



# The Leadership Challenge of Overcoming the Scourge of Racism: The Coping and Mitigative Strategies Used by Leaders

**Christopher M. Kimaru**

North Carolina Central University, Durham, USA

Email: ckimaru@NCCU.EDU

Received 5 December 2015; accepted 21 December 2015; published 24 December 2015

Copyright © 2015 by author and OALib.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

## Abstract

**Race is not a leadership challenge in culturally monolithic societies. In the United States, Caucasian leaders do not have to deal with the challenge as much as their African American counterparts. Society seems to accept their role as leaders more readily than they accept Black, Hispanic, Asian or other minority leaders. Leaders from these groups have to deal with an added challenge of coping with racism. This paper focuses on this challenge of racism, especially among African American Leaders, and examines how successful African American leaders cope or mitigate this challenge, while seeking to be effective in their leadership roles. Depersonalization of self and migrating to a group conceptualization is a common strategy that African American and minority leaders use effectively, but it can be tiring in the long run, especially if the leader wants to be at peace with his or her conscience.**

## Keywords

**Depersonalization, Leadership Challenge, Monolithic Societies, Leadership Effectiveness, Black Leadership, Prototypicality**

**Subject Areas: Sociology**

---

## 1. Introduction

Being a good leader requires adequate preparation to lead, and having the courage to face leadership challenges expected of a leader, without rancor or misgivings.

There are common leadership challenges that all leaders face, but women, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and people with disability, all face added challenges of negative stereotyping, prejudicial perceptions and second guessing their leadership competence. There are similarities in the challenges that these minorities

face, but this article will focus on the challenges facing African American leaders. Black and African-American terms are used interchangeably in the article.

A common way that African Americans have dealt with this challenge has been to disassociate race from their work or their successes. Ben Carson, for example, wants to be seen as a great neurosurgeon and not as a black neurosurgeon. This is also true of other successful African Americans in this article. Adding black to their job title is viewed as diminutive. Depersonalization of self or one's social identity has become a way to gain social acceptance for some African Americans. A white leader does not have to deal with this challenge and often does not understand why it is a challenge.

The word leadership is an encompassing term and it has many different definitions. Leadership can be defined as what a leader does to bring about change in a group, or it can be defined in terms of power relationships that exist between a leader and a follower. Northouse [1] defines leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. The Process according to Northouse, implies that a leader affects and is affected by followers [2].

Heifetz [3] has added to the meaning of leadership by pointing out that recently, business people have drawn a distinction between leadership and management, and exercising leadership has come to mean providing a vision and influencing others to realize it through noncoercive means.

## 2. The Illusion of the Post-Racial Era

The 2008 election of President Barak Obama for some signaled America had begun a post-racial era. Obama's victory in 2008, according to Rich [4] was an election that ran counter to most textbook analysis of race relations. Conventional thinking was that racism was rampant in US society, and that structural barriers precluded such an outcome. It was not likely for white voters to vote for a black man for the highest office on land, even if he were qualified [5].

According to Cose [6] the racial obstacles today are less obvious but are still omnipresent. All leaders must understand how to compete in America's post-racial society; where the rules of engagement are not the rules of the past nor are they seemingly what they appear to be in the present. The impact of the conscious and sub-conscious perpetuation of negative stereotypical imagery will often determine whether or not the leader in question will be allowed to provide viable leadership.

Cose [6] postulates that "Black men face a new America, one in which there are no limits to their dreams at least for some". However, the criteria by which black men are judged are based upon archetypes developed during America's heyday of racial intolerance. Therefore the question becomes; does the existence of institutional racialism allow members of the majority population to accept unfettered leadership from African American leaders? An example of this phenomenon is depicted in this scenario. Congressman Harold Ford Jr. was selected by Al Gore to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2000. According to Clemetson [7] the Congressman prepared his remarks but upon his arrival was told by Mr. Gore's advisers that the speech he was to deliver had already been prepared. Congressman Ford wanted to lead by talking about his vision for the future. The pre-written speech he was handed was replete with references to the civil rights movement and the glory of the past [7]. The prepared speech required the congressman to limit himself to speak only to the areas that would allow the majority of the audience to think he was creditable. Hence the influence of negative stereotypical thought presentations and caricatures.

The number of African American's in significant leadership roles in both corporate and political environments has grown significantly [6]. The old tried and true method of denying leadership opportunities as a result of a lack of credentials and or university pedigree has been effectively removed from the list of obstacles as to why African Americans could not provide effective leadership.

In 2001, Kenneth Chenault was appointed chief executive of American Express, E. Stanley O'Neal was waiting in the wings to be elevated to the C.E.O position at Merrill Lynch, and last but not least Richard Parsons was installed in the C.E.O. position at AOL Time Warner. The three prior C.E.O's unanimously stated that race was not a factor in their decision to recommend the three African American executives for the ultimate leadership position [8]. According to Roberts [8] the new class of African American C.E.O.'s have succeeded in their careers in part as a result of skills, conciliation, bluntness, boldness and their willingness to take risks. In so doing they eliminated race as a major factor in their success.

In keeping with elimination of race as away to succeed we must include President Barak Obama. In the in-

fancy of his presidential campaign a strategic decision was made to pursue a state of racial neutrality. The candidate maintained distance from civil rights leaders and certain religious figures in an effort to avoid being portrayed as black. In addition the Obama campaign distanced itself from what heretofore were considered African American political issues [9]. Candidate Obama refused to engage in African American issues for fear of upsetting the majority population. It is clear that leaders make decisions based upon how race will impact their ability to be effective.

America has come a long way in improving race relations and creating opportunities for all. Prior to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, black managers in the US were rare to find. But recently, the numbers have gone up tremendously as evidenced by the large number of black executives featured every month in *Ebony* and *Black Enterprise* magazines. But despite this progress, the skills needed to be effective as a black executive are not identical to those of a white executive. A black executive faces the added challenge of managing racism.

In their research on what a black manager needs to make it in the corporate world, Dickens Jr. and Dickens [10] contend that in addition to the usual academic qualifications that are required for a manager in a corporation, black managers feel a need to develop a higher degree of job skills than their white peers. They give an example of two additional skills that black managers need to develop; the management of racism and the management of conflict. They define management of racism as involving developing unique behaviors to counteract and neutralize demeaning, prejudicial behavior directed toward them by another race or ethnic group.

Dickens and Dickens argue that black managers can survive without managing conflict, but they will not survive for long without managing racism. White managers do not need to develop this job skill because they normally are not victims of racial discrimination in their jobs.

### 3. Understanding Historical African-American Leadership

To develop a better understanding of how black leaders have dealt with and managed racism, it is important to have a historical background of typologies of black leaders. Black leadership has evolved and we find that research prior to the 1960s indicate that there existed a well developed power structure and leadership in local Negro communities in both the North and the South. In the South, leadership and the local structure comprised of a relatively small group of preachers, teachers, undertakers, lodge leaders, and those with light skin [11] [12].

In the North, the leadership group was constituted by a handful of politicians, a smattering of business and professional men, gamblers and other underworld figures, and a large group of teachers, postal workers, and other lower-level government employees [11] [13].

At the National level, Negro leadership was comprised of persons with a more pronounced middle-class character, with considerable educational and professional achievements, and also disproportionately composed of what Myrdal called “Negro glamour personalities,” for example prominent athletes, entertainers, and others accorded status by the white community [11] [14]-[17].

Through Myrdal’s [11] classic twofold formulation of accommodation or protest, in coping with racism, we are able to understand the evolution of black leadership types in the latter years to the present.

The 1960s as an era in our history was a dynamic and tumultuous period of change, culminating in the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made discrimination in the workplace illegal. During this period, we find a number of studies examining the typologies of black leadership. Such studies as Burgess [18], Thompson [10] and others. The Myrdal and the Burgess studies capture the essence of these typologies.

Myrdal [11] viewed Negro leadership as based on terms of accepting or rejecting the extant race system, originating from slavery. Accommodation required acceptance of the caste system and leaders led only in that context. Protest on the other hand involved a rejection of the caste system. Such protest could include lobbying, litigation and nonviolent protest.

Burgess [18] in her study of Durham expanded Myrdal’s twofold construct to a fourfold typology, which included conservatives, liberals, moderates and liberals. Conservatives are those persons least likely to oppose the caste system and conforms closely to Myrdal’s accommodation categorization of “Pleading to whites”. Walter and Smith [17] call these individuals “Black Conservative Leaders”. They do not subscribe to the norms, attitudes or behavior of black leaders. They do not have a black constituency, and may be looked on with disdain within the black community because they influence white opinion about black issues. Slay [19] includes Clarence Thomas, Shelby Steele and Walter White in this category.

Liberals, according to Burgess, are the largest type and use conventional political methods such as lobbying, voting and litigation to protest caste. Moderates are those leaders who subordinate their leadership role to that of

community leaders. Radicals on the other hand identify with the masses and their form of protest is through mass demonstrations, patterned after those of Martin Luther King.

Studies by Thompson [10], Mathew and Protho [20] and Ladd [21] identified similar typologies of black leadership and shed more light into understanding black leadership types.

African Americans have also come to view leaders in terms of the expectation of their leadership. At the presidential level, for African Americans, there have been two types of presidencies: low expectations and high expectations presidencies [4]. Low expectation presidencies do not promise African Americans anything in campaigns or in office. African Americans for example, do not expect much from Republican Presidents since the Republican party adopted the southern strategy in 1968. It is common knowledge that Republican Presidents rarely meet with the Congressional Black Caucus. President George Bush was a recent exception when he met with the Congressional Black Caucus in 2005 [22].

High expectation presidencies on the other hand promise fortified policies that target eliminating inequalities and target programs to African Americans. As a result of this, we see African Americans making more political demands from Democratic Presidential candidates than they would Republican ones.

#### 4. Delivering Effective Leadership

It is a known fact that leadership and effectiveness go hand in hand. A leader's success is judged by how effective he or she is in leading. Druker [23] argued that a leader's job is to be effective, and that effectiveness can be learned.

To be effective, a leader must have consensual prestige or power to influence the attitudes, behaviors and destiny of followers and group members. Hogg [24] and Hogg & Terry [25] suggest that there are three processes that influence leadership: Prototypicality, social attraction and attribution. The three processes work conjointly to produce leadership.

Prototypicality consists of similarities in attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. In leadership, this prototypicality is demonstrated by respect for group norms, loyalty, strong sense of in-group superiority, and being "one of us" [24]. Social attraction is not based on individual characteristics but on group membership. People get attracted to each other based on group membership.

If we use the concept of leadership as based on self-categorization and self-identity, then as Hogg and Terri [25] predict, leadership effectiveness becomes more determined by group prototypicality and less by possession of general leadership qualities. When these leadership postulates are applied to a black leader, it becomes clearer why Dickens [10] singled out management of racism as crucial for a black manager's survival.

Racism is an impediment to attaining prototypicality, social attraction and attribution. That is why black leaders accede to the leadership types discussed above, and more recently to depersonalization of self. The goal is to take away focus from race and focus on job performance.

Depersonalization of self involves migrating from a self conceptualization to conceptualization as a group member [24]. For example, Chenault is called a "Consummate insider", having spent 20 years at American Express [6]. Colin Powell when faced with the reality of racism during his early days as a soldier, chose to identify his priorities—becoming enraged by racism or being successful in his army career. He determined that his priority was to be an outstanding soldier-in part, because of racism [19].

In his autobiography, Powell [26] gives an example of how he learnt to cope with racism. Colonel Brookhart, who had become like a mentor to him, had warned him on how to behave when transferred to Fort Benning in Georgia. He warned him to be careful, because the south was another world. He had to learn not to rock the boat and to be a "good Negro". He was warned not to be like a black general who preceded him named Benjamin O. Davis, who had gotten himself in trouble in the South by failing to know how to be a "good Negro". Being a good Negro at the time meant humbling oneself and kow towing the line, and sometimes taking abuse and humiliation without rancor. It involved being seen as nonthreatening and not as an angry Negro who might threaten the establishment. Success for African American leaders during this era involved swallowing one's pride and hoping for change to come.

While giving the spring 2015 commencement address to graduates at Tuskegee University, Michelle Obama warned the majority African American graduates that they will still face racism in the future. She said that while it is clear that the US has progressed on race relations, the country has further to go. She said that during her own journey to the White House, the media and critics attacked her race and questioned her character. One po-

litical sketch showed her with a “huge afro and a machine gun”. She was referred to as “Obama’s Baby Mama” and one of his “cronies of color” [27].

But President Obama has been successful in dealing with racism without going into compromises that earlier African American leaders had to go through. His success can be attributed to his depersonalization of self in his leadership, and use of postracial model in his speeches and messages. Fraser, in Marable and Clarke [28] gives an example of Obama’s speech to a large group of supporters in St. Paul Minnesota. Obama did not make reference to the historic fact that he was the first African American to be selected as the nominee of any major political party. He emphasized the postblack message, dedicating the speech to his white grandmother and highlighting the diversity of his coalition.

Shelby Steele [29] a black conservative and Hoover Institution scholar has portrayed Obama’s postracial approach as extortion to exact benefits from whites for not exploiting white guilt. He argues that Mr. Obama’s political ingenuity was very simple: “To trade moral leverage for gratitude. Give up moral leverage over whites, refuse to shame them with America’s racist past, and the gratitude they show will constitute a new form of black power. They will love you for the faith you show them.” [4].

Steele’s view of the Obama phenomenon fails to recognize depersonalization of self as a modern approach for African Americans to attain effective leadership. Slay’s [19] proposition 10, which proposes that individuals who emphasize social identification as African Americans will experience social attraction in minority (African American) contexts, while individuals who de-emphasize social identification as African Americans will experience social attraction in majority (white) contexts, rings true in most instances.

In Obama’s case, emphasizing his social identification as an African American President would reduce his social attraction and make him less effective. The same thing would happen to black CEOs such as Kenneth Chenault, Richard Parsons, and Stanley O’Neal. De-emphasizing their social identification as African Americans heightens their social attraction and facilitates their effectiveness. Roberts [8] states that neither Parsons nor Chenault nor O’Neal is comfortable with having his enormous professional accomplishment viewed through the prism of race.

If we compare the issues of managing racism which is paramount to a black leader to other paramount issues in leadership, we cannot help to wonder if the energy expended in managing racism would not be better utilized in dealing with other broader issues that lead to better and more effective leadership.

Such issues as improving emotional intelligence can lead to better leadership. This involves the ability to manage one’s emotions to make decisions, understand emotions, and perceive and manage other people’s emotions [30]. Some authors believe that emotional intelligence also includes adaptability and resiliency, achievement drive and initiative, empathy, and the ability to inspire others. These are all issues that are important for effective leadership [31] [32].

Bunker [33] list four emotional and social competencies associated with superior leadership: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management.

Self-awareness involves knowing one’s internal states, preferences, resources and intuitions. Self-management involves managing one’s internal states, impulses and resources to facilitate reaching goals. Social awareness involves awareness of others’ feelings, needs, and concerns. Relationship management involves adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others. A leader needs to work on all these four areas to excel in leadership. If managing racism, which is a form of social awareness and relationship management becomes such a priority to a black leader and a disproportionate amount of time is spent on managing it, then it means that the black leader is spending less time on the other two competencies. This can lead to making the leader less effective or holding him or her back from being a superior leader.

## 5. Conclusions

A new and a more diverse America requires leadership that is a reflection of the population. According to Cose [6] members of the majority white population see the African American community as monolithic in thought and opinion. African American’s are as diverse and complicated in thought and opinion as the white community Cose [6]. The perpetuation and acceptance of negative stereotypical messaging solidifies in the mind of some that African Americans have less ability and therefore are less capable of providing effective leadership, thereby proving the premise that African American’s are more simplistic and less equipped to lead. American society is moving towards redefining its view of African American leaders. The new paradigm will expand the meaning of



African American leadership to include ability and talent and resourcefulness. No one has to depersonalize his or her social identity to gain social attraction in the present America.

Depersonalizing oneself or migrating to a group conceptualization can both work as a coping or mitigative strategy to gain social acceptance in present day America. But one has to wonder what such self degradation, and migrating from one's social grouping to gain social acceptance does to one's pride and self worth in the long run.

## References

- [1] Northhouse, P.G. (2004) Leadership Theory and Practice. Sage Publishing Inc., Thousand Oaks.
- [2] Kimaru, C. and Scott, D. (2013) Leadership Effectiveness: Does Race Matter? Commentary. *Governance Worldwide: The Online Journal & Network of American Society of Public Administration's Section for Public Management Practice*.
- [3] Heifetz, R.A. (1994) Leadership without Easy Answers. The Bel Knap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- [4] Dowdle, A.J., Van Raemdonck, D.C., Maranto, R., Eds. (2011) The Obama Presidency: Change and Continuity. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, New York.
- [5] Zernike, K. and Sussman, D. (2008) For Pollsters, the Racial Effect That Wasn't. *New York Times*.
- [6] Cose, E. (2002) Rethinking Leadership. *Newsweek*, **139**.
- [7] Clemetson, L. (2002) Losing Old Labels: Rep. Harold Ford Jr. Pays Homage to the Past but This Rising Political Star Refuses to Be Boxed in by It. *Newsweek*, **139**.
- [8] Roberts, J.L. (2002) The Race to the Top. *Newsweek*, **139**, 44.
- [9] Silva, R. (2009) When Whites Love a Black Leader: Race Matters Obamerica. *Journal of African American Studies*, **13**, 176-183.
- [10] Dickens Jr., F. and Dickens, J.B. (1991) The Black Manager: Making It in the Corporate World. Amacom, American Management Association, New York.
- [11] Myrdal, G. (1962, 1944) An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. Harper & Row, New York.
- [12] Dollard, J. (1957) Caste and Class in a Southern Town. Doubleday, Garden City, 85-96.
- [13] Gosnell, H. (1967, 1935) Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- [14] Huggins, N. (1978) Afro-Americans. In: Higham, J., Ed., *Ethnic Leadership in America*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- [15] Bennett, L. (1964) The Black Establishment. In: Bennett, L., Ed., *The Negro Mood and Other Essays*, Ballantine Books, New York.
- [16] Bunche, R. (1939) The Programs of Organizations Devoted to the Improvement of the Status of the Negro. *Journal of Negro Education*, **8**, 539-550. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2292650>
- [17] Walters, R.W. and Smith, R.C. (1999) African American Leadership. State University of New York Press, Albany.
- [18] Burgess, M. (1962) Negro Leadership in a Southern City. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- [19] Slay, H.S. (2003) Spanning Two Worlds: Social Identity and Emergent African-American Leaders. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, **9**, 56-66. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/107179190300900405>
- [20] Matthews, D. and Prothro, J. (1966) Negroes and the New Southern Politics. Harcourt Brace and World, New York.
- [21] Ladd, E. (1962) Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does. Free Press, New York.
- [22] Hulse, C. (2005) Black Caucus Urges Bush to Combat Race Gap. *New York Times*, 1/27/2005.
- [23] Drucker, P.F. (1967) The Effective Executive. Harper & Row Publishers, New York.
- [24] Hogg, M.A. (2001) A Social Identity Theory of Leadership. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, **5**, 184-200. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0503\\_1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0503_1)
- [25] Hogg, M.A. and Terry, D.J. (2000) Social Identity and Self Categorization Process in Organization Contexts. *Academy of Management Review*, **25**, 121-140.
- [26] Powell, C. and Persico, J.E. (1995) My American Journey. Random House, New York.
- [27] Laine, S. (2015) Michelle Obama Tuskegee University Speech: What Did She Say about Racism. *Christian Science Monitor*, May 11.

- [28] Marable, M. and Clarke, K., Eds. (2009) *Barack Obama and African American Empowerment: The Rise of Black America's New Leadership*. Pilgrimage Macmillan, New York.
- [29] Steele, S. (2008) Why Jesse Jackson Hates Obama. *Walstreet Journal*, July 22, A19.
- [30] Mayer, J.D. (2006) A New Field Guide to Emotional Intelligence. In: Garrochi, J., Forgas, J.P. and Mayer, J.D., Eds., *Emotional Intelligence in Everyday Life: A Scientific Inquiry*, 2nd Edition, Psychology Press, Philadelphia.
- [31] Bar-On, R., Handley, R. and Fund, S. (2005) The Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Performance. In: Druscot, V., Sala, F. and Mount, G., Eds., *Linking Emotional Intelligence and Performance at Work: Current Research Evidence*, Erlbaum, Mahwah.
- [32] Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. and McKee, A. (2002) *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston.
- [33] Bunker, K.A., Hall, D.T. and Kram, K.E. (2010) *Extraordinary Leadership: Addressing the Gaps in Senior Executive Development*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.