



Succeeding in commercial real estate as an African-American woman - by Rachel Goldman

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It's no secret that there are millions to be made in commercial real estate. After all, commercial real estate (CRE) is a \$1.2 trillion market in the United States.

However, within this market, the vast majority of those earners are white males — less than 1% of senior CRE executives are Black women. Indeed, there is a stark inequality in access to the massive income potential brought by CRE.

In order to succeed, women of color may feel as if they have to bend to fit a certain mold, but once they enter the field, many find that they can bring some particular skills and nuance to the CRE market that their competition cannot. It is when they break this mold that a path to success is uncovered.

Breaking barriers to entry

Women of color are no strangers to experiencing some inner hesitation when entering the CRE market. Many feel they do not possess the experience, know-how, or sufficient access to the resources they need to succeed in the industry.

One way to break barriers to entry — be it a lack of resources or experience — is to seek the assistance of a trusted mentor. While such a stark lack of women of color in CRE can make finding a mentor challenging, once one is found, those mentors can help guide others over the landmines they themselves encountered.

Access to capital

Capital is necessary in order to secure properties, properly manage those locations, and scale any business. A certain former president once famously credited his father's "small loan" of \$1 million with helping him start his CRE empire.

Women of color, however, are often not in a position to borrow large amounts of startup capital from their wealthy parents. Access to resources is different for Black women in the real estate space. The lack of generational wealth in the Black community is well-documented, with a Black family holding only 25 cents to every dollar of a white family's as of 2022. This means that Black female entrepreneurs must be savvy and creative in order to build their wealth.

There have been some mentors and venture capital firms emerging in the Black community seeking to help Black entrepreneurs start their businesses. Yet, African American females in CRE remain such an outlier that even Black-centered VC firms may not have them on their radar. As such, it is up to the CRE entrepreneur herself to get her name out there and raise the capital necessary to start building a collection of properties.

Create a niche

To market oneself as an expert in the field and break through continued equity barriers, it helps to have expertise in a particular market niche. Perhaps you focus on restaurants or historic properties in a Main St. area that is being revitalized; maybe your focus is undervalued properties.

Making a name for oneself within a niche helps connect that name to that area of focus. Once you begin to prove yourself with large returns on investment, guiding buyers towards profitable locations, or leveraging networking to grow sales, your position in the industry will grow. As an added bonus, you will begin to move into the mentor position that you sought at the beginning of your career — showing other Black females in the commercial real estate space how it's done.

Pride and prejudice

There is significant pride to be had in being part of the “less than 1%” in the CRE community. Your success can speak volumes and pave the way for others, helping to close the gap between women of color in the space and other demographics.

The most important attribute you can bring to this business is an assertive attitude. Sticking up for yourself is essential to success.

The experiences of Black women in America are diverse, and inequality remains prominent in nearly every aspect of our lives. By daring to go where few others have gone before, we battle that inequality, while celebrating the strength of our diversity. Shirley Chisolm once said, “If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.” This is what the Black women in the CRE industry have done.

Every year, more and more women pull their folding chairs up to the table and start making deals. With a long-term mindset and eye on the ultimate goal, African American women can be a significant part of the new generation of commercial real estate success stories.

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