

Instilling Harmony, Building Trust

An Integrated Approach to Managing in Libraries as Women of Color

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While managers strive to bring a person-centered approach to how they lead and manage, they also must consider the inverse: how they can apply that person-centered approach inwardly. For example, managers may aspire to create an environment that invites authenticity from their direct reports while also navigating how their own identities are shaping their experience as managers. For women managers of color, their daily interactions are mediated through the intersectional lens and historically minoritized identities they hold—identities that those around them from the dominant culture may not always recognize.

How, then, do women managers of color invite authenticity and transparency, and how can they determine what aspects of their identities they are able to bring into any given space? Put another way, how can they find for themselves, not balance, but rather harmony within their intersecting professional and personal identities? We examine these ideas in this chapter, exploring how identity shapes managerial experience. (The phrase *work-life balance* conjures images of a teeter-totter that is perfectly balanced to give equal weight to both areas of someone's life. We want to emphasize that life is not that neat and thus use the concept

of *harmony*, which evokes a sense of multiple areas all in concert to form a synergistic, congruent arrangement.)

This chapter was written by three women of color whose experiences and perspectives as managers have been largely shaped while navigating predominantly white, heteronormative, capitalist, colonialist, and able-bodied privileging spaces. The authors individually identify as a first-generation southeast Asian American cisgender woman, a first-generation Afro-Dominican woman, and a Canadian woman and child of settler immigrants from the Philippines and Pakistan. (Having initially met at the Association of Research Libraries [ARL] Leadership and Career Development Program, we recognize the privilege in having access to a midcareer professional leadership program—particularly in a field that historically has provided limited opportunities to support the advancement and retention of librarians of color.) Although we realize that this chapter will likely be read by a majority-white audience, similar in composition to the workplaces and profession in which we operate, we wrote this with other women of color in mind. We see this piece as both personally reflective and in conversation with our fellow women of color; in doing so, we use first-person language to describe our experiences and offer guiding questions throughout for further reflection.

THE IDENTITIES OF WOMEN OF COLOR IN MANAGEMENT

The underrepresentation of racialized librarians within the library profession has long been understood and cited at roughly 12 percent (American Library Association, 2012). This is even more evident at the management level; although a more recent study focused only on institutions within the ARL membership, it paints a similar picture, with BIPOC librarians making up roughly 11 percent of library leadership and administrative roles (Schonfeld & Sweeney, 2017). A similar Canadian survey of BIPOC employees across libraries of all types found that only 19 percent of them held administrative roles (Li et al., 2021). It is the stark paucity of diversity in our field, and especially in management, that makes our racialized presence in these spaces that much more apparent. Echoing these numbers, we have found that our racialized

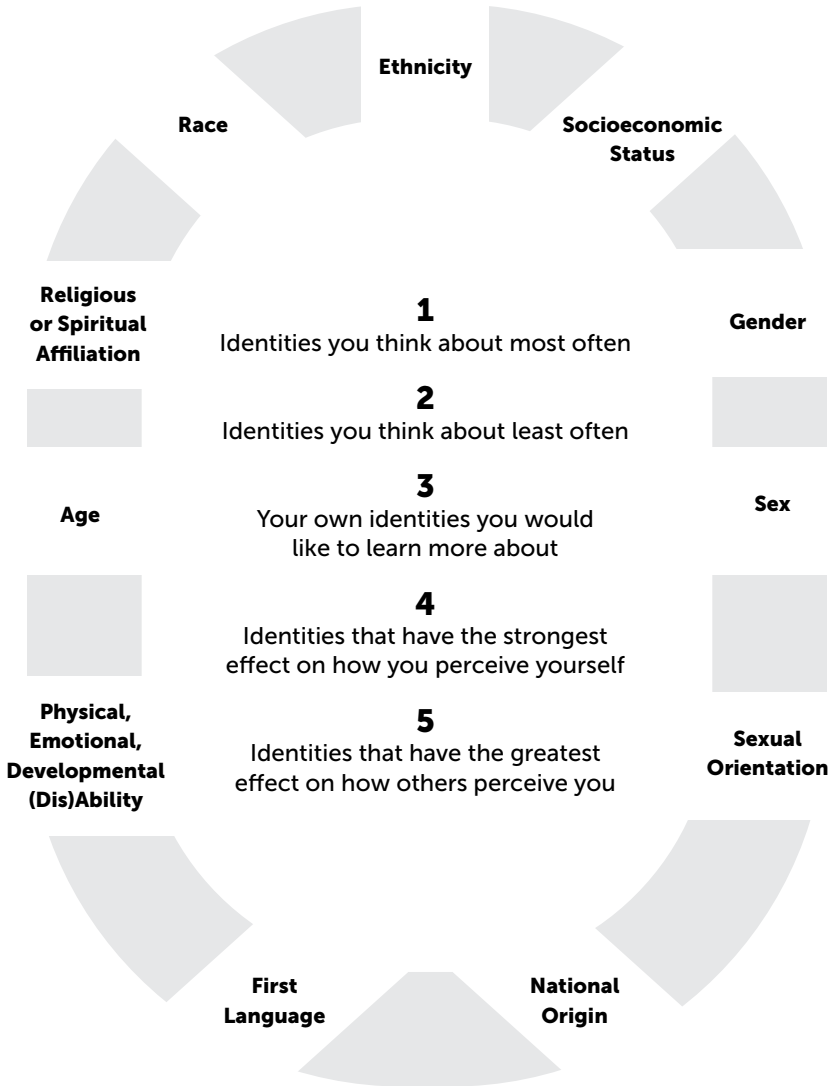
identities are inextricably linked to our experience as managers—in terms of both how we approach our work and how others interact with us in that workspace.

Given this, we felt it was worth reflecting first on this very real and visible facet of our lives. For instance, like us, our readers may have encountered a social identity wheel activity (see figure 22.1 on the following page) that sometimes accompanies EDI, inclusive teaching, or other self-reflective trainings (University of Michigan Equitable Teaching, 2024).

There are different versions of these activities, but generally they ask us to consider what identities we think about more and less often, those we may still be exploring, those that might affect how we perceive ourselves, and those that might affect how others perceive us. All of these are also contextual. When it comes to our identities within predominantly white spaces, such as the libraries where we have worked, our racial and ethnic identities are often the most salient for us. This becomes magnified for managers; some parts of our identities may be less discernible or actively hidden, thereby pushing against or resisting the notion of having to show our full selves all the time. For instance, our colleagues have not always been aware of who does or does not have immigrant or blue-collar backgrounds nor of what family structures, parental responsibilities, or other personal identities we carry. This ties back to the idea of *congruence*, and “be[ing] yourself at work” (Cook et al., 2024, p. xiv). Some of us have also been surprised when what we thought were obvious oral markers, such as our first language, were not as evident as we previously thought—thus diminishing a core part of our cultural identity.

Yet, although not universal for all racialized women, for us, our race and gender can be our more detectable traits. For racialized women, as Layla Saad (2020) notes, who are “visually identifiable as white or who pass for white . . . [including those] who are biracial, multiracial, or white-passing . . . [, we] benefit under systems of white supremacy from having lighter skin color than visibly Brown, Black or Indigenous people” (p. 15). For the authors, while we all have skin tones and hair that code us as people of color, we also recognize that we are light enough (i.e., more proximate to the whiteness Saad describes) to simultaneously occupy a

Figure 22.1
Social Identity Wheel



Source: Adpated from University of Michigan Equitable Teaching. (2024). *Social identity wheel*.
<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/sample-activities/social-identity-wheel/>

more nonthreatening and benign space than other racialized librarians. This may even be amplified by our own socialization as women who have been viewed as diplomats, mediators, and nurturers or by having characteristics attributed to us that fall within the *model minority* myth (Yao, 2022). These can create social privilege relative to the ideals of whiteness but can also be deployed as a wedge between us and other marginalized groups.

We are also aware of how our racialized presence at the management table has the opportunity to be tokenized; even prior to our becoming managers, institutions and organizations have benefited from using our faces and bodies as a means of demonstrating their commitment to inclusion. Now that we have assumed management roles, that narrative can now also include commitments to BIPOC retention and advancement. Add to that how we as women of color may question, not only our own sense of belonging in management spaces (i.e., “Are we, or do others see us as, the *diversity hire*?”), but also “[our] own thoughts and actions due to systematically delivered racialized messages that make [us] second guess [our] own lived experiences [and realities] with racism”—a process that Luke Wood and Frank Harris III (2021, para. 4) define as *racelighting*. For those of us who became managers during uncertain, or even precarious, times of organizational or social unrest, we also risk being placed on what Michelle Ryan and Alexander Haslam (2005) define as the *glass cliff*. We can interrogate these opportunities whenever possible, but we alone as women of color cannot counter the oppressive systems that are designed to appropriate and challenge our existence.

As managers who hold an additional degree of influence within our units and organizations, we also recognize that our actions have a direct impact on those who report to us, our peer managers, and others who may be situated above us in the organizational chart. That does afford us some modicum of positional power and privilege, though we note that we rarely have social power because of our racialized identities. Understanding and acknowledging these differences can lead us to make more intentional decisions in alignment with our values and principles (The Management Center, 2021). Yet the level of trust placed upon us as positional leaders of color also means that our actions and words hold that much more weight. If we are the ones to constantly bring up equity

issues, we may run the risk of being seen as playing the race card, as overly sensitive, or as showing preferential treatment to others who may share our identities (never mind that these critiques are rarely applied to those within the dominant culture). This adds tension to the notion of unconditional positive regard; in other words, it is our racialized identities and our institutions' perception of them that may result in uneven reciprocity of unconditional positive regard toward us and our intentions in the management space. Whenever any discussions related to diversity emerge, we feel our colleagues' eyes turning toward us, as the racialized leaders in the room, to provide guidance and counsel. If we ourselves experience a microaggression or even outright aggression—whether from another manager or a direct report—we also must calculate how/if to appropriately respond while also not burning our social capital within the organization.

We are also fully aware of the increased visibility, scrutiny, and responsibility that comes not only from those from the dominant culture but also from our BIPOC and other minoritized colleagues—those who are looking at us to represent their voices and needs, to vouch for those who are not at the table, and to ultimately succeed in pushing the needle forward. As Jennifer Brown and Sofia Leung (2018) observe, there is a constant push and pull in the duality of our *hypervisibility* and our *invisibility*. Managers of color are often balancing a number of factors and personal risks, all while being expected to remain a steady presence for our colleagues, and while mutually operating under the same historically inequitable structures as the rest of the organization. As women of color in management, we occupy a space where we are calculating the shifting spaces of positional and social power around us. In addition to the mental toll, this can have direct impacts on our physical health and well-being, which can be caused by even the threat or anticipation of distress (Smith et al., 2006, pp. 300–301).

Questions for Reflection

- Reviewing the social identity wheel, which are your most salient identities?
- How might they impact your management style and philosophy?

FINDING OUR FOOTING: REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT, GUARDRAILS, AND EMOTIONAL LABOR

In looking back on our library school management courses, we recall that there was no coverage of emotional labor or care work in our feminized profession and certainly no readings that touched on what management could look like specifically for racialized library leaders. The expectation was that the literature about management, drawn primarily from the corporate world, would still be relevant for and positively influence library workplace culture. However, the focus on administrative processes, functions, and bureaucracy left little room for discussions around management and leadership styles that would enable inclusive, thriving, and welcoming organizations that center the whole person. We remember reading case studies that centered on practical themes like collections budgeting during lean times, addressing faculty needs for more electronic resources, or the challenges of staffing a reference desk without the appropriate level of support. Rarely would these studies delve into the socioemotional realm of library workers nor what it would mean to develop healthy boundaries around work and home life as an early career librarian.

Similarly, we never could have thought to broach topics such as our intersectional identities as managers, how our power and privilege may shift depending on a context or situation (Vong, 2022), racial trauma in the workplace (Harts, 2019), or the continued whiteness of the profession (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2017). Indeed, research indicates that stress from negative work interactions has an impact on interactions with family and other members of our communities, described as the “spillover effect,” or the “process of carry-over of internal states from one setting to another” (Repetti & Wang, 2017, p. 15). It is imperative for leaders to develop coping strategies that provide barriers against, or at least soften, the impact of this phenomenon. As we as women of color each came into management, we realized not only that we were entering into this sphere without any grounding in these issues but also that culturally sensitive mentorship, training, and support were largely absent from the development of other managers and administrators around us.

We may not have fully questioned this approach to the study of management in library and information studies until we found ourselves in actual positions of management, tasked with supporting very real and complex people during very real and tumultuous times. Thankfully we can count more and more on peer BIPOC library managers to share their validating, first-hand experiences in a safer and authentic way. For example, in “5 Things I Learned as a First-Time Manager in a Predominantly-White Academic Library,” the author, a racially minoritized woman, bluntly states that “it takes a lot more than skills and experience to survive and thrive as a manager when you are racially minoritized in a predominantly-white profession” (Anonymous, 2022, para. 2). The author candidly and heartbreakingly shares some hard lessons learned but ends on an affirming note for BIPOC in library and information organizations: “We are worthy of opportunities recognizing our leadership skills and potential to succeed in formal leadership roles. We deserve to come into spaces that value everything we have to offer, including our whole selves and values” (Anonymous, 2022, para. 16).

We are firm believers that guardrails provide a harmonious approach to work and life. As described by Anne Helen Petersen (2022), guardrails are essential for us to maintain ourselves:

Boundaries are the responsibility of the worker to maintain, and when they fall apart, that was the worker’s own failing. . . .
But guardrails? They’re structural. They’re fundamental to the organization’s operation, and the onus for maintaining them is not on the individual, but the group as whole. (paras. 24–25)

Some examples of our boundaries include being clear about when team members can expect a quick response from us and when this is not possible; scheduling e-mail messages to arrive during regular working hours so as not to signal an expectation of a response during off-peak hours; showing support for downtime during the holidays and summertime by not holding one-on-one or group meetings; and clearly reminding others about our own personal commitments and boundaries. In contrast, some examples of guardrails include establishing and honoring organization-wide meeting-free days/hours, collectively

creating and respecting community agreements (which could even draw upon person-centered or other community-based frameworks), and encouraging and respecting uninterrupted focus times.

Crucially, these same guardrails help us manage the invisible burden of emotional labor that many women of color carry in the workplace, the demand for which has increased substantially over the years (Smith & Grandey, 2022). Several research studies show that racialized employees experience additional emotional labor (Humphrey, 2022), hidden workload, microaggressions, and early burnout (Thomas, Trucks & Kouns, 2019). Although this is sobering and relatable to us, we have intentionally leaned on one another and our communities to remind ourselves that our psychological safety and emotional well-being are more important than having to prove our worth in our organizations. And because of the cohort experiences that we create for ourselves—for instance, those created through programs such as the ARL Leadership and Career Development Program and the National Associations of Librarians of Color and those formed within communities such as We Here (<https://wehere.space>) and the Visible Minority Librarians of Canada (<https://vimloc.wordpress.com>)—we have been instrumental in building mutual support and understanding.

Questions for Reflection

- How do you develop your knowledge about inclusive leadership and care work?
- What strategies do you use to uphold guardrails (yours and others') at work and at home?
- How do you foster care and compassion for yourself and your direct reports?

SHARING IDENTITIES, INVITING AUTHENTICITY

This is not to say that we have been completely curtailed from bringing more of our identities into our work. Each of us has carefully gauged how much, and in what context, we have been able to show more of ourselves. For those of us who endeavor to center our identities as women of color

and bring a fuller version of ourselves to work, we also do so as an invitation to others to do the same, to the extent they feel comfortable. We do it out of a desire to foster an environment of belonging and authenticity, to model the person-centered spaces we aim to foster, and to empower others through vulnerability and compassionate validation. This has garnered expressions of appreciation from our colleagues and a better understanding of our collective struggles and situations, as well as more open discussions around collective empathy and supporting one another and our personal accommodations. Yet this act of vulnerability can also bring personal precarity and can be done only when coupled with a deep sense of trust and transparency. Some of us, still recovering from previous traumas, are more comfortable sharing more of ourselves just with those who share other aspects of our identities, and we are somewhat guarded even there at times. Reflecting back on the social identity wheel (figure 22.1), and as echoed by therapist and Brown Girl Therapy creator Sahaj Kaur Kohli (2023), “[our] ability to be authentic is informed by self-preservation and sense of safety” (para. 8). As such we constantly make decisions based on the situational context, doing self-assessments of our personal security, for example:

- Who here is an ally (or, better yet, an accomplice)?
- Who here understands what it is like to exist as a minoritized person in this space?
- Who here seems, or has been, visibly uncomfortable with my presence?

Sometimes tension exists between self-disclosure and one’s personal boundaries. When we reveal more of ourselves (which to some extent we may be able to control), we naturally open ourselves up for further interpretation and reaction (which we cannot control)—including potentially feeding into stereotype threat, as well as ingroup and outgroup bias. Rather than a moment of release, a disclosure of identity may also inadvertently open the doors to other microaggressions and moments of harm.

How then can we as women of color in management reveal various aspects of ourselves, center our own personhoods, and cultivate

professional and personal harmony? As we reflected on possible strategies, we found a salient concept within psychology known as narrative development: “an individual’s internalized, evolving, and *integrated story of the self* [emphasis added]” (McAdams, 2008, p. 242). In contrast to the more corporatized concept of personal branding, we appreciated the flexibility of this framework, as it recognizes how identity evolves as we continue to grow. Everyone’s identity narratives are constantly in development and can be more fully formed through being inclusive of all aspects of our identities within our various social contexts. In centering our ongoing narrative development on our values (i.e., cultivating our internal self-awareness and turning it outward), we can foster self-authenticity, facilitate our own career progression, and better integrate our identities and values into our work environments.

At the same time, sharing our authentic selves to facilitate connection creation could be interpreted by our direct reports as oversharing, considering the power dynamics involved. Additionally, when there are no limits on sharing, the stories that BIPOC employees may disclose could be experienced as undesirable, uncomfortable, or even unprofessional by others from the dominant culture.

Being authentic and transparent is a big ask for anyone in an organization. Yet libraries themselves can create structures of psychological safety that can pave the way to support these efforts. In other words, leaders are individually held accountable for fostering the right environment for their colleagues, but this is not insurmountable if the organizational culture around them is supportive and growth minded. For BIPOC library workers, being their full selves at work may mean that they need to push back on the status quo and the pressure to assimilate into majority culture. It takes the full organization to embrace or, at the very least, not alienate any expressions of full selves from those of marginalized identities. Conversely, those employees may not bring their full selves until they feel there is enough of a network of support in place. Whether through cohort models of mentoring or career development, empowering affinity groups and allies in the workplace, supporting BIPOC-centered therapy (Beard, 2022), or allowing release time for racial healing (among other opportunities), organizations need to be actively providing and continually supporting person-centered

support systems. Readers can find additional resources in BIPOC in LIS Mental Health Summit (n.d.) and Kendrick et al. (2021).

As so-called demographic outsiders within our predominantly white spaces, we are oftentimes prescribed the responsibility of transforming an organization in ways that, somewhat paradoxically, should maintain even beyond our time there. Yet we are familiar with how the efforts of people of color and those championing change oftentimes can lapse upon our departure. Although we do not want to suggest that it is our sole burden to guarantee that our impact continues after we have left, we have found ourselves optimistically striving to do so. We do this, not only for ourselves, but for those who remain as well as for those who come after us.

Questions for Reflection

- How can leaders create harmony between their identity narratives and their management practices?
- How can you continually create an environment of psychological safety that invites, but does not require, others to also share about themselves?
- Where can you identify common bonds with direct reports and peers, and how can you cultivate these to build trust and authenticity as a manager?

STILL WE RISE: FINDING HARMONY AND EMPOWERMENT

Many challenges and considerations go into pursuing management as a woman of color, but we want to close with a reflection on *why* we and others ultimately do and how it has contributed to the harmony of our work and personal identities.

In our own personal reflections, we asked ourselves what the more uplifting aspects of managing were. On one hand, management roles allow us an empowering opportunity to “get a seat at the table” and influence positive change across an organization. Management can bring an incredible opportunity to (re)shape the structures and processes of our organizations more holistically, and especially in supporting the

interests and needs of our colleagues. More specifically as women of color, entering into predominantly white management spaces has also allowed us to bring different and nuanced perspectives to the management table. Consider how many of the values, cultural backgrounds, and histories that we bring have not typically informed the frameworks around so-called traditional management literature and theory. Although much can be said about the burden and cultural taxation that this potentially places on women of color managers, the intersectional identities we hold, and the communities and histories we carry, also present unique opportunities to push for change at a more strategic level within our organizations. At the same time, other managers and organizations more broadly need to better ensure that their managers of color are not the sole voices at the table always advocating for transformation, nor the only parties expected to drive such initiatives forward. We cannot default to reserving one or two seats for these roles. Power plays out, not only in terms of positional authority within an organization, but also between the dominant and historically marginalized identities present in the room. Through a critical mass of harmonious voices we can move our contributions beyond one tokenized thought to a collective and rallying cry.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the most salient themes that emerged in our conversations on this topic was the person-centeredness of management roles and the honor of being able to support others in that capacity. All of us have greatly benefited from and have been mentors to other colleagues, providing reciprocal opportunities to brainstorm with trusted colleagues on a challenging project or other growth process. It can be humbling to be given such a level of trust in such support-centered relationships, and continually cultivating that trust is absolutely essential. As managers we have been inspired by the ways in which our jobs have required us to shift from the day-to-day and essential tasks of our units to creating opportunities and removing barriers for others to successfully do the work. For our direct reports, we have found joy in creatively providing pathways for them to do their work with fewer or no obstructions, as well as in more personally connecting with and demonstrating our investment in them as people. We strive to advocate for them in spaces where they may not be able to enter and to highlight

their everyday successes so others in the organization are aware of their contributions and impacts. But beyond simply acting as a megaphone for our colleagues, we take seriously and appreciate the micro opportunities we have in empathetically and actively listening to, reflecting upon, and validating our direct reports' and other colleagues' experiences. At times this can mean sharing their deep concerns as we commiserate on their struggles and difficulties; other times this can also mean feeling overjoyed with their growth and successes.

Having observed and been inspired by other leaders of color, we are honored to be able to follow in the pathways they helped build for us, and we work to embrace the responsibility and self-empowerment in being able to do the same for others. To this, we offer Priya Parker's observations on the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson:

I saw a Black woman who shared openly her own experiences at Harvard feeling like she may not make it, and passing a Black female student stranger who saw the look on her face and said, “persevere.” I saw *an integrated human being* [emphasis added] who knows who she is and understands the role that she is being asked to play. (Parker, 2022, para. 11)

As we work toward cultivating harmony, we carry with us the other women leaders of color who uplift us and whose words empower us. We are here and “still [we’ll] rise” (Angelou, 1978).

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