



# ADVANCING TO LEADERSHIP AS A PERSON OF COLOR

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I'm used to being the token. I didn't always know what the term entailed. I didn't understand the unwritten and unspoken expectations. I didn't understand what aspects of my identity opened doors and which ones kept me from circles of privilege. As I have come to understand the concept of tokenism more fully, I have also learned to differentiate times when I'm occupying spaces as a token, have identified strategies for withstanding some of its impacts, and ways that leaders can build resilience and progress in leadership.

My experiences are shaped by my identities as a Caribbean-American, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender woman working in middle-level management within higher education in the career field of student affairs. In my 26 years of being a student, every school I have attended has been small, private, and Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). I am used to being in settings and situations when few, if any, people around me look like me. I am used to integrating spaces with my presence due to my intersections of identity. Though I claim being a token like I saw on after-school and Saturday morning TV shows, I did not start to have an understanding of what that term "token" or "tokenism"

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could miss an event without their absence being noticed but I did not have that luxury and felt compelled to attend. The opportunities for people to experience heightened visibility is increasing as organizations, with good intentions, hire more diverse staff because there is a period of time when the ratio of staff hired within certain identities are so small (85:15) that staff experience tokenism before they reach a critical mass (65:35) to have a representative voice and be in the “minority”.

As a token there is an unspoken caution towards seeming to be too friendly with other persons of color or women to manage speculation by the dominant group. This often leads to meals, meetings, or events for people of color being planned off-campus, out of the eyes of the dominant group. This leads to the intentional head nod of acknowledgement as they walk past another person of color rather than a more overt greeting.

The second characteristic of being a token is that your actions have extended consequences. It can feel as though you are not an individual in your own right but instead there is an unspoken pressure to represent the outwardly presented identities such as race and gender. I have felt as though if I personally messed up it reflected poorly on everyone else of my race or gender that may come after me.

For instance, if I made a decision with negative consequences as a Director, I would feel that it could be years before the institution gives another Black woman a chance to be in that position or a position at that level. I have also felt called upon to represent my identities on committees, as part of welcome panels for other staff persons of color, or as an advisor to cultural student organizations.

Kanter describes the third characteristic of tokenism as when a person feels the need to work harder than most to be seen as having equal

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however, eventually I was forced to acknowledge and address it.

I was intentional, however, to keep my research guided by a positive psychology approach. I wanted to make sure that I, and others, learned from my research. Thus, I chose to look into the phenomenon of the small representation of Black women in positions of senior leadership at higher education institutions.

There are not many people in senior leadership positions with my intersections of identities. This leads to feeling like I am the token person in many settings. This experience is not unique to leaders in higher education. In both the public and private sectors there remain vast disparities in representation of persons with non-dominant race and gender identities in senior leadership positions. At the time I was conducting my dissertation research, I aspired to be a Dean of Students or Vice President for Student Affairs reporting directly to the University President; consequently, those are the people I interviewed. This chapter and the description of the model to follow are ways that I am honoring that commitment.

I wanted to stay away from a deficit model of negative experiences from those who were not in senior leadership positions. I wanted to know what the experiences of current Deans of Students and Vice Presidents for Student Affairs were on their career journey. I wanted to know what strategies they used to sustain at such a high level where others were not able to succeed. I wanted to walk away from my research with action steps that could be shared with other professionals aspiring to senior leadership and potentially close the gap of representation of Black women in similar positions.

One take-a-way of my research is the resilience tree model which serves as a framework for women of color to use as they advance in

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How do you create the infrastructure for you to withstand what the world brings? Embracing your roots by tapping into what brings you joy or fulfillment or being in spaces where you can be your most vulnerable self.

For my participants, this looked like going to church, going to the beauty parlor, listening to gospel music in the car, cooking, journaling, hiking, yoga, closing the door to their office in the middle of the day and praying, sleeping, or crying. Some of my root activities and spaces are Latin partnered dance, Bikram yoga, gratitude journaling, social-media fasting, drinking hot tea, deep breaths, attending counseling sessions, and eucalyptus spearmint lotion from Bath and Body Works. All in all, Roots allow you to reset, escape, or turn off the day for a period of time.

**Branches.** A Branch is a person who believes in you, sees your potential, wants to walk alongside you and be a witness to your testimony. They may affirm, listen, support, or encourage. They are someone to say, “You can do this!” They are there to remind you of what you have already done, what your goals are, and reaffirm that you can do what you set out to accomplish. Branches can lead to new avenues, yet they can also break off or only be there for a season. My research participants stated that they would not have been in the positions they were in if it wasn’t for someone asking them if they were going to apply for the next role or assuring them that they were already doing the work and should consider it as a next step in their career development.

For my participants, many of the people who had the biggest impact on their career trajectory they were only able to identify in hindsight. They did not need to label them mentor, role model, or coach. They did not need to establish a formal or informal relationship. These people were

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advancement. It is the climate of the office, department, or institution. It is when you feel comfortable enough to bring your whole self to work and not have everything you say or do scrutinized and used as a weapon against you. It is an institution that aligns with your values, morals, and methodologies. It is supervisors, peers, and colleagues who create space for you to be your best and meet your potential rather than making it difficult for you to succeed. As I was finishing writing my dissertation one of my participants wrote to inform me that she was stepping down from her position. Ultimately, she had realized that it was time to uproot and replant in a new environment.

### **LIVING THE RESILIENCE TREE**

As I have been living this Resilience Tree model, I have realized that you cannot add one of each of the components and be resilient. You need to counterbalance the risk factors with positive factors. The more negative experiences, then the more resilience tree components are necessary to build you up to withstand it and get through it. The more negative experiences you encounter, the more resilience tree components (roots, branches, leaves, and environment) are necessary to build you up to withstand them.

When I started this research, I wanted to believe that Black women professionals, who have experienced tokenism as I have, could be resilient despite all the discrimination and micro-aggressions they endure. I wanted to know what strategies I would need in order to sustain myself if I pursued senior management. I have since added multiple components of the resilience tree into my life and I know I am more resilient and the happiest I have been.