

Chapter 1: “I Don’t Want to Play the Game.”

You’re not wrong for saying it. In fact, I’ve said it too so I get it.

“I don’t want to play the game” usually comes from a place of exhaustion or principle. You’ve watched people get ahead by doing the most — kissing up to the right folks, shape-shifting in every meeting, code-switching like their life depends on it. And deep down, something in you resists. You know your work should speak for itself. You just want to do your job, keep your dignity, and be respected for it.

The problem is... that’s not how this works.

Corporate America *is* a game. A power game. A perception game. A game of influence, positioning, and unspoken rules. And here’s the part nobody tells you: opting out of the game doesn’t protect you from it — it just means you’re playing it without a strategy.

And when you don’t know the rules, you don’t get to win.

Let’s Redefine “The Game”

For a lot of Black men, “the game” feels like selling out. Like pretending. Like shrinking or co-signing stuff that doesn’t sit right. But that’s not the version I’m talking about. I’m not talking about sacrificing your values. I’m talking about

understanding the environment you're in so you can move smart, not bitter.

Every company has a culture. Every department has politics. Every room has someone who holds more influence than what's written on the org chart. Playing the game means knowing those dynamics — and using that insight to move with purpose.

It means:

- Knowing who gets listened to, and how they frame their ideas
- Noticing who gets promoted — and what they have in common
- Understanding the difference between visibility and performance

You don't have to be fake. But you do have to be aware.

Survival Mode vs. Strategic Movement

There's a big difference between *playing defense* and *playing to win*.

Survival mode is when you keep your head down, do your work, and hope it's enough.

Strategic movement is when you align your efforts with what the business values — and make sure the right people know it.

You can be authentic *and* intentional. You can be excellent *and* strategic.

You just have to stop assuming hard work alone will carry you.

Let me be real: I worked my way up fast. But it wasn't just because I knew how to build dashboards or deliver insights. It was because I studied who the decision-makers were. I figured out what problems they cared about. I learned how to translate

my work into business impact.

That's playing the game with integrity.

How to Play Without Losing Yourself

You don't need to change who you are — but you do need to shift how you move. Here are five ways to start:

1. Watch the Room Before You Speak

Every meeting is a power play. Observe how people interact. Who interrupts? Who gets interrupted? Who's asked to "circle back offline"? That tells you who's really running the show.

2. Master the Art of Framing

Your work needs context. Don't just say what you did — say what problem it solved. Say how it saved money. Say how it made someone's job easier. People promote results, not effort.

3. Build Strategic Relationships (Not Just Friendships)

You don't need to be everyone's favorite, but you do need allies. Mentors, yes — but also sponsors. People with pull who will put your name in rooms you haven't entered yet.

4. Pick Your Battles — and Win Them

You don't have to clap back every time you're tested. Learn to pause. Play chess, not checkers. Some wins come quietly — through your restraint, your patience, your positioning.

5. Be Good — and Be Seen

Don't fall into the "my work should speak for itself" trap. It rarely does. You have to speak for it. Communicate your wins. Document them. Share them in your 1:1s and performance reviews.

Final Thought: You're Not Here by Accident

If you've ever felt like you're playing a game you didn't sign up for, you're not alone.

But here's the truth: You wouldn't be in the building if you didn't belong in the room.

So don't run from the game. Learn it. Master it.

Then play it in a way that builds your legacy, not someone else's.