FROM CAMPUS TO CORPORATION
THE CHALLENGE TO ADJUST

I looked at the personnel interviewer for the Chase Manhattan Bank that December day a few years ago and realized immediately what he meant when he said to me, "You know how to dress." I was wearing a navy blue three-piece suit. My shoes were shapeless and unobtrusive. I was dressed corporate style—conservative, styleless, dull almost to the point of invisibility.

Adapting was already an accepted necessity for me. I was so familiar with his world and he was so unfamiliar with mine. I knew precisely what he valued and what he approved of and what impressed him. By his comment, I knew that he understood very little about me.

Yet I was stunned by the corporate lifestyle—a vague phrase that somehow connotes how one's surroundings determine one's behavior and mindset. My attempt to adapt to this corporate munificence and grandeur (perhaps hauteur and stuffiness) often led to humorous or frustrating encounters.

Starting out as a new employee for an American corporate giant may well be as startling for today's young black college graduates as it was for me a dozen years ago. For sure, today there are many more blacks occupying meaningful positions in the contemporary corporate scene than there were in the sixties. And recently graduated blacks are said to be more sophisticated in their pre-professional exposure, having traveled outside this country at least once and attended the more prestigious colleges. But I suspect that the culture shock still exists, and that the bulk of young blacks entering the executive levels of American corporate structure find themselves overwhelmed at the challenge of adapting themselves to the corporate lifestyle with its peculiar values and priorities and insistence on compromise.

I offer my experiences of twelve years ago and those of recent graduates not only as a yardstick, but also as a basis for challenging today's young blacks: Can you really readjust this corporate world to allow for your own culture? Can you maintain psychic comfort despite the continual need to adapt?

On that snowy morning in 1966 when I was suddenly notified that I was to have lunch with a vice president on the 60th-floor dining room (a perk many blacks received in the sixties but now uncommon), I looked down at my shoes to discover they were lined with white marks from street salt. I dashed out to get a shoeshine. Despite his snapping and slapping, the bootblack couldn't save me. So as I stood on the elevator with the vice president and a young officer who had met us, I tried to cover the marks by twisting my feet into a geometrical impossibility—both toes pointing toward the rear. The shoes of all the others in the elevator were, of course, shiny, blazingly polished with various spit-

coats of cordovan, oxford and black.

When the elevator reached the 60th floor, I got off, and almost lost my footing from the buoyancy of the carpeting. I followed the vice president and the younger officer through a small foyer, past two uniformed, smiling guards, and then I took a quick right into the men's room.

There were ice cubes in the urinals. The towels were gigantic—thick and as large as beach towels. The doors to the toilet stalls were solid mahogany. Everywhere I turned I was reminded that this was a *different* men's room. The lather from the soap dispenser was hot, the toilets flushed with a smooth quietness, the floor was marble.

But in the decade of the seventies the clash resulting from different backgrounds or different lifestyles has gone far beyond the fascination occasioned by the contact with material affluence. It now focuses on the need for many blacks to adjust to a corporate lifestyle (read white) as they had not previously had to do.

For example, a woman trust representative for a Rhode Island bank tells me that the biggest adaptation she has had to make since joining the bank six months ago is the required contact with so many whites. "You don't deal with those you don't want to when you're in school," she says. "You pick your friends, who usually are people you feel comfortable with, and you stay away from others." A Brown University graduate, she feels that she is forced to adjust to everyone in the corporate setting: there are no options for interacting.

A young data systems manager in Georgia describes the unease of this one-way adjustment: "Dealing with what I perceived as a white lifestyle was a big challenge for me," he says. "It's the difference in the way my coworkers dress, the way they talk, even the things they like to do at lunch time or after work. You could be the only black among six whites at a dinner," he explains, "and you go to some cornball restaurant and listen to them discuss some corny stuff. They're interested in things that I'm not and I'm sitting there bored as hell, knowing I've got to deal with it." So he finds himself listening to conversations about boating and skydiving when he'd rather be assessing Grover Washington's newest album or playing ball with the fellows.

"It's definitely a burden socially," echoes a black analyst with Union Carbide in upstate New York for less than a year, when she is asked about adjusting to the interaction. Here is the perspective of a single black woman whose professional contacts are limited mostly to whites, primarily as a result of her job location.

One consequence of this confrontation of dissimilar cultures is that the black executive finds himself compromising, adapting and adopting some of the characteristics of his white peers in order to smooth the road to corporate advancement, sometimes at the expense of his personal life. So my friend in Georgia learns to relate by smiling or drinking a beer now and then. And then he discovers he must compromise even more. "You learn to live in an all-white community," he says, "and that leads to the danger that

such an adjustment can lead you to forget the black community. We, as executives, have to understand that we've got to fight to stay a part of the black community."

The Georgia systems manager, a graduate of Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey, tells how he wanted to participate in the Big Brother program, a role model development program in his area of Georgia. But because he opted to live close to his job—30 miles from the nearest black community—he was forced to give up the Big Brother involvement which would have required a 60 mile drive on each visit. He believes he is being dragged away from the black community and that too many black executives have been dragged away without hope of return. Their recourse is to seek out other means of relieving their ethnic alienation.

And so the salient aspect of compromise becomes the need to reconcile personal priorities with professional expectations. "You may want to live in a certain area and work a certain number of hours and do some specific things for yourself personally," says the Georgia executive, "but these wishes may conflict with the company's plan. They may want you to be more mobile and move where they want you to go. They want you to deal with people their way. They want to manage your career and may move you to an assignment you don't particularly like." But anybody who thinks he's going to manage his own career is hit with a rude awakening, insists the data systems manager. "You don't have to allow the company to control your life totally," he says, "but you certainly can't manage it totally yourself."

The trust representative in Rhode Island agrees, declaring the need to compromise in the business world is a phenomenon which doesn't have a direct parallel on the campus. "Your professors in college do control your destiny to some extent," she says, "but nothing like the scale of assessment that goes on in business."

Another recent graduate talks about adjusting to the sudden demanding professionalism as an abrupt coming to terms with the fact that, unlike the academic scene, flunking an assignment in the corporate world may have severe long-term repercussions. "Poor aptitude in some areas may stick with you for the duration of your tenure with a corporation," she says.

The manager in Georgia supports that contention, advising: "In a company you might say the wrong thing and twenty years later it could destroy you. You learn to think before you commit yourself on paper or through personal contact."

But then where is the attraction? What are the benefits? How does one gain satisfaction in an environment that fosters such a reordering of one's mindset, particularly when the reordering process seems to grow even more complex over the years?

The answers to these questions have changed considerably since my first day on Chase Manhattan's sixtieth floor. As I remember it, while we waited for a table the young officer led us to the wall of glass facing south. It was a magnificent view of lower Manhattan. We looked down on the city until we were summoned by a waitress to be

seated. In front of me was a plate and saucer, a large thick napkin laid flat and on which was an array of forks. On the other side of the plate were a knife and a confusing assortment of spoons. The Schrafft's waitresses skated around and about us, pouring water out of sweating pitchers. The toothpicks, wrapped in paper of course, were mint-flavored. The silverware shone with an effulgence seen only at antique shows, and the plates, too, radiated like mirrors. The menu—a choice of *filet mignon* and other entrees which didn't attract my interest once I saw the steak—listed the calorie count next to each entry. And there were fresh stalks of celery, sticks of carrots, plump olives and sweet pickles sitting in bowls long enough to hold trout.

I was half-drunk with the splendor of Chase Manhattan around me, and as I took in this new world of gloss and glitter, I was determined to adapt myself to it. They had thrown the bait and I had bitten. In the same sense, black graduates of recent years, when considering the psychic rewards of corporate living, have learned to accept and appreciate the material affluence in general and the monetary rewards in particular as adequate returns on the emotional investment.

"There is no doubt that money is a great motivating factor," says the manager from Georgia. "They give you the good bucks and a taste of the good life and it's hard to leave it." He laughs. "You get caught up in that bag and you assimilate in order to enjoy the benefits."

Our program analyst in New York State has already opted to endure social aloneness in order to maintain her eligibility for an upcoming promotion and bonus. These material advantages are often linked to a cold appreciation of the valuable skills one has the opportunity to assemble as he or she progresses within the business world.

"I wasn't that interested in banking," says the woman trust representative in Rhode Island, "but the job opened up and I took it." After four months, she is convinced that there are—particularly as a woman in the trust management area—significant advantages to her learning as much as she can about this aspect of banking. She says that she will stay because she is convinced that mastery of the financial skills she is learning can do nothing less than enhance her value as a professional.

"It's more than just being a black professional and enjoying the ego rewards of that status," explains our manager in Georgia. "And it's more than holding a position that means something to you as well as the company. I think the satisfaction you get in that world comes from knowing that you are learning and developing personally, and that you can take those skills and apply them in other contexts." He adds, "You learn how to finance things and you learn how to motivate people and you learn how to give oral presentations. How can this be useless?"

"Sure I'll fit into the structure and subdue my personality somewhat if what I'm trading off for is some of that world of knowledge my employer represents," adds the analyst at Union Carbide.

So the culture shock exists still and the young black college graduate may be overwhelmed at the challenge of adapting to the corporate structure. But today's young executives seem convinced that you either bail out or change. You either understand the inadvisability, if not impossibility, of remaining a rebel or "totally black" as one manager puts it, or you don't.

One executive explains it this way: "You adapt to the corporate world, learn to live in those places where corporate headquarters are located and learn to live in a white community. You accept it, yet you complain about being away from the black part of town. But you complain less when you discover where the better school system is and for how much you can sell your house if it is situated in a white neighborhood if you are transferred."

"In business, knowledge alone doesn't count. You've got to play the game," says our Georgia executive. And that means adapting—a process which young blacks are undergoing with increasing frequency. Just as I sat and took in that new world of Chase Manhattan and decided that, despite my initially inauspicious entry into the interior—I now confess to putting my roll on the wrong saucer—it was a landscape that I found attractive.

Where is the difference today? Despite being mistaken for messengers in the corporate elevators; despite being questioned when they support the promotion of other blacks; despite feeling they have to perform twice as well as their white counterparts; despite being put in the position of constantly having to adapt to another world and its values, the young black executive perseveres. The executive discovers that you don't readjust the corporate world to allow for your culture at all. You adapt to its world and run with the goodies.