Being Black in Corporate America
Q&A with lead researchers Julia Taylor Kennedy and Pooja Jain-Link

What surprises did CTI’s research uncover about what it means to be black in corporate America today?

Pooja Jain-Link: I think one of the most surprising findings is that for years the conversation has been around how people of color struggle to bring their authentic selves to work. Our research finds that black professionals are authentic at work. In fact, they are just as likely as white professionals to say they are very authentic at work. But there’s one key difference: it takes a lot of effort to be authentic. And if they are putting in all of this effort to be authentic, they are either using up energy that should obviously be directed at the job at hand, or they are exhausting themselves. In fact, that’s what we heard, that black professionals find it exhausting to be authentic.

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Here’s something that will surprise white readers: While 65% of black professionals say it’s harder for black employees to advance, only 16% of white professionals agree with that statement. Many white readers don’t realize how different the workplace is for black professionals and how much harder it is for them.

The study reveals a vast perception gap between black and white professionals. How can we begin to bridge this divide?

Julia Taylor Kennedy: It’s tempting for white people to say, “Oh I know someone who’s black, let me run up to them and ask more about their experience so I can begin to understand.” But that can make your friend or your colleague feel put on the spot to speak for their entire race. So I think for white readers who find this narrative surprising and enlightening, it’s really important to go out and educate yourself. To consume great media makers and thinkers, such as Ava DuVernay, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Angela Davis, Robin DiAngelo, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Ibram X. Kendi. I would say educate yourself first, and then think about entering into dialogue. In our report, we offer resources—books, websites, movies and podcasts—for exactly this purpose.

Pooja Jain-Link: Yes, I think that’s absolutely right. And adding on to that, if you’re not black and you engage in a conversation with somebody who is and they tell you about their experience, listen. Let your defenses go down if a person is talking to you about their experiences, and how the system they live within, the country that we live within, perpetuates racism and prejudice.

What did you each learn personally as the research progressed?

Pooja Jain-Link: For a lot of black professionals, they’re not going to think that there’s a lot of new news here. But what was really meaningful to us was to hear so many people say, “Yes, this is definitely capturing our experience.”
Julia Taylor Kennedy: As a white American, I was already aware that I hold a lot of privilege in society. What I didn’t understand was how much more I could be doing to advocate on behalf of black women. And the way I can go about doing that is by asking black women what they want and need, and then acting.

How have white women failed their black professional colleagues as allies and why?

Pooja Jain-Link: If you look at representation, there have been far more advancements for white women than there have been for their black colleagues. One way that white women can really push for everyone is by focusing more on inclusion. And when they think about inclusion, they should seek input from those who are different from themselves.

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Our study found that nobody, including white women themselves, thought that white women were using their power to advocate for others. I would say, based on our own experience working with companies, the gender question is often considered first before race. It’s up to white women to say, “If what you’ve done for me is not benefitting all women, we’re not done.”

How did you feel as the data revealed so much inequity in the workplace?

Julia Taylor Kennedy: It’s easy to feel defeated because these are truly systemic issues. How can one employer impact something that is rooted in centuries of U.S. history? That’s why we put so much effort in to the solutions section of the report. These are hard problems and people need concrete advice.

Pooja Jain-Link: It does feel daunting but, at the same time, we know that corporate power in our country is strong, and companies are often able to move the needle more quickly than the government or society can.

What would you say to leaders who think their company’s current D&I efforts are enough?

Pooja Jain-Link: I would say, your black employees don’t think so. And so, look at your representation numbers, that’s probably telling a different story. Only 3.2% of executives in the U.S. are black.

Julia Taylor Kennedy: That’s why we recommend that companies start with an internal audit, because you really need a reality check from your employees. Make an effort to listen to black employees, listen to folks working in D&I, and then figure out what you need to do as a company. If you’re ahead of the curve, that’s fantastic. But also know that this work could backslide really fast. How are you sustaining diversity and inclusion?

How are small companies different than large company when it comes to the D&I efforts?

Julia Taylor Kennedy: When we looked at the advantages of small companies versus large companies, we found that black professionals get a lot of what they are looking for, professionally, at large companies. They get stability, a high salary, and great benefits. What they’re far more likely to get from a small company is this other basket of goods, which becomes increasingly more important for them as they advance in their careers. Things like respect, trust,
and most of all a sense of belonging. So, if a large company is really exploring ways to retain black professionals, they need to cultivate trust, respect from colleagues, and a sense of belonging.

Pooja Jain Link: I think that intentionality piece is critical. Large employers are more likely to mirror the systemic issues of society at large. Smaller companies can be a bit more counter-cultural and create that sense of trust and belonging you can’t find elsewhere. So, for large companies to create that, they have to put in the work to make that happen.

**What is the myth of meritocracy and why does it prevail?**

Pooja Jain Link: The myth of meritocracy is the belief that if you put your head down and work hard, you’ll advance. And as we’ve seen in our work many times, women and people of color are more likely to buy into this myth than cis straight white men, who are more likely to understand that who you know is just as important to getting ahead as how hard you work. The myth serves to obscure the fact that we don’t all have an equal chance at success. The playing field is not even.

Julia Taylor Kennedy: The myth prevails for two reasons. One, it’s attractive, so if you’re in humble circumstances, who wouldn’t want to dream that you could pull yourself out of them? And two, if you are successful, who wants to think you had very little to do with it? Many Americans who have overcome huge obstacles and worked very hard to achieve success see themselves a proof that the meritocracy works. What they don’t understand is that barriers of racial prejudice add enormous obstacles that white people simply don’t face.

**There are currently only 4 black Fortune 500 CEOs, all men. How is this small number affecting younger generations?**

Pooja Jain Link: Have you heard the expression, “You can’t be what you can’t see”? If there aren’t black Fortune 500 CEOs, it’s not something that younger black professionals are going to see as a possibility for themselves. I think that’s part of what fuels the drive for entrepreneurial ventures. Young black professionals are thinking, “Corporate America is not the place where I’m going to achieve great success. Let me seek it elsewhere.”

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Some respondents told us that they planned to work in corporate America for a few years, get that experience, get that acumen, and then leave to start their own business. I think if companies spent more time developing their young black employees, and ensuring that there were role models in place, they would have more success retaining black employees.