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Foreword

What Does Racism Have to Do With Frontline Leadership?

By Mark Anthony Gooden

About 10 years ago, I was inspired to write an article that asked what racism had to do with leadership. The title was inspired by two occurrences. The first was a conversation with an African American colleague who was a leader in higher education with a background in business. After attending a leadership seminar together, she shared her belief that good leadership was just good leadership and race had nothing to do with it. Needless to say, I was confused and inspired by that response. Second, the title was inspired by Tina Turner's anti-love hit song, "What's Love Got to Do With It?" Like the title of this song, my article was an anti-racism expression because I essentially argued through a critical race theory (CRT) analysis that racism is absolutely in leadership and that we should fight vigorously (as anti-racists) to counter the idea of color-blind or color-evasive leadership. To carefully construct this argument, I applied CRT specifically to the work of two Black principals and their race-informed and troubling portrayals in two different movies (Gooden, 2012). My central point then was that it was nearly impossible to properly examine and improve the urban principalship (or any for that matter) without some conceptualization of race and racism in the U.S. context.

In *this book*, Milner uses powerful personal narratives and experiences and compelling research to remind us that race and racism are obviously still here today and impacting leadership. Leaders cannot lead effectively in the fight against inequity without grasping an understanding that race

is always within them and the society that they work in every day. It's worth noting that his definition of leaders goes beyond position and includes young people who he wants to prepare in this fight for racial justice. From the start, Milner reminds us that attempting to lead without this acknowledgment is not only wrong, but it is dangerous and particularly harmful to the development of students, teachers, staff, and other leaders in the building. Also, this injury extends to many communities that have been impacted by racism, whether they shout out this fact or not. As Milner notes, it can be devastating for young people and adults alike as whites freely practice normalized behaviors that cause profound harm against racialized bodies.

To that end, Milner leads the reader through a focused and fruitful discussion, first seeking to teach what racism has to do with leadership in 2023. To do so, he introduces two more concepts from the literature that should be helpful in deepening the understanding of readers. Accordingly, Milner adds the interconnected concepts of whiteness and the notion of anti-Blackness as in his discussion of leadership. Both of these drivers of inequity are imperative yet underexplored concepts in the study of race and leadership. That's a shame because so much of leaders' training is based on rational, technical, and color-evasive approaches that normalize white ways of engaging in organizations. The disturbing normalizing of white supremacy is also pulled into this discussion, which lays bare all its harms.

Moreover, the study of anti-Blackness is important to help folks understand deeply ingrained disdain for Black people. Anti-Blackness pushes above and beyond general forms of racism. Anti-Blackness violently harms Black people. These troubling approaches to leadership and their alignment with compliance often seek out Black bodies, frequently and systematically aiming to label them as perpetrators, misfits, outsiders, or criminals. Anti-Black racism then needs to be explored to help us contextually understand our question about what racism has to do with leadership. In short, we are reminded that school punishment practices are often anti-Black. Who is responsible for implementing those anti-Black systems? You guessed it, leaders; and in many cases, Black men who have been charged with the duty of chief compliance officers. Indeed, many of them have found it difficult to advance beyond the position of assistant principal or overseers of Black children's compliance.

To address this issue and so many others, Milner employs the concept of Frontline Leadership as an analytical tool. This approach grows out of highlights of structural hierarchy of first responders responsible for the health, vitality, and success of the organization. There is an emphasis on implementing a focused system of goals and feedback, reminding the

reader that not only is deconstructing systems necessary but reconstructing them is needed as well, and this process cannot happen without the commitment of capable leaders.

To build on the concept of Frontline Leadership, Milner presents eight tenets to assist the reader in grasping and organizing these big ideas. While I decline to enumerate them here, it's worth summarizing some of them as they outline his approaches to Frontline Leadership. These include calls to be familiar with research, disrupt race-blindness, support hard work but challenge the meritocracy myth, revise punishment systems, learn, and develop daily, among others. He also challenges directly some myths that leaders will need to reflect upon. Leaders will do well to broaden their thinking about these possibilities as they thoughtfully help them study and map the complexities of education. Each myth (or lie) is followed by potential outcomes and opportunity gaps that many leaders will undoubtedly find as useful.

Milner's conceptualization of Frontline Leadership leans toward centering racial justice in leadership practice, which is an idea I have agreed with for all my career and advocated for, especially in principal leadership (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). While this fact is apparent throughout this book, it is captured very well in his requirement that these leaders pose these questions in the learning environment. These questions nudge Frontline leaders to examine what privileges they are willing to sacrifice in the co-creation of a racially just context that serves people of color. It also asks to what degree do they advance racial justice when I perceive benefits for my own person and collective (white community) affordances.

As one can imagine, such questions make it impossible for a leader to deny that racism has something to do with leadership. More importantly, the questions mentioned in this foreword—like *this book*—give readers a positive way forward in Frontline Leadership and provide access to a set of well-honed tools to help educators understand this connection while learning how to fight for racial justice. I hope you find the rich content here as exciting as I did and that you embrace it as we prepare young people to advocate for a more racially just future.

References

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