



Special Edition on Racism in America

The Special Edition on Racism in America provides scholarly information on the insidious nature of racism and offers solutions in an effort to eliminate it from society.

Leader-To-Leader: Reflexive Leadership in the Midst of COVID-19 and Social Unrest

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Abstract

A leader is only one person in one position, and one person's ideas are not a panacea for all social ills. But effective leadership can shift the outcome of an organization to manifest its mission of positive social change considering changes in society. Most people have been exposed to leaders who tinker around the edges and others who call for revolution. Leaders are leaders only because they have capable followers. The truth is that some things are just too big for one individual. And when we happen upon those things, we must stand together, hold each other accountable, and encourage one another.

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Introduction

From most any view of history one may take, it is undisputed that in 2020 our world has changed dramatically. Leaders of any sizable American organization must daily confront and bring clarity of direction to seemingly “new, novel, and unexpected challenges” that affect their organization, its policies, employees, and customers. The new daily challenges of 2020 test the personal, professional, and institutional values of even the most seasoned leaders. Only the most fortunate leaders operate in an environment where these values align with their organizations.

Some would argue that today's leaders have more challenges than their predecessors. In examining leadership in these new and challenging times, I am drawn to a common thread that has persisted for leaders for generations. Each leader of any organization, whether today, ten years ago, or 50 years ago, all occupied positions in which their ultimate decisions and direction could either bring success or despair to an organization. Leadership today does require all of the foundational knowledge it always has as leaders now

confront the “new” challenges raised by novel viruses and social media, but true leadership today requires, as it has for generations, personal, honest, and regular introspection. In my case, I’ve learned I didn’t always know what I didn’t know. And today, in this time of great change, turmoil, and some fear, I regularly remind myself of this simple, but often hard to admit fact—I need others to help guide, counsel, and advise me so that I can provide the best possible leadership for all associated with Walden University. I do not have all the answers and cannot lead Walden University in a vacuum of my own thoughts, ideas, and experiences. I truly believe that every leader, who is honest to self and others, must have great humility so as to own up to the fact that a great leader needs a foundation of support to develop a solid core of principles, ideas, directives, teamwork, and community for the organization. Proceeding under this leadership philosophy, I have, as I have continually done, evaluated why, how, and for what reasons I make decisions in the leadership of Walden University as I deal with many differing issues.

It’s easy to struggle as a leader amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the social unrest that has been reignited by the killing of George Floyd. Once again, America is wrestling with itself, its values, and its commitments. But this is a mission-critical commitment; and that is what our society is about right now: humanity. One could argue that America has backslid in the way we treat each other, while others would say that it has taken until 2020 for America to break barriers for positive social change. The American values we have aspired to for generations are, based on your perspective, either being tried and pushed to the limit daily or have finally been espoused without limitation. These values that are now clearly on the national stage date back to the Declaration of Independence. Clearly, America has always struggled with making sure everyone has the same access to those unalienable rights. And, as Americans, there are many times when confusion and chaos have pushed us to grow, not fall back. In a world of such divisiveness, we must decide how to reestablish our footing and move forward.

Individuals, organizations, and our country must focus on humanity and address the complex issues of our time. Leaders who seek to base their decisions on their presumed knowledge of all facts and decisions, and thus lack the humility to seek guidance and assistance from others, are not leading their organization but are simply trying to manage these new times with old thoughts and directions. “Leaders in organizations contribute significantly and create positive social change in many ways that promote the dignity of their employees and communities in which they operate” (Rimita et al., 2020). Solid leaders always have the basic qualities of clarity, decisiveness, courage, passion, and humility (Economy, 2016). But the most effective leaders don’t try to be something they are not. They stay true to who they are and then surround themselves with the right people. They understand that the principles of leadership mandate that personal success is not the finish line. Rather the goal is to initiate change that continues to grow after you’re gone (Conchie & Rath, 2008).

True leaders, who are motivated to increase their leadership knowledge by input from others and move their organizations forward, do not manage but lead by organizing movements of thought and action to help people grow in times of discomfort. Leaders are those who humbly seek guidance and then articulate a cohesive, aggressive plan forward and seek to build their organizational foundation with principles that will last and flourish. And this is not easy because certain qualities and traits are required to effect social change. What is needed in 2020 is different from what was needed 20 years ago.

The contents of our thoughts (and sometimes even our conversations) are reflections of what we believe. And if we’re honest and humble as to our strengths, weaknesses, and deficiencies, we all need to take regular inventory of our thoughts, goals, and biases. This process can be awkward, “thinking” about our thoughts. Psychologists refer to this as metathinking (Lickerman, 2011). But that inward retrospection is only the beginning of change. There can be no real dispute that retaining biased thoughts is bad, but if those thoughts remain without retrospection you cannot move forward. And we all have biases; some of them are even healthy and helpful. Fear with a biased perception of something dangerous can be quite beneficial (Hengen &

Alpers, 2019). But other biases are not. For instance, it's disingenuous to say that we don't see color when we meet someone. We all do. A person's race, ethnicity, and sex are part of their identity and should be acknowledged as a part of who they are as a person. The behavior of color-evasion has been related to other kinds of behavior that allow individuals not to acknowledge differences in others and thus maintain a power structure that disadvantages some (Annamma et al., 2017).

I am fortunate that I agree with the ideology of Walden University that as professionals we should work toward positive social change. This unfortunately is not true in all circles. Negative bias, as compared to positive bias, has a much more powerful effect on behavior, decisions, and even relationships (Cherry, 2020). But this inward reflection does not always make life simpler. In some instances, upon inward reflection, it becomes clear that the leader's personal belief system runs counter to others in the organization. But what if a leader does not have the same values as his or her organization or a colleague or even a supervisor? This is a hazard of the role when the leader's values run counter to the organization as a whole or to powerful individuals within (Blom et al., 2017).

For society to recover and advance, its organizations must lead the way. For organizations to begin to shape and mold a society of change, leaders must bravely advance new ways of thinking, acting, reacting, and communicating among all of their staff and employees. Effective leadership takes this difficult task of positively questioning old assumptions and biases, or anything believed to be part of an unstable or unhealthy foundation. If, however, the leader and those in the organization have different values, the ability to effectuate social change and be in a position of force in society is hampered if not completely nullified. A leader must be humble enough to see what is needed to move the organization forward, change one's attitude or bias, and, if necessary, go to battle within the organization to provide the leadership to move the organization toward the goals of social change.

Today's leaders, or at least the good ones, spend more time on the welfare of their organization, specifically the employees, than they do on other organizational matters. Or, as is the case at Walden University, I spend more time on employees and students. Safety and well-being have come to the forefront because of the changes in society. There is a sharper focus on health, safety, diversity, equity, and inclusion. And often, some "operational" leaders struggle to focus on these people-centered approaches to their responsibilities. They fear this is outside of their leadership comfort zone.

But the irony of this is the simplicity of leadership in these times. Leaders must be authentic and willing to be vulnerable. It may be hard to admit, but human beings are made for vulnerability. Most of us press hard against this notion, mainly because vulnerability is frightening, especially when some people take advantage of others' vulnerability (Onderko, 2017). But when we are vulnerable in the right circumstances and situations, this can lead to a shift in a person, particularly in a leader. This is not something leaders should have to be told to do; they should feel called to it. They must be vulnerable and speak their truth. Members of organizations recognize when their leader has confidence, an immeasurable heart, and sound intellect. They can appreciate the leader even if they disagree with some of that leader's decisions. This is the very essence of diversity. Leaders understand that diversity, and not just of race, is and should be all around them. A large part of diversity is simply recognizing others who are not like you.

The good news here is that society is experiencing a significant shift in our culture. Not that long ago, we solely recognized when people were different. Recent events have caused many of us to not only recognize differences, but to protect and honor those differences. However, not everyone subscribes to this philosophy. These same recent events have caused some to move further away from compassion and communication toward isolation and fear. We must recognize what it means to be a human being. We must operate under the pretense of "you're another human being, and I care about you." The genuine change in how you feel about an individual is difficult. The beauty of recognizing differences in people or cultures is that when this occurs, we

are learning something new. Recognizing differences does not mean agreeing with or supporting them. But it does mean respecting them.

For leaders today to examine their professional environment, they must first look inward to explore their personal beliefs. All of us love or have loved someone who disagrees with us. In our organizations, we have those who support the direction the organization is being led and others who want a 180-degree change in direction. We live in a society of divisiveness. We cannot expect that our organizations will always be totally aligned on all issues. I'd argue that it would be hard to find a family that is completely aligned on all issues. When our spouse, partner, child, or friend disagrees on a particular issue, we do not kick them out of our life. The more complicated part of that is applying this philosophy to people outside our family unit but inside our global family. And this, alone, is a significant source of interpersonal struggle for many leaders.

Thus, in examining what makes effective leaders in 2020, I can only realistically, honestly, and humbly make this examination if I look deeply at myself. This examination can be trying, or even scary, for any leader. We all have multiple identities, and with that comes different responsibilities. I am a man, a husband, a father, a brother, a leader, a university president, and an employee—and I struggle. I have struggled in many leadership areas. What has been especially helpful to me is knowing that I need to search myself. I know that I need to be better. I know that I need to change. But knowing is not enough. Every leader needs to have the courage to know this and make the time and effort to do the hard work. That requires courage, perseverance, and even stamina. Seldom, if ever, do these things happen overnight. Every day we need to ask ourselves how we can be better. It's also necessary to note that not everyone believes they aren't already their best. Some leaders are not willing to take this leap. When this is the case, a challenging environment can result. It's virtually impossible for a leader to improve when he or she believes there is no room for improvement.

We often hear that change is difficult. And that is often more so for leaders, as it is for me. Change in one's self happens in many ways. Therefore, helping an institution understand if change needs to happen, and then leading that change, is a more daunting task. Changes in views are not always linear. Radical changes in a person to transform values or beliefs may be a completely different process from one person to the next. If I could go back in my own life, especially concerning my ideals and philosophies I had growing up, I would have probably done things differently. I do not necessarily regret my values and beliefs, but I do have actions (and inactions) that I should have given more consideration. But just as my past is what made me who I am today, other leaders, upon reflection, will reach the same conclusion that their past has molded them, for good or bad, today. And as I matured, I made more informed decisions. I had feelings and stances that I thought would never change. But today, with humility towards my past and others, I see and process those same things differently. Very differently, in some cases.

One of the most significant areas of growth for me has been my opportunity to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. This has been quite timely for me on personal and professional fronts. A colleague once told me that I need to overcome the guilt of trying to address something outside of what I've always known. I struggled with trying not to be the stereotypical, white, Southern man talking about diversity. I still remember talking to coworkers with a great deal of discomfort in my early conversations on diversity. But I learned to trust those around me and to gain insight from them. I still say, "if I say or do something wrong, tell me." I've also grown into a place where I am comfortable being uncomfortable and no longer scared of having these conversations. That was the leap for me.

Successful, positive, and cutting-edge leaders must make the leap regularly to accepting being uncomfortable, unafraid to address tough issues or conversations, and seeking input from others. Poor, ineffective leaders are not willing to do that. Good leaders take this leap because they know that they do not know everything. Good leaders today realize they need to take the leap of faith over the abyss to keep moving forward. That's never been more critical. Every leader needs to ask themselves what they need to do and determine their leap of faith. They need to lead with personal power, and that power is achieved from hard work, humility, and

honesty. For some, that hard work might address their homophobia, racism, sexism, misogyny, ageism, or ableism. Searching inward to reveal the truth is scary. But this is precisely leadership, a continuous thirst for knowledge. It's the ability to recognize and respect lifestyles and differences in your organization. It's accepting that your values and beliefs can become outdated. It's realizing there's no such thing as "good guys" or "bad guys" because everyone does good and bad things. It's being comfortable being uncomfortable. It also requires the leader to be willing to articulate personal and organizational values to multiple audiences—to create relationships.

Leading is about building relationships and articulating a vision worth following. Every leader has to understand and use intersectionality. This is the understanding that we rarely, if ever, know everything about anyone (Coleman, 2019). Each person has multiple identities. One individual may be the following: Woman. Wife. Mother. Daughter. Sister. American. White. Baseball Fan. Another person might be: Woman. Partner. Mother. Only Child. British. Baseball Fan. While these individuals may not have much in common, they do have a connection. And this may be the only connection they have. And because you know one thing about that person, you can start a conversation and possibly form a relationship.

Each of us has many different traits and characteristics, but today we all have something in common—living in a time of social unrest and in a pandemic. Therefore, logic would support that any person in leadership owes their organization, employees, students, and society as a whole consideration of a very simple question that contains a myriad of answers: "Why has COVID-19 and social unrest not drawn us all together in this?" We all identify as being affected in some way by COVID-19. Yet it seems a majority of society does nothing to create more communication or relationships. We must find a way to use intersectionality to create more dialog and effect more positive change in society. A leader must use that dialog to create actual change in themselves, organizations, or broader culture.

Let's not be afraid of being distributors and recipients of compassion. I am willing to be a reflexive leader and an active follower. All of us have to be leaders. All of us have to be followers. All of us have to be willing to examine the values that our beliefs are built on and be prepared to create real and lasting change in the world. It will make all of us better. I'm asking the Walden community to look inward and search for areas we need to change. Our mission requires us to care about one another without reservation.

A leader is only one person in one position, so one person's ideas are not a panacea for all social ills. But effective leadership can shift the outcome of an organization to manifest its mission of positive social change considering changes in society. Most of us have seen leaders who tinker around the edges and others who call for revolution. Leaders are leaders because they have capable followers. The truth is that some things are just too big for an individual. And when we happen upon those things, we must stand together, hold each other accountable, and encourage one another. I don't have all the answers. But I do know that we need a solid strategy for listening, reflecting, and communicating the values of Walden University. That strategy must ensure that we will be open to ideas. That we try to ask the right questions, and that we won't shut down conversations. As Walden University's president, I am committed to making Walden a safe space for people to express their opinions, ideas, thoughts, and do their work in support of Walden's community and for humanity and positive social change. If, as Walden University's president, I can lead the employees and students to express their opinions, ideas, and thoughts in our society, Walden University will be effecting positive social change as we send graduates to businesses, schools, and other organizations as trained "leaders" ready to not only advocate social change but to make it a reality.

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