Culturally Agile Leadership:
A Relational Leadership Development Approach

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ABSTRACT

Leadership development programs exist to contribute to an individual's and an organization's success; however, there is a lack of studies that examine how such programs contribute to the development of cultural agility in leaders. Culturally agile leaders are more inclusive in their hiring practices and more open to encouraging more diversity within their own leadership network. Such leaders value collaboration and understand how culturally grounded traditions and preferences effect transactions. This concept article addresses the roles of positionality and cultural agility, leadership development programs, and capacity and responsibility in building culturally agile leaders. It examines the ways a leader's positionality and level of cultural agility informs and limits their ability to make an impact on their organization. The article also proposes how leaders have the capacity and the responsibility to develop other leaders through a relational leadership approach to promote inclusion and diversity.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Agility, Diversity, Inclusion, Leadership, Relational Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Leaders in today's interconnected world must add cultural agility to their competencies. How leaders respond in unpredictable circumstances, whether they are flexible and able to adapt to unique situations, will contribute to their effectiveness as a leader. With the digital landscape and globalization of the marketplace, culturally agile leaders recognize how cultural diversity makes a difference in how employees act and react. Culturally agile leaders value collaboration and understand how culturally grounded traditions and preferences effect transactions. Of significant relevance, culturally agile leaders will be more inclusive in their hiring practices and more open to encouraging more diversity within their own leadership network.

This concept paper aims to address three main areas of interest: positionality and cultural agility, leadership development programs, and capacity and responsibility. The paper will begin with an examination of the ways a leader's positionality and level of cultural agility inform and limit their ability to make an impact on their organization. Next, contemporary issues in leadership development programs will be explored. The paper will conclude with a reflection on how leaders have the capacity

and the responsibility to develop other leaders through a relational leadership approach to promote inclusion and diversity.

POSITIONALITY AND CULTURAL AGILITY

The positionality and level of cultural agility inform and limit a leader's ability to make an impact on their organization. According to Milner (2007), "The nature of reality or of our truths shapes and guides our ways and systems of knowing and our epistemological systems of knowing" (p. 395). The default leadership studies and characterizations revolved around white males; however, within the last two decades, researchers have examined leadership from a cross-cultural perspective and included women and marginalized individuals (Kezar & Lester, 2010).

Because who a person is shapes how that person perceives the world, leaders must recognize how their own subjectivity controls their perspectives and how, for the most part, their perspectives are limited to the constraints placed upon them by the perceived societal norms and the role models who raised them to understand these norms. Because today's societies are far more diverse than in the past, race plays a large factor in how leaders will need to approach actively pursuing a more inclusive workplace.

Kezar and Lester (2010) found studies examining leadership qualities focusing on gender, race, ethnicity, and the intersectionality of race and gender. In analyzing studies exclusively on women leaders, Kezar and Lester (2010) found women leadership is more participatory, relational, and interpersonal. Many "women leaders tend to conceptualize leadership as collective rather than individualistic, emphasize responsibility toward others, empower others to act within the organization, and deemphasize hierarchical relationships" (Kezar & Lester, 2010, p. 164).

Leaders must reflect about themselves in relation to others and acknowledge the multiple roles, identities, and positions that each member of the organization contributes to the organization. Positionality plays an important role in professional practice and research. A scholar-practitioner's positionality informs the problems identified and the questions asked about the respective contexts. A leader's identity informs the positionality, and there is an interconnectedness between positionality and power.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Leadership development is an important issue in corporate America (Galloway, 1997). Organizations are spending more time and money on leadership development to develop leaders (Cullen-Lester, Maupin, & Carter, 2017; Galloway, 1997; Know, 2014; Muyia & Kacirek, 2009). The W.K. Kellogg Foundation categorized 55 leadership development programs into outcomes: individual, organizational, community, field (communities of practice), and systemic effects (Nissen, Merrigan, & Kraft, 2005). Larsson, Sandahl, Soderhjelm, Sjovold, and Zander (2017) recognized leader development and leadership development differences and similarities and presented a theory-based, longitudinal study of leaders and their subordinates.

Eich (2008) used a grounded theory and studied attributes of leadership programs. The research identified three clusters of attributes for high-quality leadership programs: participants engaged in building and sustaining a learning community, student-centered experiential learning experiences, and research-grounded continuous program development. The study also showed that organizations of all sizes face challenges in regard to leadership training and implementing successful leadership development programs.

After analyzing a group of 30 CEOs and human resource executives, Groves (2007) introduced a best practices model for leadership development that is inclusive for succession planning in organizations. Groves (2007) notes evidence that supports the idea of using mentors in developing networks and exposing high potential employees to multiple stakeholders.

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