

Crain's New York Business
Published: 04/11/2005
Section: Workplace

Page: 11

Story type: current Keywords:

Subject: Economy, Business and Finance Matter: Financial and Business Services

Photo Caption: **Game face:** Richard Holloway's stony look hasn't helped him in recent interviews for clerical jobs. * Job ready: Mr. Holloway is learning the art of the relaxed smile to find more stable work in an office.

Art Caption: How to Lose the **GameFace**

Art Credit: Source: Strive

' **Game face** ' provokes frowns in job market

Harlem jobs group counsels black men to drop protective mask before interviews

*Byline: **Samantha Marshall***

Richard Holloway doesn't feel angry. The part-time security guard says he's mellow most of the time. But when he catches his facial expression in his car's rear-view mirror, he begins to understand why his three interviews for clerical jobs over the past three months haven't gone so well.

"I must have a stony look on my **face** that people misunderstand," says the soft-spoken Queens resident.

Survival tool

The "**game face**," a defensive mask that many adopt to avoid trouble in subways and rough neighborhoods, is preventing thousands of African-American New Yorkers from landing corporate jobs, employment experts say. Ranging from a sullen demeanor to a death-ray stare, the look is often necessary to survive inner-city streets. But this tough stance has become habitual among many black men.

"These guys have to learn when to code switch when they go below 96th Street," says Robert Carmona, president and chief executive of Strive, a Harlem-based nonprofit that provides job-training workshops serving mostly black and Hispanic men and women struggling to find jobs.

The percentage of work-eligible black men in the city with jobs is especially low--60.7% in 2004, compared with 76.6% of white males, according to the Community Service Society, a nonprofit that studies poverty. City job rates of African-American men have long trailed those of white and Hispanic men.

The **game face** phenomenon "is actually the No. 1 thing that holds a lot of these young men back, because companies don't look beyond that street bravado," says Cora Daniels, a workplace expert and author of the book *Black Power Inc.* "The dirty secret when it comes to job interviews is that typically interviewers will make up their minds about someone in the first three minutes."

Lingering bias

Of course, there are many other social and economic reasons why black men are at a disadvantage in an employment market--including lingering racial bias. Sociologists and

psychologists warn that it's dangerous to single out facial expression or any other behavior that's specific to a culture.

“When you start focusing purely on these guys as the source of their own problems, you don't get the whole picture,” says Roderick Watts, an associate professor of psychology at Georgia State University who specializes in African-American studies. “Employers have to deal with their own fears,” he says.

The subject heats up Mr. Carmona, who grew up in the projects in Harlem and once struggled to find work himself. He takes a tough-love approach, and he lectures his Strive charges that they need to adapt if they want to compete for jobs with so many qualified applicants.

“When do we learn to own our stuff,” he asks a grumpy-looking group of 50 predominantly male black and Hispanic job seekers on their first day of a month long training course.

Public persona

The **game face** puts job applicants at a particular disadvantage in New York's service economy, he says. While other large cities have more manufacturing and industrial jobs, many entry-level jobs in New York involve working with the public in the retail, restaurant and banking sectors.

With a job placement rate of about 70% for Strive graduates, an attitude change appears to work. But not all who attend Mr. Carmona's department boot camp are convinced that a **game face** is bad for their careers.

“I don't see it as trying to be intimidating so much as determined,” says Delvon Hairston, a young man with a penetrating gaze who's been searching for office work since his release from prison four months ago.

Changing appearance

But most in the Strive class are trying hard to break the habit.

In Harlem, the look worked for Vincent Rogers, who has earned his living the past five years as a vendor on 125th Street.

“I don't want to be someone's prey,” says the former law firm clerk, who wants to soften his somber look so he can find a 9-to-5 job.

Mr. Rogers was among a handful of men at a recent Strive workshop called upon by the instructor to stand up for appearing sulky.

Another was Mr. Holloway, the security guard.

But he says he's eager to learn the art of a relaxed smile and is looking for more stable work in an office setting with the opportunity to rise through the ranks. His **game face** notwithstanding, Mr. Holloway says he's the one who feels nervous when he's being judged by a potential employer.

“I get so intimidated I just shut down,” he says.