Avoiding Isolation When You're the Only Minority

Denene Brox, for Yahoo! HotJobs

Despite advances in corporate diversity initiatives, there are times when minority employees have that "Lone Ranger" feeling on the job.

Make Connections

According to Sondra Thiederman, author of "Making Diversity Work," the key to avoiding feelings of alienation, whether at a small or large company, is to find ways to connect with your coworkers.

"Begin to focus on what you share with your colleagues, rather than how you differ. Race and gender are just one aspect of who we are," explains Thiederman.

"We all have dozens of interests, values, and priorities which are very likely held by others in the organization. Reach out to people, have conversations and be open with what you care about. Sitting next to you just might be a colleague of any color with whom you can form a genuine friendship."

Avoid Speaking for All

Another key in avoiding isolation is to resist any urge to be the "spokesperson" for your race or gender even if you feel pressure to act as one.

"Individuals who represent a minority group on a team or in an organization run the risk of being seen as symbols of their particular category rather than as individuals," says Robert Rodriguez, assistant dean of the Graduate School of Management at Kaplan University. "That is why minority employees should resist any pressure to be an 'expert' on all issues related to their race or ethnic group. Don't make educating others about the unique aspects of your cultural or ethnic heritage or overcoming stereotypes your sole focus."

Address Incidents With Professionalism

Even if you've made your best effort to be seen as an individual, discrimination may still rear its ugly head. If a situation arises that you feel is inappropriate, you need to address it with professionalism -- not heated emotions.

"The first step is to take a beat so that emotions can settle down," says Thiederman. "Even a couple of hours will give you a chance to collect your thoughts so you can recount the incident accurately."

"Second, find out who is the appropriate person to approach, such as a manager or someone in human resources," she says. "Talk to someone who is trained to handle such
situations with confidentiality, tact, and fairness for all concerned."

"Your main concern should be delivering superior results to quench any doubts about your ability," says Rodriguez.

**Check Your Perspective**

A lack of diversity isn't necessarily a bad reflection on the company. A number of factors could be at play, such as a small staff.

Precious Kirk, vice president of creative affairs at Emerson Consulting Group in Everett, Massachusetts, is the only African American female on a staff of 10.

"Working within this company I do not have a problem being the only minority. We work so closely together that it becomes a situation in which I really don't think about it too much," says Kirk.