

## The Woodson Principles Applied

Robert “Bob” L. Woodson, Sr., Founder of the Woodson Center, is a veteran of the civil rights movement and pioneer on ways to alleviate poverty through empowering disadvantaged communities to become agents of their own uplift.

From his 40+ years in working with grassroots community leaders to overcome the problems associated with poverty, Woodson has identified the following ten principles:

Competence	Innovation	Integrity	Inspiration
Transparency	Agency	Resilience	Access
Witness	Grace		

When you reflect on the events of the Tulsa riots and massacre, which of the following Woodson principles were absent among the perpetrators of violence?

When you reflect on the success of Black Wall Street and the rebuilding efforts after the riots and massacre, which of the following Woodson principles were present?

As you review the list of Woodson principles, which of these principles do you feel you most personally embody and display in your own life? Which one(s) are hardest for you, or which one would you most like to begin to develop?

### 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.