

## **Andy Shallal, Keynote Speaker at Building a Future of Prosperity and Equity September 28, 2017**

DC, despite all its well-deserved accolades, continues to be a tale of two cities on many fronts – housing, employment, healthcare, education, crime – you name it. But it doesn't have to be this way. By thinking more creatively, using our resources more efficiently, and investing in the residents of DC we can have a more inclusive and equitable city.

Here are the 7 habits that DC should adopt in order to become a highly effective and more equitable city.

### **Habit #1: Shared Vision**

We need to come to some agreement on a shared vision for what the city will look like – 5 years from now, 10 years from now, 50 years from now. Not just talk about equity but define it in its rawest form. What kind of city do we want? We need a vision that is transparent and inclusive, and that takes into account all the elements of what makes a city functional for all its residents. Do we want to end homelessness or just warehouse people in shelters or jails? Do we want to close the educational gap between black and white kids, or is the current divide acceptable? Are we going to commit to excellent neighborhood schools or do we want to continue with using the lottery system that pits school against school, parent against parent and neighborhood against neighborhood? Do we want to be defined as a cool city, or a caring city?

### **Habit #2: Race Matters**

We need to talk about race. We need to feel comfortable talking about race—confronting the impact that race has on all elements of economic prosperity. I know that many of you in this room share with me the idea that race in this city, in this county matters a whole lot. We cannot honestly have a conversation about anything without interjecting race into the mix. Gentrification- race, schools – race, housing – race, homelessness – race, policing – race. Race is the thorn in our collective side that has paralyzed this country and in many ways continues to paralyze this city.

### **Habit #3: Culture Matters**

We also need to address the cultural shift that this city is undergoing. The most anxious population in DC today is not just the poor who are being bulldozed and priced out, but also the middle- and upper-class blacks that have seen the city change. They are squeezed between on one side holding on to black culture that this city has been defined by for so many years, and once known as chocolate city, and the mostly white new comers who bring with them resources and power that has transformed this city into an economic powerhouse while at the same time threatening its cultural identity as a city that boasts of black culture and black political power. These two pressures need to be reconciled sooner rather than later. This can only be done through an open and honest discussion.

### **Habit #4: Minding the Money**

We need to do a much better job in minding the treasury of this city. We need to make a full audit of each and every program in this city and determine its effectiveness and its efficiency. This may be a costly and time-consuming endeavor but if we don't do that, we will not get the buy-in and trust from the tax payers to continue to fund much needed programs. This will require a great deal of political will and courage and a new level of transparency that we have not seen before.

### **Habit #5: Removing Barriers**

Being the chair of the WIC, I have had the chance to better understand how we do business in this city. Too often we are looking for solutions in the wrong places. Rather than focus on doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result, we need to trust people more, unlock their potential and think of

each resident, rich and poor, old and young, black or white or brown, as an asset rather than a liability. This can be done not by handouts that keep people in a state of perpetual desperation but by committing to removing obstacles that get in the way of people getting and keeping a job and taking control of their own lives. It's easy to hand out turkeys on Thanksgiving and sometimes it is necessary but if we keep seeing the same people coming back year after year, we have to question the structure of our economic and political system that allows this to continue. Trickle down economics has never been an effective remedy for systemic issues of economic disparity no more than handing a homeless person a dollar at a traffic light would help end homelessness. One can argue that that dollar in effect is far more beneficial to the giver than the receiver. It is not intended to end homelessness but alleviate the guilt of those who have to step around a homeless person and cause more harm than good.

Job programs can be so much more effective if they are combined with affordable, easily accessible childcare and public transportation. For a single mother who is trying to gain some autonomy, it's the difference between breaking the cycle of poverty and being shackled by it.

### **Habit #6: More Affordable Housing**

We need to stop relying on the market to meet the demand of housing for the lowest income earners. We must get more creative in how we use public land. This formula of land giveaways to for-profit developers in exchange for a handful of affordable units cannot possibly meet the demand for such housing. For instance, using community land trusts, working with housing non-profits, exercising government tools such as DOPA can help to mitigate market forces and dramatically increase the inventory of much needed low-income housing.

We have to also stop thinking of gentrification as a law of nature, like gravity. Let's think of it more like Global Warming, it's reversible as long as we are honest about the causes and work together to reverse the damage already done. Additionally, we have to commit to public housing and improve it rather than demolish it—improve the lighting, the color of the building, the security, the landscaping; provide services such as childcare, after school programs, health and dental care – and making all these things accessible is a first step to empowering the most vulnerable residents of this city.

### **Habit #7: Campaign Finance Reform**

We need to get money out of politics – once and for all. None of these issues can be done without first addressing the core of our democratic process and the corrosive impact of money. Most politicians will tell you that they are un-corruptible and that money does not influence their decision. I find that hard to accept and even if it were true, we have to remove any perception of influence in order to gain the public trust. The public have seen this play out numerous times - in government agencies - on the city council, in the mayor's office – the examples are too numerous to mention.

None of these habits require raising taxes, although I am not opposed to that, it's really more about re-allocating and realigning the resources we have to make the city great for all its residents. That is not to say it will be easy. It will take political courage, trust, and political will. I am optimistic because I believe in what is possible when we unite on a shared vision and recognize that - from Anacostia to Colonial Village, from Congress Heights to Friendship Heights, we must recognize that our most important asset is not the buildings or the parks or monuments that we erect but the people who live in the shadows of those monuments and buildings and when we do we can stop being a tale of two cities and create a truly equitable city that works for all its residents.