



Taking Equity Beyond Gender

Use design thinking to create policies, practices, and programs that welcome diverse women

BY ANDREA THOMPSON AND JESSICA GOMEZ

As organizational leaders become more intentional about increasing gender diversity, inclusion, and equity, we must understand how intersectionality plays a role in marginalization and an opportunity for organizational enhancement and enrichment alike. To emphasize the latter, we should begin with the view that diversity enriches an organization, then follow up with a willingness to confront gender-related implicit biases and an empathetic approach toward developing policies, practices, and programs.

The landscape architect who embraces the benefits of different plants and flowers is likely to design a diverse and cohesive garden. Similarly, organizational leaders who understand that gender is not monocultural have the chance to benefit from the intersection of identities that a variety of women brings to it. Female experiences vary greatly based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, language, ability, sexual orientation, class, and age, and leaders should acknowledge and capitalize on all variety of identities for the organization's benefit.

Some leaders take a one-size-fits-all approach to gender equity, advancing only women of a specific race, ethnicity, experience, ability, sexuality, or class. Such a leader views intersectionality as an obstacle to organizational growth and believes that if one woman shatters the glass ceiling, gender equity has been achieved for all. But to dismiss the intersectionalities in which women thrive is to devalue all women and the value gender equity creates. Just because a few women have shattered the ceiling doesn't mean that gender equity has been achieved.

There needs to be diversity within gender diversity. With each social identity comes a variety of voices in the gender-equity discussion. The climb to the top is different for females based on any number of intersectionalities by which each is defined and marginalized.

Capturing the essence of these intersections requires a design-thinking approach that affords leaders the opportunity to empathetically listen to why some within the female gender are closer to the figurative center of success, while others are closer to the margins. Organizational leaders who embrace intersectionality understand that female leaders are often stereotyped and marginalized by every one of their identities.

Design Thinking and Gender Equity

Equitable practices must be put in place to ensure access for all diverse elements present within each educator. A design thinking paradigm that engages with intersectional females is the best way to garner the knowledge and understanding needed to develop gender-equity policies, practices, and programs that align with their needs. The process might also reveal and help confront implicit biases.

Here's what a few educators had to say about their intersectional challenges:

"At a very young age, I knew that there were unwritten rules that I had to follow in the workplace to succeed," says Latrina Woods, a teacher coach from New Orleans. "These unwritten rules dictated how I wore my hair, my tone of voice, and my facial expressions. In most situations, I was the only African American woman. The lack of representation was a constant reminder that if I [didn't] follow these unwritten rules, I was at risk of losing my job."

"As women of color, we run up against dual oppression," says Margarita Cuizon-Armelino, senior director of member services for the Association of California School Administrators. "In other words, we can't be both smart and seen as strong leaders *and* be likeable at the same time. Gender biases require that we be either/or. Now add the fact that Asian Americans are from a culture that reinforces humility to a fault and [tells us] to respect authority without question."

"As an Asian Indian female, I am often in a no-win situation," says Shana Henry, principal of New Encina Middle School in Sacramento, California. "Being assertive and direct doesn't fit the stereotype for Asians of being docile, submissive, soft-spoken, and passive. Having a strong voice or sharing your opinions can be seen as aggressive or unapproachable. People get uncomfortable if you don't fit in 'the box,' and [they see you as] a risk."

A Benefit and a Hindrance

Other educators have faced implicit bias and tokenism but were able to use their intersectional experiences to advance:

"As a Black/African American middle-class female, my social identities have been both a benefit and a hindrance to my climb up the leadership ladder," says Felicia Noel, assistant principal of Alice Birney Elementary School in California's Colton Joint Unified School District. "I'm often called upon to fill a void that allows me a seat at the table but with a silent voice. I was simply there just to be a check-the-box for equity. Although my skin color has opened many doors to opportunities, there are several doors that close simultaneously."

"I feel that the different social identities that encompass who I am—a passionate female, native Spanish speaker, Latina leader who gained access to the middle class via education—allow me to leverage my understanding of inequities," says Judith Servin, principal of Colton's William McKinley Elementary School. "This has certainly allowed me to organically focus on equitable leadership."

"As a first-generation, Spanish-speaking Latina, I believe my ethnicity benefited me as I began to move into leadership

roles," says Cindy Aguilar-Muñoz, principal of Colton's Ruth O. Harris Middle School. "Serving in diverse Title 1 schools where the majority of the student population was nonwhite, there was a move to have staff that reflects the diversity of the student body. For me, I believe this was an advantage."

Lifting Others Up

Let's create more of those advantages by recognizing that female educators are often defined by the many identities and experiences they bring to a school. Instead of marginalizing them, listen to their needs and help them enrich education with their diverse experiences. They can then, in turn, help others navigate their paths to leadership.

"My social identity as a mother, a woman, a daughter to immigrants, and the first to complete and achieve higher education degrees are just a few of the important elements that have helped me to become a school leader and a positive role model," says Cathy Cervantes, principal of Colton's Mary B. Lewis Elementary. "Although it was and still is a challenging journey to climb up the leadership ladder, I use the experiences and relationships I have gained along the way to learn, share, and articulate uplifting stories for others in similar situations. The real benefit is knowing that we are not alone as long as women leaders continue to support one another." ●

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