**Expanding and Mainstreaming Inclusive Leadership: Changing the Status Quo**

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**Abstract**

Like it or not, the world is changing. Significant demographic shifts, economic adjustments, and societal alterations are transforming the landscapes of where we live and where we work. In organizations, these differences can be a strength or a liability as management struggles to keep up (O’Leary & Weathington, 2006). It is as if both the rules of the game and the players of the game are simultaneously changing. Effective leadership is able to leverage the opportunities as well as address the challenges associated with a diverse workforce in a dynamic environment. We suggest a multilevel, multidisciplinary approach of analyzing inclusion that fuses concepts and frameworks from multiple sources in order to create a more nuanced understanding of what it takes to lead in an inclusive manner. Our approach recognizes the importance of different levels of change, but focuses on leaders within organizations as a driving force for individual and societal change. Consequently, our work extends the framework presented in Hannum, McFeeters, and Booysen (2010) by focusing on how to develop effective (and inclusive) leadership across the three primary levels: individual, organizational, and societal.

**Purpose**

Like it or not, the world is changing. Significant demographic shifts, economic adjustments, and societal alterations are transforming the landscapes of where we live and where we work. In organizations, these differences can be a strength or a liability as management struggles to keep up (O’Leary & Weathington, 2006). It is as if both the rules of the game and the players of the game are simultaneously changing. Effective leadership is able to leverage the opportunities as well as address the challenges associated with a diverse workforce working in a dynamic environment.

Leadership has been defined as the process of creating direction, alignment, and commitment among groups of people (Van Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010). At its heart leadership is establishing functional connections across differences in order to make something happen. Adler (2002) suggests that managing diversity impacts productivity more so than the presence or absence of diversity itself. Chavez and Weisinger (2008) address this need to look beyond the diversity present, which in and of itself is not necessarily more or less effective or productive, to create the inclusion needed to be effective and productive. Effective leadership holds the key to easing the fracturing that can come with increased differences and unlocking the opportunities therein. Consequently, individuals in formal leadership roles are particularly relied upon to facilitate effective interactions among people who, at times, have different perspectives and hold different values. As indicated in other research, organizations can not be successful unless people from different genders, nationalities, ethnicities, ages, religions, and other differences, are able to work effectively together (Bhappu, Zellmer-Bruhn, & Anand, 2001; Childs, 2005; Lane, DiStefano, & Maznevski, 2006). However, different perspectives and values can lead misunderstandings and friction between people and groups that hampers effective interactions.

Different perspectives and values often stem from people’s understanding of their group identity and how that influences their experience and interpretation of other people and the world around them. Our social identity shapes how we think about ourselves and those around us. Developed by Taifel and Turner (1986) Social Identity Theory indicates that we use information about identity to categorize, identify, and compare groups. Our social identity is our sense of self that comes from belonging to particular groups, including people with the same age, sex, religion, nationality, race, physical ability, socioeconomic status, etc. Demarcations between “us” (our in-group) and “them” (our out-group) form quickly and, in some cases, are based on seemingly innocuous or trivial information. When these demarcations are long standing and reinforced by larger societal institutions, media, and through our interactions with one another, they can become particularly difficult to traverse. When there is a history of mistrust and conflict that challenge of connecting is even greater.

The boundaries we create serve multiple purposes; they simultaneously protect and imprison us. They form the basis of whom we trust and whom we fear. Research by Lewis and Bates (2010) suggests that there may be a biological basis for these multiple systems for favoritism. In this complex relationship, there can be multiple influencing factors and hidden dynamics. In order to make sense of it all we develop and apply categories and frameworks to simplify.

Categorization facilitates the analysis of complex phenomena by reducing cognitive complexity. Our categorization processes tend to be fairly automatic and retrospective; in other words we make fast judgments based on previous observations and experiences. Left unexamined and unchallenged our categorization processes are likely to be static rather than dynamic: our fixed categories may not keep up with phenomena that are changing or that we did not previously have adequate information about. Significant problems arise when classifications are rigid and are seen as an adequate representation of complex phenomena. No categorization processes are entirely neutral or objective— categorization necessarily reflects decisions about what is important and meaningful to those who have created the categories.

Scientists also use categorization and other techniques to investigate their environment. For instance, frameworks and models are used to explore and explain complex phenomena. Yet, frameworks and models are by definition erroneous. They are simplifications of difficult and intricate ideas in order to help us make sense of and respond to complexity. Indeed, while it is important that scientists seek to find the most accurate and parsimonious explanations for important issues, concepts may become oversimplified in the process. Consequently, once issues are analyzed in their component parts, it is necessary to reconstruct them to create a more finely distinct and accurate understanding of the phenomena being studied. We propose that at the intersection of knowledge from different disciplines is information about how to more effectively function in a changing world. Further, we suggest a multilevel, multidisciplinary approach of analyzing inclusion that fuses concepts and frameworks from multiple sources in order to create a more nuanced understanding of what it takes to lead in an inclusive manner. Consequently, our work extends the framework presented in Hannum, McFeeters, and Booysen (2010) by focusing on how to develop effective (and inclusive) leadership across the three primary levels: individual, organizational, and societal.

Before we address inclusive leadership across three primary levels, we offer one caveat. While it is an important construct, we recognize the concept of “inclusion” contains the source of a challenge as well as the solution. That is that by definition, when someone or something is including someone or something else, the includer is in the power position, i.e., they get to choose whether or not to include “the other.” Essentially, to be inclusive suggests that those in the status quo are bringing people or ideas into something that already exists rather than co-creating something new. We believe it is important to recognize that the language of inclusion may itself need to be fine-tuned to reflect the concepts it is trying to convey. Yet, in spite of this concern, we also recognize the term inclusion has been defined within the context of diversity to suggest a bringing together of people. Therefore, we will use the term as intended in the field even as we push to find language which more closely approximates the notion of co-creation.

**Approach**

Inclusion at the individual level is an experience that can be interpreted differently depending on the mindset or perspective of the person involved. For instance, Davidson & Ferdman (2001) say that inclusion is the extent to which one makes an effort to make individuals feel valued; creates an environment that encourages others to express opinions in the organization; and encourages and places value on diversity, along with the expression of social identity. Miller and Katz (2002) present a definition of an inclusive value system where they say, “Inclusion is a sense of belonging: feeling respected, valued for who you are; feeling a level of supportive energy and commitment from others so than you can do your best work.” Edwin Hollander (2009) suggests that the four R’s of inclusive leadership include respect, recognition, responsiveness, and responsibility. These three definitions suggest that developing a deeper understanding of ourselves and our perception and treatment of others is paramount in leading effectively. Trust and perceived fairness of a leader is a critically important element in organizational relationships (Aryee, Budhwar, & Chen, 2002; Blau, 1964; Haas & Deseran 1981; Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002). Trust and fairness is more difficult to establish across differences.

While initially created to address cultural difference, Milton J. Bennett’s (2004) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity can be adapted to serve as a measuring stick and process for individual change related to inclusion in general. Not developing the awareness and skills to function across differences as an individual is liable to reduce effectiveness in that miscommunication is more probable, innovation is less likely and, in extreme cases, conflict may arise. While there are different approaches as to how inclusion on the individual level plays out, each includes a respect for the individual and seeks to mindfully include that individuality into the whole.

Inclusion (or exclusion) at the organizational level encompasses examining elements such as policies, culture, structure, reward and recognition systems, etc. and looks at how they include or exclude groups within the organization. Examining, understanding, and changing systems that may contribute to imbalances in access to power and opportunity is the pathway to greater organizational effectiveness. In essence the process for organizations is somewhat similar to that process of individuals in that categorizations and the consequences thereof are made more explicit and therefore, are able to be changed in order to be more effective. Such examinations may also contribute to deepening one’s understanding of themselves and why they see things or experience things as they do. Respect from a larger collective (e.g., an organization) to a subgroup within that collective (such as a work team), will influence attitudes and feelings from the subgroup toward the larger collective (Huo & Molina, 2006). Ernst and Chrobot-Mason’s (2011) work on boundary spanning leadership provides a framework for diagnosing and effecting change across groups at the organizational level. Organizations that are ineffective at being inclusive are likely to have reduced innovation, higher levels of conflict, higher turnover, and less access to talent from multiple sources.

At the societal level, inclusion is influenced by elements such as culture, media, systems of justice, levels of intergroup anxiety, etc. While these elements are often slow to change, understanding the influence they have on individuals and organizations will heighten awareness to changes at the societal level and how these changes influence organizations and individuals. We propose that a society that is not effectively inclusive is likely to have higher rates of conflict (perhaps manifesting in crimes) and lower effective civic engagement.

**Research Implications**

Like gears in a system individual, organizational and societal levels can reinforce one another (for better or for worse) or be a mechanism for changing direction. Changing one element may result in resistance from the others, but if powerful enough, it can drive change.

Figure 1. Gears of Change

Organizations are one of the containers in which multilayered and dynamic identities come together. It is in organizations where both the perceptions and actions of the individual as well as the context of the society interact in ways that can support or detract from the goals of the establishment. In this circumstance, leadership is a potent force for greater effectiveness and positive change. Exercising leadership in this situation requires deep self-awareness as well as awareness of others and the organizational and societal context in which events are taking place. Consequently, being centered in and responsive to identity in all of its manifestations is not an add-on to leadership, but a mainstream leadership skill set that is critical to being effective in deeply multilayered and complicated circumstances. In addition, leading with the knowledge to understand and work within and across these multiple levels is the next step in mainstreaming inclusion. Sayed and Kramer (2009) as well as Pless and Maak (2004) posit that by aligning the organizational outcomes with the social justice outcomes interventions to create inclusion are more effective.

**Value of the paper**

In this paper we posit that organizations are a driving force for individual and societal change. We integrate concepts and developmental processes from a variety of sources in order to create a more nuanced understanding of what it takes to lead in an inclusive manner in organizations. In so doing, our work extends the framework presented in Hannum, McFeeters, and Booysen (2010).

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Author Bios

Ancella Livers is Senior Faculty at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) where she facilitates and designs programs. She is also an executive coach. While she most often works with Fortune 500 companies, she also works with government agencies and nonprofits. During her tenure at the CCL, she held numerous leadership roles including global director of open enrollment programs, global program manager of CCL’s flagship offering the Leadership Development Program (LDP®) and program manager of several other offerings including the Foundations of Leadership, the African-American Leadership program and the Women’s Leadership program. For a time, she joined the Executive Leadership Council® (ELC) where she served as Executive Director of the Institute for Leadership Development and Research. While at the ELC, she worked with some of the nation’s highest ranking corporate African American executives. Prior to working in the leadership development field, Livers was an assistant professorship in the School of Journalism at West Virginia University. She also spent a decade as a newspaper journalist and held roles such as acting business editor and Capitol Hill reporter for Gannett News Service. Livers has also written extensively. She is co-author of the book *Leading in Black and White: Working across the Racial Divide* (Jossey-Bass) and of the Harvard Business Review article “Dear White Boss.” She has written chapters or essays in three other books and is a regular contributor to Positively Successful magazine. She was recently named one of the nation’s top 90 women mentor leaders by Women of Wealth magazine and is a member of the Antioch University Board of Governors and Triad Stage Board of Trustees. Livers holds a Ph.D. in History from Carnegie Mellon University.

Kelly M. Hannum is a senior faculty member at the Center for Creative Leadership and a visiting faculty member at Catholic University's IESEG School of Management in Lille, France. She has served as a consultant to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the World Bank, and other institutions. Over the last decade, her work has been disseminated internationally as peer-reviewed articles, seven books, seven book chapters, and dozens of popular or practitioner-oriented publications. She has presented at over 35 invited or peer review conferences across North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.  She has shaped the field of leadership development evaluation as well as contributed to our collective understanding of inclusive leadership processes. Most recently she led an international team of experts to create the Leadership Across Difference Casebook Package published by Pfeiffer in 2010. She was also the lead editor for Leadership Quarterly’s Special Issue: The Evaluation of Leadership Development (published in 2010). She was the Project Director of the Leadership Development Evaluation Handbook Project with funding from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and is the lead editor of the resulting publication The Handbook of Leadership Development Evaluation (Jossey-Bass). She has been an active Board Member for the Leadership Learning Community since 2007. She is the recipient of multiple awards and recognitions for her work, including the prestigious Marcia Guttentag Award from the American Evaluation Association. She holds a Ph.D. in educational research, measurement, and evaluation from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.