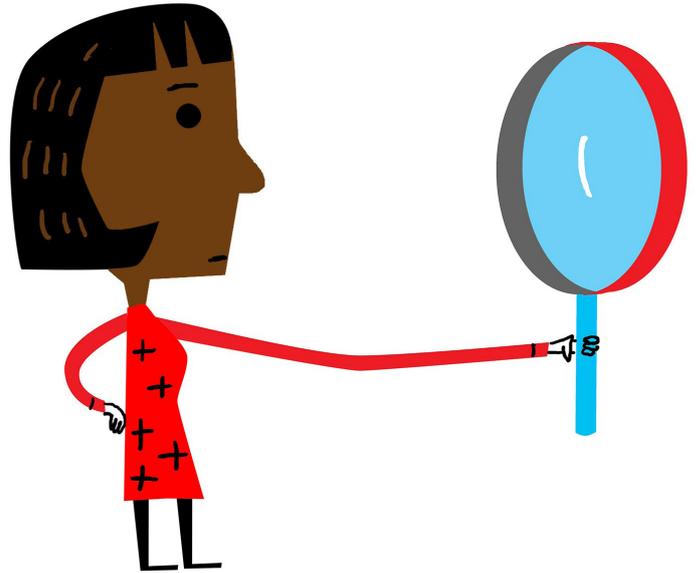




FULLY YOU: USE-OF-SELF AS A BLACK WOMAN-LEADER

Kathleen Brown



“If you work with a Black woman it’s likely she’s censoring herself most of the day. Everything from her hair, attire, tone of voice, hand gestures, accent, etc is being internally policed. Most of us don’t get to be ourselves at work.”

Christiana Amarachi Mbakwe

The focus of this article is to acknowledge Black¹ women-leaders, to let them know that they are seen. An additional focus is to offer foundational information to those who work with Black women-leaders as coaches, consultants or supervisors - to help the helpers provide supportive and developmental environments in which these women can express themselves and bring the fullness of who they are to their work.

The Challenge of Being Ourselves

I firmly believe that being a leader is challenging enough no matter who you are, and that it is even more challenging for Black women. There are few, if any, places at work where we can be ourselves. In addition to doing our jobs, our time and energy is typically spent on fitting in, staying ‘below the radar’ of anyone who is made uncomfortable by anything about us, and not ‘making waves’. It is as though we have at least two full-time jobs! I would like to change this situation so that Black women-leaders secure trusting spaces where they can ‘let their hair down’, be themselves, and support each other.

Over 22 years ago, for my master’s thesis, I researched and wrote about Black women-leaders surviving and thriving in the midst of organizational chaos (Brown, 1996). I reread this thesis recently and, 22 years later, I notice that not much has

changed. My findings at the time were that a Black woman-leader carries with her a tremendous amount of pain and loneliness because, more often than not, she is an ‘only’ in her workspace. She is often the only Black woman-leader in her division and one of few in the whole organization. She may have the added burden of being the first in her family to have achieved such a high level of success. The pressure to succeed, to maintain her ‘good’ job is on. Failure is not an option. Sharing doubts and fears with colleagues is unsafe. To share her doubts and fears with friends and family is unwelcome. There is no trusted ‘someone’ with whom she can share her feelings. This pain and loneliness is, at a minimum, unseen and unacknowledged by others. And it is often unacknowledged by the women themselves: they do not view it as anything special, out of the norm, or unexpected. It is just the way things are (Walker-Barnes, 2014).



The leaders I interviewed reported their sense of being an invisible, visible minority. They experienced profound isolation and marginalization, in spite of their positions of relative power. As a woman who is Black and a leader, the words of these women resonate with me. We do not know if a space is being held for our pain or our perspectives. And if it is, can we trust it? Our working lives include too many instances of trust ruined by acts of betrayal. In the meantime, we take great care to keep our private lives private and we are careful - careful to fit in, and careful not to be our complete selves at work (Turner, 1997). This way of being expresses itself now in my membership of many groups in which I am the only African-American; most of the other members are white, with a few women-of-color from other countries. In these groups, I find myself being watchful about how I interact and engage. But as we get to know each other and I feel more comfortable, I allow more of my true Self to show: I am more expressive, revealing a wider range of my emotions and perspectives. Sometimes this backfires in the responses that I receive, which indicates to me that my opinion is not welcome if it is not consistent with the prevailing view. Additionally, I have to watch to make sure that group leaders are not displaying behavior that shows that they are threatened by my knowledge and participation. This is especially true if the group leader is a white woman who is insecure in her role.

And in my role as a manager, I often found myself needing to 'dumb down' when I had a new boss who was new to management. In three instances I can recall them being threatened by my breadth of knowledge of the organization, and my knowledge of how to lead and manage. One boss was so intimidated that I had to stop creating an agenda for our meetings, so that she could feel that she was in charge. This leads me to ask, "*Can Black women-leaders be whom they fully are at work?*"

Let us pause for a moment and exam a snippet of daily life from the perspective of a Black woman-leader who is working in a mostly white environment?. Waking up in the morning, she thinks about her workday, noting meetings, projects, people. She is reviewing her day in order to navigate the particular territory of the work that is to be done. Are there landmines she needs to prepare for? This will determine how she styles her hair, her make-up, and the clothes she wears. Is it a day in which she can allow most of her true Self to show? Should she be mostly invisible? Or should she concentrate on self-preservation and 'having her own back'? She knows that she needs to be prepared for not just doing her job, but for how she is *perceived by others*, and for how she *does* her job. To be mostly 'who she is' could be foolish, and even risky or dangerous: "...for the most part, Black women don't expect to be able to bring their full selves to the workplace and still get ahead" (Cheeks, 2018). Rather than bringing her full Self to work, she needs

to bring the parts that will be perceived as non-threatening to the status quo. But what would our lives be like if we did bring our full selves to work? My lived experience is that the workplace is missing out when the environment supports us in hiding major parts of ourselves, in denying us a full use of ourselves.

'Use-of-Self' is a term that I first heard in conversations with organization development practitioners, Charlie and Edie Seashore, of the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science. Charlie and Edie were expert facilitators in that they embodied the task of 'holding up the mirror' in order for people to see their full selves. Their shared perspective was that, only through awareness of Self, can change happen. Building on this, Charlie became an expert in the development of Use-of-Self, a practice which addresses these questions:

- How do I use myself in any situation I may find myself?
- What patterns of behavior, traits or scenarios do I constantly find in myself?
- How can I change them for a better and richer impact? (Seashores, 2013)

In Dewane (2006), Use-of-Self is defined as follows: "Drawing from the literature and practice wisdom gleaned from the author's clinical, teaching, and supervisory observations, ... Use-of-Self can be operationally defined as: use of personality; use of belief system; use of relational dynamics; use of anxiety; and Use of self-disclosure." (p. 544) My interpretation of what the Seashores were saying is that Use-of-Self means using my Self in service of an individual or group with which I am working, looking for patterns in my behavior and that of others, and changing those behaviors to achieve a different result. It also melds with Dewane's perspective stated above (2006).

When consciously engaged in the Use-of-Self, I lower my energy-shields, bringing in my full presence. I lean into the overall feeling that is present in the room, opening myself up to sense it, let it in, and to shift into deep listening, waiting to see how I can be of best use in the moment. It requires me to trust myself, to trust my inner knowing, to trust my intuition. It is impossible to do this if I am worried about *anything*, including being worried about:

- What the clients or group members might be thinking of me;
- If I am making a good impression;
- If the others in the room will like me when this is over;
- If I am being whom they want me to be;
- If I am fitting in.



I release everything that is not salient to the moment, and turn my entire body and being into an instrument, tuning in to what I can offer that will match, support or advance the current situation. It is both exhilarating and it leaves me feeling incredibly vulnerable. It is also a powerful means of discovering the intervention that is needed to move an organization, group, or individual forward.

When I am working with clients, the use of my Self – that is my *full* Self - is easily accessible to me, mostly because I only work with clients with whom I can be fully myself, within the parameters of my particular role. When my situation is one in which I am reporting to a boss, managing staff, or teaching, it is a different matter. There is the added burden of being evaluated, assessed and projected upon. In those instances, I am mindful of these outer distractions and pay attention to navigating them as potential landmines. My focus in these instances is on doing my job while staying 'below the radar'.

How, then, do we help Black women-leaders successfully navigate the challenges of their roles? In Jordan (1997), Turner states, "I, like the majority of Black women in this society, grew up with the notion of getting as much education as I could, working, marrying, and having children as 'the norm'" (p. 162). I, too, was raised with this template as my future. My plan was to graduate from high school, go to nursing school, become a nurse, get married and have ten children. I would be a wife, mother and nurse. Imagine my shock and dismay when, just before my 46th birthday, I realized that I was unlikely to have the life I had imagined of marrying and bearing children. I had waited too late, burying myself in my career and education, rather than in relationship and family. Although I was high up the ladder of success in my career, I was single and childless. In the eyes of my family, I had failed. Feelings of failure and embarrassment would be with me for decades.

In my work life, I had risen through the ranks from staff physical therapist to eventually becoming Director of Rehabilitative Services. As Director, I oversaw the merger of Departments of Physical Therapy in what was initially two separate Medical Centers. Added to the merger were Departments of Occupational Therapy, Speech-Language Pathology, and Exercise Physiology. Initially responsible for a staff of approximately 25 employees, in six years, I grew the staff to over 100.

Like some others who rise through the ranks, as I moved up the ladder of success, my relationships with friends, family and former co-workers were affected. I was not prepared for this. In my mind, I was the same person, and I expected to be able to continue to give and receive honest feedback, support and even friendship. I was surprised and blind-sided by competition, testing and insubordination from former co-workers. It was

particularly wounding to experience this from those who had been friends: I could no longer confide in them. I found that I had to be careful and less open about *all* aspects of my life, to avoid my words and disclosures being used against me. The research of Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) provides examples of this dilemma. One of the women they interviewed was the only Black woman in her organization. She shares:

"It's such a front. I become a whole different person because I know that if I act the way that I act at home I won't be accepted. So now I have to act like the other girls. I have to be like this all day. I have to be on my guard" (p. 148).

As if 'fronting' were not enough, Black women-leaders also need to contend with the projections that come with being perceived as a strong, Black woman. We are always expected "...to be the strong, giving, nurturing one" (Turner, 1997, p. 167), without receiving support for ourselves.

As a woman who is Black and a leader, relationships outside my department were also challenging. Turner (1997) notes, "I'm beginning to believe that the Black, professional woman is the most untrusted and betrayed of all in the workplace" (p. 167). In my experience, white managers would say to my bosses, especially those who were white and were women, "I never really know what Kathleen is thinking about what I'm saying. I know she says that she will do what I ask, but I don't know what she *thinks* about what I'm asking, so I don't know if she will really do it." While their concerns were unfounded (I always did what I had committed to do), the major curiosity for me was that they did not express their concerns to me directly while smiling in my face. When I suggested to those bosses that I speak directly with the person with the concern, they would look horrified and veto the suggestion. Toward the end of my tenure in one organization, when I was four years from retirement, authenticity was more important to me than job security. Encountering similar second-hand feedback from yet another boss, I told her that I was unwilling to accept this triangulation unless the other person involved was *her* boss. While I was unable to change the culture of the organization, I decided to change it where it affected my day-to-day worklife.

For those of us who are Black and women and leaders, our own personal stories are living in our work. We have been taught how to navigate in a world which is mostly white, and even if not white, white is where the power is. We "... are raised to be more cautious than women in the majority culture" (Turner, 1997, p. 77).

I was a Black woman-leader in an environment in which the support staff were mostly people-of-color, and the professionals were mostly white. It was not enough to know my responsibilities as written



in the job description. I also needed to know how to be capable without being a threat, how to be knowledgeable without being perceived as ‘uppity’, and how to be authentic and supportive, without being betrayed or taken advantage of. In Alice Walker’s evocative words:

“And when we go in search of our mothers’ gardens, it’s not really to learn who trampled on them or how or even why – we usually know that already. Rather, it’s to learn what our mothers planted there, what they thought as they sowed, and how they survived the blighting of so many fruits.”

Sherley Anne Williams in *Surviving the Blight* (1988)

Black girls learn from their mothers to develop a “talent to survive” (Turner, 1997, p. 162). When I was working on my thesis, one of my conversations with a colleague was about our survival-mentality as Black women. We asked ourselves if, in reality, it prevented us from thriving. We wondered how we should know when to let go, to shift so that our survival tactics did not impede our forward movement. **Suppose that our task as Black women today is to let go of the survivalist, protective mentality and behaviors we were taught, and to allow ourselves to thrive?** I do not think that I would ever advocate letting go of protective behaviors completely, but I do support taking some risk each day in each encounter in service of our authenticity. It is way past time for Black women to stop taking responsibility for the feelings of others, and for the responses of others.

At one point, my department was transferred to a different administrator, requiring me to report to a white woman who was particularly difficult and immature. (This woman was small and blond, and I am large and Black. Before my department was transferred to her, whenever I passed her in the hallway at work, she would plaster herself against the wall, hold her breath and feign fear. This behavior only stopped when I asked her what she was trying to communicate by it. Was I taking up too much space in the hallway? Was she afraid that I would harm her? I did not receive an answer. She muttered that she was ‘just kidding’, and the behavior did stop.) It was *her* boss who told me that I was being transferred (normally this would have been conveyed to me by *my* boss) and he emphasized that he hoped we would be able to work well together. I assured him that we would, but asked for six sessions with the organization’s counselor to give me tools I could use to ensure I worked well with my new boss. My request was granted and I assumed all was well. However, in my first meeting with my new boss she told me that she was angry about my request for time with the counselor. She stated that she was humiliated, as my request meant that she was so difficult to work with that I needed extra help to manage the working relationship. I replied that that was not what I had

said or implied, and that my focus was to attend to anything in *me* that might prevent us from working well together. But her message was received... I was not to ask for help or to say anything disparaging about her as my boss; and, when it comes to white women, it is all about them.

This experience resonates with Turner’s (1997) examination of the plight of the strong Black woman in predominantly white organizations. She writes, “They really seem insensitive to my feelings and needs, but expect me always to come through for them” (p. 167). I took the help from the counselor and, while I knew I must ‘bite my tongue’ outside the counseling sessions, it was these sessions that truly saved my sanity, providing a place where I could be direct, honest, messy and real, without fear of repercussion; providing a place in which I could reflect, be heard, and receive guidance on navigating life in the organization.

How can coaches and consultants help?

Spaces are needed for succor and renewal: spaces in which Black women leaders can be themselves, and can be vulnerable, without prying eyes and the responsibilities of leading. A key task for the coach or consultant is to *listen* first, in order to *understand* worklife from the perspective of Black women-leaders, accepting their experiences as valid. Once understanding and acceptance is achieved, trust can be developed, along with a willingness on the part of the leader to consider additional perspectives, such as the importance of learning when to be tactical and when to be strategic, when to be direct and when to be indirect, and when to ask for help and when to accept the help that is offered. “It is not only good to try to understand Black women in a relational and systemic context relative to their ethnicity, it is vital” (Turner, 1997, p. 80).

“For Black women it’s not just a pipeline issue. Once they are in the door, they need to feel supported in ways that are specific to being a woman of color. So that even if they are alone on their team, they will realize they’re not alone at all.” (Cheeks, 2018)

Coaches and consultants who work with Black women need to do their own work to become informed and aware of issues faced by Black women in the workplace, including issues of difference and diversity. Pinnock and Mayes (2017) noted in their research that, in order for coaches to do their work well, which includes meeting clients where they are, and inviting them to bring their whole selves to the coaching relationship, “...coaches should possess competencies that support the whole person – no matter who they are, how they identify, or what may be their worldview”. As coaches, we need to provide environments in which our clients can focus



on themselves, not on making us comfortable or altering their words or behaviors to meet our needs. Additionally, "Knowledge of cross-cultural [coaching] ... techniques is vitally important in working with [people who are unlike us] ..." (Turner, 1997, p. 85). As those who work with Black women-leaders in any capacity do their own personal growth and development work, they will create encounters, experiences, and environments that are compelling enough to enable Black women to participate. Black women will be more willing to participate in ways that include vulnerability, Use-of-Self, looking at Self, and sharing out loud what is seen.

In those helping spaces, it is important to practice resilience, in which the helper can hold space for their Black clients' pain, sadness and rage, without taking it personally. To listen. And, at the end of the day, to offer concrete help.

Conclusion: A Call to All Black Women-Leaders

We who are Black, women and leaders must define ourselves for ourselves, rather than trying to squeeze ourselves into an outer-imposed idea of who we are and how we are to be. We also need to recognize the importance of forming personal support-systems and using available services that can sustain us in our professional lives. We are experts at surviving in incredibly difficult circumstances, and sacrificing ourselves for the good of the whole, putting the welfare and care of others before our own. In Suarez (2019, p. 2), the question is asked, "How [do] you get a woman of color that's in a position of leadership to realize that she doesn't have to be everything to everyone?"

Black women-leaders need to seek out mentorship, preferably from others who are Black or from people-of-color, to help navigate the politics of their organizations. Black women-leaders also need to stop holding back out of fear of being seen as too much, too strong, or too powerful. It is time we focused our skills and abilities on providing succor to ourselves, putting on our own oxygen masks first and being our full selves as leaders.

Notes

1 Editor's note: in taking this article to publication, I have chosen to maintain the capitalisation of 'B' in 'Black' as a racial identifier, at the request of the author who alerted me to a contemporary discussion in academia and elsewhere about the importance of doing so "in recognition of racial respect for those who have been generations in the 'lower case'" (The Brookings Institute).

2 Author's note: this is a composite story, combining my own experience as a Black woman-leader, and that of friends and colleagues.

Biography

My professional career took me to relatively high levels of leadership in my particular fields. I am so passionate about Black women-leaders that I wrote my doctoral dissertation on 19th-century Black women-writers who grew to adulthood enslaved, and their journey to leadership despite the oppression they experienced. At the University of California, San Francisco, I also founded two programs for women: The Women's Leadership Symposium and Strategies for Success for Women-of-Color.

I have a long history of leading T-Groups (small group self-awareness and communication training) through the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University and NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, and founded T-Groups for people of Black-African descent, for Black Women, and for Women-of-Color. I specialize in facilitating conversations of authenticity, depth, and integrity, that open up new possibilities (both inner and outer) for participants.

My current work centers on Black Women-Leaders, self-care, and Black women bringing our full selves to what we do.



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