

FINANCE

Banking while black: How a new generation of leaders is overcoming a legacy of discrimination and mistrust

FINANCE

Who needs economists? The real way to tell we're in a recession is that Subway's \$5 footlong is back

COMMENTARY • RACISM

We can't breathe at work, either: John Henryism and the health impact of racism

BY **RICHARD J. REDDICK**

June 19, 2020 7:00 AM CDT



John Henryism explains why black professionals have to work harder to overcome systemic racism in the workplace.

PEOPLEIMAGES/GETTY IMAGES





Like many black people, I have spent the past weeks reflecting and continuing Martin Luther King Jr.'s [beautiful struggle](#) of working toward dismantling racism and antiblackness, spurred by the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others. During a march last week, a colleague talked about all the spaces they were a part of: community organizations, social justice collectives, professional obligations, and work. I looked around at my fellow black faculty and administrators and realized we were all doing the same high-impact, but also high-emotional-toll, types of activities. But at the same time, we were attempting to keep all the plates spinning in our chaotic professional lives in a manner that exceeded that of our nonblack peers.

Years ago another colleague of mine mentioned the term “John Henryism” to me. I knew the name from the folktale (one of the few with a black hero): John Henry is a steel driver who races a drilling machine to bore out a tunnel. He defeats the machine, only to die immediately from a heart attack from overwork.

While the story is celebratory and heralded in [songs](#), [films](#), and [comic books](#), John Henry's death is a chilling reminder of the cost black people pay “racing the machine.” In 1983, [social epidemiologist Sherman James observed this phenomenon](#) among working-class black men, who responded affirmatively to [questions](#) such as: “I like doing things that other people thought could not be done,” “It is not always easy, but I manage to find a way to do the things I really need to get done,” and “I feel that I am the kind of individual who stands up for what he believes in, *regardless of the consequences*.” (emphasis theirs) These men suffered greater psychological and health problems such as heart disease and hypertension.

James's concept can apply to black professionals combating systemic racism in the workplace. Many black professionals are [hyperscrutinized on their credentials and performance](#), driving them to not only [work harder](#)—but also to be “[twice as good, to go half as far](#),” as Michelle Obama wrote in *Becoming*. It's evident in popular culture:

FORTUNE

[SEARCH](#)[SIGN IN](#)[Subscribe Now](#)

The hypersurveillance and scrutiny also affects the status of [other, and future, black people in the organization](#) when they're compared to other black people (and [mistaken for them](#), despite differences in appearance and personality).

This moment of activism brings excitement and possibilities of lasting change. Black professionals are reporting and presenting, talking to the media, and engaging in community service as their other work responsibilities continue, [without additional](#)

compensation. How do we guarantee that black leaders remain healthy as systemic racism works to erode their capacity?



One obvious strategy is ensuring that **antiracist work is not placed solely on the backs of black professionals.** Organizational heads should lead from the front: By **modeling personal commitments to individually and organizationally dismantling oppressive structures,** they resist implications that only black people can lead efforts.

Another step is certifying that workplaces promote mentally and physically healthy lifestyles for all—while simultaneously noting the unique stressors for employees who are black, indigenous, or people of color. In organizations with small numbers of black professionals, all must understand the pressure of being the “**only one**”—and commit to internship, hiring, and retention plans, as well accountability to them.

Resource groups (also called support groups) assist black professionals in finding community in organizations where black employees are scattered across the institution. Resource groups should be well funded for community building—and their leaders should have direct access to leadership to bring concerns to the forefront as they evolve. They also can serve as networking spaces for mentoring relationships to develop.

Last, those who evaluate and support black professionals must commit to using **non-biased rubrics** to assess progress. Professional advancement cannot depend on gut feelings or **homophily** (the similarity one has to those in leadership). Instead,

transparent and equitable benchmarks that all can achieve should be the mark of institutional advancement.

Leaders should beware of professional development requirements that mandate out-of-pocket expenditures or unpaid work, which advantage those with access to additional resources. Funding and release time should be available for all who are interested in these opportunities, particularly those who have been historically marginalized.

To ensure that the undeserved, unnecessary deaths of George Floyd and other black lives are not in vain, organizations must commit to [long-term planning and action](#). But this should not be at the expense of the physical and emotional health of black professionals in organizations. John Henryism is a warning to leaders that black professionals, too, can't breathe.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of [James A. Wilson, Jr.](#)

Richard J. Reddick is an associate professor and associate dean for equity, community engagement, and outreach for the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin, where he also holds courtesy appointments in the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies, the Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis, and the Warfield Center for African and African American Studies.

More opinion in Fortune:

- PepsiCo CEO: “Black Lives Matter, to our company and to me.” [What the food and beverage giant will do next](#)
- Small businesses: Brace yourselves for a [caregiving crisis](#)
- [Missing and murdered Native Americans](#): How to combat the worsening crisis in the U.S.

- Why a person of color should be [the next Treasury secretary](#)
- Why COVID-19 is [a wake-up call for sustainability](#)

Sponsored Video by **PROGRESSIVE**



She's not the maid, she helps you save on home and auto.

Get a Quote

Video Ad by [dianomi](#)

Sections

Automotives	The Ledger	Health	Retail
Careers	Venture	International	Sports
Design	Finance	Leadership	Technology
Executive Travel	Energy & Environment	Lifestyle	Commentary
		Luxury	

Customer Support

- [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
 - [Customer Service Portal](#)
 - [US Privacy Policy](#)
 - [Terms of Use](#)
-

Commercial Services

- [FORTUNE Knowledge Group](#)
 - [FORTUNE Branded Content](#)
 - [Fortune Data Store](#)
 - [Fortune Conferences](#)
 - [Advertising](#)
-

About Us

- [About Us](#)
 - [Work at Fortune](#)
 - [Behavioral Advertising Notice](#)
 - [Terms and Conditions](#)
-



[California Privacy Rights](#)) | [CCPA Do Not Sell My Information](#) | [Ad Choices](#)

FORTUNE is a trademark of Fortune Media IP Limited, registered in the U.S. and other countries. FORTUNE may receive compensation for some links to products and services on this website. Offers may be subject to change without notice.

Quotes delayed at least 15 minutes. Market data provided by [Interactive Data](#). ETF and Mutual Fund data provided by [Morningstar](#), Inc. Dow Jones Terms & Conditions: <http://www.djindexes.com/mdsidx/html/tandc/indexestandcs.html>.

S&P Index data is the property of Chicago Mercantile Exchange Inc. and its licensors. All rights reserved. [Terms & Conditions](#). Powered and implemented by [Interactive Data Managed Solutions](#). | [EU Data Subject Requests](#)



Sponsored Financial Content

dianomi



Dr. Ron Paul's New Video Message Says Every American Needs to Prepare

Stansberry Research



How One 29-Year-Old Trader is Quietly Making Over \$1,000,000 In 2020

RagingBull



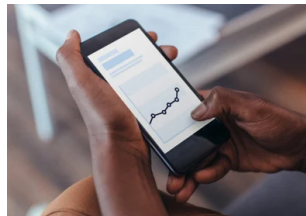
This device could mint 5x more millionaires than any other industry.

Banyan Hill



This Marijuana Stock Could Be Our Next 10X Investment

The Motley Fool



How do I invest? Turn to the Nerds to get started.

NerdWallet



Round up to the nearest 10 points on purchases.

Citi Rewards+SM Card



Fintech with a face

FT with Banco Santander





Get Trusted Advice Backed by Personal Attention

Vanguard Advisers, Inc.



2 Times Why You Should Not Tap Into Your Home Equity

From Merrill



10 Credit Cards That Can't Be Beat In 2020

NerdWallet

Rankings

40 Under 40

Most Powerful Women

100 Best Companies

World's Greatest Leaders

Fortune 500

World's Most Admired Companies

Global 500

See All Rankings

