

Early is On Time, On Time is Late and Late is Unacceptable



The Locker Room

ALICIA B., DIRECTOR 10 YEARS IN PR AND ADVERTISING

Candace was a sistah who couldn't be on time if Jesus came down from heaven himself and asked her. And here's the thing—it wouldn't have mattered IF what she did didn't reflect poorly on the rest of the sistahs struggling hard to make a good reputation for themselves at the company. There were no people of color in leadership. Director level was the highest any of us had ever managed to advance.

So, Candace showing up late made the rest of us (3 in total) seethe. Of course I was the one nominated to "Have the Talk," with her. It went something like this:

"Hi Candace, are you available for lunch today? We haven't connected in a while, wanted to see if you have time—if not today, let me know when. My treat, of course!"

"Oh, well if it's your treat, then yes, I'm free today."

At the restaurant we caught up about work, our personal lives, and all that. Then I just came clean.

"Listen, I wondered if I could talk to you about something?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"I've been in a couple of meetings with the Executive Team and they've made some not-so-flattering comments about your *chronic tardiness*." Her head snapped back.

"Who said that?!"

"Doesn't really matter. What matters is the perception that's being floated out there about you. I didn't know if you were aware, and I thought you should be."

"I want to know who said it?" I placed my napkin on the table.

"So that you can do what? Confront a member of the Executive Team? C'mon now."

"Yes! Whoever it is needs to be checked. Smearing my reputation—"

"Is it true?"

"What?"

"Is it true that you're chronically late?"

"No!"

"You were 5 minutes late for the team meeting Monday."

"That was just 5 minutes. The meeting hadn't even started."

"The meeting start time was 8:00 am. You arrived at 8:05, and everyone watched you come in."

"Yeah, well, I couldn't find parking, and—"

"You were late for the Company Earnings Call."

"Why is what I do impacting the rest of you guys?"

"I couldn't find the dial-in number. I wasn't reporting out on the call anyway —" Candace shifted in her seat.

"Rick was the one who called attention to your chronic tardiness."

"Rick?! He's late every day!"

"He's also a Senior Vice President. He's already paid his dues. And you have no idea how late he's staying or what other things he's doing."

"He's supposed to set the example."

"No. You're an adult. Responsible for your actions. You're supposed to manage your brand, Candace." She folded her arms across her chest. "Here's the thing: Your actions impact the rest of us."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, when you're late, you make the other Black employees look bad. We can't afford to give them any reason to question, doubt, or second-guess us. Being late is a stereotype that they're quick to point out and use against us."

"Seriously, Candace? How many times have you been called Alicia? I can tell you I'm called Candace, or Tanisha, or Lisa at least twice a day."

"*You all look alike.*" She mumbled.

"Exactly."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea people were watching me so closely."

"You had no idea?" I say. "Not only are they watching you, but they are documenting everything you—we—do. Trust and believe." Her eyes widened. "What can we do to support you? You've got to change the narrative about your brand."

"The narrative about my brand?"



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"Yes. We need the Executive Leadership team to see a stark change. We need to rebrand you. What do you need from us to help?"

"Nothing. I can—"

"Then why haven't you?" I look her in the eyes. "If you can."

Silence. "If I can make a few suggestions. Things I do to help me." She nods. "First, your new motto is early is on time, on time is late, and late is unacceptable."

"I—" I hold up my index finger.

"You must arrive at meetings 10 minutes before start time. That means, if it takes 30 minutes to get to the meeting place, you leave an hour before. Now you have 30 minutes for drive time, 15 minutes to park, and 5 minutes to walk to the meeting to arrive there 10 minutes before the meeting starts." Candace sighs.

"It means you put the dial-in number on your calendar and dial in 10 minutes before the conference call is scheduled to start. No more cutting it close, Candace. Best practice: Arrive early so that they see you arriving early. That's the only way you're going to change the narrative around your brand."

"Ok. Ok. I can do that. I'm sorry I've put you guys in a bad way."

"It's all good. That's what we're here for. To support each other."

"I appreciate that. And you. And this." Candace drops her head.

"Girl, we all have been through something in this place. Just get your shit together. Before they use it against you to let you go."

"I need my job."

"I know you do. So do what you have to to keep it." I smile. "And don't be catching no attitude if one of us happens to stop by your desk to pick you up for a meeting...or two."

"I don't—"

"Child, hush." I roll my eyes. "When you start arriving on time on your own, you'll stop getting an escort. But until then, this is more about us and less about you."

Fast forward 6 months, and Candace made a drastic change. It took a lot of effort on her part. She had gotten used to cutting it close. But I checked in with her the first 3 weeks and helped her rework her calendar.

"Why are your meetings back to back? This is going to have you running across the building trying to make it to the next meeting. Build in buffers around your meetings. Give yourself 10-15 minutes. If you can, give yourself 30 minutes in between each meeting. If you can't, then strategically plan them. Have them both in the same conference room. That way, you don't have to leave."

Candace started arriving to meetings early. Partially because we did swoop by and pick her up. But after a couple of weeks, she got into the habit all on her own. And as promised, we backed off.

Black women are already perceived to be inferior. We have stigmas like "Angry Black Woman" that we have to manage. We can't afford to give them anything to ding us on. Tardiness is an easy one to use against us, and to justify eliminating us. With a little planning and commitment, it should not be an issue. Sometimes things happen when you just can't avoid being late. But those instances should be the exception, not the rule.

What advice would you give a sistah coming out of college about perceptions?

I would reiterate that saying, "Perception is Reality." And in our case, it doesn't take much for them to accept the negative over the positive. Society, the media, and white people have laced us with a lot of negative stereotypes that, unfortunately, they believe. So, a part of us having to work twice as hard comes from them believing the negative (those stereotypes) over the positive.

Because we rarely get second chances or any latitude to be human and make mistakes, we have to work hard to build up stellar reputations. Even when we do, they are delicate and easily destroyed. What's that other saying? Your success lasts only as long as your next mistake. In other words, we can't rest on our laurels.

Because they are constantly changing rules to keep the playing field uneven and rigging the game to keep themselves in positions of power, it's common for them to inflate our shortcomings to use them against us.

Listen, no one is perfect. We're all human. We all make mistakes. I think what a young sistah coming out of college needs to understand is that she doesn't have the luxury of ruining her reputation over something that can be controlled. You can be on time. There are things you can do to make sure you are not late. That you can manage.

So, don't waste the two get out of jail with bail (we don't get out Free) on something that you can prevent.

Build a solid reputation for being trustworthy, for working hard, and having integrity, because invariably, there will come a time when all of that is put into question. And that's when you want to use that card.

Here's the other thing. If a person in a position of power perceives you negatively, he is likely going to share his perceptions with others. They, in turn, will look out for those traits/actions to confirm those suspicions.

All it takes is one tardy one absence, and that perception is confirmed. Nine times out of 10 you won't even know about it. It's like you're fighting a ghost you can't even see.

Is it fair? Of course not. But there's little you can do because not enough of us are in those closed door meetings where we can speak to each other's characters and advocate for each other. So, what happens is the perception is perpetuated and without you even knowing it, you're passed up for opportunities because someone or a group of people believe you're lazy, or lack drive and motivation.

When we tell you to watch your back, get in early, leave late, it's because we know they are itching to assign one of those negative stereotypes to your reputation.

My advice is to go into your role—go into corporate America—doing all you can to shine. Do all you can to demonstrate the opposite of what the negative stereotypes are of Black people, because perception is reality and these white people don't give us the benefit of the doubt. They are quick to slap a label on you that will be extremely difficult to get rid of. That's why a person typically has to leave the company if their reputation has been ruined. For the others, they can sometimes switch departments or divisions. It's a lot more difficult, if at all possible, for us to get a clean slate like that.

No, we've got to work hard to keep a good reputation because once they've decided you're a certain way, it becomes your reality. My advice is not to put yourself in that position to have to try and dig yourself out of that box of quicksand.

War Song: **Now, Miguel**