

Shirley Chisholm: We Must Reject Stereotypes

Editor's Note: In celebration of Black History Month, we are seeking out thought leadership posts about communications lessons and leadership wisdom from leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Shirley Chisholm and Brigadier General George A. Jones. Please send your submission to editor@commpro.biz

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Shirley Chisholm, future member of the U.S. House of Representatives (D-NY), announcing her candidacy. January 25, 1972 (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

As a kid growing up in the Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn, New

York, I remember the days when Congresswoman [Shirley Chisholm](#) would visit the district. Her commanding presence was impressive. She exuded confidence, strength and a sense of conviction that conveyed her drive to fight for her community even in the face of harsh opposition. She fought for – and earned – the respect of so many because of her willingness to listen. Her philosophy of life and framing the issues of her day offer so many lessons that we should be embracing now.

The woman who moved to the United States with her Barbadian parents was a true trailblazer: In 1968, she became the first African-American woman elected to Congress, serving seven terms. In 1972, she became the first African-American major-party presidential candidate, seeing the Democratic Party nomination.

In one of her insightful books, [“Unbought and Unbossed,”](#) she wrote:

In the end, anti-black, anti-female, and all forms of discrimination are equivalent to the same thing – anti-humanism. The values of life must be maintained against the enemies in every guise. We can do it by confronting people with their own humanity and their own inhumanity whenever we meet them, in the streets, in school, in bars, in the halls of legislatures.

Chisholm was always the first to say that she didn't want to just be labeled as someone who solely represented black issues or women's issues, but “the people's issues.”

Yet, she accepted her dual role as a woman and an African-American who often found herself as “*the only one*” in the room. She would argue today that it is these differences that should bring us closer together to better understand how we can move our communities forward. She would argue that if we're going to make progress in any community, in any business, in this country, that we need to bring diverse

voices to the table to devise solutions that best address everyone's needs.

Certainly, Chisholm did not live life wearing rose-colored glasses, thinking that it is as simple as asking people with stark differences to sit around in a circle and sing *Kumbaya*. If Chisholm were alive today, she would harden her resolve of being a catalyst. *"By verbalizing what is wrong, by trying to strip off the masks that make people comfortable in the midst of chaos, perhaps I can help get things moving."* Whether it's politics or helping companies or individuals communicate a message, there's a need for Chisholm's driving philosophy of respect, and creating an image that stood tall even when the opposition was constantly trying to demean and belittle her mere presence.



About the Author: Neil Foote, a veteran journalist and media executive, is a media and political junky, keeping abreast of the latest trends impacting the business of journalism, media, politics and public relations. He draws from his experience at the Miami Herald, Washington Post, Belo Corporation and Tom Joyner's Reach Media. He also teaches media convergence, media management and public affairs at the University of North Texas' Frank W. & Sue Mayborn School of Journalism and runs Foote Communications, a media consulting firm. The native of Brooklyn, NY also is a member of the board for the National Black Public Relations Society and founder of PoliticsInColor.com.[/author]