

Crash Your Comfort Zone and Experience Real Multiculturalism

The HR Professional's Blue Print for Diversity Success

By Carole Copeland Thomas, MBA, CDMP

After 26 years as a diversity professional, I am surrounded by reasons why diversity and multiculturalism are more important than ever. From small nonprofit community-based agencies to corporate giants with 150,000 employees, there are many reasons why the role of the HR professional is important in helping culturally-diverse employees succeed and achieve in the career path of their choice. With constant change, greater demands and higher expectations, every HR professional should become better equipped with knowing how to build solid relationships with managers, executives, emerging leaders, line supervisors, veteran employees and new hires of every stripe, color, or heritage.

What's the key to make this happen? How can each HR professional understand the ethnicity and diversity within the organization?

Get out of the office. Get out of your comfort zone. Experience the sights and sounds of your region. It's a simple request that may be easier for some than others.

LET ME EXPLAIN

Despite valiant efforts by some HR professionals to recruit top talent, it can sometimes prove difficult to retain young African American professionals in the Boston area. If they are a recent graduate of a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) that is located in a city like Atlanta or Baltimore, moving to the Boston area can be quite a culture shock. Boston is a smaller city with fewer

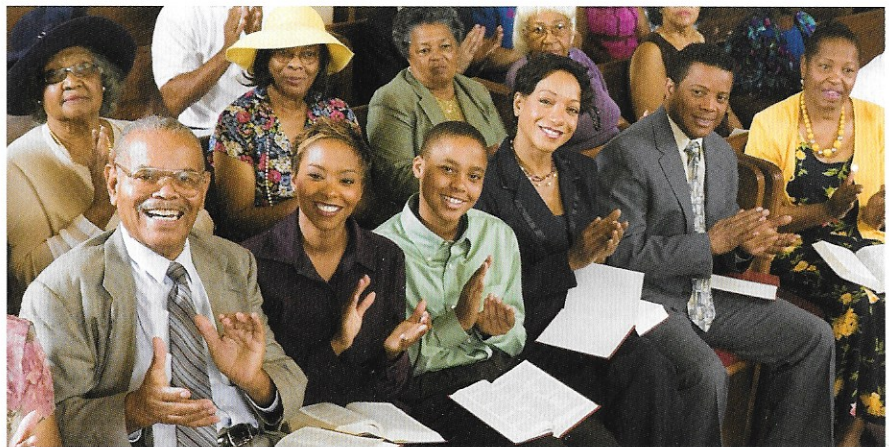
African Americans, even though the city represents more diversity now than it ever has in its history. If the young African American recruit doesn't find "roots" in the Boston area, no matter how hard you

try, they will find a new job with a new company out of state and leave the area.

This happens all the time when unsuspecting yet well-intentioned HR professionals don't anticipate the importance of helping the young recruits find cultural connections outside of work.

ONE SOLUTION: GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE AND EXPLORE YOUR AREA

If you live in Boston, Providence or Hartford, I'm not talking about just exploring the tourist destinations in your cities. I am asking you to venture deep into communities of color and build relationships with leaders in those communities.



Yes, I am a big advocate for promoting your city to those visiting on vacation or business travel. You should learn as much as you can about the historical sites and destinations of your town. That can prove especially helpful to those potential employees of color visiting your organization who can learn from your experience.

However, you should also take time to visit the Black, Hispanic and Asian neighborhoods in your area and find out what makes them so special and unique to those who live there.

PLEASE NOTE

Black, Hispanic and Asian neighborhoods are **NOT** dangerous, crime ridden wastelands! If you only watch television news reports, you might be mistaken to think that you'll not survive a walk through the "hood." Many urban neighborhoods are filled with good law abiding people who pay their taxes, take care of their families and go to work, just like you do. If you are concerned about your safety, take a friend or colleague with you on your cultural trip. You can even identify a representative of the community to "escort you" throughout the neighborhood.

PLACES OF INTEREST TO VISIT

- Churches, Worship Services, Mosques, Temples
- Hair Salons (Major connector in the Black community)
- Beauty Shops (Major connector in the Black community)
- Grocery Stores or Ethnic Food Stores
- Community Centers

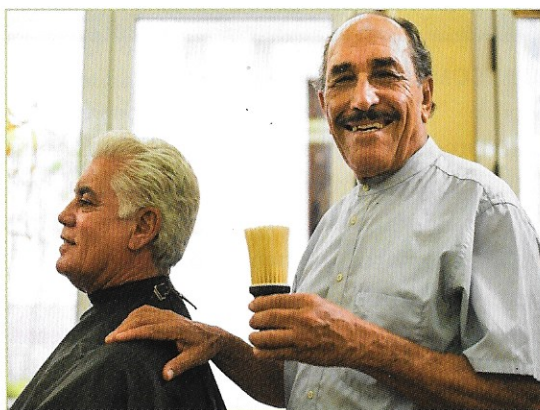
WHY THESE VISITS ARE IMPORTANT TO YOU

The best way to help a new recruit of color is to share your experiences about the neighborhoods, sights and sounds of the community at large. Not just the white community. Or the gentrified communities. Or the hip and cool neighborhood that draws the tourist crowd. I am asking you to develop a working knowledge of the urban neighborhoods, like Boston's own Roxbury, Dorchester or Mattapan. Visit these neighborhoods during the day or evening, meet the movers and shakers and learn about their cultures, customs and heritage. Your knowledge and insight will be of great value to that young professional

who really wants to know where he/she can get a haircut or find a good "beautician."

PLAN AHEAD FOR YOUR CULTURAL VISIT

Perhaps there is a special "family and friends" worship service at a small church in one of your ethnic neighborhoods. Buy an ethnic newspaper, like the Bay State Banner, and find out where the African American churches are located. You can buy a local Hispanic newspaper like El Mundo or Asian newspaper like Sampan and plan for the same kind of visit. Or you can visit the Islamic Center of Boston Cultural Center, a center open to the public and free of charge. Call ahead to verify the times, dates and location. Find out if there is a dress code. Take a friend and prepare to enjoy the experience.



STRETCH YOURSELF: GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Ask questions during your visit. Don't be afraid! When people in ethnic neighborhoods discover your sincerity, they will do their best to educate you about the customs and traditions of their culture. Years ago, I ran training workshops in Sydney, Australia. I was compelled to learn firsthand about the plight of the Aboriginal people while working there. I planned ahead, jumped on the city transit system and ended up in the Redfern section of Sydney. I walked in the first building I spotted, a healthcare center, introduced myself and asked to talk to anyone who would share their history with me. The staff members there treated me royally. They told me of the difficulties of their community, the tragic history of their people who were historically displaced and oppressed by the Australian

government and talked about their hopes for the future. They told me about a popular bookstore known for its collection of Aboriginal books and gave me posters that are still on my wall today. It was an eye opening firsthand experience that helped shape my perspective of a people whose history dates back 40,000 years.

CULTURE, TRADITIONS AND HERITAGE RIGHT IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

In organizations large and small, it's not enough for today's HR professional to just recite company policy to talented recruits of color. You have to anticipate the lifestyle necessary to make them happy and satisfied both on and off the job. And if you have preconceived notions about particular ethnic neighborhoods in your

area, it's up to you change your assumptions with cold, hard facts. You must get out of your office and your comfort zone and get to know the ethnic neighborhoods in your area.

In many ways, I am asking you to become a cultural "tour guide" to the diverse recruits who cross your path. Embracing diversity goes way beyond a reference manual, news report or water cooler conversation. It requires you to push beyond your blind spot,

get rid of your assumptions, and speak from the authentic voice that only comes from personal experience.

You can hold the key to retaining talented diverse professionals just by getting out of your office and doing some cultural bridge building of your own.

Try it. You may like it! ■

Carole Copeland Thomas is a speaker, writer, trainer and global thought leader specializing in global diversity, multiculturalism, empowerment and leadership. She has been featured on ABC Radio, CBS-TV and Fox News. Carole is a member of NEHRA's Diversity Forum and is the author of *21 Ways To Bring Multiculturalism To Your Job Your Home And Your Community*. Visit Carole online at www.tellcarole.com.