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Track: Leadership and Leadership Development

Title: Off the beaten track: Connecting the dots between inclusive strategic leadership, unconventional backgrounds and innovation through discourse analysis of CEO autobiographies

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Summary: Within strategic leadership, research into broad-based diversity, beyond surface characteristics, demographic and educational factors, at the upper echelons level is limited. Little is known about how successful strategic leaders with unconventional/atypical backgrounds, such as gaps in their CVS, a history of crime, substance abuse, mental health problems, neurodiversity etc., transcend adverse circumstances and overcome potentially crippling odds; whether or not their diverse experiences allows for better navigating workplace tensions, and increased propensity towards inclusivity and innovation. This paper brings together broad-based diversity, inclusive leadership and strategic leadership into the concept of Inclusive Strategic Leadership (ISL) as a framework to explore this gap, using Discourse Analysis of autobiographies of 6 strategic leaders with unconventional backgrounds. Additionally, it could further our understanding of leadership qualities that diverse employees/leaders bring to the table, strengthening the case for harnessing this largely untapped resource pool.

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Introduction

In strategic leadership and upper echelons research, top management team (TMT) diversity and its links to organisational outcomes has been studied extensively (Cuypers et al., 2022, Nielsen, 2009). However, much of this research has focused on demographic and surface diversity characteristics, educational and international work experience (Hays-Thomas, 2016) and there is relatively little on broad-based diversity and inclusion that encompasses employees from varied walks of life and unconventional/atypical backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, there is a need to move beyond surface diversity characteristics to consider strategic leaders with atypical backgrounds (including lack of formal tertiary education, gaps in CVs/career breaks, criminal and/or substance abuse backgrounds, mental health problems, neurodiversity etc.) and how they impact organisations/teams that they lead.

From a societal perspective too, the case for mainstreaming broad-based diversity policies within organisations is strong. Governments/institutions are facing “grand challenges” e.g. high rates of incarceration and recidivism; but rehabilitated ex-offenders tend to be some of the most dedicated employees with among the best retention rates when given the opportunity (SHRM, 2020); and society experiences positive outcomes including lower recidivism, higher GDP/tax revenues, lower crime rates, better well-being of the general population (Pati, 1973, Pettus-Davis and Epperson, 2015, SHRM, 2020) when rehabilitated ex-offenders are gainfully employed in stable jobs with good career prospects as any normal member of society.

Diversity and inclusion are closely related concepts; without diversity the concept of inclusion/inclusivity is arguably less relevant and without inclusivity the benefits of diversity cannot be harnessed (Gomez and Bernet, 2019). Outside mainstream strategic leadership, research highlights links between inclusive behaviour of leaders and how this inspires increased motivation, creativity and innovation in the individuals/teams that they work with (Bannay et al., 2020, Carmeli et al., 2010, Qi et al., 2019, Zhu et al., 2020, Xu et al., 2023). According to Ferdman et al. (2020), inclusive leadership means that “leaders must often simultaneously hold and balance seemingly disparate and even conflicting perspectives and views, as well as behave in ways that can appear to be conflicting”. Yang and Zheng (2020) identify three pillars of inclusive leadership, elucidating potential paradoxical tensions in each, further contending that these paradoxes are often interlinked such that experiencing one could trigger others. Examples of what researchers view as inclusive leadership behaviours are those that foster both a sense of uniqueness as well as a sense of belonging in employees (Roberson and Perry, 2022, Randel et al., 2018, Shore et al., 2011), which in turn is grounded in Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991), making employees feel valued and safe yet create discomfort with the status quo, pushing them to reach higher (Ferdman et al., 2020), encouraging information heterogeneity and developing shared mental models (Yang and Zheng, 2020), etc. In addition, paradoxical tensions may be compounded by the inherent predispositions of the leaders. Martins (2020, p.1193) states, “academic research on diversity leadership is relatively silent on a critical aspect of leadership that exerts powerful influences on individual, team, and organizational outcomes: *strategic leadership*” and calls for the development of a theory of strategic diversity leadership. We seek to bridge this gap with the concept of Inclusive Strategic Leadership (ISL), bringing broad-based diversity and inclusive leadership concepts into strategic leadership.

Building on functional responsibilities of strategic leaders outlined by Samimi et al. (2020), Georgakakis et al. (2023) outline one of the roles of strategic leadership as “managing conflicting [...] demands”. Purposeful ISL therefore requires leaders to adopt a “paradox mindset” involving a “both/and” focus, (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2010, Miron-Spektor et al., 2018, Smith and Lewis, 2011), to enable strategic agility for better organisational performance, particularly creativity and innovation. Further dimensions of the relationship between ISL and paradox that may have an impact on our research include studies suggesting that inclusive leadership has a paradoxical effect on employee creativity and innovation (Zhu et al., 2020) and that too much inclusivity may not always be good for employee task performance (Xiaotao et al., 2018). In our study we explore how leaders from non-conventional backgrounds navigate the inclusivity paradox and foster innovation. Specifically we seek to ask first how the unconventional backgrounds of strategic leaders influences their propensity to be inclusive and to be innovative and foster innovation in their organisations.

Methodology and method

The research question is predicated on specific qualities (traits/attributes/behaviours) of effective leaders which are a combination of inherent and acquired/learnt qualities rather than on age, race, gender or other exogenous characteristics, and on the assumption that these qualities are influenced by their life experiences, in particular their unconventional backgrounds. In keeping with this, we focus on the following research objectives:

- how do unconventional backgrounds of strategic leaders influence their propensity towards purposeful ISL behaviours and innovation
- what relationship is there between the diverse experience provided by unconventional backgrounds and the qualities that are essential for effective leaders
- how does purposeful ISL on the part of strategic leaders impact the people that work with them

Our definition of unconventional backgrounds is broad-based although our focus is on those with a history of crime and substance abuse but have since been rehabilitated. There is a growing body of scholars across disciplines who believe that life events of leaders influence strategic leadership outcomes such as performance, strategy, socio-ethical issues, innovation, governance etc., as evident from a review study of multi-disciplinary literature by Van Doorn et al. (2023). Using a strategic leadership lens to study leaders with unconventional backgrounds could give important insights into whether and how their diverse experiences can improve organisational outcomes.

In this paper we engage with autobiographical stories of strategic leaders with unconventional backgrounds. Management scholars have noted the vast possibilities autobiographies hold particularly because they afford unique research opportunities not available from any other single source, but they remain under-utilised (Mathias and Smith, 2016). Using a research design centred around Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013, Potter and Wetherell, 2002), and using thematic analysis as a tool to recognise and code recurrent and discursive patterns (Kelan, 2008, Adamson and Kelan, 2019), we explore how these leaders transcend(ed) the constraints posed by their unconventional backgrounds as well as how they use(d) purposeful ISL behaviours, what strategies they use(d) to navigate tensions and impact innovation outcomes of their organisations including whether they adopted a paradox mindset. Extant studies using similar methods appear to have included between one and ten autobiographies (Dempsey and Sanders, 2010, Phillips and Rippin, 2010, Sims,

1993, Wilhoit, 2014, Watson, 2009, Adamson and Kelan, 2019, Adamson, 2017, Kelan, 2023, Kelan, 2008, Bagnoli, 2004, Mathias and Smith, 2016, Raisch and Krakowski, 2021) and in most cases there was no set template for selecting these books (Adamson and Kelan, 2019) but seemed to vary based on the purpose and focus of the study. For instance, some studies used purposive sampling either explicitly (Mathias and Smith, 2016) or implicitly (Sims, 1993) while one carried out an exhaustive search of all books that met a specific criteria (Adamson and Kelan, 2019). For this paper, we engaged in purposeful sampling which was deemed the most suitable given the nature of our research questions and the very specific profile of people we wished to study. Further we wanted to keep our sample to a manageable level, up to a maximum of 6, which we felt could reasonably be accommodated while maintaining a sufficient level of detail in the analysis.

The selection criteria were:

- Should have held leadership positions either in large corporations or have founded their own companies
- Should have unconventional backgrounds – while we used a broad definition of what constituted an unconventional or atypical background, we looked for more than just “self-made” or “rags-to-riches” stories. We were particularly interested in those with criminal records and/or a history of substance abuse.
- Should have written autobiographies [or have narrated their stories to a biographer] – we believe that it was important for us to engage with the subjects’ life in their own words. Further the autobiography should have covered the subject’s personal life including adverse circumstances, and not just their professional lives (i.e. should not simply be a self-help book on how to be successful in business and/or get rich)
- Sample should have a balance between gender and race to the extent possible taking into account the specificity of profiles required and the small sample size.

Our search process ranged from internet searches for CEOs with unconventional backgrounds who had written autobiographies, to reviewing past papers that have used CEO autobiographies to check if any of them might fit. When we found a candidate that *prima-facie* looked suitable we checked them against each of the criteria and included them in the list if they passed the threshold for the first three. Taking all the criteria into account significantly narrowed the field and in the end we did not have much “choice”. Ultimately our selection consisted of the following 6 strategic leaders (subjects) which fulfilled the inclusion criteria as shown in Table 1. In addition, although this was not an inclusion criteria, in many cases there is also significant third party material available in the form of books or narratives written **about** them, which might be of use for triangulation purposes (or to fill in gaps in information) at a later stage. We also included an autobiography written by one of our research collaborators which is soon to be published and which we reviewed and deemed suitable for our research. [Four] others were considered but did not make the list for various reasons including not (sufficiently) meeting the threshold for one or more inclusion criteria. The process was and continues to be iterative with the possibility of adding to or amending the list as the work progresses.

Each book has been/will be read multiple times, the first time to get an overall sense of the material before coding. In the second/subsequent reading(s) passages were coded into NVivo as initial codes and aggregated into first order descriptive codes. The coding process was fluid and evolved iteratively through multiple readings. The codes were then abstracted/aggregated into second order themes and further into third order categories.

Some of the categories and themes were pre-set defined by the research question and objectives (see Table 2) but others emerged/are expected to emerge from the material. The next aspect would be to find emergent patterns and common themes as well as key differences across the books and finally to re-engage with the literature to explain the various themes and patterns. Table 3 gives the expanded themes including emergent ones, although this is work in progress and will change as the analysis progresses.

While this analysis method is not without its limitations such as possible recall bias and social desirability bias (Mathias and Smith, 2016), nevertheless it offers deep insights into the mindsets of leaders who have overcome significant and potentially crippling odds to become successful, which can be leveraged for theorising in this relatively under-researched area.

Discussion

The analysis is still ongoing with the 5 of the 6 books having been through at least one reading, and two books being coded. While some patterns have started to emerge it is as yet too early to find definitive patterns and conclusions. However from the two books being coded (Chris Wilson and Larry Miller) we found examples of navigating paradox and purposeful ISL behaviours that were in large part attributable to the prison and other (adverse) experiences of childhood and youth, and which motivated Chris Wilson in particular to use his businesses make life better for others in similar circumstances, and Larry Miller to give a significant amount of his personal time mentoring underprivileged young people to give them hope for the future. There were also clear instances of leadership qualities developed and honed during their prison term which stood them in good stead in business / career. We expect the analysis to have progressed considerably if not completed before the conference. Other interesting points emerging are that while they are nearly thirty years apart and their family backgrounds are quite different, there are some clear parallels between the two stories which shine a light on the difficult and violent environments they grew up in and which are commonly faced by black youth from low socio-economic backgrounds in USA.

Anticipated contributions

The paper contributes to strategic leadership literature by developing the theoretical concept/construct of ISL and theorising around purposeful ISL as a strategy. We also hope to contribute to strategic leadership and paradox literature by furthering an understanding of the paradoxes experienced by strategic leaders in adopting purposeful ISL behaviours/strategies and how they appear/claim to navigate these tensions to foster innovation. Importantly, we expect to contribute to a relatively unexplored research area at the intersection of DEI¹, strategic leadership and business ethics literature by seeking to understand the qualities and leadership potential that ex-offenders and other employees with unconventional backgrounds bring to the table and highlighting the benefits of employing this largely untapped resource and talent pool.

¹ Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Tables

Table 1: List of strategic leaders whose autobiographies have been selected for review

Name	Inclusion criteria					Year published
	Leadership experience	Unconventional background	Autobiography	Gender	Race	
Chris Wilson	Social entrepreneur (founder of several businesses), mentor and public speaker	Convicted felon	The Master Plan: My Journey from Life in Prison to a Life of Purpose	Male	Black	2019
Mike Lindell	Founder and CEO of MyPillow	Substance abuse	What Are the Odds? From Crack Addict to CEO	Male	White	2020
Larry Miller	Former President of the Jordan brand at Nike	Convicted felon	Jump: My Secret Journey from the Streets to the Boardroom	Male	Black	2022
Arman Vestad	Entrepreneur (founder of financial advisory business), mentor and motivational speaker	Convicted felon, substance abuse	Out of the Ashes	Male	White	2024 (currently in pre-publication stage)
Katharine Graham	Former CEO of The Washington Post	Housewife and mother for 23 years, thrust into CEO position when her husband died	Personal History	Female	White	1997
Oprah Winfrey	Founder and CEO of OWN, talk show host and TV presenter	Grew up with poverty, worked as a maid, faced sexual abuse, got a degree relatively late	What I know for sure	Female	Black	2014

Note: 5 out of 6 are US based, although that was not a specific choice but an outcome. We assume this is because there simply are not many autobiographical books by people who meet all the inclusion criteria, who are based outside of the US.

Table 2: Initial themes and categories

Second order themes	Categorisation of themes
• Growing up in a violent neighbourhood / environment • Influence of gangs • Domestic abuse • Dysfunctional family (lack of love & security as a child)	Factors contributing to downward spiral
• Education • Mentors • Finding a purpose • Faith	Factors contributing to turnaround
• Entrepreneurial • Adaptable • Inclusive • Empathetic • Collaborative • Hard-working • Persistence / perseverance	Effective leadership qualities
• Ability to navigate paradox • Optimising scarce resources • Overcoming constraints • Learning mindset	Factors shaping / contributing to success in business and leadership

Table 3 : Expanded themes and categories (work in progress)

Thematic categories	Themes
Effective leadership qualities	Building connections and relationships
	Self control, ability to remain calm and de-escalate conflict
	Coaching & mentoring
	Collaborative
	Communication
	Credible & trustworthy
	Empathy
	Giving trust
	Innovative
	Inclusive strategic leadership
	(Lifelong) learning mindset
	Ability to navigate tensions and paradox
	Purpose and determination
	Resilience
	Self confidence
	Work hard and smart
Factors contributing to downward spiral	Domestic abuse
	Dysfunctional family environment
	Growing up in a violent neighbourhood influenced by
	- guns and gang warfare - Peer pressure - desire for revenge
Factors contributing to turnaround	Faith and religion
	Mentoring and guidance
	Opportunity for education and self improvement (were 1. available and 2. s/he took adv of them)
	Love for family / Family support
	Awareness of hitting rock bottom / desire to change, self motivation
	Active use of skills
	Lucky breaks
Factors contributing to success (personal & business)	Other positive influences
	Being informed and knowledgeable
	Education release programme
	Finding the passion / purpose
	Having a plan and working at it continuously
	Help and support from mentors and others
	Learning to work the system
	Love for family (as a motivation)
	Determination & strategic decisions to stay out of prison
	Ability to navigate paradox
	Optimising scarce resources
	Being informed and knowledgeable
Challenges as a returning citizen	Overcoming constraints/winning mindset
	Stigma
	Housing
	Finance & credit
	Continuing association with (former and new) criminal elements
	Environmental factors that make it difficult to stay on the straight and narrow

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