

# The Career Development of African American Managers: Exploring the Significance of Social and Cultural Capital on Leveraging Diversity

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to discuss the career development findings of a larger qualitative research study exploring the experiences of African American managers in Fortune 500 companies, and then to consider the implications for leveraging diversity, in HRD and adult education practice.

Diversity has received growing attention as a topic of interest for many in human resource development (HRD) and adult education in recent years. Indeed, we live in a society growing ever more diverse which has affected workplace demographics (Cox, 2001). Lockwood (2005) notes how discussions of diversity have changed over time in the HRD literature, and notes that initially, there was an emphasis on *assimilation* of those who were different based on race, ethnicity, or gender. During the 1980s and 1990s, with EEO and affirmative action initiatives, diversity discussions tended to focus on the *legal* issues; while slightly later, the focus was more on being *inclusive of difference* (i.e., race, ethnicity or gender). In the new millennium, the emphasis was on *managing diversity*, which focuses on how to enable those from diverse backgrounds to work together effectively. According to Cox (2001) the concept of managing diversity has appeared to benefit organizations by improving problem solving, enhancing innovation, and valuing and investing in the talent of people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The more recent HRD discourse focuses on the idea of *leveraging* diversity, which is an extension of the idea of managing diversity, and, according to Lockwood (2005), is integral to how organizations might yield greater creativity and innovation. Leveraging diversity has received attention as organizations move into diverse or international markets, and is tied to gaining or keeping the market share within the local and global marketplace, and recruiting and retaining diverse talent. Friedman and Holtom (2002) conducted a study on the effects of network groups on minority retention and turnover rates, and found that cultural minority members who participated in network groups, particularly at the managerial level, reported greater job satisfaction and had few plans to leave the company. It appeared that such network groups provided mentoring and more of a sense of social inclusion for these managers; hence such groups appeared to have a role in the career development of its members. This perhaps indicates that companies that make use of such network groups are finding ways to leverage diversity, and to keep its talented employees by facilitating their career development. This leads to the question of how organizations can effectively facilitate the career development of its diverse employees as a way of leveraging diversity. In order to shed light on how companies might do this, the purpose of this article is to discuss the career development findings of a larger qualitative research study (Bristol, 2005). It explored the experiences of African American managers in Fortune 500 companies, and then to consider the implications for leveraging diversity.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study was grounded in a combination of Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital and Seibert, Kramer, and Liden's (2004) consideration of social capital theory and career success. In addition, an overview of the career development literature on African Americans in the workplace serves as grounding for the discussion.

Many discussions on career development emphasize either psychological issues considering the match between personality and environment (Holland, 1997), or social issues, which tend to highlight how role expectations in the social environment influences one's career development. Most career development models focus on the white, middle-class (and largely male) experience (Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998), and fail to account for the socio-political context of African Americans in society as a whole. Such a context cannot be separated from the history of race relations in the U.S., which are based on structural power inequities that often play out in unconscious ways in the workplace and society (Barrett, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2003; Brooks & Clunis, 2007). In a more recent review of race in the workplace literature, Brooks and Clunis (2007) highlight this point and note, "most studies show blacks to be at a disadvantage compared to whites regarding promotion, regardless of rank, and theories suggest the cause is structural" (p. 240).

With insights from the career development literature, the theoretical framework of this discussion is grounded in social and cultural capital theory. In the HRD literature, there has been some discussion on the importance of having "social capital" in the workplace in order to develop the social networks to navigate within the organization, not only to get things done, but to feel socially included (Friedman & Holtom, 2002; Seibert et al., 2004). Social capital generally focuses on ties among individuals, networks or patterns of those ties, and resources available to those in a network. Seibert et al.'s (2004) study of 448 employees, found that social networks facilitated greater access to information and other resources as well as career sponsorship. Further, Friedman and Holtom (2002) in their study of network groups among people of color found that participation in network groups had an extremely positive effect on those at the managerial level.

Another form of capital that has not been prevalent in human resource development, but has been discussed in adult education and sociology is the notion of "cultural capital". Grounded largely in the work of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1986). Capital needs to include an analysis of how non material forms of capital intersects with economic capital, and he discussed both social and cultural capital. This refers to the extent to which marginalized individuals possess attributes reflective of the culture of power, and ultimately impacts how successfully they can navigate within it. However, cultural capital can be obtained through formal and informal learning, whereby outsiders to the dominant culture learn dominant cultural conventions, including communication patterns, or ways of speaking and relating to others. In the corporate culture, the dominant actors are typically white males, and they utilize forms of power that are often not visible or entirely conscious. Those with the most power are aware of the rules of engagement whereas those who are outsiders often find it more difficult to break in, and often need to be taught the rules of the culture of power directly (Byrd, 2007; Delpit, 1995). Bourdieu (1986) would suggest that those from non-dominant cultures who have been successful in their career development, have developed both cultural and social capital to navigate successfully in it. As a result, along with social capital, the notion of cultural capital is important to this study on the career development of black managers, because they are navigating not only in social networks, but they are crossing culture to do so.

## **Methodology**

The study that led to this work on leveraging diversity was a qualitative study informed by the basic interpretive approach. According to Merriam (2002), a basic interpretive approach is an interactive process examining how people interacting with the world on a daily basis create meaning as a result of this interaction). A purposeful sample was used and thirteen black managers agreed to participate. The primary means of data collection were audio taped in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant. The interviews focused on: the managers' experience with gaining career entry; factors that prepared them for career opportunities in corporate America; and how they entered the ranks of management. The actual names of the companies and participants were not disclosed. Career development and training programs offered at the participants' companies were ancillary sources of data. After the tapes were transcribed, data were coded and analyzed according to the constant comparative method until common themes emerged. Participants were then contacted for member checks to enhance the dependability of the findings (Merriam, 2002).

## **Findings**

There were several findings related to career development in this study. They are outlined within the realm of leveraging diversity in the workplace. As a preface, it is important to note that participants came into the workplace with a fair amount of cultural capital and understanding of the dominant culture from their prior education and experience. Seven younger managers all attended racially mixed schools during their childhood and were exposed on a daily basis to the white culture. They reported this to be an advantage that prepared them to interact comfortably in corporate America. In fact, Barry, an older manager explained, blacks, "need to understand white people . . . It's going to be white people around you, and you need to understand how they think, and how they act." Each of the participants reported that understanding the dominant culture was an advantage, because it prepared them to interact comfortably in corporate America.

### *Importance of Senior Management and Network Groups*

The participants all stressed the importance of senior management's support for diversity and the role of African American network groups to their career development. In most instances, their company had done some specific things to attempt to leverage diversity to support these managers, such as, senior leadership directing the organizational vision and actions related to diversity and/or having a diversity manager. Most of the participants believed that their employers had some commitment to diversity, and felt that this emanated from senior leadership's directing the organizational vision and actions related to diversity. For example, Technology Company instituted a diversity task force, and hired a diversity manager who worked closely with the CEO. This position was seen as a positive influence, because he/she recruited talented black employees, and empowered incumbent managers to also recruit. Each of the participants talked about the importance of network groups. When senior management was committed to the overall satisfaction of its minority employees, they supported the existence of network groups. All but one organization had a formalized African American network group, which managers felt had tremendous value; especially those with fewer than 19 years in corporate America. Charles noted, "The African American network group gets together in D.C. every July. . . It's really good to be amongst 1500 African Americans across the

company at all different levels . . . all coming together, going to workshops, learning from each other . . . [to make sure] we're doing the right things to help build our careers.”

#### *Organizations as Microcosms of Society: Equity Efforts with Limitations*

While the participants felt that their employer embraced diversity, they also noted some limitations. Several of the managers attributed this to the fact that the corporate world was simply a microcosm of society; social structures and power dynamics between dominant and oppressed groups in society were also present within the organization. These dynamics include: the preponderance of low numbers of black managers, the marginalization of management positions, and the problem of “comfort” hiring and mentoring.

Each of the managers felt that their employer's attempted to build an internal staff that resembles the diversity in the U.S. However, this did not always result in positive outcomes for African American managers. Geri stated, “most of the minorities are in the [manufacturing] plants, they aren't managers, they're clerks, and production people. We don't have a lot of managers; we have a handful of directors—less than 10 in North America and no vice presidents.” The participants all noted that there was still a lack of adequate representation of African Americans in the management ranks, especially in the upper echelons of management. When looking at the websites for each of these organizations that displayed their senior executive leadership (i.e., CEO and vice presidents), there was a striking theme. Transmit Company had one African American female senior executive out of eight; similarly, out of 18 senior executives, Technology Company had one African American male. Materials Company had the most ethnic or racial diversity with a CEO who is Asian and two African American vice presidents. It is troubling that there is a lack of significant representation in senior leadership in these organizations, which was a concern of the participants. Even among the 13 participants in this study, five were first-line managers and there was only one senior manager.

The type of positions available to these participants was another example of the limitations on the organization's diversity efforts. These participants were dedicated to their careers; however, many of the managers felt that they had accepted marginalized positions. The positions were marginalized because their managerial peers did not want them and/or because of the problems surrounding the position. For instance, Anna as a first-line manager specifically served government accounts in the Northeastern region of the U.S. Her position was not desired by her peers because government accounts receive discounted rates and generate substantially less revenue, which in turn means lower sales commissions. She also reported that within this particular unit, “there was high turnover in management, high turnover in sales representatives, and a lack of consistency in management.” However, because she wanted to be in management, she accepted the position. The participants who wanted to gain more responsibility would take a marginalized role as a strategy to prove them selves.

#### *Informal Learning as Gaining Social and Cultural Capital*

Overall, the organizations represented here implemented positive diversity efforts. However, each is a microcosm of society and had its pitfalls. Therefore, all of these managers exercised their own sense of agency by being proactive about their ongoing learning, not only through involvement with networking groups, but also through informal learning. Two forms of informal learning that these managers valued were observing the dominant culture within the workplace and participating in mentorships.

All of the managers reported that observing the workings of the environment was integral to uncovering the unspoken norms in order to operate effectively in the workplace. For example,

Debra reported that her initial mission when she entered any organization was to understand what the organization valued in a senior manager. She stated that when she was at meetings with executives, she observes and asks herself, “What is it about this person that the company thought to make that person an executive? Is this a behavior that I want to try and adopt? And I’ve been very purposeful with what I embody.”

Similarly, learning through mentors was the most integral career development component for these managers. Mentors are important for individuals who are venturing into an unknown territory because it helps to uncover important information about developing social networks. Since the participants had aspirations to enter management, and their parents did not possess the cultural capital to transfer to them, the participant’s career development was more arduous. As a result, once they entered corporate America they had to find mentors who would willingly assist them with their career development.

Eunice had a cultural mentor and discussed their career development experiences within the company. She uncovered the significance of having a mentor from the dominant culture. This source of support more than likely assisted the participants with addressing and coping with being a member of a marginalized group.

A major theme that emerged was the importance of having mentors from the dominant culture, specifically white male mentors. These cross-cultural mentorships occur between people from different ethnic or racial backgrounds. Geri credits her career development to being mentored by a white male. She felt that the knowledge that he imparted to her was valuable to her career development. She reported:

[This white male mentor] would teach me how to maneuver the organization from a white perspective, which was quite helpful...I think it’s as important to have somebody that’s not the same race or a white male if you can that supports you... they can maneuver you through the organization quicker than somebody of color can.

In conclusion, informal learning was a process that allowed these managers to become socialized into corporate America. They were able to obtain the unspoken norms and rules of corporate America through other means (i.e., mentors and observation). This enabled them to gain the social and cultural capital they needed because these managers were obviously not members of the dominant culture of society or of the organization. Thus, informal learning served as a means, which facilitated the career development of these managers

### **Discussion and Implications**

The findings of this research study have implications for how organizations might be able to leverage diversity. First, prior studies have highlighted the importance of networks and the role of social capital in career development (Friedman & Holtom, 2002; Seibert et al., 2004). Importantly, this study brings particular attention to the role of cultural capital as well as social capital in the career development of African Americans. As the managers in this study clearly noted that in order to be successful in corporate America, there are “codes” that need to be deciphered, codes that are often related to cultural differences.

But what do the findings of this study as well as those of other studies suggest for how organizations might leverage diversity? Clearly, organizations need to focus on providing opportunities that allow employees the ability to increase cultural capital. This can be done by implementing supportive structures with top management’s commitment, hiring effective diversity managers, developing strong network groups, and facilitating mentorships.

Organizations can also facilitate opportunities for both formal and informal learning. As noted by others (Brooks & Clunis, 2007; Watkins & Marsick, 1993) informal learning was significant to these participants. However, it is also possible to develop formal learning opportunities about how to network, how to develop one's career, how to decipher codes to increase cultural capital, as well as the typical formal learning opportunities that have to do with learning factual information related to one's specific job. Mentorships are integral to the career development of any individual (Barrett et al., 2003; Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2005) and mentors need to be educated on how this process of increasing cultural as well as social capital works best. Cross-cultural mentorships are very often essential when marginalized individuals are trying to participate in a setting that is unfamiliar to them (Barrett, et al., 2003; Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998; Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2005). It is clear that that mentors transfer cultural capital to outsiders; this is one way that the structures can be softened which hinder the career progression of African Americans.

Lastly, organizations need to show their commitment to diversity by dismantling structures that impede the career development and progression of African Americans in the workplace. They need to hire African American managers in positions that are directly responsible for generating revenue rather than relegating them into marginalized managerial positions. Indeed, that is a way of really leveraging diversity!

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