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Riley Institute's Diversity Leadership

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The concept of "industry clusters" is all the rage in economic development circles. The idea of spurring synergistic economic growth in areas such as the aerospace, automotive and biomedical industry sectors is widely accepted as a leading strategy for state and regional development, as it should be.

But lately, I've been thinking about a missing link in the state's local and regional economic development strategies. I call it "the diversity cluster," and by that I mean pursuit of the goal of changing the way we think about the need to improve the overall success of South Carolina's minority populations.

Diversity Leadership Academy

For the past five months I've been a participant in The Richard W. Riley Institute's Lowcountry Diversity Leadership Academy program. The Riley Institute is affiliated with Furman University and has been offering this program in the Upstate since 2003.

The program is described in the Institute's literature as being "committed to equipping business, civic and community leaders with effective diversity management skills." The five monthly sessions are consistent with that objective, but I think the description is a bit sterile compared to the impact of the program.

The inaugural Lowcountry class last year was a veritable who's who of key leaders in the Charleston region, and this year's class was a worthy contender in that regard. I knew many of the participants from my activities in the community over the years, but I also met some great folks who were not in my circle of contacts beforehand.

The "diversity message" as it has been developed in the corporate context is a highly structured approach to ensuring that businesses and other organizations maximize the benefit of all types of diversity in their work forces. And while the DLA course materials had that flavor, the actual experience led us to be much more focused on the community impact of our actions and roles in our respective organizations.

There was a high degree of racial balance in the makeup of the class between white and black participants, and while the concept of diversity goes far beyond race or ethnic background, the impact of race relations is an obvious issue in our state. Historically, and continuing into the present, the impact generally has been more negative than positive.

One of the more disturbing and moving experiences for me was to hear professional, middle-class African-Americans in our class describe the frequent, if not daily, indignities they experience because of the color of their skin. Walk into a retail store and be the last to be served and the first to be watched surreptitiously for any sign of misconduct. Walk on to a car lot and have the sales person assume you can't afford a new car. There was more, and it was painful to hear.

Such treatment is not always intentionally malicious. We all draw from habits of thinking that may cause us to unconsciously slight others who are different from us, based not only on race but many other

personal characteristics.

Diversity is good for business

But let's return to my concept of "the diversity cluster." It is widely accepted in large Fortune 500 corporations that promoting organizational diversity is good for business, as well as being the right thing to do and being necessary to avoid running afoul of the law. Diversity strengthens an organization through the differing viewpoints it brings to the table. It helps companies understand their customers better, invigorates decision-making and brings an energy to the enterprise that doesn't exist in monolithic organizations where everyone tends to look, talk and think the same way.

In South Carolina, we are a long way from accepting the premise that encouraging and supporting the success of our state's minorities is both in our common interest and, ultimately, in our own individual self interest.

That needs to change. Ask just about any business owner or manager in the state and they will tell you that work force issues are one of their biggest challenges. In manufacturing, the construction trades and many other sectors in our state's economy, we are not turning out the work force needed to support vigorous economic growth.

And no, it's not all about race. There are failing children in our schools who are not minority, and they along with struggling minority kids need all the resources and support we can muster. But the harsh reality is that until we find a way to dramatically improve the output of minority students from our schools and into the work force, we will continue to earn our dismally low ranking among the states in the leading measures of quality of life and economic success.

Capstone presentations

In our diversity leadership class, we were divided into five "Capstone" work groups, each tasked with presenting a project that represents a way to value diversity and improve outcomes in our community. The results were presented at the final day of the class earlier this month.

One group created "Camp Hope," an intensive summer program for minority kids designed to engage and stimulate them over a five-week period of evening activities, in hopes of opening their eyes to their potential and the opportunities for a better life that could be theirs with the proper motivation and support.

Another group came up with a way to raise awareness about the impact of the language barrier when local Hispanics seek medical care. The group developed a resource guide to help overcome this challenge.

The third presentation was the bright idea of approaching the newly formed Charleston Young Professionals group to ask them to make diversity leadership a part of their ongoing activities and programs. The CYP organization, formed under the wing of the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce, is 400-strong and represents future generations of local leaders.

Idea No. 4 was to establish an annual Lowcountry diversity leadership awards program, complete with an awards event. In the Upstate, the awards events have drawn 600 people each in Greenville, Anderson and Spartanburg. It's a powerful way to demonstrate solidarity on this issue within a community.

Idea No. 5 was to develop ways to help low-income people become financially savvy and use the services of traditional banks to reduce their exploitation by payday lenders and others who take advantage of the financial vulnerability of those at the lower end of the economic food chain.

The power of ideas, combined with diversity and leadership, proved itself to be a powerful force, even

when the time allocated to effort was limited and involved people who were already busy in their respective occupations.

Can we make “the diversity cluster” a positive component of economic development in South Carolina? The answer from the Diversity Leadership Academy is a resounding “YES!”

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