

## *Preface*

Over the last decade, there have been dozens of books and articles written, and countless conversations on the cable television talk shows about America's declining global competitiveness. Rarely is there mention of one of the most significant threats to our nation's future—America's troubling racial disparities in education, employment, income, wealth, incarceration, health care, and housing. The U.S. population is projected to increase by over 110 million people between now and 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). The racial demographics are shifting so rapidly that only 50 percent of the population will be non-Hispanic Whites by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). How can America compete with emerging economies like China and India if already large and increasingly growing pockets of our population can hardly read, do math, or understand science? The lack of skills renders many people of color helpless and sitting on the bench at a time when America needs its entire team on the field and ready to play, because the game is getting tougher.

Kids are graduating from high school, if they do not drop out, with few skills that will enable them to be effective in the jobs of the future. High-paying manufacturing jobs that do not require a college degree have been steadily disappearing. Jobs that require college-level education will account for nearly half of all job growth by 2012. In fact, there will be more of these jobs than there will be qualified people to fill them (Educational Testing Service, 2007).

It is seldom mentioned that one of the primary reasons for this drought is the number of people of color who have disproportionately been on the bottom rung of prosperity in America. Based on current trends, they will continue to occupy that dubious space. Without figuring out how to engage people of color who are falling by the wayside, America may be a competitive afterthought on the global landscape in the not so distant future.

Perhaps nothing is more complex in America than race relations. While there has been substantial progress since the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, people of color, particularly Blacks, have yet to experience proportionate levels of economic success. For this to happen, we must reject the misguided “either/or” notion in popular discourse that claims either outright discrimination by Whites, or a lack of personal responsibility by Blacks is the cause of the sobering disparities. We must recognize that we are all complicit in this problem, and the culprit is our fragile minds. As brilliant as the human mind is, its design sometimes works against us—particularly when dealing with people from different backgrounds. The mind’s fragility has resulted in individual, institutional, and structural bias by some Whites in America, as well as complacency and irresponsibility by some Blacks, to perpetuate disparities between the two groups. The answers to questions of Black and White are hardly ever black and white; they are usually gray. By their very nature, people are shades of gray—not all good, bad, right, or wrong. We are often contradictory beings. How often do you hear someone emotionally and verbally commit to an issue only to behave in a way contrary to his or her stated belief?

Issues of human behavior are always more complex than they seem. I have written this book to help elected officials, business leaders, policymakers, educators, and nonprofit leaders to understand these complexities and avoid the common traps that people can fall victim to when making decisions regarding the people they serve from culturally different backgrounds than their own. The approach presented in these pages consists of a radically new perspective that relies on what science tells us about our brains—their tremendous potential, *and* their fragility.

I am not a neuroscientist or psychologist. This is not a textbook or a clinical publication. Yet, it is not a memoir, either. Too often, we read publications from trained professionals who have the technical knowledge but lack the real-world experiences in the phenomena about which they write. Without that life experience to contextualize the information they study, their work is limited. On the other hand, we read people's personal stories that fail to make appropriate connections to what researchers have indicated about human behavior. Without considering the science, their work is limited as well. This book represents my attempt to blend science and practice in a meaningful way that decision makers can use right away to make better decisions.

This book holds important implications for you, your family, your organization, and your community provided you are open to considering some new approaches to some age-old challenges. At the core of this book is the concept of emotional intelligence, or one's ability to recognize and regulate his or her emotions while simultaneously recognizing and responding to the emotional needs of others. As you read this book, I ask that you avoid jumping to quick, emotional conclusions based on your previous knowledge or philosophical positions. I want to challenge you to think beyond the sound bites of the news programs and newspaper headlines. While I have endeavored to present a balanced case, I recognize that my background and experiences have shaped who I am and how I think, so I realize that you may read some emotion in my words throughout this book that you may not agree with—I have my own fragile mind to deal with as well.