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Strategies For Responding To Inequity: A Conversation With Black Leadership

Abstract

Sponsored by the Roundtable for African American Concerns (RAAC) of the South Carolina Library Association (SCLA), this session featured African American representation from various levels of Charleston County Public Library management. Each panelist discussed their experiences of racial inequity (Individual, Institutional, and Structural), finding and being advocates, coping and self-care methods, and positive outcomes. Panelists also offered strategies and solutions for handling inequity. The article discusses what was the catalyst leading to the deliberate, purposeful efforts of Charleston County Public Library to include Equity as one of the core principles in its Strategic Vision for 2021-2024.

Keywords

Inequity, Coping, Strategies, Solutions

Strategies for Responding to Inequity: A Conversation with Black Leadership

By Gerald B. Moore

Inequity is defined as the lack of fairness or justice. Discussions about inequity can span a broad range of areas and there is difficulty sometimes in addressing all the issues that stem from inequitable systems. An informal gathering between black leadership of Charleston County Public Library (CCPL) management staff, ranging from front line small and large branch managers to administrative associate and deputy directors, sparked conversation about equity as it had been introduced as one of the CCPL organization's Core Five Principles in the Strategic Vision Plan for 2021 – 2024. Those black leadership staffers were Chief Deputy Director Darlene Jackson, Northwest District Associate Director Haley Hall, Large Branch Manager Rayburne "Ray" J. Turner, Large Branch Manager Rebecca Wright, Small Branch Manager Shelia Matthews, Small Branch Manager Michel 'Chel' Campbell, Small Branch Manager K'Lani Green, Small Branch Manager Marvin Stewart and Large Branch Manager Gerald B. Moore.

The black leadership group's conversation focused primarily on racial equity because of the historical systemic racism and current climate of race-related tension in Charleston. While progress was being made, we were still dealing with acts of microaggression, disparities among people of color, systemic racism, and struggles in the promotion, recruitment, and retention of blacks. To add their voices to the cause and to take control of their own narratives, the leadership decided to share experiences with inequity on a professional platform.

Background

The impact of the George Floyd murder and other acts of racist violence/brutality towards people of color brought riots to downtown Charleston destroying properties of business owners.

As with ALA, BCALA, PLA and SCLA's Roundtable of African American Concerns (RAAC), CCPL issued a statement of support to the value of Black Lives. Executive Director Angela Craig took a stand and then further validated the stance by adding EQUITY as a core principle in our Strategic Vision.

This [CCPL Strategic Vision Plan 2021 - 2024](#) resulted from input of staff, board members and community leaders that volunteered to participate in roundtable discussions to help develop action items for CCPL's five core focus areas, which they also helped to define. The five core principles are Equity, Community Engagement, Workforce Development, Educational Success, and Literacy.

With an Equity Strategy, CCPL was on its way to changing the library infrastructure to support the initiatives in our Strategic Vision.

One of the initiatives was to establish an Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee. This was done shortly after the publication of the CCPL Strategic Vision. This parent EDI group has extensions of subgroup areas with staff support and participation. The Racial Equity subgroup further divides into multiple subgroups of all races. One subgroup is the black leadership, which consist of black library managers from different levels in the hierarchy of the CCPL

organization. The Black Leadership Group has gatherings to support one another, to strengthen the bond between black staff, to provide informal mentoring to staff, to identify inequities and seek ways of resolution. It was concluded that the conversation needed to be voiced on a higher platform which lead to the group's participation in the 2021 SCLA Conference.

The purpose for having the conversation on this level was to educate those who are not aware, to encourage those who might be going through similar experiences and share methods of coping; to say thank you to our advocates; and to showcase and support the efforts being made by the Charleston County Public Library (CCPL). The conversation was also to acknowledge the memory of our fallen colleague Cynthia Graham Hurd who lost her life due to racist violence. She was one of the nine murdered at the Mother Emanuel Church on June 17, 2015. Cynthia was the manager of the St Andrews Library now renamed to the Cynthia Graham Hurd St. Andrews Library. Cynthia's family established The Cynthia Graham Hurd Foundation for Reading and Civic Engagement to continue Cynthia's work and legacy of engaging the community through her love and appreciation for reading and facilitating stronger relationships between community members.

Here are the stories of the black leadership group:

(Disclaimer: The viewpoints, opinions, stories, and experiences shared here are those of the participating panelists and do not reflect the current Charleston County Public Library Administration. Any content provided by our panelists is of their own opinion and is not intended to malign any organization or individual.)

Case Studies

Salary Disparity – Shelia’s Story

“The wage gap is part of systemic racism, but one thing Black women can do is learn how to quantify our worth,” Minda Harts, author of *The Memo* (Folz, 1).



Shelia Matthews is a 35-year employee of the Charleston County Public Library System without a library degree. She often felt the outlook for her in roles as a Library Generalist was grim in terms of position and salary. It is certainly something that has kept her working instead of considering retirement at this time. She came to work for the Charleston County Public Library system through a work-study program that eventually led to her being a library page. She worked as a library page for several years and then became the Library Page Supervisor. She was in this role for several years as well. Administrative officials told her that she was a natural born leader.

“I have to say that when opportunities present themselves for me to lead, I answer the call. I am no stranger to hard work and dedication,” Matthews said.

Today, Matthews is currently classified as a Library Generalist V – Small Branch Manager. She states that her recent position upgrade is a blessing and a great opportunity, but she is quick to remind those around her that the road to this achievement has been paved with challenges.

“I must be honest and say the road to this point in my career was not always easy. I have no quick fix for the problems I faced nor a magic wand to wave all the issues away. My hope is that my transparency about my situation offers solutions to someone experiencing the same things that I have faced,” Matthews said.

On average, Matthews managed 6-7 staff people in the Circulation department over the years accruing lots of supervisory and management experience. Over the years, she also supported many branch managers with different management styles.

“During my library career, I have filled in as an interim branch manager at least five times. I am currently working in this capacity right now. Under past administrations, I received incentives to undertake these interim roles such as a .25 cent raise that was abruptly taken back the moment a new branch manager was hired. I do not have a library degree and that is required to be a branch manager,” Matthews explained.

She says that she never let those disappointments stop her from pursuing professional development opportunities. Lack of finances, family obligations, and other responsibilities prevented her from pursuing a library degree.

Over the years, she has been consistent in building her professional development. She attributes that as being one solution that helped her obtain her current position upgrade. Other

solutions offered were not give up, stay the course, and more importantly, encourage yourself. Keep building upon your skill set and talents. According to Matthews, these actions show your worth and commitment. Another solution she gives is to seek out a supportive ally within your library system.

“Someone that you can trust to give you positive feedback and reinforcement. Someone not afraid to tell you the hard truths,” Matthews offered.

Most recently, Matthews participated in an internal Mentorship Program. At the conclusion of the program, Shelia and her mentor decided to maintain their working relationship. It is a bond between two women from different backgrounds who found common ground crossing racial lines. Her mentor is white.

Matthews continues to actively pursue external and internal opportunities for professional development. In 2020, she was awarded the **Cynthia Graham Hurd Award** for demonstrating to the public and community the same spirit, enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment exhibited by Cynthia in carrying out the mission of CCPL.

Mentoring, Recruitment, & Retention – Haley’s Story

“The goal of many leaders is to get people to think more highly of the leader. The goal of a great leader is to help people think more highly of themselves,” J. Carla Northcutt, Seminary Professor (Schmidt, 1).



Haley Hall is the Associate Director for the Charleston County Public Library’s (CCPL’s) Northwest District, overseeing 5 total library branches located in North Charleston, West Ashley, and Downtown Charleston. He has worked in libraries for 24 years as both a paraprofessional and as a professional. Starting out as a work-study student at an academic library, he proceeded to add to his library experiences by working in a mid-size public library system, a small rural public library branch, a special library, a large four - year academic library, a large technical college, a small technical college, and a large public library system. Within those experiences, Hall has been in a wide range of roles and positions.

“I can’t paint all my experiences during these years as 100% flawless, though. There have been many successes and failures over the years, all of which I have done my best to learn and grow from. One thing I can say is that throughout the years, I would not have found successful

pathways forward without the intentional support, coaching, and mentorship of established library professionals,” Hall said.

Having benefited from their wisdom, guidance, and professional advice, Hall states that he understood his assignment as being the one to encourage, acknowledge, and lift up library workers whose voices may normally be drowned out or silenced.

“It is important to let staff from underrepresented groups know they are seen and that their voice is just as important as everyone else. One of my personal goals is to create opportunities where underrepresented library workers can make the connections and gain the experiences needed to add their voices and perspectives to the library profession,” Hall states.

According to Hall, this involves looking beyond the usual group of staff members for committee work, getting to know staff members and their goals, and making sure staff members are acknowledged for their invested time, energy and efforts.

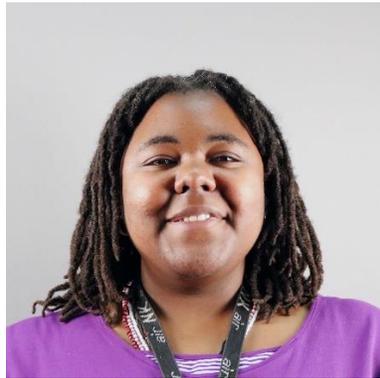
Hall says that it is important for the library profession to grow with diversity and for libraries to reflect the communities that they serve. He adds that leadership needs to make sure to amplify diverse voices and marginalized communities. His perspective is influenced by the many mentors he has had. Mentorship that came from established folks in the professional and interestingly from all female mentors.

“I think that helped my perspective with how to look out for people from different areas of life. So, they all told me. This is how you take care of people; this is how you support the people

when you are in a leadership position. That has played a huge part in my personal perspective of how to be leader,” Hall said.

Overcoming Cultural Conditioning – Rebecca’s Story

“We are culturally conditioned to believe that white is superior, and black is inferior. And the manifestation of that cultural conditioning is that black people are undervalued, underestimated, and marginalized.” (Madison, 2018)



“Every other morning, during my commute to work for the past several years, I would hear this quote by Sirius XM Radio Host Joe Madison. I knew that I understood it and saw evidence of this in the lives of my family, friends, and coworkers. But, like always, truth hits differently when you’re experiencing it, and realizing that you are culturally conditioned as well,” said Rebecca Wright, Large Branch Manager of the St. Paul’s /Hollywood Library.

Cultural conditioning is a process through which we absorb and interpret the influences, norms, and messaging from our environment and translate them into what we believe to be acceptable behaviors (Wilson, 2014).

Wright worked her way up the library system 15 years ago when she became a page at CCPL. From there, she obtained a Library Generalist/Circulation position, and then became a Librarian in Adult Services in 2010. In 2014, she moved to the West Coast and gained more experience in the San Diego Public Library system by becoming the weekend Branch Manager of a fairly big and busy branch for three years. While there, her stereotypical archetypes of how a librarian should look were shattered. There were Circulation staffers who had mohawks, piercings, and tattoos. There were even library workers who were on the spectrum and others who had physical disabilities.

“The cultural differences from San Diego and back home [South Carolina] were up front and center, and I experienced the dismantling of barriers while there,” Wright revealed.

With a new perspective, Wright decided to return home as a Children’s Librarian/ Assistant Manager at CCPL’s Cooper River Library in 2018. She was excited to see the new changes in the system when she returned, but her old way of thinking soon returned. About a year after returning, she decided to apply for the Assistant Branch Manager’s position for the John’s Island Library instead of applying for a higher-leveled position with greater responsibility as the Branch Manager of St. Paul’s/Hollywood Library location. The cultural conditioning that had influenced her all her life led her to second guess her abilities and the downplay her qualifications.

“I assumed that I couldn’t apply for the branch manager’s position because it would've been too big a jump. I figured I had to work my way up again and prove myself worthy to be a branch manager even though I already proved it for three years in a different and bigger

system. I was conditioned to believe that if I applied for the higher position, I would've been met with rejection instead of acceptance. If it wasn't for my peers informing me that I didn't have to wait to become a manager, I wouldn't have applied," Wright said.

Wright applied for the job at St. Paul's/Hollywood Library and got it. It was a lesson for her in believing in herself as well as an opportunity to shatter traditional norms. Wright, as part of her cultural conditioning, was always concerned about not looking like the traditional librarian that is seen in pop culture imagery. She attributes the support of her peers as helping her change those thoughts.

"I believe that a group of librarians who are vetted should be there to inform other young professionals in the system so that they would not feel like they are trying to reinvent the wheel. It's hard navigating the outside world alone, and it's no different in the professional world either. We often fall behind due to a lack of resources, and also due to a lack of information. I believe it is imperative to have this to prevent future leaders from leaving the field altogether," Wright adds.

In her new role, she has had the opportunity to break the mold and showcase that she can be the cool, hip, intelligent librarian wearing natural hairstyles and non-traditional attire. She reports that her time on the West Coast was an awakening. She applied this new way of thinking to her hiring practices and her team is reflective of the community they serve.

Systemic/Institutional Racism, Microaggression, Unconscious Bias – Chel’s Story

“Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble,” House Representative John Lewis, (Lewis, 2018).



Michel ‘Chel’ Campbell is Branch Manager of the McClellanville Library. Her story is a primer for overcoming the far-reaching stench of racism, race lighting, and microaggression in the workplace to find triumph.

Whether she recounts in detail the story of the day she found the date due card in a book (a former process used for checked out library materials) with the message to her, the only black person at that library location, saying, “N-Word stamp the cards right” or the time she recalls hemorrhaging on the job in front of staff and patrons and receiving no empathy from her co-workers as she frantically tried to reach her doctor, her tale is heartbreaking. In the latter instance, Campbell would go on to have an emergency partial hysterectomy which resulted in

her inability to have children. Upon returning to work, a co-worker would say to her, "Oh I see you're back. Well it was not like having a baby."

She would recall that moment as being at her lowest and reporting the co-worker to Human Resources only to have her experiences dismissed like they had been on previous occasions. The co-worker said that Campbell misinterpreted what she said.

"It seems like she always got a pass. Anything I do, it was somebody protecting her. It's like. I felt like I was in an abusive relationship," Campbell said. "Sometimes we are forced to work in a hostile environment because we simply, we just got bills to be paid."

Campbell's vindication would come later when she applied for and received the job of the person who had mentally and emotionally abused her. She recalls the day she shared that she was going to apply for the job and the person told her not to do it because she did not qualify.

Campbell has a master's degree and years of library experience. She was undeterred.

"The spirit of my mother came to me and told me, 'You don't let nobody tell you what you can't do. You apply and let them send you a rejection letter saying you didn't get it'," Campbell said.

So, Campbell applied, and she got the job. Vindication was hers.

Promotion, Recruitment and Retention – Ray’s Story

“The struggles along the way are only meant to shape you for your purpose,” Chadwick Boseman, Actor/Thespian (Strauss, 2020).



Ray Turner has been employed with Charleston County Public Library for 30 years. For the duration of his tenure within this system, he has worked solely at the Otranto Road Library. He was hired in 1992 as Circulation Manager for the then newly built regional branch library. Turner has moved from paraprofessional and pre-professional positions to being a professional librarian.

“Through all of this, I was fortunate to have a manager that supported me in all my endeavors. With my supportive manager and my desire to achieve my professional goal, I obtained my library degree in 2000,” Turner said.

Over the years, Turner thought about his future, next level responsibilities, and a position that would yield a sustainable salary. In 2019, he became the Branch Manager of the Otranto Road Library. After he was offered the position, he was informed of the salary.

“As a library professional, at that time, of 33 years, with experience in private, academic, and public libraries, I believed that the first offer was not in alignment [with] my years of experience and service to CCPL, nor my prior library experiences. Therefore, I challenged the offer,” Turner states.

His persistence worked favorably, and he was rewarded with a salary reflective of his years of experience. Turner cites the following steps as solutions to dealing with inequity:

- Prepare yourself. Make sure you have in place the qualifications needed when the opportunity occurs.
- Know your worth. Be persistent.
- Have a support system of peers and other library leaders to inform and advise you along the way. A good way to do this is also to join library organizations like SCLA, ALA, PLA, and BCALA.
- When there are opportunities to improve your library system, do so. Volunteer to serve on committees, taskforces, and panels in order to guide and help formulate the library system you would like to see.

- Give back to others, as you have been given to. Mentor and empower others to be the best that they can be, encourage staff to educate themselves through trainings, workshops, and library school, if that is their choice.

Solutions & Resolutions



Chief Deputy Director Darlene Jackson says that there are many methods of coping with racial inequities. They all require action. Here are some tips:

- Self-care (personal attention to your mental, physical, and spiritual self)
- Use Humor as a coping tool
- Participate in a wellness program within your institution or with another group
- Connect with other people experiencing the same issues for encouragement and to encourage others.

- Get involved with professional Library organizations to support change such as:
 - A. American Library Association (ALA)
 - B. Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA)
 - C. Public Library Association (PLA)
 - D. Joint Council of Librarians of Color (JCLC)
 - E. South Carolina Library Association (SCLA)

- Seek mentors-Black Leaders or other Advocates (non-Black) to help you navigate through change, tough situations or in making major decisions.

- Participate in your institution's efforts to promote initiatives to improve race relations, build equity, diversity, and inclusion.

- Curate programs, such as book talks and community leaders to support unity.

Conclusion

The stories told by this panel of library leaders reveal that even in a contemporary world systemic racism lives on and thrives. While progress is being made, black librarians and library staff still deal with acts of aggression, bigotry, cultural bias, and racism. The charge to keep is for every race of people to engage with one another showing acceptance and appreciation for our differences. To be inspired with common goals steeped in the realization of every person's basic humanity and civil liberties. To be persistent and ever present for ourselves, and for

others in this 'good' fight to achieve social justice for all. The Strategic Vision for Charleston County Public Library offers a blueprint of how library systems can step up to the challenge and start the conversations, employ the actions, and carry out the mission to bring about change.

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