

Inclusion: Points of discussion

June 6, 2010

By Ron Stodghill

Last year, Emmanuel Choice, a broker with the big commercial real estate firm Lincoln Harris, got a call from a senior executive at the firm to have lunch at the exclusive Charlotte City Club.

The executive got straight to the point: In a city as diverse as Charlotte, the City Club needed some new blood - it was too old, too white and too male to maintain its relevance as a social hub for the business elite. He wanted Choice, who is African American, to join.

"The guy who recommended me for membership is a real Southerner - and unapologetically so," says Choice, sipping tea in the club dining room, cuff links glinting against the power panorama of Charlotte's skyline.

"He has always known that I've wanted access and this was his way of saying - 'You want access? I'll open up a door for you.' It was just a great thing he did for me, and I really appreciate it."

Choice, 42, a Los Angeles native, shared this story as we discussed the long shaky bridge we walk these days toward racial inclusion in this beacon city of the New South. In a culture that prides itself as a business mecca, there's no denying the powerful symbolism in City Club entree for someone whose livelihood is tied to wheeling and dealing in the monied crowd.

Yet there's also no denying the potential peril in tokenism, or resigning your fate as the only one of your color, age, or gender at the table.

"In Charlotte, we've got to ask ourselves whether we genuinely want to be inclusive," Choice says. "Whether we really want to embrace diversity, whether we want people to bring all the depth and breadth of their experience to the discussion, or whether we just want the photo op."

As thorny as the question may be, it's a fair one for a city whose economic development will depend on its ability to beat rival cities in attracting a finicky pool of educated, global-minded, multicultural workers.

Fortunately, some of that critical soul-searching may be under way - at least

about how that interracial distrust affects commerce in a city where commerce is king.

The Charlotte Chamber is hosting a special meeting with its members Monday to discuss the business community's capacity to be inclusive.

"We're hoping to have an authentic conversation about how people really think and feel about barriers to commerce for people with different racial backgrounds and points of view," says Mike Whitehead, a Chamber executive committee member who will moderate the talk.

On Wednesday, at Johnson C. Smith University, the Urban Business Network kicks off a series of seminars dubbed "Gaining Traction to Grow Minority Business in Charlotte," hosted by university President Ron Carter.

In promoting the events, the Chamber and Urban Network cited as catalysts a couple of columns I've written recently focused on racial inclusion in our business arena.

Surely, such tensions existed long before I captured sentiments in the black community that its entrepreneurs face unusually harsh odds doing business in Charlotte, and that even powerful newcomers such as commercial real estate owner Chauncey Mayfield have trouble gaining acceptance into the city's hidebound business culture.

That city leaders, black and white alike, suddenly want to address the issue of inclusion does beg the question of what the real goal is: Is it to protect the Charlotte brand from negative publicity or to build a stronger, more diverse business community?

Assuming it's the latter, allow me to offer three suggestions:

1. Start talking. Holding separate meetings about the same issue is a waste of time. The Charlotte Chamber and the Urban Business Network should hash out their thinking and plans in one room.
2. Longtime locals, lead. With all due respect to their leadership abilities, why are Ron Carter, who makes his living in academia, and Chauncey Mayfield, whose commercial real estate business is headquartered in Detroit, carrying the water for Charlotte's black business community? Two words for those who are content to let a couple of relative newcomers on the scene do their bidding: Man up.
3. Seek and find. When the Chamber and Charlotte Regional Partnership go scouting for firms looking to expand or relocate, start sweet-talking some of those successful African-American companies that appear each month on the pages of magazines like Black Enterprise. Most are headquartered in high-priced, Northern cities. My hunch is that Charlotte, even with its challenges, will be a pretty easy sell.