Power, Gender, Leadership, and Change: Ethical Implications for Coaching

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers an exploration of the ethical implications surrounding power, gender, leadership, and change in leadership and coaching. This exploration delves into the dynamics of oppressive power structures with a specific focus on gender dynamics and their profound impact on our personal and professional lives. Through the lens of Shoukry’s Emancipatory Coaching framework (2016), we offer a strategy that can enable coaches to inspire transformative change within themselves and for their clients in the spirit of creating inclusive, safe, and equitable environments. The goal is to incite dialogue and reflection around what it means to shape a renewed commitment and approach to coaching in the context of today’s social challenges in a way that also drives positive social change.

Keywords: coaching, power, gender inequities, joy, leadership

Introduction

There is much to explore around the dynamics of oppressive power structures, particularly as they pertain to gender dynamics and the impact these power structures have on our personal and professional lives. At the foundation of this work is the pursuit of workplace joy and how coaches can work with clients to pursue that joy. As we engage in coaching practices that liberate our clients from various forms of oppression, the goal is not to merely facilitate change that relieves the oppression. It is to help our clients pursue life-fulfillment, peace of mind, and joy in their personal and professional lives. So, while the direct focus of this paper is liberation from inequitable gender dynamics, the backdrop is the mission of helping our clients pursue and secure their joy.

Pursuing Career Joy

Joy, as defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) is “a feeling of extreme gladness, or

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exhilaration of the spirit, arising from a sense of well-being or satisfaction (APA, 2018).” Career joy, then, is a profound sense of fulfillment and satisfaction that we derive from what we do for a living. It includes value alignment, feeling appreciated, experiencing well-being, feeling engaged and competent, and finding meaning in our work (Achor, 2018). This concept of career joy matters immensely to the experiences women have in the workplace and has strong implications for our work as coaches. With this as a focus, we can help clients name and address inequitable gender dynamics.

**Coaching Ethics, Justice, and Joy**

According to the Canadian Office of Public Service, Values and Ethics (Government of Canada, 2015), “ethics examines the rational justification for our judgments; it studies what is morally right or wrong, just or unjust. In a broader sense, ethics reflects on human beings and their interaction with nature and with other humans, on freedom, on responsibility and on justice.” With this understanding, the ethics of joy as we define it, examines our pursuit of joy through a lens of well-being as it pertains to moral judgments, freedom, responsibility, and justice. So, as we consider power dynamics, workplace joy, and the application of coaching ethics, this gives us a lens that centers justice as a foundation for taking clients from a place of oppression to joy.

The APA’s definition of joy emphasizes a state of well-being as a facet of joy. As research by positive psychologist, Seligman (2011) indicates, positive or high well-being reflects a state of flourishing, and compromised or low well-being reflects a state of languishing (Seligman, 2011). Our subsequent behaviors, as described by Smith (2014) and Mill (1863) are framed by our state of well-being. If we are immersed in our languishing, we may engage in more toxic forms of joy like schadenfreude (joy in other people’s pain). If we are immersed in our flourishing, we are positioned to discover greater life fulfillment and joy (Aristotle, 2000; Achor, 2018).

When coaches engage clients who are battling inequitable gender dynamics, it is important to understand how well-being may be informing their innate pursuit of joy, comfort, or peace of mind. Do their strategies resonate with sustainable practices of joy or are they pursuing temporary relief that only numbs themselves to the cycle of oppression (Brown, 2012)? Furthermore, how can we help clients recognize toxic joy pursuits in their leaders, colleagues, and others participating in oppressive behaviors? This type of self and environmental awareness can be a powerful tool toward liberation as we will see the Emancipatory Coaching framework.

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Power Dynamics and the Unique Challenges of Women at Work

Power dynamics involves the ways in which power is distributed and exercised. It can be used positively to influence, motivate, and guide others, but it can also be misused and lead to negative outcomes like abuse of power or unhealthy workplace environments. Table 1 displays a breakdown of inequitable power dynamics by types of power, environmental impacts, and personal experiences:

Table 1

How Inequitable Power Dynamics Shape Environmental and Personal Work Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Power</th>
<th>Environmental Impacts</th>
<th>Personal Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>positional power expert</td>
<td>abusive authority &amp; influence, control over resources,</td>
<td>bullying, harassment, reduced engagement and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power referent power</td>
<td>oppressive structural factors, poor decision making, social &amp; cultural exclusivity, dependent relationships, increased turnover</td>
<td>morale, inhibited innovation and creativity, conflict and disharmony, discrimination and inequality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reward power coercive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power informational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>power connection power</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: The Types of Power column in this table is a compilation of work from French & Raven (1959) and Yukl (2013). The Environmental Impacts and Personal Experiences columns were created by the author after reviewing participant responses from two presentations at the 2023 World Business & Executive Coach Summit (WBECS) and the 2024 Independent School Data Exchange (INDEX) Summit.

Gender dynamics in the workplace can be complicated and nuanced, particularly when there is an imbalance of power, most typically created by inequitable institutional, economic, or cultural norms. As reported by the “Women in the Workplace” report (LeanIn.Org, 2023), “For every female director who is promoted, two women at the same level of seniority choose to quit.” It is clear, considering the challenges women still face in the workplace, that great strides are needed to change the landscape in ways that equate to more decision-making power, higher rates of pay, and less hostile environments across all levels of organizations.

In 2023, a report found that men are twice more likely than women to hold executive roles in the top leadership teams in the largest U.S. public companies (Lieberman & Russell Reynolds Associates,
2023). Forbes reported that on average, women make 16% less than men. This equates to 84 cents for every dollar that a man earns (Haan, 2024), which is compounded by the experience of workplace hostility. Women are 35% more likely than men to mention toxic culture, which Glassdoor reviews defines as “workplace culture that is disrespectful, noninclusive, unethical, cutthroat, or abusive.” To add the intersectionality of race, black women have become a leading demographic pursuing entrepreneurship partially due to a desire to escape hostile and inequitable work environments (USA Facts, 2021; Umoh, 2020).

Exploring the nuances of gender dynamics in the workplace unveils a complex landscape of challenges and barriers to women’s success and fulfillment. While some obstacles are rooted in the broader environmental and systemic structures, others emerge from more personal interactions, deeply intertwined with the way organizational policies and societal norms are constructed. Among these, imposter syndrome, perfectionism, and work-life compatibility are significant issues that can severely restrict women’s ability to find joy and fulfillment in their careers (Orbe-Austin & Orbe-Austin, 2020; Brown, 2010).

**Intersectionality**

Inequitable gender dynamics is a complex challenge that impacts a wide range of identities. The concept of intersectionality, as articulated by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, offers a lens for comprehending the multifaceted nature of discrimination. Acknowledgement of the whole person compels coaches to recognize that individuals embody various intersecting identities including age, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and more. These intersectional identities are subject to unique experiences of discrimination or privilege that one may encounter on any given day (Crenshaw, 1989). It is through this lens that a whole person approach to coaching becomes critical and challenges coaches to be more attuned to the unique needs of each individual (Bachkirova, 2016). This is particularly important in settings that involve inequitable gender dynamics, as coaches can create opportunities for leaders and teams to examine and strategize around gaps that exist between oppressive work environments and environments that yield fulfillment, peace of mind, and joy (Shoukry, 2018; Roche, 2021; Boyatzis, Smith & Van Oosten, 2019; Roche & Passmore, 2023).

**Recognizing Marginalized Gender Identities**

As we focus on marginalized gender identities, it is important to recognize how the intersection of multiple identities can position a person to be a target of discrimination or hostility in the workplace.
We often think of women when we consider gender inequities. While this is by no means a complete list, other historically targeted gender groups include:

- Women of color
- Older women
- Younger women
- Men of color
- Men who do not conform to traditional gender roles
- Men in traditionally female-dominated professions
- Transgender and non-binary individuals

The intersectionality of multiple identities significantly influences the likelihood of experiencing discrimination or hostility. This acknowledgment serves as a critical component in the analysis of workplace dynamics and underscores the complexity of gender equity issues. The recognition of these diverse experiences contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced in achieving workplace equity. As such, a culturally responsive coach approach to these issues involves a nuanced recognition of how these intersecting identities impact individuals’ professional lives and the broader organizational culture.

Dr. Antoinette Candia-Bailey, Vice President of Student Affairs at Lincoln University who died by suicide after filing complaints of workplace hostility (Weissman, 2024), wrote the following in her own dissertation that explored the factors that affect the advancement of African-American women into senior level positions:

_African-American women senior-level administrators and those who seek to attain senior-level positions should be aware of the potential existence of sociocultural factors that may hinder them from upward mobility. It is important to not only be aware of the sociocultural factors that others may hold but to actively engage colleagues to dispel myths and create bonds. African-American women have to strategically and professionally confront sociocultural issues, or be familiar with the avenues to address the issues (Candia-Bailey, 2016, p. 92)._ 

Even then, she was sounding the alarm about the adverse challenges that black women leaders face in the workplace.
The Emancipatory Coaching Framework

For coaches working with clients who are directly experiencing oppression, a relevant and culturally responsive approach is to engage in the pedagogy and the power of their clients. The pedagogy involves what we know and understand about the oppressive environment and the power involves what we have the agency to enact to liberate ourselves from these environments. The Emancipatory Coaching framework (Shoukry, 2016) engages coaches and clients in a process that addresses both the pedagogy and power of their journey. This framework is based on a 2016 study of 12 coaches and 22 clients who engaged in the emancipatory coaching process. It is designed to help clients in oppressive scenarios find their voice, understand the context of the oppressive environment, and take action for change. This involves 5 key steps:

1. Learn the science and impact of the oppression.
2. Listen to the narratives (stories of the oppression).
3. Help clients renew debilitating beliefs.
4. Co-create a plan to fight the oppression.
5. Reflect on your own proximity to the oppression.

These steps are integrated into a structure of three overarching elements:

1. Critical and Theoretical Understanding: This element emphasizes the importance of having theoretical and critical understanding of the oppressive environment. This understanding enables the coach to ask effective questions about the experience of the oppression, which can create a generative dialogue around ideas and solutions with the client.

2. The Three Processes: The first process is retelling narratives in which the coach encourages the client to tell and retell their story. The second process is renewing beliefs, which encourages clients to revive and renew perspectives that could inhibit their ability to take action. Fighting back, the third process, involves taking action. Through this process, the coach and client begin to explore new questions: What will it take to change the story? What is the goal? What will it take to achieve emancipation? What does fighting back look like? What are the consequences?

3. Reflective Practices: It is the responsibility of the coach to engage in self-reflection around their
proximity to the experience of oppression, as coaches can be adversely impacted by the client’s experience with oppression in two primary ways: (1) as one who is also experiencing the oppression and (2) as one who does not personally identify with the oppression. This element also involves assisting the client with their own reflective practices through the emancipatory journey.

Emancipatory coaching can be a practical and powerful means for assisting clients who are impacted by inequitable gender dynamics. This can empower clients to address gender-based inequities and to pursue career joy in the following ways as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressing Inequities</th>
<th>pursuing career joy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Self-advocacy &amp; assertiveness</td>
<td>• Clarifying values &amp; passions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal development</td>
<td>• Exploring strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mentors &amp; role models</td>
<td>• Exploring possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Documentation &amp; reporting of inequities</td>
<td>• Overcoming fear of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social advocacy &amp; activism</td>
<td>• Envisioning the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Legal resources</td>
<td>• Developing a plan with accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communities of support</td>
<td>• Owning the power of choice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: This table was created by the author after reviewing participant responses from two presentations at the 2023 World Business & Executive Coach Summit (WBECS) and the 2024 Independent School Data Exchange (INDEX) Summit.*

**Reflection and Conclusion**

As eloquently stated by Phumzule Mlambo Ngcuka, a South African politician and United Nations official known for her work in advocating for women’s rights and gender equality, “there is a need to disrupt the status quo, rather than to negotiate it.” This is where coaching can play a pivotal role, by co-creating spaces and strategies that disrupt unethical systems of oppression and help leaders become catalysts for change (Roche & Passmore, 2023).

In contemplating our commitment to helping clients navigate and transform work environments marked
by inequitable gender dynamics, several critical considerations emerge: What is our role in advocating for positive social change? Who defines the parameters of this change? As we endeavor to support our clients in these challenging contexts, we recommend four key action items that can guide our practice:

1. Reframe and challenge existing mindsets to foster a culture of openness and adaptability.
2. Create processes that emphasize inclusion and collaboration, ensuring all voices are heard and valued.
3. Implement systemic changes that address the root causes of inequity and promote a fair and just workplace.
4. Encourage adaptive learning and resilience, equipping leaders and organizations with the skills to navigate and thrive in an ever-evolving professional landscape.

Intentional action and regular reflection refuels our practice and can renew our dedication to making a meaningful impact. As we integrate new and relevant principles into our work, we contribute to the broader movement towards diverse workplaces that are powerfully fulfilling and reflective of human dignity, equity, and inclusion.

References


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