



ROUND 1

Putting on the GLOVES



IN the early eighties, a street-hardened, 16-year-old kid named Michael Gerard Tyson was left in the legal care of his boxing manager and trainer Gus D’Amato after his single mother died. At that time, Tyson trained at the Catskill Boxing Club where Teddy Atlas assisted D’Amato in molding a young Tyson into the fearsome heavyweight champion he later became. D’Amato and Atlas helped Tyson perfect his signature “peak-a-boo” style of boxing in which he quickly slips his head out of range of his opponent and moves it from side to side to remain elusive while setting up his offense. Skills like this are what make boxing so fascinating to watch.

Remembering back to those early training sessions, Atlas once said of Tyson, “We used to have to pay sparring partners because he punched so hard that he knocked them out. Then every so often we’d get one that he couldn’t knock out.” When the latter happened, Tyson engaged in the “silent agreement” in which he would lean against his also-exhausted opponent giving both of them a chance to rest. Atlas blamed Tyson’s habit of making this agreement as immaturity, and he told Tyson to stop doing it. Atlas said to Tyson, “Stop making silent agreements. Because one day you’ll get a guy who won’t sign a contract.”

As a competitive weightlifter, athlete, and business owner, I’ve often thought about the correlations between sports and the fight for racial equity within corporate America. Specifically, I’ve noticed that Black executives inadvertently make silent agreements to be content with less, to not fight for what they deserve, and to fully support the demands of the corporate administration even when those demands conflict with their own community, culture, and conscience. Those who comply with these unwritten contracts with corporate America almost always find out the hard way that the other side hasn’t signed. Even though African-Americans may stay silent about the day-to-day racism they experience, and they may even

help ensure other Blacks stay on the “Black track” (the path that inevitably leads toward a managerial plateau), they are never rewarded. In fact, they come to feel like psychological contortionists who are betraying their true selves and their own culture to further what they think are their future interests, but with no real payoff.

Research conducted by McGill University’s Patricia Faison Hewlin shows that many minorities feel pressured to create “facades of conformity,” suppressing their personal values, views, and attributes to fit in with organizational ones. As Hewlin and her colleague Anna-Maria Broomes found in various industries and corporate settings, African Americans create these facades more frequently than other minority groups and feel the inauthenticity more deeply.

The major disconnect for Black men and women in corporate America is that they experience racism and micro-aggressions in the workplace every day, even as they are told that “everyone” is on board to combat these corporate conflicts. Many times, when Blacks point out race-related problems, they are punished in ways large and small by white group-think that seems to say, “We knew you would cause problems. We’re letting you be here. Isn’t that

enough?” A noted psychiatrist once summed it up this way: “Those Black executives in the potentially greatest psychological trouble are the ones who try to deny their ethnicity by trying to be least Black—in effect, trying to be white psychologically.”

These futile attempts to blend in play out in corporations across America, as Black men and women who are tired of battling micro-aggressions and flagrant discrimination at work simply make a silent agreement to stop fighting. Even those who don’t completely stop fighting still don’t fight with the same intensity they once did. Instead, they start throwing “don’t-hit-me” punches, because they are no longer trying to win, just mentally survive while waiting for the conflict to be over. Many promising Black executives leave corporate America altogether once they understand that they will never be able to win the ultimate prize: access to corporate C-suites and boardrooms.

An unfortunate majority of African American executives accept that they will be relegated to positions in race relations, community relations, or public relations while never being given opportunities to serve in meaningful positions in marketing, operations, finance, or information technology. This is not a coincidence.

It is a construct of predominantly white senior corporate boards and senior executives who excuse their racism by saying that Blacks are not qualified, not the right fit, lack the right personality, or countless other frustrating reasons designed to obscure the truth: They do not want to African Americans in their ranks.

AS OF THIS WRITING

- Fewer than 10% of senior executives that operate business units are African American.⁵
- Just 3.3% of all executive or senior leadership roles are held by African Americans.⁶
- Approximately 1% of board members in the S&P 500 are African American.⁷
- 37% of boards do not have a single Black member, according to an analysis by Black Enterprise magazine.⁷
- Fewer than 1% of Fortune 500 CEOs are Black.⁸
- Only 3 African American women have led Fortune 500 companies (SHRM, 2021).

Exclusionary tactics within corporate environments have had a devastating impact on the progress of Black America, and, ironically, have resulted in a huge loss of talent and innovation, immea-

asurable in its depth and breadth. Yet, while many African Americans choose to make a silent agreement after years of throwing powerless punches, this does not mean the fight is over.

After Mike Tyson stopped making silent agreements, he went on to be the undefeated heavyweight champion from 1987 until 1990 when he stepped into the ring against James (Buster) Douglas on a Sunday in Tokyo and reverted to past behaviors.

Commenting on the fight in which Tyson allowed Douglas to tie up his hands in clinches, Atlas said, “It was a silent contract. A free ride for the opponent, who often was glad to have it. This time, Douglas didn’t go along with the silent contract. He punched and made Tyson come up with something different.” Douglas knocked Tyson out in ten rounds, taking his title as he did.

African American executives cannot afford to make the same mistake. Like boxing, winning in corporate America is as much a mental fight as it is physical. It is imperative to understand the tactics used by corporate America to keep African-Americans down and fight with conviction, blow for blow, without making silent agreements that are bound to be broken.

WISDOM TO APPLY IN THE CORPORATE RING:

- “Stop making silent agreements. Because one day you’ll get a guy who won’t sign a contract.” – Teddy Atlas
- “Those Black executives in the potentially greatest psychological trouble are the ones who try to deny their ethnicity by trying to be least Black—in effect, trying to be white psychologically.”
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