

## “Why Don’t You Wear Your Hair Natural?” and Other Things NOT to Say to Blacks

By Carolynn Johnson



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“**Y**ou don’t seem Black,” “You speak so well” and “You just lost your Black card” are all things that, unfortunately, are said to me on a regular basis. Can you believe that these comments are made in professional settings? Believe it—and the sad fact of the matter is there’s more.

I interviewed three people for this article—two Black women who chose to remain anonymous because they did not want to risk losing their jobs for sharing their experience about feeling like outsiders at work, and David Casey, Vice President, Workforce Strategies and Chief Diversity Officer for CVS Caremark, one of [DiversityInc’s 25 Noteworthy Companies](#). One of the women is a 46-year-old Ph.D. who attended an HBCU (Historically Black College and University). She is married with two children. The second woman has an Ivy League education, worked at one of the world’s most prominent financial institutions, and currently works at an Ivy League school.

What follows is a combination of things people who are not Black shouldn’t say to Blacks AND things Blacks shouldn’t say to other Blacks.



Casey

### COMMENTS

**1 “You are the HNIC [Head N-Word in Charge].” (Meant affectionately—usually said by one Black person to another.)**

First, I don’t care who you are—do not call me the N-word. Second, it is not a term of endearment by any stretch of the imagination and does not belong in our lexicon. There is no room for [reappropriation](#) with this word. NONE.

**2 “Why don’t you wear your hair natural?”**

First, please don’t think that how [Black women wear their hair](#) reflects the acceptance or rejection of their Blackness. There are other reasons: financial, medical or just personal choice.

It is not always an attempt to assimilate to white standards of beauty. Psychological tests show people most trust people who look like them. If that means wearing my hair a certain way in order to continue to provide for my family, there is no contest. I will march into a pharmacy or beauty-supply store and proudly ask, “Relaxers are down which aisle?”

Dr. Ella Edmondson Bell, author of *Career GPS* and Associate Professor of Business Administration at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, calls this “[bicultural stress](#).”

As a 33-year-old Black woman who is 4’10”, I would love to “go natural,” but I know I can’t. I know and accept that, before I open my mouth, the deck is already stacked against me. I cannot

change my skin color, age, gender or height. In the spirit of control what you can control, I choose to relax my hair. Real change happens from the inside out. You have to fit in to get in.

### 3 “When I see you I don’t see a Black person, I just see a man or a professional.”

“While the comment might be innocent, I don’t mind if you see me as a Black person,” says Casey. “Just don’t make assumptions on what you think that means. That’s who I see every morning when I wake up and look in the mirror. I don’t have the option or the luxury of seeing myself differently and I’m OK with that.” Nothing more needs to be said here.

### 4 “Are you from [fill in inner city here]?”

All Black people are not from the hood or ghetto nearest you. I grew up in an affluent New Jersey suburb and still live in one today. Please understand the implications of asking these questions. In his popular Ask the White Guy column, DiversityInc CEO Luke Visconti [answers a very similar question](#) from a reader and provides advice on how to handle situations like this.

### 5 “How did you get into that school—athletic scholarship, right?”

“Don’t assume that because I am 6’3” and Black, I can play basketball,” explains Casey. “I didn’t go to college to play sports. I was a full-time student.” While this question might be intended as a compliment, it can be taken as an insult.

## BEHAVIORS

### 1 Don’t assume I know every other Black person.

Just because we are the minority group in most corporate situations

doesn’t mean we all know each other. And, while we are on that subject, stop calling Obama *my* President (he is *our* President)—and Oprah is not my hero.

### 2 No fist bumping, please!

“Please do not attempt any multicultural or complex six-step handshakes—I’m fine with a traditional handshake,” says Casey. I couldn’t agree more. Quite frankly, it’s too much work and I’m not interested. Let’s try to keep it as simple as possible.”

### 3 Black folks, can we please greet one another?

It bothers me when I enter a room in a professional setting and there is unnecessary tension. Know that I am very excited to see you and am not out to get you. This is not *Highlander*—there can be more than one of us; no crabs in a barrel here. Let’s at least say hello. Break the ice.

### 4 Don’t assign me a certain level of Blackness or try to take my “Black card” because of the following:

- how I speak;
- what I do or don’t eat;
- where I did or didn’t go to school;
- whom I chose as my significant other;
- what company I work for;
- whom I voted for;
- where I live;
- who my friends are;
- what type of music I like.

### 5 Don’t act too familiar with me just because we are both Black.

Calling each other “brotha” and “sista” is not the best way to begin a professional relationship. Please don’t speak Ebonics to me—half the time I have no idea what it means. We need to respect the fact that race does not provide an automatic green light to kinship.

## HOW TO HANDLE THESE COMMENTS AND BEHAVIORS

1. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Ask yourself if the comment is coming from a place of cultural incompetence or if the person is just being mean-spirited.
2. Everyone deserves one free pass. (To be clear, this excludes comments such as Don Imus’ “nappy-headed hos.”)
3. Take the opportunity to ask a few questions to try and figure out what the person is really saying.
4. Don’t have a chip on your shoulder and automatically assume that someone is trying to be offensive. Try to take an approach that isn’t all about you.
5. Take the opportunity to educate the person and help them understand why so they don’t make that mistake again.
6. View these sometimes minor infractions as an opportunity to earn trust—for all parties involved.
7. Finally, choose your battles.