

Keeping Sane as an African Canadian

Working in White Institutions

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Sometime ago, while I was making a presentation at a workshop sponsored by the Council on African Canadian Education, a participant asked the panel "As an African Canadian working within a largely White institution on behalf of African Canadians I often feel conflicted, like I'm between a rock and a hard place . . . How do I stay sane?"

This question caused me to reflect deeply on my own experience. I am an African Canadian and I have worked in increasingly responsible positions over the course of my career. Keeping well, maintaining balance, and managing the multitude of unreasonable demands that come from all sides (including one's family and one's church family) isn't easy. After much thought I realized that I have maintained my sanity because I work hard at it. Below is what I have been able to tease out and articulate as my six-point plan for keeping sane.

1. Identity: Develop and maintain a strong sense of Identity. For me, as an African Canadian, as a Man, as a Father, as a Son, as a Christian, as an Ethical Social Work Practitioner, and now as a Civil Servant, it has been extremely critical to feel secure in my multitude of roles and identities. Sometimes they conflict. Sometimes they overlap in affirming and strengthening ways. Clarity and strength of identity is very grounding. Much work has been done within Government on clarifying the role of a civil servant. Presentations on this topic are a part of the orientations

received upon hiring. Less time is being spent talking about how the role may be in conflict with other aspects of our identities. For people of African and other minority descent the transition into institutional and government roles often presents conflicts that are even more challenging.

2. Competence / Excellence: Work to be Competent at what you do. It almost goes without saying, but to be well in any role/job it is essential that a person has the necessary information and skill for the tasks of each day. I like to suggest that a person go beyond having a sense of competence. Competence will allow you to work and maintain your sanity. Excellence will allow you to thrive.

3. Analysis: Work within a theoretical Analysis of the larger, structural issues and pressures.

Conflict and difficulty are a large part of any job . . . of any life really. When a person personalizes or doesn't have a clear understanding of where problems come from, this can lead to an unnecessary sense of ownership, both of the problem and of the solution. Many social workers toil away in settings where a lack of resources in the face of monumental problems is the order of the day. They leave the office every day feeling like they haven't accomplished enough.

Understanding that this is about the larger structural and even societal realities that are beyond the scope of the individual helps to de-personalize the issue. Similarly, people of African descent often work in settings and with people who have limited understanding of the structural and pervasive nature of racism. They are engaged then in relationships, meetings, and processes that are inherently naive to the complexities of race and racism. The apparent insensitivities that are expressed in these settings can create major conflict for the person of African (or other minority) descent in these settings. A clear analysis helps a person to stay grounded and insulated from the

feelings of cultural pain and personal frustration that can result.

4. Independence: No matter what a person does, where they work, or the nature of their relationships, religious affiliations, or cultural background, it is critical that they live with a strong sense of independence. A person of African descent who feels dependent on their salary to live may feel co-opted. This feeling of being co-opted will be magnified by the messages they receive from their more activist members of their community who see institutional workers (and civil servants in particular) as the “enemy”, and Africans who work within those institutions as traitors to “the cause”. Maintaining a sense of independence from the institutional employer can be key to weathering these tensions.

5. Process: Staying sane and healthy is a work in progress. A person must have a Process, a place and method for regularly monitoring and measuring one's wellness and making necessary adjustments to ensure same. Personally I have maintained a long term relationship with a colleague, friend and mentor. I meet with her formally (though not so regularly) to consider the "big issues" in my life. I also maintain close relationships with small group and select groups of activist colleagues, one a group of African Canadians, the other a group of writers and academics. Participation in these groups allows me a safe setting to engage in the soul searching necessary for the maintenance of my health and sanity. These friends and colleagues understand the challenges I face in managing my multiple roles and are supportive.

6. Action: As a civil servant it is challenging to be involved in the kinds of activities that are consistent with the larger diversity and human rights work that I engaged in as a private citizen.

Often the work that government does in this field is limited because of the political volatility of race issues. It is essential for the preservation of sanity that a person work out with the blessing of their manager just what are those projects and activities that are appropriate for engagement, both at the community and institutional levels.

So that's the 6 points. I hope you find them useful.

Robert