

# Chapter 8

## The Academic Trinity: African American, Female, Leader

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter highlights emotional labor from the perspective of a leader with the intersectionalities of being African American, female, and serving in a leadership role at a predominantly white university. Also shared are lessons learned from managing emotion in the workplace including being true to one's self, understanding your purpose, adopting a "put me in coach" attitude, learning to talk to people, finding an affinity group, minding your manners and words on social media, and being inclusive. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the role of inclusion in mitigating emotional labor in the workplace.*

### INTRODUCTION

Being a leader is hard work. It is often a thankless job that can leave the leader feeling *psychologically, physiologically, and emotionally* bankrupt. On any given day, the emotions that a leader may experience can range from accomplishment to happiness to frustration to anger. Everyday situations like advocating for funding or seats at tables, negotiating license agreements, managing employee and patron expectations, resolving conflicts between employees, addressing issues with library space, working with difficult patrons, and celebrating major milestones, library leaders contend with a variety of emotions in the workplace. Adding issues and challenges related to gender and race into the mix often makes for a complex emotional rollercoaster ride for the leader.

The intersection of being African American and female introduces a unique set of battles that can be emotionally taxing for the leader. Proctor & Gamble's short film *The Look* is the best visual for what these battles often look like on a day-to-day basis. *The Look* chronicles the biases an African American male encounters while performing routine daily activities, providing a window into the frustration, sadness, hurt, and disappointment that Black people experience in everyday life (P&G: The Look, 2019). Whether enjoying a meal at a local restaurant, helping his son with a swimming lesson, or attempting

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something as mundane as catching an elevator, the protagonist experienced disapproving looks from White people in those spaces. The “look” suggested that the protagonist was in a space or place where he was not wanted or welcomed. While no words were spoken in the film, the looks he received communicated a message and sentiment that many African Americans know all too well.

At the conclusion of *The Look*, viewers learn that the protagonist, who had experienced implicit bias throughout his day, was a judge. The unspoken message being communicated is that no matter your chosen vocation, educational background, or socioeconomic status, you will not escape “the look” brought on by implicit bias. As an African American female serving in a leadership role, this short film spoke volumes to me and drove home the idea that the people with whom we encounter in our daily interactions assume a lot about us in every situation. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity defines implicit bias as: “The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner...encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control” (“Understanding implicit bias,” 2015, para.1). Assumptions rooted in implicit biases are harmful and hurtful in all settings, especially in the workplace.

This chapter highlights the emotional labor experienced by an African American female serving in a leadership role at a predominantly White university. Emotional labor “refers to the effort involved in managing feelings when the work role specifies that particular emotions should be displayed and others should be hidden” (Kinman & Leggetter, 2016, p. 2). David (2016) suggests that at work, “all of us are called upon to perform emotional labor which the author defines as “the effort it takes to keep your professional game face on when what you’re doing is not concordant with how you feel” (p. 2). Coping with and responding to microaggressions driven by implicit bias requires individuals from marginalized groups to absorb a tremendous amount of emotional labor as a matter of survival.

## **BACKGROUND**

To illustrate what emotional labor might look like in the workplace, David (2016) offers the following example, “your boss makes a meant-to-be inspiring comment about doing more with less, and you smile and nod, but what you’d like to do is upend the conference table” (p. 3). Durr and Wingfield (2011) go further to say,

*Etiquette, and emotional labor for African American women is defined as performance to describe two levels of personal deportment: (1) a generalized bureaucratic passive-aggressive level; and (2) a race-based set of expectations grounded in survival strategies to cope with challenges they face in environments that are unwelcoming and possess concrete ceilings across organizations and occupations. (p. 559)*

At the crux of this definition is the focus on how African American women should modify their behaviors to navigate their workplaces. The exhaustion resulting from the emotional labor of navigating spaces and places occupied predominantly by Whites is unavoidable if left unchecked. In other words, African Americans experience microaggressions in every space and every aspect of their lives. This does not change when the person assumes a leadership role. As African American women work to manage their emotions in the workplace, it gets worse.

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