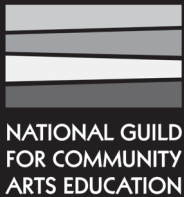


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TOWARDS A MORE CONSCIOUS LEADER

BY AMA CODJOE

Today, successful leaders in arts education recognize their role amounts to more than the management of tasks. Increasingly, effective leaders are those who understand how power impacts organizations and take transparent steps to build a culture of equity. Ama Codjoe, former director of DreamYard Art Center and faculty member for the Guild's Community Arts Education Leadership Institute (CAELI), argues that anti-oppression practices and compelling leadership are inextricably linked. As a facilitator of social justice trainings at arts organizations, universities, and public schools, Ama has developed interactive workshops for educators, leaders, students, and parents. In this article, Ama provides arts leaders with a framework for assessing their own privilege and adopting ways of "seeing, listening, and being that can deeply transform not only your leadership practice but your life."

In order to examine how leadership looks when taking issues of power and privilege into account, we must first define privilege.

Privilege

Privilege is unearned (conscious or unconscious) access and power based on systemic bias. The following section will break down the definition's components through the lens of race.

Unearned

Most of our social identity markers are not chosen. For example, each of us is born with a certain skin tone. In our society skin color has real-life implications. Skin color, along with other physical features, has been used to create specious categories of racial distinction. In other words, skin color has been made to mean something.

(continued on page 7)

IN THIS ISSUE

- 1 **Towards a More Conscious Leader**
- 2 **Guild News**
- 4 **Member News**
- 6 **New Members**
- 8 **Building a Collaborative Teaching Environment:** Excerpt from The Practice of Partnership
- 10 **Toolkit:** Strategic Communications for Year-Round Donor Engagement
- 14 **Forum:** Integrating Youth Voice and Leadership in Your Organization

[continued from front cover]

TOWARDS A MORE CONSCIOUS LEADER

Along with the pseudo-scientific categorization of people (race), a system of advantage is at play in our society. Racism, as author Beverly Daniel Tatum notes, is a system of advantage based on race. When leading anti-racism workshops, I give this definition then pause to ask the question: Who benefits from this system? At every occasion the answer is unanimous: white people benefit from the system of racism to the disadvantage of people of color.

With these essential understandings as a backdrop, let's return to the "unearned" part of the definition of privilege. Because we don't choose our skin color and for the most part can't change it, privilege based on race is unearned.

Despite the myth of meritocracy, systemic advantages are not given to white people because of merit, talent, or skill. In the case of racism, advantages are given to white people because of their skin color, something that can't be controlled or earned. Therefore, the access to power that comes with having lighter skin is unearned. Conversely, people of color exclusion from this system of advantage is not because of something they did or did not do.

Needless to say, privilege also exists in relationship to other social identities (e.g. gender identity and expression, sexuality, physical ability, mental wellness, class, age). We are not any one thing, but everything simultaneously. The intersection of social identities creates a complex web of power and privilege.

Each of our social identities grants us certain advantages or disadvantages. Take a moment to think about what privilege society affords you. Check or note all that apply.

- Light skin (light brown, white skin)
- Economic class (middle class/upper class)
- Education (completed college)
- Heterosexual
- Cis-gendered (gender expression is same as born sex)
- Male
- Able-bodied (no physical disability)
- Raised Christian or secular
- English as first language
- Born in the USA
- Middle-aged
- Other: _____

Conscious or Unconscious

Looking at your list you may notice you hadn't thought much about how some of your social identities award privilege. Maybe you never considered the ways in which your fluency in English, and ability to read this article, is a privilege. Or how a band-aid does or does not match your skin tone. Or how pop songs profess a love that does or does not resemble yours.

Whether you are conscious of it or not, privilege has impacted and shaped your life. In fact, it is often when we have experienced the most privilege that we are most unaware of it. Conversely, someone with less privilege (the non-native English speaker, for example) is well aware of how disadvantage shapes and impacts their daily lives and impedes access to institutions of power (e.g., the education system).

The "blindness" that keep us unaware of how we benefit from privilege create a paradox: people with the most privilege are the least likely to be aware of how they have benefited and continue to benefit from unearned access and power.

Access and Power

For our purposes, "access and power" means access to tools, resources, skills, and opportunities. The kind of power being described is not individual instances of power or empowerment, but "institutionally backed power" or power supported by the institutions of our society (e.g., education, military, corporate media, banks).

Based on Systemic Bias

The last part of the definition of privilege "based on systemic bias" pointedly focuses our attention to systems of bias as opposed to individual instances of bias. Each of the checkboxes in the left column relates to a system of bias and oppression (bias + power). Light skin correlates with racism, economic class with classism, and so on.

Systemic oppression has historical underpinnings. It was here before we got here, we did not create it, but if we hope to be relevant, engaged, and visionary leaders, we must acknowledge its influence and try to chart a different course. As leaders we have a responsibility to be aware of our privilege and to work towards dismantling systemic bias. If we choose not to, we are complicit, consciously or unconsciously perpetuating inequity and injustice.

A More Conscious Leader

As leaders we may be unaware of how our privilege impacts our ability to lead, or as John McCann, President of Partners in Performance and co-designer of the National Guild's Community Arts Education Leadership Institute puts it, to "behave in ways that bring people together to move things forward." An awareness of privilege, power, and bias is integral to our ability to bring people together. Whether or not you work for an organization with a commitment to social justice, effective leaders contend with questions of power and privilege because they realize that with greater understanding, sensitivity, and skills they will be better equipped to lead others towards a collective goal.

Privilege affords some people access to power and excludes others. We can't reverse this tide without effort. Here are seven action steps you can take to become a more effective leader in regards to issues of bias and privilege.

1. Attend an anti-oppression training

There are plenty of day long or weekend long experiences to participate in alone or with your entire staff. After the training reflect on how your experience relates to your work. How do issues of power and privilege impact interpersonal relationships with staff, organizational mission, grant language and applications, relationship to donors and board members, and your ability to communicate with participants, families, and partner organizations? Attending a training will give you the vocabulary to begin or deepen a leadership framework rooted in equity and social justice.

2. Create space for authentic feedback and reflection

Human beings generally prefer praise over blame and kudos instead of critique; as arts leaders we are no different. But if we are interested in being responsible, pro-active contributors to an environment of justice and equity we have to make room for feedback and critique.

When looking for ways to receive input on your own leadership, collaborate with others in your organization to create a culture where direct feedback is welcomed and encouraged. In addition, develop anonymous evaluations or use large pieces of butcher paper with questions at the top where staff can add comments on post-it notes anonymously. Respect anonymity and confidentiality.

[continued on page 13]

(continued from page 7)

Finally, take another look at your organization’s assessment tools. Consider incorporating questions or prompts specific to social identity, power, and privilege. Make an effort to bring these questions into your mid-year or year-end meetings with staff.

3. Walk the walk

The leaders we admire most are able to line up rhetoric with responsibility and intention with action. If you are on the journey of becoming a more conscious leader you don’t get a “day off.” This doesn’t mean you have to be perfect, but it does mean what you say, do, think, and believe should line up and be evidenced in your actions and legacy.

4. Admit mistakes

Part of walking the walk is acknowledging when you stumble or trip up, when you hurt someone’s feelings, slight someone, or make a mistake. Some elementary educators call this “Oops, Ouch.” “Ouch” acknowledges that a harm was done and “Oops” that the mistake or harm was likely unintentional (but that doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt). Admitting mistakes is a powerful leadership practice and paints a more refined portrait of a leader willing to take responsibility and corrective action.

5. Interrupt injustice

As arts leaders, we have a heightened responsibility to interrupt injustice whenever we hear, see, or perpetuate it. Being tongue-tied or caught off guard is not an excuse for inaction. Even if the moment of bias (a sexist insult, a racist policy, a homophobic remark, or other harm) passes we still have a responsibility to act by initiating a follow-up conversation, mediating a discussion, or calling a facilitator to mitigate the issue.

If a co-worker or staff member brings concerns to you take them seriously, ask the appropriate questions, and address them with due diligence and speed.

6. Listen

Oftentimes people in positions of social power talk first and most often. Leaders interested in interrupting injustice and distributing power more equitably listen first and make space for others to be heard. It is not enough to stop talking (though this is a great first step), we must also make space for others with less social power to be heard.

Listening is a way of casting the blinders aside and opening our eyes to the dynamics of power and privilege. Listening takes practice. Notice if you interrupt people when they speak (even out of excitement and agreement) or if you are usually the first person to give an opinion or suggestion. Beware of who is talking and who is not.

Invite a diverse range of constituents to the table—especially people who will be most impacted by organizational decisions or for whom your programs are designed. If programs are for a certain group and yet they have no decision-making power then we may be listening to the wrong people.

7. Read

Sometimes we don’t know what we don’t know, but that’s what books—and I’d add people—are for. Go to your favorite independent bookstore or library and check out some books on subjects you know little about. Look at the checklist above and consider what identities, communities, social movements and histories you know least about. What do you need to learn? Who are the communities you serve? Ask colleagues and fellow staff members for recommendations. Create a reading list, book club, or study group. Incorporate new knowledge through conversation, journaling, and self-reflection.

Reading List

Here’s a short reading list with a focus on race to get you started:

1. *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria: And Other Conversations About Race* by Beverly Daniel Tatum. A terrific primer and discussion of racial identity development with crystal clear definitions.
2. “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice” by Derald Wing Sue. Written by a team of clinical psychologists and researchers, this article is also relevant to the field of education. It contains helpful examples and charts.
3. *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine. A lyric essay/collection of poetry, this National Book Critics Circle Award winning book explores racial microaggressions grounded in real-life as well as connections between race, art, sports, history, and popular culture.
4. *Other People’s Children* by Lisa Delpit. A “classic” in progressive education circles, Delpit’s book explores the dynamic between educators and students who come from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Every day we make decisions, develop and enforce policies, hire new educators, fundraise, coordinate programs, and communicate with participants and staff. Every day we are in a position to create spaces of equity and justice or to reinforce the status quo. What kind of leader do you want to be? How does your awareness affect others? An examination of unearned (conscious or unconscious) access and power based on systemic bias is a discipline, a way of seeing, listening, and being that can deeply transform not only your leadership practice, but your life.

About the Author

Ama Codjoe is the former director of the DreamYard Art Center and is a faculty member of the Community Arts Education Leadership Institute (CAELI).



Community School of Music and Arts, Mountain View, CA