

Developing the Next Generation



As an African American woman, I often reflect on the experiences of emerging and established minority leaders. By minority, I mean women **and** people of color in all their glorious variations. I am proud of my culture's legacy of leadership and deeply invested in the development of the next generation of leaders in our region. I am particularly committed to those who climb the steep ladder of leadership with minority status as part of their identity. As I mentor emerging leaders, I am reminded of the joy and challenge that comes with being a leader.

Whether it's color or gender that differs, we stand on the shoulders of generations who came before us. We benefit from the courage it took our ancestors to create a world with greater capacity to judge by the content of our character and not by appearance alone. Yet it is still common to find organizations and companies that have yet to achieve diversity in management and leadership positions.

My mentees are publically thrilled to have leadership opportunities, yet privately stressed about navigating the journey to these opportunities. Three areas of concern always seem to emerge and tie directly to the frequently unspoken dynamics of race and gender in the workplace.

Being the First and Only- Emerging minority leaders – women and people of color - often deal with isolation and stress that comes with being the first and only on a team, or even in entire organizations. This creates challenge in terms of finding mentors and/ or people to process the experience with. They become the test case for leadership diversity, requiring tremendous courage to absorb all that comes with this type of opportunity.

Gaining and Sustaining Credibility – Stereotypes are powerful and follow minority people into leadership positions. Emerging minority leaders share even when all evidence indicates they are qualified and capable, there still remain questions about their leadership ability. They are constantly positioned to prove their effectiveness, adding stress to the already stressful job of leadership.

Paving the way for others – Emerging minority leaders know their leadership legacy often determines whether another woman or person of color will have the opportunity to lead. Therefore they feel the need to be three times smarter, talented, and effective to secure opportunity for those following them.

I share these concerns at conferences and in organizations, where this topic creates interesting tension for the multicultural audiences in attendance. People intellectually understand concerns while not always knowing how to deliver support. Yet, I often find that where committed leaders gather, the answers to important concerns are always in the room.

- Change organizational paradigms about access to leadership; seek out high potential minority employees.
- Be willing to mentor. Many minority employees are promoted by non minority managers. It is important to create safe space to discuss concerns and challenges.
- Align intentions with behaviors and actions that promote a commitment to diversity.
- Encourage employees to claim their careers and to network with other emerging minority leaders.

I hope speaking about this frequently unspoken topic inspires leaders to embrace diversity as part of their work. We live in a community built by the knowledge, talents and skills of a very diverse group of individuals. We will do the community a great disservice if we do not ensure that future generations of leaders truly reflect the demographic make-up of the community. It is not the easiest leadership work to do but it is important to do. Our strength is in our diversity.