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OPINION

Why diversity works in the workplace

By Patricia Timmons-Goodson
SPECIAL TO THE POST

Remarks from an Aug. 16 conference in Chapel Hill sponsored by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission:

Throughout my 21-plus years as a judge in North Carolina, I have often 'brought diversity.' Stated another way, I have been the 'diversifier!'

My appointment by Gov. Jim Hunt brought diversity to the District Court bench in Cumberland County. When I came to the N.C. Court of Appeals in 1997, I joined one other female and one African-American male on the 12-member court. In 1998, I became the first African-American female elected by the voters to serve on that court.

And, following my appointment to the Supreme Court in February of this year, I have the distinction of being the first African-American woman to serve on the Supreme Court of North Carolina. In the more than 150-year history of the state's highest court, I am but the fourth woman to serve.

My presence on these courts clearly added diversity. With my presence came gender and racial diversity. And, with my participation often came a different view of the world, a different perspective.

No better. No worse. But different. As the American Heritage Dictionary defines the word, 'distinct in kind,' and 'having variety in form.' I brought life experiences unlike any others on the court at that time.

Our intermediate appellate court, the N.C. Court of Appeals, is now composed of 15 judges who sit in panels of three judges. Our highest court, the Supreme Court of North Carolina, is made up on seven justices. Having served now on the Supreme Court for the last seven months, I am convinced that the quality of the decision-making is improved or enhanced by the collective wisdom of the judges and justices sitting in a group.

Yes, three heads are better than one and seven heads are better than one! The quality of the decision-making is improved - not just because there are more persons involved, but the collective wisdom is greater because of the broader life experiences that these judges and justices bring to the court and to individual cases.

I would argue that whether it is an appellate court, or the corporate or governmental workplace, diversity is a very positive force - and a key ingredient in successfully achieving the goals of the organization.

In a workplace where everyone is the same, the same ethnicity, gender, educational background and socioeconomic standing, from where do the new ideas emerge? If everyone is cut from the same cloth, change is slow. Change leading to improvement is retarded by the complacency that often comes with sameness. I would suggest that it is very likely that any organization that does not encourage and promote diversity runs the real risk of becoming an organization with a very narrow perspective.

At no other time in our nation's history have we as U.S. citizens been so connected with the other nations and peoples of the world. And, while this connection is not always easy or comfortable, and sometimes not without conflict, we have benefited greatly from this global economy and global workplace.

One of the greatest benefits of the global economy is that a byproduct of this change has been - yes, diversity. Diversity of employees. Diversity of ideas. This, in my mind, is all so very exciting and it holds great promise for our country and its employers!

Of course, with this great promise that diversity brings, also comes great responsibility. Employers must accept the responsibility for creating an environment that does not give way to biases and prejudices. Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion or gender is not acceptable in the workplace. Such discrimination not only prevents individuals from achieving their God-given potential, but also deprives the workplace, the employer and society as a whole of the promise of unlimited potential.

As one of my favorite literary figures, and one of our nation's most recognized attorneys, Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, showed us - law only goes so far. Attitude must go farther.

We have the laws. We have the regulations. And we have good people who monitor the workplace and enforce these laws and regulations at both the federal and state level.

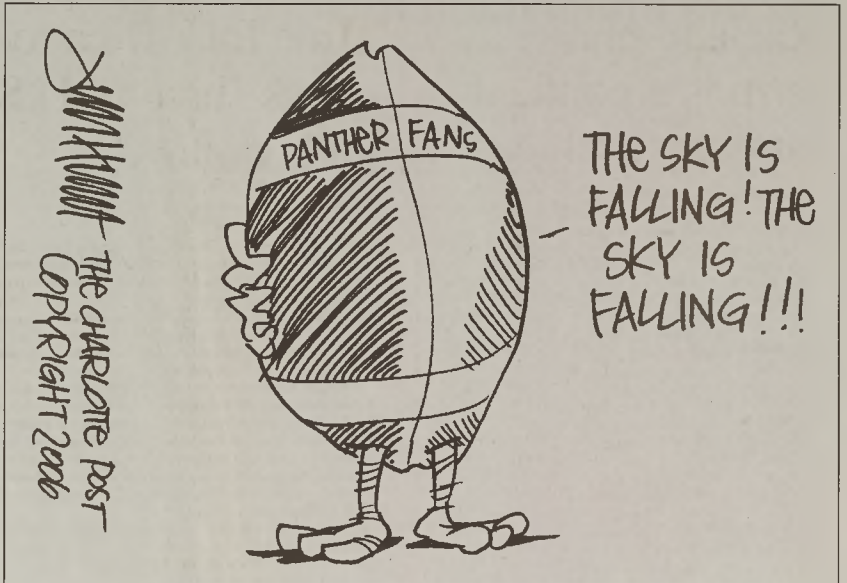
But do we, as individuals, have the will, the common sense, and the common decency to ensure that diversity in the workplace is more than just a standard to be followed? It is the individual, whether an employer, a supervisor, an employee or a regulator, who must make diversity a positive in our workplaces.

Atticus had it right. It is about attitude, not just the law. When the workplace, by its diversity, truly mirrors the society and institutions it serves, then and only then will we all be winners.

I have personally witnessed great strides toward accomplishing the goal of diversity in the legal profession and the judiciary. All of you have seen the same thing. But you also know that we are not there yet.

I ask you, regardless of your position in the employment arena, to keep pushing, keep prodding and keep the positive attitude so as to make diversity real and to make diversity work.

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Hillary isn't answer for Democrats

It's astounding that New York Sen. Hillary Clinton is considered a front-runner to capture the 2008 Democratic nomination for president. After losing year after year with weak, northern nominees, one would think that the party would have learned its lesson by now. Evidently, it hasn't.

The only way Democrats have been able to win 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in nearly a half century has been by nominating a Southerner. That's right, a Bubba. You don't have to be a rocket or social scientist to figure that out. In fact, you don't even have to be a scientist.

Look at the record. Since John F. Kennedy, a U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, was elected in 1960, the only Democrats elected president have been his vice president, Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas; Jimmy Carter of Georgia; and Bill Clinton of Arkansas.

In the case of Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, it was technically a Double-Bubba ticket, with two Southerners heading the ticket. Actually, it was more like 1.5 Bubbas; though Gore claims Tennessee as his home, he grew up in Washington, D.C. as the son of a United States senator.

Yet, Democrats seem lost



GEORGE E. CURRY

when trying to pick a candidate for president. They can't find their butts with both hands, a map and an OnStar navigation system. They are clueless and, in many instances, spineless. A poll released two weeks ago by the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press found that Democrats couldn't be better positioned to win back the White House and retake at least one chamber of Congress.

"Voters are expressing strong and consistent anti-Republican attitudes," the report stated. "The GOP lags well behind the Democratic Party on nearly all major issues, including the economy, Iraq, education, health care, the environment and the budget deficit. And the Republicans have lost ground in recent years even on such traditional strengths as terrorism and improving the nation's morality."

A famous Democrat, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, said: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Sen. John Kerry, another loser from Massachusetts, correctly noted that, "Now, we got a president and the only thing he got to sell is fear itself."

The Bush administration may be peddling fear, but fewer Americans are buying it.

"The Republican Party's advantage over the Democratic Party in dealing with the terrorist threat at

home is which was as large as 30 points in January 2002 - has declined to nine points in the current survey," the Pew study says. "In addition, the public is increasingly skeptical that the U.S. is prevailing in the war on terrorism."

With the November general election less than two months away, Democrats received some encouraging news about the prospect of recapturing at least the U.S. House of Representatives.

"As in six previous surveys over the past 12 months, voters by a wide margin say they favor the Democratic congressional candidate in their district (50%-39%)." Pew observed.

Of 17 major issues such as Iraq, the economy, taxes, health care, budget deficits, employment, crime and immigration - the public favored Democrats on 16 issues. Republicans had the edge in only one area.

"The Republican Party continues to hold a substantial lead in terms of having the 'stronger' political leaders - 43 percent say the GOP has stronger leaders, compared to 30 percent who see the Democratic Party's leaders as 'stronger,' the poll found. "This is a narrower margin than in April, when Republicans held a 53 percent to 26 percent edge in this area, but still stands out as one of the few Republican advantages going into the election season."

The reason Republicans are

perceived as stronger leaders is because, in general, they hold strong, clearly articulated views. They expect and demand party loyalty. And if one of their members gets out of line, he or she is swiftly punished. Equally important, GOP handlers have been skillful in mischaracterizing their opponents, painting those who raise questions about the U.S. presence in Iraq as traitors and linking the invasion of Iraq to the fight on terrorism.

At the same time, Democrats have been their own worst enemy. They have been timid in challenging Bush on the war in Iraq and haven't exemplified courage on simple things; they got caught up trying to label a Christmas tree a "holiday tree." Voters don't want their leaders to be politically correct - they want them to be correct.

And the correct thing for Democrats to do is to nominate a Southerner for president.

In the 10 presidential elections since the John F. Kennedy-Lyndon B. Johnson era ended in 1968, Democrats have won only three times, counting Clinton's 1996 reelection victory. With a record like that, even poor students of history should have learned by now.

GEORGE E. CURRY is editor-in-chief of the National Newspaper Publishers Association News Service and BlackPressUSA.com.

Faith-based mobilization of the clergy

In October, thousands of religious congregations of all faiths across the country will be preparing for the 15th annual National Observance



MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

of Children's Sabbaths celebrations - lifting up the needs of children in worship and action.

Many congregations will be celebrating on the weekend of October 20-22.

They were created to unite and amplify the voice of faith communities demanding justice for children and seeking to transform our nation's priorities by holding special worship services, education programs, and other activities to help people learn more about problems facing children and families and lead to service and advocacy to help children.

Over the last 15 years, hundreds of thousands of Children's Sabbaths have been celebrated across the nation, from California to Connecticut, South Dakota to South Carolina and Alaska to Arkansas. Until a mighty stream of justice rolls through our land and world to make them fit and safe for

every child, we must continue to be a faithful voice for children as our religious teachings demand.

This year, congregations will focus on the 9 million children in our nation - one in every nine - who do not have health care coverage in our rich nation and the millions of other children who are underinsured. They'll focus special attention on the need for emergency medical disaster relief - health and mental health - services for Katrina's children left behind and for all who face future disasters, and for comprehensive health and mental health coverage for all children, which is CDF's top action priority in 2007.

As the mother of three sons, I spent my share of time in the pediatrician's office for check-ups, immunizations, asthma attacks, ear infections, strep throat, and multiple bee stings, and, on occasion, in the emergency room for the inevitable stitches, sprains, and broken bones.

Of course, I worried, like any parent, when the boys were bike riding, playing sports, climbing trees, learning to drive, or other normal pursuits of childhood and youth. But I never had to worry about what I would do

if they got sick or got hurt - I could pick up the phone or get in my car and call or take them to the doctor. I never had to worry about whether I'd be able to get them health care or if their medical expenses would push our family into poverty or bankruptcy.

I can only imagine the anguish the parents of our nation's 9 million uninsured children feel under the unrelieved, daily weight of worry. Lack of, inadequate, and costly health and mental health coverage are problems that cut across every race, region, and income as middle-class and poor parents alike struggle to afford health insurance. For some, their children must sit on the sidelines while other children play sports, to avoid injury.

Others delay treatment for sick children, hoping and praying they will get better. When treatment can't be delayed, many parents watch their financial lives crumble as they try to pay medical bills.

Children, distracted by the pain of an untreated toothache or ear infection, hampered by uncorrected vision problems, or mentally delayed by undetected lead poisoning, struggle to pay

attention and keep up in school. How can we allow this to happen to children created by God in a rich nation that leads the world in health technology?

No more. It is simply time to say no more. There is no reason on God's good earth to allow any child of God to be denied the health and mental health care they need now to survive, thrive, and live the lives for which they were created.

On the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths weekend, congregations of every faith across the nation will unite to proclaim all children are precious to God and to us. We'll cry out for Katrina's forgotten children and against the injustice of children without health care.

Together we'll proclaim our commitment to hope and health care for every child. We'll pray and sing and preach and teach. And act. We will be circulating petitions calling for the president and Congress to enact health care for all children in 2007.

Bennettsville, S.C., native MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund.