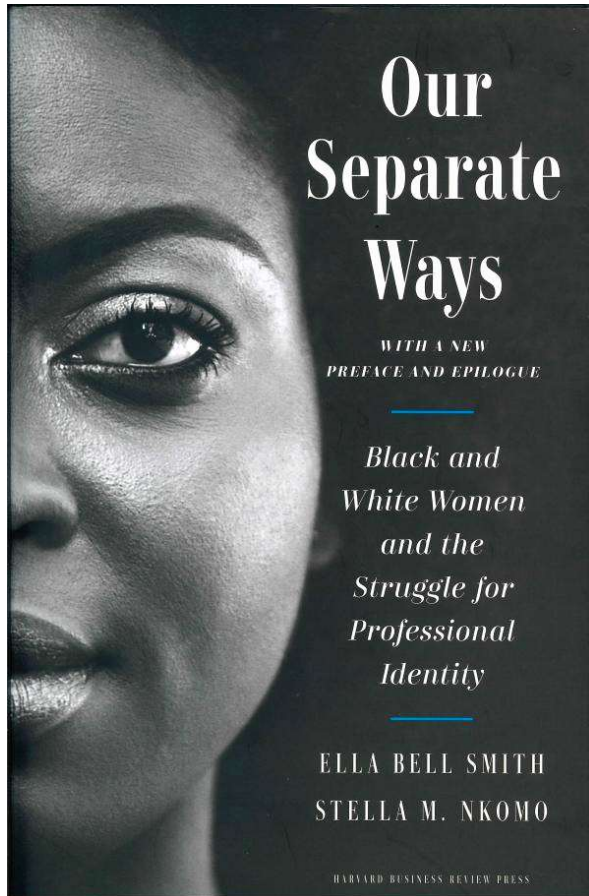


## AN EYE-OPENER:

# It's a much-needed road map for change

Posted: Sunday, July 3, 2022

*"Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity" by Ella Bell Smith and Stella M. Nkomo. Brighton, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2021, 354 pages, \$32.00 (hardcover).*



“In 2001, there were only six women CEOs in Fortune 500 companies, none of them Black,” Ella Bell Smith and Stella M. Nkomo note near the beginning of “Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity,” their powerful new analysis of the progress – or lack thereof – women have made in corporate America since the beginning of the 21st Century. “Black female managers were virtually invisible in corporate America, facing what we described as a ‘concrete wall’ built on the intersectionality of race and gender, compared with the ‘glass ceiling’ that constrained White women. Our research confirmed that both gender and race were key to understanding the career experiences of professional women, Black and White alike.”

“No sector of American society has been left untouched by the perfect storm of the anxiety of living with a deadly pandemic combined with polarized politics, economic disruption, and racial and gender disparities,” they continue a little later. “Corporations have to face the inconvenient truth that despite their efforts, progress for women has been slow and for Black women, it has stalled and

even regressed. Cynicism makes us wonder if the mega-storm we’re currently living through will be the jolt that catalyzes corporations to institute the kinds of changes require to accelerate the advancement of all women into senior leadership.”

Many readers have no doubt heard of the proverbial ‘sobering statistic.’ Well try this one on for size: According to the World Economic Forum, at the current rate of progress, women in the United States won’t achieve economic parity with their male counterparts for another 208 years. Yes, you read that right. Two more centuries. Enter Smith and Nkomo with a plan to significantly shorten that timeline while demonstrating how business and industry can benefit immensely – both financially and otherwise – by drastically changing course and enhancing the career trajectories of those they have marginalized for most of their existence.

One of the more extensively researched manuscripts I have had occasion to dissect in recent memory, “Our Separate Ways” has 26 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, 12 chapters arranged in three major sections, and the conclusion that form the main narrative. Part I, “Flashbacks” consists of the first four chapters; Part II, “Flashpoints” is made up of the following next six chapters. Part III, “The Self and the Other,” is comprised of the final two chapters. As

previously alluded to, this version is an updated version of their previous edition that was published some 20 years ago, which allows the authors to speak authoritatively about the accuracy of their conclusions and predictions and how their primary thesis has continued to evolve over the last couple of decades – something they address directly in the epilogue.

Honestly, this was an eye-opener for me – which is exactly the kind of book I like to read. In order to deal effectively with a challenge, you first have to understand the complexities inherently embedded in any system that promotes inequality. For leaders to be sufficiently motivated to advocate for needed improvement on any front, they first need to be able to comprehend the world – as much as they can – from the perspective of those adversely affected by the system. For instance, as an older, White male, seeing reality through the eyes of a Black female is exceptionally difficult. But Smith and Nkomo do a masterful job of educating those who desperately need to acknowledge and recognize the wrongs they are helping to perpetuate - consciously or unconsciously.

“Black women’s narratives suggest that even those who did not feel they had power to advocate within the company for racial justice found ways to channel their commitment to serve at the grassroots level,” the authors explain in “Making Change,” the ninth chapter and one I found especially instructive. “Some black women targeted their involvement to meet a specific need they felt was particularly troublesome, such as programs for inner-city youth or senior citizens. Much of this work is done during weekends and nights, particularly for women such as Eliza Washington, who are in lower to middle management positions and who may have less capacity to redirect the corporation’s resources.”

A consultant to Fortune 500 companies as well as several public institutions, Smith is a Professor of Business Administration at the Tuck School of Business; she is also the founder and president of Ascent: Leading Multicultural Women to the Top. Her ground-breaking work with women leaders earned her the Scholarly Contributions for Educational Practice Advancing Women in Leadership Award from the Gender and Diversity Division of the Academy of Management. Her previous books include “Career GPS: Strategies for Women Negotiating the new Corporate Landscape.” Nkomo is a Professor in the Department of Human Resource Management at the University of Pretoria. The founding president of the Africa Academy of Management and the winner of the 2017 International Leadership Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award, she is a highly sought-after consultant to organizations in South Africa, Europe and the United States.

In many respects, “Our Separate Ways” constitutes a much-needed roadmap for change. Smith and Nkomo go beyond the necessary first step of identifying the problem and alerting us to its deleterious impact on women, the companies they work for, and society in general. They provide concrete and evidence-based strategies for moving us in a more productive direction, including recommendations for how corporate leaders can change the broken status quo, the means to deploy more effective and inclusive leadership, and specific tools White women can use to move beyond allyship to become co-conspirators with Black women in the ongoing struggle for gender and racial equality.

“The real inclusion of Black women in corporate America requires a radical change, not just the incremental changes found in the majority of diversity approaches,” Smith and Nkomo assert in the epilogue. “Accelerating the path to corporate leadership for women, especially Brown and Black women, requires prioritizing opportunities for them to showcase their talents and unique leadership qualities in positions leading to the top.”

I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*