

Reframing leadership for a more just society

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of important social and political contexts that underscore the need for an increased focus on the role of social justice in leadership education and development discourse. The article also discusses key misconceptions that inhibit critical conversations about leadership education and a leadership framework that designed to center social justice in leadership development efforts.

INTRODUCTION

We are at a pivotal moment in U.S. history. In recent decades, social justice movements have raised questions regarding whether and how leaders are equipped to address some of society's most pressing challenges (Isom et al., 2022). At the same time, movements to eradicate U.S. democratic institutions have made it clear that morally just leadership is sorely needed throughout the nation. Given that higher education produces graduates who eventually occupy many leadership roles across society (Martinez et al., 2020), it is vital to have more explicit conversations about the type of leaders that colleges and universities should cultivate.

For the purposes of this issue, we define social justice as eradicating settler colonialism, white supremacy, nativistic racism, classism, ableism, heteropatriarchy, and other systems of oppression. Higher education has historically conceptualized and practiced equity through efforts to “expand educational opportunities for underrepresented students,” which scholars have noted is admirable and needed but simultaneously limited in truly advancing social justice aims (Rhoads, 2009, p. 314). Many people in U.S. society would argue that higher education should prepare students to be leaders who advocate social justice in roles across public and private sectors (Soria & Mitchell, 2016).

In the following sections, we provide important context for current and future conversations about social justice in leadership education and development. First, we discuss the important social and political contexts that highlight the need for more pointed

discussions about the role of social justice in leadership development discourse. Then, we outline a set of key misconceptions about leadership that inhibit our collective capacity to have more critical conversations about leadership education and underscore the need to refuse these fallacies in order to reframe leadership development agendas in more socially just ways. Finally, we discuss a leadership framework that was designed to offer one tool to center social justice in leadership development conversations and was the catalyst for the current edited issue.

CRITICAL CONTEXTS OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

At least three vital contextual realities are especially important in (re)shaping contemporary conversations about leadership development in higher education: (a) macro-level social and political trends, (b) higher education's responsibility to democracy, and (c) the evolution of leadership development discourse.

Shifting social and political forces

There is no consensus regarding what constitutes a good leader, and the social and political contexts of the time often shape understandings of effective leadership. Since the mid-20th Century, neoliberal logics have played a powerful role in shaping how the U.S. populace understands all aspects of social and political life, driving the majority to increasingly prioritize values of consumerism, commodification, individualistic competition, and privatization in political and education agendas and spheres (Brown, 2006). Not surprisingly, these neoliberal rationalities have also dominated mainstream understandings of the role of higher education in society, which heavily emphasize its part in producing highly skilled leaders who can maximize the nation's competitiveness in the global economy (Giroux, 2002).

Over the last 15 years, however, the U.S. has seen drastic shifts in social and political winds. Since the 2000s, global social movements have shed light on the damage caused by excessive greed and what appears to be ever-expanding wealth inequality, state sanctioned violence toward Black and indigenous communities, deep-rooted anti-immigrant and anti-Asian violence, cultures that valorize toxic masculinity and widespread sexual violence, and the continued colonization of indigenous land and water wreaking havoc on the environment and public health (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021; Wolfe, 2006). These movements continue to pressure leaders in government, higher education, and other sectors to denounce and call for an end to various forms of systemic oppression and violence.

Neo-conservative counter-movements have also contributed to the heightened political tensions of the current historical moment. In response to a wide range of developments in society, from the election of the nation's first Black president in 2008 to the increasing visibility of racial justice movements, white supremacist groups have expanded across society (Butt & Khalid, 2018). White supremacists supported the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president in 2016 (Inwood, 2019). Trump ran for and was elected to the highest office in the land, despite and even though his platform was grounded in hostility and openly sexist and xenophobic rhetoric toward women and people of color (Hooghe & Dasselonneville, 2018). While in office, Trump repeatedly defended white supremacist activists and appointed white supremacists to public office. Moreover, some of Trump's supporters might argue that some of his most significant accomplishments were passing racialized

policies that banned non-white and non-Christian migrants from the U.S. and ramping up efforts to strip disproportionately racially minoritized undocumented immigrants from their families and deport them.

Moreover, throughout Trump's campaign and presidential term, he and his allies continued to develop a sophisticated machine of misinformation, fueling rejection of valid data and evidence among a significant segment of the U.S. populace (Riley, 2022). This widespread misinformation is tied to large numbers of people rejecting public health mandates in ways that exacerbated the COVID-19 crisis (Wang et al., 2022). These trends also led to his followers' denial of Biden's victory in the 2020 U.S. presidential race, creation of false narratives of a stolen election, efforts to steal the election in the months following its conclusion, and a hostile takeover of the U.S. Capitol on January 6th of 2021 in protest of the results (Riley, 2022).

Post-presidency, questions about Trump's abuse of power and morality continue to dominate the media. As we write this piece, the Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation are examining what evidence appears to suggest was Trump's illegal removal of top secret and classified documents from the national archives, potentially jeopardizing national security. President Biden's prime-time speech characterized Trump's leadership and the authoritarian ideologies it symbolizes as the greatest existing threat to the nation and democracy.

At first glance, Trump's presidency could be perceived as an anomaly. However, recent events offer evidence to the contrary. That vast majority of Republican members of Congress refused to denounce the attempted violent theft of the U.S. democratic election. In addition, several Trump supporters and truth deniers were elected to U.S. Congress and state government positions in the 2022 election cycle. Trump's ascendance and the increased support for overtly racist, sexist, and truth-denying elected officials are irrefutable evidence that a large portion of U.S. society believes that these traits are what constitute good leadership—or at least they do not perceive such traits as antithetical to it.

Of course, higher education institutions are not impervious to these social forces, as they have both been a target of white nationalists and served as symbolic sites for white supremacists to promote their ideals under the protection of free speech and academic freedom (Satiani & Singh, 2021). Perhaps more central to the current discussion, many of those supporting this agenda are products of U.S. colleges and universities, raising questions about higher education institutions' moral responsibilities to democracy and the nation.

Higher education's responsibility to democracy

Although there is no doubt that leadership exists across all levels of education and sectors in society, higher education has always played a vital role in preparing our nation's leaders. It is common knowledge that, throughout most of the nation's history, the vast majority of those who occupy leadership positions in government, industry, nonprofits, and education have attended and graduated from U.S. colleges and universities. Therefore, questions regarding how U.S. colleges and universities should understand, approach, and optimize leadership education and development are critical to the mission of higher education.

There are divergent views about what kind of leadership higher education should cultivate. Since the mid-20th century, the majority across this sector have focused energies on producing graduates who can effectively advance capitalist desires nationally and globally (Bok, 2009). Such foci perpetuate the idea that the purpose of a college education is solely to acquire a high-paying career and advance in the professions. These perspectives

arguably reward students for leadership that conforms to the status quo, is competitive rather than community-oriented or collectivist in nature, and centers their own individual success over the greater good (Bok, 2009).

On the other hand, many people still believe that higher education has a responsibility to promote social justice and collective well-being, particularly in institutionally marginalized communities (Museus et al., 2017). This perspective prioritizes a version of leadership that is committed to more than just oneself and instead prioritizes caring for diverse communities, future generations, and the land, water, and air that comprises our planet. These perspectives underscore a need to foster an awareness of our positions within existing systems of oppression and (re)imagine another world and another university that is the opposite of dominant capitalist and neoliberal models of higher education, government, and society (Paperson, 2017).

Many would also argue that our institutions too often relegate their responsibilities to address systemic injustices to historically subjugated and continually inadequately supported faculty, staff, and student leaders on their campuses. Some argue that campuses often exploit these constituents' commitments, expecting them to dedicate excessive amounts of unpaid labor to efforts to advance equity (Linder et al., 2019; Museus & Sasaki, 2022). For example, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and during the coronavirus pandemic, a "wave" of Black college and university students were elected as student body presidents at predominantly white institutions (Weissman, 2021). These students were tasked with leading their campuses amid a global pandemic but also pushing for more accountability from their institutions on racial justice. In turn, leaving the responsibility of advocating for a more just society to marginalized communities on campus allows those in positions of power on college campuses to maintain an image of political neutrality and avoid offending donors, alumni, and community members who might be committed to maintaining the status quo.

However, it has become increasingly difficult for college and university leaders to maintain the image of political neutrality. After the murder of George Floyd sparked a global uprising in the summer of 2020, college and university leaders throughout the nation issued statements that explicitly denounced white supremacy, which executive administrators had historically failed to do in their public statements (Meikle & Morris, 2022). When the coronavirus pandemic arrived in 2020, Trump labeled it the "Chinese virus" and an ongoing rise in anti-Asian violence peaked with a mass shooting of Asian American women in Atlanta in 2021, many institutional leaders issued similar explicitly anti-racist statements. Only recently then did the shifting social and political conditions minimize the likelihood that refusing to explicitly denounce the systemic causes of racialized violence would be considered neutral or acceptable by a growing segment of the populace.

The problematic neutrality of leadership development discourse

The desire to perpetuate a view of ideal leadership as politically neutral is reflected in research and discourse around leadership development. Frameworks and narratives that have been foundational to leadership education and development in postsecondary institutions have ignored or decentered issues of race and racism, reinforcing the centrality of whiteness and white people as ideal leaders (Irwin, 2020; Liu & Baker, 2016). They have also typically ignored settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and other forms of systemic violence. And, as mentioned, these discourses have been rooted in assumptions that capitalism and neoliberalism are inherent social goods and sustaining them is sufficiently socially just (Bok, 2009).

However, it is important to ask the question, can research and discourse be politically neutral? Many would argue that, if systemic forms of oppression shape the worldviews of educators and students, then they might disproportionately interpret and apply seemingly politically neutral theories and evidence in ways that reinforce the status quo. For example, the social change model of leadership development was a major contribution to leadership discourse and has arguably been the most visible and utilized leadership development framework in higher education over the past three decades (Komives & Wagner, 2016). The model offers a series of leadership characteristics that maximize the capacity to advance positive social change, which include developing consciousness of self, congruence between individual dispositions (e.g., values, beliefs, and strengths), an orientation toward collaboration, development of common purpose, the engagement of controversy with civility, and citizenship. However, scholars have noted that elements of the model do not explicitly center issues of power, privilege, inequity, and resistance (Museus et al., 2017). Moreover, the types of change that the model and discussions grounded in them center is often not explicitly defined. While this ambiguity can provide practitioners with valuable flexibility in practice, the model can be applied to promote socially just conversations about leadership and activities in one context and has been applied in ways that minimize the role of systemic power inequities in others (see, for example, Fox, 2018).

Researchers have noted the limitations of leadership discourse that does not center issues of power and oppression (Dugan, 2017; Theoharis, 2007; Wang, 2018). They underscore the importance of considering the complexities of historic, persistent, and pervasive inequities in society and their implications for leaders and leadership development. More recently and most pertinent to the current issue, researchers have built on these prior perspectives to propose a social justice-infused framework specifically for leadership development efforts (Museus et al., 2017). Before discussing this framework in more detail, it is useful to discuss some of the barriers to engaging, adopting, and applying such frameworks in higher education.

FOUR MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

Theories are not enough to move us toward a greater focus on socially just leadership agendas. If the field of higher education is to transform conversations about leadership to more explicitly center issues of social injustice in leadership development and more effectively cultivate leaders with the capacity to address society's most pressing problems, then it must acknowledge some of the barriers that have historically inhibited such shifts. While comprehensively synthesizing such barriers is beyond the scope of this discussion, we provide an overview of four common misconceptions related to leadership development, which must be refused to advance more constructive and morally conscious leadership development agendas.

Misconception #1: Effective leadership can be morally neutral

As mentioned, since the mid-20th century, most higher education professionals arguably prioritized a focus on neoliberal agendas and developing graduates who could advance them (Bok, 2009). This emphasis often resulted in marginalizing or completely avoiding challenging engagement around moral issues related to social justice. Many have recognized that this might no longer be a viable practice. Burns (2012) was among the first to underscore that leadership is more than leveraging power to mobilize or control other

people, but is a moral endeavor. Dugan (2017) also called on leadership theory and research to grapple with the moral aspects of leadership development more thoroughly. And, scholars have applied leadership theories, such as the social change model, to center social responsibility in leadership development (such as Komives & Wagner, 2016).

The current sociopolitical environment is one in which any college graduate in a leadership position regardless of sector must be prepared to deal with moral and ethical questions related to social and organizational policies and practices. In recent years, even those occupying leadership roles historically seen as having little moral responsibility have found themselves thrust into the spotlight and forced to navigate the political tensions surrounding racial, gender, and class inequities and violence in the U.S. and around the globe. For example, social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have provided a tool for extremist and conspiracy theorists to spread misinformation (Wang et al., 2019). Trump also used social media to encourage his armed supporters, many of whom were threatening to commit acts of violence against public officials and sought to interfere with the certification of legitimate election results, to march on the U.S. capitol building on January 6, 2021 (Riley, 2022), which finally led Facebook and Twitter to ban him from their platforms (though Elon Musk reversed Twitter's ban following his acquisition of the company; Mac & Browning, 2022). These events have cast national spotlight on conversations about the moral responsibility that leaders of technologies have to the public.

Social media provides just one example of leaders across sectors being thrust into the center of controversies related to social justice. Leaders of the National Football League were forced to navigate conversations about racial violence when their players symbolically kneeled to protest state-sanctioned violence toward Black communities, Hollywood executives dealt with a wave of women speaking out about sexual assault in the industry, and a wide range of organizations have had to respond to viral videos of employees engaging in prejudicial behavior. These are just a few of the many examples that underscore the reality that today's leaders, regardless of their industry, must be socially aware and lead with moral conscience.

Misconception #2: Socially just leadership is divisive

Many people mistakenly suppose that social justice is only for Communities of Color. Many also incorrectly assume that social justice agendas are inherently politically partisan and will inevitably alienate certain groups. We believe that neither of these perspectives are backed by evidence, but those who do not acknowledge that systemic oppression is harmful to everyone in society are likely to use social justice agendas and leadership as a divisive wedge.

Current systems of oppression are sustained by the most privileged and wealthiest of the population (Chomsky, 1998), and they function to dehumanize most people across racial, ethnic, gender, and political divides. For example, while critiques of heteropatriarchy often focus on the damage it does to women, non-heterosexual, and non-binary people, the toxic masculinity that emanates from it also perpetuates endemic violence toward cisgender men regardless of political affiliation (Whitehead, 2005). While capitalism ensures that Indigenous Communities and Communities of Color continue to suffer from economic inequities, they have caused perpetually increasing wealth inequalities throughout society that have resulted in financial crises and wreaked material havoc on rural and working-class white communities across the political spectrum (Thelin, 2019). Indigenous sovereignty and decolonization movements involve their communities' reclamation of land and water (Tuck & Yang, 2012), but Native traditions of public ownership

over natural resources can surely help reverse the continual damage that society is doing to the planet and its environment that we all inhabit.

While advocating for an end to injustice involves prioritizing systemic violence that plagues the historically subjugated, such efforts benefit everyone (Freire, 2017). Equally important, the examples above highlight that it is subjugated communities' knowledge that is least understood among those in power but can help address some of society's most pressing problems. Therefore, moral leaders must be able to relinquish a self-serving desire for power and fame to empower those at the margins. They must have the capacity to share power with institutionally marginalized groups and allow them to lead efforts to effect change (Freire, 2017).

Recognizing that systemic forms of oppression harm everyone and that all voices must be authentically heard and shape the path forward is necessary for our communities to coalesce around solutions to these pervasive problems. Lilla Watson and her Aboriginal Rights group in Queensland powerfully highlighted this logic, when they declared to potential allies, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Misconception #3: Effective leadership is about accumulating power and resources

In his 1967 speech *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. highlighted the fact that U.S. society was wealthier and had more knowledge than at any point in human history but noted that these assets did not prevent the nation's tragic systemic dehumanization of people at home and across the globe. He argued that,

to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.... When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered." (Price, 2017, para. 4)

King advocated the revolution of values to transform from a thing-oriented society to a people-oriented one.

Over half a century later, many would argue that our society has only become more focused on prioritizing technology, efficiency, and productivity to maximize profits (Chomsky, 1998). Anyone involved in leadership education and development today can benefit from reflecting on what it means that leadership discourse in U.S. society has been so excessively focused on individual abilities, skills, and outcomes that enable leaders to succeed themselves and enhance the nation's competitiveness in the global economy. Systemic oppression is endemic, and leadership education can either ignore this reality or (re)center community, coalition, empathy, morality, and humanity as keys to positive change.

Misconception #4: Consciousness of systemic realities inhibits good leadership

Some people in society are significantly invested in maximizing patriotism and positive views of U.S. society. Major research organizations and media outlets have sounded the

alarm that positive views of the U.S. are on the decline, with the percent of people who are very or extremely proud to be American decreasing from 90% to 70% over the last two decades (Gallup, 2021). Researchers have also noted that college students are likely to be less positive about the nation than the overall population, concluded that colleges and universities should encourage more positive attitudes of the U.S., and argued that such positive sentiments would enable people to improve their communities and society (Bitzan & Routledge, 2022).

These researchers, however, fail to acknowledge that most of this decline in positive sentiment occurred since 2015 (Gallup, 2021), when the nation became increasingly likely to elect a leader running on a hostile platform of xenophobia and sexism. Therefore, it is important to consider the role that societal leadership that is unaware of systemic oppression or morally inept might play in eroding patriotism and positive views of the nation.

Yet, this push to be less critical of the U.S. is reflected and taken to extremes in education policy debates (Kim, 2021). Legislative efforts across the nation, such as Florida's House Bill 7, are emerging to ban teaching about racism and other forms of systemic oppression. If and where passed, such bills will ensure that more white children are denied knowledge about real injustices throughout U.S. history to protect them from guilt, while denying minoritized children the opportunity to learn their own histories or understanding how U.S. society perceives them and their communities' contributions to it. Many might argue that ignoring injustices might erode sense of responsibility and urgency to address systemic injustices and create a more equitable world. Thus, some might say that keeping people in the dark about historical and contemporary systemic injustices inhibits good leadership or a desire for it.

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTION, LEADERSHIP, AND TRANSFORMATION (SALT) MODEL

To build on previous perspectives and develop an easily actionable leadership development framework, Museus et al. (2017) created the social action, leadership, and transformation (SALT) model (Figure 1). They merged knowledge about systemic oppression and people of color in higher education with a critical analysis of elements of the social change model to generate a parallel framework that embedded an awareness of power, oppression, culture, and identity into the necessary characteristics of leadership for social justice. The resulting SALT model recognizes the legacy of structural oppression as a significant factor in both who is seen as leaders and how leadership is practiced. The model embeds these realities into the center of discussions about leadership development and it includes the following seven core elements, which are not intended to be exhaustive but underscore some of the core aspects of social justice leadership development and orientations:

1. **Capacity for empathy:** Empathy for all people and especially those historically been subjugated can enable leaders to understand their experiences, view diverse communities with anti-deficit lenses, and operate in ways that are empowering to them.
2. **Critical consciousness:** An awareness of how systemic oppression (settler colonialism, racism, heteropatriarchy, classism, etc.) negatively impacts historically subjugated communities can provide leaders with the ability to refuse these systems. Such understanding requires leaders to comprehend their own positionality or relationship to systemic forms of oppression, including how they are both privileged and oppressed in varied ways through social systems.

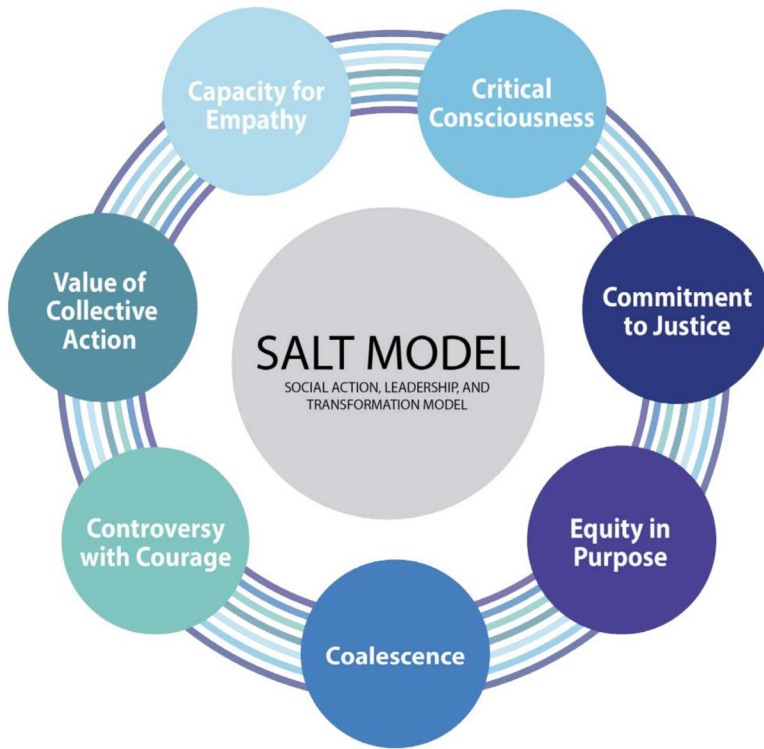


FIGURE 1 The social action, leadership, and transformation (SALT) model

3. **Commitment to justice:** Leaders should be empowered to advance the welfare of historically oppressed communities and build a more just society that equitably values, validates, and empowers all groups.
4. **Equity in purpose:** Common purposes can inherently privilege the priorities and needs of those in power, but equity in purpose ensures that the unique interests of diverse constituents, including those historically silenced and marginalized, equally shape those shared purposes.
5. **Value of collective action:** Collective action requires collective agency and denotes how leaders can and do work with diverse communities to refuse, resist, challenge, and combat systemic oppression and advance the wellbeing of all historically subjugated communities.
6. **Controversy with courage:** While civility is important, it can also be weaponized to avoid difficult conversations, vilify those in subjugated positions, and hinder movement toward justice. Controversy requires leaders to embrace discomfort, acknowledge their own positionality and responsibility to address inequities, and contribute constructively to solving their communities' most significant social problems.
7. **Coalescence:** Coalescence entails individuals and groups coming to a shared understanding that systemic forms of oppression harm society as a whole and that equity is good for everyone. This acknowledgement can enable people from diverse backgrounds to coalesce around shared goals of mutual liberation.

The SALT model was not intended to be a panacea to society's leadership challenges, but it diverges from many other leadership frameworks by packaging knowledge about social justice into an actionable framework for leadership education and development. Power,

privilege, and identity are centered as a way of understanding the current social reality and creating a more just vision for the world that many desire. We posit that focusing leadership education on uncovering, responding to, and ameliorating oppression through just leadership can promote the moral development of leaders with capacity to effect positive social transformation throughout their lifetimes, while bringing much-needed change to our communities and institutions.

CONCLUSION

Research and discourse on the role of social justice in leadership development on college and university campuses is underdeveloped, and this is the first collective issue centered on the possibilities of applying the SALT model specifically to leadership education. Therefore, much remains to be learned as higher education continues to diversify and diverse communities bring their own understandings of social justice to these leadership conversations.

To conclude, the context, misconceptions, and framework discussed herein underscore two important overarching points for consideration as these discussions evolve. First, while different systems of oppression and definitions of social justice exist, the SALT model and our discussion herein provides articulated definitions of social justice that are cognizant of power imbalances and the welfare of communities that face disproportionate systemic violence. We caution higher education researchers and practitioners to be mindful not to co-opt social justice efforts in ways that serve neoliberal agendas more than historically subjugated communities. At the same time, it is important to be critical of conceptualizations of social justice—including ours—and understand their inadequacy for advancing Indigenous sovereignty and the liberation of historically oppressed communities rendered invisible in social justice agendas.

Second, action is a necessary element of discussion about socially just leadership. The need for transformative and moral leadership is literally a life and death matter for many people from historically subjugated communities. Understanding oppression is not enough. There must be collective action, and the other articles in this issue discuss some necessary elements of efforts to realize it. Mistakes will be made, but they require accountability and reparation. But collective action to eradicate the systemic dehumanization of all people at all levels is necessary to ensure that we collectively move towards a more just world.

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