

IS THE LEADERSHIP FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION HERE TO STAY?

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we reviewed academic literature related to leaders who advocate for sustaining Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs. We analyzed published materials relating to DEI program leadership styles, that we gathered from Google Scholar, library databases, government sources, peer reviewed papers, and scholarly books. That most institutions have action plans, but there is no evidence or assessment on how those DEI action plans lead to improved organization effectiveness. We conclude from our synthesis of the literature that leadership style is a very important factor to top-down approach to DEI effectiveness. Transformational leadership appears to be the most efficacious way for organizations to achieve long-term, sustainable DEI programs. We make two recommendations that will help organizations achieve lasting DEI success.

Keywords: Leadership, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Dei Is a Top-Down Leadership Approach

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, August 28, 1963

Thibeaux et al. (2006) were early in recognizing that if the top level leadership was not involved and half-hearted in their approach to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), the DEI initiatives fail: lower level managers imitate the behaviors and sentiments of the top bosses. An insincere CEO creates an insincere organization: lip service and pillow talk are not the same as strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation of DEI programs. Organizational paradigm shifts require appreciation and understanding of both leaders and followers (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Leaders must be able to communicate their visions in a way that creates buy-in and ownership. If standard operating procedures are to be re-engineered, it is going to require a very specific type of leadership that empowers change.

Bennis & Nanus (1985), admonished leaders to *“direct organizational change that build confidence and empower their employees to seek new ways of doing things.”* Velasco & Sansone (2019) examined transformational leadership within the framework of addressing DEI, arguing that: *“An alternative orientation around resistance is presented along with effective strategies for transformational leaders to anticipate, address and redirect fear-based behaviors in order to succeed in diversity and inclusion change initiatives.”* Diversity without unity is delusion. White Americans, therefore, are an essential part of the successful implementation and sustaining of DEI programs.

We, the authors, are under the impression that DEI is not a temporary fad, but that for DEI to be sustainable, it is dependent on effective leadership. We assume leadership is essential for DEI programs to succeed (Stanley et al., 2018; Thibeaux et al., 2006). Our view is that DEI is a macro approach (societal, including most organizations) [not micro (merely one organization)] to the value chain. We did not know what types of leadership styles are best suited for DEI program success and sustainability. Thus, we used a secondary research method to examine published information gathered from Google Scholar, library databases, peer reviewed journal articles, government reports, and scholarly books, in an attempt to synthesize the knowledge found in the literature.

Furthermore, no DEI program would be possible without efficacious top-down leadership. Therefore, we asked the following research question which guided our investigation.

Research Question and Operational Definition

What leadership style is best suited for sustainable DEI initiatives, and would those leaders be more transformative or transactional in their leadership style, consistent with Burns (1978) definition?

Leadership is difficult to define due to its dynamic nature. However, Dartey-Baah (2015), defines a leader as having “*the ability to decide what is to be done and then to get others to want to do it;*” in other words, a leader is a person who can get others to advocate what the leader advocates and like it. This definition projects three basic issues about leadership: leadership is about initiation, leadership involves people (followers), and leadership involves providing direction to human resources toward achieving stated goals. Transformational leaders are keen on making an impact on the paradigm shift in leadership. Bell & Bodie (2012) surmised the following:

Although there are many definitions of leadership, Burns (1978) in his classic b-book *Leadership* provides a definition which is still relevant: “*Leadership is the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers.*” Apparently Burns (1978) perceived the ideal leader as “*transformational.*” Appealing to the followers’ values and a higher vision, transformational leaders encourage the followers to exert themselves in the service of achieving that vision.

To truly drive the vision of cultural shift towards driving lasting DEI programming, organizations must look to leaders that exhibit the qualities that Burns (1978) illustrates in his definition of transformational leaders, which is the operational definition for this study.

Dei Is Consistent With Equity Theory

Leadership is key in formulating, implementing, and evaluating organizational mission and strategy, and the CEO’s shared vision respective to DEI programs. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are words that mean different things when alone, and when combined, take on a mixture of meanings within the context of corporatism. *Diversity* is defined by Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary as: “*the condition of having or being composed of differing elements;*” *Equity* is defined as: “*the inclusion of people of different races;*” and *Inclusion* is defined as: “*The act of including: the state of being included.*” These words when combined as a DEI program pursuit take on a far richer and deeper meaning.

There is the long history of Adams (1963); Adams (1965) equity theory, and Victor Vroom (1964) work and motivation theory, applicable to predictions of human responses to

perceived inequity, across all race groups, both socially and culturally. *Equity theory* is good management theory; when people sense inequity, they quit the organization, negotiate for better terms, or reduce their outputs to match their perceived inputs. Equity theory and scientific management principles have recently been associated with interpersonal communication effectiveness between managers and workers, necessary for goal achievement (Bell & Martin, 2012; Taylor, 1998).

Onwuachi-Willig (2021) said: “*Many white individuals began to recognize and acknowledge the varied ways in which whiteness worked to privilege them in our society, even if they found themselves disadvantaged on other dimensions.*” Would the aforementioned recognition of the notion of “*whiteness*” present real tangible benefit to the value chain in corporate ecosystems. Or, is this type of sentiment faded by the news cycle, as controversy pivots in the American consciousness, from time-to-time? Words like “*whiteness*” and “*white privilege*” have the potential to alienate people in general from DEI initiatives, by making them enemy by skin color designation (completely contrary to *content of their character*). There has to be a better strategy formulation for organizations to truly spark genuine motivation, and allow a sustainable commitment to DEI.

For DEI to be successful, all race groups must be willing; all levels of management must be eagerly motivated, as successful DEI programs are a top-down management approach (Thibeaux et al, 2006). If people in the organization feel unwelcome or targeted they will resist DEI initiatives. Active resistant behaviors can come in many forms and can range from sabotage to planting seeds of doubt as to the worthiness of such programs. The Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, has recently announced his plans to ban DEI from all state colleges as a response to perceived impressions that DEI is brainwashing youths to believe in “*discriminatory*” diversity (Ledet, 2023). Figure 1 illustrates some of the active resistant behaviors exhibit by those within an organization that oppose DEI initiatives.



FIGURE 1
ACTIVE RESISTANT BEHAVIORS BY PEOPLE WHO OPPOSE DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (Hultman, 2003)

DEI Funding Initiatives

The past two years has shown a tremendous amount of interest in DEI, especially from corporations, as an extension of corporate social responsibility initiatives. Corporations have rushed to create Chief Diversity Officers (CDO) for implementation of DEI strategies (Stanley et al., 2018). Corporations donated billions of monetary awards to non-profit organizations, including nearly \$90 million to Back Lives Matter (BLM), with mixed results (Miah, 2020; Kerr, 2022; Kulish, 2022). MacKenzie Scott donated \$4.2 billion to non-profits, including hundreds of

millions to Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Prairie View A&M University received \$50 million, unrestricted funds (Kulish, 2020). The successes and failures of BLM do not dissuade the larger framework of DEI. As BLM is micro (one organization), DEI is macro (most organizations).

Despite the billions of dollars being donated, is DEI a bandwagon effect? Social injustice became a hot topic as millions took to the streets in response to the unfortunate murder of George Floyd in summer of 2020. Why was the response of youths burning down cities so severe, given that hundreds of Black men have been murdered in urban centers over the past century, i.e. Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and many others? Why was summer 2020 the lynchpin for urban chaos, burning cities, and an overwhelming corporate financial response? Many continue to question the motivation behind the rise of DEI conversations. Is DEI a hot topic because it is a fad, with CEO's jumping on the bandwagon for political clout? Is DEI used merely as a marketing tool allowing organizations to gain a competitive advantage among a target market of minority consumers, a marketing mix appealing to those with a temporarily newfound sensitivity to equality and fairness for all?

Transactional Leaders versus Transformational Leaders

Leadership is important for organizational innovation, adaptation, and performance; it is motivating team members and employing resources to fulfill the organization's mission. Studies consistently show that leadership makes a difference for countries, organizations, and teams. Leaders must scan the internal and external environment, chart strategic and task objectives, and provide performance feedback. Leadership goes beyond the motivational and quid-pro quo leader behaviors that comprise the full-range-transformational, transactional, and laissez faire-leadership model. The ever expansive knowledge on leadership broadens the argument and, thus, makes it impossible to reach a consensus as to which approach is ultimately the best. Table 1 represents the characteristics that are most notably found in describing transactional versus transformative leadership.

Transactional leaders typically center around rewards and punishments, placing a high priority on performance. Transactional leadership is not believed to be as impactful as transformative leadership in delivering organizational innovation. Transactional leaders, also known as managerial leaders, use punishment and reward systems to maintain compliance (Burns, 1978). A transactional leader employs contingent reinforcement while a transformational leader inspires, intellectually stimulates, and is considerate of them.

Transformational leaders are significant drivers of positive change; as change requires mutual interests and exchange between leaders and followers (Burns, 1978). It may be directive or participative. Schiuma et al. (2021) argued that "*The transformative leadership compass is proposed as a model to outline the critical competencies distinguishing a digital transformative leader capable of driving continuous company innovation and specifically digital transformation entrepreneurship.*" They routinely employ a higher moral development. Furthermore, contrary to earlier expectations, women leaders can to be transformational, dependent on the characteristics adopted that mirrors their male counterparts (Pafford & Schaefer, 2017). A transformational leadership characteristic typically involves leaders who inspire individuals by winning their hearts and minds, to drive long-term positive change. The efforts of an organization and those who work on its behalf should always be aligned. Guiding this effort falls squarely in the path of a transformational leader.

A transformational leader is one that inspires team members to achieve extraordinary outcomes while paying attention to the needs of individual members, which is thought to be a

stark contrast to transactional leadership. Odumeru (2013) explains how, “*Transformational leadership enhances the motivation, morale, and performance of followers through a variety of mechanisms.*”

Transactional Leadership Characteristics	Transformational Leadership Characteristics
Pushing Leadership Style	Proactive Leadership Style
Following the rules	Winning hearts and minds
Rewards and punishments	Motivation and inspiration
Cult of performance	Victory in creativity and long-term change
Working within a culture	Contribution to culture with the ideas
Motivation within a culture	" <i>What is best for the company</i> " reasoning
Management as an exception	Pulling Leadership Style
" <i>If it's not broken, don't fix it</i> " approach	

Is The Imposition of DEI Ethical?

Transformational leadership theory is all about leadership that creates positive change in their followers. Transformational leaders take care of each other's interests and act in the interests of the group as a whole. A transformational leader is one that inspires team members to achieve extraordinary outcomes. They arouse, excite and inspire team members to put extra effort to achieve goals together. As an example, the increased hiring of CDOs were put in place to transform the organization. The CDOs are tasked with retaining, growing and developing diverse talent. Transformational leaders are necessary to make an impact on the organization and it's their duty to ensure the implementation is intentional and effective. The importance of having a transformative leader is key to sustain a commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

Businesses all around the world are concerned with developing leadership. Regardless of the type of organization, leadership seeks to establish high-performing teams. Most often leaders face challenges due to the increased environmental changes in the organization. If we trace back into history, it becomes clear that leaders should have the ability to draw out changes in relation to environmental demands. The current climate of the workplace demands a competitive edge and sustained profitability. It also requires that ethical standards are maintained, compliance with civic commitments, and establishment of a safe and equitable work environment. Leadership is a critical element in enhancing organizational performance. “*Being responsible for the development and execution of strategic organizational decisions, leaders have to acquire, develop and deploy organizational resources optimally in order to bring out the best products and services in the best interest of stakeholders. In short, effective leadership is the main cause of competitive advantage for any kind of organization*”.

What are the DEI Programs Pathways?

Fitzsimmons (2020) examined leadership development and the barriers to leadership pathways. The path to leadership is obviously not an easy one, but even once minorities and women arrive in positions of leadership, they are often judged more critically and often placed in positions with daunting challenges to begin with, a concept uncovered in the literature referred to as the “*Glass Cliff*” (Obenauer & Langer, 2019). The “*Glass Cliff*” a concept in which minorities are often promoted in underperforming organizations or parts of the business, thus more likely to be targets for criticism.

Commitment in diverse leadership, does in fact lead to positive outcomes for minorities and women in the workplace (Gotsis, 2016). There are barriers in place that prevent minorities and women from entering advanced levels of corporate leadership (Fitzsimmons, 2020). Some of the most significant findings were the embedded prototype that has emerged in leadership, which is often heavily cloaked in male whiteness. The authors also express a need for leadership development to be a proactive concept not one that is reactionary and heavily reliant on “*Natural Selection*,” as confirmed by (Fitzsimmons, 2020), which has produced leadership that has been overwhelmingly white and male.

Fitzsimmons (2020) defines leadership as “*the intersection between environments and people*”. The authors examine access to social capital, the network of social connections that can be leveraged for upward mobility. Economic capital can also be leveraged as it can be used to acquire social capital. Attending elite universities or engaging in elite activities are examples of tools of both economic and social capital that can prove to be meaningful assets when seeking leadership opportunities.

Is DEI Having a Genuine Impact?

The need to understand the definition and role of the CDO is formed by identifying and defining characteristics for each CDO. The roles include but not limited to, change agents, point leaders on issues of diversity, relational leaders. After defining the roles, then you find the right CDO and create actionable items that need to take place upon hiring the CDO. There are several next steps that need to be addressed upon hiring a CDO, which is understanding the results and impact after they implement the actionable items.

Most institutions have action plans but there is no evidence or assessment on how those action plans lead to organizational change around diversity (Riaz & Haider, 2010). Their case study methodology was a mixture of surveys, statistics, interviews, meetings, etc. The key questions they asked were:

1. How do we know the diversity plan is making a difference to make the campus inclusive to all?
2. How do we know that the diversity plan is having an organizing impact on the campus diversity culture?

These are key questions that need to be answered and the research article supports each question with valuable data supporting each answer. Their article concludes by arguing that a CDO cannot lead campus diversity initiatives alone, and without attention to underlying beliefs, assumptions, values and ways of interacting, key elements of organizational change will be missed. The research does a great job of supporting the existing questions noted above, but there should be a deeper dive into the racial disparities as it relates to the impact of diversity plans.

Diversity and inclusion are creating value for organizations who make a clear commitment to it. This commitment cannot be a passive one and professional development must be reengineered to shift the paradigm that has traditionally found an overwhelming majority of heterosexual white males landing leadership positions within most organizations. Their goal is sustainability to the commitment of DEI. The Attention to diversity amounts to substantial paradigm shifts in our theories of leadership to make them more inclusive.

Does DEI Contribute to the Value Chain?

Leadership theories have evolved to reflect changing social dynamics (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). The examination of modern leadership theory emphasizes not only the need but the necessity for diversity in leadership with the evolving demographics of the labor force and societal

pressures that demand it. Gotsis & Grimani (2016) contends that a commitment to diversity and inclusion is in fact a moral issue and should be communicated effectively both internally and externally, universal recruitment and retention efforts should be implemented to ensure a lasting pledge to existing and future employees.

Fitzsimmons (2020) contends that most organizations rely heavily on “*Natural Selection*”, when it comes to leadership development, and we see where that process has landed us, when it comes to diversity and inclusion in leadership. Innovation and performance has been linked to diversity when strategy avoids the “*black box*” and augment to precision of diversity hire creativity (Lambert, 2016). The current reactive approach to identifying future leaders will certainly lead to the current status quo being maintained within the leadership ranks of most organizations. Some would argue that being white is a significant component of the leadership prototype. The NFL could serve as an example as there is limited representation in the Head Coaching ranks of NFL teams as Black players make up almost 60% of the players, yet only 9% (3 of 32) of head coaches (Bowen, 2022).

SUMMARY

There has been an increase in the hiring of CDOs. The recent hiring of CDOs and the programs that help to retain, grow and developing talent must be intentional and effective. The emergence of the CDO has proven to be a popular solution for many institutions to promote and coordinate diversity on college campuses. Companies are serious about DEI programs because they pay CDO managers a range of \$193,900 to \$272,500, as of December 27, 2022, according to Salary.com. However, it is uncertain how effective these CDOs are in implementing diversity initiatives” (Wilson, 2013).

There is a lack of evidence or assessments on the institutional action plans as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Riaz & Haider (2010) explained that most institutions have action plans but there is no evidence or assessment on how those action plans lead to organizational change around diversity.

Research Question Answered

Earlier in this article, we asked “*what leadership style is best suited for sustainable DEI initiatives, and would those leaders be more transformative or transactional in their leadership style, consistent with Burns (1978) definition?*” The answer is that transformational leadership is required to truly create a paradigm shift allowing organizations to realize a sustainable commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).

For such inclusive leadership to flourish and prosper, it cannot be left to “*natural selection*” (Fitzsimmons, 2020). There must be an organizational proactive approach to fostering and developing a diverse crop of leaders. Hiring executives that represent the underrepresented population is a start but not sustainable as relates to a commitment to elevate and sustain Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Organizational development must be customized to fit the needs of the individuals that may not come from the same mold of contemporary leaders that were afforded both economic and social capital as an aid in their ascent through the corporate ranks. Overall, the term Diversity, Equity, Inclusion will not be a sustainable goal for organizations if there are not intentional programs that are led by a transformative leaders that includes followers that truly share the vision. The following recommendations will help organizational DEI initiatives remain a part of the culture.

CONCLUSION

There is a strong need to evaluate the culture of the institution before implementation of a diversity action plan. “*several components of a culture of assessment in higher education: (a) core competencies and learning outcomes that all students are expected to demonstrate (b) faculty, staff, and administrators engaged in planning, developing and implementing assessment; (c) institutional leadership reviewing and using assessment results to inform budgeting and strategic planning; (d) campus climate assessment to explore institutional progress towards its mission and goals; and (e) cross-disciplinary forums to share assessment results and challenges, celebrate success*” Diversity from a racial/ethnic perspective is important because it develops students' knowledge, skill and open mindedness. The answer to our research question is now known.

Recommendations for Permanent DEI Solutions

Recommendation One: Foster leadership and development strategies that go outside the traditional boundaries of contemporary development programs. Organizations must also be aware of the tendency to place minorities and women in leadership roles under their most challenging circumstances. This tends to place an even greater burden and likelihood of failure on those that have an uphill battle even arriving in positions of leadership in the first place. Provide nontraditional leadership and development strategies that are not annually but monthly to reinforce the necessity of providing training and skills to develop, retain and sustain leaders.

Recommendation Two: Provide a culture assessment prior to hiring Diversity, Equity and Inclusion staff. The need to understand the expectations of the organization is very important. The assessment can help define the strategic vision and the budget or any expenditures. The assessment is very beneficial to the organizational advancement towards the mission and goals. Lastly to develop forums to discuss findings, issues and also to acknowledge the successes.

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