



RULES OF CHÉSUS: MAKING THE SYSTEM FIT YOU

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15 Years

“Black women have had to develop a larger image of society than perhaps any other group. They have had to understand white men, white women, and black men. And they have had to understand themselves. When Black women win victories, it is a boost for virtually every segment of society.”

- Angela Davis

I grew up in a predominantly Black city: Oakland, California.

“Nigger!,” yelled at me by a car full of white males on my walk home from school in the eighth grade.

My parents were homeowners. My brother and I attended private Catholic schools. My teachers were 98% White. My classmates 98% Black. My neighborhood 98% Black.

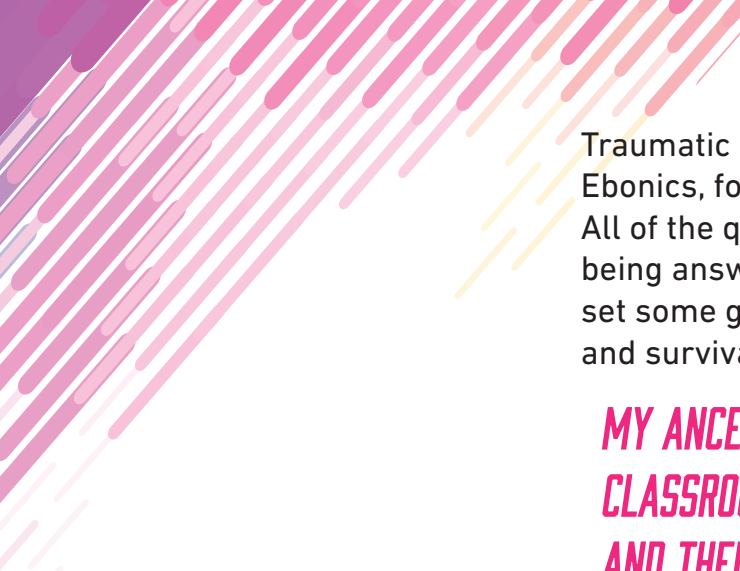
You are always so happy. White teeth against dark skin is just so beautiful.

Growing up I was told a cute story about how the paternal side of my family was White French and Black. It was the only part of the

family history researched and bragged about. Therefore, moving through life I chose to focus on anything except being Black. During my mid-teens, my brother joined the Nation of Islam and the little bubble I created for myself received its first pinprick when he handed me *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Conversations with him led to me asking questions, though not enough to rock the boat; most bounced around my mind, never fully investigated. At the time, I was not ready to open the shades on the realities of being a Black woman in the world.

I began to dig deeper into my Black identity, especially at work, where I essentially live 40 to 60 hours per week. Every employer has Equal Opportunity statements making a stand that they don't tolerate discrimination based on race and a variety of other 'isms. However, I found I needed to start investigating some of my questions:

Why don't Black people talk to each other? Why is everything related to Black students sent my way? Why am I the only one



Traumatic Slave Syndrome, Black spirituality, Ebonics, food deserts, etc. The list was endless. All of the questions I had been holding were being answered and this information led me to set some guiding rules for my daily interactions and survival of my career.

MY ANCESTORS DIED FOR ME TO BE IN A CLASSROOM. I HAVE A DUTY TO MYSELF AND THEM TO ACHIEVE OUR DREAMS.

Rule #1: Always do your work well and make decisions accordingly.

White students party and party hard. However, they are also strategically “selfish,” doing anything to make sure their long terms goals are achieved. As a Black student on my college campus, I figured all the White students were blowing off their work when partying. Therefore, I adopted a nonchalant attitude about my own work as well. My grades slipped, landing me on academic probation for the first time in my life. It was a visit to Spelman College that enlightened me to the error of my ways. It was the first time I saw my same classes being taught with textbooks written by Black faculty and countless facts about Black history almost hidden in every crevice of the campus.

My ancestors died for me to be in a classroom. I have a duty to myself and them to achieve OUR dreams.

When I returned home I started to use the resources I was paying for. I read my college catalog, met with academic counselors and professors regularly, attended career-planning workshops, and sat on student panels educating the community about student life from my perspective. Yes, I still partied; however, I made sure my grades did not suffer. I rebounded from a 2.6 GPA per term to a 3.7. Never in my life had my grades been so high.

Rule #2: Utilize resources and the wisdom and guidance of your networks.

With my volunteerism around campus and advocacy for my university, I became an unofficial ambassador, which fortunately forged the path to a position as an admissions counselor after graduation. There were two other Black women in the office and both became critical resources. Together they challenged me to obtain my Masters degree and cross-train myself in other content; as a result I realized that I wanted to provide the same support to other Black students. With that confidence, I grew in my career and moved to another university. In my new environment, I was the only Black female in the office and, thinking back, I was their “token.” I ended up being their indicator of “diversity,” helping other staff and potential students feel included. Being that I was the Black face of the organization, they sent me to lots of professional development; I was voted into

in my department sitting on a minimum of five work committees? Why is there a high turnover of highly qualified Black people at work? Why am I an outcast if I don't go to office parties?

A friend suggested a couple of books to read: *The Isis Papers* and *The United Independent Compensatory Code*. They led me through history untouched in my classes, providing a deeper understanding of symbolism and human behavior. That took me down the path of Black history that opened my mind to Post

staff leadership roles, strategically placed on advisory committees, and encouraged to attend community engagement activities, like a program with the Oakland Chamber of Commerce. I used every one of those opportunities to propel me forward in my career.

Rule #3: Always conduct your own research and come to your own conclusions.

I became a bit of a radical with all of the information I was reading and taking in. Picture me: curly wash and go, Africa-shaped earrings, dashikis on casual Friday, with anti-racism books glued to my hands while walking the halls and headed into meetings. I got to the root of things. I saw White behavior at work so differently. I started having an interesting stream of internal thoughts:

No wonder I didn't get the promotion I applied for a second time.

Explains my presence on so many damn committees...

You are not allowed to use Black slang!

The two books I mentioned completely rotated my “liberal-Californian-see-no-color” viewpoint. They gave me a clear definition of racism that I could not ignore. I attended conferences on race to learn more about higher education’s

stance on racial issues and to talk with other Black people about their racial experiences at work. I essentially came to the understanding that racism in academic institutions clearly did not end with the Civil Rights Act of 1964; rather, it has morphed to be microaggressive, causing me to question the truth of my reality. Now I probe for answers to bigger questions:

Why do organizations have diversity plans? Do they deal with institutionalized racism? What is ‘Social Justice?’ What is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)? Do I, as a Black person, have privilege?

I stopped fitting the system and began making the system fit me.

“RACISM IN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS CLEARLY DID NOT END WITH THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; RATHER, IT HAS MORPHED TO BE MICROAGGRESSIVE”

Rule #4: Be clear in your communication.

I never gave much thought to the variety of definitions for any single word. But some words, when used in mixed company, can be detrimental to your employment. Three words that are commonly used to reprimand Black people at work are unprofessional,

disrespectful, and insubordinate. They are loosely applied because they have so many interpretations.

You walked into the office without saying hello to me; that was disrespectful. I asked you to help unwrap ink pens; you responded no and that was insubordinate.

I have learned to pay close attention to the words being used with me and those used in reference to me. It has given me some power over what happens to me in the workplace, and allowed me to think about these situations with clarity, focus on facts, and evaluate what policies will provide me the most

it has remained tucked in my memory. Black people are assumed to be uneducated and unqualified. However, Dr. Pattel's quote is evidence of the idea that Black people work harder for less. It is one of the most frustrating things I have ever experienced.

I was hired with a degree higher than what was required in my department. Yet, a white person was hired while still completing the minimal degree required for the department.

THIS PROCESS GAVE ME THE POWER TO ADDRESS A SITUATION WITH A WHITE MALE BY FRAMING IT UNDER OUR ANTI-BULLYING POLICY (WINK) BECAUSE I KNEW CLAIMING RACISM WOULD GET ME NOWHERE.

I have become an expert at whatever I am in the room to learn, comment on, or lead. I have experience superior to what is required for my various roles. I make it a point to attend meetings having read agendas and supplemental materials ahead of time. I provide random data in a moment's notice. I do this because I am in competition with myself. I no longer care to dwell on how white people see me. I know more and work harder for the world to be 100 times better than the last time I touched it, so that my people, Black people, know I do this for them and only them.

support. This process gave me the power to address a situation with a White male by framing it under our anti-bullying policy (wink) because I knew claiming racism would get me nowhere.

Rule #5: Become the expert

*"I have my doctorate so that the white people know I am smart enough to be in the room."
- Dr. Anne Pattel Gray*

The quote above is from a podcast interview of Dr. Anne Pattel Gray, an Aboriginal Australian professor. I listened to it about five years ago and

Rule #6: Live with integrity.

*"Know what mountain you want to die on."
- Unknown*

I have learned how to fight for what is correct. I document conversations by taking factual notes and/or tape recording. I send follow-up emails after meetings to restate what was discussed and frame racist acts under indisputable policies and/or state and federal violations. I typically seek advice when my emotions may get the best of me. Over time, I have learned what to advocate for and what to leave alone. I make most of my decisions based on asking myself three questions:

1. Am I comfortable with the situation hitting the news and my name being attached?
2. If I had to make the same decision again 12 months or 10 years from now, would I do it again?
3. Is it worth me walking away from my job or organization because I believe I am being morally courageous and standing in my integrity?

When the answer to one or all three of these questions is yes, I start the next steps of the process. A majority of the time, I am met with positive outcomes. I place a significant amount of energy into the integrity of my work. At the end of the day, I have to answer to my heart and

continue living up to my expectation of pushing past fear.

Rule #7: You are resilient.

“The higher purpose in life is not the song and dance or the acclaim, but to rise up, to pull up others and leave the industry and the world a better place.”

- Viola Davis

I have 16 years of admission and recruitment experience. I was a mid-level director for 12 of those years. During this time, I consistently met or exceeded my recruitment goals, assisted my coworkers, and took on extra projects. A natural next step for my career was a senior level director. My division opened a senior level position and I applied for it. I was not even offered the courtesy of an interview simply because I never held a senior level title. If I could have turned red, I would have looked like a strawberry. I was so enraged, insulted, and embarrassed.

“One of the directors will eventually retire and you can apply for one of their positions,” I was told. I thought to myself: “Wait, I am just supposed to keep doing all of your dirty work and not get any rewards? Where they do that at?”

At that point, I was singing “Why You Always Lying,” breaking down into tears on a drive

into work. I decided to end my incestuous relationship with that department. I set a three-year timeline to leave the department or organization.

Refer back to Rule #2: Utilize resources and your networks’ wisdom and guidance.

I have never just done my job. I always take on “other duties as assigned.” For the entirety of my career, one of these “other duties as assigned” has been advising students of color working towards their college degrees. Approximately two years after setting my three-year timeline to leave my department, a more fitting promotion surfaced and I jumped on it! Now, I officially spend all of my work life assisting communities of color with achieving their college and career dreams. I made it to the mountain I am more than happy to die on.

Cue “6 Inch” by Beyoncé.



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Her deepest joy being a mother, Ché Abram has 10+ years of higher education experience, including extensive knowledge in the areas of enrollment, student services and retention. Her specialties include strategic planning and implementation; policy review and implementation; and organizational culture change.

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