

Commentary: Wrong side of the tracks is just a different side

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When I was young, there used to be a saying that described when a person left their own neighborhood and ventured into a neighborhood that was culturally or economically different: "You are on the wrong side of the tracks."

This simply meant stay in your own neighborhood, among your own people. It implied that you would not easily be accepted outside of those boundaries. Today, that old saying is truly being put to the test.

Every year thousands of aspiring African American men and women walk across university stages, receiving degrees of higher education, turning their tassels and celebrating one of the greatest accomplishments of their lives.

Yet the vast majority of these individuals will wake up the next morning and find themselves grappling with a decision possibly more daunting than the enormous task they just achieved. For the majority of these future professionals, the road to opportunities and the payback on their educational investments will challenge them to leave comfortable and familiar environments, entering more affluent and less diverse communities.

For the African American worker, this brings a new set of worries. Will I fit in? Will I be accepted? Will my credentials be respected? Will I get a fair chance to prove myself? Or will I meet pain and disappointment?

Three years ago, I was one of those aspiring graduates who took a job in Howell as a professor and now dean of graduate studies at Cleary University.

In Howell, African Americans make up just 0.31 percent of the population. In decades past, it was known as a capital to some of the most racist organizations in the state. Thus my challenge was how do I, as an African American brought up in inner city Detroit, navigate professionally, promote diversity and unity, and make a positive difference in this homogeneous community?

Thankfully, I am thriving here. My professional pursuits and my credentials have been honored and rewarded, and I have been promoted. I participate in campus diversity events, and I've spoken to the Howell Chamber of Commerce on issues of diversity and inclusion.

My story can be a road map for others to venture into unfamiliar territory where opportunity may lie in wait. The following steps may help African American professionals venture onto the other side of the tracks and be successful once they get there.

Do your homework. Learning your new community is paramount. Understand the culture, people and political figures. Try to remember names and titles of key dignitaries and community leaders. Subscribing to local media outlets can help.

Be flexible. Be willing to give a little. Show your new colleagues that you are willing to listen and consider new ideas. If you do, you might find others more accepting when you offer new ideas of your own.

Volunteer and participate. Volunteering is a great way to meet people, and helping others with projects and ventures casts you in a positive light. Volunteering also gives you a chance to highlight some of your special skills and abilities.

Attend civic events. Attending civic events puts you one handshake away from meeting key figures in your new community. It also gives you a chance to learn what is going on, and how you can position yourself and your talents. Plus, people will meet you and get used to seeing your face.

Introduce yourself. You must be willing to make the first move. Introducing yourself to others and showing yourself to be friendly and outgoing will benefit you greatly, while you find your place in your new community.

Be social. Within reason, accept invitations to lunch, sit-downs and other opportunities with new colleagues. If you do not feel comfortable at a local restaurant, agree to a safe space within your work environment. When others try to get to know you, use that opportunity to show yourself as friendly, learn about your co-workers, and share with them your best self and experiences.

Do not be offended easily. Your presence may be new for everyone, and sometimes there will be awkward moments. Sometimes people do not understand the lines of offense clearly, due to ignorance or cultural differences. They may inadvertently step on your toes, and you might unknowingly dish out a few bruises of your own. New relationships of any kind require patience and grace. Be quick to forgive, and make small corrections as you go. This is how you build strong and lasting relationships.

Look for the best in others. Whatever you look for, you will find, so position yourself to see positives. Look for commonalities. View your new community members and colleagues as allies and professional supports.

Be incredible. Your excellent credentials and great work ethic brought you to this community. Show them your incredible self. Let your phenomenal work and your high level of professionalism speak for itself. Leave them wondering how they ever lived without you.

Act like you belong. This is your new community. These are your neighbors and colleagues. This your space. It is important to walk around as if you belong. An attitude of ownership will go a long way in shaping the perception of others. When you act like you belong, you more easily fit in like a piece in a puzzle. When you shy away, as if you are an outsider, people will perceive you to be just that.

Above all else, remember that you have value and purpose. What you bring to your new community benefits everyone. This pursuit may come with some bumps, bruises and even setbacks, but in the end you must believe that it is worth it. Maybe, just maybe, the wrong side of the tracks may be right for you.