

Multicultural Leadership: A Literature Review

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Abstract

One significant challenge that organizations face today is the culturally diverse pool of employees, the renewed focus on multiculturalism, and the need for multicultural leadership. Consequently, this article provides a literature review on multicultural leadership. It examines multicultural leadership, perspectives, and its purpose. It also discusses conflicting values, their implications for multicultural leadership, and what organizations within a multicultural setting can do to empower and satisfy employees.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, multicultural leadership, cultural diversity, values, culture

Multicultural Leadership

One significant challenge organizations face today is the culturally diverse constitution of the employee pool (Trimble & Chin, 2019). Simply put, many diverse cultures are represented by organizations. Cultural diversity is the quality attached to different or diverse cultures within a society, organization, or working group (Alfoqahaa & Jones, 2020). This is in contrast to monoculture, characterized by one culture or the efforts towards homogenizing cultures that seek to have different cultures subsumed into one (Lu et al., 2022). On the other hand, Trimble and Chin (2019) have defined multiculturalism within the context of cultural pluralism. They have said it is where people from different cultural inclinations dialogue and collaborate without losing their identities.

Today, organizations are confronted with a myriad of challenges. Cultural diversity, especially within organizations, creates the need for multiculturalism, which Connerley and Pedersen (2005) defined as the presence of or, in fact, the support for the presence of diverse cultures within an organization, country, or society. From the description above, multiculturalism is about the presence of different cultures that must find a meaningful understanding among each other, without any one culture being dominated by the

extent of abandoning its unique cultural beliefs, lifestyles, values, and objectives in life.

A focus on multiculturalism is considered important for the growth and progress of organizations. Some scholars have argued that to create a conducive working environment, people from diverse cultures need to be treated with sensitivity, openness, and continuous candid reflection (Lu et al., 2022; Maddux et al., 2021). Kamales and Knorr (2019) noted that emphasis on multiculturalism has allowed organizations to innovate better and improve their problem-solving efforts. Multiculturalism within organizations is also associated with the introduction of fresh ideas and heightened motivation among employees who, before cultural understanding, would mostly feel disenfranchised (Parvis, 2003).

Multicultural leadership can be defined as engaging and leading a workforce comprising individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bordas, 2012). Gundling et al. (2011) noted that leaders within this space must possess the capacity to effectively deal with “multicomplexity,” which they define as the complexity that comes in different forms and upon which a leader must retool and recalibrate viewpoints and leadership models to enable it to work.

It has also been argued that within multicultural leadership, organizations tend to implement strategies that support the use and operationalization of different leadership models (Phillips, 2009). Smith (2013) observed that most organizations and institutions are steeped in using a single leadership approach, which is often grounded on and influenced by a model and practice propagated and practiced in Western world-based management practice. This often leads to a certain, even if covert feeling that there is a “right” way to lead. However, this does not effectively deal with the contextualized and situational aspects of organizations that demand a combination of leadership models to suit the unique needs of various organizations (Nevo, 2016).

The same leadership model used in the United Kingdom cannot be effectively applied in Africa, where collectivist and cultural considerations are deeply held (Kwantes et al., 2017). In the case of engaging with various leadership models, scholars such as Webb, Darling and Alvey noted that multicultural leaders are versatile with an added capacity to bring people from different leadership schools together for the enhancement and attainment of organizational goals (2014). Webb et al. (2014) further speaking about multicultural leadership succinctly say that

Organizations that adopt this approach understand the need to broaden their leadership expectations, and to learn from and apply management approaches that their diverse leaders inherently bring with them to the organization. We predict that these organizations will also be more successful because they will be better positioned to recognize high-potential talent in local markets; engage employees everywhere for higher retention and productivity; problem-solve creatively and innovate quickly; see and seize opportunities; and contribute positively to a sustainable world (p.8).

Thus, a key issue emanating from the literature review on multicultural leadership is that it is inclusive and both participative and empowering diverse cultural understanding and values within an organizational set-up. Therefore, a single leadership model may not be

sufficient under such a setup. There is a need for a combination of leadership models that enable the contextualization and situational consideration of each organization based on the unique cultural endowments that these organizations find themselves in.

Multiculturalism, however, is not without its critics, including how minority cultures have lost their unique cultural identity in their bid to accommodate other cultures (Paiuc, 2021). In addition, strong multiculturalism appears to demand that each diverse culture has equal status in society, including those that are considered malignant and archaic (Paiuc, 2021). The equality of all cultures is also considered to have suppressed women’s rights (Andersson & Linn 2010). A study by Putnam (2007) found that the level of trust is lower in organizations and societies that demonstrate more multicultural awareness, especially for those in authority. On the other hand, other scholars advocate for multiculturalism that does not necessarily view each culture as having equal footing but appreciates the fact that each culture may bring positive contributions to the whole (Lu et al., 2022).

This article is a literature review that focuses on conflicting values in multicultural leadership. Thus, it reviews what those conflicting values are, their implications for multicultural leadership, and what organizations within a multicultural setting can effectively build on multicultural leadership that empowers and satisfies employees. This paper proposes that multicultural leadership is vital for effective motivation, productivity, meaningful understanding, and empowerment of employees within an organization; yet, multicultural leadership is often inhibited by misunderstanding and misapplication of the values that relate to it. The main objective of this study is to present conflicting values in multicultural leadership.

Multiculturalism: Perspectives and Purpose

Multicultural leadership is required despite the debate on multiculturalism (Alfoqahaa & Jones, 2020). Multicultural leadership can be

described as engaging and leading a workforce comprising individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bordas, 2012). Importantly, multicultural leadership is a process rather than an end in itself. This form of leadership is vital for organizations, as it promotes correct assessment, meaningful understanding, and appropriate interaction between people and their leaders (Connerley & Pedersen, 2005).

Inaccuracies and incorrect assumptions often lead to a defensive leadership style, and a workforce focuses on protecting their own truth based on their different cultural inclinations. This is tantamount to misunderstandings and misapplied interactions that preclude the attainment of organizational goals (Connerley & Pedersen, 2005).

In the enactment of robust multicultural leadership, certain benefits exist, such as improved productivity, working conditions, job satisfaction, and stronger relationships and bond results (Parvis, 2003). Importantly, attaining multicultural leadership requires awareness of the diverse cultures within the organization (Maddux et al., 20210). In this light, one obtains the required knowledge and skills to help manage cross-cultural conflicts (Alfoqahaa & Jones, 2020) and understands his/her cultural biases that might inhibit effective multicultural understanding (Maddux et al., 2021).

When discussing multiculturalism and multicultural leadership, it is important to examine the meaning of culture and what it entails since culture lays the foundation on which multiculturalism is grounded. Under multicultural leadership, an organizational leader may ignore or embrace culture, which makes all the differences at the end of the day (Trimble & Chin, 2019). Others have noted that culture influences people's behavior in organizations (Reich & Reich, 2006). Further, the value of culture has been pronounced among minority groups' efforts to achieve political, economic, and social equity (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). In addition, culture has been instrumental in unifying and categorizing the "roots" of people

from various ethical groupings across the globe (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

Culture has been broadly defined as a part of the human psyche, characterized by everyday lifestyles, beliefs, values, symbols, and objects held by a particular person, often different from the same characteristics presented in a different group of people (Trimble & Chin, 2019). Hofstede (2001) defined culture as collective programming attached to the mind, manifesting in rituals, symbols, and values. Reich and Reich (2006) defined culture as the customs, ideas, and social behavior of a particular society or people. The culture upon which multiculturalism and multicultural leadership are grounded is hooked to the unique customs, ideas, and social behavior related to lifestyles, beliefs, values, and rituals held by a particular group or society.

Connerley and Pedersen (2005) defined multiculturalism as the presence of or, in fact, support for the presence of diverse cultures within an organization, country, or society. On the other hand, Modood (2013) describes multiculturalism as engagement in seeking the active inclusion of the contribution and views of people from diverse cultural inclinations while simultaneously preserving respect for their differences and not bowing to assimilation demands of the dominant group(s). Multiculturalism is related to some extent to cultural diversity, which Cox (1994) defined as "the representation in one social system of people with distinctly different group affiliations of cultural significance" (p. 6). These two descriptions show that cultural diversity focuses on differences, while multiculturalism focuses on multiple cultures and how they are included, respected, and valued.

In organizations, notable approaches are used to deal with cultural diversity and eventually multicultural issues. The first is separation, from which people reject all cultural differences, values, beliefs, rituals, and norms within the organization except their own. Separation has been found within the expanding multicultural and culturally diverse space, leading to significant conflicts among people, especially those from

different and firmly held cultural persuasions and backgrounds (Trimble & Chin, 2019).

The two other approaches to separation and multiculturalism are assimilation and deculturation. Assimilation is characterized by efforts to submerge diverse cultures into an organizational culture (Tung, 1993). In essence, assimilation is when the minority culture is forced to conform to the dominant culture. This often leads to significant conflicts.

Deculturation, on the other hand, is considered a weak form of separation because it is characterized by an understanding that people should hold on to their different cultural inclinations without trying to influence any other person to conform to any of these cultures (Reithel, 2007). Deculturation, in this sense, appears to have an aloof stance on different cultural inclinations, suggesting that everyone should stick to their own cultures. Thus, it is devoid of elements of respect for each other's cultures or any deliberate efforts to be culturally aware or engage with other cultures.

Multiculturalism offers a solution to the challenges associated with assimilation, separation, and, to a significant extent, deculturation. Multiculturalism has both strengths and weaknesses. The strong component of multiculturalism demands that each diverse culture has equal status in society, including cultures that are considered malignant and even archaic (Paiuc, 2021). Bordas (2007) describes weak (narrow) multiculturalism as "an inclusive approach and philosophy that incorporates the influences, practices, and values of diverse cultures in a respectful and productive manner" (p.6). Thus, the former views each culture as equally valid, whereas the latter only seeks to have the positive aspects of each culture respected and valued.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, multiculturalism is not without its critics. Related to this, there are two main criticisms of multiculturalism. Paiuc (2021) and Lu et al. (2022) argue that efforts towards multiculturalism that seek to respect each culture may emphasize the good of different cultures at the detrimental expense

of the common good. They argue that multiculturalism may lead to the elusiveness of national unity because people begin to see their key identities from their ethnic persuasions and not from the citizenry's perspective. This criticism is grounded in their empirical finding that suggests that people who derive their identities from diverse ethnicities do not develop strong national identities as citizens.

In addition, critics of multiculturalism argue that the inclusion of diverse cultures in itself is also a creation of diverse cultural competition. Such competition retrogressively leads to the usurpation of the minority cultures by the dominant culture as in the "dark days" (Paiuc, 2021; Lu et al., 2022). There is scant empirical evidence to ascertain the veracity of this claim despite the fact that the criticism is strong.

Other criticisms refer to multiculturalism undermining the concepts underpinned by individual rights and freedoms by advocating for a collectivist view (Kwantes & Glazer, 2017). This criticism is mainly advanced by people from the Western Hemisphere, where individualistic cultural dimensions are the main cultural view as opposed to the collectivist "we" espoused by people from Africa and the Eastern Hemisphere (Hostede, 2001).

Conflicting Values in Multicultural Leadership

To better understand conflicting values in multicultural leadership, it is necessary first to examine Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions. Within the organizational framework, multicultural leaders confront people who espouse high power distance and accept inequality among individuals, and are thus more hierarchical (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). On the other hand, those with lower power distance demand equality in the power structures of organizations and form a part of the organization that multicultural leaders must navigate.

Multiculturalism has also been criticized for denouncing individual autonomy for collec-

tivism. It should be underscored that there are also individualism-based values espoused by those who look at autonomous behavior. Thus, multicultural leaders deal with individuals who value personal freedom and individual endeavors. On the other hand, a multicultural leader also deals with a collectivist whose value is derived from community or communal engagement (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

Further, multicultural leaders must also understand that members of the organizations they lead possess values that may underscore uncertainty avoidance at different levels. Thus, those who are more immersed in uncertainty avoidance are more predictable and less risk-takers, while those who are not are higher risk takers and are more spontaneous (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Multicultural leaders must consider all of these factors.

Moreover, multicultural leaders confront gender issues in terms of feelings and values attached to masculine responsibility vis-à-vis feminine responsibility (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Others are clear about gender differences, while others are more egalitarian. Some scholars have noted that within organizations, and especially in Africa, for instance, there are structures that place men at the helm of leadership at the expense of women (Booyesen & van Wyk). Sun and Li (2017), in a study of women in leadership in China, found that despite an almost equal number of women in the Chinese labor force, in some cases equality is only in terms of numbers but not in terms of the quality of participation of Chinese women in decision-making and management positions.

There is value noted by Hofstede (2001), which places some as long-orientation-based and thus prone to waiting and thus not expecting instant outcomes. Thus, there are short-oriented people who value instant outcomes. In this case, a multicultural leader confronts staff and employees who, on the one hand, are prone culturally to plan and wait for long-term goals and attainment, while on the same employee

pool are those that are culturally wired to seek achievements faster. If the leader is unable to lead them, the organization may lose the potential of one or the other or both.

Moreover, multicultural leaders deal with diversity in terms of lifestyle, religion, and racial spaces and differences. These differences are clear and part of certain inequalities within the nation. For instance, Booyesen and van Wyk (2010), examined culture and leadership in South Africa. They found that while South Africa's population is multicultural, the country is still dominated by the White minority subgroup, which holds the main positions of power and thus makes the critical decisions that determine the lifeblood of the country. This disparity is the reason for some of the xenophobic-based violence witnessed in the country and is one that any effective multicultural leader must confront if the organization is to succeed. Hence, respect, sensitivity, meaningful engagement and other multicultural competencies are vital in managing organizations successfully.

Another notable conflicting value that studies on multicultural leadership identify as having a role to play is the emotional intelligence of employees within the organization (Goleman, 1995). Many employees in their bid to be culturally aware have in certain key instances lost their emotional attachment to the initial enthusiasm, which has stopped them from acting out their intentions to mingle with people from different cultures. This should be done to foster cultural competence and consideration. In defining emotional intelligence, Goleman (1995) mentioned that it involves the recognition of one's own feelings and those of others, the capacity for self-motivation, and the management of emotions in oneself and others. Based on this definition, many people who lack self-motivation, which would have driven them to actualize their intentions following any multicultural training program, have challenges with emotional intelligence. This is to say that in an organizational setting, the multicultural leader must also drive a program that advances

emotional intelligence if proper and meaningful intercultural understanding and awareness are to occur (Webb et al., 2014).

Multicultural leadership is compounded by the unawareness of individuals about their privileged racial status and how it affects those from underprivileged groups within the organization. A prevalent example is white privilege, especially when dealing with and relating to the black underprivileged group. Any negative feeling by an African American against a White American resonates with the White Identity Development Model espoused by Helms (1990). People in this model engage in various developmental models. In the first stage, Helms (1990) argued that white people are unaware of their white privilege and are generally misinformed about other races. Some, however, transcend this first stage and enter a sphere that experiences some dissonance about other races and their own biases regarding people of other races. Some make sense of the situation that aligns with what Scott and Robinson (2001) said that the proneness of people who have limited knowledge and self-awareness of their own racial bias denies, circumvents, minimizes, and even ignores issues related to race.

Racial biases are real, and thus the need to engage in conscious identity allows affected people to reevaluate their own racial attitudes about their own culture and lend themselves to appreciating other cultures. In these discussions, people soon begin to realize that racism is real and thus transcend into the empirical type as spoken of by Scott and Robinson (2001) and finally get to the optimal level that recognizes the meaningfulness of working with people from a different race and begin to appreciate that different races notwithstanding their pent-up racial feelings have valuable inputs to offer to any relationship.

Implications of Conflicting Values to Multicultural Leadership

The conflicting values related to power distance, long versus short orientation, avoidance uncertainty, and religious, social, and racial biases have certain implications for multicultural

leadership. One implication is the challenges associated with dealing with executives or leaders from organizations that espouse different cultural dimensions. One such example is often given when dealing with Japanese executives. Many people from a low-context communication cultural paradigm often fail to understand that Japanese executives are from a high-context paradigm that considers non-verbal cues as vital as verbally expressed cues (Broader, 2021).

Furthermore, the status and identity of Japanese executives are often communicated non-verbally, which many people miss. When one obtains these cues, showing more respect for greetings and other business-related etiquette becomes easier. On the other hand, Deshpandé and Farley (1999) note that the Japanese corporate executive often nods to clarify that he is agreeing with the presentation. In this case, engaging with them must make an appropriate assumption.

Also, understanding the conflicting values and being aware of their place within organizations helps one to avoid the self-reference criterion which is characterized by measuring the 'goodness' of the people from a different culture based on one's own 'natural' perspectives borne from one's own understanding of how people generally ought to behave (Murray, 1981). In addition, within a multicultural leadership setting, there is often a need to keep to the Golden Rule, especially the one that says that "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them" which is a slight twist from the one presented in the Bible (Mathew 7:12). Both these forces imply that within a multicultural setting, cultural awareness and competence are key for multicultural leaders.

Cultural awareness is further reinforced by accessing knowledge and skills that improve multiculturalism. Knowledge in this case is based on the multifaceted nature of culture and how people are bound to behave, depending on their diverse cultural settings among other cultural situations (Sue & Torino, 2005). Skills are about the application of acquired knowledge that helps

in the planning, execution, and evaluation of one's practice and interaction with people from different cultures (Sue & Torino, 2005).

Understanding the conflicting values that underscore multicultural leadership leads to the denouncing and neglect of ethnocentrism, which presents itself when the dominant ethnic group feels that the minority groups are inferior, sometimes to the extent of their complicity in enslaving or disenfranchising the dominant group in the past (Reichard et al., 2014). Further, in some ways, the minority group in their firmly held belief that they are on the right seems to fall into the 'special interest' trap, which is exclusionary by denying the existence and need for a common shared interest that serves each culture well (Nevo, 2016). These forces are aspects that multicultural leaders must put into practice if the organization is to thrive.

The findings, especially those related to racial differences and racial-based discrimination that manifest themselves in organizations, present implications that help both natives, both black and white, and potential foreign investors understand the cultural and leadership dynamics that constitute the framework of the people in business in whatever organization the issues are present (Booyesen & van Wyk). To a significant extent, the underscoring of racial differences in positions of power in organizations helps a foreigner, for instance, to underscore the collectivist force that an African business uses to deal with each other.

It also underscores the male-dominated space within the business world of Africa, and this helps a potential foreigner navigate this somewhat patriarchal business leadership with the knowledge that the country is amenable to egalitarianism (Booyesen & van Wyk, 2007). Furthermore, understanding conflicting values based on race helps any person seeking to engage with any business framework to be keenly aware of the value of body language to express certain communication outcomes. Most notably, the study has shown that the organizational world in some parts is diverse and multicultural, and

any engagement with that world needs to value egalitarianism more than cultural incompetence.

From the analysis of conflicting values, an opportunity is provided to understand the place of women in the world, especially their place in the leadership of the political and corporate space. It also underscores the steps that any government can take through legislation to try and bridge the gender gap in leadership in the country (Sun & Li, 2017). Furthermore, the examination of conflicting values that underscore multicultural leadership highlights specific vital issues that, if implemented, lead to a certain egalitarian outcome in leadership. Such issues include efforts to change attitudes regarding the value of women in leadership, the use and leveraging of new media, and changes in legislation to advance women's positions in leadership (Sun & Li, 2017).

What Organizations can do to Build a Multicultural-Friendly Environment?

One issue confronting multicultural leadership is the conflict between and among diverse cultural groups. In the face of such conflicts, the first step noted in the literature is to assess the nature of the resulting conflicts to determine whether the conflict is from one or both sides. This is important because scholars have argued that in interpersonal conflicts, it is often difficult to decide who is wrong and who is right (Knapp, Putnam, & Davis, 1988). Within multicultural conflicts, each conflicting party possesses diverse logic and sees issues from various values, making it difficult to distinguish between conflicting parties (Muna & Zennie, 2011).

Second, addressing conflicts requires an initial understanding and practice of multicultural leadership. This type of leadership is important because it offers an inclusive mechanism that respects diverse practices, beliefs, and values productively and respectfully (Reich & Reich, 2006). In addition, multicultural leadership would allow for positive engagement and contribution of the affected persons within the cultures of a multicultural team. In this case, members,

preferably representatives, from diverse religious, social, racial, or otherwise groupings, should form a team led by a leader who helps them understand the nuances of each grouping and come up with a consultative solution that both leverages and respects each culture. In this way, the team has cultural or religious awareness of each group and develops a communication strategy that is useful and respectful (Webb et al., 2014).

Furthermore, within the framework of multiculturalism, organizations must always look deeper into the positive cultural dynamics of each culture represented and respect the existing differences in a non-judgmental and open-minded way (Deshpande & Farley, 1999; Hofsyede, 2001). Such an understanding may show that one culture is collectivist culturally and thus thinks as “We” while another is individualistic and thus thinks as “I.” It may also show that they have a high power distance, are thus more hierarchical, and have strong uncertainty avoidance that demands that they maintain predictability and order (Deshpande & Farley, 1999; Hofsyede, 2001). In other words, just like Covey (1989) famously said, organizations should “seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

Organizations seeking multicultural leadership and awareness also need to find common ground with people where each representative culture can recognize and respect each other, especially where strongly held values are concerned (Webb et al., 2014). Illustratively, a Christian may not be willing to drink alcohol. Still, he can find a respectful way to pass that along with the executives who consume alcohol as part of the business meeting ritual. Organizations should also endeavor to build relationships with people from diverse cultures because, based on their culture, they may be more amenable in situations where a relationship is borne out of knowing each other more and respecting culture (Deshpande and Farley, 1999). With this information, organizations can re-engage after making the necessary changes, which often starts with practicing a culturally appropriate action.

Individually, multicultural leaders should endeavor to develop strong emotional intelligence to regain any interest in cultural issues. Goleman (1995) observed that effective leaders possess and practice excellence in whatever they seek to do, in this case being culturally aware and competent, by demonstrating potency and vigor in at least one of each of the competencies found in the four elements that underscore emotional intelligence; the four elements being self-awareness that have emotional self-awareness, self-confidence and accurate self-assessment as its key competencies. The other is social awareness, which houses empathy, service orientation, organizational awareness, and self-management with competencies such as optimism, transparency, initiative, achievement orientation, and emotional control. The last element of EI is relationship management, which comprises competencies related to inspirational leadership, developing others, collaboration, and teamwork.

Furthermore, individuals need to inculcate high human orientation. Hofstede (2001) mentioned that this orientation is more attuned to people thinking in terms of “We” as opposed to in terms of “I” and thus priority is given to benevolence, altruism, and love for others in a bid to be culturally aware and culturally sensitive. Of course, this may create problems among people who espouse a more individualized culture and who are focused more on individual autonomy. Nonetheless, it is vital for multicultural leaders to try and seek understanding, respect, and compromise between groups.

In addition, organizations ensure robust and effective multicultural training and can use both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to encourage the transfer of multicultural training (Webb et al., 2014). They can also create time and resources that allow for effective training opportunities. The resources include human experts, technology, and finance. Finally, an organization can foster a culture that makes it easy to gain interest in multicultural issues (Muna & Zennie, 2011).

Moreover, it should always be clear to organizations represented by people from different

cultures that the celebration of cultural differences ought to be a showcase of the value that each culture equally brings to the organization and that those differences are not marks that identify strong or weak cultures, but differences that showcase the value in cultural diversity (Du, 2022). Further, multiculturally friendly organizations express the value the organization obtains in respecting each culture and learning and appreciating different cultures. This multicultural competence devoid of assimilation or cultural dominance avoids feelings of disrespect and disenfranchisement especially from people from cultures that have hitherto been considered subordinate to the dominant cultures (Sizoo, Plank, Iskat, & Serrie, 2005).

Conclusion

The most frequent causes of conflict in multicultural teams are hierarchy and other phenomena related to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, such as uncertainty, avoidance, long or short orientations, and collectivism vs. individualism. It also involves conflicting issues related to decision making, direct versus indirect communication styles, language, lifestyle, religion, and race. From this, we conclude that truly, multicultural leadership is vital for effective motivation, productivity, meaningful understanding, and empowerment of employees within an organization, but that multicultural leadership is often inhibited by misunderstanding and misapplication of the values that relate to it. Thus, leaders should be aware of all the dimensions of multicultural leadership.

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