Keynote Summary: The emergence of atypical leaders and their role in equality, diversity, and inclusion-led changes at work – towards a co-design approach

Mustafa F. Özbilgin
Brunel Business School, Brunel University London

ABSTRACT

Leadership talent pools have unprecedented levels of demographic diversity internationally. Yet, leadership diversity remains a global aspiration, particularly in the STEM workforce. Much hope is placed on the emergence of atypical leaders to foster equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)-led changes at work. This paper questions how atypical leaders may support EDI-led changes. Drawing on recent literature on atypical leaders, I explain the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of atypical leaders' experience reconciling becoming part of a typical leadership elite (orthodoxy) and being part of an atypical socio-demographic background (heterodoxy). The paper concludes with an overview of how atypical leaders' emergence and support for EDI-led transformation could be fostered to benefit STEM fields, and more broadly.

KEYWORDS

Gender & STEM; leadership; equality, diversity, and inclusion

The Open University

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Recent studies on leadership show that the support for equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) has significantly increased among leaders. Eighty-five per cent of leaders globally declare their commitment and allyship with aspects of EDI (OECD, 2020; PWC, 2021; SHRM, 2009; Tatli et al., 2007). Although the support for EDI among leaders has globally increased by more than 20 per cent over the last decade, this support has not been matched with EDI-led changes in workforces. Specifically for the STEM workforce, women's participation is limited to 24% of the STEM workforce and 16% of technology work in Britain. Of the top tech firms in Britain, less than 30 per cent have a BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) member on their boards or senior management; and white men constitute 98% of boards and senior executive teams (APPG, 2020; The Lancet, 2020). Despite supportive leadership discourses, the lack of diversity in the STEM workforce remains a global problem.

The curiosity behind this paper is that the upsurge of leadership support for EDI has not translated into progress towards EDI in the workforce and leadership positions. Bebbington and Özbilgin (2013) explain that growing expectations on leaders to support EDI has not been matched with leadership diversity, particularly in higher education. They call the need for leadership support for the emergence of leaders from atypical backgrounds in the context of lack of leadership diversity in the higher education sector, the 'leadership and diversity paradox'. Due to this paradox, there is widespread interest in the EDI-led changes that the emergence of atypical leaders could inculcate. In my Keynote Address, I explored how the emergence of atypical leaders could impact EDI-led changes in organisations. First, I define typical, atypical and prototypical leaders. Second, I outline the duality of the atypical leader's experience of supporting EDI-led changes. I end with a discussion of the ways atypical leadership emergence could be helped to inculcate support for EDI-led changes in organisations.

The emergence of atypical leaders
Typical leaders are often defined in socio-demographic categories of privilege and as leaders who come from privileged, over-represented and socially valued backgrounds, such as white, heterosexual, able-bodied, able-minded men from middle and upper-class backgrounds holding dominant religious beliefs. Atypical leaders are the ones who come from under-represented, historically disadvantaged, and disenfranchised backgrounds, such as women, BAME, LGBTQ+, working-class individuals, and individuals with disabilities and who hold minority religious beliefs or none (Alter 2012; Samdanis & Özbilgin, 2020). Typical and atypical leaders are often defined in demographic terms. However, it is also possible to define atypicality in behavioural terms, such as leaders who enact inclusive leadership behaviours (Palalar Alkan et al., 2022; Torunoglu Tinay et al., 2022). Such an approach is beyond my focus here. Prototypical leaders are leaders whose leadership values, behaviours or merits are idealised. Less than 20 per cent of the talent pool in Britain is made up of 'typical' individuals (white, heterosexual, middle and upper class, able-bodied and able-minded men with dominant religious beliefs; Erbil & Özbilgin, 2022; ONS, 2020).

U.S. statistics (Leanin, 2018) also show that white men constitute less than half of the available talent pool for leadership at the point of entry.

The emergence of super-diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, disability status, age, and other etic and emic categories of disadvantage in the countries' labour markets of the global north and global south suggests that 'atypical' leadership will be the norm in the future. Further social movements such as MeToo, BlackLivesMatter and Pride Marches have changed the moral landscape internationally (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021). Thus, atypical leadership is set to become the new normal in the boardroom if atypical leaders are allowed to emerge.

However, countervailing forces mitigate against such emergence of atypical leaders. Leadership emergence is reportedly experiencing problems of incompetence and ineffectiveness (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019). The World Economic Forum (2015) calls this a 'crisis' of leadership. Global Leadership Forecast (2021) illustrates that only 23 per cent of organisations have competent leadership. One of the reasons for this crisis of competence is the dual routes to leader emergence that limit the emergence of formal leaders with requisite talents.

Two alternative routes to leader emergence exist: One is the *evidence-based* route to leader emergence based on education, training, knowledge and skills. This is the only possible route for atypical leaders as they do not come from privileged backgrounds. The second route is the (unearned) *privilege* route to leader emergence, which is available to leaders from privileged backgrounds, such as white upper-class heterosexual men, based on the misguided trust vested in this group. Chamorro-Premuzic (2019) questions how so many incompetent white men emerge as leaders in modern corporations. Mergen and Özbilgin (2021a, 2021b) have identified that leadership toxicity remains unaddressed due to inattention to the responsibility of followers in supporting toxic leader behaviours. They note that the world views of charismatic leaders often trump the world views of evidence-based leaders who can only offer realistic possibilities to their followers. As populism rises, so does the risk of followers supporting toxic leaders to power. Therefore, in the constitution of a leader in either privileged or informed/evidence-based routes, it is essential to explore the role of their followers. Well-informed followers foster the emergence of well-informed leaders. One way of overcoming the crisis of competence in leader emergence is by promoting evidence-based and responsible leader emergence. Meliou and Özbilgin (2021) show that responsible leader emergence is possible through the force of shared concerns among followers. There is a role for higher education institutions in raising awareness and promoting public interest in responsible and competent leader emergence.

Universities invest considerable resources to educate the future generation of talented individuals. Universities are vested in promoting the evidence-based route to leadership emergence while contesting the privilege route based on stereotypes, biased views, and historical privileges. Yet, the struggle between these two routes is to be settled, and there is backlash and setbacks against the emergence of atypical leaders (Saba et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, we turn to leaders from atypical backgrounds for support for EDI-led changes as

they struggle with their emergence against systems of disadvantage, inequality and discrimination.

Duality of atypical leaders' role in supporting EDI-led changes

When an atypical leader emerges, hopes are often renewed for atypical leaders to push for EDI-led changes. Yet, research shows that atypical leaders do not always support EDI-led changes. Instead, there is a duality in atypical leaders' experience in promoting EDI-led changes (Samdanis & Özbilgin 2020). Drawing on Bourdieu's terms of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, Samdanis and Özbilgin (2020) explain the duality of an atypical leader's role in supporting EDI-led changes. Orthodoxy is the established order or the straightened view in a particular field. The orthodoxy of leadership is the typical leadership, which sets the norms of being a leader. Atypical leaders come from heterodox backgrounds. As a result, despite their legitimacy as talented leaders, they are often devalued by the orthodox order. Due to their status as outsiders, atypical leaders have the potential to serve as innovators from the margins. Atypical leaders could bring new insights and ideas from other fields to an established area of leadership. Inter-field struggles between orthodoxy and heterodoxy are reflected as a struggle for power and influence between typical and atypical leaders for leadership emergence.

Atypical leaders experience a duality by (1) joining the orthodoxy of leadership with its demands for compliance to the norms of the leadership elite, and (2) coming from an atypical socio-demographic background and having heterodox qualities. Even when they wish to be part of the orthodoxy, their membership in leadership orthodoxy is contested with three mechanisms. First, atypical candidates are constantly brought on trial. For example, if a woman leader fails, the female leader is judged negatively for her failure. This is especially evident in STEM fields in which women remain severely underrepresented. Typical leaders such as men are not brought to such trials regarding manhood. A male leader failing does not often lead to a negative judgment about masculinity or manhood. Second, atypical leaders are usually offered risky leadership positions. This pattern is called the 'glass cliff', in which they may be likely or even set up to fail. Third, a higher than proportionate representation of atypical candidates is judged as riskier than a high representation of typical candidates. For example, when girls surpassed boys in A-level exams in STEM subjects in Britain, there were moral panics about boys failing, even when the difference was not statistically significant. Similar moral panic was not levied historically when girls achieved lower marks in STEM subjects. Due to these three mechanisms that treat atypical leaders with a trust deficit, even when an atypical leader joins the orthodox ranks of leadership and makes efforts to fit, they are judged differently from typical leaders.

In exploring how atypical leaders will respond to EDI-led changes, it is essential to understand their dual commitments to orthodox and heterodox fields of relations. An atypical leader may not be able to promote EDI-led changes at work unless certain conditions make it permissible for the heterodox backgrounds they come from to be valued by the orthodoxy.

CONCLUSIONS
Empowering atypical leaders and organisations for EDI-led changes
Research shows that EDI-led changes fail when they are not empowered by adequate resourcing and when they are focused on narrow training interventions. Instead, research shows that EDI-led change requires systemic and institutional transformation (Dobbin & Kalev 2016). UKRI's (2020) research in Britain shows that only interventions targeting deeper systemic and institutional EDI issues effectively foster EDI in the STEM workforce. Interventions that targeted individual-level changes through training and mentoring alone failed. Therefore, substantive institutional arrangements that support EDI-led changes are essential to enable the emergence of atypical leaders and understand their position in supporting EDI.

Atypical leaders experience a duality between orthodoxy and heterodoxy due to their dual commitments and belongings to an established order and their atypical backgrounds. Greenhalgh et al. (2021, 2022) demonstrate that the inter-field struggles between orthodoxy and heterodoxy could be overcome by adopting a transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary paradigm that allows for the co-existence and accommodation of heterodox views alongside orthodox ones in the workplace. For atypical leaders to emerge and be recognised as legitimate leaders, there needs to be a symbolic shift from trust deficit levied on atypicality in leadership settings. This needs to be replaced with building trust in atypical leaders.

The three mechanisms that negate the support that atypical leaders could offer to EDI should be addressed in organisations. Such redress may not happen only at the cognitive level. Instead, redesign of leadership norms, talents and processes is necessary with the participation of atypical leaders and leadership candidates. Through such a co-design activity, it is possible for the heterodox practices, norms, values, and understandings that atypical leaders and leadership candidates hold to inform and co-innovate leader emergence practices. Such a co-existence and co-design paradigm could challenge the crises of performance and competence that typical leadership is currently suffering. As leaders who predominantly emerge through earned and learned routes, atypical leaders should be allowed to bring innovation to how organisations and leadership are constructed in the future.

Women and men from diverse backgrounds redesigning and co-designing institutions, systems, structures and cultures of STEM could provide the long-promised EDI-led transformation of the STEM workforce. Only through such a co-design could atypical leaders and workers enjoy a more positive experience of participation, inclusion and belonging in the sector. The STEM sector is currently locked into traditional ways of doing work and leader emergence that caters for the needs of a very narrow pool of talent. The STEM sector would benefit from co-design of its institutions, which can help the sector to mobilise the potential of atypical leaders/workers including women as innovators from the margins, and in turn to become more attractive to a wider pool of talent who can reach their full potential in workplaces, to the design of which they contributed.

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Author note

This Keynote address was presented at the Network Gender & STEM biennial conference, 29-30 July 2021, The University of Sydney, Australia [online]. Both the recorded Keynote and live discussion are accessible here, with permission: https://youtu.be/sf5jSPg8xnE