Developing Professionals of Color: Going Beyond the Traditional Leadership Skill Set

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how the Leadership and Professional Development course at Morehouse College, an all-male historically Black college in Atlanta, Georgia, goes beyond teaching traditional leadership and professional development skills and exposes students to the impact of being a "professional of color" in corporate America. This paper will explore the need for African Americans to have skills related to corporate success that go beyond those needed by Whites and the pedagogical techniques used to develop the additional skill sets in undergraduate students of color. Anecdotal and empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of the course is provided.

Introduction

Leadership and professional development training in undergraduate programs seeks to develop in students the traits, skills, knowledge and behaviors that have been shown necessary for leaders to be successful. Undergraduate leadership development programs and courses provide instruction in a variety of skill sets and competencies, typically including self-regulation and self-management, effective communication skills, building and maintaining teams, personal finance, public speaking, listening skills, and personal values, as well community leaders speakers' series, and activities that foster the development of dining etiquette skills, resume writing, and interviewing skills (e.g., Hackman, Kirlin & Tharp, 2004; Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003). Hackman, et al. states that such things as listening skills and personal values may by considered "peripheral to leadership," (p. 5) but essential to a leader's success.

When a leadership and professional development program's goal is to develop successful "professionals of color," the question must be asked, "Are their additional skills, traits, behaviors, habits and knowledge the professional of color must possess in order to be successful?" Recent works have highlighted the effect of race, gender, and ethnicity in the success equation and have shown that the experience of race, gender, and ethnicity adds to the trait profile characteristics of successful leaders of color.

In *Cracking the Corporate Code*, Cobbs and Turnock (2000) record the stories of 32 successful African American senior executives in corporate America. Their stories tell "how they mastered the demons of race and gender and learned to read their environment objectively and interpret its messages accurately" (p. xii).

According to Cobbs and Turnock (2000) "Blacks in corporate America always have a second job, one that is intensely personal and never completed" (p. 4). This second job is vividly presented in "*Dear White Boss …*" by Carver and Livers (2002), faculty and coaches at the Center for Creative Leadership. They describe the frustrations and hindrances to success experienced by people of color in the workplace through a fictionalized account of a correspondence from a Black manager to his White boss. The letter describes elements of the corporate terrain that Blacks often face and Whites do not, including questions about issues related to diversity, such as "why all of the Blacks sit together in the cafeteria?"; explaining the actions of other Black people (i.e., O.J. Simpson and Jesse Jackson); and, being the only person stopped and asked for identification when entering the office building on the weekend.

Also, Livers and Carver (2004) in their article in *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development*, they detail the leadership development of people of color and the roles that difference and organizational context play in the development process. They introduce the term "miasma" (p. 314) as what occurs when difference, and the reaction to it, is introduced to the workplace. According to Livers and Carver, miasma creates an organizational climate of misperception and distortion. As the miasma of a swamp hinders navigation and progress, professionals of color can be hindered by the lack of recognizable landmarks from their own culture and identity. As a result, professionals of color are faced with additional challenges not directly related to the work and for which most organizations provide little formal support.

Recognizing that different challenges exist for professionals of color, Daft (2005) lists some of the challenges minorities face as unequal expectations/difference as deficiency, biculturalism, the glass ceiling and glass walls, and the opportunity gap. Unequal expectations/difference as deficiency describes the perception held by many minorities who feel that no matter how many college degrees they earn, how many hours they work, how they dress, or how much effort and enthusiasm they invest, they are never considered to "have the right stuff." Biculturalism is defined as the socio-cultural skills and attitudes used by racial minorities as they move back

and forth between the dominant culture and their own ethnic or racial culture. Glass ceilings refer to an invisible barrier that separates women and minorities from top leadership positions, where glass walls refer to an invisible barrier to important lateral movement within organizations. The opportunity gap refers to the challenge presented by a lack of opportunity for many minorities to obtain the same level of education as White, American-born individuals.

Given these additional challenges, professionals of color have managed to achieve success often by incorporating additional skill sets into their repertoire. In Woods (2003) reports on the results of a survey of 34 highly accomplished executives of color in the media industry and summarizes their views on how they were successful. The findings show these executives of color identify the universal success experiences shared by all executives and managers of determination, relationship-building, hard work, skillful communication, performing above and beyond the call of duty, intelligence, savvy, and courage. In addition, they identify the things that make life different and often more challenging if you are a person of color or a woman. Such things include the feeling that as a person of color and/or a woman you cannot let your guard down for one second because of the stereotypes; working doubly hard because there is an extra burden of proof for a person of color; and, turning for their greatest support to family and to faith in order to get through the maze of company mores and office politics.

Cobbs and Turnock (2000) noted one executive's story stated that the skills needed by Blacks to be successful in this environment include developing a finely-tuned sense of how to handle racial slights – when you can and should call attention to them; ability to sift through each incident and determine where race and gender are real factors and when others are operating from different agendas; developing strategies to manage your own conscious and unconscious discomfort as well as the discomfort of colleagues; and, the ability to deal with the stereotypical responses your colleagues may have for you. Other executives listed the skills of self-confidence, intelligence, and emotional fortitude as the "weapons" that provided them the ability to manage their reactions when race was used against them. And yet another African American executive stated his very successful strategy for dealing with the race issue in corporate America was through his religious faith.

Livers and Carver (2004) discussed four areas of difference that most prominently contribute to the miasma of professionals of color and the skill sets minorities must develop in order to be successful in the workplace. The differences are (a) identity, bringing one's whole self to work; (b) responsibility, being successful and looking out for each other; (c) networking, making meaningful connections; and, (d) mentoring, a scarce but valuable resource.

Figure 1. Leadership Skills - All Professionals

Universal Leader Success Skill Set (Woods)
•   Determination
•   Relationship-building
•   Hard work
•   Skillful communication
•   Performing above and beyond the call of duty
•   Intelligence
•   Savvy
•   Courage

Figure 2. Issues of Concern and Additional Leadership Skills Needed by Professional of Color

Issues	Additional Skills
• Demons of Race and Gender (Cobbs and Turnock) • Unequal expectations (Daft) • Difference as deficiency (Daft) • Biculturalism (Daft) • The Glass Ceiling (Daft) • Glass walls (Daft) • Miasma (Livers and Carver)	• Managing Stereotypes (Woods) • Turning to support of family and faith (Woods) • Developing self-confidence, intelligence and emotional fortitude (Cobbs and Turnock) • Navigating the corporate atmosphere of misperception and distortion (Livers and Carver) • Building useful support systems through networking and mentoring (Livers and Carver)

The works cited in the literature review (Carver & Livers, 2002; Cobbs & Turnock, 2000; Daft, 2005; Livers & Carver, 2004; Woods, 2003) provide substantial support for an affirmative answer to the question posed by this paper, "Are their additional skills, traits, behaviors, habits, and knowledge the professional of color must possess in order to be successful?"

In addition to exploring the above mentioned question, the intent of this paper is (a) to provide pedagogical examples of how an undergraduate core business course addresses the additional skill sets needed for professionals of color and (b) to add to the body of knowledge on leadership and professional development needs for undergraduate students of color. The description of the course follows.

Course Structure

The purpose of the Leadership and Professional Development (LPD) course at Morehouse College is to develop and enhance students' leadership traits and skills. While the purpose of other courses in the business program's core is to develop and enhance students' technical and conceptual skills, LPD focuses on those additional skills, as noted in the literature review, that are a necessary part of success for professionals of color after graduation. LPD differentiates these additional skills into three focus areas: (a) Personal Leadership – self-understanding, values identification, and ethics; (b) Personal Management – professional behaviors and decorum; and, (c) Interpersonal Leadership – teamwork, relationship building, and civic responsibility.

LPD, a three-credit hour course, was added to the business program core curriculum in 1994 during the Business Department's quest to earn national accreditation from the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). LPD has been offered each semester since its inception in 1994. One section of the course is taught each Monday of a 13-week semester for a 2.5-hour time slot. One hundred African American male undergraduate students are enrolled. A three-member instruction team leads the class. The instruction team is comprised of an assistant professor, the director of career services, and a volunteer community service consultant. The pedagogy associated with the course includes classroom discussions and lectures, role-plays, workshops, team exercises, oral presentations, guest speakers, and community service which are described in more detail in the following section.

Developing Professionals of Color

As stated in the introduction, a leadership and professional development program for professionals of color must take into consideration the effect of race, gender, and ethnicity on one's ability to be a successful leader. The development must account for the additional skills, traits, behaviors, habits, and knowledge the professional of color must possess in order to be successful. The pedagogy of the three focus areas – personal leadership, personal management, and interpersonal leadership – provide opportunities for students to be made aware of the specific challenges they will face as professionals of color and helps them to identify strategies to successfully negotiate the challenges.

Personal Leadership is defined in LPD as "doing the right thing, based on a personal value system of standards higher than the norm, which one refuses to violate, regardless of the situation." For professionals of color, this means having a clear understanding of their cultural and personal value system, being comfortable with their self-identity, and grounded by a spiritual connection. Our Professionals of Color speaker series provides an in-class forum for successful African American corporate professionals and entrepreneurs to share their personal stories, which substantiate these strategies. For example:

- I've done well, but I don't belong. There are parts of the majority culture that I will never gain admission to – coops, social clubs and country clubs. I'm still followed by security guards at store. You must have something in life that keeps you centered – religion, fraternity/sorority, family and friends. (Senior level African American male executive, finance industry)

- You are judged differently. You must work twice as hard to be successful. There is often an identity crisis and dichotomy of being Black and being successful. Others may say you are a sellout. And you may still be the "only one." Most of your peers won't look like you, so you must be comfortable with yourself. Have a personal support system. Don't neglect your spiritual side, which will provide you a place to go when things go wrong. (African American female consumer products marketing executive)

The importance of professionals of color having a strong sense of self-awareness is apparent from these comments. LPD addresses this need through three homework assignments: attitude self-assessment, strengths and weaknesses evaluation, and personal mission statement, and the "Understanding Corporate Culture 101" class session.

In the "Understanding Corporate Culture 101" class session, executives of color from corporate America participate as managers in role-plays covering situations new hires may face within the first six months of employment. The LPD instruction team wrote five role-play scenarios: (a) ethics and the job application process; (b) the first performance evaluation; (c) the racist boss; (d) sexual harassment; and, (e) manager-employee conflict. Students are divided into five groups and each group is given one scenario to discuss. Groups collaborate for 30 minutes on how the new employee should handle the situation and select a spokesperson to participate in a five-minute role-play of their strategy with a visiting African American executive. After the executive and student complete the role-play in front of the class, the executive discusses the scenario and shares insight on the best why to handle the situation. An example of a role-play scenario is found in Appendix A.

To date African American executives from Morgan Stanley, JP Morgan Chase, Cummins Inc., Banc of America Securities, and Merrill Lynch have participated as managers in the role-plays. The executives are extremely complimentary toward the authenticity of the role-plays. As one African American female, managing director, at JP Morgan Chase said to the students at the end of the role-plays, "We can't really teach it [dealing with racism and sexism], but we must talk about it so you will recognize it when it happens to you; and it *will* happen to you."

Students also give a high evaluation of the role-play session and eagerly participate in it to better understand how they might handle such situations. As an example, one student answered the scenario shown in Appendix A, *The Racist Boss*, by threatening to go to the second level boss and have his manager fired. The guest executive and instructors were then able to explain that this approach would break an unwritten rule of corporate America, "don't tell on your boss," and possibly

cause the employee more problems than it would solve. A better strategy was given which suggested that the young employee should simply but firmly say, "Thank you for the invitation. I'll be there, but I won't sing. I want to perform the same role as my colleagues, which is not to sing."

Personal Management is defined in LPD as "doing the right thing, the right way," and is covered through topics that include appropriate dress in the workplace, grooming, first impression management, corporate work ethic expectations, dining etiquette, and networking skills. Again, participants in the Professionals of Color speaker series consistently speak to the importance of these skills for professionals of color.

- Let's get real. The reason dressing appropriately and having little to no facial hair is important is because you are an African American. Having excessive facial hair places you in the category of villain, just as it is the villains in movies who have the long mustaches and sideburns. (Morehouse alumnus, Brand Manager, soft drinks industry)
- Stereotypes often heard about African Americans in the workplace are "they miss a lot of days of work; they are late; they take long lunch breaks; if they are hired, they won't work hard; and, they won't come back after the 1st pay check." You [the students] must not substantiate these stereotypes and you must not let the stereotypes hold you back. You must smash, not just break the glass ceiling. (Senior level African American male executive, transportation industry)

To help students internalize basic professionalism skills, intensive sessions are conducted that demonstrate the proper techniques of business dress and corporate etiquette. For dress, students are required to come to each class period in business attire and are critiqued by the instructors in an interview-dressing workshop. For dining etiquette, the class is taken for a five-course dinner at a local Black-owned restaurant. In addition, a reception is held at the same restaurant where students are expected to practice the art of mingling. The etiquette events feature corporate sponsorship and participation.

Interpersonal Leadership is defined in LPD as "doing the right thing, the right way, with and for others." LPD stresses the need for professionals of color to be able to work efficiently and effectively in teams, as well as develop the skills to build relationships in the workplace. In *Interpersonal Skills in Organizations,* it is "estimated that between 70 and 82 percent of U.S. companies use the team concept, making teamwork skills one of the most commonly required skills in the work environment" (de Janasz, Dowd, & Schneider, 2002, p. 311). The Professionals of Color speakers reiterate the importance of relationship building and teamwork for African Americans.

- African Americans tend not to use networking effectively. We bond with each other, but African Americans don't have the information and answers; we don't run the business. You must feel comfortable establishing relationships with people who don't look like you. (Senior level African American male executive, finance industry)

- It takes focus and energy to be Black in corporate America. There is fear and frustrations when Blacks ban together in a company in corporate America. Limit your on-job bonding time with other African Americans. And make racism your last data point in your analysis of your failure; it is the cheap way out. (Senior level African American male executive, finance industry)

Again, the role-plays discussed earlier are valuable tools in developing interpersonal leadership skills. The manager-employee conflict and sexual harassment scenarios of the Understanding Corporate Culture class session specifically address effective relationship building strategies.

Interpersonal leadership is also developed through the required community service project. The community service project enables students to serve as tutors and mentors to elementary and middle school students in the Atlanta Public Schools. This is a team service project, which helps to enhance students' awareness of their civic responsibility to give back to their communities as well as develop their interpersonal skills. The students are also required to give a team presentation relating their experiences with the elementary school students.

Readings that highlight minority issues in the workplace play a major role in the LPD pedagogy. The textbook for LPD, *The Morehouse College Career Guide: A Leadership and Professional Development Handbook* (White & McLaurin, 2004), includes a chapter that provides insight on corporate culture, corporate power and lifestyle, and corporate politics from an African American perspective. White, an African American female, spent 13 years in corporate America before joining academia. Her experiences and lessons learned are shared in this chapter. Students are also required to read *Cracking the Corporate Code* (Cobbs & Turnock, 2000).

Along with the previously discussed pedagogical techniques, instructors facilitate in-class discussions with students and draw upon personal experiences to heighten students' awareness of the role of race, gender, and ethnicity in the workplace. The instructors also spend numerous hours outside of the classroom discussing related topics with students and providing one-on-one support and coaching to students who have particular concerns with their ability to be successful in corporate America.

Course Effectiveness

Student comments written on the end of class course evaluation in Spring 2004 were complimentary of the class. "I really did enjoy this class. I learned a lot and I believe that it was one of the first classes I can say I will use all of the material." "I appreciated LPD. Some of the skills taught, I was already familiar with, but the class sharpened my skills." "Yes I would agree that overall it enhanced my personal leadership skills. I think the most beneficial part was the dinner session at Paschals." In addition, junior and senior students returning from summer Wall Street internships, as well as Morehouse alums, comment that LPD made them aware of

race, gender, and ethnicity differences that would be encountered in the workplace, thereby alleviating potential defensive thoughts and actions.

Corporate recruiters have commented on the ability of Morehouse business students to work effectively within the corporate setting. And executives of color participating in the speaker series and class sessions have applauded LPD's efforts to forewarn students of color on what to expect in corporate America and how to effectively handle themselves in corporate settings.

Although this anecdotal evidence gives support to LPD's effectiveness in the area of providing students exposure to the intricacies and nuances of organizational life (corporate culture), with special emphasis on the impact of being African American in corporate America, a more impressive measure of LPD course effectiveness is evident through a recently conducted empirical study. In Fall 2004, students taking a management consulting class at Morehouse College distributed a survey to 800 plus Morehouse business graduates who had completed requirements within the past 10 years. The survey included questions on the perceived effectiveness of LPD in the three focus areas: Personal Leadership, Personal Management, and Interpersonal Leadership. Over one-hundred, thirty responses were received. Sixty-one percent of the respondents agreed that LPD was beneficial in the development of their personal leadership skills (integrity, ethics, values); 73% of the respondents agreed that LPD was beneficial in the development of their personal management skills (professional decorum, dining etiquette, business dress); and, 69% of the respondents agreed that LPD was beneficial in the development of their interpersonal leadership skills (understanding corporate culture and the impact of being African American in a corporate setting). Complete results of the survey for the three LPD focus areas are shown in Table 1. As can be learned from the results of the survey, a majority of the alumni respondents considered the class to be effective.

Table 1: Fall 2004 Survey Results on LPD Course Effectiveness

LPD Focus Area	Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N
1) Personal Leadership	Classroom Workshops and Discussions on Integrity, Ethics and Values Were Beneficial to My Success in My Chosen Career	61%	29%	10%	132
2) Personal Management	Classroom Workshops and Discussions on Professional Decorum, Including Dining Etiquette and Business Dress, Were Beneficial to My Success in My Chosen Career.	73%	16%	11%	132

3) Interpersonal Leadership	Classroom Workshops and Discussions on Corporate Culture and The Impact of Being African American in a Corporate Setting Were Beneficial to My Success in My Chosen Career.	69%	23%	8%	133

Conclusions and Future Implications

Leadership research shows successful leaders share universal success experiences of determination, relationship-building, hard work, skillful communication, performing above and beyond the call of duty, intelligence, savvy, and courage (Woods, 2003). This holds true for successful leaders of all races, genders, and ethnicities. More recent research also shows that for professionals of color, success experiences call for additional skills, traits, behaviors, habits, and knowledge that go beyond the traditional universal set (Carver & Livers, 2002; Cobbs & Turnock, 2000; Daft, 2004; Livers & Carver, 2004; Woods, 2003). In order to develop professionals of color who are fully equipped to be successful, undergraduate leadership and professional development courses and training programs must include activities that provide its non-White participants the opportunity to develop these skills.

In 1994, Morehouse College, an all-male, historically Black college, incorporated into its business core curriculum a leadership and professional development course that teaches the traditional leadership skill sets as well as modules and activities that address the effect of race, gender, and ethnicity on one's ability to be a successful leader. The effectiveness of the program has been substantiated in two ways: (a) anecdotal evidence gathered from conversations with Morehouse College business program students and graduates, corporate recruiters, and guest speakers suggest that LPD is effective in teaching students of color the interpersonal skills, traits, and behaviors necessary to successfully negotiate corporate America and (b) empirical data collected on the perceived effectiveness of LPD through a Fall 2004 survey of Morehouse business alums who have graduated since 1994 show that a majority of respondents agree that the LPD instructional techniques in the areas of Personal Leadership, Personal Management, and Interpersonal Leadership were beneficial to their success.

The authors plan to conduct additional empirical studies of the achievements of Morehouse College business program graduates over the past 10 years compared to their peers of color, along with a qualitative assessment of their perceptions of the role LPD played in their achievements. Based on the effectiveness findings already gathered, we do not expect changes in the overall assessment of the effectiveness of this course in leadership and professional development for undergraduate students of color. However additional quantitative and qualitative research evidence that supports the effectiveness of this course would greatly add to and inform the scant

body of knowledge on leadership development needs particular to undergraduate students of color.

In conclusion, the anecdotal and empirical findings presented provide a strong argument to support the incorporation of the LPD curriculum into all leadership and professional development programs for professionals of color. Business programs at historically Black colleges and universities are strongly encouraged to follow Morehouse's lead by adding a required leadership and professional development academic course containing modules specific to the development of professionals of color. Predominately White colleges and universities should at a minimum provide opportunities for their students of color to receive exposure to the additional skills, traits, behaviors, and knowledge that go beyond the traditional universal leader success skill set (see Figure 2) through offerings such as a "Professionals of Color" speaker series, mentoring programs with successful executives of color, and seminars based on books such as *Cracking the Corporate Code* and the *Morehouse College Career Guide*. Undergraduate programs at majority White institutions that address the additional leadership development needs of professionals of color will also help to raise White students' awareness of cultural differences in the workplace.

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Appendix A

Understanding Corporate Culture 101
Class Session Role-Play

Scenario: **The Racist Boss – Student's Scenario**

New Hire: **James, 23-year-old African American male, 3.0 GPA; easy going personality, likable**

You have accepted a job with a company that hires few African Americans. You are the only black on your team of 10 people within an area of 75 people. Other blacks have been a part of the area, but none have lasted more than 6 months. You like the job; it pays well and has great benefits. You are using the company's tuition reimbursement plan next fall to start the executive MBA program at the City University. You get along well with your boss and you even like your coworkers, especially Joe and Charles. They are 23-year-old white males and started the same day as you. You three have a lot in common and a good working relationship.

The area manager, Bob, seems a little aloof. When you pass him in the hallways, he does respond to your greeting of hello but he has never called you by name or spoken first. You were introduced to him by your boss your first week on the job, but have had no interaction with him since. But with 75 people in his area, you can't expect him to know everyone by name, especially the new hires.

This morning, while walking past the break room, you notice Bob, Joe and Charles having a conversation. Your curiosity gets the best of you and you return to the break room. Bob has left. When you sit to have a cup of coffee with Joe and Charles, they ask if you will be going to the area cookout at Bob's house this coming Saturday. You are caught by surprise because you knew nothing of the cookout. You play it off with a side comment but you are hurt to know that you have not been invited.

Later in the day, you receive a call from Bob's secretary, requesting you to meet with him for five minutes. Of course you say yes to the meeting. "Bob knows that Joe and Charles have spilled the beans about the cookout and now he has to invite me. But should I go to the cookout?"

Group Discussion: **What is your strategy for meeting with Bob?**

Scenario:　　**The Racist Boss – Facilitator's Guide**

New Hire:　**James, 23-year-old African American male, 3.0 GPA; easy going personality, likable**

Manager:　**Bob, 60 year old White male, raised in the South; still not comfortable with integration.**

Manager's Role:　　You know that Joe and Charles have told James about the cookout. You must invite James but your wife would not approve. So your solution is to invite James over to provide the entertainment. Your opening line, "Well James, I understand you were in your college glee club? How about coming to the cookout Saturday and singing us a few songs?" You continue with other comments that could be received as racist.

Teaching points:
1.　　Handling a curve ball: quick thinking in racist situations.
2.　　Interacting with your boss' boss.
3.　　Developing effective workplace strategies when you are the "only one" in the workplace.