

Keeping Sane and as an African Canadian Working in White Institutions: Tips for Surviving and Thriving in Hostile Environments

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Presentation and Conversation

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What is a Hostile Environment

A hostile work environment exists when:

- Discriminatory behaviour against a protected class exists in the environment
- The behaviour constitutes a persistent pattern
- The behaviour must be severe enough to disrupt the work of the targeted employee(s)
- It is expected that the behaviour will continue if uninterrupted.

Hostile Environment: Another Consideration

A hostile environment may also be created structurally when a position exists within an institution that has an antagonistic role within the organization. Consider:

- A quality control officer working in a mine
- An SEC officer working within a security firm
- An officer in an institution responsible for investigating claims of harassment or discrimination

Are the Schulich School of Law and Other Legal Settings Hostile Environments?

The Marshall Enquiry established that racism is at work within the criminal justice system in Nova Scotia and that it excludes IB&M persons

Given this systemic exclusion it stands to reason that as agents of systemic change (by their very presence), IB&M persons are in a structural conflict with the very institutions in which they study and work

How do you Stay Sane in a Hostile Environment?

I have developed a 6 point plan for my personal sanity preservation (you can be the judge of my success):

- Identity: Develop and maintain a strong sense of Identity.
- Competence/Excellence: Work to be Competent
- Analysis: Work within a theoretical analysis of the larger, structural issues - depersonalize conflict
- Independence: It is critical to live with a strong sense of independence. Feeling trapped undermines your wellness
- Process: Staying sane and healthy is a work in progress. Some people need help with this. Sometimes counselling is helpful.
- Action: Remain connected to those activities and engagements that support and preserve your identity, even when those activities are antagonistic to the work or learning environment

What About Thriving?

IB&M persons are perched in positions of tremendous opportunity:

- Just as increasing demand for bilingual skills privileges native French speakers, demands for cultural competence privileges IB&M persons
- Changing demographics creates demand within organizations to diversify their employee roster in order to position to meet demands of new markets
- Increasingly it is recognized that “different ways of thinking” are needed in the market and in government to address complex challenges in fluid/dynamic environments: Nichols talks about “systemic congruence through cultural competence”

Acknowledge Your Value

Recognition that your “location” is an asset will prepare you to thrive rather than just survive.

- Document and articulate this value in your cv
- Cultivate expertise in known areas with a twist
- Maintain authentic relationships in your community and be a natural bridge without being a sell-out
- Where structural tensions exist, model professionalism and the value of your analysis and skill

Conclusion

Those are the six points to surviving and the four suggestions for thriving. I hope that this brief introduction to the topic allows for spirited and productive conversation.

Please look up the two resources:

- Keeping Sane . . . And
- Judicial Appointments . . .