

Gender and Racial Bias in Leadership

Assignment 1

by

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Introduction

As society changes, we are constantly trying to redefine longstanding paradigms that guide and shape our culture. Leadership is a paradigm that has been traditionally based on power, the power of strong, charismatic leaders to direct activity from an authoritative position. Most often in our culture, this role has been held by white males. This “leadership form [is] better suited to a frontier society than to the interdependent global and organizational environments that will characterize the twenty-first century” (Lipman-Bluman, 1992).

However, as we continue to advance technologically to a knowledge driven global society, power is shifting to those with the ability to process information, innovate and promote change regardless of race or gender. Yet, we continue to use previously conceived leadership theories that do not address this change in the leadership paradigm. The challenges of a global society must be addressed in leadership theories and demonstrated in the workplace.

Article Reviews

New paradigms are developed from existing theories that are currently used in practice. So, the question remains: How do current leadership theories address the role of women and minorities in leadership? Irby, Brown, Duffy, and Trautman (2001) examined 24 leadership theories in order to determine if these theories included female leaders and addressed issues involving the female experience. The findings of the study indicated that none of the theories were free of gender bias or were inclusionary with regard to the role of female leaders. Indeed, the study identified five essential problems as a result of this exclusion:

- “Leadership theories frequently taught do not reflect currently advocated leadership practices or organizational paradigms.”

- “The theories most commonly taught in leadership preparation programs are not applicable to all learners.”
- “The male-based leadership theories advanced in coursework, texts, and discussion perpetuate barriers that women leaders encounter.”
- “The theories promote stereotypical norms for organizations.”
- “These theories fail to give voice to a marginalized group in the population of chief executive officers” (Irby, et al., 2001).

Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips (2008) examined leadership prototypes as a potential explanation for racial bias in top leadership positions. The findings of the study confirmed that “white leaders continue to be the prototype for effective leadership, and correspondingly, racial minority leaders are continually disadvantaged” which “prevent racial minorities from rising to the most esteemed positions of leadership” (Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips, 2008).

Both articles highlight the point that women and minorities are marginalized populations in leadership. These articles do not relate the day to day experiences that define the leadership experience for these groups.

Leadership Experience of Marginalized Groups

Women and minorities face an equally difficult challenge of obtaining leadership positions. Banks (2007) notes that women display the same career ambitions as men but are not offered the same opportunities for employment. Ethnic minorities are often limitedly employed in situations that display a similar ethnic majority. “Many minorities enter administration through special projects and work on minority issues. They frequently work in schools with high

minority enrollment and occupy the least powerful positions in the administrative hierarchy” (Banks, 2007).

Once holding a leadership position both groups report a sense of isolation created by workplace cultural assumptions and established behavioral norms and prejudices. White males are evaluated more positively while the contributions of women and minorities are undervalued. In fact, minorities are expected to out-distance and out-perform their white male counterparts in order to overcome racial behavioral stereotypes. With a general lack of role-models and adequate diversity training, these stereotypes present a formidable barrier.

Women also experience behavioral stereotypical barriers as well. “Women are expected to combine leadership with compassion and—are disliked when they do not” (Lips, 2009). Women leaders have difficulty maintaining authority. “People do not listen to or take direction from women as comfortably as from men” (Lips, 2009). In addition, women must maintain hyper-vigilant quality standards to be perceived as effective, which may have the by-product of less social acceptance.

Both groups receive very little extrinsic motivation when committing to leadership. Women can do little to promote themselves without falling prey to stereotypical descriptions made about strong, assertive women. Further, salaries and benefits packages fall short of the offers made to their white male counterparts.

Personal Reflection

The reviewed articles highlight the experiences of the workplace in American society. Women must work longer, harder, and faster, accept a level of social ostracizing, and receive

lower amounts of compensation for the same positions that may be held by white male counterparts. Minorities must be diligent to portray a constant air of professionalism that may be divorced from their ethnic cultural norms, defend themselves against racism, and as their white female counterparts, accept a level of social ostracizing, and receive lower amounts of compensation as well. None of my personal experiences would lead me to believe any differently.

Experiencing Bias

Many occurrences of bias have been experienced during my career. My current work location has provided numerous examples of poor or preferential treatment based on gender and race. An occurrence with a white male coworker portrays the “white standard” vividly.

I recently changed position last year from classroom teacher to media specialist. When changing positions, one must go through the inevitable period of packing and cleaning an old classroom and moving to new space, in this case, was an office in the media center, which also had to be cleaned and prepared for use. During the process of cleaning the new office, a number of pieces of furniture were to be rearranged for a more effective traffic flow and to obtain a higher rating from the fire marshal.

The furniture was temporarily moved to the main room for rearrangement and cleaning. A small table with casters was a part of this assemblage. As time waned and the end of the day drew to a close, the project was left unfinished until the next day. Upon returning to my worksite the next day, the small table with casters was missing. It had been removed from the media center by a white male staff member serving as a guidance counselor.

Upon confrontation over the table, the staff member refused to return it. The principal was consulted and the counselor was instructed to return the table. The table was never returned and I was pressured to apologize for confronting this staff member. During the course of the experience, I was warned by several other female and minority staff members that because he was a white male, I was “barking at a closed gate.” He would be allowed to keep the table and I should be careful because my position would likely be in jeopardy as a result of “rocking the boat.”

Further, an eternal point of frustration in this scenario for me is the loss of the table for an ideal display area for books in the media center, whereby the table is currently being used as a corner decoration with a plant on it in the guidance office. Instead of using our resources to effectively serve our students, the ego of one white male staff member is pacified instead.

Moreover, I have lost much respect for the principal of the school for the lack of follow-up in clarifying the incident, for the lack of disciplinary action despite clearly stated rules about furniture movement, and for the break in trust that effective procedures were not followed. Since the principal is female, her ability to be an authority is now perceived as weak and ineffective. Most of the staff agree and see the small, ridiculous incident as a symptom of a much larger leadership issue.

Generally, male staff members are given more opportunities and their failures and inappropriate behaviors are overlooked. When extracurricular positions are made available, male staff members are considered first. When para-professionals are to be pulled for class coverage, the male para-professionals are pulled last, only slightly preceded by the Afro-American para-professionals who are perceived as incapable of the task.

There are also incidences of racial bias against would be leaders. We have two staff members in particular who are Afro-American females, who hold doctoral degrees, and who are also overlooked for any and every leadership role. They are overlooked as committee chairs, as experts in curriculum, and as mentors. The talents of these two individuals are not used effectively.

Recently, I spoke with one of these ladies and asked why she didn't try to move to a better position in leadership. Her comments reiterated the biased list from earlier in this paper. Without experience, assistance, or opportunities, she could not prove that she was worthy of a new position. She had applied numerous times and has been told to develop some leadership experiences.

Conclusion

The experience of investigating this topic has provided me an opportunity to consider my role as a female in leadership. How am I perceived? What choices have made me viable as a leader, which choices have hindered my advancement?

I have reflected upon my own personal experiences with leaders and considered the implications of their behaviors and the long term effects of those behaviors. If I recognize the behaviors of a gender and minority conscious leadership paradigm, am I not encouraged to implement it? The lens of truth cannot be dissuaded from its target. I now feel a personal responsibility to seek training that will help me improve my interactions with women and minorities in the workplace, and also foster an environment that encourages positive inter-relational behaviors.

Despite the outlined experiences, I continue to press on at this school site because I believe the best opportunity to improve a situation is in the midst of it. To walk away without trying to affect change, would be a form of tacit approval. I do concede that victories on this front are small, but I have to believe that somehow change will occur for the betterment of our school.

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