Vulnerable Populations: People of Color in Leadership Roles

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While we all know that much stress comes with leadership, authority and responsibility, People of Color (POC) in leadership roles must also deal with the unique stressor of structural racism. Viewing Barack Obama's experience as President clearly indicates that even highly educated, successful POC at the top of their profession do not, and cannot, escape the ravages of structural racism and microaggressions.

Psychologist Derald Wing Sue defines microaggressions as "brief, everyday ex-changes that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership." We know that it is difficult to gauge the intent of the person who does a mi-croaggression. They may either deny it was a microaggression or say that it was simply mis-understood. People tend to deny biases that are more implicit, so the recipient then has to justify his or her position.

According to the Nonprofit Quarterly, in a 2014 study by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 79% of nonprofit executives nationwide are white. As a result, senior leadership roles held by POC are still a novelty in many of our institutions, which leads to their heightened visibility and vulnerability. Though all leaders are vulnerable to criticisms and subsequent attacks, it is exacerbated for POC. Since POC are underrepresented in leadership, they become much more visible and receive more scrutiny. This intense inspection can add pressure to assimilate into the majority culture. Internalizing criticism not only enhances this vulnerability, but also discourages them from bringing their individuality and uniqueness to the role.

Constant scrutiny can lead to self-doubt which can compel people of color in leadership roles to be more accommodating – accepting the status quo rather than following their instincts and offering a more authentic and diverse point of view. This results in our organizations being denied all the benefits of fresh perspectives and change that is so desperately needed to meet the needs of a primarily diverse client population. The challenges proposed by increased visibility and vulnerability drains energy, and often causes executives of Color to lose touch with other colleagues who can empathize and act as a sounding board. The first step is to become aware of the impact of this increased vulnerabil-ity that stems from increased visibility on lead-ers of color.

Prior to my training and exposure to as-pects of organizational life (ie; the role of organizational dynamics, roles, posturing for power and authority) at the William Alanson White Institute, I had no awareness of organizational life despite my extensive clinical training and practical experience. Because of this lack of awareness, and lack of knowledge about organizational theory, I spent years taking organizational issues personally. I learned, and truly internalized at The White Institute, that an individual in a group or organization is no longer just an individual. In other words, it's not about me – which makes dealing with criticism much easier. We, as people of color who regularly experience criticism due to racial stereotyping, need to develop a more measured response. Also, alternative explanations for criticism for our actions should be thoroughly examined from an organizational lens, while keeping our integrity and self-esteem intact. At the same time, we must be mindful that learning to distinguish between racially motivated and substantive criticisms requires time, sophistication and intense awareness of one's strengths and challenges.

Additionally, leaders, managers and supervisors must be taught to recognize that contempo-rary forms of racism exist and become familiar with the various forms that it takes within the institution. A part of adequately assessing talent in an organization and improving effectiveness requires thinking about power, splitting, boundaries, authority, roles and tasks through a race lens in order to avoid the impact of stereotyping and scapegoating within the organization. It is also necessary for **all** leaders both White and POC to understand organizational life in order to build strong partnerships which will ultimately lead to a greater numbers and success of leaders of color.

As White leaders, managers, supervisors or colleague, there are a few things that you can do to make a difference: (a) Identify and name racism directly – when you see something say something, even when a POC is not present. Be mindful remaining silent, "neutral" or "objective" can be a form of race privilege and it leaves the POC feeling alone and abandoned by you. (b) Take responsibility for self-education and don't expect POC to teach you. (c) Cultivate genuine relationships with POC that are mutually beneficial. (d) Struggle every day to understand and undo aspects of your own privilege. (e) Accept that POC's experience of racism is not debatable. (f) Don't require POC to display proof of racist injury. (g) See racism as a problem because it is personally offensive. (h) Consistently interrupt racist statements or behaviors whether or not a POC is present or objects. (Adapted from Antiracist Alliance: Checklist of Characteristics of Active Anti-racist Ally Behavior)

Leadership Today: In the U.S., white supremacy is "a pervasive social, political and economic phenomenon." Not only is it an ideology based on racial prejudice, but it is also a system that includes cultural messages, policies, practices, beliefs and actions (Disrupting White Supremacy from Within, 2004). As a result, white men have historically carried out leadership in organizations. Cultural overlays are at the core; these institutional structures have created and sustained the dominant way of being. According to SPAN Anti-Racist Education (2005), there may be tokenized hiring, repetitive injury and denial of racism. They may ignore, blame and retaliate. These internal practices harm people of color. But pushing for accountability means pushing against "the system."

We know from organizational literature that many human services organizations are struggling to survive. There is a desperate need for leadership that is transformative, collaborative, relationship oriented, empathetic and visionary. Our organizations also need to become more adaptive and responsive to the changing environment by becoming more, inclusive, pliable and reliant on teams, all of which requires building authentic relationships.

People of color comprise more than half of the clients being serviced by our organizations. Who better to articulate the depth, intensity and perspective of diverse groups than a leader from that group who has lived the experience? This is not to say other leaders cannot provide credible leadership. However, knowledge based on lived experience in a given culture creates the potential for bringing a unique perspective to leadership. Their presence adds another level of credibility to the organization and has great value to the community, the staff and the clients.

Despite the obvious need and research confirming the value that difference and inclusion can make to our organizations, why is it so difficult for People of Color to lead? One factor is our mental models for leadership. A charismatic, heroic white male model is indelibly etched in our collective mindset. There is still little acceptance for a model of leadership using all the talents in an organization and valuing all perspectives. While we all understand that change – whether individual, family or organizational – involves letting go of the familiar. And we all resist change.

Social service organizations have claimed the reason leadership talent is sought outside of the profession is because it cannot be found within. Translation: qualified and desirable candidates can only be found by increasing the pool to candidates from outside of the profession, or more specifically, white men with traditional skill sets from the business and legal worlds. Leaders are thought to be competitive, dominant, confident, aggressive, take-charge individuals – qualities more likely to be attributed to white men.

Although both female and male leaders of color face great challenges in leadership roles, men tend to fare better. While men may suffer from racial stereotyping (where people might report being afraid of them), they still receive the benefit of male privilege. Catalyst, the leading research and advisory organization, found that while white women frequently reference the glass ceiling as obstructing their advancement, women of color characterize their barriers as the "concrete ceiling." The study found that the darker the woman's skin, the more dense the concrete ceiling. Authority and credibility were also constantly questioned. This double outsider status results in exclusion from informal networks.

Catalyst likens the professional journey of people of color to a labyrinth, with very persistent and intractable negative race-based stereotypes. Webster dictionary defines a labyrinth as, "an intricate, confusing combination of paths in which it is difficult to find one's way; a complicated or tortuous arrangement". Additionally, with credibility and authority constantly in dispute, people of color in leadership positions have to continually prove themselves.

Since women often require more external validation than men, this problem is further exacerbated by the combination of gender and race. In order for women to be accepted in some leadership roles, they often need external endorsements – especially in highly competitive environments. Simply having adequate leadership training or task-related expertise does not guarantee success unless accompanied by a legitimation by an established leadership source. Sadly even today, because gender stereotypes often hinder the ability to see female executives' competence, it is often necessary for a highly regarded male to vouch for their credibility

We, as women and POC leaders in a White male dominated environment, may be hesitant in advocating for gender or racial equality out of the fear it may compromise our own personal success. This heightens the competition between us because we are all vying for the same few spots. It causes a negative impact on our connection to other women and POC in the lower levels of our organization and lessens our potential for developing a strong support base. When there are fewer leaders of color at the top, the message sent to younger POC is that only a minor percentage of opportunity in the organization is available to them. This ultimately leads to fewer people of color in the pipeline for leadership. Another opportunity is then missed to add diversity to our leadership – not instead of, but in addition to, white leaders.

Looking Ahead: It will take all of us, and our combined efforts, to make our organizations and our profession a place where all people can contribute to their full potential. It's about fully utilizing the talents of all people – women and men, People of Color and White people, LGBTQ and straight, old and young, physically challenged and able bodied. We need to draw and benefit from all of the talent available to us. Splitting in the form of racism, sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and all of the isms, invalidates the unique richness available in a truly diverse executive suite. Our organizations are often left with a less than ideal vision for providing leadership and services because of the impact of white organizational culture, stereotyping and splitting.

Equipping ourselves with two vital pieces of knowledge will enable us to have truly authentic relationships. The first is a genuine understanding of the role oppression plays in people's lives. The second is a sincere appreciation of privilege, what privilege is, who it impacts and how it permeates our culture – often in ways that are difficult to recognize and even harder to understand. We must accept that we don't know what we don't know. To get that understanding, we must first be willing to learn about issues that may not be a part of our personal experience. If you see something, say something. It will heard more objectively if the issue is not your own. When I, a straight woman of color, discuss LGBTQ issues, Islamophobia or bicultural/bilingual representation, it has greater impact.

Workplace diversity is important, but so is organizational culture. Organizational culture is often inhospitable to people of color in leadership roles. This is why so many people of color are overlooked, opt out of leadership paths, or simply leave an organization after just a few years. Many who leave publicly claim it was for a better opportunity, but privately they admit to not feeling valued for who they were and what they contributed. When people feel valued, welcomed and appreciated, they do a better job and are more productive. It is no secret, people want to connect and make a difference.

People of color may find their workplace culture to be hostile or at the very least, uncomfortable. In subtle ways, they can feel devalued. As leaders, we should not be surprised when they seek out more supportive environments. There are subtle but effective methods that can exclude – exclusion from work that matters, treating someone as though they are invisible when they're present, and marginalizing their contribution.

The topic of microaggressions at work has been hotly debated. On one side of the argument are those who believe microaggressions (everyday slights and snubs, whether intentional or unintentional, that make people feel like they don't belong) must be actively challenged and stopped. On the other side are those who suggest people of color who are demanding that everyone should become sensitive to the impacts of historical and structural racism are furthering a culture of victimhood and threaten free speech.

Suggestions for Improving Our Profession: In order to truly assess an organization for the impact of structural racism and to have authentic cross-racial and cross-cultural dialogue, training is key. A more diverse executive suite means more role models and opportunities to achieve professional goals. But most importantly, it means an opportunity to bring new aspects of leadership into our profession. While change supported from the top is easier, I believe change can start with you, regardless of your positional authority: (1) Take the Undoing Racism workshop that is offered by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. It changed my life and my practice. (2) Regularly visit the AntiRacist Alliance website www.antiracistalliance.com for hundreds of meetings, articles, books, workshop etc. (3) Recruit at least one other person to accompany you on your professional and personal antiracist journey. (4) Develop a close and authentic cross-cultural relationship. It will help you to expand your life and your practice. (5) Support and work towards building a leadership team that reflects your organizations client population.

Based on what I witness daily, a larger number of people of color, attainting and succeeding in leadership roles within our profession is not only possible – but is indeed the future!