



AFRICAN AMERICAN BEHAVIOR: TRUST

“GETTING TO KNOW YOU ...”

SEARCH AND RESCUE

When I first arrived at Douglas Middle School on the West Side of Chicago in the 70's --I was there for seven years— I tried to get to know the African American women I was working with. Part of my initial presentation of self was trying to show myself as an empathic caring person. In that regard I called upon my “white girl antennae” to pick up dissonance in the environment and go on “search and rescue.” One morning a black woman colleague seemed upset about something. I “read” this by the way she sat down, her expression, and the manner in which she tossed her attendance book on her desk. In white girl/woman culture, you are at risk if you don't respond to these signals, which are interpreted as distress signals. If you ignored such “obvious” cries for help from a white woman, she might talk about you later behind your back.

So, following my white women cultural protocols, I asked the black woman how she was doing. She looked at me in a way that told me it was none of my business. I was shocked at the rebuff of my attempt to show myself as someone who was caring and considerate of other people's feelings. So I went and sat down, all the while thinking, “I can't believe she did that”, a common white woman expression, which is why it became the title of Mooney's book.¹ However, as the new kid on the block and dissatisfied with the way it went, I approached her again and asked, “Have I done anything to upset you.” She said, “Jean, you're really not that important.” Later that day I went home and said to my white women friends, “I can't work with them. They are so mean!” The black woman's view of what happened, no doubt, was equally uncharitable towards me. As I came to understand the culture, she probably thought --since validated by other black women-- “First, you think that you can come and ask me how I'm doing (as if we had the kind of relationship that would allow you to do that), and, second, you think you cause everything that happens.”

¹ Mooney, N. 2005. *I Can't Believe She Did That!: Why Women Betray Other Women at Work*. New York: St. Martin's Press.



SOLICITING AND SHARING PERSONAL INFORMATION

My other approach to show myself as caring and friendly also failed. White women build relationships and make friends by soliciting and sharing personal information. On meeting someone for the first time –part of the getting acquainted stage -- white women typically ask questions such as: “Where do you live? Are you married? Do you have any children?” African Americans view such questions on first meeting someone as violations of personal boundaries.

Consequently, when I asked African American women these kinds of questions, I got a cold, disbelieving look, and the comment, “You got any chips for all that dippin’ in my business?” What I subsequently learned through many trial and error attempts was that soliciting personal information and showing that one is considerate of other people’s feelings is a way to start a friendship or relationship –things that worked in my white woman cultural group—only happened with African American women after a trusting relationship has been built. So how does one then start to develop a trusting relationship with black women? The answer is by being personally helpful and supportive at work, not by being inquisitive.

SHARING PERSONAL INFORMATION WITH OTHERS

The other mistake I made with African Americans –this part also applies to Latinas—was sharing information that I had learned about that person with others. This was not “telling tales out of school” or gossiping about someone in the traditional sense, but rather a well intentioned move on my part to correct a wrong impression that another woman had of the black woman or Latina that I had come to know -- a move perfectly acceptable in white girl/women culture. For example, if an African American woman (Ms. A) shares something with me (white woman B) about a struggle in her personal life, and a third colleague (Ms. C) comes to me to say, “Ms. A is being so mean”, I will share what I learned about Ms. A so that Ms. C won’t continue to spread mean things about her. Bringing Ms. C into the reasons why Ms. A is acting as she is, requires

Ms. C now to be protectively considerate of Ms. A’s reputation and emotional well being in relationships that she may also have with others, not just herself. If the shared information is not to be shared with others white women mark it by saying, “Promise not to share this with anybody”. Women



of color, on the other hand, assume that you will not share their personal information. Consequently, regardless of my motive to “save someone’s reputation” this behavior was taken by African American women and Latinas as malicious gossiping: not only a breach of confidentiality: “tattling”, but more seriously: disloyal “backstabbing”. I later discovered that women of color will often test white women for trust by sharing personal information and wait to see if it comes back around.