



# Diversity and Inclusion in Rocky Mount: Lessons Learned

Carl W. Stenberg III

The idea of having a diversity plan for the City of Rocky Mount is critical in today's environment. In a large organization with over 900 employees, it is important that diversity is recognized and appreciated not only with our managers and department heads but throughout our entire work force. Understanding others is an important component in being able to create a workplace atmosphere that is inclusive and understood by all employees.

David W. Combs  
Mayor, City of Rocky Mount, NC

## Introduction

As North Carolina's demographics continue to change rapidly, local governments are increasingly paying attention to diversity and inclusion and making efforts to align their organizational cultures, values, and practices with the changing faces of their communities.

In 2015, the author facilitated the annual Rocky Mount City Council Retreat, and diversity was a high-priority topic on the agenda. On December 9, he interviewed City Manager Charles Penny and Assistant City Manager Thom Moton about their experiences and their advice to others.

The interview appears below. The final section of this bulletin provides an update on post-interview progress.

**Stenberg:** I understand that one of the goals of your 2015 City Council Retreat was to increase appreciation of diversity and inclusion. Why was this so important, especially given the African American majority in Rocky Mount's population and the fact that nearly

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half of the members of the city council and the management team are persons of color?

**Penny:**

The interest in diversity and inclusion dates back many years. Council members talked about the importance of diversity and approved my recommendation that a plan be developed for the city government.

In 2014, we entered into a \$60,000 contract with VISIONS, Inc., for diversity training for the city's leadership team (department directors, city clerk, city manager, city manager direct reports, and assistant city managers). VISIONS was founded in Rocky Mount by Angela Bryant; Valerie Batts, PhD; Ida Dew Hickerson; and John Capitman, PhD. They work all over the United States and abroad. The city's entire leadership team composition had changed substantially at the time the diversity training discussion began.

Diversity means different things to different people, and we needed to understand more about what it is. Most people think about diversity as black and white, but we learned that diversity is a lot more. We embarked on the journey of developing a common language or shared terminology to facilitate effective diversity and inclusion conversations.

**Stenberg:** What approaches did VISIONS use?

**Penny:**

VISIONS gave the city staff a number of articles to read before the first of several two-day training sessions with the leadership team. VISIONS also conducted focus groups involving about 110 employees and shared their feedback with the leadership team and the mayor and city council members.

One interesting revelation from the focus groups was how some female employees felt about their work environment and their interactions with male employees. VISIONS met with council members and gave them feedback—not as a whole, but in groups of two and three.

The council member groups were also divided by race; the facilitator who met with the African American council members was African American, and the facilitator who met with the white council members was white. It was important for the council members to understand the need for their support and for them to model the skills senior management was learning.

The mayor pro tem felt that it was important to reinforce the diversity and inclusion training and that the council members needed more exposure, so VISIONS conducted a four-hour workshop session on diversity at the 2015 retreat.

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**Stenberg:** Can you give an example of one of the skills that VISIONS worked on with staff and council members?

**Penny:** VISIONS advised that there are certain ground rules—like “no shaming and blaming”—that you have to own your experiences and views. For example, when you start talking about diversity, there could be an 800-pound gorilla in the room; if you go back in history, it could be really insensitive and you could make someone feel really bad and shut them down.

VISIONS advises participants to own their experiences and to exercise self-focus when describing situations. For example, as a male and a person of color, if I am sharing an experience with others about being in an environment with people possessing different backgrounds than my own, I should state my feelings as my own and not attribute my feelings to the collective “we.”

In management, people always talk about “we,” but we learned that in this situation you can’t use “we.” Instead, use “I,” to take ownership.

**Moton:** The topics of diversity and inclusion really open the conversation beyond race. The employee focus group told us a lot about relational dynamics with women and how they felt in the workplace. We’re really just being more thoughtful about how habits can have unintended effects.

We’re talking about impact and intention. Our intentions are one way, but the impact may be different. The other part is being broader in our conversations about diversity. Diversity extends beyond just black and white; it is also socioeconomic status, educational attainment, what side of the city you live on, and so forth.

**Penny:** We also gained an understanding of targeted and non-targeted groups. Targeted and non-targeted groups are defined using a historical perspective. The group that has historically possessed the power/resources to impact others is called the non-targeted group. The group that historically possessed less or no power to impact the other group is called the targeted group.

There are many facets that one can consider when looking at privilege, and to some degree those identifying or belonging to the privileged group can be considered the non-targeted group. I identify as a member of a targeted group because I’m of a particular race. The facilitator challenged me by saying that I’m part of the non-targeted group because of my position as city manager. I had to own that I have factors that could negatively impact others.

The “isms” continue to grow—racism, sexism, transgenderism. As African Americans, I think we sometimes assume that we know all there is to know about diversity. During the training, I realized all I didn’t know.

**Stenberg:** What is the diversity plan’s current status?

**Penny:** We haven’t finalized the plan, because the senior leadership team worked with VISIONS to draft the plan, but we had not selected our employee committee, the Diversity Inclusion Group (DIG), at that point.

The DIG consists of a cross-section of 26 employees. Thom leads the group and is the City Manager’s Office representative.

The group went through two days of training in October 2015. The DIG members’ training closely followed the leadership team’s training. Topics included fundamental terms—such as diversity, inclusion, and targeted and non-targeted groups—and learning strategies for effective cross-cultural communication, to name a few.

A DIG leadership group with three chairs has been created, based on race and gender, and Thom is one of the tri-chairs. The individuals chosen to form the group had associations with persons from diverse backgrounds or could identify the “isms” (not just gender, race, and sex, but all the other elements) and differed in terms of position and background, such as hourly/salary, non-management/management, and educational attainment.

The DIG members have formed work teams to help create a more diverse and inclusionary work environment. In essence, that is the group’s charge.

**Stenberg:** What will the DIG do now?

**Penny:** We’ve been doing a lot of work with the senior staff and council members, getting them to think more broadly and deeply about diversity and inclusion. Now we have an action group that will take the plan forward and implement it throughout the organization.

**Stenberg:** What are some examples of possible steps the DIG will take to move forward?

**Penny:** DIG members have expressed to Thom that they do not like to be referred to as “eyes and ears” because that phrase suggests being a tattletale. So the group will serve as “ambassadors” and as collaborators with the leadership team to implement different aspects of the diversity and inclusion plan. They will help shape the transition to a more culturally diverse and inclusive organization and will serve as a resource to others wishing to learn about the initiative. As they see things that are contrary to the plan, we want them to keep us informed.

The goal is for all of our 900 employees to have diversity and inclusion training. The DIG can also help share information in their work groups.

We have to consider how we approach different things. Some of us are stuck in our traditional ways. For example, at a Supervisors’ Graduation, I asked Thom to bless the food before the meal, and he

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stated that I had just put him in a really tough place because not everyone necessarily believes.

There's a pastor in a community who, when asked to pray, recognizes that everybody may not worship the same deity. He lets them know that he is going to pray, but before he prays, he has a moment of silence, to let the people go in their own special place. He doesn't want to offend anybody; nor did Thom, in that meeting.

*The reality is that the leadership team must remain engaged throughout this initiative, and every employee has a role to play in fostering a more diverse and inclusive work environment.*

**Moton:** We had intended to turn implementation over to the DIG, but VISIONS advised us that this plan has to work from both ends. The plan has a five-year time line, and much of the responsibility for action falls on department heads and departments.

The reality is that the leadership team must remain engaged throughout this initiative, and every employee has a role to play in fostering a more diverse and inclusive work environment.

**Stenberg:** How are the council and staff kept informed about progress?

**Penny:** The leadership team will update the council. We want to make sure, even though we have the DIG as our ambassadors and collaborators, that we're not giving this to them. We're not stepping away from it.

We have to be a part of the process. There is nothing worse than to say, "Okay, we have done our work, now you take it and don't bother us." Thom always updates department heads at staff meetings, and we talk about what's going on.

**Moton:** VISIONS has encouraged us to think about the project as a learning lab. It's not just a task to be checked off as being done—and we're all of a sudden culturally competent.

We're planning on more training for the DIG. Topics will continue to build upon the previous training to deepen and reinforce foundational diversity and inclusion concepts, and the workshops will provide opportunities for DIG members to practice skills.

The learning will be ongoing. Individuals don't become comfortable dealing with this topic at the same rate, and we do want our employees to be more comfortable.

**Penny:** We have supervisor meetings quarterly. We've been updating supervisors on diversity and inclusion, and we record those sessions to put on YouTube to make the information available to our employees. We want them to be able to see what we are talking about in those supervisor meetings.

**Moton:** We have sent two workforce communications to employees on diversity and inclusion—one last year and one this year. We've tried to be intentional about it.

- Stenberg:** You've made a significant investment of time, staff, and organizational resources. What has been the reaction from the staff and from the council members? Have they felt that this was a good thing to do and that there will be returns on the investment?
- Penny:** I want to make sure we recognize the council's commitment and support. In addition to funding the first phase at \$60,000, they committed another \$35,000 in our current budget. Some council members said they want to be leading the pack, not following. I hope that with the diversity inclusion process, we are leading the pack.
- Moton:** Even among our leadership team, people wanted to know when we'll be finished with the training. We're becoming more comfortable with the notion that this effort is more about cultural shifts, is ongoing, and needs reinforcement. The feedback has been positive, but there was a period when we were in the middle of transition and wondering where this is really going to lead.
- Stenberg:** More and more of North Carolina's communities are likely going to need to come to grips with diversity as their demographics change. They will want to apply inclusion concepts throughout the organization and seek to change and align cultures. What advice would you give to fellow city or county managers or elected officials who want to embark on this journey to really dig into diversity as you have done?
- Penny:** Ours being a global society, you can't shy away from it. It doesn't matter how small the community is, chances are you will see people of different nationalities, and we have to appreciate this.  
I don't think we could have launched this effort without having someone lead us through the process. If we're trying to affect organizational culture, diversity training is very important to understanding the people who work in our organization and why they do what they do.
- Stenberg:** Would you say that a greater appreciation of the importance of diversity is one of the main benefits of the experience thus far?
- Penny:** I think so. With regard to community projects, we selected the design/build team and told them we wanted to be in the neighborhood of 30 percent participation by minority contractors.  
Many North Carolina local governments seek about 5–10 percent participation by minority/women business enterprises. The company we chose was Barnhill Contracting; they came in at about 30–35 percent minority participation, which was recognized by our council. One of Barnhill's architects is an African American from Edgecombe County.

**Moton:** Also, the training made us more conscious of how we can be motivated by others if we don't assume that because we look alike or talk alike, we must think alike or approach things the same way. We learned the term "microaggressions"—those small stings that happen throughout the day. Microaggressions are verbal slights or personal stings experienced by a member of a targeted group.

The microaggressions in and of themselves do not amount to a sufficient level of insult or disrespect to warrant a full response. Over time, however, microaggressions have a profound emotional impact on the targeted group member. You can think of microaggressions as small put-downs; for example, someone walking into an administrative office and immediately assuming that of the two employees standing in the office, the female employee is the administrative assistant and the male employee is the supervisor/professional.

**Penny:** In the first training, one of our staff members kept saying that we are more similar than we are different. When the person said that, the facilitator immediately wanted to dig deeper. After further discussion, the person understood that we are different. Recognizing those differences is very important in how we relate.

**Moton:** We learned what it really means when we say that we are color blind. It's nice to say that, but in reality it's like saying, "I am gender blind—I don't know if these are men or women."

You really notice things and learn how to be aware of how you are treating people. Through our training, we learned that the concept of equality (sameness) takes the approach that everyone is the same and ignores our differences; on the other hand, the concept of equity (fairness) takes into account our differences, both visible and invisible.

**Penny:** The training is not perfect, but it's a good learning experience and continuing learning process. The things said in our leadership team and Diversity Inclusion Group meetings are confidential.

When the DIG was going through two-day training, I told Thom that I was just going to drop in to show support. When I got there, the group members were sitting in circles and wanted me to sit in a circle. I told them that I wasn't going to sit in a circle because I wasn't going to be there long—I just wanted to observe. One of the facilitators tried to force me to participate in a circle. I told him I didn't mind explaining to the group why, but I didn't want to get into the circle because I wasn't going to be there long.

At the end of the day, the facilitator told the group that he had made an error. He said, "A white person tried to force the manager to do something." He wanted to apologize, but I understood. I told Thom that had I not gone down to that training at all, it would have sent a message to those employees that I really wasn't interested,

that this was all for show. I would never allow anyone to have any type of training in our organization that I, as a manager, cannot walk into, observe, and support.

**Moton:** Everybody considering undertaking a diversity and inclusion initiative should have engagement from the top of the organization: the manager's office and assistants and elected officials. This type of engagement in the process, instead of delegating it to a committee to work on and bring back, is really important.

Cultural change is more than a plan. The plan is less significant than the process of just having this conversation. Developing cultural competency moves our thinking to a different level of awareness of things that may seem obvious to others.

**Stenberg:** What you have been going through in diversity and inclusion planning and training and what lies ahead for Rocky Mount in terms of culture change should provide valuable lessons to other communities in North Carolina. We hope they will learn from your experiences.

## Post-Interview Progress

### Diversity and Inclusion Plan

Since this interview, the Diversity and Inclusion Plan has been finalized. The plan includes three goals:

1. Workforce Diversity—Recruit from a diverse, qualified labor market to secure a high-performing workforce recruited locally, regionally, and nationally.
2. Workplace Inclusion—Cultivate an internal culture that recognizes, understands, appreciates, and leverages diversity, enabling each individual to contribute to his/her full potential and furthering retention.
3. Sustainability—Develop structures and strategies to equip the organization with the ability to manage diversity, be accountable, measure results, refine approaches on the basis of data, and achieve a culture of inclusive learning and development.

Each goal includes a series of strategies, action steps by year, and measures of success. However, the leadership team fully expects that adjustments will be made to the plan during its initial five-year horizon in order to take advantage of new opportunities and/or address areas that are later identified as areas of need.

Diversity Inclusion Group members have established the following work groups or subcommittees:

1. Executive Committee (in place at the time of the interview)
2. Welcome and Connect Committee
3. Operations and Guidelines Committee
4. Communications Committee
5. Support and Logistics Committee
6. Education and Engagement Committee
7. Meeting Recording Committee

The DIG will help the leadership team communicate with employees and educate the workforce about the initiative. It will also help other employees learn how to be more effective in cross-cultural work settings. The first workforce written communication was distributed with payroll on April 29, 2016.

In April, the DIG held its first team meeting with the support of VISIONS consultants via a half-day teleconference. The group focused on privilege and gender discrimination exercises as well as refreshing and reinforcing basic skills in diversity and inclusion. The DIG will meet quarterly, and the executive committee will meet every two weeks.

### **City Council Retreat**

The city council's February 2016 City Council Retreat, held in Greensboro, continued the diversity and inclusion learning experiences that started with the 2015 retreat. At both retreats, VISIONS, Inc., consultants Deborah J. Walker, PhD, and Thomas S. Griggs, PhD, led the diversity and inclusion workshops.

During this year's three-hour workshop, some discussion concentrated on how the council can support the organization's Diversity and Inclusion Plan and what that support would look like in terms of council behaviors. By consensus, the council expressed a desire for more support from VISIONS. The council will plan future diversity and inclusion workshops.

As a person of color serving on the Council, I appreciate the need to develop and strengthen employee and City Council knowledge and awareness of diversity and inclusion. In today's environment, where city employees render services in our community, our focus needs to extend beyond the traditional topics of race and gender to include diversity of perspectives based on culture, ethnicity, and other unique identifying factors. Diversity conversations should always be welcomed and encouraged, with the goal of welcoming and helping those whom we might look upon as being from non-traditional or different backgrounds feel welcomed, valued, and included in all aspects of local government. A welcoming and inclusive local government is yet another precursor to local and regional economic and fiscal vibrancy.

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