

# White Men & Diversity: What's It Gonna Take—Critical Skills for Courageous White Male Leaders

by Bill Proudman

*Imagine the power of a workplace where all of us can be all we are all the time. Imagine the sense of personal fulfillment each of us would have knowing that whatever it is that we can contribute would be heard and valued. Imagine the excitement and energy that would surround this type of organization. Imagine the good we could do for ourselves, each other, our clients, and society if we were able to operate day-in and day-out without barriers and biases. This would be a firm that would survive the centuries. This is a firm each of you can help create."*

—Mike Kennedy, (then Manager of the Northwest Region) President, Transportation Business Group, CH2M HILL



Sometimes being a fish that rarely, if ever, has to leave the water can be problematic. White men, immersed almost always in white male culture, face a challenge in understanding their role in creating inclusive organizations. Often faced with not knowing that they do not know, many well-intended white male leaders defer their lead on diversity issues to white women and people of color. They often step out altogether or downplay their knowledge and role in these pivotal change efforts. When courageous white men stand up and lead on diversity partnerships with white women and people of color, as well as with other white men, will be permanently transformed for the better.

Mike Kennedy, President, Transportation Business Group, CH2M HILL, a company that offers engineering consulting related to industrial facility design, transportation, water treatment, and environmental remediation, is a courageous white male leader who is actively engaged both as a partner and a corporate leader in transforming how his company does business and values its people.

Most white male leaders are skilled and savvy enough to recognize the value of a diverse and inclusive workforce; however, they frequently come up short because they live and work in a culture they have never had to leave or consciously adjust to accordingly. A while back, a colleague attended a speech made by a CEO to a group of employees of a mid-size company located in the upper Midwest. The 20-minute presentation focused the business case for diversity and the progress made by the company. After the talk concluded, my colleague randomly surveyed a number of employees in the audience about their reaction to the CEO's words.

Several commented, *"He just doesn't get it."* When probed further, they reported that the leader said all the *"right"* things, but that the remarks lacked a *"heart connection."* This leader was unaware that some of his employees didn't connect with his message. Diversity and inclusion changes in companies can't be simply mandated or engineered. Courageous leaders implement strategy and amend initiatives with energy and passion. They demonstrate an artful blend of heightened self awareness, tenacity, and empathy, and they inspire others to do great things. They become the glue that connects people's hearts with strategy creating transformative organization change.

## 8 CRITICAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS

#1: COURAGE OF THEIR CONVICTIONS

#2: INTEGRATING HEAD AND HEART

#3: LISTENING

#4: BALANCING KEY PARADOXES

#5: LEVERAGING AMBIGUITY AND TURBULENCE

#6: MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

#7: SEEING/THINKING SYSTEMICALLY

#8: BEING AN AGENT OF CHANGE

## BILL PROUDMAN CEO, Founder

Bill started WMFDP in the 90s after noticing white men leaders repeatedly disengaging from diversity efforts.

For more than 30 years, he has served as a consultant, coach and facilitator to countless companies and organizations on issues of team effectiveness, diversity and leadership development.

Bill is a writer, blogger, and sought after speaker and co-author of a three-volume field guide on white men, leadership, and diversity partnerships.

### BILL BLOGS

It is all about heart. Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence (EI) bears this out. Goleman is an internationally known author of Emotional Intelligence and Working with Emotional Intelligence, and coauthor (with Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee) of Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence. Goleman defines EI as five key components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. Goleman's research has shown that people with higher EI are more effective leaders.

Frank McCloskey is another courageous white male leader. As vice president for diversity at Georgia Power, McCloskey is one of the few heterosexual white males in the chief diversity officer role of a large U.S. corporation. McCloskey leads with his heart and is unrelenting in his quest to be a positive agent of change in his company. Georgia Power has begun to create influential partnerships, enlightened dialogue, and a culture of full diversity partnerships among many of their senior leaders. Their work has barely begun, but the commitment at the top by McCloskey, CEO Mike Garrett, and Southern Company CEO David Radcliffe embody three white men in positions of power who are making a difference. Their commitment to gaining knowledge in public is at the crux of Georgia Power's learning curve.

Most diversity change agents of organizations are white women and people of color. Often white male leaders express support and buy-in to these efforts by charging a diversity council (usually made up primarily of non-white men) to lead the organization's diversity and inclusiveness efforts. Instead, CEOs and executive teams need to see the wisdom in having more heterosexual white men in strategic diversity change positions. If diversity and inclusion efforts continue to be left only to white women and people of color, long-term progress will not happen. Without a deeper partnership among senior, white male leaders, white women, and people of color, companies will continue to stall out in their diversity efforts, because changing a culture must involve a critical coalition of senior

leaders. This shift will involve new behaviors and actions on everyone's part that leaders. This shift will involve new behaviors and actions on everyone's part that fundamentally alter partnerships across differences and within perceived sameness.

In our research, we have noticed that effective white male leaders who are engaged in diversity and inclusion work utilize a common set of critical skills. While every leader is different and there is no one formula for effective leadership, the following eight skills provide a glimpse of essential attitudes and behaviors.

### CRITICAL SKILL #1: COURAGE OF THEIR CONVICTIONS

*I have a personal need to create places where people can be their complete and total selves. This need is based on my deep belief that we are all more fulfilled, and able to contribute more to our own growth and to the growth of others, when we are able to be fully present. In the workplace, I feel real physical and emotional pain when I find someone who has much to contribute, but they are unable to make that full contribution because they are blocked by someone else, or by some structure or policy. Each of us individually, and the company as a whole, is hurt every time someone's ability to contribute is blocked.*

—Mike Kennedy, (then Manager of the Northwest Region), President, Transportation Business Group, CH2M HILL

The word courage literally means to "stand by one's core." Acting on courageous decisions requires knowing one's own core. What is the essence of one's principles and character? Courageous management is truly leadership from the inside out. Kennedy's words embody his deep belief that guides his actions. His employees know it every time he speaks and acts.

As a leader, the courage demonstrated indirectly informs others where they stand and whether they are trustworthy. Their actions invite others to join with them. Courage helps maintain momentum in the face of uncertainty.

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Tenacity and risk taking historically helped European white men travel to America against great odds, and these qualities continue today as threads of American white male culture. Combining these attributes with other cultural threads such as rugged individualism and the quiet determination signified in the phrase “run silent run deep” creates a blend of courage that have white men “go it alone.” They pursue success where logic rules. Leadership can be enhanced when courage-backed action is expanded beyond the world of certainty and logic and into connecting with our hearts.

### CRITICAL SKILL #2: INTEGRATING HEAD AND HEART

*While the objective is to change the company, that change starts in our hearts and minds. I am completely confident that the workplace will change for the better if each of us takes the time to look inside and consider what we personally can do to make this a more inclusive environment.*

—Mike Kennedy, (then Manager of the Northwest Region), President, Transportation Business Group, CH2M HILL

The Chinese language symbol for consensus literally means “the head and heart come together and speak with one voice.” In contrast, American white male culture has emphasized rationality as the single source of truth and the primary key to success. Leaders fully grounded in both head and heart can access more of their internal resources and successfully lead more kinds of people; they are more powerful than those who attempt to lead with intellect alone.

White male leaders with their heads and hearts connected will routinely display vulnerability that creates openness and authentic connection with others. Connected leaders know their own blind spots and growing edges. They recognize how their leadership presence affects others’ performance.

### CRITICAL SKILL #3: LISTENING

*I have reinforced my recognition that my diversity understanding is indeed an ongoing odyssey and that I do not have all the answers, understand all the questions, or recognize all the issues. I solicit the conscious support, input, and feedback from everyone as we move forward.*

—Bill Archer, Executive Vice President External Affairs, Georgia Power

The word “respect” literally means “the willingness to look again.” Courageous leaders give others a second look rather than lock themselves into quick judgments. Leaders who listen to others are often accused of not knowing what course they want their organization to take. They can be viewed as “wishy-washy” and unsure. Some courageous white male leaders break with this monolith image of the leader as all-knowing and all-seeing and surround themselves with people who often know more than they do.

If my head and heart are not connected, then I am not bringing my full self to work, to my community, to my relationships.

—Bill Proudman CEO, Founder

HEAD & HEART 2MIN. VIDEO



As a leader, listening allows them to know how others experience a given situation. Listening further develops the necessary skills of empathy and compassion, and builds relationships that maximize opportunity for learning and partnership.

White male culture in America places value on arguing and winning debates, which emphasizes logic. Emotion is usually limited to expressions of anger, which for men may be viewed as a sign of strong, determined leadership. White men learn that it is more important to prove their point and create a rebuttal than to truly listen in order to understand others. As a result, conversations end with a winner, a loser, and little shared understanding. Leaders can miss important wisdom if they assume everyone around the table contributes by logic and argument.

When white male leaders add “listening fully” to their toolkit, they complement their ingrained advocacy skills with inquiry skills, which gives them greater voice. Inquiry skills help them to learn collaboratively with others. Leaders learn to see the world through others’ eyes and, as a result, their vision of the world becomes broader.

#### CRITICAL SKILL #4: BALANCING KEY PARADOXES

*Diversity is not about moving over or giving up power. It is about learning and using the best all have to offer. Diversity is not about dividing a limited resource but expanding resources. We have the power and responsibility to begin to define a new culture that does not exclude but respectfully values all people.*

—Paul Kirkwold, former County Manager, Ramsey County, Minnesota (retired)

Given the emphasis on rationality in white male culture, those immersed in this culture do not naturally subscribe to the notion that opposing needs or goals should be simultaneously pursued. This either/or mindset can lead to an attempt to solve problems with a single solution. Either/or problem solving can exacerbate complex problems. Leadership is enhanced by looking at the relationship between problems that seem opposing or unrelated.

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White male leaders are often faced with a number of seemingly contradictory choices when facing diversity dilemmas. Examples of paradoxes that must be negotiated include:

#### INDIVIDUALITY AND GROUPNESS

Teaching white men to understand what it means to be seen as a member of a group is challenging. One of the vestiges of white male culture, as previously mentioned, is for white men to view themselves only as unique individuals. Courageous white male leaders recognize that all people are “both” individuals and members of numerous groups. White men don’t lose their individuality when they acknowledge their group memberships.

#### SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE

Focusing on the trap of believing that you treat everyone the same and don’t acknowledge differences can impair partnership. Focusing on sameness can unintentionally contribute to other’s constant pressure to fit into a world where to be seen and valued they must act, think, dress, and even talk like white men. Courageous white male leaders are simultaneously colorblind and color conscious. They can see one side of the sameness/difference paradox without negating the other.

#### CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

White men are rewarded for challenging. They also have been conditioned to go it alone and not ask for help or let others assist. White male leaders know how to negotiate “status and rank” with other white men and simultaneously challenge them to examine their behaviors related to diversity. They often do it through public examination of their own actions and behaviors. As role models, white male leaders challenge white men, but do so without verbal intimidation or ultimatums.



## NOT MY FAULT AND I AM RESPONSIBLE

Many white men feel personally blamed for centuries of mistreatment of others. It is not helpful to apologize for things you were not involved with, so don't do it. Courageous white male leaders do take responsibility for understanding how the nuance of decades and centuries of mistreatment impact how we hear and communicate with each other at work. Courageous white male leaders are quick to ask, "How is the history of systemic injustice impacting the dynamics of this conversation and/or effectiveness of this team?"

**CRITICAL SKILL #5: LEVERAGING AMBIGUITY AND TURBULENCE** *Over 10 years ago, I began the diversity journey, full of energy and wanting to do what's right. Along the way, I learned to become resentful and angry with the process and progress women, people of color and gay/lesbian groups were going through. It felt like everything I did was wrong and I was a target of their anger, fear, and hostility. As a result, my personal progress became "frozen"—if anything you did was wrong, the only right thing to do was nothing. I now feel unfrozen.*

—Mike Andries, Principal Management Consultant Shell Oil Company (retired)

The Calvinistic roots of white male culture hold a predisposition to either/or thinking, which assumes there is a right or wrong with no gray area in between. This mindset holds a very low tolerance for uncertainty. Today's world is complex. Leadership requires more skill in managing ambiguity and working in the midst of the confusion that results when there are many sides to an issue.

Effective leaders remain open to paradoxes and polarities and are less stressed with finding definitive solutions to complex and oftentimes confusing diversity dilemmas. Instead, they get more comfortable with being uncomfortable or confused. They retain the ability to make decisions when logic dictates otherwise or data is simply not available. Finally, they understand that ambiguity and change create an atmosphere of turbulence. Leadership requires that they acknowledge, use, and manage resistance to this turbulence.

Simultaneously, they must use it as an opportunity to remove both real and perceived barriers to change.

## CRITICAL SKILL #6: MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

*This experience has helped me to shed (or begin to shed) the "if I don't see something wrong, everything must be OK" attitude that I didn't even know I had. I will not apologize for being who I am, but I will do what I believe I can to minimize (dare I say eliminate) the negative impact of who I am on others. I will continue to educate my children, and try to increase my sphere of influence to their friends, and my friends and family, to reduce the words and actions that they may not know are hurtful to others. I will falter, but I will try to get back up.*

—Michael Wuebben, Work Management Specialist DTE Energy

Many factors influence whether people communicate directly or not. American white male culture tends to value direct communication, although men's emotional sharing may be limited to anger. Other feelings of confusion, uncertainty, fear, or the sadness behind anger may not be shared. Emphasis on rationality and advocacy, rather than inquiry, may turn difficult conversations into a debate, with the intention of having a winner and a loser. Often the complexity of a conflict is oversimplified by the search for a "right" and a "wrong" perspective.

In contrast, when the emphasis is on inquiry, a learning conversation takes place. Leadership is enhanced when the truth in each person's story emerges. The conversation projects a broader picture that then gets to the heart of conflicts. Courageous white male leaders initiate and engage in direct, honest, and timely conversations, without blame, in order to maximize partnership and business success. They acknowledge immediately when something is not working and they stop doing it. In listening to others, they recognize when they are observing behavior and when they are adding their own interpretation to that behavior.

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They then fully choose when to give clear feedback and when to share their own perspective. This self-awareness helps leaders to avoid attributing negative intentions to others and to monitor their own intentions while communicating. They don't collude with their own stereotypes about other people.

### CRITICAL SKILL #7: SEEING/THINKING SYSTEMICALLY

*I am more aware of the privileges that as a white male I can and do take for granted. I am also aware of how those very privileges cause me consciously (and unconsciously) to behave (by commission and omission) in ways that belie my avowed aspiration to value, seek and affirm inclusivity. My merely doing the right thing as an individual is "not" enough.*

—Pat Dreckman, Vice President and General Tax Counsel, Shell Oil Company (retired)

Being able to see the patterns in systems is a critical skill for a leader. Leaders are able to see and intervene when invisible systemic advantages drive or influence organizational policies and procedures. They can see the big picture.

Leaders don't blame individuals, but work incessantly to shift policies and systems, so that white male culture is not the invisible "default" that determines systems like hiring, performance appraisal, and succession planning. Courageous leaders know that culture is created, in part, by shared assumptions embedded in groups of people. They know these assumptions create dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. They are astute in knowing that assumptions or stereotypes can often creep into decisions, strategy approaches, or personal assessments. They are vigilant in separating unconscious shared assumptions with real data based on performance behavior and results.

Courageous white male leaders continually seek to understand and interrupt these dynamics in order to create a more equitable and just world.

### CRITICAL SKILL #8: BEING AN AGENT OF CHANGE

*What a freeing experience! My personal learning's were significant and as a result of honest, compassionate dialogue on difficult and uncomfortable issues. I am better prepared to be a diversity partner with not only people of color and women, but also other white men. As a white male, I have a desire to be a credible diversity partner. I see my participation in the white men's caucus not as a destination experience but rather the start of a longer journey to overcome fear and apprehension.*

—Frank J. McCloskey, VP Diversity and Corporate Relations, Georgia Power

Western culture views change most often as a rational, linear process. Yet human beings are inherently non-rational, and change processes involving humans are usually nonlinear. Leaders who accept the existence of non-rational aspects of change in their organizations should learn to tap the expression of "resistance" and emotional turmoil as important fuel for driving organizational change.

White male leaders who view their role as change agents understand how to respond to resistance to change. They are reluctant to label non-supportive behavior as opposition and instead seek out dialogue with those who have a different perspective"

They embrace the chaos that comes with change. Courageous leaders possess an understanding of the emotional components in changing systems; they personally model and demonstrate how to create inclusion, ownership, and commitment while implementing change. The quest to become an effective diversity partner is an ongoing, never-ending process. When more white male leaders become visibly engaged in their own diversity journey, their

organization's diversity and inclusion efforts will make real progress. This critical step forward will heighten the chance of truly creating inclusive work cultures that enhance real business results.

Organizations are in desperate need of courageous white male leaders to join white women and people of color to effectively create future work cultures of inclusion. If we all learn to more effectively partner across differences, workplace diversity will be a tremendous and virtually untapped competitive advantage.

As stated by Mohandas Gandhi, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

Make it happen.

