, looking for a new job, trying to figure out whether there is less bias elsewhere) for months, or even years, meanwhile downsizing effort and expectations. One participant told us she had “quit but stayed on the job”—with predictable effects on performance.

Leveraging Unseen Strengths

Companies stand to benefit enormously if they can learn to nurture and support the cultural capital that minority professionals routinely develop outside work. Our research reveals four ways companies can discover and leverage these hidden skills: Companies need to build a greater awareness of the invisible lives of their minority professionals; they need to appreciate and try to lighten the outside burdens these professionals carry; they must build trust in their ranks by putting teeth into diversity goals and encouraging more latitude in leadership style; and they should finish the job of leadership development begun in minorities’ off-hours activities so that those nascent skills can make a difference to workplace performance and competitive strength.

Shine a light. First, greater awareness and appreciation of community work is key. A large number of minority women professionals (45%) do not feel that their roles and responsibilities outside the workplace are recog-

A large proportion of minority women professionals...



Copyright © 2005 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved.

nized or understood by their employers. Minority women in larger companies (56%), young women of color (50%), and Asian women (49%) are the most likely to feel that their lives are “invisible” to their employers.

Demitra Jones, on the other hand, has no such concern. A dedicated human resource generalist at Pitney Bowes, she feels her employer is fully supportive of the evenings and weekends she spends with her sorority sisters. When Demitra says “sorority,” she’s talking about Delta Sigma Theta, an African-American organization founded in 1913 that “places more emphasis on service than on socializing.” Her membership in the organization is a strenuous commitment, demanding 30 hours a month on top of 60-hour workweeks. It’s a win-win situation for her and for Pitney Bowes and has been since the beginning. It was a Delta Sigma Theta member who matched Demitra with the company even before she entered college through Inroads, a leadership development institute for minority youth. Since then, Pitney Bowes has continued to support Delta Sigma Theta in many ways, from purchasing advertis-

ing space in fund-raising souvenir journals to matching Demitra’s own donations. More important, it has kept an eye on the cultivation and training of Demitra as a leader in both worlds. It’s no coincidence that her rapid rise in the company paralleled her progress through the leadership structure of the sorority, which she joined as a junior at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

What Pitney Bowes has done is not difficult; the company merely shined a light on an aspect of employee life that is often left in the shadows. This kind of light can take many forms. Some specific suggestions that came out of our survey include, for example, ensuring that recruiting activities are recognized explicitly in job descriptions and performance evaluations. Also, allowing employees to set aside time for volunteer activities—even a few hours a month—would send a message that employers recognize and value social outreach and community involvement. An overwhelming majority of our survey participants would welcome training from their companies in fund-raising for volunteer activities. Companies

Invisible Lives in the Global Context

Our research shows that minority executives in the United States lead rich lives of leadership and responsibility that are largely invisible to their employers. Is the same true for global executives who do not share the dominant ethnicity of leaders at headquarters? To examine this question, we conducted an employee survey of one large company, a Europe-based multinational with extensive operations in the United Kingdom, India, and South Africa. Targeting midlevel managers and senior executives, we reached more than 1,900 employees. Our goal was to compare the experiences of a group of predominantly white executives in the UK (male and female) with those of a group of predominantly nonwhite executives in India and South Africa.

Like minority executives in the United States, this company’s global executives are rich in cultural capital

- 30% of South African executives are leaders in their religious organizations (com-

pared with 10% of executives in the UK)

- 20% of Indian executives serve as mentors to young people in their communities (the figure for UK executives is 8%)
- 38% of South African executives are involved in social outreach programs, as are 27% of Indian executives

Global executives deal with an inordinate load of care responsibilities

- 32% of Indian respondents have elders in their households, while in South Africa, 46% regularly care for elderly relatives outside their homes (only 3% of UK executives have elders living in their homes)
- 33% of Indian respondents support children from extended families and the community (for UK executives, the figure is 12%)

Many global executives suspect hidden bias and choose to keep information about their personal lives close to the vest

- 49% of South African executives perceive “style compliance” pressures
- 78% of respondents in India and South Af-

rica believe that colleagues whose looks and style mirror senior management’s are unfairly favored in promotions

- 48% of Indian executives don’t fully trust their employer with information about their private lives (compared with 35% of UK executives)
- Almost half of nonwhite global executives say their outside lives are invisible to the company

Among the initiatives suggested by the survey to improve the situation, the following were favored by an overwhelming majority of global executives

- cultural sensitivity training to break down stereotypes (89% to 96%)
- better access to mentors (88% to 95%)
- safe harbors for discussing issues in their private lives while maintaining anonymity (77% to 86%)
- evaluation of individual managers’ success in developing diverse talent based on input from subordinates (60% to 78%)

A detailed report of this survey’s findings and its underlying methodology will be available from the Center for Work-Life Policy in late 2005.

Community involvement develops skills that are transferable to and highly valued in the workplace.

could even take an active role in helping young minority professionals access nonprofit boards, thereby giving them an early opportunity to develop leadership skills they can bring back to their workplaces.

Lessen the load. Companies that are truly invested in seeing their diverse talent flourish must be better attuned to the extra burdens carried by many minorities—particularly minority women, whose load of care reaches beyond the nuclear family to extended family and the community. Over half of minority professional women are working mothers (51%), compared with 41% of professional white women. Many, too, are single moms or prime breadwinners. African-American professional women in our survey are more than twice as likely as white women to be single mothers (18%, compared with 7%). In addition, minority women spend significant amounts of time caring for elders and extended family. Seventeen percent of African-American female professionals care for elders and extended family, spending an average of 12.4 hours per week on this care. (The figures for professional white men and women are 6.6 and 9.5 hours, respectively.)

Given this heavy burden of care, some well-established practices like flextime and telecommuting may be especially attractive to minority professionals. Beyond these, there are forms of assistance that few companies have considered, but that might, at small expense, be of tremendous benefit. For example, in our survey there was considerable support for company initiatives that “widen the tent,” such as employee benefits that go beyond the nuclear family. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of minority women want help paying for health insurance for up to two members of their extended families. Many minority women (72%) want a few days of annual leave for the purpose of elder care or extended-family care. And 74% of minority women say they would appreciate help in accessing state and federal services for a range of nuclear- and extended-family needs.

Time Warner is one company that has begun to address the issue. Patricia Fili-Krushel, executive vice president of administration, explains, “I wanted to check if we were looking through a white lens in terms of how we organize benefits—and, sure enough, we were.” The company recently extended its employee assistance program (which includes, for example, access to child care referral services

and company scholarship programs) to other reliant family members (perhaps an aunt or uncle). “In the last five months, there’s been a 200% increase in uptake,” she says. “There’s a lot we can do that doesn’t cost a lot of money. It just takes some different thinking.”

Reimagine inclusion. The research data underscore the need to expand and amplify what is meant by inclusion. We’re not talking here about the same old diversity initiatives, but specifically about innovative policies that build trust and foster workplace environments where minorities feel able to share the full round of their lives. Our survey revealed a widespread wish that companies establish “safe harbors”—places where employees can discuss issues, challenges, or opportunities in their private lives while maintaining anonymity. (Support for this notion was highest among Hispanic women professionals, at 75%, but it was also favored by majorities of African-American women, white women, and African-American men.)

Respondents in our survey also emphasize the need to “walk the talk” in diversity initiatives and put in place financial incentives to motivate managers. Fully 71% of minority businesswomen support the idea of evaluating managers on their track records in recruiting minority talent and favor linking this evaluation to compensation.

This was particularly important to Marie, a Wall Street professional coming back to the financial world after a few years doing client work. She wanted a company that not only had a diversity program, but had one with teeth. As an African-American woman, she was all too familiar with diversity initiatives that never seemed to amount to anything and diversity goals that were never evaluated past their inception. When Marie started work at Lehman Brothers, she was encouraged by the firm’s sizable diversity bonus pool—an incentive that recognizes individual managers and teams for their innovative diversity initiatives. The fact that her new firm encouraged investment bankers to take diversity seriously by providing meaningful incentives was a source of reassurance for Marie.

At Time Warner, there is a policy that for any hire at the vice president level or above, the slate of candidates must be diverse. In 2002, the company created the role of executive connector to make sure that there are viable candidates available for consideration. The

connector uses contacts in numerous social and professional circles to develop an extensive pool of diverse candidates. Since taking on this role, Debra Langford has been instrumental in the hiring of 65 minority senior executives. She travels frequently to events and conferences looking for talented high-potential candidates. Once Debra has facilitated a minority hire, she monitors his or her progress. She knows that, unlike their white counterparts, the individuals may not have preexisting relationships within the company. Debra organizes formal and informal gatherings of employees with similar backgrounds—for instance, a lunch for African-American fathers or a dinner for minority lawyers.

Minority professionals are also reassured when they see companies actively combating hidden bias. According to DeAnne Aguirre, a senior vice president at Booz Allen Hamilton, a good way to begin is to “examine the prevailing mode of managerial behavior, determine where it is narrowly drawn, and reenvision a much more inclusive model.” In our survey, 72% of minority women back cultural sensitivity training for managers to break down stereotypes.

One company that has historically welcomed diversity and champions the notion of bringing one’s whole self to work is Unilever. Through its Getting into the Skin program, introduced in 2002 as a key part of the company’s leadership development program, Unilever takes direct aim at hidden biases by asking selected groups of current and future leaders to spend time outside the realm of their normal experiences. Former Unilever co-chairman Niall FitzGerald helped create the program and was also a participant. Of a 2002 journey to Croatia, he remarked, “I lived the life of a Salvation Army volunteer and picked up an unkempt, uncared-for man off the street...we talked about his life. In an eerie twist of fate, he turned out to be from my hometown. We were two people who fate had dealt very different hands. He taught me, in a way no other experience has, the power of generous listening—without judgment.” Other participants have spent time at a rural hospital in Mexico, an AIDS clinic in Ireland, and a prison in Germany. The current CEO Patrick Cescau continues to build on Unilever’s mission of inclusion and has established a diversity board, which he chairs.

Finish the job of leadership development.

Companies will reap the most benefit from the outside leadership experiences of their employees when they begin to consider this cultural capital explicitly as a form of leadership “action learning.” What this means is that they should observe established pedagogical practice, helping minority executives reflect on their experiences, extract and generalize the lessons, and apply what’s been learned to other settings.

Some leading corporations are beginning to view after-hours work as leadership training. Goldman Sachs is one, says Aynesh Johnson, an investment banker at Goldman. With the firm’s full knowledge and encouragement, Aynesh is sharpening her people skills by working as a board vice president for the Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center, a nonprofit organization that supports public housing residents who happen to share a zip code with some of the richest people in the world. In the process of figuring out how to fund-raise for these families, Aynesh has taken on a marketing task so challenging it would serve admirably as a business school case study. “It’s a very rich and wonderful opportunity,” Aynesh says, carefully. “But it’s not glamorous.” Nevertheless, Aynesh is proud to call her position on the center’s board “part of my career.” Describing her volunteer work, Aynesh says “it has taught me how to work with a wide range of individuals...maximizing their contributions.” She’s also learned how to listen gracefully when a prospective donor says no and how to refuse (also gracefully) to take no for an answer. These are skills her superiors at Goldman Sachs think are important. As a result, at work she does not hesitate to be open about this outside commitment. “Managers know, all the way up to the executive suite.”

Another way to transfer cultural capital to the workplace is through networks of mentors. Many minority businesswomen are skilled mentors themselves, having reached out to young people in their own communities. They therefore know the potential of these relationships and feel frustrated when they lack mentors in their own organizations. In our survey, a significant proportion of minority professionals (66%) supported the creation of mentoring programs across divisions and the matching of minority employees with senior colleagues from similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

About the Research

Statistics in this article are the findings of a 2005 survey, fielded by Charney Research under the auspices of the Center for Work-Life Policy. The targeted survey sample comprised 1,601 professionals in the United States, ages 28 to 55, with college or professional degrees. This included 1,001 minority women (of whom one-third were African-American, one-third were Hispanic, and one-third were Asian), 200 minority men (also equally divided among the three groups), 198 white women, and 202 white men. The survey targeted people equally in four professional areas: medicine, law, education, and business and accounting. Interviews averaged 20 minutes and were conducted by telephone between January 2005 and February 2005. (A detailed report of the findings will be available at www.work-lifepolicy.org in late 2005.)

When mentors build trusting, open relationships with minority protégés, companies gain an important window on leadership talent that is often hidden from view. Mentors can actively engage their protégés in discussions about their outside roles and work with them to apply and enhance those skills in their everyday jobs.

General Electric provides much-needed access to mentors and actively fosters leadership along the way through affinity networks. The African-American Forum is a case in point. It began informally—15 black managers coming together to study retention problems—and has grown into a major initiative that both serves as a vehicle through which minority employees find mentors and holds an annual meeting that draws nearly 1,400 people and features top executives. GE has integrated the AAF into succession planning. As Deborah Elam, manager of diversity and inclusive leadership, explains, “The practice of taking high-potential employees and placing them in leadership roles within the AAF allows top executives to better see the strengths of talented minority professionals.”

Lives Made Visible

In 1952, Ralph Waldo Ellison published his classic novel, *Invisible Man*. His central insight remains relevant more than 50 years later: Those rendered “invisible” may well be the key to maintaining America’s prosperity and integrity. This past half century has seen a sea change in terms of the opportunities available to minorities—especially female minorities. In response to the antidiscrimination laws of the 1960s and 1970s and the global talent shifts of the past 15 years, the face of power has begun to change. One only need look around the workplace. Whether you’re talking Wall Street, Main Street, or the White House, most

management teams now include powerful and conspicuous nonwhite talent. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Avon CEO Andrea Jung, and Time Warner CEO Dick Parsons are cases in point.

Still, the belief among many minority professionals that they must somehow cloak their real identities has been extremely debilitating. Every professional, no matter what color or creed, wants to be recognized, appreciated, and supported. As we can see from these new data, for a substantial number of minority professionals, covering up outside lives and staying below the radar has produced isolation, alienation, distrust, and disengagement, all of which helps explain why progress has stalled. According to Catalyst and other research organizations, the data show that minorities are not being promoted or advanced at a rate commensurate with their representation in the talent pool. They remain bunched in the early stretches of the career highway. Few make it into the fast lane.

Any company that hopes to compete on the world stage using superior leadership talent must look squarely at the problem of hidden lives and resolve to overcome it. The key is to value the cultural capital that minorities routinely develop in their communities and bring this to bear in their workplaces. Think of the extraordinary energy and purpose that will be released when minority professionals are finally able to speak openly and proudly of their lives, their core values, and their skills. It might well be transformative—of individuals, of companies, and of society.

Reprint [R0511D](#)

To order, see the next page
or call 800-988-0886 or 617-783-7500
or go to www.hbrreprints.org

Leadership in Your Midst

Tapping the Hidden Strengths of Minority Executives

Further Reading

ARTICLES

[Diversity as Strategy](#)

by David A. Thomas
Harvard Business Review
September 2004
Product no. R0409G

IBM actively cultivates diverse talent. The company created a task force for each of many constituencies—Asians; blacks; the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community; Hispanics; white men; Native Americans; people with disabilities; women. The task forces research four questions: 1) “What does your constituency need to feel welcome and valued at IBM?” 2) “How can IBM maximize your constituency’s productivity?” 3) “How can we influence your constituency’s view of IBM as a preferred solution provider?” 4) “What external organizations should IBM forge relationships with to better understand your constituency’s needs?” The company uses responses to these questions to formulate its diversity strategies. With strong support from the top, an engaged employee base, and a clear business case for leveraging diversity, IBM has been able to link its diversity strategy to measurable business growth.

[From Affirmative Action to Affirming Diversity](#)

by R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr.
Harvard Business Review
February 2000
Product no. 90213

Thomas affirms the benefits of leveraging diverse employees’ talents—including brisker sales when your workforce mirrors your customer base and a sharper competitive edge when it comes to recruiting. The author also offers guidelines for managing your diversity initiatives: 1) Expand your focus beyond a few minority constituencies to ensure that your company’s culture makes *everyone* feel welcomed and valued. 2) Craft a culture in which people don’t just tolerate differences but celebrate them. 3) Ensure that your promotion

and mentoring systems work for everyone. The “cream” of your workforce won’t rise to the top on its own.

[Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success](#)

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and
Carolyn Buck Luce
Harvard Business Review
March 2005
Product no. R0503B

The same strategies that capture the talents of accomplished white women will attract skilled minority women to your firm. These strategies include: 1) offering reduced-hour jobs and flexible work days that let minority women keep a hand in their chosen field while tending to their community and family responsibilities; 2) creating policies that allow employees to adopt unconventional work arrangements without suffering damage to their careers; 3) using formal alumni programs to maintain connections with minority women professionals who have taken a hiatus from work; and 4) establishing “old girls” networks to help minority women build skills, contacts, and confidence, as well as earn recognition.

Harvard Business Review 

To Order

For *Harvard Business Review* reprints and subscriptions, call 800-988-0886 or 617-783-7500. Go to www.hbrreprints.org

For customized and quantity orders of *Harvard Business Review* article reprints, call 617-783-7626, or e-mail customizations@hbsp.harvard.edu