

Chapter 8

Managing Privilege as a Key to Inclusive Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The field of diversity and inclusion has experienced exponential growth over last 30 years. Yet, while these progressions have occurred, many of the core diversity and inclusion concepts have remained fairly stagnant. One critical example is around the concept of privilege. All of us find ourselves privileged in some way, but leaders in particular need to recognize and manage privilege to ensure inclusion in the workplace. Through personal examples and real stories, this chapter highlights the many positive outcomes leaders will experience by effectively managing privilege. These powerful outcomes include areas such as personal growth and effectiveness, more authentic relationships, increased levels of respect, expanded circle of influence, and maximized employee performance. To conclude, the authors look at the stages leaders go through before they are able to effectively manage this expanded view of privilege. These stages can be described as bliss, awareness, overprotection, enlightened, and ultimately managing privilege.

INTRODUCTION

While much has been written on the concept of privilege there is an opportunity to explore the concept specifically as it relates to leadership in today's organizations. In this chapter we look at privilege

across a wide and often subtle set of attributes that result in everyone, particularly leaders, being privileged in some form. As opposed to privilege being a passive factor that simply runs in the background for leaders, we conclude that leaders can in fact manage privilege actively. When leaders manage their privilege, it is argued that many individual, team and organization benefits can be achieved.

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These positive outcomes include: personal growth and effectiveness, more authentic relationships, increased levels of respect, expanded circle of influence, and maximized employee performance. Understanding these outcomes is critical in helping leaders advance through the following stages that we label as bliss, awareness, overprotection, enlightened, and ultimately managing privilege. It is by sharing practical stories and tips that we hope that leaders can become better equipped to not only understand how they are privileged, but more importantly how they can manage that privilege to create an even more inclusive workplace, community and marketplace.

BACKGROUND: APPROACHES TO PRIVILEGE WITHIN THE LITERATURE

In order to discuss how managing privilege is a key to inclusive leadership, a definition of privilege is presented along with how the topic has been addressed to date in the literature. Privilege is a concept that surfaces in a variety of arenas. It is used in common language and every-day speech, for example, *I had the privilege to be included at last night's event*. It is a phenomenon that has been researched by scholars (e.g. Johnson, 2006; Kimmel & Ferber, 2010; Wildman, 1996). It is an area that has been studied in psychological experiments (e.g. Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005). It is also a term frequently tossed around in the field of diversity of inclusion; for example, *that group of employees must be privileged, I wonder if they are even aware of it?* Through our work as Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) practitioners, consultants, and trainers, we have also experienced that the term frequently carries an emotional weight and evokes strong reactions. As Johnson (2006) noted, "privilege has become one of those loaded words we need to reclaim so that we can use it to name and illuminate the truth" (p. 21). Privilege has

been defined and addressed in the literature in a number of ways.

McIntosh's (1988) classic personal essay, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to see Correspondence through Work in Women's Studies*, is a seminal work in the area of privilege. While McIntosh devoted the majority of the essay to the analysis of her own white privilege, she also recognized the need to expand the discussion beyond white and male privilege. Johnson (2006) credited McIntosh with identifying two types of privilege: "unearned entitlement" that should be granted to everyone but when restricted to some groups turns into "unearned advantage," as well as "conferred power," which "goes a step further by giving one group power over another" (pp. 22-23).

Historically, privilege has been frequently discussed in the context of oppression. Johnson (2006) believed oppression to be "the flip side of privilege" (p. 38) and Ferber (2010) stated: "privilege and oppression are two sides of the same coin" (p. 252). Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin (2010) observed that "oppression is an interlocking, multileveled system that consolidates social power to the benefit of members of privileged groups and is maintained and operationalized on three dimensions: a) contextual dimension, b) conscious/unconscious dimension, and c) applied dimension" (pp. 26-27). These dimensions deal with whether oppression is intentional and unintentional, whether it happens on an individual, institutional, and social/cultural level and with how it is applied. Hardiman et al. added, however, that "it is not useful to argue about a hierarchy of oppressions" (p. 33).

Many authors on the topic have tended to focus only on one or two categories or dimensions of difference, where privilege appears. The most commonly discussed privilege dimensions are race and gender; privilege in the context of broader dimensions of difference, such as socio-economic status or education levels, has been less common. When reviewing literature on the topic,

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