ADVANCING HEALTH EQUITY:

LEADING CARE, PAYMENT, AND SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

AHE Small Bytes Episode 5:
Let's Talk About Power

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We Can't Talk About Health Equity Without Talking About Power

The moment an organization decides to devote financial resources, people power, and training hours to advancing health equity is a moment filled with possibility and excitement. Some teams will be ready with ideas and a blueprint for what they want to happen next. Other teams will be energized but unsure of where to start with little consensus on the best way forward. No matter where your team lands on that spectrum, your health equity efforts won't be nearly as strong as they could be without first addressing power and its impact on team efficacy.

Power is not inherently negative. When used in service to others, power is a healthy and necessary foundation of health equity efforts. For example, if the Senior Director within a major healthcare company became a champion of an intervention that sought to increase the number of certified medical interpreters available for Cantonese-speaking patients, they might divert funds to support the program, instruct departments to cooperate with the intervention's leads, or discuss the program in the local media so that it garners more widespread support.

Power isn't limited to those with keys to the corner office, however. A recommendation from a trusted community-based organization or local activist about the increase in certified medical interpreters, for instance, might be the only reason community members sign up for a new diabetes prevention program. Although we tend to narrow the concept of power to mean money, fame, or high social status, the truth is, many, if not most of us, have some sort of power that we use on a day-to-day basis.

Setting a Foundation for Success

Acts that we might think are small could actually create power imbalances that are hard to shake. For example, imploring staff to bring their whole selves to work puts the onus on employees to perform their identity in a mode you find suitable. BIPOC, gender non-confirming, trans, and/or other minoritized individuals may not feel comfortable bringing their Home Self to work for **fear of how it might impact them professionally**. The directive, "bring your whole self" also can imply that the person in front of you is somehow disingenuous or secretive and that you have the right to demand which version of themselves they show you whether they want to or not.

To encourage a feeling of safety and give employees agency in how they present themselves at work, consider making space for each staff member to design the team's culture building moments so different viewpoints are represented. Take the time to learn the historical context of why workplaces may feel more dangerous to those in marginalized communities when it comes to expressing their authentic selves at work. Doing so can create small, but important shifts that set the foundation for a successful health equity effort.

Most of us have some level of power that we use every single day.
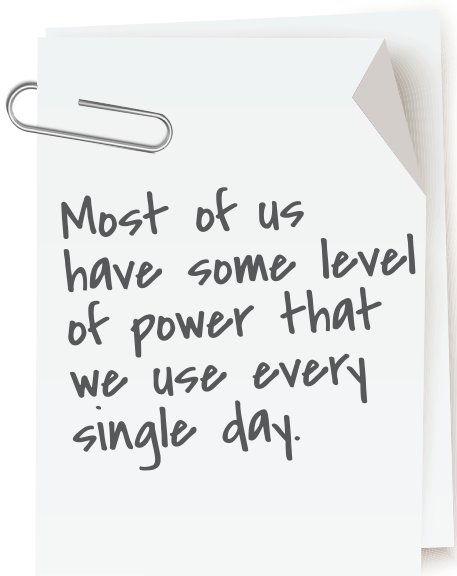
The phrase "cede power" is often used in equity spaces, referring to the need to ensure that those with years—or decades—of accumulated power in a leadership capacity step back in their role to allow others to drive decision making. **A 2021 study** on the impact of power in multidisciplinary health care team performance and patient safety found that power imbalances can have negative effects on collaboration, decision making, communication, and overall team performance. Ceding power without first addressing how power imbalances negatively impact team cohesion risks limiting or erasing altogether the potential impact that ceding power can have.

5 Ideas for Moving Forward

Below are common mistakes teams make that can exacerbate power imbalances and upend health equity efforts. As you read, think carefully about whether similar mistakes have impacted your team and what you might do differently if the situation arises again.

1. Assuming Power is Ahistorical

Power does not occur in a vacuum. Often, we make assumptions about who holds (or should hold) power; those assumptions can impact how we regard the person in charge and their attempts to affect change. One person does not amass power out of sheer will or hard work alone. There are historical, social, educational, and economic structures at play that made the path smoother for some and bumpier for others. Minimizing that history can lead to bias against a person who has worked long and hard but has not been well rewarded for their efforts.

1. A Way Forward: DEI programming should include a historical analysis and context of the social, fiscal, racial, and gendered systems that lead to power imbalances inside the workplace. If your organization's DEI programming doesn't include those analyses, you should work to coordinate methods to train the entire team. Contextual DEI knowledge is an important aspect of professional development that will improve your overall work culture. Additionally, make sure that training includes an **explicit power analysis** *so your team better understands the different types and dimensions of power.*

2. Equating Power with Expertise

It's not always the case that a person who has been rewarded by the industry for their work is the best and most knowledgeable in their field. It is that their mode of articulating their expertise was most easily understood by those in charge of hiring and promotion. For example, when an immensely qualified job candidate with a wide variety of work experiences fails to submit a required cover letter, their candidacy may be eliminated because their resume alone did not clearly articulate how their skills could be applied to the specific job at hand.

It is an established equity principle that **lived experience is its own form of expertise**. For example, the AHE Illinois Learning Collaborative team created a Lived Experience Advisory Committee (LEAC) to center the voices of those they served within their initiative; LEAC members offered valuable feedback as to what were the most pressing issues for Illinoisans experiencing homelessness from those with firsthand experience of it. Keep in mind when you make recommendations for speakers, hire new talent, or look for community partners, that just because *you* don't know them, it doesn't mean they aren't known.

2. A Way Forward: Equity Practitioners and scholars have long documented how insistence on one-dimensional definitions of professionalism in the workplace erase or minimize the contributions of minoritized cultures and people in favor of practices and opinions that reflect the dominant culture. **Without taking active measures to combat that dominant culture bias***, your health equity efforts are unlikely to progress beyond surface-level interventions.*

3. Making it about you

It is natural to think that the person ceding power is most directly impacted by a power shift. Yet, there are multiple people impacted when the power players at the table change — especially the person taking over. The person coming into that now-open seat may face roadblocks in the form of colleagues who do not recognize their expertise, colleagues who rely on organizational "fit" without acknowledging how **fit is explicitly linked to racial bias**, or colleagues who are unhappy with the change, including you. A team is bigger than one single person, yet one single person can stymie its progress. It is important to take stock of the power you may hold within a team or project so you can use it to enact lasting, positive changes on the team.

3. A Way Forward: Acknowledge the roles each person plays in the system. Doing so allows us to see, clear-eyed, how we have internalized and replicated forms of bias and oppression. Centering the voices of those most impacted in any system can result in dramatic change. Investing in mindfulness training and emotional intelligence skill building can help your team make better-informed decisions moving forward and illustrate how one person's professional role does not always need to be centered for a team to succeed.

4. Ceding power in name only

Giving up power does not mean your responsibility to help the team succeed ends. This is true whether you are in the C-suite of your organization, you're promoting a direct report, or you're acting on behalf of your organization in relationship with the local community or other partners. It's not enough to say, "OK, you're in charge." You must also commit to supporting the decisions of those you've tasked with moving the project forward, paying close attention to how your actions may impact the overall outcome.
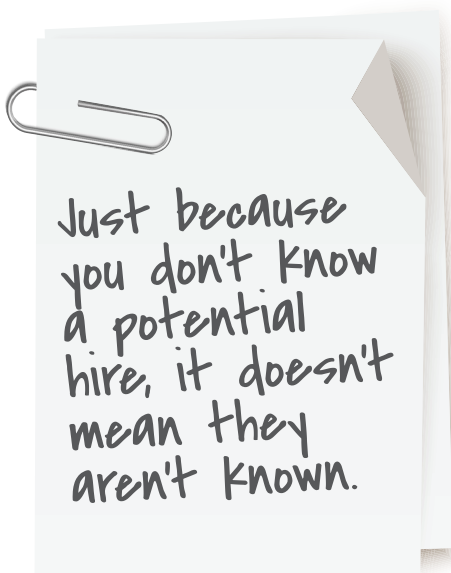
Consider how friendly advice might come across as a not-so-subtle directive. Think carefully about whether you might be nonverbally telegraphing disapproval with your body language or facial expressions. Think deeply about how your reactions to suggested changes could impact whether or not the new team lead approaches you with ideas and opinions.

How we engage within a space can implicitly change how that space functions. This is especially true for those who have an abundance of power, whether financial, social, or organizational. Even when ceding power may feel like a simple, albeit significant decision, we must consider what is needed for successful empowerment. That can include a multitude of factors depending on the person stepping into power and the historical context of the situation.

Just because you don't know a potential hire, it doesn't mean they aren't known.

4. A Way Forward:

Consider working with an intermediary who can attend conversations and meetings as a potential mediator or facilitator, or create an anonymized system whereby thoughts and ideas could be easily relayed and recorded for future reference.

Ensure that new team leads are properly equipped to carry out their responsibilities and that other team members feel adequately prepared to support that new leader. Does the new role require skillbuilding? Advising? Clarity of communication? Ask yourself honestly if you have set the new team lead up for success and what you can do to be more supportive.

Recognize the obstacles that those with new power will face. They will likely be more highly criticized than you were, and will undoubtedly have more to prove. Consider how you can demonstrate your trust in the new leader to others.

Practice Shine Theory. Communicate how you see the new lead's strengths and assets as beneficial and leverage your influence to make a call to action for others to support them, too. It takes just ten words: "Here's how I expect all of you to support [name]" to put that new team lead on a path to success.

Agree to do the work to stay aligned on intended outcomes. Ensuring everyone leaves the power transfer conversation with a clear understanding of what should happen next will produce much better results than walking away without supporting the process. Transferring power to another person does not mean you are no longer an important member of your team. Consult your team to decide how you can support differently and most effectively.

5. Denying or not taking responsibility for one's power.

We run the risk of abusing power when we deny having it. Embracing — rather than being ashamed of — one's power is a necessary step to being able leverage it for meaningful, lasting change and building a team culture based on equity. Flattening organizational team structures without acknowledging power dynamics and expectations is one way to negatively impact team synergy. Another is championing a policy of colorblindness. On its face, colorblindness can seem positive, but it actually silences People of Color by implying that one's daily lived experience as a racialized Other and how it affects their personal and professional life is unimportant.

5. A Way Forward: Self-education and external training to understand historical contexts and manifestations of power are key elements in creating and sustaining a culture of equity. However, they are just two tools in the equity toolbox. Self-reflexivity, self-awareness, and learning to sit with—not avoid—the discomfort of the power we hold will help us use our power consciously and for the benefit of others.

AHE SMALL BYTES EPISODE 5: LET'S TALK ABOUT POWER

The list of ideas for moving forward is meant to jumpstart your journey to address power imbalances on your team. Take time to learn what internal (self) and external (community, team, or organizational culture) change work is needed in addition to what we've listed here. Asking ourselves on a regular basis, "Do I have an opportunity to repair harm?" is an essential equity tool we must use to take necessary responsibility for needed change.

Denying your power denies the responsibility you have to enact change.
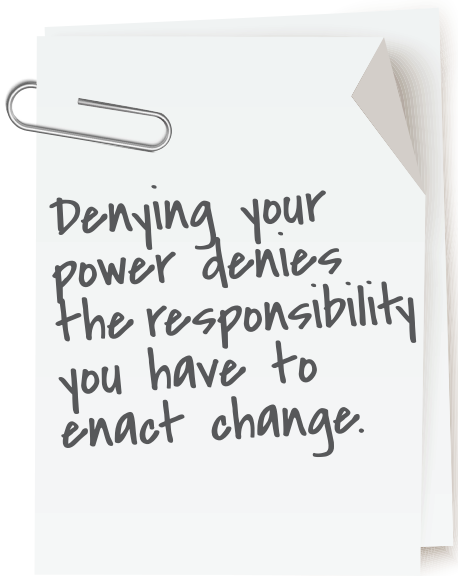
Although we tailored the guidelines and advice above for individuals in leadership positions, they are widely applicable to anyone in a team or organization. Ensuring the team feels well-equipped to support new leadership and that their questions and concerns are heard in leadership transition conversations are not one-and-done activities. They are measures that should be routinely taken in support of a sustainable, well-functioning approach to advancing health equity. For more on how power imbalances can negatively impact health equity efforts, be sure to watch **AHE Small Bytes, Episode 5: Power and Health Equity**.

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