

How it feels to...

... be black in the corporate world

Raised as the only black child in the Shetland Islands, *Marcus Whyte* learnt harsh lessons about rejection and isolation — which prepared him for the monocultural City boardrooms he later worked in

There are some experiences in life that have such an impact on the mind that it tries to make sense of them by playing them over and over again. The film I play on a mental loop is a true story featuring me in a boardroom at the then leading accountancy firm Arthur Andersen.

It was in 2000 and I was one of about 30 newly promoted senior consultants invited to attend a promotion school. The group consisted largely of white men, a handful of women and one or two Asians. The Q&A didn't feel like it was going anywhere so I raised my hand to ask the senior partner a question: "So why aren't there any black partners in the firm?" He paused for a second and his face looked like it was thinking: "Shit! I don't know." But what he actually said was worse: "Well, erm, we do have quite a few Indian partners."

My reaction was profound. I left the room, went outside and just cried and cried for 30 minutes. It was as if all the feelings of

difference and unfairness, all the hurt and loneliness that is sometimes part and parcel of being black in a white world, came flooding out. The emotions just burst out of me.

To his credit, the partner later wrote to me and asked: "What do you want us to do?" The simplicity of the question revealed the complexity of a problem that still exists today. No single business can solve it because a generational shift has to happen that is about parenting, housing, schooling and real opportunities to broaden horizons and escape poverty. But the corporate world can learn to have collective empathy and help to bridge the gaps with initiatives such as mentoring and meaningful corporate-responsibility investment.

My experience is an extreme example, but there were other, more subtle, experiences that often left me feeling like an outsider. In the late 1990s, dress-down policies became fashionable in the corporate world. But in reality it was always just another "white" uniform of chinos, Ralph Lauren shirts and blazers. The African part of me has always loved colourful, quirky dress, but my bright orange V-neck tops were seen as adversarial. I wasn't following financial-services protocol, was the covert message in the sideways glances.

Then there was the issue of my big hair. When I started out as a headhunter, I chose to wear my Afro loud and proud, a trademark that won me the nickname the Don King of recruitment. But I was taken aside several times by employers and told: "You need to cut your hair to win clients."

Nowadays, I run my own successful headhunting firm and sit across the table from CEOs and chairmen while placing consulting partners, chief operating officers, chiefs of staff and heads of strategy and transformation in £250K-plus financial-services jobs. I've not placed many black people into the top jobs — because there simply aren't any black people in the pool of talent to place. Despite that, I'm changing lives, and I pride myself on telling people the truth. If I don't think a job is right for someone, I'll tell them. People need to be happy and comfortable in their own skin.

I can see now that I tried to conform in the corporate world for too many years by wearing all the right clothes and saying all the right things. I want the people I place in jobs to be able to be themselves from the beginning. I wish I'd had that chance earlier in my life, especially growing up as the only black child on the Shetland Islands.

My mum died aged 69 last year. She made a massive impact on my life. Unusually, for a young woman growing up in the Shetland Islands in the 1960s, she trained as a teacher and ventured into Africa in her early twenties to teach in Botswana. She had a whirlwind romance with my dad, a civil servant, and I arrived a year later. But the relationship ended when I was a year old and she made her way home with a small child tucked under her arm. We arrived unannounced on my grandmother's doorstep. She let us in, but for three years refused to acknowledge me. Having a black grandson was not on the agenda. Even though I didn't



ODD ONE OUT Above: Whyte as a child with his mum (left) and a family friend in Lerwick, 1977. Right: as a headhunter he still has difficulty finding black candidates for the top jobs



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sport, becoming a champion schoolboy swimmer. I won a Scottish Schools silver medal for butterfly on the day Nelson Mandela was released from prison. After school, I made my way to Loughborough University, where I studied banking and finance.

Despite the teacher's barb, I've managed to date some girls over the years — most of them black — and also returned to the land of my birth for a reunion with my father. He's remarried and I have two black brothers, but I'm not interested in connecting too deeply. The reality is, I've constantly lived in environments where I'm the odd one out. I've always seen myself as black but sometimes it feels as if — unlike in the US — there is no united front for Africans in the UK. You are either black Nigerian, black Ghanaian and so on. So at times the predominant feeling is one of loneliness. I've been a pioneer, but not by choice.

So are there solutions for bringing black people into the boardroom? We need to begin by having more conversations and taking more cues from the US corporates and boardrooms, where diversity is more incorporated and publicly promoted. Where there is racism in the US, it's more obvious. In the UK corporate world, it's under the radar.

My company's tagline is "Search Within". I'm still on that journey. To get where I am has taken a lot of work and there have been a lot of bumps. The colour of my skin has shaped my life, but I guess it really is what's within us that makes us stand out. When I'm looking for the next corporate leader, I can bet that all the candidates will have the same skills. What is inside will make them different ■

Interview by Sharon Hendry
Marcus Whyte is the founder and managing partner of Zyna Search; zynasearch.com

have language for difference then, I knew what it felt like.

Eventually there was school. For me, there was no privileged pre-grounding for the corporate world on hallowed rugby pitches or in well-connected classrooms. In fact, I almost didn't get the opportunity to go to primary school. The teacher told my mum I was stupid because I didn't know my alphabet and kept me in the bottom class.

Publicly, mum went in to bat for me. Privately, she told me: "Marcus, you will have to be twice as good at whatever you

do and work twice as hard." Even though I was only five, I knew the subtext of her concerns.

I learnt my alphabet in a week — but then the jokes started.

"Marcus Whyte is not white", was a theme. Later, as a teenager, I attended a social-science class where the teacher asked the girl sitting next to me: "Would your parents be happy if you took a black man home?" Sheepishly, she spoke the truth: "Not really, no." In that moment, my adolescent world fell apart. I thought: "F***! How will I ever get a girlfriend?"

I got through tough times with

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The number of black CEOs in the FTSE 100