

## Dismantling Bias Conference Series

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# Stories of leadership during Covid-19: Reflections on leadership to develop and advance new ways of thinking and operating in organizations

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## **“Stories of leadership during Covid-19: Reflections on leadership to develop and advance new ways of thinking and operating in organizations”**

### **Abstract**

During the last two years, many organizations worldwide have witnessed an unprecedented need for organizational change that rapidly transformed the work environment and operational procedures. Many countries across the globe enforced mandatory shutdowns to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic that forced organizations to quickly move work from the traditional work environment to a virtual space. This serves as an opportunity for complexity leadership scholars to apply new ways of thinking to leadership practices (Uhl-Bien, 2021) given “the level of uncertainty associated with rapidly changing, unpredictable conditions” (Hannah et al., 2009, p. 911), such as those that organizations and their members experienced due to Covid-19. In light of the changes put in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we examine how stories of leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic serve as an opportunity to reflect on leadership experiences, processes, and practices to develop and advance new ways of thinking and operating in organizations. Specifically, this study focuses on how leadership experiences serve to shift diversity, equity, and inclusion paradigms in organizations.

Examining leaders' stories of their leadership experiences within the context of complexity, specifically within the context of rapid organizational change, allows scholars to broadly think about organizational contexts within what at times can be “rigid systems” of organizing (Uhl-Bien, 2021, p. 1403). Indeed, organizational leaders can either contribute to or impede progress based whether they “[limit] initiatives to those emphasizing awareness and consciousness-raising training in leadership development more than [they promote] other more ambitious structural and policy changes” (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018, p. 814). Additionally, workplace climate at the group level, as co-constructed by leaders and followers, does not always positively relate to a more favorable climate for diversity, equity, and inclusion (Kossek et al., 2003).

Specifically, this study seeks to explore how leadership that is co-constructed by leaders and followers foregrounds and/or backgrounds certain voices within organizations, including those individuals on the margins. This study will pay particular attention to issues of power. Power is defined as the way that organizations and/or individuals influence or control others thoughts and/or actions (van Dijk, 1993). Tompkins and Cheney (1985) position power as the ability to accomplish a goal, even if it is in opposition to the goals of others, and argue that organizational power is the ability of leaders to control the actions of others in order to meet organizational goals. Power is seen as the “pivotal concept in explaining the process by which certain organizational and institutional structures prevail over others” (Mumby & Stohl, 1991, p. 313). In this way, organizations may control the actions of employees (through leaders) in order to meet organizational goals.

This study will also attend to the concept of belongingness - the human psychological need to feel connected to others in their community in meaningful ways (Hofmann et al., 2012). People naturally tend to crave a sense of belongingness in whatever social environment they find themselves. Feelings of belonging become a critical aspect of how individuals perceive themselves to be situated within and engaged with an organization. This is important because

good citizenship behaviors decrease when individuals do not feel a sense of belongingness with their organization (Baumister, 2018; Filstad et al., 2019). Before Covid-19, the issue of creating an environment that supports a sense of belonging, while promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, had been one that had gained the spotlight in many organizations. The current Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the need for organizations to create a supportive environment that fosters belongingness and inclusiveness intentionally. Due to the pandemic, organizations were forced to make rapid changes to the workplace and work processes that were counter supportive of the environment for building a sense of belonging. We argue that the marginalized groups in the workplace who typically struggle to gain a sense of belonging would be the most impacted by these changes. For these individuals, the current work atmosphere (i.e., remote, hybrid) would require that they find supportive systems outside of the normal in-person working structure to help them feel they belong.

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