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Survival in the Corporate Fishbowl

*Making It into Upper and Middle
Management*

by
John P. Fernandez



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Preface and Acknowledgments

As I wrote my previous books, *Black Managers in White Corporations* (1975), *Racism and Sexism in Corporate Life* (1981), and *Child Care and Corporate Productivity* (1985), I became acutely aware of the sometimes overt but most times covert dissatisfaction that many employees have with corporate careers and corporate work environments.

I have sensed an increase in employee dissatisfaction and an intensification of career concerns as the United States has begun losing its economic world dominance. Management has responded to economic hardships by terminating many jobs in the United States and moving operations to foreign countries.

I believe that several crucial factors are leading to increased job dissatisfaction and career concerns. One is that the good opportunities existing in corporate America overall have decreased, while the number of people entering the work force has increased. At the same time, those entering the work force are more educated than previous generations. Educated people have higher aspirations and goals; thus, while there has always been an imbalance between employee aspirations and corporate opportunities, this imbalance is greater today than in the past.

Another factor contributing to the overall low morale of corporate employees is the failure of corporate America to equitably introduce women and minorities into areas once perceived as the domains of white males.

The third factor contributing to the overall dissatisfaction of most employees is the inability of corporate leaders to recognize the inherent inequities and shortcomings of bureaucracies. In addition,

they have not understood some basic fundamentals about human nature.

I sincerely believe that until corporate leaders and employees deal with the realities of bureaucracies and human nature, corporations will not operate as efficiently as they can, and many employees will be in a constant state of dissatisfaction.

This book gives readers a realistic understanding of bureaucracies and how the human element affects the effective and efficient operations of a bureaucracy. It also documents the continued existence of racism and sexism which, in most companies, does not allow the full use of more than half of the work force. Only through understanding these factors can employees develop realistic strategies to survive and make it into middle and upper management.

I hope that the readers of this book will walk away with some new insights and a confirmation of some old ones, which will allow them to better achieve their career goals. Corporate executives who read this book to run their companies better should be able to come up with more realistic strategies for their future successes.

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1

Introduction

The Issues

The comments presented in the following chapters represent responses of more than 12,000 management and nonmanagement employees in thirteen companies.* For this book, since 1984, I have surveyed employees' perceptions of their careers with a particular focus on the social aspects of their work lives: social interaction, cross-cultural/cross-racial experiences, race/gender effects, and pluralism issues. By pluralism I mean the reflection within the corporate hierarchy of the heterogeneous mixture of people that make up U.S. society in the 1980s. These surveys reveal grave concerns that employees have about corporate America: that it is unimaginative and authoritarian, and has untrustworthy leadership, a debilitating environment not conducive to risk taking, a plethora of politicking, insufficient opportunities, lack of proper recognition and reward, and discrimination based on race, gender, and age.

These comments come from both genders and from all races and levels of the corporate hierarchy—a sure sign that something is wrong with corporate America.

The comments were made in response to open-ended statements such as: “Please make any additional comments you wish to make about yourself and your career.” In other words, the statements were neutral in tone and unbiased toward eliciting either negative or positive responses.

Throughout this book I discuss three race groups: blacks, other minorities, and whites. Other than blacks, Hispanics were by far the largest minority group in these studies. Since the responses of Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans were very similar in most cases, I combined all minorities except for blacks under the name of other minorities.

The following responses primarily concern corporate leadership:

There is very little feedback concerning what is considered when promoting, giving raises or bonuses. Our department head and his high level staff do not fight for the staff, and the staff is aware of this.

—black, male, upper-level manager

I feel stranded without support, goals, paths or challenges. I feel underemployed as compared to my positions in the past. I want a chance to succeed but cannot find a way. I want to use the knowledge and skills I've obtained.

—white, female, lower-level manager

As a new employee with a college degree, I feel my contributions will be better recognized in another company where creativity, risk, ambition and marketing are recognized as key components for success.

—black, female, lower-level manager

I really like the challenge of my job, but things would go much smoother if I had a middle-level manager who appreciated my knowledge and job expertise. Instead, decisions are always second-guessed because he manages by the "shut up and do it because I am the boss" style of management.

—white, male, craftsworker

Biggest obstacle to my advancement and satisfaction lies in the amount of *exposure* I receive and a lack of commitment on the part of my management (not immediate supervisor) to help me and let me perform functions that I do best.

—white, female, lower-level manager

I was told that I was "acting" so long (over two years) because I was being punished for referring a job issue to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

—white, female, lower-level manager

It's pretty difficult when your middle-level supervisor lies to you and afterwards admits that he lied in order to advance his own objectives. It would be a lot less aggravating if he were honest in his approach; after all, he is middle management and has final

word. Being pluralistic, I believe, is necessary in order to compete; however, being honest in one's approach is most important.

—Hispanic, female, craftsworker

We still profess a positive atmosphere of "risk taking," yet the result is squelching creativity through non-acceptance and reprimand.

—white, male, lower-level manager

Lip service and hot air! Are there other jobs out there that could use my talents? If there are, then how do I find them? Managerial job openings are hidden and will never be advertised because our V.P. of Personnel doesn't want managerial job openings advertised. By the time an opening is heard about, the job is filled. Can't even compete! Blah! . . . you have people with tunnel vision running this company . . .

—Hispanic, male, lower-level manager

I have had good, challenging assignments although my abilities and skills have been underutilized. Organizational politics seem dishonest and insincere to me so I have not succeeded well in that arena.

—white, male, upper-level manager

The next series of responses demonstrate the pervasiveness of politics as perceived by employees in the corporate bureaucracy:

Generally, I believe promotions are too often given to those who have "showcased" or otherwise exercised political means to get recognition. Often the results are not evaluated but the window dressing is rewarded. In our efforts to encourage a pluralistic mix, I hope we will not continue this propensity toward promoting the "flashers." Among all groups of employees there are those who deserve promotion and don't necessarily "grab the microphone" at every opportunity.

—white, female, upper-level manager

I truly feel that most women who advanced got there for favors rendered or for knowing the right person. Management is a buddy system that promotes friends and partners. Rarely does someone who really deserves it get promoted to management.

—black, female, craftsworker

We fear internal repercussions from filing an Equal Employment Opportunity complaint. No support from superiors, or their bosses. Internal merit pay raises were outright discrimination—popularity contests, the “good old boy” network at its finest. Utterly discouraging . . .

—Asian, female, lower-level manager

I wish playing good-old-boy politics were not a prerequisite for any type of promotion—it makes me feel bad.

—American Indian, female, craftswoman

I feel that the sponsorship program to get into management should be eliminated because the majority of management people are whites. A lot of people of color that are qualified are overlooked because whites sponsor other whites regardless of qualifications. I have facts to back this statement.

—black, female, lower-level manager

I have found in my 13.5 years with the company that most of the people that get ahead aren't necessarily the best qualified. They were picked a lot by whom they knew and who they are. I don't see that it will ever change—it has gone on too long and it will continue. Prejudices still exist at the company that will never change.

—Hispanic, female, lower-level manager

Although there is much rhetoric about “excellence,” we seem to be managing the same old way. The company still seems to place more weight on political (good old boy/girl) acceptability than on honest, dedicated performance. My last appraisal was based 100 percent on perceptions of personality, not on performance.

—white, male, lower-level manager

Surrounded by a climate of poor leadership and politics, it is not surprising that employees sense a system that is not organically responsive to them as individuals:

Even though I am an over 40 white male with over 20 years' experience, I feel I still have something to give to this company. If I am told one more time I ought to be glad I still have a job, I'll scream.

—white, male, middle-level manager

I feel the “surplus” conditions are handled unfairly—those with a few years of service are working twice as hard as those who have 20 years of service and are out the door first, even though the ones who have less seniority may be better qualified for a particular job.

—white, female, craftworker

I have finally come to grips with what is possible in this company and what isn't—that is, unless you're willing to sell your soul and give up who you are, you won't advance. I now work for quality in my life and what I have control of and I have quit worrying about what I don't.

—white, female, lower-level manager

It used to be fun working for this company; now you don't know whether you have a job or not.

—white, male, craftworker

Considering the previous comments, it is not surprising that employees doubt that they are valued and rewarded:

I am a hard-working, conscientious, devoted employee. I should be treated as a valued employee who earns his money and then some—instead of the same or not as good as the flunky who doesn't earn his pay and gets promoted.

—Hispanic, male, craftworker

My experience has been that informal rewards are seldom received. “No news is good news” holds true here. You are told only about the mistakes, and no one says “That was a good job.” This is a shame because often a lack of informal rewards leads to frustration.

—white, female, lower-level manager

I feel that many employees with talent and ability are routinely overlooked and unappreciated *regardless* of race, sex, or cultural background. The company does not discriminate against any particular group nearly as much as it discriminates against individuals who show signs of intelligent, independent thought.

—white, female, craftworker

As employees believe that management has poor leadership