



Blog

Navigating Identity as Part of Your Leadership Practice

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Identity awareness — understanding the various attributes and beliefs that make us different from others — is a core element of good leadership. This is true especially in the nonprofit sector, when identity can powerfully shape power, opportunity, and outcomes in the communities we serve.

But what is identity? It is any affiliation or membership of specific groups, whether chosen or given to us, which forms part of our sense of who we are. Some identities, such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, national origin, ability, or religious affiliation carry particular significance given their influence on our social, cultural, political, and economic experiences within a specific historical or geographical context.

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nonprofit managers called the [High Performing Managers Initiative \(HPMI\)](#), we recently invited over 40 emerging leaders to reflect on the question of how identity matters to their leadership. Several themes emerged from this rich exploration.

- **Identity is inextricably linked to power and privilege:** Through experiential exercises, participants shared how aspects of their own identity often became salient to them through an experience of “otherness” while identities they take for granted or don’t consider often signify their own privilege. Being aware of the power and privilege (or lack thereof) that comes with their multiple identities is an important foundation for cultivating self-awareness as a leader. As one participant, Joy Pittman, reflected: “Our discussions on identity were the most impactful and transformative parts of the training for me. I was encouraged to embrace the complexity of my own identity, and its relevance to my work. And this awareness grounded my leadership of an agency-wide process that CRE is supporting to cultivate not just diversity but also inclusion and equity in my own workplace.”
- **“Code-switching” comes at a cost:** Participants who have identities that are different from the dominant norm of their workplace, particularly around race and class, spoke about the burden of code-switching — learning the skills to adapt to the expectations of an organizational culture shaped by dominant norms. They identified code switching and the feeling of being an “outsider” as taking a toll on their ability to bring their full, authentic selves to work, and often a reason many people of color are overlooked for promotions or choose to opt out of organizations and leadership paths.
- **Marginal identities can be a strength:** At the same time, several participants described how having a marginalized identity had fostered consciousness and connection with others in service of a social justice mission. Being from a socio-economically disadvantaged background, for example, had helped them to see injustice in multiple forms more clearly, connect with clients that had shared lived experiences, and to model success for these communities.
- **Acknowledging difference and privilege is core to bridge-building:** Participants also shared their insights on working across difference, particularly when one holds a dominant identity. One participant who managed a multi-racial team shared how [acknowledging her privilege as a white woman, and naming whiteness](#) — which

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Her acknowledgement helped create a space where her team saw that it was acceptable for them to talk about race, and how it impacted their work together and with their clients.

Some of these themes will be familiar, and others will involve thinking differently about how identity shapes your leadership. But they all yield some practical strategies for those who are interested in developing a reflective, inclusive, and equity-focused leadership practice.

Following these themes, we've identified three strategies that together form a great base when navigating identity as nonprofit leaders.

- 1. Cultivate identity awareness and cultural literacy:** Consider what identities are most salient to you, and why. These are likely to shape your worldviews, relationships and decisions, and can show up in all of us as implicit biases, whether you are aware of it or not. Recognizing and being able to speak about the pain, power, and pertinence of identity for you and those you work with and serve will enable you to lead more consciously and effectively in complex situations that require multiple (often contradictory) perspectives.
- 2. Be thoughtful when seeking authenticity:** We tend to laud “authentic leadership” as the ultimate goal, without fully considering the challenges this involves for those who have had to code-switch or render invisible core elements of their being in order to adapt and survive in dominant cultures. There are no easy answers to this bind. For those with marginalized identities, identify your non-negotiables where it relates to organizational culture, seek relationships at work that affirm your identities, and build diverse alliances that help you advocate for more inclusive organizational norms. Expand authenticity by also recognizing the pain and triggers that arise from some of your identities, and practice self-care to process and manage the emotions (often anger or rage) that you may be expressing in ways that are less constructive for you, your team, and your clients. For those with dominant identities, ask yourself: ‘How do I take up space or share power in interactions with colleagues and clients? How do I benefit from inequity? How can I create leadership pathways for others, so that we expand all of our potential?’ These

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includes being an effective advocate of equity and change within organizations that seek to advance equity externally in their missions.

- 3. Be courageous:** Courageous leadership means being attuned to the interpersonal and organizational dynamics of identity at work and being an effective advocate for inclusion and equity. This includes engaging in difficult conversations around race, gender, and other identities at work, naming micro-aggressions when they arise, and using your positional authority to promote organizational dialogue and learning. Be attentive to who is at the table and who has a voice in your organization, and where possible, seek out and center marginalized voices, share power, and enable diverse leadership.

Navigating identity can be challenging, but is ultimately a worthwhile and necessary practice for all leaders. Identity matters — in life, at work, and in leadership — whether we acknowledge it or not. The African-American poet, scholar, and activist Audre Lorde famously said that “it is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.”

To find out more about [CRE’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#) practice, including how we can work with your organization, please contact Fiona Kanagasingam at fganagasingam@crenyc.org.

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