

DIVERSE




Francisco Alvarado (left) and Felicia Watlington (right) are among the thought leaders guiding the chamber's new diversity initiatives.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHANIE CHESSON

VIEWPOINTS

BY CHRIS JENSEN, APR, MBA



On a recent fall morning, a small group gathered around a table at the Charlotte Chamber to talk about diversity. We asked them: What does “diversity” mean today? Why is it important to the Charlotte region? And what role does, or should, the Chamber play in promoting diversity? All it took was a couple of questions to get the discussion rolling.

What follows is an abbreviated version of that lively and thoughtful discussion. (Please refer to the sidebar for information about the seven round-table participants.)

DIVERSITY ROUND TABLE PARTICIPANTS

Brenda Anderson, President and CEO, Galilee Agency

Francisco Alvarado, President and Owner, Marand Builders, and Chair, Latin American Chamber of Commerce

Emmanuel Choice, Project Manager, Lincoln Harris, and Board Member, Diversity Business Council

Anthony (Tony) Perez, Senior Vice President, Bank of America, and Chair, Diversity Business Council

Frances Queen, President and CEO, Queen Associates

Keva Walton, Senior Vice President, Charlotte Chamber of Commerce

Felicia Watlington, Senior Associate and Founder, Supplier Diversity Works, and Board Member, Diversity Business Council

Q:

How long have you been in Charlotte? And what changes related to diversity have you observed during that time?

Anderson: Since 1994. Much like the Chamber, Charlotte has grown significantly in diversity relative to the demographics. What I see in other organizations, as well



as the Chamber, is an increased awareness that diversity is something that they need to address and leverage.

Queen: 30 years. And Charlotte is a very different place than it was 30 years ago. Then it was a very black and white community. Today when I look around Charlotte, the diversity is phenomenal, and I love it. It is making us a much stronger and better community.

Perez: I have been in Charlotte on and off for 15 years. I haven't really seen much of a change. It's still somewhat of a Southern town. Unfortunately, I think the predominate perception is still black and white, and the recognition of Hispanic is just Hispanic — not understanding that there is a wide range of Latinos and Hispanics.

Choice: I came from Los Angeles 10 years ago. Most of the change that I have seen is about color, but mostly about green (natural areas) or lack of green because of growth and development. I can also say that, when I moved here, there was a certain enthusiasm. There were a lot of transplants, all eager to be a part of something special. I still feel that enthusiasm 10 years later.

Walton: 20 years. I came here with the planning commission, so I tend to look at Charlotte from a physical land standpoint. There has been tremendous change. The borders of the city have reached to where we are almost out of annexable space. Racially, my test for change is the grocery store test, specifically the cereal aisle. Everybody goes to the grocery store and inevitably they end up in the cereal aisle. If you stand there and listen to the language differences, the change has been amazing. Now you hear Russian, Spanish, Indian people.

Watlington: 17 years. When we first moved to Charlotte, we attended a church that was predominately black. Now the church we attend has flags representing 40-some countries.

Alvarado: We moved here in 1995 after spending eight years in Germany. In Charlotte, I have seen a lot of things change and a lot of things remain the same. One

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way to gauge change is by restaurants: Now you are able to find many more restaurants representing different cultures. But when I look at businesses in many areas, even though there are programs to include minorities, many of them are just window-dressing. It is the same game, with the same guys still in charge, and small companies profit from the crumbs that fall off the table.



What does diversity mean to you?

Anderson: The unique differences that describe us as individuals and as groups — our human characteristics, but also our experiences, occupations, values and beliefs.

Choice: Diversity means competitiveness. For business and for our city to remain competitive — economically, politically and socially — we need everyone to contribute their very best talents, to utilize those differences that benefit us all.

Alvarado: It does not have to do only with color. I think diversity also has a socio-economic component. We need social and economic inclusiveness, so that we don't marginalize part of our society. That will end up hurting us.

Choice: May I speak to that? We had an experience with that in the company that I work for. We were challenged by our clients to cut costs and to be more efficient, and we had a lot of people on the executive level trying to figure out how we were going to make that happen. And at a lower level, among the folks who produce the work every day, we had a single mother of three who had struggled all of her life to make ends meet. She came up with some ideas and suggestions that were right on point. Because of her experience of having to make the most out of the little that she had, she was able to contribute solutions that no one else could bring to the table.



Emmanuel Choice

Walton: Another component is geographical diversity because we are part of a regional economy. That is one of the reasons we have reached out to offer a regional membership. I wish there were another word besides “diversity,” perhaps “inclusion.” Part of the challenge here is creating an environment and culture that people find welcoming and inclusive.

Watlington: Like Keva, I'm not real crazy about the term “diversity.” That has become overused. To me it's about being competitive — realizing that if we include all segments of the population, it's good for the economy. When you look at the things that happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, you see the results of a huge disparity between the haves and have-nots. It is really to our advantage as a community, as a nation, that we include everybody in business and in the work force.

Walton: Just look at the sheer numbers ... Bob (Morgan) does a presentation about 2026, and there is a slide in there about shifting demographics. That's the whole case right there because those folks are going to spend money, they are going to work here and they are going to be customers here. I think that some people don't realize that

yet, and that is why we need to craft the message so that people really get it.

Queen: Since I am the only person here representing technology, I'd like to speak to diversity within my industry. I've worked in IT for more than 30 years, which has been not only a very white world, but also a very male-dominated world. It still is a male-dominated industry. We are losing the women that are in IT and not attracting new ones. Women and minorities are a passion of mine, specifically women and minorities in technology. I want to add that India is obviously doing a lot of things correctly, especially training their young men and women in math and science.

Alvarado: There is going to be some forced diversity, whether you want it or not. You have it particularly in technology. Many American kids do not really want to go into technology — they all want to be stockbrokers or something — so technology education is dominated by foreign students. They could be American and hopefully more



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— Francisco Alvarado

Latin American. . . . I was talking to my kids a couple of days ago about the fact that you don't see many Indians laying bricks, and you don't see many Chinese cutting grass.

Perez: I have seen diversity from three different perspectives. First, the corporate perspective — I don't know about other corporations, but for Bank of America diversity is a business imperative; it is not something that we do as window-dressing. It is the right thing to do, but we are way beyond that. We have made significant investments in Latin America and in China, knowing that we need to be internationally diverse. Even domestically, our investments in Latinos reflect what we know is the future. A large percentage of the tellers we hire today are bilingual. As leaders, we have diversity goals that are tied to our bonuses. These goals involve attracting and retaining people of color and women. What we've learned is that diversity is not really about color; it's not about national origin; it's not even socio-economic. Those are the inputs that we

bring to the table. The output, the real value, is diversity of thought. Emmanuel's example about the single mother of three is perfect. Without that diversity of thought, we're not getting any value out of diversity.

The second perspective, which I live day in and day out as an employee of a corporation and as a minority, is that we are not looking for handouts. We are just looking for inclusion. How can we be included, so we can be proud of our organizations and add value?

My third perspective on diversity has to do with small business. Our goal at the Diversity Business Council is to make Charlotte the best city in the country for minority and women-owned business. To become that, we need to have the best minority and women-owned businesses. But many of those businesses still need a lot of education about doing business in general and about doing business in Charlotte, which is a unique culture.

Alvarado: Just to follow up what you are saying, the inclusion portion translates into opportunity. If the corporation will only give the minority the opportunity, knowing that this might involve a little more risk. . . . But risk can be managed. That is basically what everybody needs: an opportunity. Minorities can be “included” in discussions, but those discussions have to materialize into solid opportunities, so everybody can prove themselves and grow.

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Perez: What we're really talking about is a cultural shift. Because when you talk about the need to take a risk, that's the last thing many corporations want to do. They tend to look for consistency, for other companies that they have been able to depend on before. So part of what we try to do with the Diversity Business Council is to help minority and women-owned businesses start the process of building relationships. Inclusion is a process, and building relationships helps minimize risks.

Watlington: And managing expectations on both sides. Because that's when you have issues — when the parties have different expectations.

Perez: If I bring in a new company to work with, then I need to hold your hand and walk you through the process. And if I don't have the support within my organization, then that becomes difficult. What we need are more representatives, who are supported by their organizations, to cultivate and nurture new relationships.



What is the Charlotte Chamber doing, or what should it do, with regard to diversity?

Anderson: The Chamber needs to understand more strategically how to leverage diversity to accomplish its mission. And the Chamber needs to understand the important role it can play in helping other organizations with their efforts. As the Chamber works to attract new businesses to this community, diversity should be a key part of that discussion.

Perez: It's about access. How can we provide Francisco with access to Bank of America? That's the role I see for the Chamber: access. The second piece is referrals, which is different from access.

Alvarado: I am going to talk more from the perspective of the Latin American Chamber of Commerce. We are already talking to Keva about how we can work more closely with the Charlotte Chamber. We will be most effective if we work together, because we serve different markets. I use an analogy with my Chamber: Mainstream America is like a highway. There are a lot of parallel streets — some are dirt roads, some are cobblestone, some are paved, some are two-lane, and some are four-lane. We as Chambers should provide the on-ramps to allow companies to move into the highway.

Walton: A testament to diversity is that we have several ethnic Chambers

in Charlotte — the Latin American Chamber, the Asian Chamber, the Black Chamber and the German-American Chamber. The concept that we are all going to be one is not realistic, nor should it be. But again, how do we leverage, support, connect?

Watlington: I think the Chamber is in a unique position to model behavior that would be helpful for the community at large — to help corporations move beyond diversity as window-dressing, to provide forums or tools to help them set and achieve specific goals.

Queen: I'm getting excited listening to all of you talk, because I see this an opportunity for the Chamber to become the gathering place for inclusion. We have all these Chambers talking about collaborating, and I would like to see some of the women's organizations become involved too. I'm sitting here just appreciating the opportunity. I think the Chamber is at an important crossroad right now. **V**

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