Leading for Equity Framework

National Equity Project’s Leading for Equity Framework provides a frame of reference that enables leaders to navigate the complex territory of equity challenges and to develop the capacity to engage in purposeful leadership action.

Leadership Stance
See, Engage & Act

Equity leadership moves from the “inside-out,” as different from traditional leadership which tends to move top-down. How we See informs how we Engage, which informs how we Act.

See
How we perceive the world (window) and practice self-awareness (mirror)

Engage
How we “show up” and engage relationally; how we listen, build relationships and create strong “containers” for complex work.

Act
How we design, decide, implement, learn; how we influence direction, bring focus to action, engage in safe-to-fail experiments.

Three Disciplines
Equity, Complexity & Design

Each discipline contains theory, knowledge and approaches to practice. Understanding each of these, and their interrelationships, enables leaders to frame their challenges and focus their activities.

EQUITY
Developing equity consciousness (internal and external awareness of systemic oppression and its effects) and commitment (the will to take up equity challenges).

COMPLEXITY
Understanding the nature of complex systems, distinguishing between complex versus simple or complicated problems, and developing corresponding leadership approaches that match the actual complexity of equity challenges.

DESIGN
Approaching equity challenges through the mindset of user-centered design, which shifts traditional power dynamics related to decision-making and brings forth deeper innovation and agency amidst institutionalized norms and structures.

LIBERATORY & RESILIENT SYSTEMS
Often the goal of equity work is framed as closing achievement and/or opportunity gaps. Here we emphasize a goal of developing certain system conditions—that increase its capacity to bring about more equitable outcomes and experiences.
Expanding Our Mental Model of Leadership

It is critical to recognize the nature of your situation and take the appropriate approach.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional leadership</th>
<th>Equity leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Controlled approach—top-down</em></td>
<td><em>Emergent approach—inside-out</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order and control</td>
<td>Equity &amp; complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical management</td>
<td>“Hosting” and listening to system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directing strategy and plans</td>
<td>Safe-to-Fail experimentation; collective (re-) design of opportunity structures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This approach is appropriate when the problems are “simple” (obvious) or “complicated” (manageable and the solutions can be known). It is the dominant culture default leadership approach. This approach emphasizes *performance*.

This approach is needed when problems are “complex” (messy and solutions can’t be known in advance). Approaches must be developed through experimentation and learning. This approach runs counter to our deeply entrained notions of what good leadership is. This approach emphasizes *learning*.

### Role awareness
- our work is determined by our position and responsibilities

### Order and control
- leader’s role is to bring rational functioning to often unruly, ineffective organizational behavior

### Technical lens
- equity is about identifying proper strategies

### Decision mindset
- identify decisions to be made

### Message
- communicate what needs to happen

### Top-down
- use chain of command

### Confirm
- seek homogenous values and ideas

### Role defining
- job and task descriptions

### Decision-making
- find the ‘best’ choice

### Planning, forecasting
- set longer-term goals, plan specific actions & strategies, then roll out

### Staying the course
- align and maintain focus

### Self awareness
- recognize that our identity shapes what we see and others experience us

### Situational awareness
- leader’s role is to recognize what is currently happening in a context and the many dynamics at play

### Equity lens
- recognize how inequities are products of system oppression

### Design mindset
- recognize design opportunities

### Listen
- pay attention to people’s experience

### Distributed leadership
- leadership across the system and team-driven leadership

### Diversify
- seek heterogenous input, especially from those impacted and those furthest from power

### Relationship building
- work with patterns of interaction

### Sense-making
- collective interpretation, meaning-making act/learn/plan at the same time

### Direction-setting
- set a few short-term goals, develop “minimum spec”/“skinny” plans

### Noticing emergent direction
- identify emerging patterns, amplify/dampen these