

The Woodson Principles Applied

Robert “Bob” L. Woodson, Sr., Founder of the Woodson Center, is an influential leader on issues of poverty alleviation and empowering disadvantaged communities to become agents of their own uplift.

Woodson is a frequent advisor to local, state and federal government officials as well as business and philanthropic organizations. His social activism dates back to the 1960s, when as a young civil rights activist he developed and coordinated national and local community revitalization programs. During the 1970s, he directed the National Urban League’s Administration of Justice division, and later served as a Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

He is the recipient of the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship award, the Bradley Prizes presented by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Presidential Citizens Medal, the 2018 William Wilberforce Award, The Heritage Foundation’s 2020 Salvatori Prize for American Citizenship, Hillsdale College’s Freedom Leadership Award, and many other honors.

Bob Woodson is the author of several books, including *On the Road to Economic Freedom*, *The Triumphs of Joseph: How Today’s Community Healers are Reviving Our Streets and Neighborhood*, and *Lessons from the Least of These: The Woodson Principles*.

Here is a list of Bob Woodson’s 10 Principles:

Competence	Innovation
Integrity	Inspiration
Transparency	Agency
Resilience	Access
Witness	Grace

Which of the Woodson Principles do you think the American athletes who competed in the 1936 Olympics most embodied at the games and in their lives? How so?

Competence

Look first among people suffering the problem for a solution. Then rely on the “uncertified” practical knowledge of those living in the same geographic and cultural zip code as the people experiencing the problem, instead of ivory tower ideas from distant scholarly experts. Certification is not always synonymous with qualification.

Integrity

Relationships are the necessary condition for transforming others, and trust is the common currency. Before you can help others, you need to uncover and acknowledge your personal motives and level of commitment. Then, seek out leaders that are moral practitioners of virtue, honesty, and integrity and who are trustworthy and honest. One test of their authenticity is if they willingly point to those who have been helped by them or their organization.

Transparency

Leaders willingly open up and share their triumphs over the challenges they have faced in their lives, describing how they overcame brokenness, and suffering. This is how they build trust. They refuse to hide behind their pain or their pride, instead offering up stories of their struggles with humility in the interest of establishing trust. We are all sinners in need of a Savior.

Resilience

In searching for healing agents within toxic communities, study those who are “in” troubled circumstances but not “of” those circumstances—those who have managed to survive and thrive. If 70% of parents have troubled kids, study the 30% who have successful, healthy children to discover the secret of their success.

Witness

A witness is more powerful than an advocate, because witnesses live by the values they convey to others. Look for those who have overcome hardship. They possess more credibility with the lost and struggling than the most pedigreed, accomplished experts. For example, those who are in recovery from an addiction are living proof that recovery is possible.

Innovation

In our market economy, just three percent of people are entrepreneurs, but they create 70% of all new jobs. In like manner, a small percentage of social entrepreneurs can generate large-scale changes and improvements in the social economy, and their innovative ideas are by far the most effective. Empower the leaders and leverage the skills that are already available in the neighborhood.

Inspiration

You can learn nothing from studying failure except how to create failure. Begin your inquiry by recognizing the capacity people possess. People are inspired to improve when they are presented with victories that are possible, not injuries to be avoided. Provide them with the tools for self-determination and help them strive to succeed above all reasonable expectations. Then, look for ways to celebrate even modest improvements.

Agency

No one should have to surrender his or her dignity as a condition for receiving help. Unconditional giving leads to pity rather than the desire to succeed. People should be agents of their own uplift. Never do more for them than they are willing to do for themselves. There must be reciprocity as the framework of any meaningful relationship. In other words, a person should be given the opportunity to give in return for what is received.

Access

Eliminate barriers to access and serve all who suffer. Support positive incremental change through flexible options, not directives. Always strive to be on “tap and not on top.” Expectations in the absence of opportunity are restrictive. People must be given the tools to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them.

Grace

Love and respect others, even when it’s inconvenient. Look at neighborhoods as filled with people who have potential, not dysfunctional victims. The foundation of grace is radical forgiveness; a refusal to be held back by what used to be a hindrance in your life, real or imagined. Be free of bitterness, regret, and uncertainty about the future.