
Gender, Communication, and the Leadership Gap

2017

edited by

Carolyn M. Cunningham
Gonzaga University

Heather M. Crandall
Gonzaga University

Alexa M. Dare
University of Portland



INFORMATION AGE PUBLISHING, INC.
Charlotte, NC • www.infoagepub.com

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN AS INCLUSIVE LEADERS

Intersectionality Matters

Brenda J. Allen
University of Colorado Denver

While writing this essay at the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017, I followed discussions about the Women's March on Washington, scheduled for the day after the presidential inauguration on January 20. More than 600 "sister marches" were planned for the same day in the United States and around the world. When I learned that one was scheduled to be held in Denver, I debated whether or not to attend. My reticence was based on my experiences that initiatives about women often assume a pre-existing "unity" among women that neglects to acknowledge differential power relations and systems of oppression that women from varying backgrounds can experience (Butler, 1990). I also had read reports that because the original national march organizers were White women, some prospective attendees were concerned that the march would fail to address concerns of marginalized women, especially women of color. The leaders responded by inviting three young women of color who are experienced activists and

organizers to become national co-chairs of the event. They also created a diverse national committee, and they appointed a group of honorary co-chairs who are civil rights icons. In addition, the leaders invited presenters and performers who represent a wide variety of human rights issues.

The organizers decided to focus on the premise that “women have intersecting identities and are therefore impacted by a multitude of social justice and human rights issues” (Women’s March, 2016b, para. 2). Their comprehensive policy statement highlights diverse gender categories: “We must create a society in which all women—including Black women, Native women, poor women, immigrant women, Muslim women, lesbian, queer, and trans women—are free and able to care for and nurture their families, however they are formed, in safe and healthy environments free from structural impediments” (Women’s March, 2016a, para. 1).

Media coverage described varying responses up to and after the marches. Although many people applauded the comprehensive focus on diverse issues, others did not. Racial tensions persisted related to the march itself and to the feminist movement. Some White women who reported feeling uneasy, excluded, or attacked by calls to acknowledge race and privilege opted out of the march. Some women of color declined to participate because they were offended at the omission of their voices at the outset, as well as frustrated that many White women had not previously seemed to care about their plight. Unfortunately, these conflicts and challenges are not new. They reflect enduring critiques about feminists and feminisms that trace back to the origins of demands for gender equality.

When a Muslim student leader-activist from my campus told me that she was a speaker for the Denver march, I was impressed that the organizers had invited her. The event program listed a wide variety of speakers who represented diverse perspectives on women’s issues (e.g., Native American, African American, transgender, and the deaf community). Heartened by this information, I attended the march. I am grateful that I did because the experience exceeded my expectations. As a result of participating in the march, I feel more optimistic about the future of fighting for gender equity, and I have more clarity about what I can do as a woman leader. I appreciate the opportunity to share my ideas as they relate to the goal of this volume to address the under-representation of women in leadership. To achieve that goal, we should promote leadership practices that encourage, edify, and empower *all* women to enact formal roles where they have primary responsibility for guiding others to achieve organizational, institutional, or group goals. I stressed *all* in the preceding sentence because we must acknowledge a need to focus on women from non-dominant social identity categories (examples include but are not limited to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, ability status, and

nationality). We also should be mindful of how these and other aspects of identity intersect with one another.

Despite an increasing emphasis on intersectionality in work about gender equity, as well as repeated calls and demands to consider diverse women in feminist-focused endeavors, a need persists to become more committed and intentional. As I discuss below, those of us in leadership positions can create and optimize opportunities to enhance inclusion and attend to intersectionality within a variety of contexts.

INCLUSION AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The everyday definition of inclusion refers to the act of making something part of a whole or a set. In groups, organizations, or institutions, inclusion refers more specifically to creating environments where everyone feels respected and valued for their role in achieving the goals of the group, institution, or organization. Inclusion also can refer to explicitly acknowledging and involving individuals who might be excluded or marginalized due to their social identity. To ensure that efforts to be inclusive encompass women from traditionally marginalized groups, leaders should focus on intersectionality. Anticipating that the primary audience of this volume will be women, this essay speaks to women leaders; however, the ideas presented are relevant to all leaders.

The concept of intersectionality is based on the idea that, in addition to belonging to a marginalized gender category (i.e., woman), many women are also members of other marginalized groups. Proponents of intersectionality contend that we cannot effectively address gender equity without considering other identity categories that inform gender constructions and meanings. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) is credited with coining the term “intersectionality,” although she has noted that the concept existed long before she named it. Her early work critiqued how mainstream theories on feminism and anti-racism excluded Black women because they focused separately on sexism and racism. Thus, those theories neglected to allow for how the two types of oppression can intersect to create something qualitatively distinct from either sexism or racism.

Roots of intersectionality reside in the early 1970s during the era of feminism known as the second wave, which was when scholars of color discerned that feminist scholarship tended to concentrate on middle-class, educated, White women. They advocated a more inclusive view of women that acknowledged how social positions can overlap and therefore have varying consequences for women. Womanist and feminist scholars and others have integrated ideas of intersectionality into research and practice. They also have expanded from centering on gender and women to encompass

other aspects of identity. As Risman (2004) observed, “[T]here is now considerable consensus growing that one must always take into consideration multiple axes of oppression; to do otherwise presumes the Whiteness of women, the maleness of people of color, and the heterosexuality of everyone” (p. 442). For purposes of this volume on women, communication, and leadership, intersectionality invites us to recognize the complexities of women’s identities because women usually embody dominant and non-dominant social identity categories. That is, a woman may be likely to enjoy privilege or experience discrimination as a result of her gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, ability status, nationality, age, citizenship, religion, and their intersections. For example, I might experience privilege because I am a straight, cisgender, middle-class, able-bodied, U.S. citizen. Simultaneously, I might experience or perceive discrimination due to being a Black, female baby boomer, with multiplicative implications of intersections of those marginalized identities.

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

An emerging area of leadership studies stems from the idea that leaders need to understand and be skilled at inclusion if they want to succeed in increasingly diverse environments. This body of work summons leaders to learn how to engage with persons from diverse backgrounds based on the multiple ways that individuals define themselves. To explore how inclusive leadership matters to women, I highlight a research report from Deloitte University Press, which heralds inclusive leadership as “a new capability that is vital to the way leadership is executed” (Dillon & Bourke, 2016, p. 3). Based on a comprehensive review of literature and experiences with more than 1,000 global leaders across Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United States; in-depth interviews with leaders and subject matter experts; and surveys of more than 1,500 employees on their perceptions of inclusion interviews; the researchers concluded that inclusive leadership is about

1. treating people and groups fairly—that is, based on their unique characteristics, rather than on stereotypes;
2. personalizing individuals—that is, understanding and valuing the uniqueness of diverse others while also accepting them as members of the group; and
3. leveraging the thinking of diverse groups for smarter ideation and decision making that reduces the risk of being [caught off guard] (para. 32).

Dillon and Bourke (2016) also delineate six interrelated signature traits (commitment, courage, cognizance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration) of what highly inclusive leaders think about and do in order to achieve those goals. As I illustrate later, these traits refer explicitly or implicitly to various formal and informal communication behaviors. Embodying and enacting these traits can help leaders achieve organizational, institutional, or group goals, while those leaders also enable individuals from diverse groups to reach their full potential.

While reviewing explanations of these six traits, I discerned implications for how women can apply an intersectional ethic to inclusive leadership. An intersectional ethic provides a lens to perceive how multiple aspects of identity “compound and complicate oppressions and marginalizations” (Uwujaren & Utt, 2015, para. 15). As Uwujaren and Utt explain, “Intersectionality must be about more than intellectualizing the work. It must be grounded in an ethic of feminist praxis that blends critical theory, like that of Kimberlé Crenshaw, with self-work and activism” (para. 34).

In the section that follows, I share ideas about how to apply an intersectional ethic (along with some personal examples) within brief descriptions of each trait. In addition, I refer to communication practices, and I offer some personal examples.

Commitment

Highly inclusive leaders are dedicated to inclusion and diversity because these principles align with their personal values and because they believe that being inclusive helps them achieve their goals (Dillon & Bourke, 2016). Being committed to effecting change and to being fair, highly inclusive leaders perform elements of inclusion cited earlier, and they help individuals feel connected to the group, institution, or organization. Inclusive leaders also monitor and adapt their practices to meet others’ needs. As diversity champions, inclusive leaders exhibit their commitment by frequently and consistently articulating how and why diversity and inclusion matter. Moreover, they routinely allocate resources to develop and advance diversity and inclusion.

To employ an intersectional ethic, women leaders should analyze their commitment to categories of social identity to which they do and do not belong, with an emphasis on marginalized groups. For example, thanks in large part to my friend and former colleague, Anna Spradlin, I became aware of how I had been enacting heteronormativity, despite my commitment to diversity and inclusion. After Anna came out to me as a lesbian, she and I discussed our experiences with discrimination. I talked with her about being Black (she is White), and she shared experiences and challenges of

being lesbian (I am straight). Her stories prompted me to comprehend my heterosexual privilege at the same time I was trying to help White students understand their racial privilege.

I acted upon my newfound knowledge in a few ways. For instance, as director of graduate students who taught an introductory course in organizational communication, I required those students to assign readings about sexual orientation. I also asked Anna and a female graduate student to present our experiences as women from different backgrounds at a national convention, and I encouraged Anna to submit her presentation for publication (Spradlin, 1998). In addition, I wrote about our experiences in an essay entitled "Sapphire and Sappho: Allies in Authenticity" (Allen, 2004).

Courage

Highly inclusive leaders confront difficult situations by challenging the status quo with others, with systems, and with themselves (Dillon & Bourke, 2016). They respectfully require those whom they lead to monitor their behaviors and consider their impacts. They challenge deep-seated organizational practices and perspectives that promote homogeneity. In addition, they hold themselves and others accountable for non-inclusive behaviors. One of the leaders the researchers interviewed reported "gently challenging followers to see their behaviors and the impact they have on others" (Dillon & Bourke, p. 10) and also regularly giving them feedback on such behaviors. Inclusive leaders also are willing to detect and acknowledge their own limitations, to admit mistakes, and to learn from criticism.

An intersectional ethic of courage prompts women leaders to question individual and systemic dynamics related to social identity categories, starting with themselves. For example, after Anna helped me recognize my heterosexual privilege, I sought and shared knowledge about LGBTQ history and challenges. I continue to seek information and insights related to privileged facets of my identity, and I try to alter my attitudes and actions according to what I learn.

Women who embody other marginalized identities should resist internalizing negative stereotypes about themselves. When I was introduced to feminist studies, challenges that confront Black women and other women of color were described as "double jeopardy." Although I agreed with the premise, I did not want to embrace a victim mentality. To share an alternative perspective, I wrote and presented a paper entitled "Twice Blessed, Doubly Oppressed" (Allen, 1995) that delineates and celebrates ways that I have been socialized as a Black woman. I often encourage persons whom I mentor or supervise to heighten their awareness of valuable attributes of

aspects of their identity that society marginalizes or devalues, and I give them feedback about those attributes.

An intersectional ethic of courage guides women to contest entrenched attitudes and practices that promote homogeneity. To illustrate, here is an example of what this kind of courage looks like in an ordinary organizational interaction. When I was invited to be on the selection committee for a leadership program for women in academia, I asked for the selection criteria and learned that there were none. I also inquired about how the leader of the program solicited nominations and whether the committee sought a diverse pool of nominees, given the institution's stated commitment to diversity. One of my colleagues had told me that the previous group of nominees had included a Black female who had worked at the sponsoring organization for many years and was disappointed that she had not been chosen. Instead, the committee had selected a White woman who was brand new to the organization. When I asked how the committee had chosen that employee, the chair said that the committee believed that the program would help the newcomer develop a professional network. While that was an admirable goal, it was not a stated criterion. Inquiring further, I also found out that the committee had never considered diversity nor tracked demographics of program participants.

The chair graciously accepted my offer to review the selection processes, and she convened a small group that discerned a need to strive for more diversity in participants' racial-ethnic identities as well as their organizational roles (i.e., staff and faculty in mid to high level positions). We developed explicit selection criteria, and we added a statement to the call for nominations that we sought a diverse pool of nominees. In this example, my colleague and I both performed behaviors that Dillon and Bourke (2016) cite in their overview of courage.

Cognizance of Bias

Highly inclusive leaders understand that organizations and institutions, despite good intentions, have implicit preferences and institutionalized -isms built into policies, processes, and practices that tend to favor members of some identity categories more than others (Dillon & Bourke, 2016). In addition to being alert to institutional biases, inclusive leaders self-regulate for personal biases.

To apply an intersectional ethic to cognizance of bias, inclusive women leaders should accept that we all have been socialized to harbor implicit biases for or against individuals (including ourselves) based on social identity. They should try to identify and mitigate their biases, solicit feedback from peers and those whom they lead, and cultivate receptive cultures where members feel empowered to offer feedback about perceived biased

behavior. They also should identify and address organizational processes that are likely to embed bias. In addition, as my example about the leadership program exemplifies, they should employ transparent, inclusive, and consistent decision-making processes.

During a meeting with a group of staff who report to me, a female employee stated that I had paid more attention to males than females during a previous meeting of all the offices that I oversee. I thanked her for expressing her observations. I promised to pay closer attention to my behaviors and be more inclusive of all staff. Ironically, I had recently given similar feedback to a male colleague who was the chair of a search committee on which I served, after noticing that he tended to solicit input from the men much more frequently than from the women. After a few meetings, I privately described the pattern to him. He was taken aback but receptive and apologetic.

Curiosity

Highly inclusive leaders have an open-minded, genuine desire to understand other persons' viewpoints and experiences, especially those who have viewpoints different from them (Dillon & Bourke, 2016). They seek opportunities to interact with a diverse range of people. They welcome and value insights, they respectfully ask questions to deepen their understanding, and they listen actively and empathically. They also model and promote divergent thinking.

To apply an intersectionality ethic to curiosity, inclusive leaders should connect and dialogue with members of non-dominant groups. I recently hired a transgender employee who frequently experiences interactions where others refer to him using inaccurate pronouns. Another employee (who is acutely aware of these dynamics because she is a queer Latina and a strong advocate for marginalized groups) observed some of these interactions and recommended that I offer LGBTQ safe zone training for staff. I readily agreed. I knew that many persons introduce themselves by stating their pronouns, and I somewhat understood why that was important. However, after the staff member expressed his frustration, I delved more deeply into the topic. I found a few online resources that augmented my awareness and strengthened my commitment to educating others. I asked him to review those resources and to provide others if he had any. He shared a few very helpful resources that were quite illuminating for me (see, for example, Reiss, 2016).

Culturally Intelligent

Highly inclusive leaders understand that cultural differences and similarities exist and they realize that their own culture impacts their personal

worldview (Dillon & Bourke, 2016). They also know that cultural stereotypes can influence their expectations of others. Therefore, they value cultural differences, and they work to expand their knowledge about them. They also try to be aware of ethnocentric tendencies that might affect their attitudes and actions. Note that Dillon and Bourke's description of this trait refers mainly to national cultures.

An intersectional ethic of being culturally intelligent can illuminate differences in women's behaviors based on their nationality. Inclusive leaders should observe and respect varying communication styles, language, and other ways of expression based on differing cultural norms and socialization. For example, an employee from outside the United States who was seeking guidance about a conflict on her job brought her husband to a meeting with me, and he did most of the talking for her. Although I do not believe my frustration showed, I struggled with accepting this cultural difference. I wanted to meet with the woman alone and to encourage her to speak for herself. However, I did try to understand the situation, to temper my judgment, and to not let it influence how I assisted her. In addition to national cultures, an intersectionality ethic of cultural intelligence also should incorporate perspectives on intercultural interactions from the field of communication that expand beyond nationality to encompass cultural concepts about social identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality (Nakayama & Martin, 2012).

Collaborative

Highly inclusive leaders foster creativity and cooperation among diverse individuals by empowering them to contribute their unique perspectives to team or group efforts (Dillon & Bourke, 2016). They understand that collaborating across difference can be challenging due to power dynamics, varying communication styles, and a lack of trust. Recognizing that individuals must feel safe and respected before they engage fully, inclusive leaders create environments and endorse processes that ensure everyone feels welcomed and valued.

An intersectional ethic of collaboration directs inclusive leaders to pay special attention to social identity power dynamics that can permeate group interactions. If leaders are not familiar with these dynamics, they should learn about them, and they should educate those whom they lead. For example, standpoint theory explains that members of marginalized groups often can offer valuable insights because they understand reality both from dominant perspectives and their own (Collins, 1986). In addition, inclusive leaders can optimize teamwork by offering and engaging in implicit bias training to help individuals understand how their biases related to

marginalized groups might hamper collaboration, and to acquire strategies and techniques to mitigate bias.

In conclusion, this overview of signature traits and ideas for an intersectional ethic to enact them offers explicit and implicit communication guidelines for inclusive leadership. To contribute to the goal of this volume, I concentrated on how women's gender intersects with other aspects of identity. However, because intersectionality refers to other social identity categories, leaders also should consider them as they strive to be inclusive. I encourage women who want to develop inclusive capabilities to learn more about intersectionality and to be self-reflexive.

As Uwujaren and Utt (2015) caution, applying an intersectional ethic will not be easy. However, they assert that "We must take upon ourselves the desire to learn about issues and identities that do not impact us personally" (para. 36). We should analyze how our social identity composite matters to why, how, and whom we lead. We should conscientiously apply the lessons we learn in order to realize the potential of inclusive leadership traits. I have begun to identify resources (e.g., KCL Intersectional, n.d.; Paul, 2016) to enlighten me about categories of identity about which I have limited knowledge (e.g., transgender and Muslim). If women leaders work diligently to become more inclusive while also attending to implications of intersectionality, we will help increase the number and the diversity of women leaders. As a result, our organizations, institutions, and groups will reap rich rewards.

REFERENCES

- Allen, B. J. (1995). Twice blessed, doubly oppressed: Women of color in academe. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed June 16, 2017).
- Allen, B. J. (2004). Sapphire and Sappho: Allies in authenticity. In A. Gonzales, M. Houston, & V. Chen (Eds.), *Our voices: Essays in culture, ethnicity, and communication* (4th ed., pp. 198–202). Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminist thought. *Social Problems*, 33(6), S14–S32.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Dillon, B., & Bourke, J. (2016, April 14). The six signature traits of inclusive leadership: Thriving in a diverse new world. In *Global human capital trends*, Deloitte University Press. Retrieved from <https://dupress.deloitte.com/dup-us-en/topics/talent/six-signature-traits-of-inclusive-leadership.html>
- KCL Intersectional Feminist Society. (n.d.) Reading list. Retrieved from <https://kclinfemsoc.wordpress.com/reading-list/>

Nakayama, T. K. & Martin, J. N. (2012). *Intercultural communication in contexts* (6th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Paul, C. (2016, March 10). 12 books to keep your feminism intersectional. *Bustle*. Retrieved from <https://www.bustle.com/articles/143803-12-books-to-keep-your-feminism-intersectional>

Reis, E. (2016, September 25). Pronoun privilege. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/26/opinion/pronoun-privilege.html>

Risman, B. J. (2004). Gender as a social structure: Theory wrestling with activism. *Gender & Society*, 18(4), 429–450.

Spradlin, A. L. (1998). The price of "passing": A lesbian perspective on authenticity in organizations. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 11(4), 598–605.

Uwujaren, J., & Utt, J. (2015, January 11). Why our feminism must be intersectional (and 3 ways to practice it). *Everyday feminism*. Retrieved from <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/why-our-feminism-must-be-intersectional/>

Women's March. (2016a). Unity principles. Retrieved from <https://www.womensmarch.com/principles/>

Women's March. (2016b). Guiding vision and definition of principles. Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/584086c7bc6594762f5ec56c/t/587ff20579fb3554668c111/1484782369253/WMW+Guiding+Vision+%26+Definition+of+Principles.pdf>