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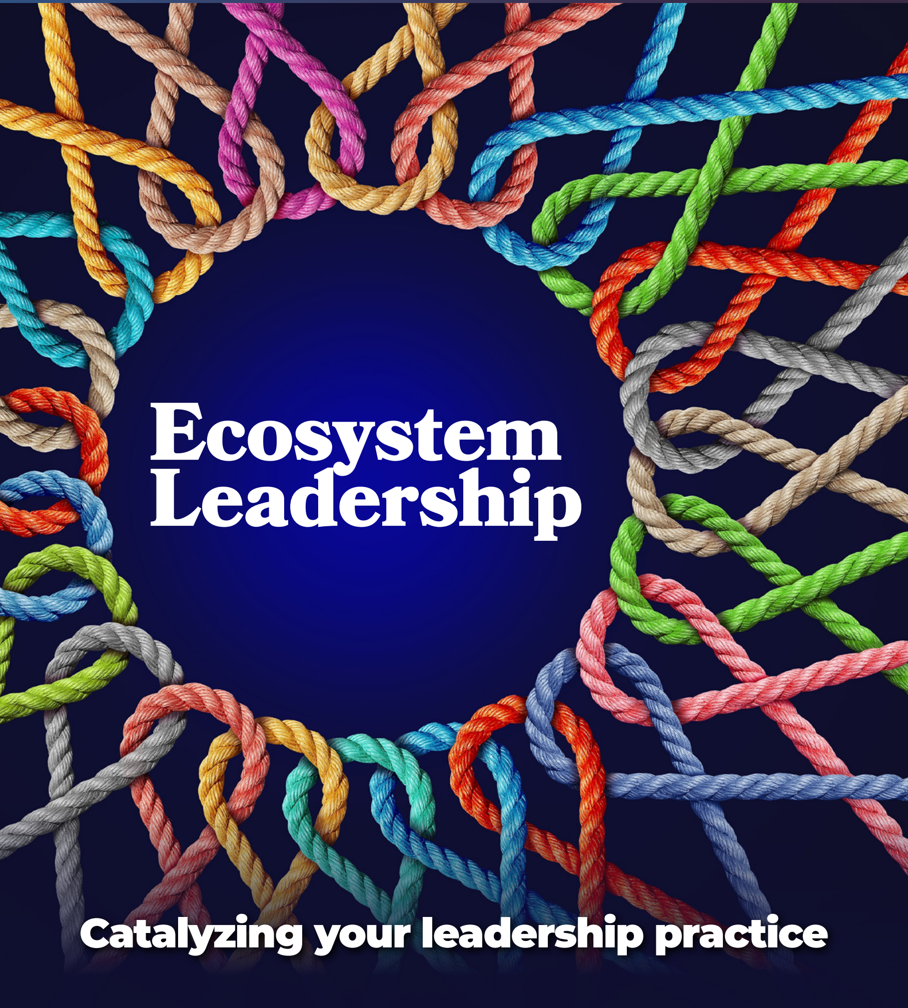
Developing Leaders
Quarterly

MAKING ORGANIZATIONS MORE HUMAN



Ecosystem Leadership

Catalyzing your leadership practice

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By LaTonya Wilkins

The Hidden Benefits of Engaging Across Differences

Not so long ago I took part in a "fishbowl" discussion at a conference I attended. A small group at the center of the room started the conversation, and others were welcome to observe and jump in if we wanted to participate. It didn't take long for the group to notice that men were taking up more space and time in the inner circle. At the same time, everyone in that room also was aware that diversity is critical for innovation, profitability, and overall success. So one woman decided to address the elephant in the room and ask: What are men in leadership doing to champion more women?

It soon became clear that leaders in privileged groups are still struggling with building relationships across differences. One of the men present admitted that he doesn't have *any* quality friendships with women. He said he "didn't know how to relate to *them*." Now, we can roll our eyes at this—I did—but I also thought it was very candid of him to share that with the group. A few people in the circle felt the same way and were getting visibly frustrated, so I jumped in to point out the simple truth: this was simply an exhibition of human bias. This participant's naivety put everyone in the circle on notice of the group's biases and how they spontaneously show up in our careers and personal lives. Not to condone his views, but ultimately, talking about biases as a natural human behaviour *with real consequences* led to a productive conversation.

In my early professional life I was almost always the "only one" in the room. Leaders typically had a hard time authentically connecting with me. From my perspective, I could clearly see that in order to build equitable systems where everyone can succeed, people (especially those with power) have to be able to build real, psychologically safe relationships with people across differences. But this can be easier said than done. The systems around us constantly challenge this very thing.

I'd like you to see for yourself. Before you move on to the next section, take a minute and jot down what your friends look like. Are they diverse? Do they all look the same? How similar are they to you? If you are like most of us, they probably tend to look the same and this has far bigger implications than you think.

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It All Starts with How We Choose Our Friends

It is not ethical or fair of us, but we all have superficial biases that affect who we eagerly choose to socialize with. The phenomenon is called homophily, defined as "a preference for people we perceive to be similar to us," and it applies to race, socio-economic background, gender, and other identity markers. We detect others' similarities to us almost instantaneously, and this discernment can have a major effect on our decision to pursue relationships. However, as interpersonal interactions develop, similarity is less important, and deeper phenomena like self-disclosure, trust, and reciprocity eventually take a bigger role.

It is no surprise that people who grew up in homogeneous environments have limited experience building relationships with people of different backgrounds. It is a skill that we have to deliberately seek out if we want to get better. I will expand further on this later.

Some groups seem to build more diverse friendships than others: three-quarters of white Americans

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have exclusively white social networks while the same is true for slightly less than two-thirds of Black Americans. When I reflect on my own upbringing, I'm thinking that, in regards to Black Americans, an anecdotal explanation for this higher proportion is due to us not having as much of a choice about who we choose to be friends with because we are outnumbered in many environments.

Researchers have hypothesized that interacting with people from different backgrounds may make us more likely to accept them due to the mere exposure effect. In a nutshell, this theory says we prefer people (and all kinds of other stimuli) that look or sound like other people and things we have encountered before. However, a new study shows that the mere exposure effect may not apply to human faces so mere exposure may not be as effective as we thought.

In my experience, the leaders who are most successful with recognizing and transcending bias, are those who had key experiences with people from different backgrounds earlier in life. Some grew up in diverse neighbourhoods. Others traveled a lot or lived on military bases. The common thread is not just that they had exposure, but they also developed real, and positive, relationships over time. They even sought out relationships with people who were different from them. In my own corporate career, I can say that real sponsorship and mentorship came from people who had those experiences either early in life or through an organization.

Engaging with others and sharing power are critical skills for leaders who want to build cultures of belonging, while reducing bias at organizational levels. It is also individually healthier for us: studies suggest that friendships with people of different backgrounds lead to less anxiety, more empathy for others, reduced prejudice, and even increased self-awareness.

Why Simply Being “Aware” of Your Biases is Not Enough

Unconscious biases are formed early and are regularly reinforced: they are hard to change because, by definition, we are not aware of them. Unfortunately, growing conscious of our own biases does not make them go away. Unconscious bias training tends to be ineffective because learning these abstract concepts doesn’t create behavioral change. In fact, increased awareness without

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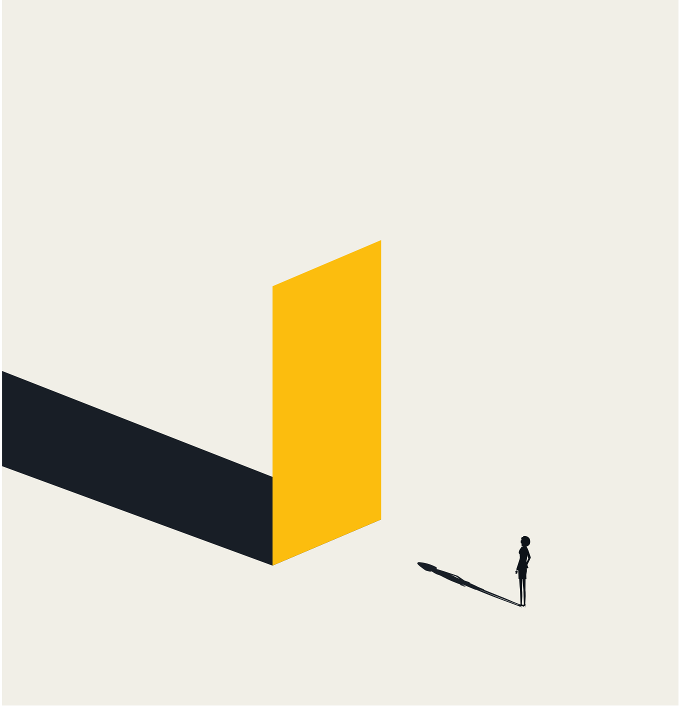
positive behavior models or accountability for change can actually backfire and make things worse.

We know that judging people and treating them differently based on how they look is wrong. For people who have not done the work of examining their own biases and changing their social habits, a thick cloud of anxiety and shame can make it even harder to recognize and root-out biased behaviour. According to the intergroup anxiety model, white Americans in particular can be so self-conscious about not appearing racist that they overcompensate, acting overly friendly. In more extreme cases, white scholars who have tokenized a Black person in the past not only continue to show a preference for white people—they will also create rationales to justify their preferences that have nothing to do with race or ethnicity. Acknowledging their own racism would be so painful that they come up with excuses to deflect guilt. To come to terms with biases and effectively change them, individuals need to experience a bit of discomfort, but too much can shut down progress.



The Consequences of Biases that Are Widely Accepted in the Workplace

Notice how I have not really provided a definition of what I mean by “bias” yet? Most people know enough about bias to feel some level of shame around it. There’s little use talking about what specific feelings and behaviours to look for until you have at least accepted that you have biases—and that they may have a negative impact on others. Based on what we know about unconscious processes that affect the way we make friends, paying attention to our anxieties as well as what makes us feel most comfortable is a good place to start.

In the workplace, there are a few specific types of bias that tend to negatively impact the experiences of marginalized groups. I call them the Terrible Three:

Affinity bias: The tendency to favour and gravitate towards people who are similar to us

Confirmation bias: The tendency to seek out, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms our own beliefs or values

In-group bias: The tendency to give preferential treatment to others who are in our in-group

The issue with the terrible three is that these biases are widely accepted. They sustain our comfort levels. For example, regarding affinity bias, many companies are happy to build their companies with people from all the same schools. They are more likely to promote those people as well.

Anyone with a very basic understanding of bias knows that it results in preferential treatment, exclusion, and overall worse outcomes for the marginalized individuals. What many leaders do not realize is how insidious bias can be or how it can sabotage underrepresented groups in subtle ways. One study found that white women are afraid to give black women feedback: "the less comfortable women were, the friendlier they became, whereas their male counterparts became less

> ***We might ignore emotions and personal matters while prioritizing traditional leadership values of speed, meritocracy, and aggression.***

friendly." White women tend to respond this way because of their deep desires to be liked and the intergroup anxiety I mentioned earlier. Another study examined the feedback executive coaches gave clients of different racial backgrounds. Researchers found that "Black clients received more support, yet less challenge, less constructive feedback, and less time devoted to areas of development than did otherwise identical white clients. The result is that leaders of colour who receive coaching may be robbed of developmental opportunities offered to white organizational leaders."

Most of my examples are from research done in the United States, but there is no question that similar biases exist in every leadership team and every individual leader on a global scale. We have to learn to recognize our biases and differentiate our perceptions from reality so we can act accordingly.

Where do we go from here?

So now that we know that we all suffer from bias, what can we do about it both within ourselves and organizations? I suggest focusing on two key areas:

1. Taking responsibility for your own biases
2. Recognizing and reducing bias in your organization

Let's start with what people can do on an individual level.

Take Responsibility for *Individual* Biases and Behaviour

It is incredibly hard to confront our own biases. While they can be conscious and explicit, homophily tends to happen on an unconscious level. But organizational approaches won't work if we fail to first look inward. This work can only begin once the cloud of anxiety is gone and you can accept responsibility for your actions.

So, let's return to our initial question: What can leaders do to engage people who are different? A couple of simple things to start with would be auditing your network to see which identities are represented and to what degree. You can also make an effort to spend more downtime with people of different backgrounds and prioritize diverse voices in the leadership books, podcasts, articles, and speakers you seek out. These are what I would call "surface-level" interactions. They are great ways to start getting outside your comfort zone to expose yourself to different people and ideas. But to create deep human relationships that can prepare you to manage biases in the long-term, you will need to get *below the surface.*

What exactly does this mean? The dominant leadership standard promotes a "surface" way of thinking when we interact with others. We might ignore emotions and personal matters while prioritizing traditional leadership values of speed, meritocracy, and aggression. Just like a servant-leader or a coach-leader, the *Below the Surface Leader* is an archetype you can strive for in your own practice. *Below the Surface Leaders* share a few specific values, skills, and characteristics that help them build deep relationships across differences, including REAL values: being relatable, equitable, aware, and loyal. They make it safe for all employees to be their authentic selves and say what is on their minds by practicing empathetic listening and creating psychological safety.

A couple of examples of actions you can take to take that next step and get below the surface: First off, gain more below the surface awareness. As I mentioned earlier, surface-level awareness includes the assumption that simply being "aware" of biases will dissolve them. That is not true. The A (awareness) in REAL leadership goes deeper and emphasizes feelings, interactions, and how we respond. When you notice feelings of anxiety or judgment towards another person, examine where these feelings are coming from. Take a moment to determine whether they are "true" or based on assumptions before letting them affect your actions. These skills take a lot of practice, but they are things you can do every single day, at work and anywhere else. Only then can you achieve equitable interactions or the E in REAL and getting there is the goal.

We all take on different roles in different areas of our lives, and that is fine as long as our human needs and boundaries don't get lost in the shuffle. One of my clients recently put it like this: "people are who they are at work and they are who they are at home."

Recognize and Reduce Bias in Your Organization

Many of you have probably had your fill of working on yourself. The question has now become how do you change your organization for the long-haul? As us DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging) experts often say, changing people is hard so focusing on structures and systems is the key to longer-term change. There are a few changes you can make on an organizational level to recognize and reduce bias. First, you can ask your executive team to serve on boards in different communities. It is important that people go into these without centering themselves. They are there to learn, be curious, uplift, and to build deeper relationships in different communities. Many companies have volunteer days but these rarely create lasting change.

Another thing you can do is work to create structures that facilitate people creating REAL relationships across differences including different levels, sites, genders, divi-

Most corporate sponsorship programs are surface-level and transactional, which can perpetuate a lack of belonging at more senior levels.

sions, or even age groups. You can host diverse mentoring circles that focus on things outside of business or facilitate connections between field and corporate employees.

It is worth noting that most corporate sponsorship programs are surface-level and transactional, which can perpetuate a lack of belonging at more senior levels. It takes serious intention and accountability to ensure your executive sponsors are creating *below the surface* connections. If you have these programs, be sure to audit them and add in space and opportunities for people to form real relationships. If it is all business, it won't work.

I believe in holding space for everyone to "bring their whole selves to work" but it takes time to build-up enough trust with employees that they feel safe doing so. We all take on different roles in different areas of our lives, and that is fine as long as our human needs and boundaries don't get lost in the shuffle. One of my clients recently put it like this: "people are who they are at work and they are who they are at home." The best thing you can do as a leader is to remind your team often that it's okay to push back when there's something getting in the way of their performance. Let them know they won't be penalized for voicing a concern, no matter what it is.

The ultimate goal for all of us is that eventually our beliefs about decision-making and our conversations will be guided by the challenges at hand and our ideas, not assumptions we have made about the people in the room. It is the very reason we do this work. But in order to get there, we each need to take responsibility for what's happening in organizations, teams, and our own heads, for that matter. We can't do this without accepting the challenge to intentionally seek out people with different perspectives, sit with their own uncomfortable feelings, and accept accountability for our behaviours. Implementing some of the tips I provided in this article is a great place to start.

***LaTonya Wilkins** is the author of* **Leading Below the Surface: How to Build Real Relationships with People Who Are Different from You.** *She is also the founder and CEO of* **Change Coaches**. *To learn more about Below the Surface Leadership, follow LaTonya's monthly* **LinkedIn newsletter.**

www.amazon.com/Leading-Below-Surface-Psychologically-Relationships/dp/1951591844

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