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- | BUSINESS
- | ENTERTAINMENT
- | EDUCATION
- | HEALTH
- | LIFESTYLE
- | MONEY
- | SPORTS
- | URBAN LIVING
- | STORE



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## DIVERSITY

### We're Better Than This

Dr. Shelton J. Goode

The ongoing contemporary debate on racial disparities, hostilities, and cultural tensions are having a profound business, community, and social impact. These developments span race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, and health care. For the past several months I have been working with a team select group of 60 community and corporate leaders from the City of Appleton, Wisconsin, Thedacare's Community Health Action Team, and African Heritage, Inc. to develop diversity initiatives that will help community leaders better understand and ultimately address the implication of these changes.



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During the Fox City Diversity Plunge, we spent numerous hours discussing ways to increase diversity in the Fox cities region, reduce African American poverty and improve inclusion in local communities and companies. Leaders in the Fox Cities' community spent hours sharing knowledge, learning from those at the heart of the issue, and developing solutions for change. As you may have guessed we spent a lot talking about race.

It is not true that we don't talk about race. Race informs our discussion of everything from crime to education, to who got picked on "The Voice." We talk about race in the lunchroom with people who look like us, yell race at the television when we get angry with people who don't look like us. We read about race in our newspapers and magazines, then write about race in letters and e-mails to editors. In January we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. and in February we observe Black History Month.

We talk about race all the time. We are just really bad at it! A good example of this is the events at the University of Missouri where the racial environment and protests in response, eventually resulted in the resignation of two senior University of Missouri leaders. There is however, more to it than that. A large component of my work for nearly 20 years has involved talking about, and persuading people to talk about, race. After hundreds of courses, dozens of presentations at conferences and thousands of face-to-face and e-mail exchanges with people of all races, I consider myself something of an expert on the subject of racial diversity. And I'm here to tell you that race is like a ten car pileup on the Atlanta freeway: It simultaneously attracts and scares people.

#### ABOUT AUTHOR

Shelton Goode is a leader with over 20 years of business and university-teaching experience. He has held executive HR and Diversity positions for companies ranging in size from \$500M to \$20B+. He is the author of Diversity Managers of Mercy or Barbarians at the Gate. His latest book, Make You Wanna Holla: Diversity in America from Strawberry Mansion to Silicon Valley is due out Dec 2016.

Dr. Shelton J. Goode

Because of this, we can't help but talk about it. Yet at the same time, people can't help but be afraid to talk about it. The result is, no one is good talking about it – at least not in any sort of honest, intelligent or sustained way, because doing so requires cross-cultural confidence, competence and courage. Not to mention trust, which we do not have.

So we talk about race but we don't. More often we yell about race. Or talk around race. Or deliver self-righteous monologues on race. All of it tainted by a gaping ignorance of, and stubborn refusal to grapple with, the hateful, hurtful history that makes talking about race, necessary in the first place. We play games instead. Many African Americans can't wait to cry "gotcha!" when some white person inadvertently says some questionable thing, as though innocent ignorance was indistinguishable from actual malice.

We play games. Many white Americans go about their daily life with fingers in their ears singing "la,la,la" at the top of their lungs rather than hear inconvenient truths that challenge their fantasies of a post-racial America. You can share thousands of anecdotes, you can bury them in studies and statistics documenting continuing racial bias in housing, employment, education and criminal justice, and they will still tell you that we live in a color-blind society.

In my upcoming book, "Make You Wanna Holla: Diversity in America from Strawberry Mansion to Silicon Valley", I share my personal perspectives on race and talk about what I have repeatedly seen. What I have witnessed is black people who have stopped trying to having substantive discussions about race with those white people who refuse to listen. What I have experienced is white people who have stopped speaking freely about race with black people who believe that every little slight is based on racism. Lastly, what I have observed is that in recent months, the discussion on race has been dominated by loud, intolerant voices using the reach afforded by social media and the political cover they are provided by conservative extremism more hurtful than anything many of us have seen in years.

We live in an era where the bad people among us are feeling emboldened by the silence and compassion fatigue of the good people. But after all we've been through and, after all we have done and suffered to bring about change, we cannot afford to yield the conversation about race to the voices of intolerance.

So thank you to the brave participants of the Fox City Diversity Plunge for the reminder – we're better than this -- if good people do not speak up and lead the discussion on race, the bad ones certainly will.

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