



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Conference 2022

Cape Town: Disruption

Workshop 4:

Can Business Leaders Learn Social Justice?

The Disruptive Role of Critical Race Theory Informed Social Justice

Pedagogy in Executive Education

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Workshop outline

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a scholarly framework used to raise awareness about the

systemic nature of racism and its ubiquitous influence in social systems (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). As such, CRT has the power to transform racial and social justice in business school education because it provides a scaffolding for conversations about antiracism, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in organizations and society at large. This workshop explores the disruptive potential of an executive education program that utilizes CRT-informed social justice tools and frameworks to inform the development of DEI competencies. In this workshop, we will review the findings of a study designed to understand how participants make sense of what they learned from a CRT-informed *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Champion* certificate program that invites learners to decenter tendencies to assume whiteness as superior, challenge the systemic and accepted denigration of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), and grapple with their own experiences of race as a social construction (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Our goal is to host an interactive space where we discuss DEI education from a social justice perspective.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, executive education, diversity, equity, and inclusion, adult learning, business schools, antiracism, social justice

Employees rely on executive education programs to enhance leader competencies. For example, in 2021, the number one topic requested by Learning and Development (L&D) professionals from executive education programming was how to lead through change, followed closely by the need for DEI training (LinkedIn, 2021). These trends stem from a shift in employee activism as employees now demand their company leaders actively fight against racial and social injustices (SIOP, 2021).

To deliver on these demands and meet the challenges of our time, successful executive education programs draw from adult learning and social learning theories (Black & Earnest, 2009 referencing Bandura, 1971 and Lieb, 1991) which help adult learners achieve outcomes

that lead to growth and benefits for their teams and organizations. Adults learn best when what they learn is relevant to their immediate challenges and experiences (Black & Earnest, 2009). Thus, it appears there is a need for high-quality executive education programs that are grounded in social justice frameworks, and that can offer accessible tools to transform the workplace. The *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Champion* certificate program offered by Bentley University is an example of one such approach.

METHOD

Through class observations and interviews, our work captures the learner's journey through the DEI Champion certificate program. As an exploratory study, we piloted an interview protocol with two program participants – one bisexual Black woman in her 30s and the second a lesbian-identified Black woman in her 40s. Each interview lasted a half-hour and followed the same protocol (see Appendix for the interview protocol). The study also included the analysis of a class observation with study participants engaging with their cohort. On the day of the observation, the executives discussed privilege and race, a day that would challenge participants

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to reflect on their own experiences about race and how they interact across differences in different settings – family, community, work.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In this workshop, we will present preliminary findings that demonstrate how a CRT informed program can support the development of DEI change leaders in the context of corporate social justice. We identified three primary factors that facilitated transfer-of-training outcomes related to the development of DEI competencies from a CRT lens: (1) increased knowledge and awareness of the role of authorization (self; others) in maintaining and/or disrupting power and structural inequities; (2) identification and engagement with strategies to

mitigate the emotional toll associated with DEI work; and (3) the power of reflective practice and integration of life experiences with DEI demands on the job.

The first factor is authorization from within and from others. Green and Molenkamp (2005) define authorization as a person's right to work. They state that authorization from within comes in the form of self-authorization and from others through the delegation of authority. In the DEI Certificate program, executives increased their level of self-authorization by connecting pre-existing knowledge about power and privilege to gain confidence in their ability to perform a leadership role. Some realized how their individual and unique intersectionality of privilege, power, and marginalization helps them lead DEI work in their organizations (Observation, October 14, 2021). One executive stated, "I think that it helped me to provide feedback and evaluate things that are already happening so that I can see how I could do it better in light of the things we learned in the class (WD, Research Participant Interview, November 5, 2021)." Going through formal education helps participants who have been informally engaged in DEI work feel more competent and authorized to do DEI work. CRT activities surface racialized experiences

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and enhance authorization among change leaders and organizational stakeholders. The class also teaches learners how to facilitate this kind of intersectionality and identity reflection within their organizations to forge a more profound commitment to corporate social justice and equity without undermining employees' challenges outside of social and political inequalities.

The second factor is learning that DEI work in organizations is more labor-intensive in practice than a leader might imagine. Utilizing CRT to reflect on racialized experiences of identity, power, and privilege requires stamina and vulnerability from all participants, regardless of identities, albeit with different impacts and different levels of awareness. Since Hochschild first wrote about emotional labor (1983), scholars acknowledge various ways employees engage in surface feelings to cover deeper feelings when experiencing the emotional and psychological

burden of DEI work. For example, Evans and Moore (2015) highlight emotional labor that Black employees engage in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). They point to the emotional labor of navigating organizational dynamics that favor white employees. They also talk about the emotional labor related to the subtle microaggressive acts that psychologically harm them despite the wish to access the organization's rewards by focusing on the task. Participants in this study shared that they underestimated the amount of emotional labor doing DEI work entails – as individuals and in their roles. Participants hear one another's experiences of inequity at work. Utilizing CRT, they recognize how social hierarchies replicate in seemingly race-and other identity-neutral processes like hiring, promotions, leadership opportunities, and salary and rewards.

The third factor that facilitated learning was the executive's appreciation for the opportunity to reflect and integrate their life experiences with their DEI role. Drawing from CRT, the certificate program includes reflective practice on critical transformative moments in

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participants' lives that led them to care about DEI. This process allowed for a deeper exploration into their reasons for doing DEI work, and of their earliest memories learning about their identities –specifically the CRT-informed "race and other identities" approach. A "race and" approach places racialization *and* intersectionality at the core of individual reflection (Ladson Billings, 1998; Stovall, 2006), thus preventing avoidance of learning about personal experiences of race.

DISCUSSION

DEI change leaders who engage with social justice principles like CRT in a business school setting learn to understand how personal and professional life experiences converge to influence how they perform their organizational roles and advance equity and inclusion in the

workplace. Formal education through participation in a DEI change leadership program enables executives to feel confident and authorized. Authorization helps executives impact organizational DEI initiatives because it legitimizes their expertise and tasks. In addition, authorization allows them to engage critical and supportive corporate stakeholders and identify ways to contribute to the organization's short and long-term DEI initiatives.

DEI change leaders who received certification as DEI champions are now more aware of their stories, intersectionalities, lived experiences, and personal reasons why they want to advance DEI work. Through the program modules, they accessed knowledge, developed self awareness, and built a community of practitioners to help them manage the inevitable emotional labor that comes with the role.

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SUMMARY

The workshop reviews a study at the intersection of change management, leadership development, CRT, and social justice. Attendees will learn about the program components, success measures, and learning outcomes. Facilitators will lead dialogue and a feedback process of program components that bridge social justice and business education. The goal is to share the work and create opportunities for feedback and iteration of the program design and contents. Attendees are not required to have experience in any of the topics mentioned above, and all are invited to participate.

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OVERVIEW OF WORKSHOP DESIGN

1. Intros and Framing
2. Overview of DEI Champion program design, participant profile, and learning outcomes
3. Summary of study findings

4. Discussion in small groups

- What are the components of an effective DEI change leader program in business?
- Can social justice be taught to corporate executives?

5. Feedback about the program design and outcomes

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

1. In what ways did the DEI certificate influence how you do DEI work in your organization?
2. How did your learnings about social justice from the course inform how you do work now?
3. How, if at all, did our focus on social justice influence your learnings?