

## Race Work and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience

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## *Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage*

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### **Race Work and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience**

By Roberts, Morgan. Laura, Mayo, Anthony. J, Thomas, David. A.

Boston, M.A.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2019, 512 pages

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*“We must defend the immigrant and the stranger, the impoverished and the forgotten, and speak sensitively and firmly to the fears of those who see globalization as a threat and who worry that the social and cultural progress of those who look different than they do will wipe away all that they have known. And regardless of our ideological differences, we must link arms and stand-or kneel-publicly against anti-Semitism, against homophobia, against Islamophobia, against sexism, gender discrimination, and anti-black racism, and ladies and gentlemen, against white supremacist ideology in all of its hideously ugly, violent forms. This is no time for equivocation or false equivalences. This is a time for truth” (p. 37).*

This book assembles qualitative and quantitative research based on surveys of over 3,600 African American working adults, with comparison samples of over 25,000 data points that highlight the experiences of these workers in the United States. The articles emerge from 140 interviews, as well as focus groups and case studies. One laudable feature of this book is that it is comparative; it examines the experiences of black employees, business owners, and professionals across disparate fields including Law, Healthcare, Business, Education, Academe, and Theology. The comparative nature of this book adds credibility to these workers' experiences and helps the reader understand that they are not isolated. The book also holds value because it helps to counter the notion that race does

not affect a black person's success, professional journey, and well-being. The narratives leave no doubt that African American professionals have an uphill struggle with respect to experiencing and sustaining success.

The book is 486 pages long, and contains a Foreword and Five Sections. The Foreword sets the stage for the legitimacy and need for a book on race, work and leadership, "This book responds to the need to explore the intersecting space within the spheres of race, work, and leadership, wherein we make tangible the contributions that black Americans have provided to the infrastructure of business. This book also highlights the very tangible ways in which black talent is being undervalued or squandered" (p. 4).

Section 1, *History and Critical Questions in Black Business Leadership*, demonstrates how black students and workers in business and law use their education as a tool to build credibility and legitimacy, to exercise their agency to bring about change in terms of representation and access. One of the greatest takeaways from this section is the power of mentorship to affect the professional trajectory of Black workers. "[A] mentor helps you navigate the power structure of the firm, especially when there is no one in senior management who looks like you" (p. 69).

Section 2, *Comparative Studies*, discusses workplace engagement and the glass ceiling, authenticity in the workplace, relationships and feeling connected. The reader learns how disengaged many black employees are from their work, and the role of managers in fostering inclusion, disrupting the glass ceiling, and improving job satisfaction. The reader will understand the important role that managers and peers play in making diverse employees feel a sense of belonging, mattering, connection, and engagement.

Section 3, *Phenomenological Studies - The Lived Experience*, highlights the lived experiences of Black employees in their disparate roles and finds that they function symbolically. Their presence in a role does not lead to improved representation in high-status occupations. "Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita (2001) conclude that diversity measures are designed more to shield organizations from liability and litigation than to create real systemic change or to restructure organizational leadership" (p. 175). This section uses the narratives of black workers to help the reader empathize with their feelings of marginalization, silencing, and erasure, and to understand the role that mentorship, ally ship, and authentic relationships can have in the battle against oppression in workplaces.

In Section 4, *Theorizing Black Leadership*, the authors explore opportunities and constraints that black leaders face in advancing efforts toward diversity and inclusion in their workspaces. This section provides a salient reminder that black leaders are not monolithic, and in examining them we need to remember their gender, sexuality, class and other intersecting identities that differentiate them, their perspectives, and approaches to leadership.

Finally, Section 5, *The Future - Lessons for the Next Generation of Leaders*, is forward looking and suggests directions for research and work in leadership to support future generations. The final article in this section attempts to consolidate all the information in this book and challenges the notion that Americans are living in a post racial society. "In many

ways, now more than ever, we need to understand the reality of the black experience, and we need to embrace and champion policies, practices and programs that help to level the playing field but also, more importantly, allow organizations and society to benefit from the collective experiences, knowledge, and skills of all, not just a few” (p. 420).

This book takes an excellent step toward foregrounding narratives that have been largely absent from discourses about leadership. It would be wonderful for the comparative nature of the inquiry to extend beyond the borders of America to demonstrate the extent to which these findings could generalize to other regions in North America and beyond because this experience is not unique to America; as a Canadian, I can confirm that these narratives can and do take place here. It is time for researchers to provide actionable steps to disrupt systems that perpetuate the harms experienced by Black and other Racialized people in disparate workplaces and across borders. Only by sharing these stories can we surface truth that requires attention, action, and change.

This book opens the door for evidence-informed conversations about race and inspires potential future research avenues that address race, work, and leadership. The book is recommended to anyone interested in learning about how to increase the authentic inclusion of diverse perspectives and social identities within organizations. It can also support leaders from various fields to engage in genuine and courageous conversations about race and the ways it affects the experiences of workers who identify as Black, with the hope that this learning and these conversations will lead to positive change that will “encourage and cultivate a robust pipeline of black talent” (p. 429).

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