

Intersectionality and Sensemaking: Advancing the Conversation on Leadership as the Management of Meaning

Authors : Clifford Lewis

Abstract : This paper aims to advance the conversation of an alternative view of leadership, namely 'leadership as the management of meaning'. Here, leadership is considered as a social process of the management of meaning within an employment context, as opposed to a psychological trait, set of behaviours or relational consequence as seen in mainstream leadership research. Specifically, this study explores the relationship between intersectional identities and the management of meaning. Design: Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with women and men of colour working in the South African private sector organisations in various leadership positions. Employing an intersectional approach using gender and race, participants were selected by using purposive and snowball sampling concurrently. Thematic and Axial coding was used to identify dominant themes. Findings: Findings suggest that, both gender and race shape how leaders manage meaning. Findings also confirm that intersectionality is an appropriate approach when studying the leadership experiences of those groups who are underrepresented in organisational leadership structures. The findings points to the need for further research into the differential effects of intersecting identities on organisational leadership experiences and that 'leadership as the management of meaning' is an appropriate approach for addressing this knowledge gap. Theoretical Contribution: There is a large body of literature on the complex challenges faced by women and people of colour in leadership but there is relatively little empirical work on how identity influences the management of meaning. This study contributes to the leadership literature by providing insight into how intersectional identities influence the management of meaning at work and how this impacts the leadership experiences of largely marginalised groups. Practical Implications: Understanding the leadership experiences of underrepresented groups is important because of both legal mandates and for building diverse talent for organisations and societies. Such an understanding assists practitioners in being sensitive to simplistic notions of challenges individuals might face in accessing and practicing leadership in organisations. Advancing the conversation on leadership as the management of meaning allows for a better understanding of complex challenges faced by women and people of colour and an opportunity for organisations to systematically remove unfair structural obstacles and develop their diverse leadership capacity.

Keywords : intersectionality, diversity, leadership, sensemaking

Conference Title : ICIOP 2018 : International Conference on Industrial and Organizational Psychology

Conference Location : Vienna, Austria

Conference Dates : June 14-15, 2018