



Leveling the Leadership Playing Field for Women of Color

The challenges women of color in leadership positions face are daunting because most are based in conscious and unconscious biases which are difficult to root out. The solutions include bias training and executives willing to let the women talk.

There are more women of color in business leadership positions than ever before, and studies have proven they bring new perspectives and ideas that flow right to the bottom line. Yet, conscious and unconscious biases continue to hold them back from fully participating on leadership teams or contributing to their organizations. Stereotyping, like the 'angry black woman,' and biases, like 'a white woman or man could do a better job,' remain deeply embedded in many businesses, forcing the women of color to find ways to succeed without alienating others in the organization. It is a tightrope walked daily simply because they violate the stereotypes that executives and peers hold on to as to what a business leader should look like and how the person should act. Rooting out the biases begins with recognition of the problem followed by developing and implementing strategies that systematically address and overcome them.

Biases and Stereotyping Times Three

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) researched the status of women in leadership, reporting the results in "Barriers and Bias." The study found that women are much less likely than men to reach leadership positions in business, universities, state legislatures, unions, and religious institutions. Of the people in executive positions, 2 percent are Black women, 1 percent are Hispanic women, 1 percent are Asian American, and less than one percent are women of other racial and ethnic groups.¹ The women who reach these positions are held up as role models, yet they continue to face a number of challenges that are mostly due to bias and stereotyping. Persistent sex discrimination affects all women leaders to some degree, but women of color are dealt a triple dose of discrimination based on sex, race, and ethnicity.

One of the common challenges women of color leaders face is based on two stereotypes. One says that masculine traits, like aggression and willingness to engage in conflict, are needed for effective leadership. The other says women should not act like men. Women of color have another layer of bias to contend with – stereotyping of race and ethnicity. For example, Latin women are stereotyped as loud, outgoing, and lacking seriousness (and always have an accent.) Asian women are humble and unwilling to speak up at meetings. Black women are angry and overly assertive. It is not difficult to imagine the responses the women of color elicit from the traditional white male leader when they are assertive, intelligent, and willing to present and logically defend their perspectives and ideas. In many cases, they continue to be viewed as threats to the status quo.

Just Because You are Different than Me

Women of color face more complex challenges than white women in identifying the basis of the biases. A white woman can say the discrimination is gender based or based on sexual preference. Bias distorts the view as to the ability of the woman to manage the job responsibilities. Research has shown that women who are members of racial minorities face negative stereotyping first around their identity. A woman of color facing bias must decide if it is based on gender, race, ethnicity,



sexual preference, or some combination. The complex biases get them excluded from critical meetings, interrupted when presenting new ideas, unfair work assessments, and unrealistic work expectations are the outward expressions of this bias.

Another challenge is overcoming stereotyping of "Black" or "Latin" or "Asian. For example, Black women may identify as African-American, Caribbean, or African, and their backgrounds influence their communication and leadership styles. Yet all women of color must display leadership ability while conforming to white European American standards for the Black, Latin, or Asian prototype.² This creates a terrible dissonance for the women of color and within the organization.

Action and Not Time

The AAUW makes the important point that action and not time can address the challenges. Organizations are becoming more aware of the role of bias in holding back the full participation of women of color leaders. One approach to giving the women the full leadership voice they earned is to address the expression of bias in leadership training. Corporate America's executive and senior management ranks are still mostly older white men who may not even be aware they harbor the biases.

Two types of training are structured free recall, in which participants consider the positive and negative attributes of people to avoid generalizations, and source monitoring, in which participants focus on true remembered judgments rather than their gut feelings. Male leaders are simply acting like aggressive, competent managers when interrupting a woman of color who is presenting a new idea or thought. The aggressive behavior is expected and often admired. The AAUW reports that studies have found that gender and race influence how others interpret a person's behaviors, such as self-promotion and assertive language. For example, Latinas who are assertive are seen as emotional or angry when they are not.

Organizations are also instituting practices to fully integrate women of color into the leadership network and process. That includes ensuring they attend key meetings and are allowed to freely speak, creating work partnerships of white male and woman of color as equal partners, and including women in business socialization opportunities. Of course, the business culture is crucial. Bias should be eliminated when selecting project leaders, assigning responsibilities, and measuring performance.

Women of color in leadership face complex challenges in fulfilling their roles. They are leaders who must persevere, and sometimes that means politely saying when interrupted, "Please, I will finish presenting my thoughts in their entirety, and then I will be happy to hear your reflections."