

**Research Article****LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AS EQUITY INFRASTRUCTURE: STRATEGIES FOR AUTHENTIC BLACK, INDIGENOUS AND PEOPLE OF COLOR (BIPOC) ADVANCEMENT*****Renee M. Collins and Kim A. Critchlow**

College of Management and Human Potential, Doctor of Business Administration, Walden University, Minnesota, US

Received 25th June 2026; Accepted 27th July 2026; Published online 25th August 2026

Abstract

Purpose: Organizations that advance Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) professionals into senior-level positions through effective talent acquisition and pipeline development often encounter a distinct barrier business leaders who lack the competencies to establish inclusive cultures that support authentic BIPOC advancement once professionals enter the organization. This study explores effective strategies business leaders use to develop leadership capacity and representation as components of equity infrastructure, examining how leadership philosophy, inclusive competency development, visibility practices, and mentorship and sponsorship systems create the conditions leaders describe as necessary for sustainable BIPOC advancement to senior-level roles. **Design/Methodology/Approach:** This qualitative pragmatic inquiry is grounded in a composite conceptual framework integrating Sue's (2001) Multidimensional Cultural Competency (MDCC) framework, Akbar and Parker's (2021) Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Theory, and Kotter's (1996) eight-step Change Management model. Nine business leaders in North America who have implemented leadership development and representation strategies with demonstrated success in advancing BIPOC professionals were selected through purposive sampling. Semi structured interviews served as the primary data source, supplemented by publicly available organizational documents. Thematic analysis yielded intercoder reliability above 85%. **Findings:** Thematic analysis identified four interconnected strategies participants described using: 1) leadership philosophy, approach, and representation, 2) inclusive leadership competency development, 3) visibility practices and behaviors, and 4) mentorship, sponsorship, and support systems. Participants' accounts suggest these strategies function as integrated equity infrastructure leadership philosophy translated into actionable competencies, reinforced through visibility initiatives, and sustained through mentorship and sponsorship collectively creating pathways participants described as critical to enabling BIPOC professionals to advance and lead authentically in senior-level roles. **Originality/Value:** Equity infrastructure an integrated system encompassing philosophy, inclusive competencies, visibility practices, and mentorship and sponsorship reframes leadership development as a structural organizational imperative rather than an individual capability-building exercise. Where prior scholarship (including companion research on this dataset) has examined talent acquisition and pipeline mechanics as the primary lever for BIPOC representation, this study suggests that sustainable senior-level advancement additionally requires investment in the leadership culture that determines whether BIPOC professionals can lead authentically once inside the organization. Formal sponsorship emerges as a particularly notable finding participants who described building sponsorship into standard leadership practice, rather than relying on organic relationship development, reported stronger perceived BIPOC advancement outcomes than those without such structures. As this qualitative pragmatic inquiry is grounded in interview data and participant accounts rather than independently audited organizational metrics, these findings should be interpreted as reflecting practitioners' experiences and perspectives rather than independently verified outcomes.

Keywords: BIPOC Leadership Development, Inclusive Leadership, Leadership Representation, Mentorship and Sponsorship, Visibility Practices, Employee Resource Groups, Equity Infrastructure, Organizational Cultural Change, Leadership Competencies, BIPOC Senior Advancement.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations that have invested significantly in BIPOC talent acquisition and pipeline development often encounter a secondary and equally consequential challenge a gap in the leadership competencies needed to establish inclusive cultures that support authentic BIPOC advancement once professionals enter the organization. The business leaders in this study recognized this gap firsthand and described adapting their own leadership approach in response, reporting outcomes they attributed to that shift. Racial minorities remain sharply underrepresented in the most senior leadership roles: as of 2024, only 1.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs were Black, compared to 14.4% of the U.S. population (Zhang, Mooney, & Ozgen, 2025), a gap that has narrowed only marginally since African American and Latinx Americans collectively represented less than 3% of Fortune 500 CEO positions in 2005 (Rosette *et al.*, 2008, as cited in Ubaka *et al.*, 2023).

Progress has been made since the civil rights movement through individual determination and organizational striving for equity; however, more work is required to achieve meaningful and sustained increases in BIPOC senior leadership representation (Ruffin, 2021). The persistence of this gap suggests that pipeline investment, while necessary, may be insufficient when organizational leaders have not yet recognized or addressed the competencies required to create environments in which BIPOC professionals can advance authentically to senior roles. This pattern is consistent with longstanding critiques in the leadership literature that race has too often been treated as a fixed constraint on individual leaders rather than as a fluid, collective dimension of the leadership context itself a framing that has historically limited how leadership scholarship accounts for the lived experiences of leaders of color (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Mainstream leadership narratives compound this challenge by dismissing nontraditional leadership styles as valuable assets and embedding dominant cultural norms within organizational leadership philosophy, requiring paradigmatic shifts in how organizations conceptualize and evaluate leadership capacity (Mitchell *et al.*, 2023). Leadership development strategies must

***Corresponding Author: Renee M. Collins**

College of Management and Human Potential, Doctor of Business Administration, Walden University, Minnesota, US.

therefore extend beyond talent acquisition to focus on cultivating inclusive leadership capabilities where leaders embrace the unique qualities of individuals and create organizational environments that actively support BIPOC advancement (Powell, 2025). Drawing on interviews with nine business leaders in North America who recognized this competency gap and described adapting their leadership practices in response, this study explores how leadership development functions as equity infrastructure to support authentic BIPOC advancement to senior-level roles.

The specific business problem addressed in this article is that a competency gap in establishing inclusive cultures limits BIPOC advancement to senior-level positions and negatively impacts organizational financial performance until leaders recognize and respond to it. Cultural intelligence (CQ) represents a critical leadership competency that, when absent, may contribute to the scarcity of BIPOC employees in senior-level positions. Leaders who develop CQ through drive, knowledge, and action strategies are more likely to foster inclusive environments where BIPOC employees can thrive, with culturally intelligent leaders associated with higher organizational performance outcomes (Paiuc, 2021). Recent evidence extends this link beyond individual performance to collective work climate: employees' perceptions of a leader's cultural intelligence have been associated with a stronger sense of inclusivity, which in turn relates to greater work meaningfulness and engagement (Lee & Gardner, 2025), suggesting that leader CQ shapes not only individual outcomes but the broader organizational culture that either supports or undermines BIPOC advancement. When this competency gap goes unrecognized or unaddressed, BIPOC professionals report code-switching, work exhaustion, and psychological safety deterioration as coping responses to noninclusive environments costs that participants and researchers link to unaddressed leadership gaps rather than individual limitation (Raddatz *et al.*, 2024). Effective leadership development strategies that prioritize equity, diversity, and inclusion align with belonging, resilience, and morale while increasing leaders' awareness of blind spots, assumptions, and challenges that disproportionately affect BIPOC individuals in the workplace (Vogel & Erickson, 2021). Recognizing and addressing the leadership competency gap is therefore both an equity imperative and a potential driver of organizational performance, with direct implications for financial outcomes and business stability.

This article introduces equity infrastructure as a conceptual framework for understanding how business leaders in this study, having recognized the competency gap firsthand, constructed the organizational conditions through which sustainable BIPOC senior leadership representation may be achieved. Equity infrastructure encompasses four interconnected strategic components leadership philosophy, approach, and representation; inclusive leadership competency development; visibility practices and behaviors; and mentorship, sponsorship, and support systems that participants described adopting as an integrated organizational system in response to that gap, rather than as isolated diversity initiatives. Together these components form a progressive framework that, based on participants' firsthand accounts, transforms leadership from individual skill-building into coordinated organizational change supporting BIPOC advancement while contributing to enhanced performance outcomes. Where existing scholarship has focused primarily on

recruitment and pipeline processes, this study advances disciplinary knowledge by suggesting that sustainable senior-level representation requires leaders to first recognize, and then invest in, the leadership cultures and support systems that shape whether BIPOC professionals can advance and lead authentically once they enter the organization. This article offers three contributions to the existing literature. First, it extends the composite conceptual framework integrating Sue's (2001) Multidimensional Cultural Competency (MDCC) framework, Akbar and Parker's (2021) Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Theory, and Kotter's (1996) eight-step Change Management model by demonstrating its applicability to leadership development and organizational culture contexts extending these frameworks to the cultural and structural conditions that sustain or undermine pipeline investment over time. Second, it identifies four strategies that the business leaders in this study described adopting once they recognized the competency gap, offering a practitioner-oriented framework for transforming fragmented leadership development activities into coordinated organizational systems. Third, it establishes formal mentorship and sponsorship infrastructure specifically the institutionalization of sponsorship as a leadership accountability practice rather than an organic relationship practice as a strategy business leaders directly linked, based on their own firsthand experience responding to the competency gap, to stronger perceived outcomes for BIPOC senior advancement, with direct implications for professional practice.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section briefly details the participant selection criteria, data collection procedures, and the analytical steps employed in the study. Following this, the composite conceptual framework is introduced with attention to how each theoretical lens applies to leadership development and representation contexts. The findings are then presented through the lens of equity infrastructure, addressing each of the four identified strategies and their interconnections for positive social change, directions for future research, and a synthesis of the study's theoretical and practical contributions to leadership development scholarship and professional practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review situates equity infrastructure within the existing literature on leadership development, cultural intelligence, and BIPOC advancement, organized around the four strategic components that emerged from this study: leadership philosophy, approach, and representation; inclusive leadership competency development; visibility practices and behaviors; and mentorship, sponsorship, and support systems. Consistent with the composite conceptual framework introduced in Section 1, each subsection is read through the lens of Sue's (2001) Multidimensional Cultural Competency (MDCC) framework, Akbar and Parker's (2021) Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) theory, and Kotter's (1996) Change Management model. While a companion study examining this dataset's talent acquisition and pipeline development theme addresses the systemic barriers that limit BIPOC entry into senior-level candidacy, the present review turns to a distinct and downstream question: once BIPOC professionals enter an organization, what leadership conditions determine whether they can advance and lead authentically once inside it.

Leadership Philosophy and the Limits of Individual-Trait Models

Leadership philosophy has traditionally been theorized as an individual trait a set of values a leader personally holds rather than as an organizational condition that either enables or constrains BIPOC advancement. This individualized framing has limited the field's capacity to account for how race operates as a collective, contextual dimension of leadership rather than a fixed characteristic of the leader alone (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Ospina and Foldy's review demonstrates that leadership scholarship has moved gradually from treating race as a constraint imposed on individual leaders of color toward recognizing it as a resource leaders draw upon, and finally toward understanding race and leadership as mutually constructed within a given organizational context a progression directly relevant to this study's premise that leadership philosophy functions as infrastructure rather than personal disposition.

Contemporary research on racial minority representation in the most senior leadership tiers reinforces the urgency of this reframing. Zhang, Mooney, and Ozgen's (2025) integrative review of 147 studies on racial minorities in strategic leadership found that representation remains concentrated at the board level, with far less empirical attention paid to top management teams and C-suite roles beyond the CEO a gap that mirrors this study's findings that leadership philosophy must be embedded across the full leadership structure, not confined to a single symbolic appointment. Their review also found that firm-level outcomes associated with racial minority leadership are generally positive, while individual-level outcomes for the leaders themselves are frequently negative or null, including lower compensation and higher dismissal likelihood a tension that underscores why leadership philosophy alone, without accompanying structural investment, is insufficient to sustain BIPOC advancement.

Mainstream leadership narratives further compound this problem by treating nontraditional leadership styles as deviations from an unstated White, male standard rather than as legitimate expressions of leadership capacity (Mitchell *et al.*, 2023). Complicating this standard further, Yang (2024) proposes a conceptual model of authentic leadership in cross-cultural contexts, arguing that authenticity itself is not a culturally neutral construct what reads as authentic self-expression in one cultural frame may be read as unprofessional or insufficiently assertive in another, requiring leaders to navigate a bicultural authenticity that dominant leadership models rarely account for. This model offers a direct theoretical anchor for the present study's central claim that BIPOC professionals require organizational conditions that support leading authentically, rather than conditions that merely tolerate their presence in leadership roles. Powell (2025) extends this argument at the organizational level, contending that inclusive leadership theory requires organizations to move beyond diversity training toward leadership philosophies that actively challenge these embedded assumptions, positioning representation as a demonstrated organizational value rather than a stated aspiration. Wadhwa and Aggarwal (2023) similarly find that organizations achieve stronger workforce effectiveness outcomes when they pivot from diversity training as a standalone intervention toward leadership development that embeds inclusion principles into everyday decision-making and evaluation practices a shift that

anchors leadership philosophy in structural accountability rather than episodic programming. Together, these findings suggest that leadership philosophy functions as the foundational layer of equity infrastructure, establishing the cultural premise from which the competencies, visibility practices, and support structures examined in the following sections become possible.

Cultural intelligence and inclusive leadership competency

Cultural intelligence (CQ) has emerged as a central construct in the literature on inclusive leadership competency. Paiuc (2021) establishes CQ developed through drive, knowledge, and action strategies as a core competency that enables leaders to navigate cultural difference and foster environments where BIPOC professionals can contribute fully; where this construct has previously been applied to the earlier-stage question of equitable hiring and assessment, the present study applies it to a distinct downstream question: whether leaders who have already brought BIPOC professionals into the organization possess the competency to sustain their advancement once inside. Recent evidence extends this individual-level finding to the collective work climate: Lee and Gardner's (2025) two-wave multilevel study found that employees' perceptions of a leader's cultural intelligence were positively associated with a stronger sense of workplace inclusivity, which in turn related to greater work meaningfulness and engagement. This finding is significant for the present study because it suggests that leader CQ does not operate solely as an individual leadership trait but as a mechanism that shapes the broader organizational culture in which BIPOC advancement either flourishes or stalls.

The costs of underdeveloped CQ fall disproportionately on BIPOC employees who are already inside the organization. Raddatz *et al.* (2024) demonstrate that BIPOC professionals adopt code-switching as a coping mechanism in response to anticipated discrimination, a pattern associated with work exhaustion and diminished psychological safety; while this pattern has previously been examined as a barrier BIPOC candidates anticipate during hiring and interview processes, the present study is concerned with its persistence as an ongoing organizational climate cost borne by BIPOC professionals long after entry, one that inclusive leadership competency is specifically positioned to address. Because these adaptive behaviors are responses to organizational conditions rather than individual deficits, Raddatz *et al.* frame them as evidence of a leadership competency gap rather than a BIPOC employee limitation a framing this study adopts in distinguishing inclusive competency development from individual capability-building.

Vogel and Erickson (2021) similarly argue that leadership development grounded in equity, diversity, and inclusion principles increases leaders' awareness of blind spots and assumptions that disproportionately affect BIPOC individuals, aligning leadership competency directly with belonging and retention outcomes. Arora and Wolbring (2022) extend this argument to the behavioral level, finding that leadership development addressing microaggressions, prejudicial behavior, and discrimination directly increases opportunities for BIPOC representation to be realized in practice rather than remaining a stated organizational commitment. Inclusive competency development, considered together with the leadership philosophy examined above, establishes the internal

capability leaders require to translate stated values into sustained action a capability that must, in turn, be made visible to the organization for its effects to extend beyond the individual leader-employee relationships, as the following section addresses.

Visibility, Hypervisibility, and Career Advancement Resources

Visibility functions as both a resource and a risk for BIPOC professionals navigating senior leadership pathways. Beigi et al.'s (2025) systematic review of career success among historically marginalized groups identifies "complex visibility" encompassing hypervisibility, invisibility, and managed visibility as a mechanism that mediates minority professionals' access to career advancement resources such as networking, mentoring, and role models. Hypervisibility, in which BIPOC professionals face heightened scrutiny and token status, and invisibility, in which their contributions and voices are overlooked, can coexist for the same individual depending on organizational context, complicating any straightforward organizational strategy for increasing visibility. This framework offers a theoretical vocabulary for understanding why visibility practices in the present study functioned not merely as recognition efforts but as deliberate counterweights to these paradoxical dynamics.

Otaye-Ebede and Shaffakat's (2024) qualitative study of 50 Black and Asian women leaders in the United Kingdom similarly found that resilience, emotional intelligence, and self-promotion functioned as key personal resources for career advancement, particularly at later career stages when discriminatory experiences intensified. Their resource taxonomy distinguishing contextual resources (networking, sponsorship, organizational policy) from personal resources (constructive skills, key personality traits, and energy for recovery) offers a close comparative framework for the visibility practices described by participants in the present study, particularly the emphasis on deliberate, sustained self-advocacy rather than passive recognition. Notably, both Beigi et al. (2025) and Otaye-Ebede and Shaffakat (2024) converge on a finding directly relevant to this study: visibility that is not accompanied by structural support whether organizational policy or personal recovery resources can leave BIPOC professionals exposed to increased scrutiny without a corresponding increase in advancement opportunity, underscoring why visibility practices in isolation, absent the mentorship and sponsorship structures discussed next, may be insufficient to sustain BIPOC leadership advancement.

Mentorship, Sponsorship, and the Sponsorship-Mentoring Distinction

The distinction between mentorship and sponsorship is foundational to this study's fourth component. Randel et al. (2021) offer an identity-based model demonstrating that sponsorship the active use of organizational influence to advocate for a protégé's advancement functions as a distinct mechanism from mentorship's guidance-oriented support, with particular relevance to cross-race mentoring relationships involving African American professionals. Their model proposes that sponsors' willingness to leverage organizational capital on a protégé's behalf depends on the strength of relational identification across racial lines, a dynamic that helps explain why informal mentoring relationships alone have

proven insufficient to overcome the structural barriers BIPOC professionals encounter at the senior level. This pattern extends beyond a single racial group. Sebastian et al.'s (2026) qualitative study of 32 Asian and Asian American midlevel faculty in academic medicine found that participants viewed sponsorship as essential for career advancement yet frequently could not identify a sponsor once given a formal definition of the role, pointing to unclear pathways to sponsorship and limited access to decision-makers as persistent barriers. Participants also described cultural norms discouraging self-promotion as a compounding barrier to accessing sponsorship, suggesting that the mechanisms limiting sponsorship access may vary across BIPOC groups even as the underlying gap between mentorship's availability and sponsorship's scarcity remains consistent. Taken together, Randel et al. (2021) and Sebastian et al. (2026) indicate that the mentorship-sponsorship distinction is not specific to a single racial or ethnic group but reflects a broader structural pattern in how organizations distribute advocacy and access unevenly across BIPOC professionals.

Understanding how sponsorship relationships take shape once access barriers are addressed adds further precision to this distinction. Gröschl et al. (2025) found that effective sponsorship combines two distinct forms of support: assistive support, involving tangible advocacy and access to opportunity, and appreciative support, involving recognition and encouragement of a protégé's capability. Their findings further indicate that sponsorship relationships more often emerge organically through superiors and informal networks than through formal programs alone, a pattern that helps explain why BIPOC professionals without existing access to those informal networks may be structurally disadvantaged in acquiring a sponsor even when formal sponsorship programs exist. This distinction between assistive and appreciative support offers a useful analytic lens for examining how sponsorship functions as a component of equity infrastructure once access to it is achieved, complementing Randel et al.'s (2021) and Sebastian et al.'s (2026) focus on the barriers that precede it.

Titanji et al. (2022) reinforce this point at the organizational level, demonstrating that comprehensive talent development initiatives create micro-communities in which BIPOC professionals with shared identities develop collective resources for advancement, contributing to both individual empowerment and organizational capacity a finding that underscores why sponsorship structures built around racial identity and shared experience function differently than generic mentoring programs. Kamali et al. (2024) similarly emphasize that sustainable leadership capacity development for underrepresented groups requires systematic, sustained organizational commitment rather than episodic or informally sustained mentoring relationships.

Taken together, this literature suggests that mentorship and sponsorship function most powerfully for BIPOC advancement when organizations move beyond relying on organic relationship formation and instead embed sponsorship into leadership accountability structures a proposition this study's findings directly examine, and one that closes the loop on the equity infrastructure this review has traced from leadership philosophy, through competency development and visibility practice, to the structural support that sustains them.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the same composite conceptual framework applied throughout the broader research project Sue's (2001) Multidimensional Cultural Competency (MDCC) framework, Akbar and Parker's (2021) Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) theory, and Kotter's (1996) eight-step Change Management model but applies each theoretical lens to a distinct question from the one addressed in the companion study on talent acquisition and pipeline development. Where that companion study examines how these frameworks illuminate bias in sourcing, assessment, and hiring processes, the present study applies the same three frameworks to the leadership development and representation conditions that determine whether BIPOC professionals can advance and lead authentically once already inside the organization, as described by the business leaders in this study. Table 1 summarizes each theory's application to this study.

Table 1. Theories Used to Examine Leadership Development as Equity Infrastructure

Theory	Date	Theorist	Application to This Study
Multidimensional Cultural Competency (MDCC)	2001	Sue	Provides a framework for understanding how leaders develop the cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to recognize and dismantle the individual- and institutional-level blind spots shaping whether BIPOC professionals can advance authentically once inside the organization
Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Theory	2021	Akbar & Parker	Extends representation goals beyond recruitment to address the systemic inequities in leadership culture, policy, and practice that determine whether BIPOC professionals experience authentic belonging and opportunity after entry
Change Management Theory	1996	Kotter	Offers an eight-step model for implementing and sustaining leadership development activities as organizational infrastructure, explaining why fragmented leadership initiatives fail and how integrated, accountability-driven approaches create lasting change

Multidimensional Cultural Competency (MDCC) Framework

Sue's (2001) MDCC framework provides a foundation for understanding how business leaders develop the cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to recognize and address the barriers that limit authentic BIPOC advancement once professionals are already inside the organization. The framework's central premise that cultural competency operates simultaneously at individual, institutional, and societal levels is directly relevant to this study's finding that leadership philosophy alone, without accompanying competency development and institutional reinforcement, is insufficient to sustain BIPOC advancement. At the individual level, cultural awareness requires leaders to recognize their own assumptions and cultural worldviews, including the assumptions embedded in dominant notions of executive presence, communication style, and leadership behavior that, according to the business leaders in this study, disadvantage BIPOC professionals who lead in ways that diverge from those norms. At the institutional level, cultural competency requires organizations to examine how visibility practices, mentorship structures, and advancement criteria embedded in leadership development systems may inadvertently reproduce the very norms that limit authentic BIPOC leadership. Applied to leadership development specifically, the MDCC framework illuminates why competency-building efforts that focus solely on individual leader awareness, without corresponding institutional change to visibility and sponsorship structures, are unlikely to produce sustained advancement. Akpapuna et al. (2020) extend this application to organizational behavior management, demonstrating that embedding multicultural competency principles into leadership development systems produces measurably more equitable outcomes by shifting

evaluation criteria from conformity-based to capability-based assessment; the leaders in this study described enacting a similar shift through inclusive competency development and visibility practices that recognized BIPOC leadership capability beyond dominant-group norms. Their accounts of developing inclusive leadership competencies through drive, knowledge, and action are consistent with Paiuc's (2021) conceptualization of cultural intelligence and reflect the individual-level dimension of MDCC, while their reported efforts to build visibility initiatives and formal sponsorship structures reflect the framework's institutional-level competency. Yang (2024) extends this institutional-level competency further with a conceptual model of authentic leadership in cross-cultural contexts, proposing that leaders must develop a bicultural fluency that recognizes authenticity as culturally situated rather than universally defined a competency reflected in how participants described leading authentically while navigating dominant organizational norms.

Together, these accounts support MDCC's premise that authentic BIPOC advancement requires cultural competency to be embedded structurally into leadership development systems, not treated solely as an individual leadership virtue.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Theory

Akbar and Parker's (2021) EDI theory emerged from recognition that representation-focused approaches, while necessary, are insufficient to address the deeper cultural and systemic conditions that determine whether BIPOC professionals can lead authentically, contribute fully, and advance equitably once inside an organization. This premise is central to the present study's departure from the companion study's pipeline-focused framing: where pipeline development addresses whether BIPOC professionals enter senior-level candidacy, EDI theory addresses whether the organizational environment sustains their advancement once they have entered, recognizing that recruitment gains are quickly eroded when leadership culture fails to support equitable advancement. EDI theory's emphasis on authentic inclusion creating conditions in which BIPOC professionals experience genuine belonging and voice rather than conditional acceptance contingent on cultural conformity directly grounds this study's examination of leadership philosophy, inclusive competency development, visibility practices, and mentorship and sponsorship as interconnected functions rather than independent initiatives. The business leaders in this study consistently described these four components as operating together, an account that extends EDI theory's prior use in talent acquisition contexts to the leadership development domain specifically. Their descriptions demonstrate that the theory's core proposition, that authentic inclusion requires addressing policy, practice, and culture simultaneously, applies with equal force to

developing and advancing leaders already within an organization's ranks.

Kotter's Change Management Theory

Kotter's (1996) eight-step change management model offers a structured account of how organizations implement and sustain leadership development transformation, explaining why fragmented leadership initiatives consistently fail to produce lasting change while integrated, accountability-driven approaches create sustainable transformation in leadership culture. The model's first four steps establishing urgency, building a guiding coalition, developing a clear vision, and communicating that vision broadly address why leadership development initiatives that lack executive sponsorship and organization-wide communication remain peripheral rather than becoming embedded in core leadership practice. This pattern is consistent with how leaders in this study described leadership philosophy as requiring visible, sustained organizational commitment rather than isolated programming. Mitchell et al.'s (2023) critique of mainstream leadership narratives reinforces why this first phase is a necessary precondition: without organization-wide communication that names nontraditional leadership styles as legitimate rather than deviant, subsequent implementation steps have no cultural foundation to build upon.

The model's subsequent steps, empowering broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains, and anchoring change in organizational culture, address the implementation structures through which leadership development transformation is sustained over time. This study's finding that formal, institutionalized sponsorship was associated with stronger perceived outcomes than organically formed mentoring relationships directly reflects Kotter's emphasis on anchoring change in structural accountability rather than relying on informal or spontaneous organizational behavior. Kotter's framework therefore provides the implementation architecture through which the cultural competencies established by MDCC and the equity principles established by EDI theory are translated into the accountable, sustained leadership development systems this study identifies as equity infrastructure.

Integrating the Composite Framework

Taken together, the MDCC framework, EDI theory, and Kotter's Change Management model form a coherent analytical foundation for this study, distinct in application from the companion study while sharing the same theoretical architecture. The MDCC framework establishes the cultural and institutional competencies leaders must develop to recognize and address the barriers to authentic BIPOC advancement after entry. EDI theory situates those competencies within the broader systemic and cultural conditions required for authentic inclusion, connecting individual leadership practices to organizational conditions that extend well beyond recruitment. Kotter's model provides the implementation architecture through which both cultural competency and equity principles are translated into sustained organizational transformation. Arora and Wolbring (2022) further support this integrated view, arguing that dismantling structural barriers such as micro aggressions and prejudicial behavior requires leadership development, EDI-grounded policy, and sustained cultural change to operate simultaneously

rather than sequentially a pattern consistent with how the business leaders in this study characterized the four components of equity infrastructure as functioning most effectively as an interdependent system rather than isolated leadership development activities. This integrated framework guided the analysis of participant accounts presented in the following sections, providing a multilevel lens through which the leadership philosophy, competency development, visibility practices, and mentorship and sponsorship strategies described by participants were interpreted and connected to the scholarly literature reviewed in Section 2.

METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to identify and explore effective strategies that business leaders use to develop leadership capacity and representation as components of equity infrastructure supporting authentic BIPOC advancement to senior-level roles. This section describes the study's design rationale, participant selection criteria, data collection procedures, analytic approach, and ethical safeguards.

Nature of the Project

This study employed a qualitative pragmatic inquiry design, prioritizing practical, problem-oriented knowledge generated from real-world professional experience over abstract theoretical development. This approach was selected for its capacity to generate nuanced, context-rich insight into the strategies business leaders have implemented to develop leadership capacity and representation as a sustained response to BIPOC underrepresentation in senior-level roles. The design also aligns with the composite theoretical framework introduced in Section 3, because MDCC, EDI, and Kotter's Change Management model share a common emphasis on applied organizational change: practitioner-generated evidence offers the most relevant data for examining how these frameworks operate. This study and its companion article on BIPOC talent acquisition and pipeline development draw on a shared dataset generated through the same participant sample, data collection procedures, and analytic process. The methodological detail presented here therefore applies to both articles. Section 4.4 identifies the distinct theme and subthemes this article addresses the leadership development and representation of BIPOC professionals already within the organization as distinguished from the companion article's focus on talent acquisition and pipeline development preceding entry.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling a non-probability sampling strategy in which participants are deliberately selected based on characteristics directly relevant to the research question, rather than through random selection was used to select nine business leaders in North America who had identified leadership philosophy, inclusive competency development, and mentorship and sponsorship structures as critical components of effective BIPOC advancement strategies. Purposive sampling was selected over probability-based approaches because it enables the intentional identification of information-rich cases most likely to illuminate the research phenomenon in this context, leaders with direct demonstrated experience developing leadership capacity for BIPOC advancement rather

than general familiarity with diversity initiatives (Ames *et al.*, 2019; Campbell *et al.*, 2020). Participants were required to demonstrate at least five years of measurable progress in advancing BIPOC representation in senior-level roles. Candidate eligibility was assessed through a two-stage screening process conducted prior to enrollment and separated from the primary semistructured interviews. In the first stage, candidates identified through professional networks, personal connections, industry associations, and social media platforms completed a structured pre-screening protocol describing their organizations' BIPOC advancement trajectories, including the specific initiatives they personally implemented, the roles over which they held leadership development authority, and the duration and nature of measurable progress achieved. In the second stage, researchers reviewed publicly available organizational documents, including published diversity and inclusion reports, organizational demographic disclosures, and professional publications authored or cited by the candidate, to provide independent corroboration of the trajectories candidates described during pre-screening. This two-stage protocol addressed the potential for circular sampling by establishing that participants were selected on the basis of evidence assessed before and independent of the interview data from which this study's findings are drawn. Participants represented diverse organizational contexts, including insurance, technology, legal, nonprofit, and business and medical consulting sectors, with experience levels ranging from 18 to 37 years in their respective fields. All participants held senior leadership roles with direct influence over talent acquisition and leadership development decisions. The project reached data saturation after eight interviews, with one additional interview conducted for confirmation.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semistructured interviews lasting 45 to 90 minutes per participant. The semistructured format enabled consistent exploration of core research questions while allowing flexibility to pursue emergent themes and participant-specific insights (Junnier, 2024). Interview questions addressed strategies employed, implementation challenges, organizational contexts, and measurable outcomes. Supplementary data sources consisted of publicly available industry-level documents linked to the sectors represented by participants rather than to individual organizations, consistent with the study's focus on leader-level strategies rather than organizational practices. Document types included industry workforce data, published industry demographic surveys, trade association publications, and sector-specific industry reports drawn from public records, ranging from none to 15 documents per participant depending on the availability of relevant public records in each sector. These documents were incorporated as a secondary data stream to provide contextual corroboration of participant-reported strategies and to situate individual leader accounts within the broader workforce conditions of their respective industries. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve data accuracy and integrity. Member-checking sessions were conducted following initial analysis, during which participants reviewed researchers' interpretation of their responses and confirmed accuracy, clarified meaning, and elaborated where needed. This process strengthens the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings (de Loyola González-Salgado *et al.*, 2024).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for systematically identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across a dataset (Busetto *et al.*, 2020) was applied following six phases: familiarization with data, initial code generation, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting. Substantive thematic coding was applied simultaneously and in parallel to both interview transcripts and supplementary industry-level documents, treating both data streams as active inputs to the analytic process. NVivo computer software served as the primary coding environment, supported by parallel supplementary coding conducted in Microsoft Excel, enabling cross-verification of code assignments and enhancing the transparency and consistency of the analytic process. This article presents the leadership development and representation theme and its four subthemes, identified in the broader thematic analysis described above; the companion article addresses the talent acquisition and pipeline development theme and its associated subthemes, drawn from the same coded dataset. Both themes emerged inductively from the coded dataset, derived from patterns of interdependence observed across participant accounts rather than imposed as predetermined structures.

Intercoder reliability was established through independent coding by two researchers, achieving agreement rates above 85%, consistent with established standards for qualitative research rigor (Krawczyk *et al.*, 2019). Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus, with refined coding criteria applied to subsequent coding rounds. Data saturation was confirmed when no new codes or themes emerged following the eighth interview; the ninth interview, conducted for confirmation, generated no additional codes or themes across either coding stream. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytic process via analytic memos and ongoing critical reflection on research positionality. As coding progressed, four interconnected subthemes emerged specific to leadership development and representation: leadership philosophy, approach, and representation (9 participants, 25 excerpts); inclusive leadership competency development (9 participants, 16 excerpts); visibility practices and behaviors (9 participants, 15 excerpts); and mentorship, sponsorship, and support systems, retained as a supporting theme (8 participants, 34 excerpts). All nine participants contributed data to three of the four subthemes, reflecting the consistency with which leadership development and representation strategies were described across the sample. Mentorship, sponsorship, and support systems, while contributed by eight of the nine participants, was retained as a distinct supporting theme because its content was sufficiently distinct that absorbing it into another subtheme would have obscured meaning critical to understanding how BIPOC professionals are advanced and sustained in leadership roles once inside the organization.

Ethical Considerations

Given that participants were discussing professional experiences involving racial equity, organizational inequity, and BIPOC advancement, the study was designed with comprehensive ethical safeguards consistent with the principles established in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Institutional

Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent and were fully briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, data use, and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was protected through the anonymization of all identifying information in data storage and reporting, with participant identifiers used in place of names throughout all analytic and dissemination materials (Leahy, 2022). All collected data were securely stored in password-protected files with access restricted to authorized researchers.

FINDINGS

The overarching research question guiding this study was: What effective strategies have business leaders used to develop leadership capacity and representation to support authentic BIPOC advancement in senior-level positions? The analysis revealed leadership development and representation as a foundational strategic framework addressing the leadership competencies required to establish inclusive cultures that sustain BIPOC advancement once professionals enter the organization. Findings are interpreted through the composite conceptual framework integrating Sue's (2001) MDCC framework, Akbar and Parker's (2021) EDI theory, and Kotter's (1996) Change Management model, introduced in Section 3. All nine participants contributed data to three of the four subthemes identified in this theme, generating 56 excerpts across leadership philosophy, competency development, and visibility practices, supported by mentorship, sponsorship, and support systems as a fourth subtheme generating 34 additional excerpts (see Table 2). Together, these subthemes function as an integrated system that participants described as transforming leadership development from individual skill-building into coordinated organizational infrastructure supporting BIPOC advancement.

Leadership Philosophy, Approach, and Representation

All nine participants described leadership philosophy, approach, and representation as a foundational strategic component for advancing BIPOC professionals in senior-level positions, generating 25 excerpts. Participants consistently described intentional leadership philosophy as a prerequisite for BIPOC advancement rather than a byproduct of general leadership competence, an account consistent with Ospina and Foldy's (2009) finding that leadership scholarship must treat race as a structural, contextual condition of leadership rather than a trait residing solely in individual leaders of color. Participants' descriptions encompassed three interconnected practices: intentional leadership development, challenging exclusionary systems, and strategic representation and visibility initiatives, which together participants described as establishing the ethical foundation and organizational credibility necessary for sustained cultural transformation.

Intentional Leadership Development: Participants described intentional leadership philosophy as requiring deliberate practices that recognize and develop BIPOC capabilities rather than treating advancement as incidental to broader leadership development. A chief underwriting officer described ensuring appropriate representation of BIPOC individuals in senior leadership settings by focusing evaluation on skillset and capability rather than nonperformance attributes, explaining that intentionality in leadership development affirms equity and fair representation beyond technical expertise, positioning individuals for future success by setting expectations early rather than leaving advancement to chance. A technology executive similarly described expanding leadership development resources to reach BIPOC talent as a deliberate strategy rather than a passive one, noting that this intentionality reflected an organizational recognition that diversity drives a broader range of beneficial business outcomes and required actively fostering new ways of thinking among decision-makers who might otherwise default to familiar candidates. A chief claims officer described ensuring senior colleagues maintained focus on leveling opportunities for all employees, explaining that leaders must be multidimensional in how they think about and respond to development needs, and that BIPOC senior leaders play a role in helping executive leadership understand the return on investment in developing People of Color for vital leadership roles. These accounts are consistent with Powell's (2025) argument that inclusive leadership theory requires organizations to move beyond diversity training toward leadership philosophies that actively challenge embedded assumptions about who occupies leadership roles, treating intentionality as a structural commitment rather than an individual leader's discretionary approach.

Challenging Exclusionary Systems: Beyond intentional development, participants described sustainable change as requiring leaders to challenge exclusionary systems and confront norms that perpetuate homogeneity, rather than working exclusively within existing structures that had historically limited BIPOC advancement. A senior managing attorney described challenging legal sector leadership norms by aligning her role with revenue generation from BIPOC clients, positioning herself as indispensable to the firm's business development in a way that made her advancement difficult for colleagues to dismiss or overlook. An insurance chief commercial officer described confronting the status quo among leadership ranks by questioning practices that promoted homogeneity despite qualified BIPOC talent being available, and by deliberately inviting BIPOC individuals from supporting roles into meetings where advancement decisions were discussed, using her own positional privilege to force visibility that would not otherwise have occurred. A medical consulting leader described extending this system disruption beyond a single organization by connecting BIPOC individuals to other organizations for recruitment and advancement opportunities, observing that organizations are not always

Table 2. Leadership Development and Representation

Subtheme	N of Participants who contributed data (N=9)	N of Excerpts from data assigned to subtheme
Leadership philosophy, approach, and representation	9	25
Inclusive leadership competency development	9	16
Visibility practices and behaviors	9	15
Mentorship, sponsorship, and support systems (supporting)	8	34

ready to advance talent even when that talent is fully prepared to lead, and that leaders committed to equity must sometimes look outside their own walls to create the opportunities their own institutions are not yet ready to offer. These accounts illustrate what Yang (2024) describes as the bicultural fluency dominant leadership models rarely account for, requiring leaders to actively work against norms that treat divergence from dominant leadership styles as a deficiency rather than a legitimate expression of capability, and demonstrating that challenging exclusionary systems requires both internal advocacy and external network-building to create durable pathways for advancement.

Strategic Representation and Visibility Initiatives:

Participants described strategic representation and visibility initiatives as generating attraction mechanisms that sustain leadership pipelines over time, grounded in the principle that representation attracts representation and that BIPOC talent evaluates organizational credibility through the visible presence of BIPOC leaders already in place. An insurance claims operations leader described representation as directly linked to talent retention, explaining that representation improves BIPOC talent retention and acquisition while reducing attrition, with direct implications for organizational financial strength, and that advancing BIPOC talent through visible development opportunities creates an aspirational effect that draws additional talent toward the organization. A nonprofit chief operating officer described ensuring BIPOC individuals in key leadership roles actively engaged in leadership development pathways, explaining that BIPOC senior leaders function as talent strategists whose executive presence is vital to advancing BIPOC talent because their visibility signals to others what advancement realistically looks like within the organization. A business consulting chief executive officer described creating development programs that deliberately connected senior leadership with top talent from underrepresented groups, enabling senior leaders to directly observe BIPOC talent demonstrating capabilities for advanced roles rather than relying on secondhand assessments or resumes alone. Together, these accounts of intentional leadership development, challenging exclusionary systems, and strategic representation initiatives suggest that leadership philosophy functions as the foundational layer of equity infrastructure, consistent with Wadhwa and Aggarwal's (2023) finding that organizations achieve stronger effectiveness outcomes when leadership development embeds inclusion principles into everyday decision-making rather than treating diversity training as a standalone intervention. Participants' descriptions of intentionality, disruption, and visibility as interlocking rather than sequential practices further suggest that leadership philosophy alone, absent the competency development addressed in the following section, may generate representation without the sustained capability required to advance it.

Inclusive Leadership Competency Development

All nine participants described strategies for developing inclusive leadership competencies, generating 16 excerpts. Where leadership philosophy establishes the cultural premise for BIPOC advancement, participants described competency development as the practical skill set leaders must build to act on that premise credibly and consistently. Participants' descriptions encompassed three interconnected strategies: establishing ethical leadership practices, maintaining

leadership credibility, and creating inclusive communication cultures competencies consistent with Paiuc's (2021) conceptualization of cultural intelligence as developed through drive, knowledge, and action.

Establishing Ethical Leadership Practices: Participants described establishing ethical practices as a critical component of inclusive competency development, requiring leaders to move beyond stated values toward consistent, verifiable behavior. A technology executive described an employee-centric leadership approach combining the hiring manager, human resources, an employee peer support system, and an executive sponsor into a single coordinated structure, explaining that this all-hands approach ensures a comprehensive and accountable path to success for BIPOC employees rather than leaving their development to any single relationship. A chief underwriting officer described personal accountability modeling as central to ethical leadership, explaining that what a leader expects from others should reflect what that leader delivers themselves, and that recognizing the existence of leadership privilege obligates leaders to remain closely connected to the communities within their organizations rather than operating at a remove from employees' lived experiences. A business consulting chief executive officer described implementing baseline standard credentials for leadership roles as a further ethical safeguard, emphasizing that many organizations have become so flat that average employees have limited paths for lateral or upward movement, and that establishing clear, consistently applied credential standards helps address the resulting gap between BIPOC employees and senior leaders by focusing evaluation on transferable skills rather than informal, subjective criteria. Consistent with Akpapuna et al.'s (2020) finding that embedding multicultural competency principles shifts evaluation criteria from conformity-based to capability-based assessment, these accounts reflect a deliberate effort to recognize BIPOC leadership capability beyond dominant-group norms and to formalize that recognition into consistent organizational practice.

Maintaining Leadership Credibility: Participants described maintaining leadership credibility as essential to a multidimensional approach to inclusive leadership, particularly because credibility, once established, allows leaders to model possibility for others navigating similar barriers. An insurance claims operations leader, describing herself as an introverted BIPOC leader, described incorporating her own personal experiences as a driver for building credibility, explaining that BIPOC employees often carry the weight of being the only person of color in the room as they advance further up the organizational ladder, and using personal storytelling to encourage employees not to lose their voice and to remain active participants in ensuring their skillset and competency are recognized. A chief claims officer described the importance of authenticity in leadership, explaining that leading authentically reflects the excellence instilled in them from an early age and that taking ownership of one's identity, rather than minimizing it, was the way to bring forward the excellence expected of them. These accounts of authenticity as a leadership competency reflect Yang's (2024) proposition that leaders must develop a bicultural fluency recognizing authenticity as culturally situated, consistent with this study's finding that leading authentically requires organizational conditions that support rather than merely tolerate divergence from dominant leadership norms, and that personal

authenticity, when modeled visibly by senior leaders, functions as a credibility-building resource for the BIPOC professionals who observe it.

Creating Inclusive Communication Cultures: All participants described creating inclusive communication cultures as a practical strategy for fostering environments where individuals feel welcome, respected, and heard. A senior managing attorney described using inclusive communication to facilitate discussions about sensitive topics, including race, religion, and politics, despite being discouraged from addressing them directly, aligning difficult conversations with what mattered most to clients, and using that alignment to build a level of trust from business partners that ultimately affected the organization's bottom line. A nonprofit chief operating officer described the importance of external leadership recognition in raising the profile of existing BIPOC leaders, explaining that this approach required working through the discomfort some senior leaders experienced upon learning about the accomplishments of their own top talent from an external source, and using that discomfort as an opening to help those leaders see internal talent more clearly. A medical consulting leader described leveraging social engagements as a further avenue for inclusive communication, explaining that BIPOC individuals often lack a natural peer support network due to longstanding division, making deliberate social interaction a strategic way to build workplace trust and professional connection over time. These accounts are consistent with Vogel and Erickson's (2021) finding that leadership development grounded in equity, diversity, and inclusion principles increases leaders' awareness of blind spots that disproportionately affect BIPOC individuals, and with Arora and Wolbring's (2022) finding that leadership development addressing microaggressions and prejudicial behavior directly increases opportunities for BIPOC representation to be realized in practice rather than remaining an aspirational commitment. Taken together, participants' accounts of ethical practice, credibility, and communication suggest that inclusive competency development functions as the bridge between stated leadership philosophy and the visible organizational action addressed in the following section, translating values into behaviors that BIPOC employees can observe and rely upon.

Visibility Practices and Behaviors

All nine participants described visibility practices and behaviors as a culminating set of actions that demonstrate organizational commitment to BIPOC leadership development, generating 15 excerpts. Where competency development builds leaders' internal capability, participants described visibility practices as the mechanism through which that capability becomes externally recognized, both within the organization and in the broader industry. Participants' descriptions encompassed three interconnected strategies: reflecting diversity in visual identity, creating affinity affiliation through employee resource groups, and establishing intentional BIPOC community connection.

Reflecting Diversity in Visual Identity: Participants described reflecting diversity in visual identity as vital to establishing visible leadership representation that BIPOC employees and prospective talent could point to as evidence of organizational commitment. A technology executive described developing video content that documented BIPOC leaders'

career journeys from their initial roles through executive positions, explaining that this approach featured authentic, internally sourced leaders narrating their own career stories and perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion, rather than externally produced or scripted messaging, and that the resulting content also created a platform to measure and communicate the progress and impact of those leaders' journeys to the board, customers, and internal communities. A chief claims officer described focusing on resource allocation behaviors intended to level the playing field and identify impediments facing underrepresented individuals, explaining that allocating additional development resources to individuals facing barriers that non-BIPOC individuals did not experience was necessary to elevate organizational performance and ensure the playing field was genuinely fair rather than nominally so. These accounts are consistent with Beigi et al.'s (2025) concept of managed visibility, in which BIPOC professionals and their organizations must deliberately construct forms of visibility that counteract the paradoxical dynamics of hypervisibility and invisibility documented in the career advancement literature, using authentic representation and resource allocation as complementary tools for making BIPOC leadership visible on the organization's own terms.

Creating Affinity Affiliation Through Employee Resource Groups: Employee resource groups emerged as a strategy participants described using to create affinity affiliation supporting BIPOC leadership development, offering platforms for connection, shared experience, and mutual professional support. Several participants, including the chief underwriting officer, insurance claims operations leader, senior managing attorney, and business consulting chief executive officer, described serving in ERG leadership roles to build connections among individuals with shared experiences and to provide strong employee experiences beyond what formal programming alone could offer. The senior managing attorney described leveraging informal resource groups even in the absence of formal organizational programs, explaining that meaningful support does not require a numerical majority, only individuals with authority strategically supporting leadership development and representation, and that the absence of a formal ERG structure should not set the standard for whether BIPOC individuals receive visibility, since support can and should be tailored to individual needs regardless of formal infrastructure. These accounts of deliberate, sustained visibility infrastructure are consistent with Otaye-Ebede and Shaffakat's (2024) finding that resilience, emotional intelligence, and self-promotion function as key personal resources for career advancement, particularly when supported by structural resources such as affinity networks, and with Beigi et al.'s (2025) identification of networking and role models as career advancement resources whose accessibility is mediated by the complex visibility BIPOC professionals navigate in organizational settings.

Establishing Intentional BIPOC Community Connection: Participants described intentional community connection as addressing visibility gaps through nontraditional business channels, extending organizational visibility efforts beyond internal programming into the broader BIPOC professional community. A nonprofit chief operating officer described transforming an early-career experience of inadequate leadership development support, in which he had been placed as the sole diversity representative on a panel with individuals five levels more senior, into large-scale visibility initiatives

providing BIPOC individuals opportunities to demonstrate expertise on prominent platforms, using that formative experience to build confidence and vital leadership development pathways for others. An insurance chief commercial officer described regularly attending BIPOC-centered events to support colleagues' growth and to bring the knowledge gained back into the organization, explaining that understanding BIPOC culture and worldview shifted the direction of business decisions over time as individuals gained confidence and began to feel like owners rather than processors of the work. Consistent with the convergence Beigi et al. (2025) and Otaye-Ebede and Shaffakat (2024) identify between visibility and structural support, participants' accounts suggest that visibility practices absent accompanying organizational infrastructure risk exposing BIPOC professionals to increased scrutiny without a corresponding increase in advancement opportunity, underscoring why visibility functioned in participants' accounts as inseparable from the mentorship and sponsorship structures addressed next.

Mentorship, Sponsorship, and Support Systems

Mentorship, sponsorship, and support systems emerged as a supporting theme to leadership development and representation, described by eight of the nine participants across 34 excerpts. Participants' accounts encompassed three interconnected strategies: mentorship strategies, sponsorship strategies, and support systems, reflecting the distinction Randel et al. (2021) and Sebastian et al. (2026) establish between mentorship's guidance-oriented support and sponsorship's active use of organizational influence, a distinction participants described as consequential for whether BIPOC professionals' advancement remained dependent on individual initiative or became embedded in organizational accountability.

Mentorship Strategies: Participants described mentorship as combining strategic positioning with skills development, tailored to the specific development needs of the individual being mentored. A chief underwriting officer described a mentoring technique focused on building a more senior position for a well-skilled individual whose title did not yet reflect their capability, approaching senior leadership to build a role leading to promotion rather than having the individual report directly to them, aligning skillset with position rather than addressing a development deficit that did not exist. A senior managing attorney described practicing mentoring through one-on-one conversations aimed at understanding personal development goals, explaining that failing to recognize an individual's unique skills and strengths does that person a disservice, and using these conversations to give individuals explicit permission to leverage their strengths within the organization rather than minimize them. A business consulting chief executive officer described mentorship as among the smartest strategies for increasing representation at the leadership level when applied to existing employees, framing it as a build-or-buy approach in which growing internal talent through sustained mentorship generates positive returns comparable to, and often exceeding, those of external recruitment.

Sponsorship Strategies: Participants described sponsorship as functioning distinctly from mentorship in their advancement strategies, requiring leaders to actively expend organizational

capital rather than offer guidance alone. A technology executive described aligning executive-level leadership to sponsor BIPOC individuals, explaining that the cultural aspects of advancement are rarely documented formally, making sponsorship an important part of the accountability structure supporting BIPOC success and requiring sponsors to become active participants in guiding individuals through unwritten organizational expectations. An insurance claims operations leader described initiating sponsorship by directly advocating on candidates' behalf, including making calls to open doors on their behalf, and noting that trust was a key factor in successful sponsorship relationships, since extending trusted relationships to others required a foundation of credibility the sponsor had already established. A chief claims officer described a four-pronged approach to sponsorship combining focus on self, organization, others, and mentorship, explaining that senior leaders with organizational stature have the ability to influence decisions in rooms where advancement determinations are made, and advising that BIPOC individuals should carefully evaluate potential mentors and sponsors, since not everyone is equipped to serve well in that role. These accounts of sponsorship as an active, organizationally embedded practice rather than an organic relationship are consistent with Randel et al.'s (2021) finding that sponsors' willingness to leverage organizational capital depends on the strength of relational identification, and with Gröschl et al.'s (2025) distinction between assistive support, involving tangible advocacy, and appreciative support, involving recognition and encouragement.

Support Systems: Participants described support systems as complementing mentorship and sponsorship to address organizational navigation and industry-level barriers that individual relationships alone could not resolve. A nonprofit chief operating officer described using their own position to provide exposure and encourage individuals to take on additional responsibility, explaining that BIPOC individuals have often served as the supporting cast rather than the central focus of organizational initiatives, and that creating opportunities for exposure allowed them to assume primary roles they had previously been overlooked for. A medical consulting leader described support systems as helping BIPOC individuals navigate organizational acclimatization, particularly when entering largely White organizations, explaining that overcoming covert or oblivious racism in the workplace is not something typically taught in business schools, and that BIPOC individuals need someone to turn to who understands how to navigate those dynamics. A chief claims officer described serving in roles at industry-adjacent professional organizations to support BIPOC individuals across different career endeavors, explaining that stabilizing negative organizational trends such as attrition, rising expenses, and rework required addressing business problems through tangible, practical resolutions rather than relying on goodwill alone. These accounts reflect Sebastian et al.'s (2026) finding that unclear pathways to sponsorship and limited access to decision-makers persist as barriers even when participants recognize sponsorship as essential, underscoring why participants in this study described formal support structures as necessary complements to informal advocacy rather than substitutes for it. Analysis reveals that mentorship, sponsorship, and support systems function as an integrated framework in participants' accounts, bridging individual development with organizational advancement through personalized guidance, strategic advocacy, and structural

support. Participants who described institutionalizing sponsorship as a leadership accountability practice, rather than relying on organic relationship development, reported stronger perceived BIPOC advancement outcomes than those without such structures a pattern participants attributed to sponsorship's capacity to formalize advocacy that would otherwise depend on individual initiative or happenstance, consistent with Titanji et al.'s (2022) finding that talent development initiatives create micro-communities generating collective resources for advancement, and Kamali et al.'s (2024) emphasis on systematic rather than episodic organizational commitment.

Conclusion

Through examination of leadership philosophy, competency development, visibility, and mentorship and sponsorship, leadership development and representation emerges in participants' accounts as a coordinated system that transforms BIPOC advancement from individual skill-building into organizational infrastructure. Participants articulated a framework in which leadership philosophy establishes the cultural premise for advancement, inclusive competency development builds the capability to act on that premise, visibility practices extend that capability into organizational recognition, and mentorship and sponsorship structures sustain it over time. Applied through the composite conceptual framework, the MDCC framework illuminates the individual- and institutional-level cultural competencies participants described developing; EDI theory grounds these practices in the systemic conditions required for authentic inclusion after entry; and Kotter's Change Management model explains how participants described translating leadership philosophy into sustained organizational transformation through accountability structures. These findings affirm that leadership development and representation function, in participants' accounts, as components that build upon and reinforce one another rather than as strategies pursued in isolation. For scholars, this study extends the composite conceptual framework beyond the talent acquisition and pipeline development context addressed in the companion study to the leadership culture that determines whether BIPOC professionals can advance and lead authentically once already inside the organization. For practitioners, participants' accounts suggest that leadership development strategies achieve their fullest effect when philosophy, competency, visibility, and sponsorship operate as a single coordinated system rather than as discrete initiatives a proposition addressed further in Section 6.

BUSINESS RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

This study's findings offer practical guidance for business leaders seeking to advance BIPOC professionals into senior-level roles once they are already within the organization. Where the companion study's recommendations address how organizations source, assess, and hire BIPOC talent, the recommendations offered here address a distinct and downstream business problem: what leaders must do once BIPOC professionals have entered the organization to ensure they can advance and lead authentically. Participants across diverse sectors, including insurance, technology, legal, nonprofit, and consulting, converged on the same four interconnected strategies, suggesting that equity infrastructure functions as a general leadership development framework

rather than a sector-specific practice. Based on participants' accounts, the four interconnected strategies that business leaders can implement to develop leadership capacity supporting authentic BIPOC advancement are: (a) establish leadership philosophy as structural commitment rather than individual discretion, (b) build cultural intelligence into leadership competency requirements, (c) institutionalize visibility as an organizational practice, and (d) formalize sponsorship as a leadership accountability practice. Organizational leaders may find these strategies most effective when applied as an interdependent system, consistent with how participants described equity infrastructure functioning as an integrated whole rather than as isolated initiatives.

Establish leadership philosophy as structural commitment, not individual discretion

Participants' accounts suggest that organizations benefit from treating leadership philosophy as an organizational commitment embedded in policy and practice, rather than as a value left to individual leaders' discretion. Participants described leadership philosophy left to individual discretion as inconsistent and unlikely to withstand leadership turnover, whereas philosophy embedded structurally into organizational practice persisted across changes in individual leadership. Business leaders can operationalize this by requiring leadership development programs to explicitly name BIPOC advancement as an organizational priority, by building accountability for representation into senior leaders' own performance expectations, and by creating structured opportunities, such as cross-functional talent reviews, that allow senior leaders to directly observe BIPOC talent rather than relying on secondhand assessment. This strategy synthesizes Section 5's findings on intentional leadership development, challenging exclusionary systems, and strategic representation and visibility initiatives, incorporating systematic accountability structures that shift leadership philosophy from an individual leader's discretionary approach toward embedded organizational commitment. Organizational leaders who implement this strategy may, according to participants' accounts, experience stronger BIPOC talent retention and a more visible internal pipeline of prepared candidates, consistent with participants' own descriptions of representation generating further representation. Participants further indicated that this approach reduces reliance on any single leader's continued presence to sustain BIPOC advancement efforts within the organization.

Build cultural intelligence into leadership competency requirements

Consistent with participants' descriptions of ethical practice, credibility, and inclusive communication as core competencies, organizations may benefit from formally incorporating cultural intelligence into leadership competency frameworks and promotion criteria, rather than treating it as a supplemental skill. Participants described this shift as moving evaluation away from conformity-based standards, which tend to privilege dominant-group norms of leadership presentation, toward capability-based standards that more accurately capture BIPOC leadership capacity. This includes evaluating leaders on their demonstrated capacity to build inclusive teams and communication cultures, not solely on traditional performance metrics. This strategy synthesizes participants' accounts of establishing ethical leadership practices, maintaining

leadership credibility, and creating inclusive communication cultures, incorporating formal competency requirements and evaluation criteria to ensure inclusive practices function as sustained capability rather than individual disposition. Organizational leaders who implement this strategy may, according to participants' accounts, be better positioned to recognize BIPOC leadership capability that might otherwise be overlooked under conformity-based standards, while also building the organizational capacity to identify and develop future BIPOC leaders more consistently.

Institutionalize Visibility as an Organizational Practice

Participants' accounts suggest that visibility initiatives, including authentic leadership storytelling, employee resource groups, and intentional community connection, are most effective when treated as sustained organizational infrastructure rather than periodic or one-time efforts. Participants described visibility efforts that lacked institutional backing as vulnerable to discontinuation and as placing an outsized burden on individual BIPOC leaders to sustain momentum on their own. Organizations can support this by allocating dedicated resources to visibility initiatives, formally recognizing ERG leadership as part of leaders' professional development, and building relationships with BIPOC professional communities as an ongoing practice rather than an occasional outreach effort. This strategy synthesizes participants' accounts of reflecting diversity in visual identity, creating affinity affiliation through employee resource groups, and establishing intentional BIPOC community connection, incorporating dedicated organizational resources to ensure visibility functions as sustained infrastructure rather than as an initiative dependent on individual advocacy. Organizational leaders who implement this strategy may, according to participants' accounts, generate the aspirational effect participants associated with visible BIPOC leadership, drawing additional BIPOC talent toward the organization while also reinforcing existing employees' confidence in realistic advancement pathways. Participants consistently described visibility practices as functioning most effectively when paired with the structural support addressed in the following strategy, rather than operating as a standalone initiative.

Formalize sponsorship as a leadership accountability practice

The most consequential recommendation to emerge from this study's findings is that organizations move beyond relying on organically formed mentoring relationships and instead institutionalize sponsorship as a formal leadership accountability practice. Participants distinguished sponsorship from mentorship by its requirement that leaders actively expend organizational capital and advocate on a protégé's behalf, rather than offering guidance alone. Participants who described building sponsorship into standard leadership practice, rather than depending on informal relationship development, reported stronger perceived BIPOC advancement outcomes. This strategy synthesizes participants' accounts of mentorship strategies, sponsorship strategies, and support systems, incorporating formal accountability mechanisms to ensure sponsorship functions as embedded organizational practice rather than depending on individual initiative or happenstance. Organizational leaders who implement this strategy may, according to participants' accounts, close the gap between BIPOC professionals' access to guidance and their

access to active advocacy, addressing the unclear pathways to sponsorship and limited access to decision-makers that participants and prior research identify as persistent barriers even where mentorship is readily available.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

This study's findings suggest implications for positive social change that extend beyond individual organizations. Participants' accounts indicate that when BIPOC professionals advance into senior leadership roles and are supported in leading authentically, the effects may extend to increased organizational commitment to BIPOC communities more broadly, expanded customer patronage from BIPOC consumers who evaluate organizational values through the visible presence of BIPOC leadership, and generational economic advancement for the families and communities connected to advancing professionals. Participants described a bidirectional relationship between organizational and community outcomes, wherein visible BIPOC leadership functions as an aspirational model that participants suggested may inspire sustained BIPOC career progression across industries, while organizations that support authentic BIPOC leadership are, according to participants, better positioned to build lasting relationships with BIPOC communities and talent pools. As this study is grounded in participant accounts rather than independently measured community-level outcomes, these implications should be understood as directions participants believe are plausible based on their own organizational experience, not as findings independently verified at the community or societal level.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This qualitative pragmatic inquiry explored effective strategies that business leaders described using to develop leadership capacity and representation supporting authentic BIPOC advancement in senior-level positions. Several limitations suggest directions for future research. First, the sample of nine business leaders, while providing rich qualitative insight across diverse organizational contexts, represents a bounded sample whose findings may not generalize across all industries or geographic contexts; future research could expand the sample size, industry range, and geographic scope to test whether the four components of equity infrastructure identified here operate consistently across different organizational settings. Second, because this study relies on participant self-report and perception rather than independently audited organizational outcomes, future research employing quantitative methods, such as longitudinal tracking of BIPOC advancement rates in organizations that adopt formal sponsorship structures compared to those that do not, could help establish whether the outcomes participants described as stronger are borne out in measurable advancement data. Third, given this study's finding that sponsorship functions differently from mentorship in supporting BIPOC advancement, future research could examine this distinction directly, testing whether formalized sponsorship structures produce measurably different advancement outcomes than organically formed mentoring relationships across a larger and more diverse sample. Finally, because equity infrastructure was found to function as an interdependent system in participants' accounts, future research could investigate whether all four components are necessary for sustained BIPOC advancement or whether

certain components carry disproportionate weight in specific organizational contexts.

CONCLUSION

BIPOC professionals remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions, and this underrepresentation persists even in organizations that have made meaningful investment in talent acquisition and pipeline development. This qualitative pragmatic inquiry explored the leadership development and representation strategies that nine business leaders described using to support authentic BIPOC advancement once professionals are already within the organization, grounded in a composite conceptual framework integrating Sue's (2001) MDCC framework, Akbar and Parker's (2021) EDI theory, and Kotter's (1996) Change Management model. These findings identified four interconnected components of what this study terms equity infrastructure: leadership philosophy, approach, and representation; inclusive leadership competency development; visibility practices and behaviors; and mentorship, sponsorship, and support systems. Participants described these components as functioning together rather than independently, with leadership philosophy establishing the cultural premise for advancement, competency development building the capability to act on that premise, visibility practices extending that capability into organizational recognition, and mentorship and sponsorship structures sustaining advancement over time. Formal, institutionalized sponsorship emerged as a particularly notable finding, with participants who described building sponsorship into standard leadership practice reporting stronger perceived BIPOC advancement outcomes than those who relied on organic relationship development. This study extends the composite conceptual framework applied throughout this research project beyond the talent acquisition and pipeline development context addressed in the companion study to the leadership culture that determines whether BIPOC professionals can advance and lead authentically once already inside the organization. For scholars, this contributes an equity infrastructure framework that reframes leadership development as a structural organizational imperative. For practitioners, participants' accounts suggest that sustainable BIPOC advancement requires organizations to invest in leadership culture with the same intentionality historically applied to talent acquisition, recognizing that pipeline investment alone, without corresponding investment in the conditions that sustain advancement after entry, may be insufficient to achieve lasting representation at the senior level.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

REFERENCES

- Akbar, M., & Parker, T. L. (2021). Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Framework. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/framework>
- Akpanuna, M., Choi, E., Johnson, D. A., & Lopez, J. A. (2020). Encouraging Multiculturalism and Diversity Within Organizational Behavior Management. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, 40(3–4), 186–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01608061.2020.1832014>
- Ames, H., Glenton, C., & Lewin, S. (2019). Purposive Sampling in a Qualitative Evidence Synthesis: A Worked Example From a Synthesis on Parental Perceptions of Vaccination Communication. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 19(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0665-4>
- Arora, K., & Wolbring, G. (2022). Kinesiology, Physical Activity, Physical Education, and Sports Through an Equity/Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Lens: A Scoping Review. *Sports*, 10(4), 55. <https://doi.org/10.3390/sports10040055>
- Beigi, M., Shirmohammadi, M., Ayoobzadeh, M., Hedayati Mehdiabadi, A., Au, W. C., Wang, H., et al. (2025). Career Success and Minority Status: A Review and Conceptual Framework. *Journal of Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063251342190>
- Busetto, L., Wick, W., & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to Use and Assess Qualitative Research Methods. *Neurological Research and Practice*, 2, Article 14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z>
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., et al. (2020). Purposive Sampling: Complex or Simple? Research Case Examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 25(8), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- de Loyola González-Salgado, I., Rivera-Navarro, J., Gutiérrez-Sastre, M., Conde, P., & Franco, M. (2024). Conducting Member Checking Within a Qualitative Case Study on Health-Related Behaviours in a Large European City: Appraising Interpretations and Co-Constructing Findings. *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness & Medicine*, 28(1), 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634593221109682>
- Gröschl, S., Gabaldon, P., Hahn, T., & Kelan, E. K. (2025). The Emergence and Effects of Sponsors for Women Leaders. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 32(5), 1786–1796. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13217>
- Junnier, F. (2024). Action and Understanding in the Semi-Structured Research Interview: Using CA to Analyse European Research Scientists' Attitudes to Linguistic (Dis)Advantage. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 68, Article 101355. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2024.101355>
- Kamali, A., Hosseini, S. M., Alimohammadzadeh, K., & Khamseh, A. H. S. (2024). Talent Identification and Succession Planning Strategies for the Appointment of Nursing Unit Managers: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion*, 13(1), 485. https://doi.org/10.4103/jehp.jehp_2087_23
- Kotter, J. (1996). *Leading Change*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Krawczyk, P., Maslov, I., Topolewski, M., Pallot, M., Lehtosaari, H., & Huotari, J. (2019). Threats to Reliability and Validity of Mixed Methods Research in User eXperience. 2019 *IEEE International Conference on Engineering, Technology and Innovation (ICE/ITMC)*, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICE.2019.8792676>
- Leahy, C. (2022). The Afterlife of Interviews: Explicit Ethics and Subtle Ethics in Sensitive or Distressing Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Research*, 22(5), 777–794. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211012924>
- Lee, M. C. C., & Gardner, D. (2025). Inclusivity and Work Meaningfulness as Mediators Between Leader's Cultural Intelligence and Work Engagement: A Two-Wave Multilevel Study. *Psychological Reports*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941251363481>

- Mitchell, T., Fulton, L., Boey, L., & Cruz, T. (2023). BIPOC Student Leaders in Predominantly White Institutions: Who They Work With, Who They Work For, and Why Their Work Is Needed. *Journal of College Student Development*, 64(4), 454–469. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2023.a907342>
- National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. (1979). *The Belmont Report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.
- Ospina, S., & Foldy, E. (2009). A Critical Review of Race and Ethnicity in the Leadership Literature: Surfacing Context, Power and the Collective Dimensions of Leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20, 876–896. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.09.005>
- Otaye-Ebede, L., & Shaffakat, S. (2024). Breaking the Concrete Ceiling: Resources and Strategies for Career Success Amongst Black and Asian Minority Ethnic Women Leaders. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 97(4), 1243–1281. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12520>
- Paiuc, D. (2021). Cultural Intelligence as a Core Competence of Inclusive Leadership. *Management Dynamics in the Knowledge Economy*, 9(3), 363–378. <https://doi.org/10.2478/mdke-2021-0024>
- Powell, B. (2025). Inclusive Leadership Theory and the Future of the Profession. *Journal of Financial Planning*, 38(4), 26–33.
- Raddatz, N., Raddatz, P., Sorensen, K., & Ogunade, K. (2024). The Adverse Effects of the “Anticipation of Racial Discrimination” on Auditors Who Are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC): An Exploratory Study with Research Propositions. *Accounting Horizons*, 38(1), 139–147. <https://doi.org/10.2308/HORIZONS-2022-098>
- Randel, A. E., Galvin, B. M., Gibson, C. B., & Batts, S. I. (2021). Increasing Career Advancement Opportunities Through Sponsorship: An Identity-Based Model With Illustrative Application to Cross-Race Mentorship of African Americans. *Group & Organization Management*, 46(1), 105–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601120978003>
- Ruffin, H. G., II. (2021). Working Together to Survive and Thrive: The Struggle for Black Lives Past and Present. *Leadership*, 17, 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020976200>
- Sebastian, D., Gonzalez Herrera, K., Ranganathan, M., Landeros-Weisenberger, A., & Latimore, D. (2026). Sponsorship and Career Advancement for Asian Medical Faculty. *JAMA Network Open*, 9(1), Article e2553241. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.53241>
- Sue, D. (2001). Multidimensional Facets of Cultural Competence. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 29(6), 790–821. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000001296002>
- Titanji, B., Abdul-Mutakabbir, J., Christophers, B., Flores, L., Marcelin, J., & Swartz, T. (2022). Social Media: Flattening Hierarchies for Women and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) to Enter the Room Where It Happens. *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, 74(Supplement_3), S222–S228. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciac047>
- Ubaka, A., Lu, X., & Gutierrez, L. (2023). Testing the Generalizability of the White Leadership Standard in the Post-Obama Era. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 34, Article 101591. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2021.101591>
- Vogel, K., & Erickson, S. (2021). Well-Being, EDIB, and the Promise of Leadership Development. *Journal of Library Administration*, 61(8), 1008–1016. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2021.1984145>
- Wadhwa, S., & Aggarwal, P. (2023). Impact of Diversity and Inclusion on Workplace Effectiveness. *Journal of Management & Public Policy*, 14(2), 64–73. <https://doi.org/10.47914/jmpp.2023.v14i2.007>
- Yang, Y. (2024). A Conceptual Model of Authentic Leadership in Cross-Cultural Context. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 24(3), 609–629. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14705958241286690>
- Zhang, Y., Mooney, A., & Ozgen, S. (2025). Racial Minorities in Strategic Leadership: An Integrative Literature Review and Future Research Roadmap. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 36, Article 101840. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2024.101840>
