

Charlotte Day After Conversations

June 30, 2020

Two “Day After” conversations were co-convened by Ronnie Bryant, Chair, Institute for Work & the Economy, and by the Institute in Charlotte, NC on June 30, 2020. The purposes of both online conversations were to establish a collective agenda that leverages the COVID-19 pandemic and civil actions taken in the wake of the spate of killings of African Americans and other People of Color and to set a course for greater economic and social equity and equality in Charlotte/Mecklenburg.

There were four action items that emerged:

- Big, bold, radical and holistic actions are needed. Charlotte/Mecklenburg is already served by several commissions and institutions addressing long-term change. Immediate actions should seize the heightened awareness by whites of systemic and systematic racist policies and practices and draw on the energy and engagement of new allies in the fight.
- All proposed actions must outline clear goals and measurable results. The focus of the conversations was Charlotte; however, the desired goals and results are universal and apply to both urban and rural residents. Possible goals and results include a basic minimum living wage, Medicaid expansion, ending routine credit checks for basic services and housing – actions that lead to a more civil society. An even bolder suggestion was to de-couple basic necessities, such as health care, from an employer-based system. This will create greater opportunities for entrepreneurship as innovators would be freer to pursue their ideas without having to depend on an employer to cover such needs.
- Business leaders in Charlotte/Mecklenburg are key to achieving substantial and lasting change. Their active involvement and commitment are required, especially those who are members of the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council (CELC). They can lead by leveraging the resources and influence of the businesses that they head to reverse racially-driven advantage in order to achieve a greater common good – a good from which all will benefit. Their commitment and action are required to “expand the pie as well as reallocate the shares”.
- Leaders who are Black or People of Color must be supported in their careers and with respect to their well-being as they advocate for change. White government leaders, CEOs and boards of directors must clear the way as African Americans and other People of Color press forward on actions to eliminate systemic and systematic racist policies and practices.

The possible next steps for the group to agree upon so as to enact these changes and actions:

- Who and which people and organizations need to be approached and engaged and in what order?
- What are the specific action items, including goals, measurable results and metrics?
- How will these actions, goals and results be achieved?
- What are the pathways for making last changes?

Combined Summary of Conversations and Advance Worksheets

On June 30, Ronnie Bryant and 25 other community leaders in the Charlotte/Mecklenburg region participated in one of two conversations on the metaphorical “Day After:” the aftermath of acute phases of the twin “pandemics” of this year’s spate of killings of African Americans and other People of Color and of COVID-19. These conversations were conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Work & the Economy, chaired by Ronnie Bryant, and facilitated by Peter Creticos, President, and Mary Wright, Chair of the Achieving the Promise of Work initiative of the Institute.

Each participant received a worksheet to help them prepare for the conversations and for their initial observations in response to the questions: “Existing economic and social fissures separating people have been exposed by the events of this spring. What may result for workers and workers rights if no action is taken? What actions should be taken?” The groups then narrowed their ideas into a set of actions that they thought should be undertaken.

Although there were some differences in the composition, tenor and energy of the two groups, their initial comments as well as their final conclusions were remarkably consistent. This summary captures and combines the general themes expressed during the two conversations. By prior agreement, no one is quoted in this summary.

1. Although very tragic, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for people to pause and reflect on the both the economic and societal consequences of the disease and on the continued murders of African Americans and other People of Color that hit a crescendo this spring. The twin set of events has exposed the intersection of race and poverty between those who have suffered the greatest proportional losses from the novel coronavirus and from outright killings. These events collectively form an inflection point – an awakening – and have the potential to be leveraged to change fundamental policies and practices. While immediate actions are needed, it is important to think of future actions as sprints over the course of a marathon. It is important to take tactical advantage of opportunities while working towards long term results.
2. The concept of a “Day After” is actually too singular. The “Day After” the events of the spring are really part of a long history of “Days After.” Nonetheless, we now have an

opportunity for reconciliation. Many people are changing their minds and hearts. To do that, people need to search their souls and recognize their embedded biases and feelings. The history of meaningful, ongoing efforts to change Charlotte should remind those who want change now to remain humble and patient. One needs to have compassion and not merely sympathy for another's position. Also, the conditions that we believe define today are not necessarily different from the past.

3. White privilege is real and is embedded in all ways of life and work in Charlotte/Mecklenburg. Whites benefit from a system that is intended to work to their advantage. In other words, today's economic, social and political systems work as intended, as they have during the course of American history. After Emancipation, former slaves did not receive the same benefits in terms of land and livestock that even immigrants enjoyed. These early differences put whites and Blacks on distinctly separate courses that resulted in ever-widening gaps. The advantages enjoyed by whites must ultimately be eliminated. It is incumbent on white leadership to drive such change. This is not an act of paternalistic benevolence, however, since Black and other leaders among People of Color are required to direct that process. Charity is an insult, that's why the focus is and must be on the empowerment of Blacks and all People of Color.

While the twin "pandemics" can be used to drive change, it is easy to become overly optimistic and not act strategically to transform the moment into a movement. It is also easy to become too insular to Charlotte/Mecklenburg alone. Many of metropolitan region's rural "brothers and sisters" share the same challenges and absence of privilege. It is imperative that people who share common challenges work together. It is essential to get past a zero-sum construction and, instead, work cooperatively.

How do we want to treat one another as a community so that every person is successful? For example, the disputes over wearing masks illustrate the difference between individualistic versus cooperative behavior. Those who refuse to wear a mask frequently cite their individual right to do what suits them while those who advocate in favor of masks often say that doing so is for the greater good.

4. African Americans who are senior executives or CEOs have opportunities to make changes from within. But these opportunities sometimes come with great risk – challenges to the advantages enjoyed by whites, and in particular leaders who are white, can jeopardize the career advancement of those who raise the issue. African Americans who have positions of status and respect need to acknowledge and decide how to meld their personal, professional and community priorities.
5. Policies and practices that are promoted as neutral simply reinforce the status quo. We operate believing in the myth of meritocracy. If you are not making it, then somehow it is your own fault. Real change is purposeful and must address directly inequities and inequality. The twin pandemics pose an opportunity for bold and radical actions that leverage the involvement of new allies and young activists who want to undo systemic

and systematic racist policies and practices and achieve a new order that is equal and equitable. The immediate focus of such actions are the predominantly white corporate leaders and local board members of Charlotte, e.g., those who are members of the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council. They can commit their businesses and resources to make fundamental changes that will begin to undo systemic and systematic racist policies and practices. Public pronouncements by many businesses and foundations in the U.S. in support of racial and economic justice have amounted to no more than pandering. Charlotte business leaders have an opportunity to take a different course that commits to making substantive changes.

6. Change requires the heart of sacrifice, a mind of understanding and thoughts of empathy. It requires acts of kindness, but these acts often get undone by the policies and practices that perpetuate in the absence of making direct changes.