
The New Gig

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You are a little nervous. But you have on your new pantsuit and pumps and are ready for action. It's the first day of your new job. You are nice and early and you proceed to the receptionist who happens to be a middle-aged white woman. She looks at you quizzically: "Do you need an application?" Application, you think to yourself; what is she talking about? Does she think that I am here to apply for another job? "Miss, do you need an application? We have lots of positions for the file room and secretaries, open right now."

I can't believe my ears. After all, I am wearing Ferragamos!

Now I'm angry. "No," I respond. "My name is Ashley Whitney and I am an attorney. Today is my first day."

"Oh," she says, "You are Ashley Whitney? Please, come right this way..."

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If you are a minority female attorney, this is not a new scenario. Somewhere along the way, perhaps multiple times, you have had a case of, let's call it, mistaken identity. You are the only brown face around, except perhaps the cleaning ladies, file room women and/or secretaries and assumed to be someone other than an attorney.

How do you adapt to your new environment? Here are a few tips:

1. Say hello to everybody and anybody. Even if it is not your natural inclination, make an effort to meet as many people as you can in your early months of work. Certainly, get to know the colleagues in your group. Also, don't ignore the secretaries, paralegals and cleaning ladies. They are not invisible. They know everything that is going on and could help you to gain a better understanding of the company. A friend of mine at one of the oldest and most prestigious New York law firms found out that he made partner from, guess who? The janitor who he had befriended during the many evenings

when he was burning the midnight oil in the office.

2. Network before you show up. Our communities are small. Does anyone know anyone who works there? Ask around. When you arrive, if you are fortunate enough to meet a professional of color at your new job, play the name game. Where did you go to school? Where are you from? Where do you live? Where do your children go to school? Chances are good that you know someone that he or she knows. One of my colleagues-of-color who recently joined my company is in a book club with one of my dear friends of over 20 years. She also happened to begin her law practice in Los Angeles with one of my law school buddies. It turns out that we both attended our mutual friend's wedding several years ago and didn't even know it! There are less than two degrees of separation in the minority bar and the minority community in general. Making a connection makes everyone feel more comfortable.

3. Focus on commonalities, not differences. When I started my position at Schering-Plough Corporation, there were very few women attorneys and no African-American female attorneys with children. But, almost all of the male attorneys were married with children. So, when our group lunch conversations turned to lighter topics, I tried to steer the conversation away from the latest professional football or baseball game (of which I could offer limited opinion) and instead discussed what happened at the latest extracurricular activity that our children were involved in over the weekend. Since some of them coached their children's team and certainly all attended the games, this was a topic we could all relate to. You would be surprised at how much mileage you can get out of soccer and Little League!

While the indignity of a "mistaken identity" is unpleasant, using network techniques such as those listed above can help you to brush off those incidents like fleeting footnotes in your professional life and focus on the satisfaction and pleasure that you derive from your work and colleagues. •