

**Breaking Systemic Barriers: The Role of Lived Experience in Building Better Leaders**

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsem/ Esquimalt) Peoples  
on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose  
historical relationships with the land continue to this day

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## My Positionality

My journey into leadership was shaped more than a decade ago when my mentor, Dr. Linda Franchi, an accomplished marginalized leader recognized my potential and provided me with the opportunity to grow.

I came to understand equity as creating the conditions for success by equipping people with the tools they need to thrive. Living with a disability as a hard of hearing person has strengthened my resilience, discipline, teamwork, and adaptability qualities that have guided me through culturally complex environments where accessibility, identity, and social justice intersect.

These experiences inspired my pursuit of a master's degree in community development. Bearing witness to systemic barriers and inequities has grounded my leadership in empathy, humility, and an unwavering commitment to inclusion. Today, I define leadership by the ability to carry forward the stories, strengths, and struggles of my community.

In every role whether in policy, program development, or mentorship I draw from lived experience to open pathways for others. I carry with me the enduring encouragement of my latefather: *“My fighting spirit will be with you always – All my Love, Dad.”*

## Executive Summary

This research project investigates the systemic barriers preventing individuals from marginalized communities including women, Indigenous Peoples, racialized groups, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQ2S+ individuals from attaining and advancing into leadership roles. Conducted independently and without affiliation to any organization, the study explores how leadership selection processes, cultural biases, and rigid organizational structures contribute to the underrepresentation of these groups. The goal is to highlight the voices of successful marginalized leaders and human resource professionals to identify actionable solutions for building equitable leadership pathways.

## Methodology

The research study employed a qualitative semi-structured interview approach grounded in phenomenological methodology to capture the lived experience of five successful leaders from marginalized communities and five human resource professionals. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it focuses on understanding how individuals experience leadership, decision-making and systemic barriers in their own words. Consistent interview questions were posed to all participants, with flexibility to probe deeper based on individual responses.

This allowed for the identification of recurring themes, emerging issues, and unique perspectives. Data analysis focused on recognizing shared challenges, highlighting systemic patterns, and capturing participant-driven recommendations.

## Key Findings

The findings reveal that leadership pathways remain constrained by exclusionary criteria, privileging hierarchical experience, formal credentials, and dominant cultural norms over community-based leadership and lived experience. Hiring and promotion processes often perpetuate systemic bias through rigid merit standards, culturally unresponsive interview practices, and opaque advancement opportunities. Even when diversity targets are met, tokenistic approaches frequently leave marginalized leaders without genuine influence or decision-making authority.

At the same time, the research underscores the transformative potential of leaders with lived experience, whose insights can address policy gaps, meet community needs, and challenge systemic inequities. However, without equitable hiring systems and structural change, these contributions remain undervalued. Expanding culturally responsive leadership development through mentorship, sponsorship, and the integration of

Indigenous governance principles offers proven pathways to build inclusive decision-making and ensure meaningful representation at all levels.

## Recommendations

The research project concludes with fifteen recommendations, including:

- **Redefining Leadership Competencies** – Recognizing lived experience, cultural knowledge, and relational leadership as assets equal to formal credentials.
- **Culturally Responsive Mentorship & Sponsorship** – Structuring long-term, cross-cultural mentorships and sponsorships to actively advocate for marginalized leaders.
- **Equitable Hiring and Promotion** – Conducting equity audits, implementing anti-bias training for hiring committees, and ensuring transparent advancement pathways.
- **Integrating Indigenous Governance and Community-Based Leadership Models** – Including elders and community knowledge keepers in decision-making processes.
- **Embedding Inclusive Policy Frameworks** – Aligning leadership recruitment and governance policies with reconciliation, equity, and principles drawn from lived experience.
- **Empowering Human Resources as Equity Champions** – Embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion accountability into HR roles and granting authority to address biased processes.

The study confirms that systemic barriers in leadership recruitment and promotion disproportionately exclude individuals with lived experience from marginalized communities. Leaders without such experience often make decisions through a narrow cultural lens, overlooking critical intersectional knowledge and perpetuating policies that fail to meet community needs. This research highlights how exclusionary norms, rigid hiring standards, and narrow definitions of success suppress diverse leadership potential. In contrast, leaders from marginalized communities bring unique insights shaped by intersectional identities and firsthand experience navigating systemic barriers that can transform policies, programs, and organizational cultures.

The findings call for embedding equity into every stage of leadership development, from recruitment and mentorship to succession planning, ensuring that leadership pathways are redefined to reflect lived experience as a core competency. Moving beyond performative diversity, organizations must commit to structurally inclusive practices that empower marginalized voices to lead, influence, and create lasting, equitable change.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Defining the Problem

There is a systemic problem of hiring leaders who do not have lived experience in leadership positions who make decisions and create policies that negatively affect and impact the lives of individuals from marginalized communities. According to Given (2008), lived experience speaks to how individual experiences are shaped by subjective factors of identity, including race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, political associations and other roles and characteristics that determine how people live their daily lives. The result is that leaders without lived experiences are making decisions for groups of people through their own cultural lens which excludes necessary intersectional knowledge or lived experience. This has serious impacts on the lives of individuals who are from marginalized communities. The effects of this are evidenced in their daily lives by barriers to services, policies that are ineffectual, and suppression of those who want to achieve leadership roles. Their futures are dependent on their “masters” who often hold the power, yet do not have lived experience in or with marginalized communities.

This is particularly striking in Metro Vancouver, where over 57% of residents are visible minorities, yet their representation in leadership roles remains disproportionately low (e.g., just 11% in senior management and 10% on boards across sectors) (Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia [SPARC BC], 2011). While in Toronto, racialized individuals comprise 48.6% of the population yet occupy only 15.9% of senior management positions (Future Skills Centre, 2025). The reports on diversity in Canada revealed women held 29% of all senior positions, Indigenous Peoples held 0.5%, visible minorities held 13%, persons with disabilities held 0.5% and LGBTQ2S+ held 0.15% (Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP, 2024). These disparities demonstrate how leadership bodies remain dominated by individuals lacking lived experience of marginalization, a leadership gap with real-world consequences. Policies formed without intersectional insight often entrench existing barriers to services, reinforce inequities and limit career opportunities for marginalized communities. This paper will examine and analyze cross-cultural leadership and its positive impacts on the individual, community and society.

Leaders with solid potential, qualifications and lived experience are not provided mentoring or opportunities to lead. As noted by Eagly & Chin (2010), members of social groups encounter discrimination if their surface-level category memberships lead people to believe that they do not “have what it takes” for success in a leadership role. Regardless of individuals’ actual qualities, attitudes are less favorable toward those who are

stereotypically mismatched with the requirements of a leader role than toward those who are matched. This less favorable attitude often results in discrimination (Eagly & Chin, 2010, p.217). This is a systemic issue carried out by those in power creating policies and programs that further marginalize individuals needing to access those services.

Decision-making is a critical dimension of leadership, shaping not only organizational direction but also the inclusivity and equity of outcomes. Traditional models of decision-making often emphasize efficiency, hierarchy and policy compliance, yet these approaches may overlook the lived realities of marginalized communities. For leaders from marginalized communities, decision-making is grounded in lived experience, empathy and relational accountability. Their decisions are often informed by navigating systemic barriers and advocating for voices that are otherwise excluded from organizational processes. Often decision-making is made by those who do not have the lived experiences and this contributes to the systemic discrimination in society.

There is evidence that individuals with lived experiences can foster the ability to shift thinking between contexts (Molinsky, 2007) as well as creative cognitive processes and superior problem-solving abilities (Leung, Maddux, Galinsky & Chiu, 2008). The degree and type of multicultural experience can positively influence marginalized leaders' effectiveness, as cultural intelligence has been shown to enhance adaptability, empathy and the ability to work across difference (Ang, Van Dyne & Koh, 2006). Marginalized leaders with lived experiences who are engaged in policy decision-making often face additional challenges in demonstrating competency compared to their counterparts who are not from a marginalized group due to systemic biases that question their legitimacy (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Leaders who do not have lived experience may portray the belief and value that they know best, which reflects broader patterns of epistemic injustice where dominant voices are privileged over marginalized knowledge (Fricker, 2007). This can be evidenced by individuals who have a pathological or medical model view of disabilities and/or superiority beliefs relating to gender, class, race, and sexual orientation. Let us not forget the long history of documented systemic oppression of Indigenous Peoples by Canadian governments for centuries underscore the structural nature of exclusion and the need to centre lived experience in leadership and policy processes (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Leadership of the future needs to adopt a more collaborative approach across all spectrums of marginalized groups when developing policies, decision-making and implementation of services.

## 1.2 Purpose, Project Objectives and Research Questions

The purpose of this project is to examine how leaders from marginalized communities influence policy and decision-making through their lived experiences and to identify pathways for creating more equitable leadership opportunities. To fulfill this purpose, the project aims to deepen understanding of the systemic barriers that limit leadership opportunities for marginalized communities, highlight the role of lived experience in shaping inclusive decision-making and policy outcomes and contribute to leadership development practices by offering insights that support more equitable representation in leadership roles. The goals are pursued through three specific objectives through direct interactions with successful marginalized leaders who are willing to participate in this research and then conduct comparative analysis between the successful leaders and human resource professionals. The findings will outline measurable steps to develop a conceptual framework that enhances human resource retention strategies from marginalized communities and develops gateways for leadership opportunities.

For the purpose of this research, a successful leader is defined as an individual from a marginalized community who has attained a leadership role and demonstrated the ability to create meaningful impact within their organization or community. Success is understood as multidimensional encompassing the authentic use of lived experience in decision-making, contributions to equity and inclusion and the capacity to influence policy or systemic change. Successful leadership, in turn refers to the practice of leading in ways that foster equity, inclusion and structural transformation. It emphasizes how leadership practices positively influence communities, empower others, and dismantle systemic barriers, ensure that opportunities for advancement are accessible to all.

### Project Objectives:

1. Engage directly with leaders from marginalized communities through in-depth interviews to better understand challenges to leadership opportunity processes.
2. Analyze decision-making processes by leaders from marginalized groups when creating policies which are influenced through their lived experiences.
3. Outline a conceptual framework that attracts leaders with lived experiences to participate in competitive leadership opportunities and the development of policies, decision-making and implementation of programs.

### Research Questions:

1. What are the systemic barriers that marginalized leaders have to overcome in order to be competitive for leadership opportunities?

2. How do leaders with lived experiences from marginalized communities influence decision-making that has positive impacts on policies and programs?
3. How does systemic discrimination influence the lack of leadership opportunities for marginalized communities?

### 1.3 Scope of the Study

This research focuses on leadership experiences within the Metro Vancouver region of British Columbia, Canada. The study examines leaders from marginalized communities, specifically individuals who identify as women, racialized, Indigenous, disabled, or LGBTQ2S+ and who have held leadership positions across sectors such as non-profit organizations, government agencies and Crown corporations. While the term “marginalized leaders” may include other groups such as newcomers, refugees, or religious minorities, the scope of this research project is intentionally limited to those identified in participant recruitment that represents women, racialized individuals, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples or members of the LGBTQ2S+ community. The study also incorporates perspectives from human resource professionals to better understand organizational hiring and leadership development practices. The project provides a snapshot in time, based on semi-structured in-depth interviews of ten participants conducted between 2023 and 2024, rather than a longitudinal analysis of leadership trajectories. It does not claim to represent the experiences of all marginalized leaders across Canada, nor does it offer a sector-by-sector breakdown of leadership practices. Instead, it focuses on highlighting the lived experiences of individuals from marginalized communities who face systemic barriers within Metro Vancouver. The intention of the findings is to generate insights and recommendations that may be transferable to broader contexts.

### 1.4 Background

Canada’s legal landscape includes the Employment Equity Act, Pay Equity Act, Accessible Canada Act, Canadian Human Rights Act, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Compliance with these legislative frameworks requires employers and organizations to reduce and prevent discrimination against marginalized groups including women, racialized individuals, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, members of the LGBTQ2S+ community and individuals facing barriers based on gender, age, religion, family status, or criminal record. These legal protections form the foundation for advancing equitable leadership pathways and inclusive workplace practices across Canada.

Barriers are anything that hinders someone’s full and equal participation in society. The Employment Equity Act (Government of Canada, 1995/2024) focuses on reducing

employment barriers. The purpose of this Act is to achieve equality in the workplace so that no person shall be denied employment opportunities or benefits for reasons unrelated to ability and, in the fulfilment of that goal, to correct the conditions of disadvantage in employment experienced by women, Aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities by giving effect to the principle that employment equity means more than treating persons in the same way but also requires special measures and the accommodation of differences (Government of Canada, 1995/2024). The Employment Equity Act focuses on removing barriers to employment for women, Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities, and visible minorities. While it doesn't explicitly include gender identity or expression as designated groups, the Canadian Human Rights Act (Government of Canada, 1985/2024) does, prohibiting discrimination on these grounds. The Canadian Human Rights Act applies to federal workplaces and the provision of goods and services within federal jurisdiction. The BC Human Rights Code was amended to include Indigenous identity and gender identity or expression as protected grounds on November 25, 2021 (British Columbia Human Rights Code, RSBC 1996, c. 210, as amended 2021). These additions are part of the broader effect to ensure protected individuals under the law.

The purpose of the Pay Equity Act is to achieve pay equity through proactive means by redressing the systemic gender-based discrimination in the compensation practices and systems of employers that is experienced by employees who occupy positions in predominantly female job classes so that they receive equal compensation for work of equal value, while taking into account the diverse needs of employers, and then to maintain pay equity through proactive means (Government of Canada, 2018).

The Accessible Canada Act (ACA) was implemented in 2019, to ensure a barrier-free Canada is to benefit all persons, especially persons with disabilities by identifying, removing and preventing barriers within federal jurisdiction (Government of Canada, 2019). The ACA provides for the development of accessibility standards and gives the Government of Canada the authority to work with stakeholders and persons with disabilities to create new accessibility regulations that will apply to sectors within the federal jurisdiction. This Act opens leadership opportunities for people with disabilities by the identification and removal of barriers and prevention of new barriers.

Indigenous communities in Canada have long been subjected to systemic marginalization, colonial violence, and exclusion from decision-making processes. The passing of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA) in British Columbia in 2019 represents a pivotal step toward redressing these historical injustices (Government of British Columbia, 2019). DRIPA aims to align provincial laws with the principles of the

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), advancing Indigenous self-determination, legal recognition, and social and economic justice (United Nations, n.d.).

UNDRIP establishes a universal framework reinforcing existing human rights and fundamental freedoms as they specifically apply to Indigenous contexts. DRIPA operationalizes these standards by committing the British Columbia government to take concrete actions in partnership with Indigenous communities ensuring their voices are meaningfully included in shaping laws, policies, and leadership structures (Government of British Columbia, 2019; United Nations, n.d.).

Leaders with lived experiences from marginalized communities have struggled to fit in society for many years. There is a lack of informed leadership to influence decision-making change in policies and programs. Marginalized leaders continue to face barriers to the decision-making process based on their marginalized identities. Spruill, Kenney & Kaplan (2001) state that “a systems approach can help flesh out the ‘information and knowledge gaps’ that hinder development” (p. 106).

This project will show the systemic problem of hiring leaders who do not have lived experience in leadership positions who make decisions and create policies that negatively affect and impact the lives of individuals from marginalized communities. A lack of educational awareness the continued use of stereotypical leadership hiring practices often leaves members of marginalized communities as second choice options. Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Government of Canada, 1982/2024) speaks about equality rights and affirmative action programs. Through affirmative action, according to Fullinwider (2018), positive steps are taken to increase the representation of marginalized communities in employment, education, and culture from which they have been historically excluded. That place calls for active effort, not only good intentions, to eliminate prohibited discrimination. Systemic barriers continue in our society that deprive members of certain groups of opportunities or privileges that are available to members of other groups.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

A literature review was conducted to provide a deeper understanding of leadership qualities and its impacts on marginalized communities. The literature review is sourced

through the University of Victoria's search engine Summon 2.0, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, SAGE, the internet and books that explore scholarly research on themes related to marginalized communities, leadership development, systemic barriers and systemic discrimination. The literature review builds on the project objectives and research questions.

As such, the literature review examines:

1. How does systemic discrimination influence the lack of leadership opportunities for marginalized communities?
2. What are the systemic barriers that marginalized leaders have to overcome in order to be competitive for leadership opportunities?
3. How do leaders with lived experiences from marginalized communities influence decision-making that has positive impacts on policies and programs?

## 2.2 Definitions

**Leadership** refers to a social influence process in which leaders attempt to motivate and enable followers to contribute toward achieving collective goals (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2013). A related concept is management, involving activities of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational resources to attain organizational objectives effectively and efficiently (Kotter, 2018).

**Lived experience** refers to the first-hand involvement or direct experiences and choices of a given person, and the knowledge that they gain from it, as opposed to the knowledge a given person gains from second-hand or mediated source (Wikipedia, n.d., para. 1).

**Systemic Barriers** refers to structural obstacles within society that prevent individuals or groups, particularly marginalized communities, from accessing opportunities and resources. These barriers are often embedded in policies, practices, and cultural norms, making it difficult for affected populations to succeed in areas such as education, employment, and healthcare. (Fiveable, n.d., para. 1).

**Systemic discrimination** refers to a method of discrimination that occurs regularly in the workplace as an inherent part of the organization through interactions and processes creating a disadvantage for people with a common set of characteristics such as race, gender and disability over a long period of time (TalentLyft, n.d.)

**Marginalized communities and groups** include women, people with disabilities, people of colour, LGBTQ2S+ and Indigenous Peoples. (Culture Ally, n.d.). These marginalized

communities noted above and below are often excluded from mainstream social, economic, cultural, or political life. Further examples of marginalized groups include, but are by no means limited to, groups excluded due to race, religion, political or cultural group, age, gender identity or gender expression, sexuality, or socioeconomic or financial status. To what extent such populations are marginalized, however, is context specific and reliant on the cultural organization of the social site in question. (University of British Columbia, n.d.)

## 2.3 Context

The researcher examined the literature through the lens of specific research questions related to the impacts on leadership opportunities, policies and programs, and community development. The analysis revealed a wide range of issues, including: discriminatory cultures and norms that create barriers for individuals who do not conform to the status quo (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016); limited access to mentorship and professional networks (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013), which reduces visibility and opportunities for advancement; intersectional barriers that exacerbate inequities for individuals with overlapping identities, subjecting them to additional discrimination and exclusion from leadership roles (Crenshaw, 1991); bias in recruitment and promotion practices that often favour dominant groups, and the need for policy and structural reforms to establish accountability measures (Bierema, 2016).

The literature review found that qualitative methodology was more frequent, particularly in studies exploring the lived experiences of marginalized leaders. This reflects the need to capture the nuanced, contextual and intersectional realities that quantitative data may not fully reveal. Researchers often rely on interviews to understand how systemic barriers and discrimination shape individuals' path to leadership.

There is a broad consensus that systemic barriers and discrimination hinder the advancement of marginalized communities in leadership positions; however, scholars differ in their interpretations of the root causes and potential solutions. Some authors, such as Cornwall and Gaventa (2001), highlight the importance of participatory and community-led leadership models, arguing that lived experiences can be transformative in developing inclusive policies. Crenshaw (1991) emphasizes the necessity of incorporating intersectional voices in leadership to address existing policy gaps. Systemic discrimination influences leadership outcomes by allowing structures of power to perpetuate inequities, particularly through intersectional exclusion. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, (Crenshaw, 1989; Wikipedia, n.d.), "intersectionality" has been used as an analytic framework to investigate lived experiences and asymmetrical power relationships

stemming from oppressive systems in diverse settings, including leadership at work and organization contexts (Sim & Bierema, 2024, p. 72). This intersectional marginalization intensifies systemic exclusion from leadership opportunities.

Disagreements and debates among some scholars arise from differing disciplinary perspectives, methodologies, and interpretations regarding necessary changes. For instance, systems that are merit-based are often critiqued for excluding marginalized communities. There is ongoing debate about whether simply increasing the number of marginalized individuals in leadership roles is sufficient, or whether more radical transformations of power are needed. Some argue that tokenistic diversity policies may lead to symbolic inclusion without genuinely altering decision-making authority (Ahmed, 2012). Additionally, some frameworks address gender and race separately, overlooking the complexities of overlapping oppressions.

There is a divide in literature regarding approaches to addressing inequity. Some literature emphasize individual agency, focusing on mentorship, sponsorship, and resilience (Robotham & Jacobs, 2025). In contrast, other authors, such as Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (2000), argue that true equity in leadership cannot be achieved without dismantling the institutional foundations of racism, sexism, and ableism. Furthermore, while some researchers prioritize increasing representation within existing power structures, others advocate for a redistribution of power that challenges the very frameworks that exclude marginalized voices. These tensions reveal an ongoing debate: whether incremental change within existing systems is sufficient, or whether deeper, systemic transformation is required to achieve equitable leadership in community development.

Early trait-based leadership theories reinforced systemic bias by associating effective leadership with immutable traits such as race, gender, and physical appearance, which aligned with dominant societal norms and contributed to the underrepresentation of racialized and gender-diverse leaders (Liden, Wang & Wang, 2025). Leadership in the modern organizational context is increasingly scrutinized through the lenses of culture, power dynamics, and systemic inequality. Cross-cultural leadership, social dominance theory, and intersectionality provide a framework for understanding the structural and social barriers faced by leaders from marginalized communities. This review examines the interplay of these themes, emphasizing the intersectionality of marginalized identities, and explores their implications for leadership recruitment, inclusivity, and organizational effectiveness.

The literature review also highlights a gap in quantitative research. Guan et al. (2021) noted a growing interest in understanding how systemic discrimination affects leadership opportunities for marginalized communities. However, their systematic review of 153 studies revealed that quantitative methods capable of effectively capturing intersectionality remain limited, particularly in health research. The authors found that although many studies used statistical models with interaction terms such as combining race and gender in regression analysis, these methods often fell short of fully capturing intersectionality. In particular, many studies failed to meaningfully engage with the core concepts of intersectionality, particularly the role of social dominance and systemic discrimination.

Moreover, fewer than half of the studies explicitly referenced power dynamics, raising concerns that many quantitative models reduce intersectionality to mere combinations of identity variables rather than engaging with its deeper sociopolitical context. This limitation directly applies to leadership research, where existing datasets and statistical models often overlook how interlocking systems of oppression constrain leadership access. The findings by Guan et al. (2021) underscore the methodological challenge of applying quantitative tools to complex intersectional realities and call for more theoretically grounded approaches that reflect the lived experiences of marginalized leaders. As such, this paper supports the argument that current quantitative methodologies are insufficient for fully capturing the systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups in leadership. In leadership research, this poses a critical challenge: without explicit modeling of how systemic power structures interact with individual identities, the complex realities faced by marginalized leaders risk being reduced to additive identity variables.

Systems thinking is a way of understanding complex issues by recognizing the interrelated parts within a larger whole. It focuses on the patterns, relationships and feedback loops that shape outcomes over time. Systems thinking is a necessary component of any effective community intervention if we wish to connect learning and development (Spruill, Kenney and Kaplan, 2001). The systems thinking approach will help analyze the issues with the complexity of cross-cultural leaders and their influence in the decision-making process of policies and programs that impact marginalized communities. It is essential to understand leadership strategies by examining the lived experiences of marginalized leaders, how they navigate complex decision-making environments, and the systems that influence their hiring and advancement. A systems thinking approach enables us to explore these interconnected elements not as isolated events, but as part of a larger structure that shapes opportunities, power, and influence within organizations.

## 2.4 Summary

In summary, the literature review explores the relationship between leadership development and the systemic challenges faced by marginalized communities, drawing from scholarly databases and diverse sources. The review examines how systemic discrimination and barriers limit leadership opportunities, while highlighting the significance of lived experiences in shaping leadership opportunities and outcomes. Definitions of key terms such as leadership, systemic barriers and intersectionality set the foundation for the analysis. The analysis identifies that marginalized leaders often navigate limited access to mentorship, biased recruitment practices, and intersectional barriers, all of which hinder their advancement. In response, leaders from marginalized communities frequently develop key leadership traits rooted in lived experience such as greater empathy and emotional intelligence, enhanced resilience and adaptability, and a deeper commitment to ethical values and social justice. Previous research suggests that lived experiences navigating marginalization can strengthen leadership capacity in areas such as decision-making, policy awareness and the ability to recognize and address systemic barriers. Leaders from marginalized groups often bring critical perspectives shaped by their lived experiences, which can inform more inclusive and responsive policy development and organizational changes (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). These lived experiences also strengthen problem-solving abilities, improve communication and conflict resolution skills, and foster a sense of vision and transformational motivation.

Qualitative research is prevalent in this field, especially through interviews, as it effectively captures the complex, nuanced, and intersectional realities of marginalized leaders. The review highlights ongoing scholarly debates about whether small changes are sufficient or if larger, systemic changes are necessary. It critiques tokenistic diversity and points out methodological gaps in quantitative studies, such as those identified by Guan et al. (2021), which often overlook power dynamics. The literature emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, systems thinking, and community-driven leadership models, demonstrating how lived experiences not only shape leadership styles but also empower leaders to develop inclusive policies and promote equitable change.

## Chapter 3 Methodology and Methods

This research project is conducted independently by the researcher and is not affiliated with any client or organization. This study is guided by a phenomenological research methodology, which seeks to understand and interpret the meanings of lived experiences from the perspectives of those who have lived them. Phenomenology is suited to this

project because it prioritizes the voices of leaders from marginalized communities and centres the unique insights that arise from their experiences. By focusing on how these leaders make sense of their roles, challenges and decision-making processes, phenomenology provides a framework for uncovering the deeper significance of lived experience in shaping leadership opportunities and policy influence (Creswell, 2007).

To collect data within this phenomenological methodology, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with two groups of participants: successful marginalized leaders from marginalized communities and human resource professionals involved in recruitment and leadership development. This dual perspective ensures that both the lived experiences of leaders and the organizational practices influencing leadership recruitment and opportunities are captured and analyzed. The primary objective is to gain a better understanding of the obstacles and challenges marginalized leaders experience. Additionally, the researcher will examine influences on decision-making processes that create policy and program changes.

According to Given (2008), in-depth interviews are most successful when participants are encouraged and prompted to talk at length about the topic under investigation without the researcher's use of predetermined, focused, short-answer questions. In-depth interviews are often referred to as semi-structured interviews and are a key strategy for data collection on marginalized leaders with lived experiences by documenting information in their own words about their opinions and personal experiences. Due to the nature of the topic, confidentiality is paramount in the collection of their data. The researcher has specifically chosen face to face interviews for marginalized leaders to elicit rich data and gather human resource professional's perspectives on recruitment strategies and decision-making when hiring candidates from marginalized communities.

My approach to the research participants is to have an unbiased perspective to ensure data collected focuses on the consistency of the questionnaires posed, and adaptable to probe further based on their responses. The researcher's focus is to identify their comments, replies, or suggestions for further research in order to analyze what perspective they expressed, as well as noting other themes presented.

Each participant has been assigned a code number to identify the structured interview and maintain confidentiality. Interview style open-ended questionnaires were developed focusing on systemic discrimination, lived experience and cross-cultural decision-making. All participants are anonymous and any identifying information is codified. Tremblay & Gutberlet (2012) indicated the qualitative research style is a methodology drawn from a

human-oriented perspective that leads to knowledge generation and social change, as reflection can spiral into action. By preparing a set of interview questions that is tailored to the linguistic, accessible and cultural considerations of the identified marginalized communities, data gathering optimizes their free expression throughout the interview process. The series of interview questions are found under the appendices.

### 3.1 Inquiry Question

How does systemic discrimination influence the lack of leadership opportunities for marginalized communities? What are the systemic barriers that marginalized leaders have to overcome in order to be competitive for leadership opportunities? How do leaders with lived experiences from marginalized communities influence decision-making that have positive impacts on policies and programs?

### 3.2 Inquiry Design - Methods

The inquiry was designed using a semi-structured, in-depth interview style to deeply explore the lived experiences and perspectives of two distinct groups: successful leaders from marginalized communities and human resource professionals involved in leadership recruitment and development. By focusing on these two groups, the research aimed to achieve a form of data triangulation, capturing both the individual experiences of successful leaders and the organizational perspectives of human resource professionals. This approach strengthens the credibility of the findings by allowing for comparison and cross-validation between lived experience narratives and organizational practices (Denzin, 2012). By drawing from multiple perspectives, the study was able to present a comprehensive and trustworthy account of how systemic barriers and opportunities are perceived, experienced and acted upon within leadership contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words, highlighting challenges, barriers, values and strategies that influence leadership pathways. The interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform, video recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis to identify commonalities and differences across participants. This design provided rich, qualitative insights into how systemic issues are experienced on an individual level and how organizational processes can either support or hinder inclusive leadership development.

### 3.3 Project Participants and Recruitment

The project draws on the insights of a collective of participants from marginalized communities who identify from the fields of women, disability, people of colour, gender, sexuality and Indigenous Peoples. The participants have been recruited independently

through professional networks and community organizations. Two distinct participant groups were engaged: (1) successful leaders from marginalized backgrounds, and (2) human resource professionals with insight into recruitment and organizational development. The data collected from these groups, along with their shared recommendations, contribute to a deeper understanding of systemic barriers and offer practical guidance to advance equitable and inclusive leadership development practices. The scope, objectives, and deliverables of this project involve using a consistent set of interview questions across all participants, followed by a thematic analysis of their responses to identify common patterns and insights, in order to fulfill academic research requirements.

To recruit participants for this study, outreach was made to 24 individuals including, both successful leaders from marginalized communities and groups, and human resource professionals with relevant experience in leadership development and organizational diversity. In addition to individual outreach, contact was also made with 14 relevant organizations, such as professional associations and community organizations to support participant identification and encourage engagement; however, only one community organization responded. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that participants could offer meaningful insights into both personal leadership journeys, offering rich and informed perspectives.

Recruitment was conducted primarily through professional networks, LinkedIn, and community organizations. Participants were contacted based on an existing professional relationship or prior acquaintance, while others were approached through cold outreach, with email correspondence initiated without any prior connection. Recruitment emails were designed to clearly communicate the study's purpose, participation criteria, and voluntary nature. Ten individuals participated in semi-structured interviews: five successful leaders and five human resource professionals. These individuals are recruited from private, public and non-profit sectors where they are shaped by their lived experienced identities. A sample of project clients were taken to represent different aspects of marginalization, including disability, people of colour, gender, sexuality and Indigenous Peoples. In addition, secondary data were gathered from human resource professionals. The final sample provided a balanced and nuanced perspective combining lived experiences of marginalized leaders with organizational viewpoints of human resource professionals thereby enhancing the depth and credibility of the research findings of leadership development and organizational insights into hiring and advancement. The demographics of individuals who participated are found in Table 1 in the findings chapter. All participants resided in Metro Vancouver area.

### 3.4 Semi-structured Interview Questions Design

The first group of successful leaders made up of five participants were asked 14 questions. The questions can be found in Appendix 1. The purpose of these questions is to explore the experiences, challenges, and strategies of successful leaders focusing on marginalized communities, inclusivity, representation, and leadership development. The inquiry seeks to understand how leaders ensure that decision-making processes reflect the needs and voices of marginalized individuals, the barriers they face in accessing leadership opportunities, and how lived experiences influence their leadership and policy decisions. It also aims to examine the impact of systemic barriers and discrimination on leadership recruitment, as well as the effectiveness of existing programs and services that support marginalized leaders. Finally, the questions explore advice for promoting inclusive leadership, fostering opportunities for emerging leaders from marginalized communities, and improving recruitment and retention practices in competitive leadership environments.

The second group of human resource professionals of five participants were asked 12 questions. The questions can be found in Appendix 2. The purpose of these questions is to explore how human resource professionals incorporate lived experiences, particularly from marginalized communities, into recruitment, hiring, and leadership development processes. The inquiry examines the impact of systemic discrimination on leadership opportunities for marginalized groups, as well as how HR policies and decision-making influence inclusivity in recruitment. It seeks to understand the inclusive practices that enhance leadership opportunities, the challenges HR professionals face when integrating lived experience into decision-making, and the balance between lived experience, qualifications, and skills in leadership advancement. The questions also aim to gather insights on promoting inclusive leadership and fostering an environment where marginalized employees feel empowered to share their experiences, alongside suggestions for improving recruitment and retention practices for emerging leaders from marginalized communities.

### 3.5 Information Gathering

In each interview, and for the purpose of consistency, participants were given a copy of the participant information and consent form that outlines the parameters of the research project and protocols of confidentiality. Participants were informed about how the information gathered would be shared and how raw data would not be shared with other participants or with anyone other than the researcher and supervisor. The ability to withdraw consent to participate was shared with each participant in the invitation email,

consent form and during the introduction. Participants were told that the interviews are recorded and written notes would be taken in efforts to capture the information shared; those notes were not shared with the client or with other participants. The intent of written notes was to capture what was shared and by whom. The interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length.

### 3.6 Limitations and Delimitations

A first limitation is some participants may be uncomfortable with sharing their lived experiences due to cultural sensitivity of the subject matter. It was essential to create a safe space to allow participants to share their experiences. A second limitation is that interviews were conducted virtually using the Zoom platform, chosen for its flexibility and accessibility, reflecting the broader shift toward online methods that emerged during and after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. This limitation impacted the social distance between the researcher and the participants. The third limitation was how long the interview process was because of the length of the questionnaires and participant's availability and energy level. The average interview times was 75 minutes.

A delimitation to the project goals of data collection is that it took 12 months to capture and complete in-depth interviews due to challenges finding suitable participants. It required intense efforts due to participant's changing life circumstances and availability. Lastly, the data collected had to accommodate competing work schedules between the researcher and the participants. As a side comment, sample size could also be a limitation if the aim were to generalize findings. However, in phenomenological research, small sample sizes are common and sufficient to achieve data saturation, allowing for exploration of lived experiences rather than broad generalization (Creswell, 2007). From this perspective, this sample size is considered a strength of this study design.

### 3.7 Data Collection

The interviews were completed virtually on Zoom to capture the data. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure the information was fully captured. As relationships with all participants had not been established prior to the interviews and the topic of leadership qualities, the researcher video recorded throughout the interviews. Upon the closing of all interviews, the information gathered was automatically recorded and transcribed into text format. The transcriptions were used for analysis and identification of themes and coding.

### 3.8 Data Analysis

The interview recordings and transcriptions were used for analysis and for the identification of themes. A comparative thematic analysis approach was used, focusing on the identification of recurring words, phrases, and ideas across interviews. Words or phrases that were repeated in the interviews identified broad themes and multiple subthemes. Once the themes were identified, they were reviewed, refined and organized to capture nuances in participant experiences. This process involved comparing themes across two participant groups, leaders from marginalized communities and human resource professionals to identify both convergences and divergences. This comparative approach highlighted how systemic barriers were experienced on an individual level by leaders and interpreted by human resource professionals. The final themes were clearly defined and named to reflect the lived experiences of successful leaders and the human resource perspectives under review. This approach ensured that the analysis was connected to the broader purpose of examining how marginalized leaders influence decision-making and leadership opportunities.

## Chapter 4 Findings

This section presents the major themes and patterns that emerged from using qualitative methodology, offering insight into how leaders from marginalized communities navigate leadership roles and influence decision-making processes. The findings are grounded in the lived experiences of five leaders from marginalized communities and five human resource professionals. Their perspectives reflect both systemic barriers and enabling factors within organizational structures. The analysis focuses on identifying challenges, strategies for overcoming obstacles, and the ways in which these leaders contribute to policy and program development. These findings are organized in a narrative approach based on the interview questions asked to reflect the core research objectives exploring the impact of those experiences on leadership decision-making.

### 4.1 Participant demographics

Five successful leaders identified as SL-01, SL-02, SL-03, SL-04 and SL-05 interviewed come from diverse backgrounds, representing women, persons of color, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, and members of LGBTQ2S+ communities. Their roles span senior management to top-level executive positions across multiple sectors, including non-profit organizations, private enterprises, crown corporations, and government institutions. The human resource professionals interviewed identified as HR-01, HR-02, HR-03, HR-04 and HR-05 in this study serve as human resource consultants in a range of sectors, including non-profit organizations, crown corporations, private

companies, and government entities. Notably, human resource professional participants reported experience showcasing their broad expertise across diverse organizational contexts. Many participants reflected an intersectionality of identity markers that underscores the interconnected nature of social categorizations as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination. Outlined in the Table 1 are breakdown of the demographics of the participants from the Metro Vancouver area and the breakdown of the industry sector they work in. To provide context for the findings, the following participant coding system was developed to represent successful leaders and human resource professionals, categorized by identity markers relevant to this study.

Table 1: Participant Profile Table

Code	Role	Gender	Identity Markers	Sector
SL-01	Successful Leader	Woman	Person of Colour, Queer	Non-Profit
SL-02	Successful Leader	Woman	Person with Disability, White	Government
SL-03	Successful Leader	Woman	Person with Disability, Person of Colour	Corporate
SL-04	Successful Leader	Woman	Indigenous Peoples	Non-Profit
SL-05	Successful Leader	Woman	White	Non-Profit
HR-01	Human Resource	Woman	Person of Colour	Non-Profit
HR-02	Human Resource	Woman	White	Corporate
HR-03	Human Resource	Man	Indigenous Peoples	Corporate
HR-04	Human Resource	Woman	White	Private
HR-05	Human Resource	Woman	Person of Colour	Private

### 4.2 Interviews from Successful Leaders from Marginalized Groups

In exploring experiences within the successful leader's cohort, they highlighted the diversity and intersectionality present in their involvement in various community-oriented sectors, such as working with queer and disability communities, engaging with Indigenous populations, and addressing issues faced by women and people of colour. These successful leaders are working professionals in their respective industries while also contributing to their communities in various roles. They have served on boards, engaged in advocacy, and/or participate as members of the communities they represent. Participants repeatedly emphasized the barriers marginalized communities face in accessing employment opportunities, noting that these groups significantly underrepresented in the workforce.

An overarching theme was the importance of lifting marginalized voices, striving for equality, and ensuring that all individuals have the right to occupy spaces where they feel valued and respected. All successful leaders highlighted the emphasis on lived experiences and intersectional identities, which are crucial for inclusive decision-making. For example, participant SL-04 shared the challenges in hiring Indigenous candidates during the recruitment process despite commitments and agreements to employ a certain number of Indigenous individuals. They stressed the importance of diverse perspectives and community representation, including Indigenous voices, in leadership and governance. The inclusion of elders in the decision-making process acts as a "sanity check" to align organizational decisions with community needs.

The findings acknowledge potential biases and cultural gaps and calls for open-mindedness and commitment to inclusivity. Participant SL-05 shared the values of intersectional identities and voices are dynamic and lend more to the success of organization. As such, a non-profit organization that serves women includes Indigenous women on its board, including elders, who represent many of the organization's users. Their input is especially valuable given the diversity among board members. The board is composed of a mix of high-level professionals, such as lawyers and individuals involved with First Nations, as well as community members with lived experience, bringing a broad and meaningful range of perspectives to decision-making.

Majority of the successful leaders (SL-01, 03, 04, 05) shared how marginalized communities face stereotypes, and often, their competencies were undervalued compared to those with mainstream leaders with traditional resumes or appearances. Structural challenges like patriarchy in institutions, rigid merit criteria, and a focus on seniority limit access, while personal barriers such as confidence, mentorship, and logistical constraints (e.g., daycare, transportation) exacerbate the issue. This also includes that marginalized communities must often work harder to validate their contributions, navigating a system that is not yet fully inclusive of diverse perspectives, and there remains a need for more champions and mentors to guide emerging leaders.

One contrasting perspective of a successful leader participant SL-02 noted that individuals must earn their achievements just like everyone else, by overcoming personal biases and perceived barriers. They stressed the importance of merit and the need to define appropriate merit criteria. Leadership is often shaped by cultural perceptions, including assumptions about how leaders should look, speak, and exhibit leadership competencies, often viewed in a rigid, binary way. They also highlighted differing leadership traits, such as attributes often associated with women, like emotional expression, which they

emphasized is not inherently negative. The primary challenge, according to the participant SL-02, is overcoming self-doubt and building the confidence needed to pursue a management path. Strategies for getting on a management track is job shadowing and moving around various departments.

Participant SL-04 shared how Indigenous Peoples with qualifications are highly sought after in many fields. They go on to say that it is important to nurture younger generation's mindset early to see themselves as leaders and build their confidence. More mentors are needed for individuals who can share their experiences, explain how they achieved success, and guide others along their paths. Many of the Indigenous peoples face transportation, childcare, home responsibilities, and work hour barriers which creates significant challenges. While there are champions who advocate for change, there are not enough of them. Systemic issues persist, such as the prevalence of patriarchy in government and business where colonial values still dominate prioritizing years of service and seniority in roles as measures of success. The system is not yet designed to truly welcome people with diverse perspectives into decision-making roles.

Participant SL-01 explained that leaders with lived experiences, such as those who identify as queer and trans offer valuable insights that enhance their ability to understand and address the needs of diverse communities. These perspectives contribute to the development of more inclusive and effective policies and programs. Their lived experiences offer alternative viewpoints that challenge conventional leadership norms, helping to ensure that decision-making reflects a wider range of community needs and realities. Diversity at senior levels and in leadership committees, such as multicultural and women's leadership groups, fosters influence and access to decision-making channels. However, systemic barriers, such as resistance to policy changes, require innovative approaches like piloting initiatives and embedding reconciliation frameworks to hold decision-makers accountable. While achievements in diversity can be undone by structural shifts, the consistent reflection of the communities served remains crucial for impactful and equitable governance. Having queer and trans leaders improves the ability to serve the community effectively by bringing in a deeper understanding of the community's needs, allowing for the development of more inclusive and impactful programming. Policymakers, however, often approach decisions based on their own limited experiences. To create effective policies and programs, it is essential to ask the right questions and engage with diverse perspectives.

Participant SL-02 emphasized how leaders with lived experiences lead to more thoughtful decision-making and discussions evolve when women are included at the table. Her

perspectives shape the flow of conversations and highlight different aspects of a situation. Women at senior levels, within top leadership roles play a key role in driving change. Additionally, committees and networks, such as multicultural groups, women's leadership groups, and Indigenous employee networks, are in place and often have direct access to senior leadership. These structures enhance their ability to influence decisions and ensure diverse voices are heard. They can better understand the needs of the community and develop more effective programming by being thorough and inclusive.

Systemic discrimination influences the lack of leadership opportunities for marginalized communities by perpetuating societal norms and institutional structures that inadvertently exclude diverse individuals from advancing. While discrimination is often not intentional, it manifests through repeated patterns, such as traditional hiring standards and competency definitions that fail to account for varied lived experiences. Marginalized individuals, including persons with disabilities, newcomers, and Indigenous leaders, face compounded challenges, from needing to navigate systems that are not designed to accommodate their perspectives to confronting biases about their qualifications. Despite efforts to promote equity and inclusion, current practices often remain superficial, limited to “checking the boxes” rather than genuinely diversifying leadership frameworks. True change requires a shift from viewing accommodation as a burden to recognizing the value of diverse perspectives in shaping leadership, yet systemic barriers and societal attitudes show that this journey is still in its early stages.

For example, participant SL-01 described an organization prioritizes a people-first approach, as reflected in their core values on their organization, though not formally outlined in their strategic plan. They support initiatives like Rainbow Refugees, which focus on newcomers, and take pride in transforming the employment experience with a people-first mindset. This includes never questioning the need to accommodate individuals and recognizing that traditional employment standards are not designed for everyone. They are also quick to challenge these outdated norms. However, they face challenges in achieving sufficient representation of newcomers within their staff.

Participant SL-02 expressed discomfort with the term "systemic discrimination," explaining that it often implies intentionality, which they do not see in most cases. To them, discrimination is intentional, whereas systemic issues arise unconsciously through societal norms and repeated decisions that have become ingrained over time. For example, hiring processes may unintentionally screen out people with disabilities, even though the intent is to include them. While discrimination is occurring, it is not necessarily by design.

SL-02 highlighted that leadership opportunities require individuals to already be part of the system, meaning they must first gain entry to advance. People with disabilities may also belong to other marginalized communities, and when these identities intersect, they can face compounded barriers and discrimination. Despite this, the individual noted that they have not personally experienced a lack of leadership opportunities related to their disability. They believe that opportunities exist, but individuals must be aware of them, actively pursue them, and compete on the same terms as others. The larger issue, in her view, lies in systemic barriers that prevent people with disabilities from entering the system in the first place. It is an access issue. They emphasized that the most significant systemic discrimination comes from how competencies are defined, as these definitions can unintentionally exclude certain groups.

An Indigenous leader (SL-04) who transitioned into various leadership roles shared contrasting perspectives on the hiring process, noting that while some organizations demonstrate genuine efforts to recruit inclusively, others continue to rely on rigid, colonial hiring frameworks that overlook lived experience and community-based knowledge. As such there was great respect for an Indigenous individual as a respected leader from their band, particularly due to an agreement with the three nations. However, for individuals working outside their Indigenous nation or community, the workplace expectations were often perceived as rigid and unforgiving. The participant SL-04 described the pressure with stark language “stay, go, live, die” highlighting the emotional toll of navigating environments where belonging, support or cultural understanding was lacking. It was evident that the work environment required significant resilience. The participant noted, Indigenous leaders are often seen as being “brought-in” to meet inclusion targets, with an unspoken assumption that organizations will need to accommodate them. This reflects systemic discrimination and fails to recognize the depth of leadership they bring. Participant SL-04 emphasized the importance of creating intentional space to learn from Indigenous leaders and to meaningfully integrate their approaches into the organization’s culture and decision-making processes. This perspective fails to view Indigenous contributions as equal and does not prioritize diversifying perspectives within leadership.

As it stands, the system in Western society, particularly in Canada, is only beginning to understand concepts like equality, inclusion, and belonging. However, there is still a long way to go before these principles are fully embraced and lived out. Currently, we remain in a “check-the-box” era, where promoting people into leadership roles or assigning them leadership positions in projects often feels performative. Despite the strong intent to reduce and eliminate systemic discrimination, it remains a persistent reality. The system is

still deeply influenced by these structures, and while progress is being made, it is clear there is much work left to do.

Participants shared that the development of policies and decision-making processes directly influences leadership recruitment by shaping how inclusivity and diversity are prioritized in leadership roles. For example, several noted that job postings with rigid education or experience requirements without recognizing community-based leadership or lived experience can unintentionally exclude highly qualified candidates from marginalized backgrounds. While some organizations were described as organically fostering diversity by embedding inclusive practices into their hiring culture, others were said to struggle due to the absence of intentional diversity policies. These insights underscore the need for structured policy frameworks that explicitly value diverse leadership pathways and actively address systemic bias in recruitment.

Participants emphasized that policy development without diverse voices can result in the exclusion of marginalized perspectives. This often manifests in job descriptions, project mandates, and recruitment criteria that fail to accommodate non-traditional but highly qualified candidates. To support more equitable leadership recruitment, participants stressed the importance of integrating diverse viewpoints during policy creation, ensuring opportunities reflect inclusivity and flexibility. Although the process can be challenging, a commitment to reconciliation, equality, and clear, inclusive language in policies can create pathways for diverse candidates to rise into leadership positions.

Participants emphasized that diversity is essential for creating effective policies. They described how inclusive leaders play a key role in ensuring that a wide range of perspectives are considered in decision-making, leading to more responsive and equitable outcomes. However, they acknowledged that it is not always necessary to have every marginalized group represented at every table. Instead, what matters is fostering an environment where diverse viewpoints are valued and considered. Representation often happens organically, as the right individuals emerge at the right time. This highlights the importance of cultivating leadership pipelines and opportunities that allow marginalized voices to naturally rise to positions of influence.

Policy development that excludes diverse voices can result in missed opportunities to create pathways for people from different backgrounds to access leadership positions. For example, job descriptions, project charters, or mandates that are not inclusive may fail to account for different approaches to handling projects, limiting the pool of potential candidates. Additionally, recruitment for leadership roles is often a downstream process

influenced by these policies. Recruiters frequently have little or no input into defining the roles, responsibilities, or criteria for leadership positions. This lack of involvement can hinder their ability to consider excellent candidates who may not meet all the predefined criteria but could bring valuable perspectives and skills to the role. Inclusive practices at the policy level are essential to creating leadership opportunities that reflect diverse experiences and talents.

The policy development process is seen as an important opportunity for leaders to build relationships and better understand one another. There is a strong belief that by remaining committed to agreements, reconciliation, equality, and doing what is right in a thoughtful and respectful way, meaningful progress can be achieved. While developing effective policies is challenging, the effort is worthwhile. Once policies are clear, equitable, and well-crafted, they provide a strong foundation for action. However, refining the language to ensure clarity and mutual understanding takes time and careful consideration.

Participant SL-05 acknowledged that while the organization is fulfilling an extraordinarily valuable mandate and actively serving the community, there remain unmet needs and opportunities for broader impact. The participant noted that the organization is not yet serving the community in all the ways it could, suggesting room for growth in both scope and inclusivity of its programs and services. The approach is largely reactive rather than proactive, which limits the scope and effectiveness of the services provided. For example, in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver, the organization faces significant challenges due to limited resources and financial constraints, with staffing being a major issue. The turnover rate in this neighborhood is estimated to be three times higher than what a typical organization might experience. Currently, funding comes from 80% government sources and 20% fundraising revenue. The DTES presents a complex ecosystem where poverty, drug abuse, mental health issues, and homelessness are deeply interconnected. The organization addresses a small part of these challenges by providing shelters and offering support with dignity through food, clothing, and programs. However, mental health services are not part of the current offerings, and while their efforts make a difference, they acknowledge it is not enough. There is ongoing frustration and outrage that these issues are not receiving the broader attention and conversation they deserve, underscoring the need for systemic change and increased support.

Participant SL-04 shared that while current programs and services provide a foundation, there is significant room for improvement, particularly in leadership development. They observed that the organization's current approach is reminiscent of what they described as a 'navigator program' a past initiative intended to pair staff with mentors to support their

growth into leadership roles. While this model was valuable in its time, SL-04 noted that it now feels outdated limited in reach, lacking cultural relevance, and not sufficiently responsive to the complex barriers faced by today's emerging leaders from marginalized communities. The participant emphasized the need for modernized and expanded mentorship structures that go beyond basic guidance to include systemic support, representation, and lived experience integration in leadership pathways. To address this, it is important to establish a cohort-based system that takes the time to empower Indigenous applicants to overcome the barrier of self-doubt or a lack of belonging by providing opportunities to learn the role fully. Introducing the Indigenous applicants to two or three potential roles can help clarify expectations and build confidence. Additionally, there is a need for more programs, not just a single initiative, but a range of options to better meet the diverse needs of participants and ensure greater inclusivity and accessibility.

Employment opportunities in leadership positions within non-profit organizations are viewed positively, with a diverse leadership team and an active effort to ensure inclusivity and representation. The organization offers plenty of openings and opportunities for growth, with low attrition and an accommodating approach to diverse candidates. However, SL-01 emphasized how leadership turnover in the non-profit sector remains a significant issue, leading to information loss impacting the storytelling-based operations without formal archiving as people leave for better-paying opportunities elsewhere. Sustainability is a challenge for non-profits, as much of their organizational knowledge is storytelling-based and lacks an archived record. This creates difficulties in maintaining continuity and preserving the organization's history. The absence of proper documentation can impact how the community perceives the organization from a historical perspective.

Another approach for an organization said HR-04 is exploring ways to engage marginalized groups, including Indigenous candidates, for leadership roles. Encouraging interest in leadership roles, particularly among Indigenous individuals, is a key challenge. One major barrier is compensation, as many Indigenous professionals are highly sought after and often face wage disparities and opt for higher-paying roles or consulting work, which often offers greater financial benefits and flexibility. Addressing these factors is essential to attracting and retaining Indigenous leaders.

Decisions influenced by lived experiences have led to significant positive impacts across various contexts within organizations. For instance, SL-01 highlighted a leader with Black heritage initiated the organization's first recognition of Black History Month, collaborating with Black staff to give back to the community and increase representation. They felt a strong desire to influence change by collaborating with other Black staff members to

ensure the organization takes meaningful steps to support and give back to the Black community. Similarly, internal advocacy efforts have improved workplace relations by addressing cultural differences and fostering supportive environments, such as resolving disciplinary situations with empathy and coaching rather than judgment. They also emphasized the importance of being a community representative and engaging in internal advocacy. This includes strengthening staff relationships and addressing incidents involving trans staff and leadership. Issues such as misgendering and exclusion were met with inclusion training, revised policies, and better reporting processes demonstrating the organization's commitment to equity and inclusive leadership.

According to SL-03, employee concerns are typically addressed with managers actively involved in handling performance or disciplinary issues. This approach reflects the organization's commitment to accountability, though it also raises questions about whether equity-informed support are consistently applied. These situations such as repeated tardiness, communication misunderstandings, or unmet performance expectations require clear and thorough explanations that go beyond what might typically be expected. Setting clear expectations is important, but it is equally crucial to approach these situations without judgment, recognizing that barriers may be rooted in systemic or personal challenges. The focus should be on how the issue is handled, specifically how the manager communicates with and coaches the employee. An essential part of this process is understanding and appreciating cultural differences. Without this awareness, there is a risk of judging individuals through a negative lens, rather than recognizing that their approach may simply reflect a different way of doing things. Embracing this perspective fosters a more inclusive and supportive work environment such as respecting diverse communication styles, providing flexible work arrangements and ensuring culturally safe feedback processes. These practices help all employees feel valued, understood and empowered to contribute fully.

Participant SL-04, an Indigenous leader from the Musqueam Nation, shared the pivotal experience of accepting her first major leadership role within a large organization. The Musqueam people are a Coast Salish First Nation whose traditional territory encompasses much of what is now known as Vancouver, British Columbia. Despite their deep historical connection to the land, the Musqueam community like many Indigenous Peoples in Canada has faced long-standing systemic marginalization, colonial disruption, and exclusion from decision-making structures.

SL-04 recalled undergoing eight interviews before being hired, fully aware of the significant responsibilities tied to the position. Upon accepting the role, she inherited an agreement

comprising 18 articles, each with pressing, community-endorsed objectives. However, there was no concrete implementation plan in place. Determined to deliver meaningful results, they began building partnerships across departments. Early on, she was summoned by the Vice President signaling underlying skepticism. When told that “things take 30 years to accomplish,” SL-04 challenged that mindset, asserting that their community didn’t have the luxury of time the agreement had already been signed and ratified by Musqueam leadership, and expectations were clear.

Within three months, SL-04 had initiated progress on all 18 articles. By year’s end, they had successfully brought 91 Musqueam individuals into the organization either as staff or contractors and prioritized recognition, cultural connection, and relational leadership. Their second major initiative focused on raising visibility and building internal relationships for those newly hired, grounded in Musqueam ways of knowing, being, and communicating. While this approach sometimes challenged dominant timelines, it resulted in transformative change.

This story illustrates how Indigenous leaders draw upon lived experience to lead with vision, urgency, and cultural integrity. SL-04’s leadership not only advanced organizational goals but also demonstrated how inclusive, relationship-centered decision-making can honor Indigenous self-determination and reshape systems from within.

Participants shared that their lived experiences have played a pivotal role in challenging assumptions and reshaping perspectives, leading to more inclusive and effective decision-making. They described how their personal identities directly influenced their management styles and helped them foster deeper understanding within diverse teams. Serving on boards and working alongside marginalized communities illuminated systemic biases and highlighted the importance of small, meaningful improvements within complex organizational systems. Listening to individuals with disabilities challenged preconceived notions about capability and contributed to more inclusive practices. Participants also emphasized the importance of conflict resolution and coaching strategies that support leaders in embracing diverse communication and work styles. By listening authentically, considering the whole person, and encouraging collective input, these leaders demonstrated how lived experience cultivates empathy, curiosity, and a more relational approach to leadership.

Participant SL-05 shared her experience as a board member where she initially had preconceived notions about the type of information, they would receive from board meetings. She learned after spending time with elders and marginalized communities,

particularly women who serve on the board, has taught valuable lessons. One of the most significant realizations has been the importance of recognizing personal biases. Despite her education, financial independence, and privileged position, she came to understand how deeply ingrained biases can be. She learned the value of incremental improvement such as small steps forward are meaningful in a complex ecosystem where decisions are never influenced by just one factor. She came to appreciate that solutions often challenge traditional beliefs and require input from a collective, rather than being decided by a single individual. This experience has made her more curious and motivated to better understand the broader context of decision-making and a deeper appreciation of the complexities involved in creating meaningful change.

The researcher observed that leaders looking to incorporate lived experience into their decision-making should start by fostering openness, authenticity, and a willingness to learn and act on what they hear. It's essential to move beyond tokenism by focusing on individuals' abilities and skills rather than solely on identity markers, while creating policies that allow people to participate on their terms. Leaders must challenge traditional hiring practices, ensuring that lived experience complements skill sets rather than substituting for them. They should actively engage in conversations that may feel uncomfortable, listening authentically and maintaining a two-way, educational dialogue. Building exposure by stepping outside comfort zones, joining ally groups, or collaborating with diverse individuals can help broaden perspectives. Leaders must approach the process as a way to model inclusive behavior, integrating lived experiences into project planning by prioritizing consultations with knowledgeable individuals. Ultimately, leaders should embrace vulnerability, recognize that everyone belongs, and ensure their actions align with fostering an inclusive and respectful workplace.

Acknowledging that you don't know everything can be uncomfortable, but it is a necessary step for personal and professional growth. True progress begins with a willingness to engage in authentic conversations and genuinely listen to others. It's equally important to remain open to acting on what you learn, even though immediate action may not always be possible. In such cases, the process becomes a continuous exchange of learning and education. These conversations must be a two-way dialogue, requiring openness and vulnerability from all parties to foster understanding and drive meaningful change.

Encourage other leaders to incorporate more diverse perspectives and lived experiences into their processes when addressing problems, challenges, or projects. During the initial stages, such as drafting the project charter, identify and determine who can be called upon to provide valuable insights and counsel. Make it a priority for someone senior on the

project or leadership team to reach out to these individuals. By doing so, you model the behavior you want to see more widely adopted, ensuring that these conversations and meetings take place. This approach not only enriches the project but also provides existing leaders with the opportunity to learn firsthand from diverse perspectives, fostering growth and inclusivity within the leadership team.

The researcher observed that leadership is not about having all the answers, but about creating space for others to be heard. Inclusive leadership challenges traditional, top-down models by prioritizing humility, collaboration, strategic oversight, and the active amplification of marginalized voices. Inclusive leaders focus on fostering collective growth, mentoring the next generation of leaders and encouraging individuals from marginalized communities to grow and reach beyond their limits. This requires stepping beyond comfort zones, engaging with diverse perspectives across cultures and experiences, and restructuring roles and responsibilities to ensure inclusion while maintaining team success. By actively listening, engaging, mentoring, and fostering dialogue, leaders can create environments where all voices contribute to meaningful decision-making.

Participants encouraged current leaders to take on active mentorship roles by reaching out, guiding others, and modeling inclusive leadership. Traditionally, team formation focuses on skill sets, dynamics, and leadership potential. However, if the aim is to build more inclusive teams, this approach must evolve. Leaders should consider how roles and deliverables can be adapted to include diverse voices and perspectives. While this may shift the team's composition, it enhances creativity, broadens understanding, and ultimately strengthens team performance and cohesion.

All participants shared the same perspective on emerging leaders from marginalized communities are encouraged to cultivate strong relationships, seek mentors, and build networks to navigate the complexities of leadership. Mentors, both formal and informal, should include a diverse mix of able-bodied and disabled individuals, as well as racialized and non-racialized leaders, who can provide guidance, support, and actionable advice on standing out and overcoming challenges. Approach these mentors with the intent to learn by asking for advice on how to stand out and sharing your goals and aspirations. It is essential to take charge of your own development, being proactive in shaping your growth journey. Reach out to leaders who inspire you and build meaningful relationships with them. These relationships can be formal or informal, depending on what works best for both you and your mentor.

Taking initiative and being clear about personal goals are crucial, as is developing adaptability to overcome barriers, such as alternative ways of working or facilitating. Networking remains a critical skill, and emerging leaders are encouraged to get out there and start building connections. Begin small reach out to someone in your neighborhood or local community.

SL-05 shared, emerging leaders are encouraged to bravely step forward, trust in their safety, and persevere through challenges, following the example of trailblazers like Ketanji Brown Jackson, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of United States who advocates for resilience and persistence in achieving success. Judge Jackson, the first Black woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court by President Biden, offers one key piece of advice for young people: "Persevere" (Leonhardt, 2022). This guiding principle emphasizes the importance of resilience in the face of challenges.

If granted a wish, many participants said they would prioritize dismantling systemic barriers rooted in patriarchal and white supremacist values, decolonizing workplaces, and shifting away from capitalistic standards that dominate even non-profit spaces. They envision leadership that normalizes inclusion where marginalized voices are no longer the exception but are embedded in every decision-making circle. Achieving this vision requires fostering safe, honest, and vulnerable conversations that prioritize learning over fear of judgment or cancel culture. Participants emphasized that genuine inclusion demands space for dialogue, reflection, and growth, particularly for those from marginalized communities striving to lead.

Decolonization involves re-evaluating how we work, what we value, and what we are willing to unlearn in pursuit of ethical, community-centered leadership. Cultural change begins when organizations partner meaningfully such as through reconciliation models and expand hiring practices to avoid replicating dominant leadership profiles. Ultimately, inclusion must be a lived value, integrated into every facet of organizational culture, not treated as an add-on.

#### 4.2.1 Thematic Findings: Successful Leaders

The interviews with successful leaders from marginalized communities revealed six key themes. These themes illustrate how lived experience, systemic barriers and organizational practices shape leadership opportunities and decision-making. Direct participant quotes are included to highlight and ground the analysis in their voices.

### *Theme 1: Lived Experience as a Leadership Asset*

Participants consistently emphasized that lived experience and intersectional identities shaped their leadership approaches and decision-making. These perspectives provided alternative viewpoints that challenged conventional leadership norms and ensured policy and programming were more inclusive.

*“As a queer leader, my lived experience helps me understand and address the needs of diverse communities in ways others often overlook.” (SL-01)*

Leaders stressed that lived experiences offered depth and authenticity, helping them to design programs and influence policies in ways that reflect community realities rather than dominant perspectives.

### *Theme 2: Systemic Barriers and Legitimacy Challenges*

Most leaders described encountering systemic barriers that undervalued their competencies compared to mainstream peers. Structural challenges included patriarchal norms, rigid merit criteria, and colonial definitions of leadership. Many noted that they had to work harder to validate their contributions within systems not designed for diverse perspectives.

*“Indigenous leaders are often brought in to meet inclusion targets, but the system doesn’t see the depth of leadership we bring.” (SL-04)*

*“I always felt I had to prove twice as much as my non-racialized peers just to be considered equal.” (SL-03)*

While most participants highlighted barriers, one contrasting perspective (SL-02) emphasized the importance of merit, suggesting that individuals must “earn their achievements just like everyone else,” though they acknowledged that systemic definitions of competency often exclude marginalized groups.

### *Theme 3: The Role of Mentorship and Champions*

Mentorship was identified as critical in helping leaders navigate barriers, build confidence, and gain access to leadership pathways. Indigenous participants in particular stressed the need for mentors to inspire younger generations.

*“More mentors are needed who can share their experiences and guide others along the path. Without champions, it’s hard for us to rise.” (SL-04)*

Mentorship and sponsorship were viewed not only as individual supports but also as systemic interventions that could shift organizational cultures to be more inclusive.

#### *Theme 4: Intersectionality and Inclusive Decision-Making*

Leaders emphasized that intersectional identities broaden perspectives and strengthen governance. Organizations that intentionally included women, Indigenous elders, and diverse board members were seen as more responsive to community needs.

*“Including Indigenous women and elders on our board has made our decisions more grounded and representative of the communities we serve.” (SL-05)*

Several participants highlighted that intersectionality was not about representation for its own sake, but about creating space where diverse perspectives shape outcomes.

#### *Theme 5: Policy, Structures, and Systemic Change*

Policy frameworks were frequently cited as reinforcing systemic barriers. Job postings with rigid education or experience requirements often excluded candidates with strong community-based leadership experience. Leaders emphasized that equitable recruitment requires intentional policy reform, including reconciliation frameworks and explicit recognition of lived experience.

*“Job postings with rigid requirements overlook community leadership. That’s where policy is failing us.” (SL-03)*

*“If policies don’t reflect diverse voices, you end up with leadership that looks the same as before.” (SL-01)*

Leaders also warned against performative “check-the-box” approaches to diversity, stressing that meaningful change requires rethinking definitions of merit, competence, and leadership.

#### *Theme 6: Redefining Leadership Through Community Values*

Participants described leadership not as top-down authority but as relational, inclusive, and grounded in community values. They emphasized humility, collaboration, and creating space for others to lead.

*“Leadership is about creating space for others to be heard — not about having all the answers.” (SL-05)*

*“For me, leadership is about lifting others up so they can lead too.” (SL-01)*

Leaders envisioned a future where inclusion and belonging are normalized, decolonization informs workplace culture, and leadership opportunities are no longer exceptional for marginalized groups but embedded within all decision-making processes.

These six themes illustrate the lived realities of successful leaders from marginalized groups, highlighting how lived experience, systemic barriers, mentorship, intersectionality, policy reform and community values shape leadership opportunities. Together, they provide the foundation for the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 5, which maps how these dynamics intersect to support more equitable leadership development and inclusive decision-making.

### 4.3 Human Resource Professionals – Interview responses

Human resource professionals increasingly recognize that lived experience enhances recruitment and hiring processes by broadening the applicant pool and valuing diverse perspectives and skills. Moving beyond traditional "cookie-cutter" approaches, human resource professionals now consider lived experience as a crucial skill that can foster innovation, inclusivity, and stronger team dynamics, particularly in values-based organizations and those serving marginalized communities. This shift involves adapting hiring practices, such as partnering with community organizations, incorporating inclusive job descriptions, and acknowledging non-traditional skills gained outside formal education or work environments. Human resource leaders emphasize the importance of early, inclusive conversations about lived experience as a skill and caution against tokenism in diversity efforts. By valuing lived experience, organizations can create workplaces that are more empathetic, robust, and reflective of the communities they serve.

All participants shared that in the past, a cookie-cutter approach was the standard. As people have become more educated about individuals with lived experiences and diverse communities, organizations have had to adapt. Leaders and hiring teams must be open, understanding, and willing to embrace these changes. It's also important to ask candidates if they require accessibility accommodations, ensuring a more inclusive and supportive environment throughout the hiring process.

The importance of lived experience has become increasingly recognized in recent years. Research shows that diversity in teams leads to greater innovation, profitability, and overall success. However, real progress often depends on leadership's commitment to setting measurable targets or metrics. When organizations set such goals, it drives tangible changes in processes and practices. At the same time, it's important to be cautious with these targets to avoid creating situations where individuals feel like tokens, for example the quote from participant HR-01 surfaces a critical concern meeting diversity target for women in a leadership role solely to meet a 30% female representation without deeper inclusion risks tokenism. The key takeaway is that organizations must balance accountability through measurable goals with genuine inclusion practices that avoid tokenism.

Regarding recruitment decisions, hiring managers and recruiters must engage in conversations before positions are posted. For example, HR-02 said if a team is predominantly made up of white women, it might benefit from adding a man or a person of color to diversify perspectives. These discussions should prioritize balancing skill sets with the lived experiences that candidates bring to the team. Lived experience, whether as a man, a person of color, or someone from another marginalized group should be recognized as a valuable skill that enriches the team's overall capabilities.

These conversations must happen early and in alignment with the organization's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies. DEI leaders, such as directors or officers, play a crucial role in fostering inclusive workplaces and helping hiring managers recognize the value of lived experience as a skill. While this mindset has gained traction in the past decade, it is still evolving. The recognition of lived experience as a critical skill is a step toward more inclusive and effective recruitment practices.

The consideration of lived experience in hiring often depends on when and how human resource professionals were educated. For example, HR-03 shared that in the context of First Nations communities, lived experience plays a significant role, particularly through storytelling and unique cultural contributions. This perspective differs from the Western approach, which tends to prioritize formal job experience, specific responsibilities, and measurable competencies.

In First Nations communities, activities such as caring for elders or organizing annual powwows involve valuable skills, including planning, communication, and coordination. However, these experiences are often overlooked in traditional hiring processes because they do not fit the conventional definition of "work experience" recognized by Western

recruiting standards. Western practices typically focus on formal roles, job responsibilities, and past employment history, failing to recognize the broader scope of skills gained through lived experiences.

HR-03 shared that they observed that managers and directors often need education on how to value lived experience in recruitment. For example, skills developed through living and working on the land, using its resources, and contributing to the community may not align with formal education or training but are no less valuable. These experiences represent soft skills and practical knowledge that can significantly enhance workplace diversity and effectiveness. Ultimately, there is a need for greater awareness and appreciation of how lived experience contributes to an individual's qualifications, particularly in contexts outside traditional Western frameworks. By recognizing and incorporating these perspectives into hiring practices, organizations can create more inclusive and equitable processes.

All human resource professionals shared that the human resource industry is increasingly recognizing that lived experience can be just as valuable and credible as formal qualifications. For instance, many job descriptions now include language such as "bachelor's degree or equivalent," acknowledging that critical skills like analytical thinking, reading, and writing can be gained through other experiences beyond traditional education. This shift allows workplaces to look beyond formal credentials and appreciate the value of lived experiences. Individuals with such backgrounds bring unique perspectives that can significantly enhance the workplace, making it more robust, dynamic, and accountable to the communities it serves. This approach not only diversifies the talent pool but also strengthens the organization's ability to connect with and serve its stakeholders effectively.

In values-based organizations, such as non-profits and public sector entities, lived experience is increasingly recognized as an asset. These organizations often work with marginalized populations who share specific lived experiences, such as those facing housing insecurity or poverty. Having staff members who can empathize with and relate to these experiences adds significant value. It allows organizations to connect more meaningfully with the communities they serve and enhances their ability to deliver effective support and services. This approach may not be as prominent in industries like accounting, but for organizations addressing social issues, it is invaluable. Employing individuals with lived experience not only demonstrates inclusivity but also strengthens the organization's ability to understand and address the unique needs of its clients. It is a powerful way to bridge empathy and leadership, enriching both the workplace and the community it serves.

Human resource professionals working with marginalized communities enhance recruitment and retention to leadership opportunities by leveraging partnerships with community organizations, creating pathways for career advancement, and fostering inclusive workplace cultures. Efforts include developing tailored positions, such as trade helpers, and supporting progression through apprenticeship programs and leadership development initiatives. These professionals emphasize the importance of sponsorship over mentorship, actively advocating for individuals' growth within organizations. Recruitment strategies often involve collaboration with agencies to address unique cultural needs, such as incorporating elders in interviews for Indigenous applicants. Retention focuses on ensuring a positive workplace culture, creating safe spaces for feedback, and enabling employees to authentically contribute to their roles. These practices aim to overcome biases, mitigate risks perceived by hiring committees, and foster environments where diverse talent thrives and grows into leadership roles.

HR-03 recounted a former role where they collaborated closely with an Indigenous colleague who had deep ties to the community and played a key role in delivering skills training and workshops. Recognizing a gap in qualifications among potential trades candidates, they created a new "Trades Helper" position and worked with the compensation team to establish appropriate pay. They monitored participants' progress, supported those interested in becoming tradespeople by enrolling them in British Columbia Institute of Technology apprenticeship program, and helped them gain Red Seal qualifications. A major takeaway from this experience was the importance of cultural sensitivity such as accommodating support persons or elders during interviews which helped foster trust and respect in the hiring process while aligning recruitment efforts with community values.

HR-02 shared that as a woman, the opportunity to participate in various leadership experiences, such as those offered by Minerva, an organization in British Columbia focused on supporting women and girls in leadership. When reflecting on her experience working with marginalized communities, particularly in recruitment and retention for leadership opportunities, partnerships stand out as essential. From a recruitment perspective, organizations looking to diversify their workforce must actively partner with community groups. These partnerships are key to ensuring that employees represent the communities they serve. Many agencies specialize in this work and can provide valuable insights to help organizations succeed. It is important to start small and build relationships with these groups to understand their needs and the structural changes required within the organization. Agencies often highlight that a successful hiring campaign depends on having the necessary internal systems in place to make the organization inclusive and welcoming.

On the retention side, organizations must invest in development programs, such as women's leadership initiatives like Minerva. However, one area is crucial but underutilized is a comprehensive sponsorship program, which goes beyond traditional mentorship. While mentorship focuses on providing advice and building relationships, sponsorship involves actively using one's privilege and influence to advocate for others. For example, a sponsor would ensure that someone aspiring to a leadership role is introduced to the right people, given visibility in important meetings, or provided opportunities to showcase their skills. Sponsors put their own reputation on the line to validate and promote the person they are supporting.

This approach differs from mentorship because it involves a vested interest in the individual's success. Sponsors engage directly with senior leaders, advocating for their protégé by suggesting courses, projects, or opportunities to help them progress in their careers. Unfortunately, not all managers embrace this approach, as some prefer to retain strong performers in their current roles rather than support their advancement. This hesitation highlights the importance of sponsorship programs that extend beyond direct management.

Sponsorship is particularly critical for marginalized groups, as it ensures they have advocates who help them navigate systemic barriers and access opportunities for growth. By fostering sponsorship across all levels, organizations can create more equitable pathways for leadership and better support diverse talent.

Organizations can create an environment where employees, particularly those from marginalized groups, feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences by fostering trust, transparency, and consistency. Establishing dedicated departments like Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging, Employee Resource Groups, and reconciliation strategies can provide spaces for connection and support. Education and training programs, such as disability awareness and cultural competence workshops, equip managers and leaders to build meaningful relationships with employees, creating trust. Leaders sharing their own lived experiences helps set an inclusive tone, while proactive measures like accessible hiring practices, engagement surveys, and clear follow-through on employee feedback ensure that voices are heard and valued. Familiarity, representation, and tailored support during hiring and beyond further enhance comfort, making organizations more inclusive and supportive of diverse lived experiences.

There are many things organizations can do to create a more inclusive and supportive environment said participant HR-02. At a high level, the key principles are building trust,

being transparent, and staying consistent. Building trust involves creating spaces where employees can share their experiences and feel supported. One way to achieve this is through Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). For example, at HR-02's company, they have ERGs such as a Pride group for LGBTQ2S+ employees, a women's ERG, and a caregiver's ERG. These groups bring employees with shared lived experiences together and are structured with leadership, executive sponsorship, and budgets to run programming or bring in guest speakers. The governance structure ensures these groups are impactful and well-supported.

Transparency is also important, especially in hiring practices. For instance, recruiters can normalize conversations around accommodations by proactively saying, "At any time, if you need an accommodation or adjustment, just let us know." This approach makes accommodations a standard part of the process rather than placing the burden on candidates to request them from fine print. Small practices, like sharing questions in advance during interviews, can also make a big difference in creating an inclusive experience. Having leaders who are open and vulnerable by sharing their lived experiences is another way to foster inclusivity. When employees see that directors or VPs are part of the LGBTQ2S+ community or other marginalized groups, it sends a powerful message that the company values and promotes diversity at all levels. They highlight how trust, transparency, and leadership vulnerability can contribute to creating a workplace where everyone feels valued and supported.

Systemic discrimination and unchecked biases among human resource professionals and hiring managers can significantly influence the lack of leadership opportunities for marginalized communities. While human resource professionals are often the first gatekeepers, biases in evaluating non-traditional qualifications or lived experiences may prevent eligible candidates from advancing. However, the greater influence often lies with hiring managers, who hold decision-making power in succession planning and promotions. Participant HR-04 and 05 shared cultural biases, such as misinterpreting communication styles or values from marginalized groups, further compound these barriers. While external recruitment firms and bias-free training can mitigate discrimination, ultimate decisions rest with organizations, and deeply ingrained biases in leadership hierarchies can persist. Efforts to promote equitable leadership opportunities require proactive measures, including cultural competence training, accountability in hiring processes, and recognizing lived experience as a valuable asset.

Participant HR-04 shared hiring and evaluation processes should prioritize performance-based criteria rather than focusing solely on credentials. Training programs, both past and

present, can sometimes reflect biases, whether intentional or unintentional. To create a more inclusive environment, managers need to remain vigilant and aware of their own biases, ensuring fair and equitable practices throughout the hiring and evaluation process. Many organizations tend to prioritize hiring candidates who can hit the ground running, often influenced by unconscious biases. These biases can arise not out of malice but from a lack of awareness or understanding. This issue is particularly evident in the private sector, where profit is prioritized, and systemic discrimination or biases often go unnoticed. Participant HR-03 shared a significant cultural difference, for example, can be seen in First Nations communities, where individuals may be less inclined to "sell themselves" during interviews, often providing brief responses rather than elaborating on their accomplishments. In contrast, Western interview practices tend to reward candidates who are more verbose, direct, and confident.

Cultural differences in nonverbal communication can also be misunderstood. For instance, while Western norms encourage direct eye contact and firm handshakes, some First Nations individuals, particularly younger ones speaking with elders, may avoid direct eye contact as a sign of respect. These differences can unintentionally lead to biases in hiring processes. To address this, leadership teams, including CEOs and managers, need to be educated about these cultural nuances to prevent misinterpretation during interviews.

HR-04 shared that human resource's role ideally transitions once a candidate is hired. The focus shifts to onboarding and ensuring the new employee settles into their role effectively. Beyond this, interactions with human resource typically occur around administrative tasks such as benefits, leave balances, or performance management support. A well-functioning system ensures that day-to-day employee management is handled by the managers, with human resource stepping in only for broader organizational support or specific needs. This approach allows for a clear separation of responsibilities and ensures that human resource remains a strategic resource while empowering managers to lead their teams effectively.

Human resource professionals play a crucial role in shaping an organization's equity and diversity practices, but if they have unchecked biases, they can also become significant barriers to progress. Often, human resource professionals are the first point of contact for applications, and their decisions on which candidates to advance can heavily influence hiring outcomes. If biases are not recognized or addressed, human resource professionals may inadvertently overlook applicants with lived experiences or unconventional qualifications, even if those candidates have the potential to excel in the role. For instance, if a human resource professional receives five applications and two candidates lack

traditional qualifications but bring valuable lived experiences, failing to consider how those experiences might be equivalent to formal qualifications can immediately disqualify them. This stops those candidates from advancing in the hiring process, effectively limiting opportunities for diverse talent.

While HR professionals can be powerful advocates for creating equitable and inclusive workplaces, they must actively manage their biases to avoid becoming obstacles to diversity. Recognizing the value of lived experiences and ensuring fair consideration for all candidates is essential for fostering a truly inclusive environment. Bias-free interviewing is a significant value that external recruitment firms can offer, though it's impossible to eliminate all biases completely. Unconscious biases can still come into play during the hiring process. HR-02 shared that human resource professionals generally excel at maintaining objectivity, but the employers themselves often require more guidance to avoid biases.

While recruitment firms strive to be as objective as possible, ultimately, the hiring decision is up to the client. We can influence their decision and provide recommendations, but they may still choose someone who was not our top candidate. If that hire does not work out, human resource professionals are there to support them in the future. The increasing self-awareness among organizations is encouraging, and these practices are helping to reduce bias over time, even if it still occurs occasionally.

All human resource participants shared that policies and decision-making development significantly impact leadership recruitment in marginalized communities by shaping inclusivity and accessibility in hiring practices. Policies like inclusive dress codes, equitable recruitment criteria, and diversity-focused decision-making frameworks encourage representation and cultural understanding. However, the effectiveness of these policies depends on their enforcement and alignment with organizational values. Systemic biases, such as rigid educational requirements and undervaluing lived experience, often limit access for marginalized candidates. Human resource professionals must challenge traditional practices, recognize diverse pathways to skill acquisition, and set equitable compensation policies to attract diverse talent. While policies set the foundation, their practical implementation and continuous evolution are critical for fostering inclusive leadership recruitment.

Decision-making and policy development now often require thinking outside the box. For instance, participant HR-01 recruiters and managers used to rely solely on numerical ratings to select candidates, always choosing the highest-scoring individual. However, this

approach has evolved, with organizations increasingly considering other factors, such as cultural fit, lived experience, and diverse perspectives, to make more equitable and inclusive decisions. Having strong foundational policies, such as a recruitment policy or an equity, diversity, and inclusion policy is important. These policies set the tone and provide a framework for creating an inclusive workplace. However, the real challenge lies in ensuring that these policies are consistently enforced and that people adhere to them.

For example, participant HR-05 shared many organizations have had respectful workplace policies in place for years. In theory, if such policies were fully effective, workplace discrimination wouldn't exist. Yet, discrimination continues to occur, highlighting the gap between having a policy and putting it into practice. Policies are essential for establishing expectations and organizational values, but they must be actively lived and integrated into daily operations. Simply having a policy is not enough; organizations must ensure that employees and leaders embody these principles. When individuals or teams fail to uphold these values, there should be meaningful consequences, discussions, or corrective actions to address the issue and reinforce the importance of living the organization's inclusive values.

Participant HR-04 shared that human resources professionals require continuous learning and adaptation to refresh their knowledge and stay current to keep pace with evolving techniques and developments in the field. The way human resource was practiced in the 1980s and 1990s is vastly different from today, and those who fail to stay engaged with new methodologies and research risk becoming stagnant. Human resource policies, decision-making, and leadership development are constantly progressing, reflecting broader advancements in knowledge and practice. This continual evolution impacts leadership recruitment, particularly when it comes to diversity and inclusion. Workshops, awareness training, and a willingness to remain curious are essential for human resource professionals to recognize the value of diversity and ensure equitable recruitment processes.

They shared that research consistently shows that diverse teams perform better, even though they may face challenges. A homogeneous team often becomes comfortable with a singular way of thinking, leading to limited perspectives. In contrast, diverse teams encourage members to step back, think critically, and engage in open dialogue. While this can result in some initial pushback or friction, it often leads to more innovative solutions and better outcomes.

When it comes to leadership recruitment in marginalized communities, representation is crucial. Individuals from marginalized communities bring unique cultural perspectives and approaches to problem-solving, enriching team dynamics. Including diverse voices ensures that leadership better reflects the society it serves and fosters an environment where different contributions are valued and leveraged for success. Ultimately, diversity in leadership and teams strengthens organizations, promoting both growth and inclusivity.

Participants shared that they employ various accessibility practices to increase leadership opportunities for marginalized communities, focusing on flexibility, inclusivity, and tailored support. Practices include adapting interview formats and evaluation criteria to account for cultural differences, such as Indigenous candidates' communication styles, and reframing questions to recognize lived experiences as valuable skills. Organizations set diversity goals and implement metrics to guide efforts, such as training managers on inclusivity, creating employee resource groups, and partnering with community organizations to build trust and awareness. Recruitment strategies emphasize diverse job posting platforms, transparent salary ranges, and onboarding plans that clearly define success criteria. These practices aim to break systemic barriers, support diverse candidates' success, and create leadership pathways by fostering equity and inclusion throughout the hiring process.

HR-01 shared Indigenous hiring efforts often revealed that many candidates did not perform well in traditional interview settings. As recruiters, it was essential to recognize and understand this dynamic. Lower interview scores needed to be contextualized and incorporated into the evaluation process. This required flexibility in decision-making and adapting how interview questions were framed to ensure fairness and inclusivity in the hiring process.

Having a clear target or goal is crucial for driving progress. Organizations are familiar with setting measurable objectives, such as financial targets or carbon emission goals, and the same principle applies to equity and inclusion efforts. Without defined metrics, efforts can become anecdotal and lack direction. The specific metrics chosen can vary. For example, instead of solely aiming for a certain percentage of employees with disabilities at the managerial or director level, the focus should also be on creating an inclusive environment that enables individuals with disabilities to advance into these roles.

These metrics compel organizations to take actionable steps to achieve the desired outcome. For example, achieving such a target might require additional training for managers to build understanding and awareness of disabilities. It might also involve establishing employee resource groups to ensure that employees with disabilities feel safe

and supported in disclosing their needs. Partnering with community organizations that have expertise in working with disability communities is another key strategy. Building relationships with these organizations and engaging with the community about available roles fosters trust and expands the organization's reach.

Creating leadership opportunities for marginalized communities requires thoughtful planning, mentorship, and a commitment to inclusivity. Leadership development starts with structured support, such as providing a willing mentor or leader who can coach individuals and answer questions as they transition into leadership roles. While challenges are not unique to marginalized individuals, good coaching and planning can help prepare anyone for leadership. Encouragement and recognition of potential can go a long way in motivating individuals to excel and pursue advancement opportunities.

A critical aspect of fostering diversity in leadership is cultivating organizational awareness and education around inclusion, accessibility, and cultural differences. This includes framing interview questions in ways that account for cultural differences and recognizing how lived experiences contribute to valuable skills.

Several participants including HR-04 and HR-05 work with organizations to develop policies and identify leaders who align with their mission and vision. Part of their practice involves advising clients on job postings. For example, they guide them on using inclusive language, such as "this requirement or equivalent," and coach them on how to broaden criteria to attract a wider range of candidates. They also assist in designing inclusive interview questions that allow candidates to showcase their lived experiences and demonstrate the required skills. The way interview questions are framed can unintentionally exclude qualified individuals, so they work with clients to ensure their questions are equitable and provide opportunities for all candidates to shine.

Beyond recruitment, they help clients refine their policies and procedures and offer services to improve employee onboarding. For instance, if a client hires a leader particularly one with diverse lived experiences who may not have held a senior leadership position before, they create an onboarding plan tailored to their success. This plan outlines key priorities, decision-making levels, success metrics, and evaluation timelines, such as performance measures at three months during the probationary period and at one year. By providing this roadmap, they help new leaders understand their role and thrive in it.

This approach benefits all candidates, whether from diverse backgrounds or not, as success often depends on being set up with the right tools and clarity from the start. By

prioritizing structured support and clear communication, organizations create the conditions for new leaders to excel and make meaningful contributions. In terms of recruitment, their approach is fairly diverse, especially when it comes to where we post leadership opportunities.

Human resource participants shared several challenges when incorporating lived experience into decision-making, including navigating rigid traditional hiring practices, overcoming risk-averse organizational cultures, and addressing biases against non-traditional qualifications. Candidates with lived experience often do not align with standardized evaluation frameworks, resulting in lower scores during interviews. To overcome these obstacles, human resource professionals emphasize flexibility in decision-making, reframing questions to capture competencies beyond conventional metrics, and valuing lived experience as equivalent to formal education. Additionally, fostering inclusive organizational cultures through education, conversation, and strategic policy adjustments, such as weighting experience over education in job criteria, helps to address these challenges. By building awareness and advocating for adaptive practices, human resource professionals can bridge the gap between lived experience and leadership opportunities, ensuring equity and inclusivity in recruitment processes.

Many of the candidates HR-01 interviewed struggled with traditional corporate-style interviews, which often differed from the cultural norms of their communities. This highlights a disconnect between conventional hiring practices and candidate diversity. As recruiters, it's important to adapt expectations and evaluate responses in context. Even when candidates don't meet standard criteria, their lived experiences and transferable skills may still be highly relevant. While their interview scores may be lower, HR-01 emphasized the importance of looking beyond numbers to assess true potential.

This adjustment allows them to evaluate their competencies in a broader context. By shifting the focus to competencies rather than rigidly specific examples, they create space for candidates to demonstrate their abilities in ways that reflect their unique experiences. This approach ensures a more equitable and inclusive evaluation process, accommodating diverse backgrounds while still identifying strong potential hires.

HR-03 shared their experience with recruiting, particularly in roles involving Indigenous communities, certain requirements were in place to ensure fair representation on interview panels. For example, if there were three panel members, at least one needed to be from the nation, and for five panel members, at least two, preferably three, would be from the nation. These representatives could include elders, community members, or individuals

from other departments. Challenges often arose when panel members, were not subject-matter experts for the role being hired. For instance, when hiring an archaeologist, community members or elders might not fully understand the nature of the work. To address this, they would take time before interviews to explain the role, provide job descriptions, and clarify the kinds of answers they were looking for. This preparation ensured panelists could fairly evaluate candidates and make legally defensible decisions while reducing misunderstandings. This approach aimed to minimize biases, though no system is entirely bias-free. Education and preparation were critical in overcoming these challenges, ensuring everyone involved in the hiring process understood best practices and could contribute effectively.

Lived experience, particularly in cultural contexts, brings a different perspective to evaluating candidates. For instance, traditional Western hiring criteria might ask for formal customer service experience but lived cultural experiences such as helping at a Christmas party, potluck, or longhouse event also involve welcoming people, anticipating their needs, and fostering a positive environment. These are valuable skills that should be recognized as part of a candidate's qualifications.

Overcoming these obstacles requires extensive planning, education, and preparation. Investing time to share information and build understanding among panel members fosters more equitable and inclusive hiring processes while ensuring that cultural and lived experiences are appropriately valued. Sometimes organizations hire individuals with lived experience to better serve populations facing similar challenges. For example, a company working with people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity may intentionally hire staff who have faced these issues themselves. Research shows that peer-to-peer support can be highly effective, as lived experience fosters empathy and connection, improving outcomes for those being served.

However, hiring individuals with lived experience can introduce unique challenges in the employer-employee relationship. These employees may feel compelled to advocate for better support and systemic change, which can create tension if leadership is not aligned with those values. This dynamic can lead to situations where employees feel they are fighting against their own organization, causing frustration and strain on both sides. Organizations must create an environment where employees feel valued and supported without feeling burdened to advocate for systemic changes on their own. Organizations are hiring employees, not full-time advocates, and it's important for both sides to manage expectations while leveraging lived experiences to enhance services. By fostering

leadership accountability and providing role clarity, organizations can reduce tension and ensure a productive, impactful work environment for all employees.

Participant HR-04 shared a project with a Downtown Eastside organization that redefined job qualifications to be more inclusive of lived experience. The team conducted a compensation review and developed a job-leveling framework that evaluated roles based on education, experience, and leadership. Lived experience was formally recognized as a valuable asset, particularly in roles like outreach manager, where the framework prioritized relevant community experience over traditional credentials. Job descriptions were revised to reflect this inclusive lens, and the weighting system was adjusted to favor experience over formal education. However, HR-04 acknowledged the ongoing need to balance inclusivity with operational requirements for example, senior roles such as director of finance still required professional credentials like a Chartered Professional Accountant.

This balance required ongoing discussions to ensure the definition of experience was as broad as possible while maintaining the organization's operational effectiveness. The aim was to create a framework that valued lived experience without compromising the organization's ability to deliver its mission effectively. This process exemplifies the complexity of creating inclusive systems that also meet practical organizational needs.

When decision-makers overlook or ignore the lived experiences of marginalized communities, it often leads to missed opportunities and reinforces systemic biases in the recruitment process. For example, cultural norms like avoiding eye contact, a preference for remote work due to community ties, or non-traditional qualifications such as lived experience may be misinterpreted or undervalued. Assumptions about "fit" or subjective traits like energy levels also create barriers. In one instance, a highly skilled candidate with extensive lived experience in environmental stewardship was passed over due to the lack of formal qualifications, despite their proven ability in the field. Such situations highlight the need for education, flexibility, and intentional policies to break away from traditional biases, ensuring decision-makers value diverse pathways to expertise and create equitable opportunities for marginalized individuals.

Participant HR-03 described the unique challenges of working in human resources within First Nations band offices, which often operate as small municipalities, family-run organizations, and close-knit communities. Decisions made by human resources can affect the entire community, and relationships with leadership such as chiefs and council members add layers of complexity. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some bands closed their borders entirely, illustrating their distinct governance and communal

priorities. These dynamics emphasize the importance of balancing formal qualifications with lived experience in recruitment and the need to navigate community relationships and potential biases with cultural sensitivity.

Participant HR-04 described her role as a consultant in the hiring process, where she observes hiring committee decisions. While she may occasionally disagree with their choices, the final decision ultimately belongs to the committee. Consultants offer guidance by presenting qualified candidates and outlining their strengths and potential concerns, but authority remains with the committee. She noted that organizations establish hiring committees to support shared decision-making, and while these structures sometimes lead to less-than-ideal hires, they usually self-correct. If a candidate proves to be a poor fit, it is unlikely they'll remain in the role long term typically not beyond two years.

The role as human resource consultants is to identify candidates who meet the minimum qualifications and present them to the committee. While they can share their perspectives, such as potential concerns about a candidate's demeanor or their ability to gain respect within the organization, it is important to recognize their own biases. For example, the participant HR-04 personally gravitate toward dynamic, extroverted individuals, which might cause the consultant to overlook quieter candidates who could be equally, if not more, capable of excelling in the role. This is where a diverse hiring committee proves valuable offering a range of perspectives that can cross-check individual biases and lead to a more balanced decision.

It is also worth noting that biases, whether conscious or unconscious, can influence how human resources perceive candidates. For this reason, fostering robust, open conversations within the hiring committee is essential. Success in a leadership role can manifest in many forms, and it's important to acknowledge that predictions are not always accurate. Sometimes, a candidate who seemed like a poor fit ends up thriving, while in other cases, initial doubts about a hire prove to be correct. That is part of the process and what matters is creating a thoughtful and inclusive decision-making framework that supports the organization's goals.

Participant HR-05 worked with a non-profit organization engaging in a preferential recruitment process, giving hiring priority to individuals from marginalized communities. This required navigating a formal procedure through the Human Rights Tribunal to ensure the process adhered to guidelines. In one instance, the organization ultimately selected an Indigenous candidate as their senior leader after considerable discussion and pushback.

The debate centered on balancing lived experience with formal qualifications, such as prior CEO experience, which the candidate lacked. However, the hiring team saw potential and believed the individual could thrive in the role. A key concern for participant HR-05 as recruiters in such cases is ensuring that candidates, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, are set up for success within the organization. For example, they do not want them to become the sole voice for Indigenous initiatives or bear the full burden of advancing reconciliation efforts. Ensuring an inclusive, supportive environment is vital for long-term success.

In another instance, an Indigenous candidate requested to work remotely from their reserve a few days per week, which the organization ultimately rejected, citing a preference for full-time, in-office leadership. Despite efforts to advocate for flexibility and highlight the candidate's strengths, the organization chose not to proceed with their application. This reflects a broader challenge on overcoming traditional biases and perceptions of leadership, while demonstrating how diverse approaches can drive success.

Preferential hiring, such as targeting candidates from marginalized communities, involves restricting the applicant pool to specific categories. To implement such processes, organizations must coordinate with the Office of the Human Rights Commissioner in BC, establishing guidelines and ensuring candidates meet the designated criteria. In these situations, factors like remote work preferences or tax considerations such as an Indigenous candidate wanting to live and work on reserve can influence decisions. While these complexities sometimes result in missed opportunities, they highlight the need for organizations to adapt and rethink traditional hiring practices to embrace diversity effectively.

Participants shared their views on balancing lived experience, qualifications, skills, and expertise in decision-making for hiring, promotions, and career advancement involves recognizing the unique value each component brings to leadership roles. Lived experience is increasingly seen as a critical skill, particularly for fostering innovation and empathy within diverse teams. While technical qualifications and specific expertise remain essential for roles with regulatory or professional requirements, organizations are beginning to prioritize flexibility in evaluating candidates, allowing lived experiences to complement traditional qualifications. For example, organizations may include lived experience as an asset or criterion, particularly for roles involving community engagement or leadership. Deliberate succession planning, training programs, and promoting diversity are essential strategies, alongside fostering an environment where lived experiences are acknowledged as enhancing leadership potential and team dynamics. Successful balance

requires human resource professionals and decision-makers to challenge biases, embrace diverse perspectives, and provide tailored support to candidates, ensuring inclusivity without compromising organizational goals.

In the past, hiring decisions often focused solely on selecting candidates with the highest scores during the recruitment process. However, there has been a shift toward considering more than just scores. When candidates have similar qualifications, factors like lived experience or representation from an underrepresented community are increasingly being weighed. The focus now includes evaluating the unique perspectives these individuals can bring to the organization, their role, or the department, and how they can contribute meaningfully to the team.

HR-01 shared an organization where there was a succession planning program in place, although it's unclear if equity considerations were explicitly integrated. Incorporating equity into such programs would add immense value. As a regulated organization, it adheres to the Employment Equity Act, tracking metrics on representation across various groups, including women, persons of color, and other equity-seeking populations at different levels, from administrative roles to directors. While these numbers provide a measurable framework, it is crucial that the focus extends beyond merely meeting quotas to fostering meaningful inclusion and participation. The organization has made intentional efforts to address equity in hiring. For example, there have been job postings specifically aimed at recruiting women in traditionally male-dominated fields like firefighting. This approach demonstrates deliberate and thoughtful action to diversify the workforce and build a more inclusive environment. Additionally, having structured tools like a checklist for managers could ensure equity considerations remain central to hiring decisions. This could include prompts such as evaluating lived experience or actively seeking candidates from marginalized groups, encouraging managers to approach recruitment with inclusivity in mind.

One notable example from participant HR-01 shared an experience with the organization which involved a promotion to the executive committee, where a person of color was selected over a white male candidate. While the HR-01 was not directly involved, it appeared to be a deliberate decision tied to equity goals. Although some might view this as meeting a checkbox, HR-01 hope it reflected a genuine effort to create a leadership team that values diversity and represents broader perspectives. It is essential to move beyond homogeneous leadership teams and embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion as core organizational values. Ultimately, hiring decisions and promotions must go beyond quotas, focusing on building leadership teams that reflect diverse perspectives, drive innovation,

and strengthen organizational performance. Equity efforts should be intentional, ensuring that workplaces not only reflect diversity but also create an environment where all individuals can thrive.

In the human resource profession, there is a need to balance specific regulatory requirements for certain roles with inclusive hiring practices. For example, some positions, such as engineering or accounting, legally require formal qualifications. A professional engineer must have an engineering degree and certification to sign off on regulated documents, while accountants must meet specific credentials to approve financial statements under standardized practices. These regulatory standards cannot be bypassed without compromising professionalism and compliance. However, human resource professionals can still find ways to recognize and value lived experience alongside these formal qualifications, especially in positions where strict certification isn't mandated.

In the context of Indigenous communities, career pathing and succession planning are critical. Human resource professionals can play a significant role in coaching employees on the steps required to move into higher roles, including training and skill development. Many First Nations organizations offer extensive training programs and funding to help employees grow and promote from within. This not only engages employees but also enhances organizational continuity. It is essential to identify and support individuals who show initiative and are eager to develop their leadership and soft skills.

Promoting from within is often more efficient because it allows organizations to observe a candidate's progression and areas for improvement firsthand. It provides opportunities for individuals to balance lived experiences with structured training, enhancing their qualifications and soft skills over time. Organizations that prioritize internal promotions are better positioned to identify talent and provide the necessary resources for growth.

When considering core competencies for a role, it is essential to identify the specific skills required. These can range from technical abilities like financial acumen, writing, or verbal communication, to broader competencies like leadership, change management, problem-solving, and the ability to inspire and motivate others. Each job will demand a unique set of these skills, depending on its nature and responsibilities.

When evaluating candidates for promotion or advancement, it is important to assess whether the required skills can be learned on the job or if additional training is necessary. For instance, participant HR-05 shared that if a candidate is missing certain technical skills, they might be able to acquire them through targeted learning opportunities,

especially if they are given the chance to grow and develop. Skill acquisition is often straightforward, as long as individuals are given the time and resources to learn. However, leadership competencies are often less about technical skills and more about behaviors and emotional intelligence. Effective leaders must be able to relate to people, motivate teams, navigate change, and have challenging conversations constructively. These behavioral skills are harder to teach and require a different approach to development.

This is where lived experience can be incredibly valuable. Someone with lived experience often brings a deeper understanding of people and situations, which can enhance their ability to lead effectively. They may have unique insights and empathy, which are critical for building trust and fostering collaboration. At the same time, lived experience can present challenges if an individual is unable to manage triggers or separate personal experiences from professional interactions. The key is to harness those experiences in a way that strengthens leadership capacity using them as a tool to connect with and support others, rather than allowing them to interfere with objective decision-making.

The combination of technical skills, behavioral competencies, and lived experience creates well-rounded leaders who can navigate complex environments and inspire their teams. Organizations that recognize and value this balance are better positioned to develop leaders who drive meaningful change and create inclusive workplaces.

In terms of promotions and career advancement within organizations, the influence of lived experience appears to diminish. Advancement often depends more on performance, demonstrated skills, and alignment with organizational goals rather than personal lived experience. While this observation is largely anecdotal, it suggests that lived experience may not be a major factor in how individuals progress within organizations once they are hired. Overall, the flexibility around valuing lived experience in hiring processes can vary widely. Some organizations are more generous and progressive in recognizing its importance, particularly in roles where it complements other qualifications. However, this flexibility is far from universal, especially across the public sector, where traditional qualifications and skills often remain prioritized over lived experience.

All participants emphasized that fostering inclusive leadership requires organizations to build a culture of trust, where marginalized voices can be shared openly and without fear. Creating this environment is essential to ensure that diverse perspectives are heard in decision-making processes. This includes establishing diverse and inclusive teams, implementing structured mentoring and sponsorship programs, and encouraging open dialogue through safe spaces and multiple avenues like surveys and resource groups.

Leadership accountability is crucial, with managers being evaluated on their inclusivity and provided with necessary training when needed. Additionally, organizations should embed inclusion principles at all levels, ensuring that leadership reflects the diversity of the broader community, and provide professional development opportunities to empower marginalized groups to advance. Inclusive leadership requires not only diversity at the table but also the active creation of environments where all voices can contribute meaningfully to organizational decisions.

According to HR-01, their team is highly diverse, and deliberate efforts are made to ensure all members feel safe and inclusive in their meetings. They have built trust among themselves, allowing team members to feel comfortable speaking up and sharing their thoughts. This openness enables suggestions to be made, whether they are accepted, rejected, or lead to further brainstorming. Building trust and fostering a safe environment for open communication is crucial, whether it's in a team setting or during an all-employee meeting. Recognizing that not everyone may feel comfortable speaking up in those settings, no matter how safe they are made to feel. To address this, they provide alternative ways for employees to voice their opinions, such as through employee resource groups, engagement surveys, or anonymous employee feedback tools. There has always been a strong emphasis on encouraging feedback. Leaders have consistently prioritized listening to employees and valuing their input, which helps foster a more engaged and collaborative workplace. Feedback is a vital tool in creating a workplace culture where everyone feels heard and valued.

Participant HR-02 shared that by pairing each senior, such as vice president or executive director, with an individual from a marginalized community. The relationship would begin as mentorship and over the course of 12 to 18 months, evolve into sponsorship, fostering deeper advocacy and career advancement opportunities. This extended partnership would allow the leader to build a strong relationship and provide meaningful support to the individual, creating opportunities for growth and development.

The emphasis here is on supporting leaders in developing people management skills. Often, individuals move into leadership positions because they excel in their technical roles, but that doesn't always mean they are equipped to manage people effectively. For smaller organizations, there might not be a separate track for technical experts to advance without transitioning into management roles. Unfortunately, many professionals may feel pressured to take on people management roles simply because they provide higher compensation, especially in high-cost regions like the Metro Vancouver. Ideally, organizations would create pathways for technical experts to grow and be compensated

appropriately without requiring them to shift into people management, ensuring they remain in roles where their skills are most valuable.

Ongoing education efforts, such as lunch-and-learn sessions or targeted presentations, are vital. These sessions should highlight the benefits and accomplishments of inclusive leadership, demonstrating how diversity fosters stronger, more innovative teams. Importantly, this approach amplifies the voices of marginalized individuals, ensuring they are both heard and seen. Inclusive leadership doesn't mean every decision aligns with the perspective of a marginalized group, but it does mean those perspectives are valued and considered in the decision-making process. A strong leader listens to all voices and integrates diverse viewpoints to make informed, balanced decisions.

In terms of specific education, HR-03 often conduct sessions like "Indigenous Awareness 101," which focuses on the history of Canada, colonialism, and the presence of Indigenous Peoples long before colonial powers arrived. The first level of these sessions raises awareness about this history, while "Indigenous Awareness 201" delves deeper into concepts like reconciliation and frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Canada and British Columbia have committed to UNDRIP, making it an important component of reconciliation efforts.

Reconciliation involves creating opportunities for marginalized groups, particularly Indigenous Peoples, to fully participate in and contribute to society. According to the 2021 Statistics Canada Census (Statistics Canada, 2023), Indigenous communities make up approximately 5% of the Canadian population, which is significant and cannot be overlooked. Inclusive leadership is about ensuring their representation and involvement in broader societal structures. It is a step toward building a more equitable and representative society, aligned with the goals of reconciliation and inclusion.

Participant HR-01 observed that some organizations are creating roles such as "Accessibility Coordinator" or "Indigenous Relations Manager" to focus on specific areas of diversity and inclusion. While well-intentioned, this approach can unintentionally confine responsibility for accessibility or Indigenous engagement to a single individual, limiting the broader organizational impact these initiatives could achieve. The goal should not be to rely on a single voice to champion diversity or inclusion in a hiring committee or organizational setting. Instead, it should be about fostering a culture where everyone is actively engaged in supporting accessibility, Indigenous inclusion, and other equity initiatives. The responsibility for these considerations must be embedded across the entire organization, so they become core principles that everyone understands and integrates into their work.

As participant HR-01 explained, for example, we've worked with government organizations that recognized a lack of Indigenous representation and decided to create a single role focused on providing an Indigenous perspective. While well-intentioned, this approach often places an overwhelming and isolating burden on the person hired for that role. They become the sole voice for an entire community, often expected to educate, advocate, and influence change across the organization. This can be incredibly challenging and unfair to the individual, as it limits their ability to thrive and contribute beyond being the "representative voice."

Instead of creating isolated roles or tokenizing voices, organizations should focus on comprehensive training, capacity-building within teams, and embedding inclusive principles throughout all levels of leadership. Committees and teams should reflect diversity and inclusivity naturally, without relying on a single advocate or representative. Everyone in the organization should be trained and empowered to consider equity and inclusion as part of their decision-making processes.

Participant HR-02 reinforced that representation of marginalized individuals at decision-making tables, whether at the board level or in senior leadership, is a critical step toward inclusive leadership. Currently, research highlights how minimal this representation is, emphasizing the importance of increasing diversity at these levels. However, representation alone is not enough. It is equally important to ensure that once individuals from marginalized communities are present, they have the opportunity to provide feedback in a safe and equitable environment where everyone's voice is heard and valued.

All participants observed highlighted that emerging leaders from marginalized communities are encouraged to build strong relationships within their teams and organizations, leveraging networks like employee resource groups for guidance and connection. Seeking mentorship both inside and outside their organization is critical to gaining insights, support, and advocacy. Continuous learning and curiosity are essential traits for growth, alongside taking advantage of training opportunities and participating in initiatives like mentorship programs. These programs not only help develop leadership skills but also demonstrate a commitment to professional development. Leaders must also create support systems and mentor champions to guide and validate their progress, ensuring they do not feel isolated in their journey to effect meaningful change. Stagnation often occurs when individuals stop learning, so emerging leaders must actively seek growth opportunities and strive to improve their competencies.

Emerging leaders, especially those from marginalized communities, face various challenges, but persistence, initiative, and strong mentorship can significantly enhance their chances of success. Mentorship, whether internal or external plays a vital role in guiding and supporting leadership growth, while organizations must foster environments that encourage such relationships and implement effective succession planning to preserve institutional knowledge. Capacity and funding constraints can hinder leadership development, but human resource professionals can mitigate these by capturing expertise from retiring employees and involving them in mentorship roles. Addressing ageism and valuing the experience of older workers are also key. For marginalized leaders in particular, leadership can be isolating due to the added responsibility of driving cultural change, making robust support systems, collaborative networks, and inclusive leadership development programs essential to building a diverse and resilient leadership pipeline.

It's also essential for organizations to recognize that the responsibility of driving cultural transformation cannot rest solely on one individual. Expecting a single person to shoulder the burden of creating a more inclusive and accessible workplace is overwhelming and unsustainable. Instead, organizations must foster a collective approach where inclusivity becomes a shared responsibility across all levels of leadership and teams. For leaders, building a personal support network within and outside the organization can make a significant difference. This network can help mitigate the challenges of isolation, provide emotional and professional support, and empower them to drive change more effectively without feeling solely responsible for the weight of transformation.

If granted a magic wand to improve retention and recruitment in leadership circles for marginalized communities, participants emphasized the importance of fostering comfort and trust for both candidates and recruiters to create an environment where authenticity and transparency thrive. They highlighted the need for employee feedback systems to hold organizations accountable, ensuring practices genuinely reflect inclusivity rather than superficial gestures. Providing equitable compensation across all levels was another critical focus, ensuring employees feel valued for their contributions. Additionally, participants suggested supporting hiring committees to overcome biases, embrace change, and prioritize setting diverse candidates up for success through mentorship, adequate resources, and supportive organizational structures. These measures collectively aim to dismantle barriers and promote a more inclusive and equitable workplace.

Focus on breaking down biases, particularly in leadership recruitment and retention. These biases can often be disproven with proper education, awareness, and openness.

Leadership circles do not have to agree on everything, but they must be willing to embrace diverse perspectives and value the contributions of marginalized communities. Education and awareness are pivotal in fostering this openness, not just in hiring and advancement but in creating an inclusive culture overall.

Fostering long-term change by embedding equity, diversity, and inclusion into every layer of the organization. This includes establishing mentorship programs, succession planning, and robust frameworks to ensure that marginalized voices are represented and supported at all levels. The focus would be on creating sustainable systems that continue to promote inclusivity, even as leadership changes over time. Increasing capacity, challenging biases, and institutionalizing inclusion because those are the keys to unlocking a more equitable and effective workplace.

In practice, this resistance to change is still common. Organizations may say they want to prioritize diversity, but when faced with actual candidates, they often revert to selecting someone who fits the traditional profile. This is where hiring committees need to be challenged to align their decisions with their stated values. If a diverse candidate is just as qualified or even better suited for the role it's essential to confront the unconscious bias that may steer them toward the status quo.

On the flip side, there are also instances where a diverse candidate is chosen without the necessary support structures in place to help them succeed. This often results in failure, not because the candidate wasn't capable, but because they were not set up for success. When that happens, it can reinforce biases, with people claiming, "We tried hiring someone different, and it didn't work out." The failure lies in the lack of mentorship, onboarding, and resources provided to the individual.

In sectors like municipalities and post-secondary institutions, which are expected to be more progressive, this resistance can be particularly disheartening. These organizations often have the right language and policies on paper, but when it comes to action, they struggle to align with their stated commitments. The journey toward meaningful change requires both accountability and follow through ensuring that diverse hires are supported to thrive and that hiring committees are prepared to embrace new possibilities.

Creating more equitable and objective compensation plans for organizations. While it may not be the most exciting topic when discussing recruitment and retention strategies, compensation is a critical factor that significantly impacts employees, especially those from marginalized communities. Developing compensation plans that are fair, transparent,

and sustainable. These plans should acknowledge the cost of living and the value of the work being done, rather than disproportionately allocating resources to senior leadership while others struggle with low wages. This disparity undermines morale, retention, and equity within the workplace.

By ensuring that compensation reflects the actual worth of a role and is fairly distributed across all levels of the organization, employees would feel valued and fairly rewarded for their contributions. This approach would not only improve retention rates but also make organizations more attractive to diverse talent. Ultimately, equitable compensation systems could be a game-changer in fostering a more inclusive and supportive workplace.

### 4.3.1 – Thematic Findings: Human Resource Professionals

The interviews with human resource professionals revealed six key themes. These themes demonstrate how lived experience, inclusive hiring practices, and organizational policies influence leadership recruitment and development. Direct participant quotes are included to highlight and ground the analysis in their perspectives.

#### *Theme 1: Lived Experience as a Competency*

Human resource participants reported a shift from “cookie-cutter” hiring to recognizing lived experience as a skill that strengthens teams and aligns services with community values.

*“Lived experience should be treated as a skill, especially in organizations serving marginalized communities.” (HR-02)*

*“We used to pick whoever had the highest score; now we also look at the lived experience a candidate brings.” (HR-01)*

This theme highlights how human resource practices are evolving to see cultural knowledge, community engagement and lived experience as leadership assets equal to formal qualifications.

#### *Theme 2: Metrics with Meaning: Targets Without Tokenism*

Setting measurable diversity goals was seen as necessary, but participants emphasized that that representation targets must be paired with authentic inclusion.

*“Targets move processes, but hiring to hit 30% without deeper inclusion risks tokenism.” (HR-01)*

The insight underscores the risk of superficial compliance and stresses the importance of accountability systems that foster meaningful change beyond quotas.

### *Theme 3: Inclusive Hiring Design: Upstream Conversations & Community Partnerships*

Equity succeeds when inclusion is built before a job posting through aligning criteria, reframing questions and engaging community partners.

*“Before posting, we ask what the team actually needs regarding skills and lived experience.” (HR-02)*

*“Including elders on panels and reframing questions built on trust and fairness.” (HR-03)*

These practices reposition recruitment as a collaborative, relationship-based process that acknowledges cultural knowledge and community perspectives as legitimate qualifications. From my experiences as a professional in a leadership role who had the opportunity to recruit, I used equivalencies from educational qualifications, comparatively to language, culture exposure within marginalized communities. In my view, each had the same value as it was related to a certain position.

### *Theme 4: Fair Assessment: Reduce Bias & Broaden Evidence*

Standard interviews often disadvantage candidates unfamiliar with traditional norms requiring human resource professionals to adapt evaluation methods.

*“Lower interview scores needed context—some candidates don’t ‘sell’ themselves; we adjusted how we evaluated answers.” (HR-01)*

*“Direct eye contact can be disrespectful in some contexts—managers need that cultural education.” (HR-03)*

By broadening evidence and contextualizing responses, human resource professionals sought to reduce cultural bias and ensure fairer evaluation of diverse candidates.

### *Theme 5: Advancement Levers: Sponsorship, Onboarding, and Clear Success Plans*

Progression from entry-level to leadership roles requires deliberate structures such as sponsorship, tailored onboarding and explicit success measures.

*“Sponsors use their influence, put you in the room, give visibility, stake their reputation.” (HR-02)*

*“We rewrote job levels so lived experience could outweigh formal education in outreach leadership while keeping credentials for regulated roles.” (HR-04)*

This reflects a shift from passive mentorship to active sponsorship and system-level redesign that creates genuine pathways into leadership.

#### *Theme 6: Culture & Accountability: From Policy to Practice*

Policies alone are insufficient unless enforced through organizational culture, equity training and accountability mechanisms.

*“We have had respectful workplace policies for years, yet discrimination persists—because policy isn’t lived.” (HR-05)*

*“ERGs with budgets and exec sponsors, plus normalizing accommodation asks, build trust and transparency.” (HR-02)*

This theme highlights how the gap between written policies and lived realities can only be bridged through ongoing accountability, cultural safety and leadership commitment.

These six themes illustrate how human resource professionals are reshaping leadership recruitment and development by valuing lived experience, embedding inclusivity into hiring design and holding organizations accountable for meaningful change. Their perspectives emphasize that progress requires moving beyond tokenistic targets to intentional policies, culturally sensitive practices and structural supports such as sponsorship and onboarding. Together, these insights provide critical grounding for the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 5, showing how human resource professionals function as both gate keepers and catalyst in advancing equitable leadership opportunities.

## 4.4 Comparative Analysis of Perspectives

The comparative analysis of successful leaders and human resource professionals highlights how lived experience shapes leadership opportunities and decision-making. Leaders from marginalized communities empathized lived experience as central to their leadership identity and effectiveness. They described how their identities as women, Indigenous, queer, racialized or disabled leaders provided authenticity and insight that

enriched policy making and community engagement. At the same time, they revealed systemic barriers, including rigid definitions of merit, stereotypes and patriarchal or colonial structures, that require them to work harder to prove legitimacy. For many participants, mentorship was seen as a critical way to build confidence, nurture younger leaders and navigate systemic exclusion.

Human resource professionals recognized lived experience as a competency that can broaden recruitment and strengthen organizational culture. Their focus was more structural, emphasizing the role of inclusive hiring practices, community partnerships, sponsorship programs and policy enforcement in creating pathways for marginalized leaders. Human resource participants noted progress in adoptive inclusive language and criteria in job postings but acknowledged the ongoing risks of tokenism when diversity goals are treated as quotas rather than authentic commitments.

Both groups converged on the view that lived experience strengthens leadership and that intentional supports such as mentorship, sponsorship, and inclusive policies are necessary to create equitable pathways. Where they diverged was in emphasis: leaders spoke to the personal cost of systemic exclusion, while HR professionals focused on organizational processes and accountability. Together, these perspectives illustrate that advancing equitable leadership requires the integration of lived experience into both individual pathways and organizational systems.

## Chapter 5 Discussion and Analysis

### 5.1 Introduction

This section will discuss and synthesize the findings from interviews with successful leaders and human resource professionals. This discussion will also include literature on leadership, systemic barriers, systemic discrimination, and marginalized communities. This section also explores how lived experience, intersectionality, and inclusive practices reshape leadership and inform recommendations for equitable change. The analysis is structured around central themes that emerged from the data and literature leading into the suggestions and final recommendations.

### 5.2 Reframing Leadership through Lived Experience

Lived experience emerged as a foundational element in shaping effective, inclusive leadership and policy development. Unlike traditional leadership models centered on formal qualifications or hierarchical experience, participants highlighted the value of first-

hand knowledge in understanding community needs and building empathetic, grounded leadership practices. Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality provides the foundational framework for understanding how overlapping social identities shape unique lived experiences. This theory positions those lived experiences from marginalized communities as sources of insight into leadership, organizational change and inclusive decision-making demonstrating unique perspectives that challenge dominant norms and inform inclusive, equity-driven policies. Human resource professionals interviewed in this study noted a growing recognition that leaders from marginalized communities bring transformative insights into system change through positions of influence and decision-making, reframing leadership paradigms to prioritize diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

The data demonstrates how organizations that recognize lived experience as a leadership asset foster better decision-making, policy development, innovation, and community connection. Lived experience as a leadership competency challenges traditional based leadership models thus redefining leadership criteria in policy and hiring practices. The characteristics of traditional leadership typically emphasize adherence to established norms, often favouring dominant groups sacrificing authenticity for acceptance. It does not make room for collaborative, adaptive and flexibility between individuals. Whereas marginalized leadership emerges from lived experience offering valuable insights that challenge dominant perspectives and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of organizational dynamics. By redefining leadership competencies to include lived experience, organizations begin to disrupt exclusionary norms and build more reflective, responsive, and innovative leadership structures.

Leaders working with marginalized communities often wear multiple hats, engaging in their respective industries while also contributing through advocacy, board memberships, and community involvement. Their leadership is shaped by direct and indirect engagement with marginalized groups, acknowledging the persistent underrepresentation of these communities in employment opportunities. A key observation is that effective leadership within marginalized groups often involves fostering long-term, inclusive relationships. This is evident in initiatives such as sustainability programs and friendship agreements among Indigenous leaders, which promote ongoing community support. These findings reinforce the notion that leadership within marginalized communities is deeply relational, requiring both structural engagement and personal commitment.

Moreover, a recurring theme is the importance of lifting marginalized voices and ensuring that individuals feel valued in decision-making spaces. This aligns with existing research on

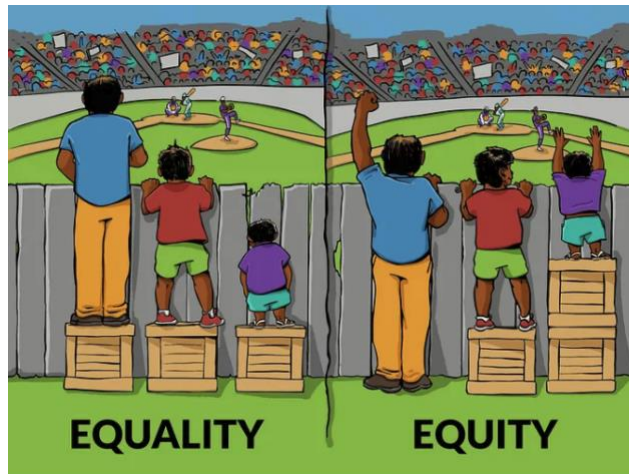
community-based leadership, which emphasizes participatory and relational leadership approaches as essential in fostering inclusivity (Eagly & Chin, 2010). As Spruill, Kenney, and Kaplan (2001) assert, systems thinking is a necessary component of any effective community intervention, especially when addressing the complexities of cross-cultural leadership. Understanding leadership through the lens of lived experience requires analyzing the sum of interactions and influences that shape decision-making within organizational and social systems. In this way, marginalized leaders contribute not only to inclusive outcomes but also to the structural transformation of the systems in which they operate.

This particular element of lived experience found with the participants resonated with not only my leadership style, but with the researcher's experience. I never imagined that growing up hard of hearing would become the very foundation of my leadership journey. But over the years, I have come to see how my lived experience, once viewed as a limitation, has become a source of insight, resilience, and purpose.

More than a decade ago, one of the most defining moments in my career occurred when a mentor of mine, a successful marginalized leader deeply committed to serving marginalized communities, not only saw my potential but also acted on it. They hired me not just for my lived experience, but because they believed in my capacity to grow and develop. They offered me an opportunity to develop professional skills I had never been given the space to build before. That act of trust reshaped my future.

I was offered an opportunity to work in social services, directly serving the Deaf and hard of hearing communities. It was not just a job; it was a turning point. I have realized my personal experiences weren't something I had to overcome or hide; they were an asset. I brought not only my professional skills, but also cultural understanding, bilingual language fluency in English and American Sign Language, and a deep empathy rooted in shared lived experience.

My mentor often said "*You can't expect someone to step up to the plate if they've never been handed a bat*" as a metaphor about equity. In my research, I have encountered a range of equity images that convey the notion that resources are necessary for everyone to access equal opportunities. For example, consider the common equity image below, which challenges the notion of equity and equality (Interaction Institute for Social Change, n.d.).



It is simple to interpret the above image to provide people with different-sized boxes to stand on, allowing them to see the baseball game. This accounts for varied circumstances and offers similar opportunities to each person to achieve an equal view of the game. However, remembering my mentor's quote about needing the tools was more symbolic to me. It was a powerful reminder that equity is not about expecting the same outcomes; it 'is about creating the conditions for success by equipping people with what they need to thrive. That quote stayed with me, grounding the way I now lead and mentor others.

My early years in competitive sports helped me develop transferable skills such as discipline, teamwork, adaptability, and perseverance. Sports taught me how to lead, communicate under pressure, and trust the strength of a community working toward a shared goal. These lessons served me well when I began working in culturally complex environments where identity, accessibility, social justice, and intersectionality mattered deeply. I often found myself bridging gaps between systems and people. I became a connector between service providers and clients, between policies and real-world impact, between Deaf and hearing cultures. My understanding of cultural geography helped me recognize the importance of place, identity, and belonging in shaping service delivery and advocacy.

It was this combination of lived experience, cultural knowledge, and professional practice that inspired me to pursue a master's degree in community development. I did not enter this program through a traditional academic route, in the sense of pursuing a master's degree after completing my bachelor's degree. Before entering this master's program, my professional development was deeply enriched through the privilege of working alongside marginalized community members from diverse walks of life. This experience has not only shaped my skills but has given me the rare opportunity to stand on the other side of the

fence, to listen, learn, and imagine what it means to be in someone else's shoes. Bearing witness to these struggles has made me more aware of the power imbalances that exist, and has grounded my work in empathy, humility, and a deeper commitment to equity.

I approached it as someone who had lived through the challenges I was now studying. And that mattered. My perspective brought depth to classroom discussions, grounded theory in reality, and helped frame community development as not just systems work, but deeply human work.

Now, reflecting on where I started and where I stand today, I see a clear transformation, not just in my career, but in how I define leadership. I am no longer just someone who advocates from the margins; I am a transformational leader who carries the stories, struggles, and strengths of my community forward. My leadership is not defined by titles or traditional credentials, but by trust, empathy, and a relentless commitment to inclusion.

In every space I enter, whether it is policy work, program development, or mentoring others, I carry the lessons of my lived experience. It reminds me that leadership isn't about overcoming who you are. It's about embracing it, elevating it, and using it to create space for others to thrive.

During one of the interviews, a participant shared a powerful piece of advice from Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first Black woman to serve on the United States Supreme Court. Her one-word message to young people was: *Persevere*. This advice, drawn from her own experience in which a stranger's simple encouragement helped her endure difficult times, stood out as an "aha" moment for me. It deeply resonated with my father's final words to me before his passing.

*"My fighting spirit will be with you always –  
All my Love, Dad"*

My lived experience leads well into the section on intersectionality and systemic barriers.

## 5.3 Intersectionality and Systemic Barriers for Leadership Opportunities

Marginalized leaders face a variety of systemic barriers identified as racism, cultural biases, gender identity, disability status and sexual orientation that dictate perceptions of leadership. These barriers manifest through exclusionary hiring practices, rigid definitions of leadership, and societal expectations regarding how leaders should look, speak, and

behave. The findings suggest that systemic change requires dismantling these outdated metrics of success and recognizing non-traditional pathways into leadership. Leadership barriers, including a lack of mentorship, self-doubt, and logistical challenges (e.g., childcare, transportation), exacerbate systemic obstacles. They must work harder to be recognized and achieve success. The flip side of a contrasting perspective was noted that individuals must earn their stripes like everyone else by overcoming their personal biases and perceived barriers. Granted that marginalized leaders must work harder to prove their legitimacy in leadership roles, their lived experience perspectives also bring in challenges for leadership opportunities.

Women and racialized individuals are particularly affected by stereotypes that undermine their competencies. For instance, leadership attributes associated with women such as emotional expression are often undervalued in favor of more dominant, traditionally male-coded traits. Furthermore, the persistence of colonial values such as prioritizing seniority over lived experience continues to limit access to leadership for diverse candidates. Colonial values often include a sense of superiority over Indigenous Peoples, viewing them as obstacles to progress in leadership.

The lived realities of leaders from marginalized communities are shaped by overlapping systems of oppression. As articulated by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality reveals how race, gender, disability, and other identity markers intensify barriers to leadership. Participants described experiencing rigid merit criteria, implicit biases, and cultural exclusion that undermine their access to leadership roles. The findings mirror literature that critiques early trait-based leadership theories for reinforcing dominant norms (Liden, Wang & Wang, 2025) and call for more inclusive models that reflect the diverse identities of today's workforce. Inclusive leadership is strongly linked to lived experiences and intersectional identities, as leaders emphasize the necessity of diverse perspectives in organizational structures.

However, the findings reveal significant challenges in hiring and representation, particularly for Indigenous candidates, even when formal commitments to employ Indigenous individuals exist. The role of elders in decision-making is highlighted as a critical mechanism for ensuring that leadership aligns with community needs. Elders act as a "sanity check" to maintain cultural integrity in organizational decisions. This reflects Indigenous governance models where elders play an advisory role, ensuring that leadership remains accountable to the collective wisdom of the community (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 25).

One of the most significant barriers identified is systemic bias within hiring processes, which perpetuates cultural gaps. Leaders and human resources highlight the need for bias-free recruitment and succession planning strategies that focus on developing and mentoring candidates rather than merely hiring them into roles. This finding aligns with research on equitable hiring, which stresses that organizations must move beyond performative diversity efforts toward substantive inclusivity in leadership structures (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Additionally, the findings illustrate a case study from an organization from the Downtown Eastside, where Indigenous women and elders hold board positions, ensuring that leadership reflects the population it serves. This demonstrates the effectiveness of embedding lived experiences into organizational structures to improve representation and decision-making.

## 5.4 Representation vs. Tokenism in Leadership

While representation is crucial, several participants warned against performative inclusion. Tokenism, where marginalized leaders are placed in roles without real authority or support, was a common concern. Ahmed (2012) critiques such practices for reinforcing symbolic inclusion without power redistribution, noting that inclusion must extend beyond representation to structural change. The findings show that meaningful representation requires empowering diverse leaders to shape policy, strategy, and culture not simply occupying seats at the table. This distinction reinforces the need to challenge traditional hiring practices, ensuring that lived experience complements skill sets for authentic engagement, leadership pipelines, and inclusive practices that are genuine and substantive.

## 5.5 The Role of HR Professionals and Organizational Gatekeeping

Human resource professionals working with marginalized communities focus on building pathways to leadership through tailored positions, mentorship and career progression initiatives. They play a dual role as both facilitators and potential barriers to inclusive leadership. Participants acknowledged a shift toward valuing lived experience in recruitment but noted inconsistencies in how this is applied. Human resource often defers to hiring managers, whose biases may remain unchecked. Strategies such as collaborating with value-based organizations help build trust and ensure marginalized communities are reached. Human resource professionals emphasize the need for hiring policies and training programs that are aligned with diversity, equity and inclusion principles and actively work to challenge systemic bias. Embedding lived experience into job frameworks and evaluation tools requires intentional human resource practices and leadership accountability.

## 5.6 Cultural Sensitivity and Accessibility in Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment practices often fail to account for cultural differences, disproportionately excluding marginalized candidates. Participants shared how seemingly neutral practices, like rigid interviews or competency-based assessments, reinforce inequity. Cultural awareness, such as accepting the presence of elders during interviews or recognizing informal community-based leadership, emerged as best practices. The literature affirms that inclusive hiring must adapt to cultural and experiential diversity to ensure fair access to leadership. The impact on leadership recruitment in how organizations approach diversity derives from internal policies. While some organizations successfully integrate inclusivity into their policy, others struggle due to traditional norms. One of the key findings is that diverse representation in leadership often happens organically suggesting the need for intentional leadership practices rather than tokenism efforts. Recruitment that fails to integrate diverse perspectives often results in exclusionary hiring practices. This reflects broader discussions on the necessity of embedding diversity within structural frameworks (Ahmed, 2012). This also highlights the importance of ensuring that diverse candidates are not only recruited, but also retained and supported, reinforcing the role of mentorship in long-term leadership development.

Retention efforts include creating positive workplace cultures, safe spaces for feedback, and mentorship-driven career advancement programs. Some organizations incorporate elders into hiring committees for Indigenous applicants to ensure culturally sensitive recruitment processes. One key lesson shared was the importance of flexibility in hiring, particularly in roles that may require accommodation or alternative career paths for marginalized candidates.

## 5.7 Mentorship, Sponsorship, and Leadership Development

Leaders and human resource professional emphasize the importance of mentorship, sponsorship, and proactive engagement in promoting inclusive leadership. Emerging leaders from marginalized backgrounds are encouraged to seek mentors from diverse identities, take initiative, and build networks. Networking is identified as a crucial skill, allowing leaders to develop professional relationships and find champions who advocate for their growth. Notably, mentorship is seen as a two-way process—emerging leaders must actively seek guidance while organizations should intentionally cultivate leadership circles.

Mentorship is a widely recognized tool for leadership development, but participants emphasized the added value of sponsorship. Sponsors advocate for emerging leaders, often using their influence to open doors. This distinction is especially important for marginalized professionals who may lack visibility in traditional networks. Mentorship programs tend to work from a deficit model that there are gaps in people's knowledge, skills and experience that need to be filled through mentoring through a top-down approach. Sponsorship programs recognize the unique skills and lived experience that people bring to their jobs that might transform leadership and are more of a two-way relationship. If the goal is ultimately to change leadership, this can be much more effective since the sponsor often learns just as much from the emerging leader, if not more.

Effective leadership development for marginalized communities must therefore be intentional, culturally responsive and grounded in systemic change. This includes redefining success outcomes, investing in leadership training that values diverse experiences and accountability for inclusive practices.

## 5.8 Conceptual Framework for Equitable Leadership

The themes emerging from both successful leaders and human resource professionals point to a shared conclusion: equitable leadership development is most effective when lived experience is recognized as a core competency and organizational systems are designed to value, support, and amplify it. From the leaders' perspective, themes such as reframing leadership through lived experience, overcoming systemic barriers, and resisting tokenism underscore the importance of authentic inclusion. From the human resource perspective, themes such as organizational gatekeeping, cultural sensitivity, and mentorship/sponsorship highlight the structural elements that either hinder or advance equitable leadership opportunities. Taken together, these themes informed the following development of a conceptual framework for equitable leadership. The following framework is inductively derived from the data and integrates both sets of perspectives from successful leaders and human resource professionals. This framework illustrates how individual lived experiences and organizational practices intersect to shape leadership opportunities. It also emphasizes that sustainable change requires both individual resilience and systemic reform.

**Inputs:** Lived experiences of marginalized leaders; organizational policies and practices shaped by HR professionals.

**Processes:** Inclusive recruitment and retention practices; mentorship and sponsorship models; recognition of intersectionality and cultural context.

**Outcomes:** Equitable leadership pathways; policies shaped by diverse voices; systemic transformation that disrupts exclusionary norms.

The next chapter will outline the fifteen recommendations for change that will shape leadership opportunities.

## Chapter 6 Recommendations

### 6.1 Introduction

The following recommendations are intended for multiple audiences who play a direct role in shaping leadership opportunities. These include human resource professionals and organizational decision-makers responsible for recruitment and leadership development, senior leaders within government, non-profit and Crown organizations that influence equity and inclusion practices to support equitable leadership development for individuals from marginalized communities. The responsibility for designing and implementing these recommendations rests with organizations that recruit, develop and support leaders. However, the findings also highlight the need for collaboration with marginalized leaders themselves to ensure that initiatives are co-created, culturally responsive and grounded in lived experience. The recommendations outlined below aim to provide practical strategies for advancing equitable leadership development and creating pathways for more inclusive decision-making across sectors. How does systemic discrimination influence the lack of leadership opportunities for marginalized communities? What are the systemic barriers that marginalized leaders have to overcome in order to be competitive for leadership opportunities? How do leaders with lived experiences from marginalized communities influence decision-making that have positive impacts on policies and programs? Each recommendation is designed to challenge exclusionary practices, empower marginalized voices, and build systems that value lived experience as a leadership asset. In addition, the hope is to build the case to move beyond systemic discrimination, systemic barriers and impacts of leaders from marginalized communities that have positive impacts on policies and programs. These recommendations are grounded in the findings from interviews with successful leaders and human resource professionals, as well as the broader literature on systemic discrimination, intersectionality, and inclusive leadership.

### 6.2 Reframe Leadership Criteria

#### **Recommendation 1: Redefine Leadership Competencies**

Redefining leadership competencies to include lived experience, cultural knowledge, and relational leadership as assets. Traditional leadership criteria often prioritize hierarchical experience, formal credentials, and dominant cultural behaviors. This excludes those

whose strengths lie in community engagement, grassroots advocacy, and lived experience. As demonstrated by this study, leaders with lived experience bring insight into social dynamics, policy gaps, and community needs that are often invisible to mainstream leadership. Having open conversations about revising the responsibilities of leadership roles and providing resources that value diversity and its contributions to the organization further motivates marginalized candidates to engage with the process.

### **Recommendation 2: Develop Inclusive Hiring Guidelines**

Developing clear and inclusive hiring guidelines that encourages and support individuals from marginalized groups to step into leadership roles not only benefits those individuals but also enhances the organization as a whole by fostering innovation, adaptability, and a culture of inclusion. By creating equitable pathways to leadership, organizations can better reflect and respond to the communities they serve.

## **6.3 Develop Inclusive Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs**

### **Recommendation 3: Establish Culturally Responsive Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs**

Establish culturally responsive mentorship and sponsorship programs that prioritize equity in access and advancement. While mentorship helps emerging leaders navigate organizational culture, sponsorship is vital in breaking down barriers to opportunity. Sponsorship is where senior leaders actively advocate for and promote individuals from marginalized communities, was cited as a missing but necessary factor for leadership development. Creating structured sponsorship programs where established leaders advocate for marginalized professionals in decision-making spaces.

### **Recommendation 4: Promote Mutual Learning in Mentorship Relationships**

The fourth recommendation is to encourage mutual learning in mentorship relationships, valuing lived experience as a two-way exchange. Allocating dedicated resources to support long-term mentorship partnerships, particularly across cultural lines. The role of mentorship and sponsorship can improve implicit biases and support marginalized communities seek for leadership opportunities particularly for those organizations who are deficient in cultural diversity. As a result of this is to create transformational leadership allowing emerging marginalized leaders to achieve their fullest potential.

## **6.4 Address Systemic Barriers in Hiring and Advancement**

### **Recommendation 5: Conduct Equity Audits and Improve Hiring Practices**

Leadership opportunities are often hindered by systemic barriers which shape perceptions of who is capable of leadership. Despite many individuals from marginalized communities

contributing significantly to support and service roles, they are underrepresented in leadership positions due to biases about cultural norms of leadership. Organizations should be conducting equity audits and improve hiring practices to eliminate systemic barriers. Hiring systems often replicate bias through rigid merit criteria, culturally unresponsive interviews, and a lack of transparency in promotions. Marginalized leaders face compounded barriers such as implicit bias, assumptions about communication styles, and cultural exclusion.

**Recommendation 6: Train Hiring Committees in Anti-Bias and Cultural Competency**

Training hiring managers and selection committees in anti-bias practices and cultural competency helps ensure that all candidates are evaluated fairly and equitably, regardless of their background. Establishing equitable promotion pathways and leadership development opportunities for staff from marginalized communities within the organization will provide meaningful avenues for advancement, foster a more inclusive workplace culture, and help address systemic barriers to leadership.

## 6.5 Support Cultural and Community-Based Leadership Models

**Recommendation 7: Integrate Indigenous and Culturally Grounded Leadership Models**

Integrating Indigenous and culturally grounded leadership approaches into organizational governance. Community-based leadership is rooted in relational accountability, shared decision-making, and cultural protocols. Incorporating Indigenous governance models, including elder involvement and collective leadership, provide valuable alternatives to hierarchical models that often exclude diverse voices.

**Recommendation 8: Include Elders and Knowledge Keepers in Decision-Making**

Formalizing the inclusion of elders or community knowledge keepers in leadership decision-making structures. Working effectively with communities to address current needs and issues for culturally significant roles, ceremonies, and relationship-building practices in leadership processes. When you have a platform, it is essential to adopt innovative approaches that create opportunities for marginalized communities to be included. This fosters an inclusive environment where all voices are valued and meaningful contributions are encouraged, demonstrating leadership competencies in policies, decision-making, and managing projects or community programs and services.

## 6.6 Move from Representation to Meaningful Participation

**Recommendation 9: Embed Equity into Leadership Policy and Governance**

Organizations should implement equitable leadership policies that ensure accountability, transparency, and sustainability, and measuring leadership effectiveness through tangible

impact, not just presence. Ensure that representation leads to real power, influence, and decision-making authority. The focus should be on diversifying leadership to genuinely reflect the market and communities served. Diversity must be treated as a lived organizational value woven into policy frameworks and embedded within decision-making structures. This requires not only the representation of marginalized leaders but the integration of policies that grant them real authority and influence.

#### **Recommendation 10: Invest in Leadership Training and Capacity Building**

Organizations must establish leadership training and capacity-building opportunities to empower leaders from marginalized communities to lead, influence systems, and shape inclusive futures. This includes learning that equip emerging leaders to navigate organizational structures, influence change, and shape inclusive futures. Empowered leaders build stronger, more reflective organizations that serve communities equitably.

### **6.7 Strengthen Human Resource Accountability**

#### **Recommendation 11: Position Human Resource Professionals as Equity Leaders**

Empower human resource professionals to be equity champions and system changemakers. Human resource plays a central role in recruitment, advancement, retention and policy design. Organizations should invest in workplace culture initiatives that prioritize inclusion, safety, and long-term support. However, deference to hiring managers and inconsistent application of diversity, equity and inclusion principles often create roadblocks for marginalized candidates. Include diversity, equity and inclusion performance indicators in human resource roles and leadership accountability frameworks.

#### **Recommendation 12: Co-Design Inclusive Practices with Communities**

Human resource professionals must be given the authority to challenge biased hiring practices and intervene in inequitable systems. Partnering with marginalized communities to co-create inclusive hiring and retention strategies ensures systems reflect the lived realities of those they seek to include.

#### **Recommendation 13: Invest in Equity Education and Cultural Safety**

Retention depends on more than recruitment. Organizations should invest in ongoing training in disability inclusion, anti-racism, and cultural competency for equipping managers and leaders to build authentic relationships and inclusive teams. Peer mentorship, leadership development grounded in lived experience, and continuous feedback mechanisms create safe, inclusive environments where marginalized leaders can

thrive. Through these combined strategies, organizations move from performative inclusion to structural transformation.

## 6.8 Embed Structural Change in Policy and Practice

### **Recommendation 14: Inclusive and Flexible Policies Rooted in Equity and Lived Experience**

Changing policies can be a powerful lever for embedding structural change, but only when those policies are intentionally designed to reflect diverse lived experiences. Leadership recruitment processes must go beyond surface-level inclusion by incorporating diverse voices directly into policy development. Without such input, job descriptions, mandates, and criteria may unintentionally exclude highly qualified individuals who bring non-traditional yet essential perspectives. Inclusive and flexible policies rooted in reconciliation, equity, and lived experience create the conditions necessary for marginalized leaders to access and thrive in leadership roles.

### **Recommendation 15: Embed Diverse Perspectives into Policy and Decision-Making Structures**

Participants emphasized that while representation at every table isn't always possible, creating policies that value and integrate diverse viewpoints is critical. Leaders must cultivate environments where diverse perspectives are not only heard but shape decision-making at all levels. Clear, inclusive language and collaborative policy development especially involving recruiters and frontline practitioners strengthen leadership roles. Although this work is complex, embedding thoughtful, equitable policy practices builds a foundation for sustainable structural change that allows marginalized leaders to rise with authenticity and influence.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

This research hypothesized that there was a systemic problem of hiring leaders who do not have lived experience in leadership positions who make decisions and create policies that negatively affect and impact the lives of individuals from marginalized communities. The result is that leaders without lived experiences are making decisions for groups of people through their own cultural lens which excludes necessary intersectional knowledge or lived experience. This has serious impacts on the lives of individuals who are from marginalized communities. The effects of this are evidenced in their daily lives by barriers to services, policies that are ineffectual, and suppression of those who want to achieve leadership roles.

The research and recommendations outlined in the previous chapter aim to dismantle systemic barriers and rebuild leadership pathways that reflect the strengths, knowledge, and lived experiences of marginalized communities. These strategies move beyond inclusion to create transformational change within organizations. By embedding equity into policy, fostering relational leadership, and embracing cultural responsiveness, organizations can create environments where diverse leaders not only belong but thrive to lead, influence and shape systems that are more equitable and inclusive for all.

Marginalized leaders with lived experiences who are making policy decisions face more than normal challenges in their competency decision-making processes from their counterparts who are not from a marginalized group. Leaders without lived experience portray the belief and value that they know best even though they do not have the lived experiences.

The research underscores the urgent need to review leadership through the lens of marginalized communities with lived experience and systemic change. Drawing from qualitative interviews the findings reveal that traditional leadership paradigms remain rooted in exclusionary norms favoring dominant cultural traits, rigid hiring standards, and narrow definitions of success. In contrast, leaders from marginalized communities bring valuable insight shaped by intersectional identities, community engagement, and firsthand experience navigating systemic barriers. Their perspectives offer transformative potential for shaping more inclusive policies, programs, and organizational cultures.

To move from representation to transformation, organizations must embed equity in every stage of leadership development from recruitment and mentorship to succession planning and retention. This requires dismantling systemic barriers, redefining leadership competencies, and holding systems accountable for creating real opportunities for advancement. These research findings call on organizations to shift from performative diversity efforts toward structurally inclusive practices that uplift the voices, wisdom, and leadership potential of historically excluded communities. Only through such intentional, systemic action can we cultivate leadership that reflects the diversity of the communities we serve and delivers lasting, equitable change.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Successful Leaders Interview Questions

- 1) Can you tell me about your experience in working with marginalized communities specifically your leadership role within those communities?
- 2) How do you ensure inclusivity and representation when engaging decision-making processes of marginalized communities?
- 3) What are the challenges and barriers that marginalized individuals have to overcome in order to be competitive for leadership opportunities?
- 4) How do leaders with marginalized lived experiences influence decision-making impact on policies and programs?
- 5) How does systemic discrimination influence the lack of leadership opportunities for marginalized identified communities?
- 6) How does policy and decision-making development impact leadership recruitment?
- 7) How do you feel about the programs and services that are available?
- 8) How do you feel about employment opportunities in leadership positions within your organization?
- 9) Can you share an example of a decision you made that was influenced by lived experience, and how it positively impacted the outcome?
- 10) Have there been instances where lived experience has challenged or changed your perspective, leading to better decision making? Could you elaborate on such an experience?
- 11) What advice would you give to other leaders who are looking to incorporate lived experience into their decision making but may be unsure of where to start?
- 12) How would you promote inclusive leadership and ensure that the voices of marginalized individuals are heard or seen in decision making processes?
- 13) Do you have any suggestions for emerging leaders from marginalized communities?
- 14) If I had a magic wand and I could grant you one wish. What would you want to see happen regarding retention and recruitment in leadership circles for marginalized communities in today's competitive market?

## Appendix 2: Human Resource Professionals Interview Questions

- 1) In what ways do human resource professionals consider lived experience applicants enhance recruitment and hiring processes and practices?
- 2) Can you tell me about your experience in working with marginalized communities specifically related to recruitment and retention to leadership opportunities?
- 3) What steps can organizations take to create an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences, especially those from marginalized groups?
- 4) Does human resource professionals systemic discrimination influence the lack of leadership opportunities for marginalized identified communities?
- 5) Does human resource policy and decision-making development impact leadership recruitment in marginalized communities?
- 6) What accessibility practices do you or human resource professionals undertake to increase leadership opportunities for marginalized communities?
- 7) Have you come across specific challenges or obstacles that human resource professionals face when trying to incorporate lived experience in decision making? How do you overcome them?
- 8) Have you ever encountered situations where decision makers overlooked or ignored the lived experiences of marginalized communities? How did that impact the recruitment process?
- 9) How do you balance the importance of lived experience, qualifications, skills, and expertise in decision making related to hiring, promotions or career advancement for leadership positions?
- 10) How would you promote inclusive leadership and ensure that the voices of marginalized individuals are heard or seen in decision making processes?
- 11) Do you have any suggestions for emerging leaders from marginalized communities?
- 12) If I had a magic wand and I could grant you one wish. What would you want to see happen regarding retention and recruitment in leadership circles for marginalized communities in today's competitive market?