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Betting white men can learn

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Jerry Large

by Jerry Large
Seattle Times staff columnist

People don't know what to think at first.

Some are startled by the title of Chuck Shelton's new book, "*Leadership 101 for White Men.*" He understands why.

A few years ago he Googled "white men" and most of the listings were either supremacy groups or porn sites.

Some people don't know what to make of Shelton himself. When I met him the other day, he was wearing a dark suit, his hair was short and well-groomed, very corporate. And he was talking about race.

His book is subtitled, "How to Work Successfully with Black Colleagues and Customers."

He writes that white men hold 80 percent of the senior leadership positions in America, yet those white executives are just a fraction of the total work force.

Given what the rest of the work force looks like (and all those potential customers), it makes sense that white men ought to know how to play well with others.

Shelton focuses on the relationship with black people because that's what he knows best and because it is a particularly long and challenging relationship.

Who better to do that than a white guy who grew up in Seattle's North End and on Mercer Island?

He knows white men. And he told me he has spent much of his life learning about and from black people.

His mother was a Head Start volunteer in the early 1960s. "So every Monday afternoon and evening when I was 10 and 11 years old, I was coming into the Central District and ... hanging out with a group of little black guys."

In 1967, when he was 13, he attended a racial-reconciliation workshop in Seattle and learned three important things from a black speaker, the Rev. Woodie White:

"Black people resent being viewed as a 'problem' when white people are often the main problem black folks have."

Black people tire of the expectation they should teach white people about race:

"White people must learn how to accept responsibility for being white."

Shelton embraces being a white guy and a leader, and he's taken on the responsibility of helping other white leaders understand whiteness and



Chuck Shelton

understand people who aren't white or male.

He has a degree in conflict studies from The Evergreen State College, and an M.A. in theology and ethics from Fuller Theological Seminary.

Since 1981, his company, Greatheart Leader Labs, has trained leaders at more than 40 organizations, including Apple, Microsoft, Wal-Mart, colleges and nonprofits.

Shelton said leaders who effectively manage diversity reap more productive employees — and more business.

The book, which came out in January, talks about the advantages that go with being white and male, the tension between being honest and being respectful, the illusion of colorblindness.

If you know what you're doing, you don't have to tiptoe around race or gender.

Shelton told me his faith is at the core of his values. It requires him to see the gift that God has given each person.

He's an evangelical Christian. Yeah, he's hard to pigeonhole. He makes you think.

Jerry Large's column appears Monday and Thursday. Reach him at 206-464-3346 or jlarge@seattletimes.com.