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Crabs in a Barrel: The Importance of Minority Mentorship

James H. Lowry - 6/17/13

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In March The Wall Street Journal published an article, "The Tyranny of the Queen Bee," which addressed a common condition: queen bee syndrome. All too often, a female boss has no interest in fostering the careers of women who aim to follow in her footsteps. She creates barriers for younger women whom she envisions as competitors within her company. I have observed this behavior while consulting on diversity and upward mobility for many different organizations. After reading this article, I felt great pain for the many women who dropped out of professional careers because of this negative behavior.

Reflecting on my career, I have had many mentors of all colors, races and both genders who played pivotal roles in assisting my development and success. Often my mentors were neither gentle nor sensitive in their criticism, but I knew they cared about me and wanted me to succeed. Their guidance fostered a long, prosperous and impactful career, and I will always be indebted to these friends, bosses and allies. Because of the assistance and motivation bestowed upon me, I have dedicated my life to assisting young professionals, which is one of the reasons why I continue to work at my advanced age.

With the people I mentor, I hope there are one or two pieces of advice I offer that make a difference in their careers or lives. Like many of my mentors, I too can be candid because I do not want anything lost in translation. However, the queen bee syndrome forced me to consider the many others along my journey who were not positive, supportive or fair. Despite efforts to thwart my advancement and the great pain these people caused me, they also motivated me to

succeed. Once again, these people were of all colors, genders and ethnicities. However, the African-Americans who tried to prevent my progress hurt the most.

The first-generation corporate executives did not call these people queen or king bee; we called them crabs in a barrel. I distinctly remember discussing the crabs in a barrel mentality at Harvard Business School with a group of students and professionals. When I began discussing the concept, many of the African-American students began nodding their heads in agreement, and the discomfort in the room was palpable.

I often think of why this costly, losing proposition exists. How many careers were abandoned? How many talented women and people of color could have made constructive and profitable contributions if crabs had not held them back? Over time, I observed that many of the negative, selfish people who desperately wanted that corner office at the expense of others were not happy, and many failed to achieve their career goals.

Today many of the old barriers manifest differently than 40 years ago, often in subtle and at times just as effective ways. Instead of open criticism, the overly ambitious climbers will tell their boss that a colleague is not analytical, hard-working or a good corporate fit. Often and sadly, these same climbers were "diversity hires" themselves.

I continue the fight to open up doors and mentor the next generation. I also remind CEOs of the early heroes who successfully mentored me and others, changed cultures and improved profits for their companies. I am grateful for heroes such as Darwin Davis, who after becoming one of the top salespeople for Equitable, recruited and mentored hundreds of high-performing blacks. Thomas Shropshire rose within the ranks of Philip Morris mentoring hundreds of young blacks, one of whom was George Lewis, who later became the company's CFO.

These gentlemen were my heroes, my allies and my friends. I will always respect them for being leaders and impactful to me, the community and the corporations they served so effectively. I hope the days of the queen bees and crabs in the barrel are limited, and that we measure our success not only on our impact today but also on the generations to come.

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