

Diversity, Bias & Integrity: Leadership Implications

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the nature of diversity, bias, and integrity as concepts that today's leaders must address and to explain how those three concepts interrelate in affecting a leader's credibility. After defining each of these key terms, we identify ten common responses of managers and leaders about diversity and bias that undermine their ability to be deemed men or women of integrity. We suggest six action steps for leaders and organizations to adopt to demonstrate their commitment to unbiased treatment of employees and conclude the paper with a challenge to those who lead to reflect on their own interactions as they strive to be perceived as fair and just.

Keywords: ethical leadership, leadership credibility, understanding diversity, the nature of bias, the nature of integrity

1. Introduction

Among the gnawing challenges of leadership in the 21st century is the quest to be perceived as equitable, fair, and just in establishing relationships with others (Bodanis, 2021). Issues associated with diversity (Roberson, 2019), bias (Ebeid, 2021), and integrity (Marr, 2007; McCann, Sparks, & Kohntopp, 2017), are constantly raised in the modern workplace and leaders within all sectors of the economy as leaders struggle to be perceived as worthy of being trusted (Harrington, 2017; Edelman, 2022) and being perceived as credible (Noon, 2018; Clifton & Harter, 2019).

2. Understanding Diversity

Within the context of the workplace, diversity is the practice of recognizing, acknowledging, and appreciating the differences in individuals and using those differences to benefit an organization (Elmore & Maxwell, 2022). Bowes (2021) explained that recognizing and valuing the differences inherent in people can be an untapped resource that enables organizations to achieve a competitive advantage. From a practical economic perspective, Hunt, Layton, and Prince (2015) found that employers that engage in racial and ethnic diversity are 35 percent more likely to earn financial returns that are greater than their respective national industry medians while firms that practice gender diversity are fifteen percent more likely to exceed industry medians.

Although diversity is often framed within the context of racial minority representation, its scope is far more encompassing (Morgan & Vardy, 2009). Reiners and Powers (2022) have noted that there are no fewer than 39 distinct ways to categorize the differences that constitute diversity. In addition to a myriad of demographic differences between individuals, diversity may be manifest as a uniquely different perspective or a different way of thinking that adds value and increases the creativity and innovation in an organization (Ellemers & Rink, 2016).

Sunstein and Hastie (2015) explained that individuals who offered an opinion that is distinct from others in a group can enable that group to avoid the groupthink that was responsible for such disasters as the Bay of Pigs failure and the catastrophic Challenger explosion. Diversity culturally and interpersonally also enables organizations to understand the perspectives of a broader range of customers, respect different viewpoints, and attract highly talented people who offer a different perspective (Li & Nagar, 2013). Although diversity and inclusion are not the same, both contribute to the ability of organizations to increase a sense of employees' belonging and commitment to organizations (Anderson, Bhuyan, & Caldwell, 2022).

The failure of leaders and organizations to recognize the value of diversity and to value individuals and groups who are different than them is a historic reality in the United States since its inception, according to Harvard's Robert Livingston (2021). "Gaslighting," the insidious psychological manipulation of others who may be different in disregard

of their implicit value, is a fundamental characteristic of immoral and unethical behavior and a denial of other individuals' fundamental rights (Sweet, 2019). Treating individuals who are different and ignoring the potential value of those differences is a failure of those who lead to acknowledge the inherent equality and human rights of others (Peck, 2003).

The impact of gaslighting people with differences and failing to embrace them as fully involved and respected organization members violates the moral obligations of leadership (cf. Leve, 2017). Erskine and Bilimoria (2022, p. 1) decry gaslighting techniques commonly used by leaders who employ "sensebreaking tactics that invalidate, delegitimize, and/or sow seeds of doubt" in the minds of employees. Gaslighting undermines relationships, destroys the trust that is implicit in the leader-follower relationship, and violates the obligations of leaders to the individuals that they serve (Kirk-Giannini, 2022).

Rather than honoring the obligation that leaders owe those with whom they work to pursue the best interests of their colleagues (DePree, 2004), leaders who fail to recognize and value those who are different erode the self-worth of others by challenging their sense of their own value (Mace, 2022). Creating an organizational culture that disregards the worth of those who are different is a moral violation of leadership (Schein & Schein, 2016) and Singleton (2022) described such conduct as a fundamental violation of the principles of ethical leadership.

3. The Nature of Bias

Biases, or selective preferential behaviors of many types, may be conscious or unconscious and positive or negative (Blaakman, 2022). By their very nature, every individual and organization have built-in biases that reflect their respective backgrounds, personal experiences, and underlying core beliefs (Jana, Mejias & Gilbert, 2018). Bias includes how individuals process thoughts and implicit feelings to confirm their existing attitudes as well as actions that stereotype others in ways that are often prejudicial and inaccurate (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Xu and Koss (2022) have identified sixteen different types of unconscious bias ranging from affinity or selective bias to confirmation bias.

In writing about the impact of bias in the workplace, David George (2021, 9) has offered powerful insights about the nature of the problem.

Unconscious bias can be consequential to employee experience and, consequently, hinder the organization's capabilities. However, topics on race, diversity, and prejudice cause discomfort to most. But viewed from a risk vs. reward perspective, it is clear that these topics are very often avoided with the notion that it causes more harm than good. Nevertheless, the outpouring of grief, anger, and actions provoked by recent high-profile tragedies have made the majority of society more open about their biases. The fact that the cost of workplace bias annually is around \$64B is alarming and slowly drives various economies to the dust.

Workplace bias frequently results in unequal treatment and is based upon the inability to see or understand the value of diversity (Livingston, 2021).

Discrimination and unequal treatment are frequently the results of bias and permeate all aspects of life (Banks, Eberhardt & Ross, 2009). The unfair mistreatment of others within the workplace is the byproduct of those who are guilty of bias – even when that mistreatment may otherwise be unconscious or may be rationalized by the perpetrator based upon that person's distorted thinking (Dasgupta, 2004; Tellock & Mitchell, 2009). Generational labeling, whether for Baby Boomers or for Generation Z, is a form of dysfunctional prejudice that negatively impacts the workplace culture (Cox et al., 2017).

In writing about the toxic effects of bias in society, Rudman (2004) explained that bias is disruptive both personally and collectively but is nonetheless extremely common in its occurrence. The unfortunate reality is that bias, inconsistent treatment, discrimination, and prejudice are the experiences of many individuals perceived to possess any of a multitude of differences from others – whether those differences be based upon demographic, philosophical, political, religious, or any other differences (George, 2021).

Whether biased or preferential treatment is conscious or unconscious, the impact upon individuals and organizations can nonetheless be profoundly significant. The failure to treat each person with dignity, respect, and a commitment to their best interests sends a powerful message throughout an organization (Covey, 2013) and defines that organization's culture, core beliefs, assumptions about how work gets done, and the underlying values of that organization's leaders (Schein & Schein, 2016).

4. The Importance of Integrity

Integrity is the attribute which measures whether an individual keeps promises and commitments, tells the truth, and honors duties owed to others (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009). In his book about integrity, Henry Cloud (2009,9) explained that integrity consists of six vital qualities.

- 1) ***The ability to create and sustain trust.*** As a foundation for trust, integrity is the most important factor that both followers and peers deem most important for any leader (Kouzes & Posner, 2011).
- 2) ***The capacity to understand and confront reality.*** The responsibility to define reality to others and to lead them in the pursuit of worthy goals, despite the challenges facing organizations, is a moral obligation of leaders that is owed to an organization's employees (DePree, 2004).
- 3) ***The competence required to achieve sought-after results.*** Understanding the difference between lofty plans and practical realities enables individuals with integrity to focus their efforts on the difficult tasks required to translate effort into success (Pfeffer, 1998; Beer, 2009).
- 4) ***The problem-solving acumen to overcome obstacles and persevere.*** Integrity is driven by the passion and perseverance to assess problems, identify their root causes, and turn negatives into positives through unyielding effort (Collins, 2001; Duckworth, 2018).
- 5) ***The foresight to understand how to grow and flourish.*** Wisdom is required in the application of correct principles, in recognizing their validity, and in identifying when conditions require the need for well-considered flexibility (Covey, 1992; Kotter, 2012).
- 6) ***The dedication to truth to achieve personal meaning and transcendence.*** Recognizing the need to honor oneself is the foundation for service to others, as well as for achieving unprecedented personal achievement (Quinn, 2006), self-discovery (Peck, 2003), and self-transcendence (Maslow, 1994; Dambrun & Ricard, 2011).

Each of these six elements of integrity is essential in establishing a leader's reputation and earns the trust, commitment, and admiration of others when those elements are demonstrated by leaders (Covey, 2013). When these elements are missing, however, those who lead inevitably struggle to earn the confidence of those with whom they work and markedly reduce their ability to motivate others, inspire their followership, and retain others' respect (Bligh, 2017). Integrity is widely regarded as the primary foundation of a leader's ability to generate others' confidence and is the foundation of personal relationships and the glue that holds organizations together (Covey, 2004).

It has long been established by the research of James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2011) that integrity, honesty, and honoring commitments are the most important keys to a leader's personal credibility, or the capacity to be perceived as fair, and just (Colquitt & Rodell, 2014). Trustworthiness depends upon the degree to which leaders and managers demonstrate their effectiveness in establishing relationships (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Hosmer, 1995 & 2010) and the link between individuals' perceptions about integrity, trustworthiness, and justice is well established (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Howes & Arnold, 2013).

As indicated by Figure 1, provided below, the integrity and credibility of leaders is subjectively perceived by the mediating lens of through which each individual views others. That mediating lens is based upon each person's unique personal history, her or his life experiences, that individual's perceptions and beliefs about how (s)he is treated by the leader, and the actions of leaders in their roles within an organization (cf. Hayes et al., 2015; Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2020).

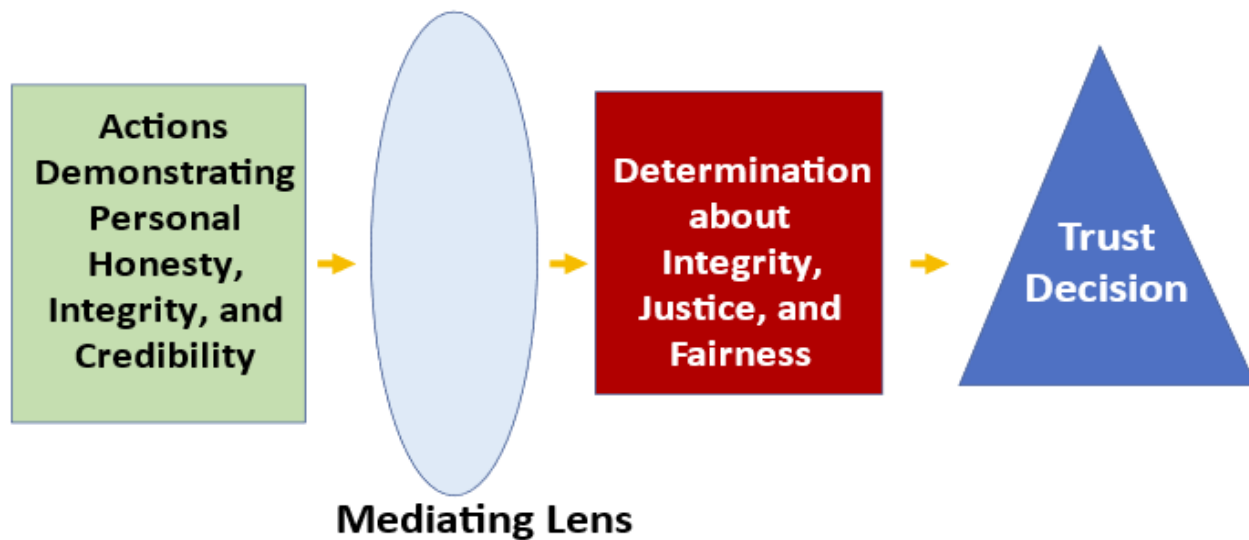


Figure 1. Perceptions about Integrity and Trust Decisions

As suggested by Figure 1, perceived integrity is fundamentally important in the decision to trust and is widely recognized as the key to increasing employee commitment and workplace performance (Kannan-Narasimhan & Lawrence, 2012; Engelbrecht, Heine, & Mahembe, 2017).

Layton (2019) also found that inclusiveness in culturally diverse work environments increased employee trust and commitment – affirming the research of other scholars about the empirical link between trust and performance (cf. Clapham et al., 2014; Colquitt & Rodell, 2015). Dang, Volpone, and Umphress (2022) have found that leaders who recognize how demographic and other diversity differences should be navigated in the workplace are more likely to be perceived as ethical by those diverse employees. In her book about diversity management and ethical leadership, Rachelle (2017) called for leaders to fully embrace moral conduct by understanding the implications of diversity throughout an organization – including how individuals are perceived as ethical leaders.

5. Integrating the Concepts

As leaders act with integrity in guiding the modern organization, they play several key roles in the process of 1) overcoming implicit biases, 2) demonstrating respect for those who are different, and 3) creating a healthy and inclusive organizational culture (Howes & Arnold, 2013). We identify eight integrity-based roles and explain how each role provides an opportunity for individuals to positively promote diversity in their own actions and attitudes and minimize potential bias in their relationships with others.

5.1 Examining Self

A leader initiates a comprehensive personal inventory of actions and attitudes associated with both diversity and bias. (S)he reflects on past behaviors in interacting with others as a benchmark for self-improvement. (S)he acknowledges the reality of unconscious bias tendencies in past choices and strives to be authentic and fully conscious of the impact of decisions.

5.2 Clarifying Values

A conscientious leader formalizes a commitment to the fair and just treatment of all individuals and groups. (S)he establishes policies, guidelines, and practices for those with whom (s)he works that reinforce compliance with those values for all organization members.

5.3 Setting an Example

The leader demonstrates by personal example fair treatment of others in a manner that is visible to those with whom (s)he works. (S)he treats all individuals and groups with dignity and respect and consciously examines her/his own personal conduct to ensure that (s)he exemplifies the values (s)he espouses.

5.4 Articulating Personal Guidelines

The leader specifically commits to others that (s)he will honor the guidelines that (s)he advocates and asks them to confirm that accountability. (S)he regularly evaluates her/his own actions and attitudes both consciously and subconsciously according to those guidelines and their intent.

5.5 Encouraging Others

The leader kindly but consistently encourages colleagues and associates to examine their own conduct and unconscious biases. (S)he becomes an advocate for fairness in all relationships and asks others to join in the treatment of all groups and individuals with regard and respect. (S)he consciously creates opportunities to encourage and inspire others.

5.6 Monitoring Own Behavior

Leaders carefully monitor the decisions that they make and their subjective emotional reactions toward others. They delve into the underlying root causes of their own bias and humbly acknowledge insights. They then seek to make amends for inappropriate bias.

5.7 Evaluating Outcomes

Leaders assess the degree that behaviors and attitudes about fairness, equity, respect, and kindness actually mirror the values of their organization. They examine the degree to which policies and practices reinforce desired outcomes.

5.8 Improving Constantly

The leader shares information with members of the organization and uses that information as an opportunity to reinforce the organization's commitment to values, standards, principles, and guidelines. Creates systems that monitor behaviors at all levels and constantly looks for opportunities to improve personal and organizational treatment of all individuals and groups.

Each of these eight roles requires persons with integrity to closely examine their responsibility to acknowledge the worth of every individual and group by consciously striving to honor other persons as possessing great potential value (Peck, 2003). The standards of ethical leadership upon which integrity is based require leaders to honor their obligation to others as stewards of their organization's welfare (Engelbrecht, Heine, & Mahembe, 2015 & 2017). As leaders demonstrate integrity and deal justly and without bias or prejudice in their interactions with individuals of all groups, a compelling body of extensive evidence suggests that employees will return a leader's commitment to fairness by demonstrating their increased commitment to the organization (Covey, 1992; Franklin, 2020; Northouse, 2021, Kouzes & Posner, 2023).

6. Common Responses Undermining Integrity

In dealing with issues associated with diversity and bias, leaders impair or sustain their ability to be perceived as men or women of integrity by their actions and/or inactions (Pless & Maak, 2004). The following ten responses often occur in organizations of all types that demonstrate insensitivity to issues associated with diversity and bias and weaken the ability of a leader to be perceived as ethical and possessing interpersonal integrity.

6.1 Poorly Conducted Hiring Practices

When employee recruitment, testing, and selection practices consistently fail to result in the hiring of candidates that are non-traditional, despite when the qualifications of those individuals meet or exceed hiring requirements, credibility about the fairness and even the legality of those hiring practices are called into question (Villegas, Lloyd, & Tritt, 2019).

6.2 Preferential Treatment by Gender

Preferential treatment has consistently been decried by sociologists, scholars, and policy makers for decades – yet those same gender-based inequities continue to exist (Kabeer & Sweetman, 2015). Addressing issues that affect the fairness of hiring and promoting women must be confronted by organizations and data about the treatment of women must be monitored to resolve this problem.

6.3 Unequal Compensation for Similar Work

Gender bias has consistently resulted in paying women less than men and women are currently being paid 82 cents for every dollar that men are paid who perform identical or essentially similar work (Cahn, Carbone, & Levit, 2023).

6.4 Favoritism in Providing Access to Training

Opportunities for personal growth and professional development are defining requirements of a “great job” according to extensive research conducted by the Gallup corporation (Clifton & Harter, 2019). Despite that fact, favoritism in providing access to training has been a chronic issue for decades (May, 2021).

6.5 Preferential Promotional Policies

Promotional policies reflect bias when qualified persons within diverse demographic groups are consistently passed over for management positions (Beattie & Johnson, 2011). Although women may earn a higher number of advanced degrees in specific fields, those same women have consistently been less likely to be promoted to management positions than their male counterparts despite their qualifications (Elliott & Smith, 2004).

6.6 Limiting Opportunities for Job Flexibility

O’Connor and Cech (2018) found that restricting job flexibility often occurs and that its impact can reduce employee engagement and job satisfaction for the entire workforce while also increasing the incidence of turnover. Providing job flexibility, including the opportunity for persons to work virtually from home, has been identified as a positive benefit for employees and those opportunities should not be restricted by demographic group (Twinn, Humphries, & Kearins, 2006).

6.7 Inconsistency Enforcing Work Rules

Selective enforcement of work rules can often result in the lowering of morale in organizations (Bock, 2015). Badgett, Lau & Sears (2007) identified inconsistency in how organizations enforced their work rules based upon employees’ both gender and sexual orientation. Discriminatory practices caused by this inconsistency undermines the credibility of organizational leaders (Munger & Munger, 2015).

6.8 Favoring In-Group Members in Work Assignments

In-groups” and politics are a reality of many workplace cultures and frequently result in inequitable treatment of employees (Molenberghs, 2013). Favoring members of those in-groups undermines workplace effectiveness overall, undermines the credibility of an organization’s policies, and reduces trust in organization leaders. (Weeks, Weeks & Long, 2017).

6.9 Disregarding Suggestions for Improvement

Denying employees voice, particularly when those employees are perceived as representing a different perspective, not only limits the ability of an organization to take advantage of employee insights but sends a message throughout the organization that its leaders have failed to fully empower its workforce and are unwilling to be receptive to innovative thinking (Morrison, 2014; Blink, 2022).

6.10 Ignoring Cultural Differences

Even though organizations with multicultural teams have been found to be more effective (Hajro, Gibson, & Pudelko, 2017), many organizations fail to adequately address or respect cultural differences of their various employees (Ghemawat, 2001). By acknowledging and respecting cultural differences, leaders and organizations create a work environment that is more effective at dealing with an increasingly diverse customer population (Luthans et al., 2008).

Disparate treatment is defined as any unfair employment-related treatment of an individual based upon that person’s demographic characteristics, country of origin, or other protected differences; and systemic disparate treatment is the patterned unfair treatment to an entire protected class, or demographic group, of employees (Lewis, Jr. & Norman, 2004). Although an individual employee who has suffered mistreatment by upon any of these ten responses may or may not pursue a legal remedy, the impact of unfair treatment, discrimination, and bias nonetheless can be detrimental to an entire organization and demonstrates that the integrity of its leaders is subject to question (Covey, 1992; Lips-Wiersma, Haar, & Wright, 2020).

7. Action Steps for Integrity

The most effective way for leaders and organizations to eliminate bias is by implementing a comprehensive program that emphasizes treating diverse individuals and groups fairly, consistently, and equitably (George, 2021).

Incorporating the research about workplace bias, we recommend six action steps for organization seeking to reduce bias and increase the comfort level of employees about the diversity and inclusion in their organizations (Clark, 2020).

7.1 Educate the Organization about the Nature of Bias

Acknowledging that bias is often unconscious and implicit is the first step in identifying its presence in organizations (George, 2021). The importance of educating employees about bias, its effect on organizational success, and its ethical implications is an important part of creating a responsible organization (Raimi & Kah, 2022).

7.2 Establish Clear Criteria for Performance Goals

Identifying the degree to which bias has affected past employees and identifying specific criteria by which to measure performance goals about diversity can enable organizations to track their performance in creating a fair and equitable workplace (Javidmehr & Ebrahimpour, 2015).

7.3 Conduct Training of Key Personnel

Managers and supervisors, human resource professionals, and members of an organization's top management team can all benefit from receiving extensive training about diversity and the nature of unconscious bias (Emerson, 2017). Without that training, those key individuals are likely to be unaware of the subtle nature of implicit bias and how to eliminate biased treatment (Kim & Roberson, 2022).

7.4 Hold Decision Makers Responsible for Results

Without an accountability process for evaluating the achievement of workplace goals, the likelihood that unconscious bias and sensitivity to issues associated with diversity is not likely to improve (Kalev, 2014).

7.5 Obtain Feedback from Employees about Fairness and Equity

The importance of obtaining direct feedback from employees about the degree to which their organization is free from workplace bias is a critical part of improving an organization's culture and determining whether performance goals are being achieved (Pendell, 2022).

7.6 Sustain Progress toward Achieving Diversity and Eliminating Bias

Monitoring progress and constantly improving efforts to demonstrate respect for all individuals and groups are critical to making a diversity program truly successful (Hirsh & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2020). Tracking that progress should be accompanied by also reporting the results to organization members.

This six-step program can enable organization leaders to improve the level of employee confidence about fairness in the workplace and also increase the level of psychological safety of employees (Clark, 2020). The ultimate measure of the effectiveness of these six steps is the degree of employee engagement, personal commitment, and productivity which accompanies the feeling of inclusion and sense of belonging of diverse individuals and groups (Itam & Bagali, 2018).

8. A Challenge to Leaders

To implement these six integrity-based action steps, an organization's leadership will need to champion the transforming of the beliefs, attitudes, and values of employees at all levels of the organization. By aligning leadership efforts with their organizations' proclaimed beliefs, attitudes, and values, leaders must be personal examples that connect with their employees at a personal level (Kouzes & Posner, 2023). By modeling their vision to followers, such leaders provide inspirational motivation that employees will then aspire to emulate (Burns, 2010). True transformational leadership demonstrates alignment with the ethical values of utility, transcendence, trust, and justice (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

A transformational leadership approach enables leaders to articulate their vision in a manner that emotionally appeals to followers, creating a need within them to ensure that their organization's vision is fulfilled (Waldman, Siegel & Javidan 2006). Until employees believe that their leaders' actions are aligned with their organization's stated beliefs, those employees will be reluctant to believe that their organization and its leaders have adopted the values of integrity that are essential for fair and equitable treatment of people with differences (Brown & Trevino, 2006).

In today's modern environment, it is essential for businesses to focus on recruiting and retaining diverse employees to ensure that their organizations can excel in today's competitive markets (Dass & Parker, 2017). To sustain successful businesses, management must be able to retain talented diverse employees so that those employees become fully engaged and productive contributors (Downey et al., 2014). Implementing the six action steps for integrity will enable for a company to showcase to their employees how important their strategy for diversity and employee engagement is

to their overall success. By so doing those companies will also gain the goodwill and approval of the communities from which these same diverse employees come (Preece, 2005).

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