

BLACK ENTERPRISE

A Training Program Just For Women Of Color

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Between 2006 and 2016, women are projected to account for 49% of the increase in total labor force growth. There are a total of 8.5 million black working women, approximately 5.8% of the labor force, and by 2010 this number is expected to grow to 11.1 million. [To prepare both women and corporate America for the impending uptick on this demographic, Ella L. J. Edmonson Bell, an associate professor of business administration at Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, and Stella M. Nkomo, a University of South Africa professor, developed ASCENT: Leading Multicultural Women to the Top. Here they share their expectations for how their program will best serve the needs of the work environment.](#)

What makes ASCENT unique?

Bell: Our program is based on the notion that we won't change how women are developing until we work with all women. We must recognize that there's a chorus of women with different needs, experiences, obstacles, and ways in which they lead or we won't see a change in the overall status of women in the corporate world. ASCENT is about companies being able to harness the uniqueness that all women bring to the table.

What problems do women of color face In the workplace?

Nkomo: For our book, *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity* (Harvard Business School Press; \$29.95), we interviewed 120 white and black women and we contrasted their experiences. We found that black women don't face a glass ceiling; they are dealing with a concrete wall. Not only do they face sexism, but they face racism at the same time. They're invisible to opportunities, but when they make a mistake the spotlight is on them and if they do badly, another black woman may not get an opportunity.

What Is the goal of ASCENT?

Bell: ASCENT is about learning to bring all of ourselves into the workplace: race, culture, and gender. It teaches the women not to lose their voice and helps their companies learn to capitalize on their uniqueness. Our goal is to give women strategies to bring their chair up to the table. It might be a little bit more colorful, it might be a little bit bigger, it might be a little bit smaller, but companies need to pay attention because this is the workforce in the next 20 years.