

**RACIAL DISPARITY IN THE CHARLOTTE FIRE DEPARTMENT  
STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY RISK REDUCTION**

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**An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy  
As part of the Executive Fire Officer Program**

**March 2002**

## **ABSTRACT**

This research project explored the feasibility of a diversity initiative The Charlotte Fire Department could use to ensure equal opportunities for women and minorities. The problem addressed was the increasing lack of diversity in the Charlotte Fire Department. The purpose of this project was to develop a set of diversity initiatives the Department could use to ensure a diverse workforce.

Action research, including the literature review, was used to explore what diversity initiatives work best, to explore diversity in corporate America, and to focus on the specific steps an organization should take to make certain that its workforce is reflective of the community it serves.

The research questions posed were:

1. What diversity initiatives work best?
2. What makes corporate diversity succeed?
3. Are affirmative action programs still necessary?

The procedure began with a literature review of diversity initiatives experts in the field of diversity say work best. Next, diversity in the corporate world was examined. A literature review on affirmative action programs was also completed.

The results of this research project showed that in the absence of clear cut diversity initiatives, people in management tend to favor people similar to them. The results also showed that affirmative action levels the playing field so people of color and all women have the chance to compete in education and in business. White men hold 95% to 97% of high-level corporate jobs, and that's with affirmative action programs in place. Despite the enormous gains made by the civil rights and women's rights movements, women and people of color still face unfair obstacles in business and education.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Charlotte Fire Department is a large department, consisting of 900 career suppression personnel, operating out of 35 fire stations. The rapid growth of the city of Charlotte has made it necessary to build new stations and hire additional firefighters. For the past five years the city of Charlotte has not operated under any affirmative action guidelines, and the Fire Department has ceased recruiting. Most of those hired over the past five years have family members or friends in the department. The volunteer departments that border Charlotte have also seen many of their members become career firefighters in the city of Charlotte. Black males and females make up less than 10 percent of the current workforce, so there is not a large amount of family and friends from which to draw. The volunteer departments in the area consist mostly of white males.

The problem prompting this research project was the growing racial disparity throughout the Charlotte Fire Department. If the current hiring and promotional practices are not changed, the problem will continue to escalate. The Fire Department will regress to a situation in which black males and females are rare and black chief officers are nonexistent.

The purpose of the applied research project was to develop a plan the Charlotte Fire Department could use in recruiting black males and females for the fire service and to advance the careers of multiethnic employees. Action research, including the literature review, was used to explore what diversity initiatives the Charlotte Fire Department could put into action. The research questions examined were:

1. What diversity initiatives work best?
2. What makes corporate diversity succeed?
3. Are affirmative action programs still necessary?

## **Background and Significance**

Charlotte is a growing city with a population of 527,291. It is seen nationally as one of the best cities in the country because of its exemplary quality of life and resilient economic strength.

As the 25<sup>th</sup> largest U.S. City, Charlotte lies at the heart of a region that is the nation's fifth largest urban area. Fortune magazine has ranked Charlotte as having the nation's best pro-business attitude and the US Conference of Mayors has deemed it the Nation's Most Livable City.

The city boasts a thriving arts community, national sports leagues, museums, parks and recreational facilities, including golf, boating, skiing and tennis.

Charlotte means many things to many people: A worldwide financial center, a leader in new information technology, a global trade center and home for international business, a resource for entrepreneurs and small businesses, a leader in manufacturing, and more.

Even with such a bright future, Charlotte is becoming a "tale of two cities." There is a growing population of very poor, mostly minority residents struggling with unemployment and underemployment, lack of affordable housing, and inadequate community resources. The city overall boasts one of the state's largest per capita incomes; it ranks fourth largest nationally in bank assets and has strong population and employment growth. However, there is growing economic division among the "haves" and "have nots" in the community.

The Charlotte City Council adopted an Affirmative Action Plan in January of 1977, which was amended in February 1977 and again in February 1981. For the purpose of this applied research project, "affirmative action" means the deliberate use of race and gender in personnel decisions to correct past discrimination. During this four-

year span, black males and females were recruited for the fire service under the city's Affirmative Action Plan. For the first time since its creation in 1887 as a paid department, Charlotte's Fire Department had a diverse workforce.

At present the number of black male and female firefighters has declined in the Charlotte Fire Department. It's clear the city's new Equal Employment Opportunity Plan does not work for the fire department. Most job opportunities in the fire service are heard about through informal networks of friends, family, and neighbors. Because the results of racism are segregated communities, schools, and workplaces, this pattern leaves people of color out of the loop for many jobs, advancement opportunities, scholarships, and training programs.

The researcher of this project was hired in 1997 by the Charlotte Fire Department under the city's old Affirmative Action Plan. Of the 42 firefighters in this class, 21 were black, the largest number of black males ever in one class. We soon found out that this was traditionally a segregated job. There were only two black officers on the department. This group of entry-level firefighters would need mentors. The author was fortunate to be assigned to the same station as one of these officers who became his mentor, which helped the author avoid pitfalls that may have negatively affected his career. That mentor was David Taylor, the first black Captain, Battalion Chief, and Deputy Chief in the history of the Charlotte Fire Department. David Taylor recently retired from Charlotte to become the Fire Chief of the city of High Point, North Carolina.

Chief Taylor was a pioneer, and he left behind a better department than when he arrived. Presently, the department's Administrative Division consists of the Fire Chief and four Deputy Chiefs, all white males. Of the 24 battalion chiefs, five are black and two are female. All the black and female battalion chiefs became members of the

department between 1977 and 1985 through affirmative action. This has benefited the department and the city of Charlotte.

The Charlotte Fire Department has total personnel of 851. There are 777 in uniform, 74 are civilian, 11 are black females, 41 are white females, 1 is Asian female, 114 are black males, 81 are white males, and 2 are Hispanic males. The captains on the department total 158. Of this number, 137 are white males, 14 are black males, 6 are white females, 1 black female and 1 is a Hispanic male. At present the number of black male and female firefighters has declined on the Charlotte Fire Department. There are several reasons for this decline. The first is retirement. In December 1998, Captain Earl Adams, the second black officer, retired from the Charlotte Fire Department. He was the very first black man to do so. It was a very proud moment in time for the author. Captain Adams began his career with the Charlotte Fire Department in the early 70s at a time when the number of blacks in the department could be counted on one hand. At his retirement dinner he talked about his experiences with racism as a firefighter. This racism came from white officers and the people of the community he was there to serve. Rather than become bitter, he used this as his motivation to become the second black firefighter to reach the rank of captain in Charlotte.

In 2001, four black captains retired after twenty-five years of service. Another reason for the decline of black males on the department is a negative one. In the past five years nine black firefighters were terminated for violation of the department's code of conduct. The number of female firefighters has declined also. Two retired after on-the-job injuries; others left to pursue different careers. The primary reason for the decline in the number of blacks and females on the department is the lack of strong commitment to diversity at the top of the organization.

Of those applying for the position of firefighter with the city of Charlotte over the past three years, 92 percent have been white males, 6 percent black males and 2 percent females. The future could be bleak for people of color and white women in the fire service if the fire department does not develop and enforce some form of Affirmative Recruitment Plan. Affirmative Action programs have not eliminated racism, nor have they always been implemented without problems. However, there would be no struggle to roll back the gains achieved if affirmative action policies were ineffective.

This paper has been produced to satisfy the applied research project requirement for the Executive Development course at the National Fire Academy. The project relates to the course work on problem solving, problem recognition, and constraints of inadequate information. The author hopes that this research will offer some insight on how to build and benefit from a diverse workforce.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review for this project focused on three essential areas: (1) what diversity initiatives work best; (2) what makes corporate diversity succeed; and (3) whether affirmative action programs are still necessary. The first two topics were researched through literature searches conducted at the Public Library of Charlotte and the NETC Learning Resource Center. The third topic was researched by conducting interviews with experts in the field of affirmative action and conducting literature searches at the Public Library of Charlotte and on the Internet.

### **What Diversity Initiatives Work Best?**

Pine (2001) wrote that a strong commitment to diversity at the top of an organization must include a strategy that links diversity to the corporate bottom line. Professionals of color and corporate executives agree that these fundamentals are vital

to the retention of employees of color, according to a recent survey by global recruiting firm Korn/Ferry International.

According to (Pine 2001) Korn/Ferry also uncovered a significant disparity between what executives think is working versus what professionals of color see as effective. On the list were some of the Fortune 500 company's most sacred cows, such as mentoring programs for employees of color and partnerships with "minority-oriented" organizations.

Bean (2001) writes:

Somewhere in corporate America, an eager mid-level manager is basking in the praise of a chief executive who just signed off on a new diversity initiative researched and written outside the executive suite. What you have just experienced is the first indication that (leadership) has abdicated responsibility for diversity, and your diversity program is in trouble.

The first step for anyone in charge of a diversity program, Bean (2001) said, is securing the active participation, not just the passive backing and support of corporate leadership. Subsequent steps will logically flow from the goals and objectives set by those leaders. "Recognize that you want the executives to write the strategy. This is one of the CEO's deliverables to the diversity initiative and to the organization."

Thomas (2002) wrote that strong support networks are what African Americans who make it to the top have in common. "Mentoring and sponsorship at all stages" is one of five crucial factors in the career development of African Americans.

According to Thomas (2002), as global workplaces diversify--via mergers and acquisitions, racial and ethnic hiring recruitment programs, the creation of global operations and units--executives must learn now to manage the groups and offices in a way that is effective and profitable.

Brune (2001) states: "I'm always astounded at how many people want to know how to measure diversity before they've established the specific long-term goals of their

process. You want to be measuring the right thing. It is very disheartening when you've got a set of metrics that don't really get to the heart of where you want to go."

For example, a company might successfully hire women and people of color, but do a poor job of creating an environment that allows diversity to flourish. According to Simmons (2001). "You are going to end up looking really good to yourself, but totally miss the long-term goals of your process."

As noted by Wallace (2001) when managers arrive at the office each day, they are likely to bring their cultural biases with them. However, they don't necessarily do it consciously. Often times a manager's hidden bias is often betrayed in real-life situations:

An African-American employee writes a well-written report and a white boss asks, "Did you write this by yourself?"

An Asian-American college professor is asked by an African-American co-worker, "Where are you from?" The professor responds, "Cleveland." The colleague then asks, "No, I mean, what country are you from?"

Susan, a white engineer who is double-checking calculations in a set of plans calls her Latina colleague, Maria. "Are you certain this is correct?" she asks. "Yes," Maria replies. Susan then calls a white colleague, Tom, and asks, "Are you certain Maria's calculations are right?" Tom calls Maria, who again confirms it. He then calls Susan to assure her that Maria's work is correct. Susan accepts his assurance as the truth.

A corporate planning committee is discussing an off-site training session. The team leader says, "Not all of us have to go if the building isn't accessible." This implies that Bob, who uses a wheelchair – and is sitting in the meeting – is expendable.

Morris (2002) likens culture to sunglasses, a cadre of “tools that you carry around with you, but which shape your perceptions only when they are put into use.” These “sunglasses” can distort the way people view the workplace and the performance of colleagues. Managers can view events through their cultural lenses without ever realizing they are doing so.

Wallace (2001) goes on to note that an effort to tap America’s burgeoning ethnic and racial markets and grow the economy is facing some new challenges, including a disagreement as to whether corporate diversity programs should focus more on “race” or “culture.” Is there evidence to substantiate a need to focus? Morris (2001) says yes, noting that “Managing diversity is everybody’s business these days.” Why? Because:

- Women and people of color will represent approximately 70 percent of new entrants to the U.S. workforce by 2008. Cultural competence therefore, is taking on greater significance, both in retention and recruitment of multiethnic workers and in reaching the multicultural consumer market.
- As the demographic shift quickens its pace, it will bring conflict, multicultural miscues, and tensions. Still, companies that don’t tackle the challenges will pay a price for not tying diversity initiatives into the bottom line.
- While the workforce is changing quickly, research on cross-cultural communication and behaviors has been slower to arrive. When crises occur, managers sometimes lack the cultural data to interpret them with accuracy.
- Diverse work teams bring high value to contemporary organizations. Just as cross-functional task forces have long been used to reach decisions that better represent the whole organization, so diverse cultural teams and organizations offer the potential to design products and policies with broad applicability in the global economy.

Thiederman (2001) concurs with the last point, stating: “There is a lot of evidence that when the task you are doing connects to cultural knowledge, having people represented who have different forms of cultural knowledge leads to a better set

of conclusions.” Successful corporations must create environments where differences flourish, and conversation and language are not restricted. “I disagree with the notion that becoming self-conscious about every term or phrase we use is the answer to creating a more harmonious workplace.”

One technique consultants such as Theiderman (2001) suggest to enhance understanding without creating chaos is:

- Encourage honest and respectful communication among workers of different races. If the issue is particularly volatile, have a trained moderator on hand to step in and lead the dialogue. If employees are expressing feelings of discomfort because of the recent bombings of the World Trade Center and Pentagon, for example, it is better to allow staff the chance to air fears rather than suppress them.

Theiderman (2001) believes that if a manager suppresses the discussion and orders everyone to get along, “That is where you get people acting cold and not talking to one another. I would sit everyone down and ask, “Is anybody feeling a little afraid?”

Looking back briefly on the year 2001 with regards to corporate diversity initiatives, Franklin (2002) observes, “While more corporations discovered the economic benefits of multicultural employees and customers, the mounting recession and the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> had a profound impact on managers, employees and corporate priorities. Appropriately, diversity initiatives once perceived as “soft” and “expendable,” ended the year as “do not cut” items in many otherwise strained corporate budgets.”

### **What Makes Corporate Diversity Succeed in Instituting These Initiatives?**

Brune (2002) acknowledges that many U.S. companies have been working on diversity goals for a number of years, and advancing the careers of multiethnic employees has become the dominant focus of efforts to retain as well as recruit people of color. Take, for example, Ernst & Young. In recent years, this Big Five accounting

firm has assembled a large enough base of multiethnic employees to make retention feasible and then made a natural progression to focusing on career development in addition to other retention issues and recruitment. According to the firm's director of ethnicity diversity initiatives, today, 21 percent of the firm's employees are people of color - up from 9 percent in 1994, when Ernst & Young added its office of minority recruiting and retention.

Commenting on the diversity directors themselves, Cole (2002) states:

When conjuring an image of a diversity director, you might picture a woman wearing Birkenstock sandals and a crushed cotton dress, who walks the cubicles with a guitar slung over her shoulder for the company's multicultural mid-morning "Kumbaya" circle. The reality is far more rooted in budgets and boardrooms than in altruistic and poetic fantasies. A diversity director in today's tough economy, where departments prove their worth or are eliminated, must be enterprising and focus on proving the initiative's worth to the bottom line.

Pine (2001) continues:

More often than not in corporate America, diversity is a tough sell. Few people truly understand why diversity is important to their business. More people are likely to put up their defenses the minute they hear the "d" word. This presents an interesting challenge for diversity directors. Their job is to make sure the values inherent in a company's paper commitment to diversity permeate the entire organization. Yet some of the language they're given to work with may come with built-in baggage.

Ideally, the burden would not be left entirely to one person/department.

"Diversity is a business imperative for each and every corporate employee," says Brune (2002). Cole (2002) consents, continuing, "A company that is honestly seeking the goal of a diverse workforce from the mailroom to the boardroom will show support for a diversity initiative through a code of ethics."

Commenting on another way to ensure success of diversity initiatives, Cole (2002) continues:

Positioning diversity as a business case imperative is integral to an initiative working. Otherwise, the white men who have been historically in power will be able to cast these initiatives aside as a waste of company time. While changing a company's culture to reflect the diverse demographics of the nation and its markets could be perceived as an altruistic effort, an opportunity to generate revenues will capture executives' interest. A diversity drive must be positioned in such a way.

Offering another way to secure success, Cole (2002) notes the positive examples of UPS and American Express (two companies that have reached a commendable level of diversity with involuntary action). In both corporations diversity permeates all facets of cultural behavior in the workplace. When asked how such a significant level of ethnic diversion was achieved, Malcolm Berkley, a spokesperson for United Parcel Service commented: "Diversity has to become a part of your business process in that it is no longer something you have to think about. Like brushing your teeth – It's just something that you do." Both companies (UPS and American Express) have spent the time and money to ensure that their corporate leaders, department managers, and employees are automatically cognizant of diversity concerns and how they saturate their operations.

On the flipside, Pine (2001) notes the embarrassing example of another globally recognized firm: "In an attempt to rebuild its reputation in the aftermath of the largest racial-bias lawsuit settlement ever, Coca-Cola may have fallen into a common trap." Diversity consultant Howard Ross calls it the "car wash" approach to diversity training, a technique that presupposes running a large group of employees (8,000 in this case) through a one-day diversity training session will have a positive impact on a damaged corporate culture. Ross calls this a car wash approach because employees come out of training "squeaky clean," but re-enter their same-old environment and quickly get "dirty" again.

Spruell (2002) notes further negative exposure that should spur management into action: “The sparse number of African-American law enforcers at Ground Zero on and after September 11<sup>th</sup> made it overwhelmingly obvious that the New York City fire and police departments need to increase their representation of minorities.” Paul Washington (President of the professional African-American firefighter group Vulcan Society, Inc.) contributes: “Our representation in the fire department is dismal. African Americans represent only 2.7 percent, more than half of who are eligible for retirement.” To remedy the problem, the coalition of Concerned African American Law Enforcement and Fire Fighters (CALEFF) has been launched with the single goal of increasing African-American law enforcement and fire fighters.

Obviously, the creation of new professional organizations that focus on diversity (such as the Black Fire Fighters Association in Charlotte, NC) would help anchor the efforts of diversity initiatives with respect to recruiting, but what about those with the goal of retention? Many corporations have been forced to review their diversification policy with current ethnic employees in mind. It would be impossible to grow an ethnically diverse employee base if the one you have is constantly subject to turnover. Likewise, it would be ludicrous to advertise diversification policies and standards to potential employees if the existing ethnic workforce can speak of only a lack thereof.

How are leading organizations finding ways to successfully manage retention? Brune (2001) relates the example of ING U.S. Financial Services in Hartford, Connecticut. To celebrate Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Day this year, ING gave 10,700 employees Monday off – as many companies are doing on the federal holiday and sponsoring the King Day observance at the symphony in Hartford, where the company is headquartered. According to ING unit president Allan Baker, the celebration is not a one-day occurrence in diversification efforts. “We are diversity conscious day in and

day out, giving financial support to the Thurgood Marshall Scholarship Fund, 100 Black Men of America and the American Council on Education's "Educating All In One Nation" conference. We look at these programs with one view: There is a business case for valuing diversity. It is very important for us in terms of the future growth of business, but we don't do these things in a vacuum; we also believe in valuing diversity internal to external."

Shawn Flaherty, a spokesperson for Freddie Mac, takes a similar stance. Yes, Freddie Mac gave its 3,684 employees Martin Luther King Jr. Day off, and yes, the company will spend about \$5,000 to sponsor culturally related education events during Black History month, but according to Flaherty, that is just the tip of the iceberg: "Diversity is a business imperative. We can't do our business effectively without addressing it. Not just having a diverse workforce, but understanding what is different and what is similar about us."

So, after a company acknowledges its diversity deficit, funnels funds to ameliorate the situation, sees an increase in the number of multicultural and female employees, and partners with a variety of suppliers owned by a people of color and women, the senior management can sit back and watch it all jell, right? Cole (2002) says absolutely not. "To stay ahead of the diversity curve, create an all-inclusive work environment, capture the attention of the wildest variety of customers and work with the most diverse group of suppliers, company executives must inject the notion of diversity into the marrow of the business. In other words, they must inject it into the very culture of the business."

### **Affirmative Action Programs – Are They (Still) Necessary?**

Affirmative Action, the granddaddy of modern diversification efforts, is still a debatable topic across the American workforce. Eastland (1998) describes Affirmative

Action as a giving a “hand up” to “people who have had a hard time.” But this hardly suffices as an accurate description and obscures why the policy has proved to be so controversial.

When it began in the early 1960’s, affirmative action was an attempt to remedy the ill effects of past discrimination against blacks. In its earliest forms it emphasized the elimination of blatant barriers to employment as well as outreach, recruitment, and job training. However, open criticism began when isolated cases of a new form of affirmative action that favored blacks over equally or (in some cases) better-qualified whites. When such incidents appeared not only in the workplace but also in higher education, they were attributed to government percentages and quotas.

Recently, a rash of individuals have tried to take advantage of the minute number of affirmative action cases gone awry -- labeling them as “reverse discrimination” and using them as ammunition to destroy what civil rights leaders and movement members fought and died for so passionately. Celebrated attorney Johnny Cochran commented on the unreasonable stance taken by some members of the white community saying: “I don’t see this (so-called reverse discrimination) as a viable complaint by people who for years and years and years and years have had the unearned privilege, almost a right to jobs while others have been shut out.”

Today, others argue that affirmative action measures are no longer necessary because members of the white community are no longer enjoying these “unearned privileges.” Basic investigation proves such claims most assuredly untrue. Nelson (2001) sites the case of white firefighters in Chicago, IL, who claimed reverse discrimination, saying that they were overlooked for promotions due to an affirmative action program in place within the Chicago Fire Department. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the case and quickly dismissed it. Why? Chicago was immediately

identified as one of several major cities with low levels of minorities in fire departments. An overwhelming majority of 62% of Chicago's population is either African-American or Latino, while only 29% of the firefighters are representative of these racial and ethnic categories.

In the article "Talking About Affirmative Action," Pine (2001) discusses the myths against and more importantly, the facts that solidify the need to continue affirmative action programs. Note what it has to say:

*Myth: Affirmative Action is "reverse discrimination" -- let's stop giving special rights to certain groups while others are left out.*

**Fact: Affirmative Action is fair!**

Affirmative Action levels the playing field so people of color and all women have the chance to compete in education and in business. White men hold 95% to 97% of the high-level corporate jobs. And that's with affirmative action programs in place. Imagine how low figures would be without affirmative action. Of 3000 federal court decisions in discrimination cases between 1990 and 1994, only 100 involved claims of reverse discrimination; only 6 of those claims were found to be valid.

*Myth: Affirmative Action isn't necessary anymore because discrimination is illegal.*

**Fact: Women and people of color still face discrimination.**

Despite the enormous gains made by the civil rights and women's rights movements, women and people of color still face unfair obstacles in business and education. An astonishing 70% of schools are not in compliance with Title IX, the federal equal education opportunity law. For every dollar earned by men, women on a whole earn 74 cents, African American women earn 63 cents and Latina women earn 57 cents. According to the Census Bureau, only 25% of all doctors and lawyers are women. Less than 1% of auto mechanics are women. And women are only 8.4% of engineers.

*Myth: Women-owned companies get fewer contracts because there aren't very many of them.*

**Fact: Women-owned businesses don't get their fair share of government contracts.**

Less than 3% of federal contracts go to women-owned firms. In Washington, less than 10% of state contracts and purchasing dollars go to women-owned firms -- even though women own 39% of firms.

*Myth: Affirmative Action should be based on economic need.*

**Fact: Affirmative Action is necessary so that women and people of color of every economic class have the opportunity to enter all fields.**

Women and people of color should, of course, have the chance to compete for jobs in the trades, construction, skilled labor -- and they should have access to professional jobs in engineering, medicine and the law as well as policy-making positions in executive suites and on boards of directors.

*Myth: Affirmative Action lowers standards in education and the workplace by letting unqualified people get ahead.*

**Fact: Affirmative Action helps qualified candidates overcome racism and sexism.**

Affirmative Action is an investment in the future. By the time today's college students are at the height of their careers, one-third of the population will be comprised of African Americans and Latinos/Latinas.

*Myth: My son can't get into a good school because of affirmative action.*

**Fact: If half of the people of color who are admitted to schools under affirmative action programs were cut, the acceptance rates of white men would only increase by 2%.**

Women still face barriers in schools. In Washington, women receive only 12% of doctorates in engineering, and women are substantially under-represented in computer science nationwide.

*Myth: Nobody else gets special consideration when applying to a college or for a job. Why should all women and people of color?*

**Fact: Lots of people get "special" consideration when applying for jobs or to schools.**

Veterans often get preferences in workplaces and on campuses -- which usually benefit men more than women. The children of alumni get preferential treatment over others in admission to college. Friends help friends and acquaintances get jobs. Affirmative Action helps open doors for women and people of color who often don't have those connections.

*Myth: Affirmative Action won't help me.*

**Fact: Everyone benefits when discrimination is eliminated.**

The majority of families depend on the income of women. When Affirmative Action opens up education, employment, and business, families and communities have greater economic security. Business leaders understand that affirmative action is necessary to

develop a strong workforce. Women and people of color have a lot to offer their communities. Affirmative Action helps insure that everyone gets the chance to contribute.

*Myth: Affirmative Action = Preferences*

**Fact: Affirmative Action = Equal Opportunities**

Affirmative Action programs merely acknowledge that hundreds of years of discrimination cannot be erased in a few decades and still hold women and people of color back. Affirmative Action is the bridge between changing the laws and changing the culture.

*Myth: Things are different now, we don't need affirmative action any more.*

**Fact: Until women and people of color get equal pay and education, we need affirmative action.**

The radical right wing would have us believe that women and people of color earn less because we don't work as hard or we're not as smart. That simply isn't the case. Laws have changed, but discrimination persists. Affirmative Action only opens doors, women and people of color have to walk through those doors by themselves.

## **PROCEDURES**

Action research was conducted through several avenues, including literature review, personal correspondence, personal interviews, and phone interviews.

### **Literature Review**

Literature searches were initiated at the National Emergency Training Center's (NETC) Learning Resource Center (LRC) in August 2001 during the author's attendance at the National Fire Academy. Additional searches were conducted within the public library system of the city of Charlotte, North Carolina. Extensive searches were also conducted online through the Internet to identify published documents, web sites, organizations and newsletters with content relative to the subjects of diversity, affirmative action and civil rights.

### **Personal Interviews and Correspondence**

Phone interviews and written correspondence were conducted with experts in the field of diversity. A series of ten initiatives was posed to all those who were interviewed (Appendix A). Phone interviews and electronic mail correspondence was conducted with Mr. Vern Williams, who is the Managing Partner of V.T. Williams Associates, Inc., a diversity and leadership firm located in Charlotte, North Carolina. The firm provides consultation and training services in Human resources and Workforce Diversity to local corporations.

Within Charlotte, several personal interviews were conducted with High point Fire Department Chief, David Taylor. Chief Taylor is responsible for personnel recruiting and

selection for the High Point fire Department. He was interviewed on December 3, 2001, and on January 18, 2002.

Miss Dorothy Yancy, who serves as the President of Johnson C. Smith University, was also interviewed on January 12, 2002. A follow-up phone interview was conducted on January 26, 2002. Miss Yancy is a teacher, facilitator, and coach with over 30 years of experience in diversity and leadership development.

Written correspondence in the form of requests for information were also sent to several diversity trainings firms, DiversityInc.Com, Pro2Net, American Corporate Counsel Association, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Not all of the organizations responded; however, some did offer information on diversity and affirmative action and leads to other literary resources.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

In performing this research, the author assumed that material cited in the literature review was conducted in an unbiased manner. It was further assumed that the fire service community has an interest in diversity initiatives.

The limitations that affected this research project included the author's lack of knowledge about affirmative action laws and diversity initiatives in the private sector.

The research project was also limited by time. The six-month submission criteria of the EFO program did not allow the author to travel to other cities and conduct interviews in person with experts in the field of diversity. The research was further limited to books readily available at public libraries on the subject of diversity. The

author found that many new books that examined the results of diversity were not carried by the public libraries of Charlotte.

### **Definition and Clarification of Selected Terms**

**Affirmative Action.** Action taken to provide equal opportunity as in admissions or employment, for minority groups and women.

**Culture.** The conscious and unconscious ways of life of a people, including attitudes, values, behavior, and material things.

**Discrimination.** Treatment that favors one person or group over another.

**Diversity.** A goal for workplaces and educational facilities to include people in their population who represent many different races, backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives.

## **RESULTS**

### **1. What diversity initiatives work best?**

The research data revealed that a strong commitment to diversity at the top of an organization and a strategy that links diversity to the corporate bottom line are vital to the retention of employees of color. Also uncovered was a significant disparity between what executives think is working vs. what professionals of color see as effective.

The research also revealed that while more corporations discovered the economic benefits of multicultural employees and customers, the mounting recession and the events of Sept.11 had a profound impact on managers, employees, and

corporate priorities. Appropriately, diversity initiatives, once perceived as soft and expendable, ended the year as “do not cut” items in many otherwise strained corporate budgets.

Tapping diversity’s hidden wealth doesn’t always require big bucks or grand initiative. You don’t need a big budget to get started. Managers and executives can create small projects and make subtle adjustments during the year to help to leverage diversity, enhance cross-cultural communication, and put creative differences to work.

## **2. What makes corporate diversity succeed?**

The research data shows that companies leading in diversity create an all-inclusive work environment, capture the attention of the widest variety of customers, and work with the most diverse group of suppliers. Company executives must inject the notion of diversity into the marrow of the business. Many experts say diversity should permeate all facets of cultural behavior in the workplace. Once diversity becomes a part of your business process, it no longer becomes something you have to think about, it’s just something that you do.

The research pointed out that diversity is a tough sell in corporate America. Few people truly understand why diversity is important to their business. More people are likely to put up their defenses the minute they hear the “d” word. The research did give some positive examples to look at: UPS and American Express. These two companies have reached a commendable level of diversity with involuntary action. In both corporations, diversity permeates all facets of cultural behavior in the workplace.

### **3. Are affirmative action programs still necessary?**

The research revealed that affirmative action is the granddaddy of modern diversification efforts and is still a debatable topic across the American workforce. When it began in the early 1960's, affirmative action was an attempt to remedy the ill effects of past discrimination against blacks. In its earliest form, it emphasized the elimination of blatant barriers to employment as well as outreach, recruitment, and job training.

The research also pointed out that some argue that affirmative action measures are no longer necessary, because whites are no longer enjoying these "unearned privileges". A basic investigation proves such claims most assuredly untrue. There are many myths about affirmative action, but the facts show that women and people of color still face discrimination. Despite the enormous gains made by the civil rights and women's rights movements, women and people of color face unfair obstacles in business and education.

## **DISCUSSION**

The literature search revealed that a strong commitment to diversity is needed at the top of an organization (Bean, 2001). The first step for anyone in charge of a diversity program is securing the active participation, not just the passive backing, and support of corporate leadership. Subsequent steps will logically flow from the goals and objectives set by those leaders. Recognize that you want the executives to write the strategy. This is one of the CEO's deliverables to the diversity initiative and to the organization.

The findings indicated that diverse work teams bring high value to contemporary organizations. Just as cross-functional task forces have been long used to reach decisions that better represent the whole organization, so diverse cultural teams and organizations offer the potential to design products and policies with broad applicability in the global economy.

The research recognized that many U.S. companies have been working on diversity goals for a number of years, and advancing the careers of multiethnic employees has become the dominant focus of efforts to retain, as well as recruit, people of color (Brune, 2002).

More often than not in corporate America, diversity is a tough sell (Pine, 2001). Few people truly understand why diversity is important to their business. More people are likely to put up their defenses the minute they hear the “d” word. This presents an interesting challenge for diversity directors. Their job is to make sure the values inherent in a company’s paper commitment to diversity permeate an entire organization.

The research also recognized that affirmative action is the granddaddy of the modern diversification efforts (Eastland, 1998). In its earliest forms it emphasized the elimination of blatant barriers to employment as well as outreach, recruitment and job training.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based upon this research, the following recommendations are made for the Charlotte Fire Department:

1. Rely on multiethnic strategies and culturally competent systems, not just on good intentions. The company might, for instance, implement a mentoring program to assure that all employees get the close relationships they need with managers in order to access information and opportunities.

2. Provide every employee constructive feedback so he or she receives an opportunity to learn and grow. Sometimes managers shy away from appraising performance across the cultural divide.
3. Work to ensure that all cultural groups are treated fairly and have access to opportunities.
4. Work to ensure that all cultural groups within the organization perceive that they are treated fairly.
5. Provide cultural competence training for managers and equip them with the necessary resources to conduct performance appraisals fairly and assist and support staff in career development.
6. Help supervisors understand that they should be sensitive to obstacles facing members of certain cultural groups and provide flexibility to adjust performance evaluations in order to even the playing field.
7. Put members of different groups into key performance-appraising positions and encourage managers to call on those with cultural expertise much as they would call on those with technical expertise for an I. T. problem.
8. Include all employees and all ethnic cultures in diversity discussions. Fair-minded companies don't limit cross-cultural understanding to the experiences of communities of color.

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## Appendix A

### Diversity Initiatives For The Charlotte Fire Department

**Step #1. Diversity Is A Journey Toward Excellence:** Change agents who advocate diversity as a pathway to excellence must always lead by example. Show colleagues how to incorporate diversity in work relationships and on their jobs by demonstrating the techniques.

**Step #2. Become a Cultural Coach:** The best forum for a diversity discussion is a lunchroom, not a conference center. Instead of sending memos about problems in your corporation, invest time taking a co-worker of another color out to lunch. Spend the hour finding out what you have in common and how you are different.

**Step #3. Ask What You Can Do For The Company, Not What The Company Can Do For You:** In meetings, emphasize how employees of color contribute to the bottom line with their special skills and cultural knowledge.

**Step #4. Catch Colleagues Doing Something Right:** The fastest way to spark interest in diversity is to praise the people who are getting it right.

**Step #5. Write An Article On A Positive Workplace Experience Related To Diversity:** Share the lessons learned on the corporate Intranet or in the employee newsletter. Too often, diversity is treated as a challenge to be controlled rather than as a solution to corporate problems.

**Step #6. Set Up An Employee Diversity Speakers' Bureau To Give Talks Inside The Workplace or In The Community:** Make the speakers' bureau available to local universities and colleges, as well as elementary and secondary schools.

**Step #7. Track Departmental Successes And Record The Ways In Which Diversity Makes A Contribution To The Bottom Line:** Too often, managers will concentrate on problems related to diversity-related conflict and fail to track and monitor ways in which diverse employees contribute to the bottom line.

## Appendix B

### Building Corporate Coalitions Around Diversity

- 1. Ensure Your Company's Top Leaders Are Believers:** A strong commitment to diversity at the top of an organization is essential.
- 2. Choose Respected Managers To Serve On A Diversity Council:** Select senior-level people who have established a real rapport with the people they have supervised.
- 3. Consider Everyone:** Diversity is all about inclusiveness. Don't allow its definition inside your company to be limited to ethnicity and race.
- 4. Set-up An Outreach Program With Every Advance:** Diversity is an evolving discipline. The further you move out there in terms of trying to create an environment of inclusion, the more challenging it becomes to create the environment that supports that process.
- 5. Involve Culture Behavior In Performance Evaluations:** Efforts should be made to value and leverage everybody's differences and similarities.
- 6. Repeatedly Review Diversity At All Levels, And Act On the Behalf Of Women:** In this area women are still not getting the promotions or the recognition or the salaries that men are getting and that is discrimination.