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## **Black Women Leaders in Municipal Government: Leading with Ability, Agility, and Authenticity**

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### **Author Acknowledgement**

Chao Mwatela was selected in 2021 as the first-ever director of diversity, equity and inclusion for the city of Rochester, Minnesota. She is also a graduate student in the Master of Organizational Leadership program at Winona State University, Winona, Minnesota.

## **Black Women Leaders in Municipal Government: Leading with Ability, Agility, and Authenticity**

Chao M. Mwatela

### **Abstract**

This research study explored skills and competencies that Black women need to achieve upward mobility into leadership roles in municipal government in the United States (US). The study also reveals how Black women navigate the intersection of race and gender in upward mobility. Three Black women in leadership roles in municipal government during the fall semester of 2021 participated in the study. Feminist leadership theory for social transformation and the theory of intersectionality supported this study. Responses provided insights into abilities needed for upward mobility, strategies Black women use to address the intersection of race and gender in upward mobility, and the career strategies that are important in negotiating leadership positions in municipal government. Emerging themes from the study include: decisive and good communication, leading with truth, and asset-based intersectionality.

*Keywords:* Intersectionality, Black Women Leaders, Municipal Government, Leadership

### **Introduction**

Municipal government plays an integral role in shaping communities, including neighborhood development, revitalization decisions, industry support, federal and state funding expenditures (Eisenstein, 2019). Yet, in 2019, out of 100 of the nation's largest cities in the US, only 10 Black women were elected to serve as Mayor (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, n.d.). Most US cities have a council-manager form of government, with city managers holding much power. New research (Funkhouser, 2020) indicates that 14% of city managers are female, few of whom are Black. City managers are responsible for hiring city staff, making budget recommendations and shaping policy. These recommendations and decisions significantly impact all people in the community, with about 1 in 6 Black Americans lacking representation in local city councils (Shanton, 2014).

Extensive research conducted on barriers that face Black women in upward mobility into leadership roles reveal terms and theories encompassing several barriers; glass ceiling, glass cliff, intersectionality and imposter syndrome. Municipalities recognize that addressing these barriers may lead to increased participation in local government, positively impacting communities (Shanton, 2014).

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this Participatory Action Research (PAR) study was to explore the skills, competencies and intersectionality considerations that Black women leaders in municipal government highlight as important for upward mobility and success in leadership roles.

## **Research Questions**

The questions guiding this qualitative research study included:

**RQ1** What abilities are needed for upward mobility to leadership in municipal government?

**RQ2** How have women municipal leaders addressed the intersection of race and gender in upward mobility?

**RQ3** What career strategies are important in negotiating leadership positions in municipal government?

## **Background**

Much is known about barriers women face in the quest for leadership positions. Leadership qualities and competencies continue to be based on traits stereotypically assigned to men, as women continue to carry the heavier load at home and with family, aside from responsibilities at work (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2014). The glass ceiling is well documented, from overt discrimination in work assignments and promotions, to less overt and almost invisible barriers that still have men occupying most leadership roles from private organizations to municipal government (Howard University, 2002).

The case for women of color, specifically Black women, is more drastic. By 2014, women of color comprised 23% of the workforce, but represented only 14% of women in managerial roles. Black women made up only 6% of the women in managerial roles (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2014). In research from EMILY's list (2021), only 19% of seats in the House of Representatives are occupied by women, although the US population is at parity by gender. Black women occupy only 4% of these seats. This disparity is evident in municipal government as well (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, n.d.).

There is limited research and documentation on Black women's upward mobility into leadership positions in municipal government. Extensive research on barriers, although beneficial, does not provide important information on skills and competencies contributing to the success of Black women leaders in municipal government. Addressing this gap in research, this study explores skills, competencies, career strategies and intersectionality considerations integral in the upward mobility of Black women leaders in municipal government.

## Literature Review

### The Case of Race

In 1965, the federal Voting Rights Act was passed, removing barriers people of color encountered in the voting process. This led to a growing number of elected Black legislators in southern states from 1965 to 1985 (Grofman & Handley, 1991). This trend is documented for municipalities as well (Marschall & Ruhil, 2006). The legacy of slavery in the US that upheld legal barriers to participation in the political process for Black Americans impacted political trust, negatively influencing participation. The lack of involvement through voting correlates to lack of representation of Black Americans in political leadership positions (Solomon et al., 2019). Descriptive representation in municipal government is valuable as it builds trust with the Black community. Black municipal leaders show greater engagement with the Black community, are more responsive to citizen needs, and advocate more for community needs than white lawmakers (Shanton, 2014).

### The Case of Gender

In 1920, the US congress passed the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment banning voting discrimination based on sex (Block, 2020). Before this, few women held municipal office, beginning with Susanna Madora, Mayor of Argonia Kansas, in 1887. Eighty-six years later, in 1973, the first female Black mayor, Lelia Foley-Davis, was elected (Brockell, 2019). Block (2020) contends that this is because the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was not just about sex. It was about race as well, as there was a concerted effort through poll taxes, clauses, literacy tests and lynching to prevent political participation. Lelia Foley-Davis discussed discouragement from running for school board by people who did not think she was qualified prior to a run for Mayor (Brockell, 2019). Over time, Black women documented several barriers to participation in government; a deep belief that people will not vote for them, invisibility in public office, perception of inadequacy due to the intersection of race and gender, lack of community support, socio-economic agility, and a lack of mentorship (Cummings, 2021).

### Barriers to Mobility

Extensive research done on competencies and skills leading to upward mobility into leadership roles utilized predominantly male participants. Leadership aptitude and best practices assume male subjects. As a result, women seeking information on leadership miss about 33% of the equation (Colantuono, 2010). The 'glass ceiling', an invisible barrier preventing women from advancement into leadership was coined in 1978. Subsequent research revealed the 'glass cliff,' where women are called to leadership roles in tenuous and high-risk times for organizations or communities. Women tend to grasp at these risky leadership opportunities in a bid to prove their ability (Glass & Cook, 2016).

Imposter phenomenon is also observed in high achieving women, manifesting in internal feelings of 'phoniness' and misplacement (Clance & Imes, 1978). Tulshyan and Burey (2021)

discuss imposter phenomenon in Black women leaders, citing initial research on Imposter syndrome did not account for the intersection of race and gender. They contend that for women of color, feelings of self-doubt are deeply entangled with ongoing systemic bias and racism. These intersections lead to many women of color planning to leave jobs within two years of hiring, allowing little time to advance into leadership roles (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The feminist leadership theory for social transformation and the theory of intersectionality guided this research. These theoretical frameworks guide this study because they inform the understanding of leadership from a feminist lens and the complexities of access to leadership within the intersection of race and gender.

Feminist leadership theory for social transformation indicates that feminist leaders are driven by social equity and use that lens to account for changes in communities. The theory targets inequities by gender, but includes others such as race, abilities, social class, and socio-economics. It also contextualizes social, economic, and political oppression to provide an understanding of the multitude of factors that affect women's access and success (Love & Duncan, 2017).

Theory of intersectionality suggests that those that hold more than one marginalized identity are impacted by each facet of the marginalization that comes with that identity in a compounding way. In the case of the intersection of race and gender for Black women, there is exclusion from the feminist agenda as it does not take into account race, and exclusion from the antiracist agenda as it does not take into account gender (Crenshaw, 1989). In addressing the oppression of those who hold marginalized identities, Crenshaw (1989) asserts that it is useless to use models that were designed to address a singular marginalized identity. New models need to be created that address the complexity of barriers greater than the sum of each essence.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study utilized Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a methodology. PAR utilizes lived experiences of participants, as well as recommended actions for change. PAR shares power between the researcher and the researched, allowing the researcher to contribute to responses, data collection strategies, analysis and next steps (Baum, McDougall and Smith, 2006). A popular choice for social justice research, PAR is used to dismantle existing power structures in a bid to transform communities socially (Benjamin-Thomas et al., 2018).

The sample for this study was drawn from a pool of Black women leaders in municipal government across the US, including county staff and elected officials, and city staff and elected officials. Data were collected in the fall semester 2021 in electronic format via email. The email contained a brief introduction to the study and three open-ended questions.

The researcher used thematic analysis to interpret the data collected from respondents. Thematic analysis allows researchers to understand issues broadly and look beyond repeated

phrases to extract themes (Alhojailan, 2012). This analysis consists of three stages; data reduction, data display and conclusion verifying.

### Findings

An analysis of participant reflections on the three open-ended questions materialized these themes: (1) decisiveness and good communication (2) leading with truth (3) asset-based intersectionality.

Table 1. *Thematic Analysis Outcomes*

Question	Theme
<b>RQ1</b> What abilities are needed for upward mobility to leadership in municipal government?	Decisiveness and good communication
<b>RQ2</b> How have women municipal leaders addressed the intersection of race and gender in upward mobility?	Leading with truth
<b>RQ3</b> What career strategies are important in negotiating leadership positions in municipal government?	Asset-based intersectionality

### Results and Discussion

Decisiveness and good communication, leading with truth and asset-based intersectionality, resonated from each of the participants in their reflections to the open-ended questions presented.

#### Decisiveness and Good Communication

In response to RQ1, participants reflected on the various abilities needed for upward mobility in municipal government. Reflections included relationship building, listening, commitment, and a good understanding of government. Consistent in all responses was decisiveness and good communication. One participant shared, “In this role, leaders have many challenges and constant changes. We need to have the ability to assume challenges, come up with solutions and communicate effectively with peers and community members.” Other participants echo this reflection, indicating that frustration from staff and community members is often born of indecisiveness or a lack of communication. A lack of either or both leads to a lack of trust in leadership, and impacts confidence and upward mobility.

All participants shared that the decisions they make are often time-sensitive and never positively impactful to all constituents. The effectiveness of those decisions, and perception of their ability to lead, lies in the ability to explain the ‘why’ to municipality staff and constituents. This study advances that decisiveness and good communication are essential abilities for upward mobility into leadership roles in municipal government.

## **Leading with Truth**

In response to the question regarding how women address the intersection of race and gender in upward mobility, all participants reflected on the changing face of leadership, but static state of systems. One participant reflected, “Municipalities are still systems that uphold patriarchy and white dominant culture. Another participant shared, “In every capacity, there seems to be opposition to the mere existence of a diverse woman...In government specifically, the ‘face’ of a leader is a white male”. Many women subscribed to the same value systems to advance in the system without acknowledging the need to reflect on increased barriers faced by women of color.” By doing so, participants suggest that this fosters small, slow and ineffective change.

Rather than perpetuate static systems, there was consensus in leading with truth, creating systems to educate others on topics of race, gender, and intersectionality, seeking and listening to varied perspectives, and challenging the status quo. Reflecting on how to share truth without bias, a participant discussed using data to provide context, and as a foundation for conversation, sharing, “using data provides an undeniable platform for the beginning of a conversation and ongoing platform for accountability of change.” All participants discussed the discomfort of engaging in these conversations candidly, but the rewards of developing trust, engaged teams, and respect from peers.

## **Asset-based Intersectionality**

In response to the question about career strategies necessary for negotiating leadership positions in municipal government, participants discussed the deficit-based perspective on the intersectionality of race and gender. Two out of three participants discussed the barriers faced due to intersecting identities, but also highlighted their unique perspectives and skills as a result of that intersectionality. One of them shared, “Having a good understanding of the job market is important, but knowing and understanding your community is invaluable. That is a career skill that cannot be taught in any textbook.” Participants shared frequent experiences requesting expertise in outreach, convening, and community engagement efforts all without compensation for their time, skills or efforts.

Participants shared that Black women often concentrate solely on external credentials when negotiating leadership positions, discussing skills, talents, knowledge, and education, but forget to highlight invaluable perspectives and experiences from lived experience that would be an asset to the municipality and their leadership role. This study suggests that asset-based intersectionality is valuable in negotiating career advancement into leadership roles in municipal government.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This qualitative study provided insights into the abilities, career strategies and intersectionality considerations for Black women leaders in municipal government. Three participants provided responses to three open-ended questions synthesized into three emerging themes; decisiveness and good communication, leading with truth and asset-based intersectionality.

The study revealed the duality of intersectionality, presenting barriers to Black women in upward mobility, but providing unique lived experiences, community knowledge, connection, and trust that elevates credentials and capacity to lead in local government. All three respondents discussed the static state of systems, even as faces in leadership change. Although representation matters, it is external and not evidence that systems that uphold gender or racial inequities have diminished. This study suggests that municipal government leadership structures and systems have not evolved to be inclusive of Black women leaders, and emphasis is placed on barriers that Black women need to overcome, without addressing internal structures that need evolution. Black women leaders in municipal government display agility. This agility is needed in municipal government structures as well. The findings also disclosed the value of leading with truth and not shying away from candid conversations on race and gender. Municipalities must encourage and foster safe spaces for this learning to occur.

As municipalities strive to serve the needs of all community members, efforts should not end at understanding and addressing barriers to representation, but should extend to abilities and competencies to success. Doing so would provide meaningful information to communities seeking tools and pathways to participation and representation in municipal government. It would also allow municipal government to incorporate those competencies when considering access and upward mobility in leadership positions. For example, this study revealed that it would be helpful to include lived experience as a competency for upward mobility, which could potentially increase access for Black women and others who hold a marginalized identity. Future research on disparities in representation in leadership should stretch beyond barriers and include competencies, skills and tools for success.

**About the Author** Chao Mwatela was selected in 2021 as the first-ever director of diversity, equity and inclusion for the city of Rochester, Minnesota. She is also a graduate student in the Master of Organizational Leadership program at Winona State University, Winona, Minnesota.

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