

## Chapter 5

# Addressing Workplace Bullying Behaviors Through Responsible Leadership Theory: Essential Skills for Strategic Communicators

*Michelle T. Violanti*

### Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to argue why a responsible leadership (RL) approach advances the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts of organizations and their members in ways that reduce or eradicate bullying behaviors that can thwart DEI authenticity. Strategic communicators (SCs) are positioned to address issues that influence their organization's ability to remain sustainable and to treat each employee ethically. These goals intersect when organizational policies and practices affect workers' ability to develop healthy, sustainable relationships. Workplace bullying behaviors, an area of growing human resource (HR) sustainability concern, disrupt relationship-building processes and increase employees' emotional labor, stress, burnout, and intent to leave. Bullying behaviors include aggressive or abusive communication in relationships with a perceived or positional power differential. Without legal definitions and guidance, organizations must create their own policies and procedures for developing a bully-free work environment. SCs play a critical communication role in these dynamics.

*Keywords:* Perspective taking; relational intelligence; presence; cocultural competence; antecedents; consequences

### Introduction

Ethics, values, corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability, and global development is the language of responsible leadership (RL) as these areas govern how we think about, study, and implement RL theory. What began as an

attempt to recognize the interconnected nature of people, organizations, and the environment has developed into a means for putting theory into practice. At its core, RL is communicative, relational (Violanti & Ray, 2019), interactive, and ethical (Maak, 2007). Combined, these conceptualizations highlight the importance of interacting with others in ways that celebrate and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

In this chapter, the communicative actions and interactions between and among organizational stakeholders that promote DEI and engagement constitute leadership. These interactions occur as people collaborate on project teams to improve a product or service, volunteer teams to strengthen the community's response to racial injustice, and/or decision-making teams to develop organizational policies and procedures. A role-based approach to leadership and followership indicates people are leaders because they hold a title or position with authority over followers (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). These leader roles can be temporary (e.g., leader for a specific project team) or permanent (e.g., director of human relations, organizational founder, or CEO). Leadership also can be granted to strategic communicators (SCs).

Working together today means people in organizations are not working with others who are identical with respect to any number of social identity dimensions, characteristics, or philosophies. Much has yet to be written about defining DEI and engagement because people's perspectives on the terms are a function of their experiences. In this chapter, DEI involves dimensions that make a difference when two or more people are communicating. The idea of *differences that make a difference* is not new (Eoyang, 2015; Espinoza & Titinger, 2019). Just because two people have different characteristics does not guarantee DEI is present. Two people may communicate differently if they grew up in different neighborhoods (suburbs vs inner-city), attended different schools (prep academy and low-performing public school), or had access to different extracurricular activities (travel sports and local pick-up games). Their skin color may, or may not, make a tremendous difference in their communication. Implicit assumptions highlight the need to pay attention to language that reflects code words for people's diversity (Enaharo, 2003). Often, code words do more to promote division than engagement, unity, equity, or inclusion.

Because diversity reflecting the general population is a goal of many HR departments, it is important to support and stimulate workplace engagement, unity, and DEI (Pompper, 2014). Human beings have an innate need for belonging (Kunc, 1992; Maslow, 1970). While Kunc (1992) was writing specifically about people with disabilities not being prepared for life after K-12 education where they were kept in segregated classrooms away from people without disabilities, the argument can be extended to all forms of diversity. When people do not have a chance to participate with others who are different from them, they miss an opportunity to strengthen their communication skills, expand their horizons, and practice building connections with others. Organizations thrive and innovate when members with different perspectives and life experiences come together; in these synergistic interactions, stronger decisions and solutions emerge (Moon & Christensen, 2020).

Supporting strong and ethical RL advancing organizations' DEI efforts may be SCs in roles such as public relations, internal and external communication, leaders (executive, managerial, group or team), and followers. When these various SCs work together on improving DEI, organizations promote the sustainability of all stakeholders. Because DEI is such a broad topic, this chapter focuses specifically on the role of RL with respect to workplace bullying. This chapter is organized in five parts: (1) Overview of responsible leadership, (2) Role of communication in responsible leadership, (3) Responsible leadership and CSR, (4) Workplace bullying and responsible leadership, and (5) Recommendations.

## **Overview of Responsible Leadership**

RL theory, which [Maak and Pless \(2006\)](#) named less than two decades ago, grew out of leadership research and practice addressing transformational, ethical, authentic, and servant behaviors. What differentiates RL from previous approaches is movement from a dyadic focus between leader and follower ([Shi & Ye, 2016](#)) to three- or four-dimensional spherical perspectives when adding the concept of time. Leaders are continuously connected to individual and group stakeholders. Adding the time dimension encourages people to remember leadership as an ongoing process wherein leaders build trust, enhance organizational reputation, and achieve sustainability ([Voegtlin, Patzer, & Scherer, 2011](#)). The connections between RLs and various stakeholders are built and maintained over time.

Participation in the RL process is enhanced when people who serve in those roles possess certain characteristics, such as servant, steward, citizen, visionary, coach, networker, storyteller, architect, and change agent ([Pless, 2007](#)). Enacting these characteristics allows RLs to focus on trust, reputation, and sustainability. For example, RLs use their visionary capabilities to craft messages to enable organizations to connect with the larger community through both storytelling and action. Less than 30 seconds into its sustainability video, Coca-Cola President and CEO James Quincey talks about how profitability is important to the company, but not at any cost since both people and our planet matter ([Coca-Cola, 2018](#)). Indirectly, the sustainability story he weaves indicates concern for employees, customers, and suppliers by signifying an underlying theme of transparency. More directly, he shows care for the environment by endorsing recycling campaigns with bin donations and building watersheds designed to replace each drop of water used in manufacturing processes ([Fig. 5.1](#)).

## **Role of Communication in Responsible Leadership**

RLs remember there are three outcomes associated with communicative interactions: instrumental, relational, and identity ([Clark & Delia, 1979](#)). These apply equally to interpersonal and organizational interactions, between leaders and individual stakeholders, or between organizations and stakeholder groups. The model in [Fig. 5.2](#) illustrates the overall relationships among stakeholder characteristics, RL practices, and outcomes of RL interactions with various stakeholders



Fig. 5.1. When People with Different Perspectives and Life Experiences Come Together and They Participate in Responsible Leadership, Synergistic Interactions with Stronger Decisions and Solutions Follow.

*Source:* Stuart Jenner.

at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Violanti & Ray, 2019). Micro-level processes occur at the interpersonal level and reflect the individuals' communication abilities. Meso-level processes occur between the organization and various internal and external stakeholders. These processes can reflect policies and procedures used in the organization when interacting with employees, suppliers, customers, clients, shareholders for publicly traded organizations, donors for nonprofit organizations, and the communities where the organization operates. Finally, macro-level processes reflect the larger societies and cultures in which the organizations and stakeholders reside. As the world becomes more connected and traditional characteristics once associated with particular countries or geographic regions blur, macro-level analyses become more difficult unless researchers are going to engage in stereotyping or decision-making based upon majority perspectives. Both routes are dangerous when we are ultimately interested in DEI efforts.

What follows next are four communication skills necessary for facilitating RL: (1) Perspective taking, (2) Relational intelligence, (3) Presence, and (4) Cocultural competence.

### ***Perspective Taking***

Perspective taking involves being able to see a situation from others' vantage points. People who draw upon a larger set of experiences are better, generally, at engaging in perspective taking, which is critical in today's multinational (Antunes & Franco, 2016; Voegtlin, 2016) and domestically diverse organizations. Similar

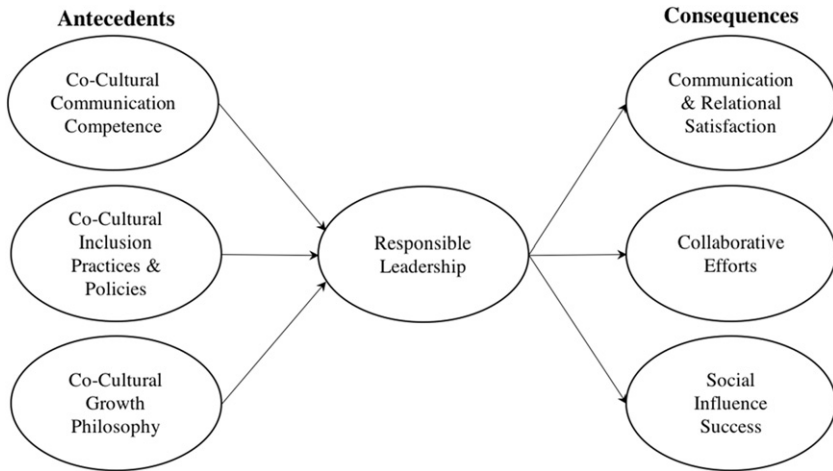


Fig. 5.2. Antecedents and Consequences of Responsible Leadership Communication. *Source:* Created by author.

to standpoint theory's concept of situated knowledge, those in dominant identity positions only have to worry about communicating with those who also are in dominant identity positions. Those who are in underrepresented identity positions must be able to communicate with those who are in dominant as well as underrepresented identity positions (Hartsock, 1998). Considering this dynamic in a DEI context, those at the top of the organization must be able to see situations through the eyes of other executive-level employees as well as those who keep the organization operational (i.e., donors, shareholders, venture capitalists, funding agencies, etc.). To belong in the organization, those who are in underrepresented identity positions must be able to interact with others in similar underrepresented identity positions as well as those in power positions. The more diversity an organization has, the stronger the perspective taking skills everyone involved must have to keep people engaged and promote feelings of inclusion.

### ***Relational Intelligence***

Like perspective taking, relational intelligence abilities allow responsible leaders to make connections with various stakeholders to build trusting relationships (Koh, Fernando, & Spedding, 2018; Pless & Maak, 2005). Building trust means people perceive a sense of psychological safety (Kahn, 1990), being without fear of negative reactions or repercussions. While some aspects of diversity are visible (e.g., skin color, many physical disabilities), the vast majority are invisible (e.g., ideology, mental health, chronic illnesses, past traumatic events), which is especially true when talking about people who possess diverse backgrounds (Pompper, 2014). Over time, interactions involving relational intelligence transform organizational cultures, policies, and procedures to recognize and celebrate

DEI when dealing with both internal and external stakeholders. Overall, DEI efforts require relationally intelligent interactions at the micro level to begin making transformations at the meso and macro levels.

### ***Presence***

While perspective taking and relational intelligence are cognitive skills, presence is more relational. It involves attention, focus, integration, and connection (Kahn, 1992). People cannot be present in an interaction if they are not listening to the other person. Listening requires significantly more time and effort than simply hearing or reading another's words. Effective listening results in a shared understanding of, not necessarily agreement with, the message. Integration calls for people to invoke their own sense of diversity to help others feel included, a critical component missing in many organizational DEI efforts because it cannot be mandated through policies and practices. People must be willing to diversify individually to develop a repertoire of experiences that help them craft the messages necessary to build trusting relationships with diverse others.

As people find themselves interacting more in technology-mediated environments, the concept of presence expands to highlight social presence, creating an online environment where people perceive the other person as being there (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). We create social presence by developing cohesion among the people who are interacting, exchanging affective messages, and developing healthy communication interaction patterns. In a world where people may feel technology protects them, allowing them to say or do things they would not in person, social presence is an integral component of both DEI and RL.

### ***Cocultural Competence***

Cocultural competence (CCC) is the enactment of cognitive and relational communication abilities. Cultural communication researchers continuously try to balance conceptualizing meanings of culture and cultural communication (Collier, 2015). While cultures often have been defined at the group level, distinguishing factors between groups is becoming more difficult as human groups become increasingly diverse. Using *cocultural* rather than *intercultural* with respect to communication reflects the fact that diversity, and by extension subcultures, exist locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally (Ray & Violanti, 2018). Thus, cocultural communication processes involve exchanging symbolic information between people who, because of culture, can simultaneously share the same, similar, and different orientations toward the world.

As underlying mechanisms of CCC at the micro level, self-regulation and perspective taking work in conjunction, affording RLs the ability to develop and express audience-centered messages (Gilead et al., 2016). At the meso level, cocultural communication practices and policies are a prerequisite for RL. If groups, teams, and organizations have not developed inclusion policies and practices, they are less likely to be successful and sustainable. Having policies in name only is not going to

achieve the desired outcomes. Organizations must attain stakeholder buy-in to be effective (Sposato, Feeke, Anderson-Walsh, & Spencer, 2015). If DEI is not valued at the organizational level, then the individuals who comprise the micro level are not going to be as receptive to RL communication. At the macro level, a cocultural growth philosophy, which has yet to be examined in the literature, is necessary for RL to be effective. How CCC promotes acceptance and adoption of culturally eclectic norms and values is the essence of RL and DEI.

## **Responsible Leadership and CSR**

RL benefits from possessing degrees of communication skill competence, ranging from perspective taking, relational intelligence, and presence, to CCC. While these communication abilities typically occur between people in interpersonal, small group, organizational, and technology-mediated contexts, a broader level of communication occurs between organizations and their stakeholders. Most organizational-level communication episodes (at least the ones we hear about), involve technology-mediated communication. Beyond looking specifically at individual-level organization members' communication abilities, the ways organizations demonstrate CSR are important.

RLs show their organizations can self-regulate and contribute to a larger community's goals (Maak & Pless, 2006). Contributions can be philanthropic, community-building, or activist efforts aimed at improving the social and physical environment. The connection between RL and CSR has existed for some time without those specific labels. Organizations, and by extension their leaders, cannot display social responsibility without also displaying ethics and moral values (Szczepańska-Woszczyzna, 2015). To engage in CSR and embody the necessary ethics and moral values, organizational members must go beyond what can be found in an employee handbook, or the policies governing an organization.

In this sense, RL is left in the hands of those who typically inhabit leadership roles and/or are visible to the media and local community. One potential gap between CSR and RL is the possibility that external stakeholders will view organizations' behaviors as being more about the organization than being about CSR or some cause or justice demand. Greenwashing, a concept that emerged in the 1960s with the nuclear power industry (Mander, 1972), involves using advertising to give the appearance of being concerned about the environment when the organization is actually more concerned about its reputation and bottom-line profits or sustainability (Pompper, 2015). While examples of greenwashing continue to abound, we also must pay attention to ways organizations tout concern for human rights while continuing to allow microaggressions and other injustices against employees to play out in the workplace.

## **Workplace Bullying and Responsible Leadership**

Employees are an underrepresented stakeholder group among much RL research (Frangieh & Yaacoub, 2017). Because organizational leaders believe their

employees are committed to the organization and its practices because they continue to work there, they do not believe they have to market their CSR practices to employees. Times of crisis, organizational change, and employee-appreciation celebrations are notable exceptions. Leaders must consider their employees as equals among stakeholders and ensure that organizational policies and practices are transparent and culturally sensitive as one step toward eradicating workplace bullying.

Workplace bullying is a communicative act, taking place via messages and interactions. While workplace bullying is defined in many ways, three elements are consistent: (1) detriment to the personal and professional well-being of the individual and organization, (2) ongoing rather than occurring at one moment in time, and (3) based in power differentials that often prevent someone from stopping the hostile communication (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). The most obvious connection between RL and workplace bullying is that RLs show concern for all stakeholders, including employees. Less obvious connections between workplace bullying and RL suggest that the antecedents and outcomes of RL minimize the opportunities for workplace bullying to occur. At least three intersections exist connecting RL and workplace bullying.

First, workplace bullying at the macro level is an artifact of the cultural underpinnings of the context. Hence, individualistic cultures are more prone to experiencing workplace bullying than collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 1980). Countries, such as the United States, where competition and personal rights are more important than connections among people, are more prone to workplace bullying behaviors. As workplaces have become more multinational and connected electronically, national cultures are not always as clearly delineated based upon geographic locations.

Second, workplace bullying at the meso level is an artifact of the institutional policies, processes, and strategies that provide or minimize conditions for workplace bullying occurrence. Just as societies have their own cultures, so do organizations (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Beyond organizational-level policies, there are departmental, group, and team norms that may facilitate workplace bullying (Glambek, Einarsen, & Notelaers, 2020). These may include homogeneous teams with a token member possessing an underrepresented identity, or open departments where sharing anything on one's mind is not only encouraged but expected. There are very few organizational policies regarding workplace bullying (Cowan, 2011; Hodgins et al., 2020). So, without formal policies, organizational members may perceive it as not important enough to be part of an employee handbook or organizational practices.

Finally, the micro level is where most workplace bullying occurs. The repeated hostile communication generally occurs dyadically, often involving bystanders and upstanders (Zimmer, 2016). *Bystanders* are people who witness bullying behaviors and choose to do nothing about it. *Upstanders* are people who witness bullying behaviors and intervene to help those being bullied by reporting an instance to HR or management, publicly challenging the bullying behavior as inappropriate, and/or working to change workplace policies/practices. Being an upstander means not isolating or moving those who engage in bullying behaviors, but rather critically evaluating the current organizational norms (written enforceable rules and



agreed-upon norms for interacting with others), and involving a larger collective in the decision-making process for how to handle workplace bullying (adapted from Voegtlin, 2016).

Among the most important RL tenets is leaders behaving to promote good and avoid harm (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). For the purposes of this chapter, preventing harm includes calling out people who treat others with disrespect or discrimination. Unlike other forms of discrimination for which there are legal protections, such as sex, race, gender, and ability, workplace bullying carries no such protection. In August 2020, Puerto Rico passed a workplace bullying law that creates potential liability for organizations that knowingly allow workplace bullies to continue engaging in the behaviors (House Bill 306; August 7, 2020). No such laws exist in most other places. Viewing responsibility as a social connection suggests that agents can be held responsible for their actions not only where a direct causal link can be established between an action and an outcome (direct liability) but also in cases where these links are indirect. Those who “contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice have responsibilities to work to remedy these injustices” (Young, 2011, p. 137). Residing in positions of privilege inherently grants RLs the necessary power to effect change (Maak & Pless, 2009; Voegtlin, 2016).

## **Recommendations**

Merely amplifying connections among RL, CSR, and workplace bullying is insufficient. We must be willing to put the connections into practice to curtail and prevent workplace bullying.

Much workplace bullying plays out behind the scenes. Even when others are made aware of the behaviors, there is an implicit assumption that if there were reason for concern, the immediate supervisor would have taken care of the situation. In organizations, each layer of employees believes (or at least assumes) that the layer of employees below are doing their job according to organizations’ formal and informal policies and rules. This may not always be the reality, however.

What if managers and supervisors were willing to fulfill their RL communication roles? First, at the meso level, organizations would benefit from training and cultural reenactments that help people develop their perspective-taking and relational-intelligence skills. Second, at the micro level, helping people see interactions from other perspectives broadens horizons. In today’s fast-paced, overly connected, information-saturated world, we rarely take the time to be completely present with others in person or via technology. Helping internal and external stakeholders slow down long enough to get to know one another and to build trust and climates of psychological safety benefits everyone in organizations. Organizations benefit from employees who take the time to be more culturally competent and develop more audience-centered messages when we continue to address micro- and meso-level communication abilities. Ultimately, RLs must consider the implications of their actions on others and not just themselves or the organization (Voegtlin, Frisch, Walther, & Schwab, 2019). It is no longer sufficient to simply provide a list of

statistics regarding underrepresented groups. True DEI efforts to curtail workplace bullying must begin with cultural communication competence that leads everyone to behave as responsible leaders.

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