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Providing Quality Leadership in Roxbury: A Profile of Leon T. Nelson

by Harold Horton

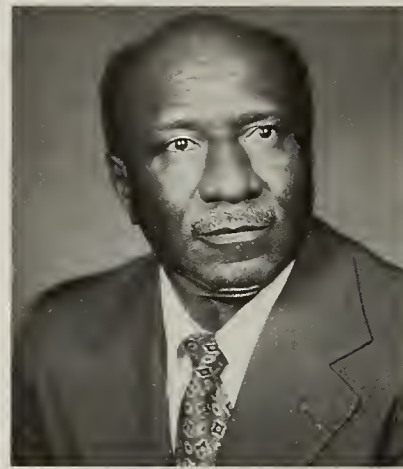
Poor leadership is often the cause for the inept functioning and eventual collapse of an organization or agency. This is because the leader sets the tone and to a great extent determines whether or not an organization will be viable. Leon T. Nelson, president of the Greater Roxbury Chamber of Commerce, has done his utmost to live up to the organization's motto, "Quod facis bene fac," which means doing whatever you do as well as you possibly can.

In a community that underwent drastic demographic changes during the 1970s and 1980s, when numerous businesses led the "white flight" to suburbia, like so many cities in America at the time; in a community that City Hall has ignored, where quality education no longer exists, where unemployment remains exceptionally high, where infant mortality rates continue to skyrocket, where there are no newsstands or newspaper vending machines on any corner, where there is crime, where there is only one supermarket, Leon T. Nelson, as president of the GRCC, has made a Samson-like stance to cede no more ground to dismay and deterioration. He is constantly working to fulfill his pledge to improve the economic, political, and social life in Roxbury.

The Awesome Task of Organizing

Nelson, a native of New Haven, Connecticut, has lived in Boston for thirty years. He holds a bachelor's degree in history and government from Colby College and earned his master's degree in political science at Northeastern University. Besides heading GRCC, Nelson is publisher and editor of the *Boston Minority Business News* as well as president of the Greater Roxbury Economic Development Corporation. He is also a member of the Bunker Hill Community College Board of Visitors; Colby College Board of Overseers; Omega Psi Phi fraternity; and the Prince Hall Masons.

Nelson's leadership role with GRCC began as recently as 1991 when a group of individuals began holding a series of meetings at the Roxbury Multi-Service Center to discuss concerns about youth services, business development, and outreach activities that were geared to a particular segment of the community. Realizing that some of the individuals had come together with the purpose in mind of forming such an organization as GRCC, Nelson "took the



Harold Horton



Leon T. Nelson

bull by the horns" and assumed the awesome task of developing an organization that, as he explained, "would prove to be viable, action-oriented, positive in thought process, and a key player on the cutting edge of economic development and minority business in the city of Boston."

Realizing that organizations come and go in the black community, Nelson was determined that GRCC would not be short-lived. Under his quiet but emphatic leadership, GRCC decided to carefully plan its programs so that the organization would be practical, or as Nelson explained, "feasible and do-able." This philosophy is still crucial to all of GRCC's activities.

A Commendable Growth within a Three-Year Period

Within the relatively short period of three years, GRCC has grown and is now comprised of more than three hundred members, including organizations, groups, corporations, and individuals. GRCC sponsors many events and programs, among them breakfast and luncheon information sessions; symposia; newsletters; annual membership luncheons and awards dinners; conferences; position papers; forums; seminars; and legislative initiatives. Nelson explained that GRCC is making an effort to serve "its constituents as a gateway to economic development, business information, community involvement, information services, and networking."

Without question, GRCC, under the dynamic leadership of Leon Nelson, has made a definite impact on the community of Roxbury, for a day does not pass without Nelson providing assistance to local business people. The following responses were offered by Leon Nelson during an interview by the Trotter Institute:

H.H.:What, in your opinion, are some of the major accomplishments of GRCC?

L.N.:The chamber has emerged as an organization that can be of direct assistance to the minority businessperson and economic development initiatives in the community. Through its information and communication processes, the chamber is able to remain in continuous contact with its constituents; majority corporate structures; city, state and federal government officials; and many community, human service, and health agencies in the area.

The chamber takes a direct approach in acting on its initiatives and mandates to be of assistance to the minority businessperson. On several occasions the chamber has served as that intermediary force that brings together—at the meeting table—those individuals interested in fostering and pursuing expanding business opportunities. Direct contact has been made with several corporations which has allowed the minority businessperson to participate in and gain a greater share of the procurement and services market.

The chamber has sponsored economic development bus tours, “We Care” marketing programs, breakfast and luncheon information sessions, business and economic development seminars and symposia, a trade mission to West Africa, and annual awards dinners and membership luncheons. Our biweekly information mailings to the membership are always replete with current data and information tracts which have proven to be useful to our constituents. The GRCC *Black Business Directory* has provided area residents with a listing of the plethora of minority businesses in operation in the area.

Our outreach efforts include initiatives in the fields of corporate linkage and partnership programs, youth employment opportunities, and assisting community organizations.

H.H.: To what extent do you believe that people at-large who live in Roxbury are aware of GRCC’s major accomplishments?

L.N.: Fortunately, the work of GRCC is often chronicled in the news media. Not a week goes by without GRCC and its ongoing programs being highlighted in one or more of the following print media: *The Bay State Banner*, *Dorchester Community News*, *South End News*, *Boston Minority Business News*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Boston Herald*. A number of chamber programs and initiatives have been aired on major television stations in the area, and cable television has continuously focused on the work of GRCC.

Every day, telephone calls are received from community residents and local businesspersons requesting the chamber’s assistance. The chamber is now one of the most visible and identifiable organizations in Boston’s minority community.

H.H.: How would you describe the current status of GRCC?

L.N.: With a membership of more than three hundred individuals, groups, organizations and corporations, and with numerous requests and invitations to participate in activities, the chamber is on the cutting edge of significant change and action in the minority community. The chamber is held in high regard by the community, corporations, and governmental

staffers. It is frequently called upon to lend its expertise or advice on particular issues. The telephone rings constantly. The chamber has stepped rather sprightly into a void that previously existed, and has now emerged as the best ball game in town.

H.H.: Do you believe that residents of Roxbury should consider renaming the area Mandela or Malcolmtown, or any other such name?

L.N.: No. Roxbury is Roxbury. A name change does not produce new attitudes or mindsets. We can all work together to make Roxbury the place that we want it to be; then, perhaps, other areas of the nation, through our example, may want to rename their community Roxbury.

H.H.: What type of relationship exists between GRCC and City Hall?

L.N.: Since its inception, GRCC has maintained a strong business relationship and direct communications with former Mayor Raymond L. Flynn and current Mayor Thomas M. Menino. City agencies participate in all of GRCC’s public events. They advertise in our program booklets. In short, GRCC has formed a partnership with the city, geared to enhance the growth of minority business and substantive economic development in the minority community.

H.H.: Are there any types of economic initiatives coming out of the state legislature or the U.S. Congress that appear to be promising for Roxbury?

L.N.: Yes. The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development’s \$100 million Disposition Program is an excellent opportunity for the minority businessperson. The possibility of Boston being designated an “Empowerment Zone” could result in viable economic development for the area. The commonwealth’s siting of the Registry of Motor Vehicles office building in Roxbury, and Economic Affairs Secretary Gloria Cordes Larson’s efforts to have the state be more responsive to urban minority business interests are definitely steps in the right direction. In addition to the funding by the legislature of the Urban Initiative Fund, the state is properly pursuing a policy of deeper, more positive involvement in minority business affairs. Of course, much more can be done by the federal, state, and local governments. We have all traveled a long way; much more needs to be done.

H.H.: In looking toward the twenty-first century, overall, how does the future look economically for Roxbury?

L.N.: One can either be optimistic or pessimistic on this score. In short, one can see a glass half-full or half-empty. The possibility of a sports megaplex being located in Roxbury, new convention facilities, new

housing, start-up of new businesses, retooling old businesses, and bringing in established businesses—all of these are feasible goals that may or may not succeed. Everything is relative: Who is in public office? What dictates a priority? Who foots the bill? Where does the bottom line and community development merge into a workable plan?

No one can forecast the future, but plans can be made for when the timing and position are right for putting them into action.

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