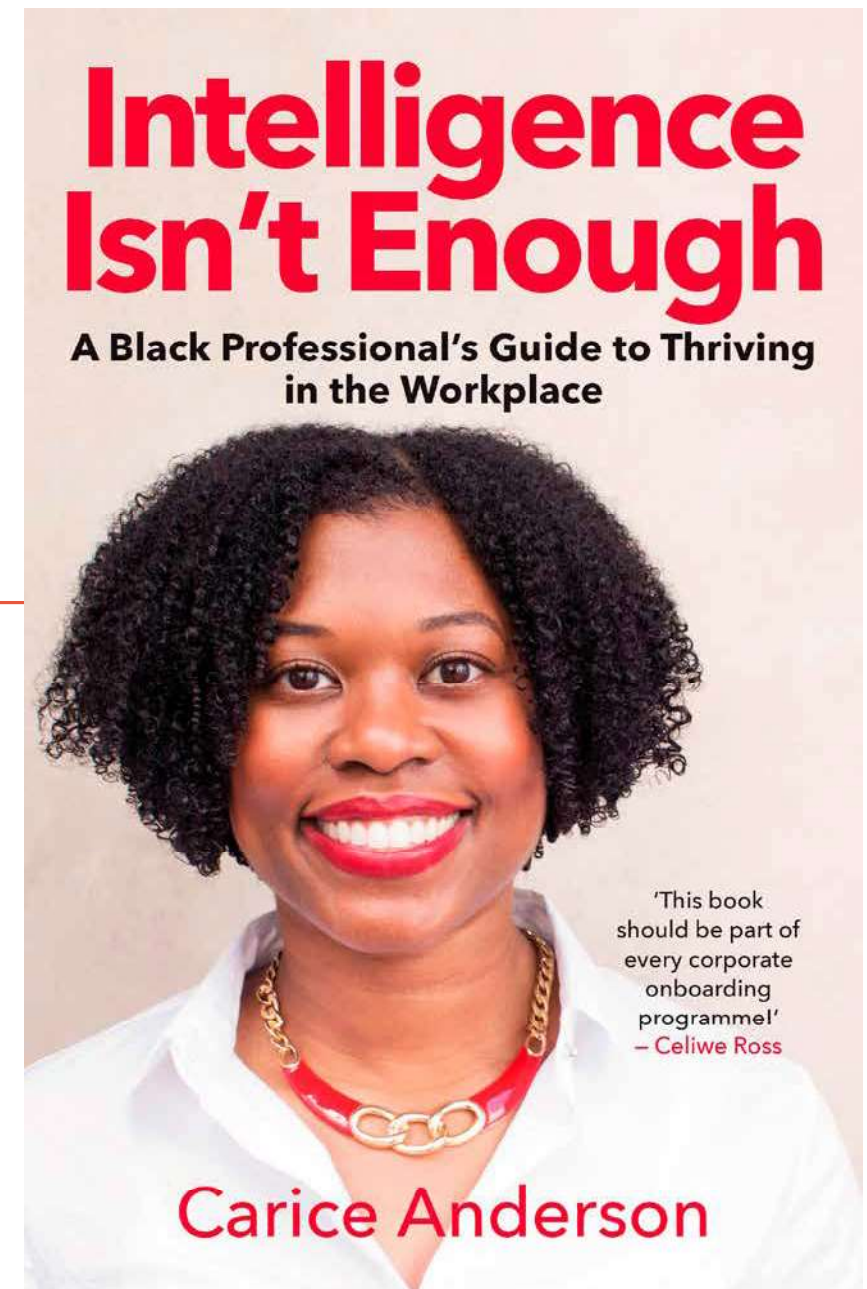**BY EUGENE YIGA**

Black in Business

Black graduates need more than just credentials to thrive in a new workplace, says professional development manager, coach, and consultant, Carice Anderson. She spoke to Eugene Yiga about her new book, *Intelligence Isn't Enough – A Black Professional's Guide to Thriving in the Workplace.*

Intelligence Isn't Enough – A Black Professional's Guide to Thriving in the Workplace by Carice Anderson is published by Jonathan Ball Publishers – R250.00

What were your early experiences as a young Black woman in the corporate world?

At Arthur Andersen, I worked in the human capital consulting practice and was the only Black consultant on the entire floor. This was quite a contrast from my previous company, so I was in shock. The environment was much more hierarchical, and I felt the gravity of the company and its history in a way I hadn't before. I felt a tremendous amount of pressure to prove that I (and any other black person, for that matter) deserved to be there. I felt I needed to represent all Black people and that my failure would reflect poorly on all Black people.

This is connected to your idea of the Black tax, which I've always understood differently. Could you expand on that?

Black tax can be understood in various ways, but I'm referring to it as the notion that Black people have to work and perform regular tasks twice as well as white people. For many of us, Black tax is real. It's unfair, and unfortunately, it affects us in ways that other people will never understand.

What is the root of all this?

Historically, Black people have been marginalised in certain parts of the world. For Black people, this implies that there are things we do not know or have not been exposed to. Even if you grew up in a place where Black people weren't marginalised, it's highly unlikely that you, as a young Black person, are a fourth or fifth generation corporate employee. I can just imagine how much more prepared I would have been, or how different my family's dinner table conversations would have been, had my grandfather been an employee or partner at Goldman Sachs. But he wasn't. He worked in a steel mill for 41 years. This lack of exposure definitely contributes to Black people's unfamiliarity with corporate

environments. It doesn't mean that Black people can't succeed in those areas, but it does mean that we have a lot of catching up to do.

How should Black people deal with racism in the workplace?

We have to acknowledge that not every instance of poor performance can be blamed on racism or bias on the part of our colleagues. We need to admit that we might not know certain things and that a lack of knowledge affects our performance and our relationships at work. Obviously, taking ownership of your organisation and career doesn't imply placing any responsibility for fixing a toxic, racist, and sexist environment on the shoulders of marginalised individuals. In no way should we absolve corporate leaders of their obligations as good corporate citizens to transform their cultures into inclusive environments where everyone – regardless of race, socioeconomic status, physical ability, gender, religion, or sexual orientation – feels like they belong and have an equal shot at success.

So, it is more about a joint responsibility?

Yes. I strongly believe there is a shared responsibility in a healthy professional relationship: the organisation has its part to play, and you have yours. While organisational change is absolutely necessary, it takes time, determination, and effort. In the meantime, work on bringing your best self to the relationship.

Your book talks about how every situation is an opportunity to learn something about yourself and other people. But even now, in 2021, many people still hold biases. Why is this?

I'd be lying if I told you that we live in a post-racial, post-gender world. And while some people aren't aware that they hold unconscious biases, we have to admit that everyone has beliefs about various social and identity groups. These biases often stem from the human tendency to organise the social world by category. If you're working in an institution where there aren't many people of colour or women of colour (especially in leadership), or not many of them have been successful historically, there's a high probability that you'll face biases. If you work in a culture where people see age as a proxy for knowledge and credibility, you might even face bias because of your age.

What kinds of environments are most at risk?

If you're working for a company founded in a country with a history of racial segregation, the chances are slight that the face of success at your workplace will be a person of colour. The chances are even slighter that it will be a woman of colour. Because you may not represent the success profile physically, people may unconsciously place you in the box of unsuccessful people. They may be less likely to forgive poor performance than they would from a person of another race. During my career, I've seen how poor performance by white people is often interpreted as a blip on the screen or a wobble. However, when a Black person performs poorly, people can quickly ask whether that person has what it takes to be successful. If you're working in a male-dominated field, the same snap judgments might be levelled against you if you're a woman.

These kinds of frustrations make a lot of talented Black people give up on corporate life altogether. What is causing this struggle?

In general, we as Black people struggle to brand ourselves. I think much of the reason has to do with the messages we've received about focusing solely on obtaining degrees, being more concerned with the team than ourselves, and believing that our work will speak for us. Conversations around our dinner tables don't touch on the topic of personal branding. But how can other people know what value we bring if we are never comfortable talking about that value? How can people know what we can do to help them if we never talk about it? Part of our challenge is that it seems arrogant to talk about ourselves [but] there's a big difference between confidence and arrogance. Confidence draws people in; arrogance repels people.

> ## We cannot control others' expectations of us, but we can be empowered enough to maximise our time, relationships, learning, and impact at an organisation.
> ### – Carice Anderson

What final advice would you offer young Black people in the corporate world?

Remember that every person who has ever been the first at anything – the first university graduate in the family, the first to get a postgraduate degree, the first to buy a house – had to face that daunting uphill climb. Nevertheless, they were able to achieve it despite their circumstances and the evidence that proved the contrary. All you can do is focus on your situation, your gifts, the value you bring, the effort you put in, and other factors you can control and influence. Don't let whatever it is you see or don't see in your working environment discourage you. You can be the first or one of the first. You can combat learned helplessness by mastering your craft, building your resilience, learning to be optimistic, being compassionate to yourself, and building your internal self-worth. **GIBS**