

EQUITY LEADERSHIP & THE SELF: A TOOL

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Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center

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About the Centers

The Region III Equity Assistance Center is a project of the Great Lakes Equity Center, an educational research and service center located in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. The Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Education under Title IV of the Civil Rights Act. We provide equity-focused technical assistance to states, districts, and public schools focused on systemic improvements to ensure educational access, participation and positive outcomes for students who have been historically marginalized based on race, sex, national origin, or religion, at the request of public schools, districts, state departments of education, and other responsible governmental agencies.



Introduction

This *Equity Tool* is intended to support leaders in increasing their self-awareness, aligning action with intention, and improving equity-focused action as it relates to interpersonal relationships and inclusion. Building on the *Equity by Design* brief, *Complexities of the Self: Inner Work for Equity Leaders*, and as a supplement to the *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable, Connecting Across Differences: Tools and Approaches for Important Conversations*, this Tool will:

- Guide leaders in reflecting on their internal life
- Aid leaders in identifying and articulating how their Self shows up in their interactions across differences
- Support learning towards improving interactions across differences to build relationships
- Encourage exploration into how this process connects to key issues related to equity

Goals:

- Provide a practical means for leaders to engage in internal reflection
- Support leaders in increasing self-awareness and decreasing ego-driven behavior
- Assist leaders in strengthening their interpersonal relationship skills

Outcomes:

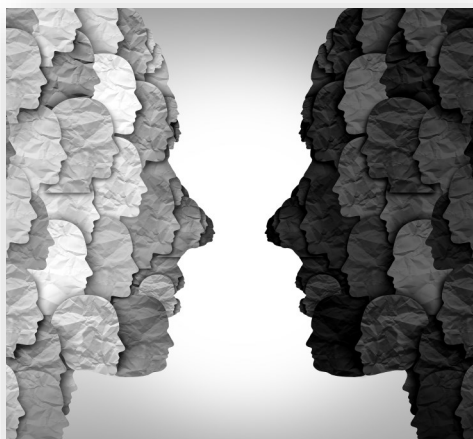
- Identify and activate aspects of the Core Self
- Reduce ego-driven actions and increase connection-driven actions
- More effectively engage with others in equity-focused action



About This Tool

The *Equity by Design* brief *Complexities of the Self: Inner Work for Equity Leaders* offers a framework intended to support equity-focused leaders to reflect on their internal life; understand how that internal life intersects with their public equity leadership; and using a set of grounding principles, begin a practice of *Conscious Praxis* (Radd, 2021). The term *internal life* refers to what goes on inside a person: their thoughts, emotions, physiology, paradigms, values, and meaning-making process outcomes; how those inner dynamics interact with one another; and how those dynamics and interactions influence one's outward actions. The term *Conscious Praxis* refers to a practice of reflection and action that supports one to discern the current moment and circumstances *as they are* with

1. minimal interference from ego (Radd, 2022, p. 6) or the altered self (Radd, 2022, p. 3);
2. awareness and adjustment as needed related to the impact of past woundedness and traumas; and
3. consciousness of the impact, both internal and externally, of one's positionality.



[Graphic image description: Profile of two faces looking at each other. Each face is comprised of smaller faces made of paper.]

This Tool is intended as a companion to the Brief, as well as a supplement to the *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable Connecting Across Differences: Tools and Approaches for Important Conversations*. The Roundtable addresses how interactions across differences are fraught with the potential for conflict that can escalate to crisis, and offers approaches to connect more openly, meaningfully, and effectively with others. For valuable background to supplement the use of this Tool, I encourage you to review the Roundtable for considerations and explanations for why connecting across differences can be so challenging.



About This Tool (cont.)

In building on both the Brief and the Roundtable, I make a distinction and a connection between (1) differences in perspective and opinion on the one hand, in comparison to (2) differences in socio-cultural identities on the other. I borrow from the Brief *Complexities of the Self* to define the term socio-cultural identities, which

...refers to things like race, gender, sex, sexual identity, dis/ability, religion, etc. These are aspects of a person's identity that are socially constructed – in other words, what they mean within society, the significance it carries, and whether it leads to privilege or exclusion *are not* inherently endowed, but instead have been determined by the cultural context and society in which a person lives. (Radd, 2022, p. 5)

Differences in socio-cultural identities often go hand-in-hand with differences in perspective and opinion, but they are *not* synonymous. Still, the inability or unwillingness to honor, work with, and work through differences in perspective, is a skill-deficit that erodes capacity for inclusion. Thus, improving skills for working through differences in perspective and opinions can improve skills for interacting more inclusively and constructively across differences in socio-cultural identity (Radd, 2014).

Pre-reflection Exercise: Consider these facts: Whenever a person is interacting with another person, those two people will have both similarities and differences between them (Bennett, 2004; Hammer, 2005). Most people – about 80% of the population - have a tendency to focus on the similarities and what they have in common with other people (Bennett, 2004; Hammer, 2005). Many others – about 10% of the population - have a tendency to focus exclusively on the differences they have with other people who they perceive to be different from themselves.

- Where do you see yourself on this continuum?
- Consider situations where you have focused on the differences between yourself and others. What actions and approaches did you take? What happened?



[Image description: A feminine-presenting person of Asian descent sitting and speak to a person of Color turned away from the camera.]



About This Tool (cont.)

- Consider situations where you have focused on finding similarities between yourself and others. What actions and approaches did you take? What happened?

Consider: When people *focus primarily on differences*, they miss the opportunity to build a foundation of common ground. When people *focus primarily on similarities*, they simultaneously ignore important differences between them and the other person/parties.

To be adept and inclusive when connecting across differences requires both skill and maturity. This Tool addresses these capacities:

- 1) The willingness and ability to engage the complex and accurate consciousness of one's own lenses, perspectives, values, beliefs, and paradigms
- 2) The willingness and ability to see and work with both the similarities and the differences that exist in the situation, recognizing the validity and complexity of both
- 3) The willingness and ability to actively notice and take responsibility for one's internal life, working with it to improve one's external experiences and interactions



User's Guide

Overall, this Tool seeks to offer a bridge for leaders to manage their internal life in ways that support meaningful and constructive connections and relationships with others, through communication. It is particularly focused on connections in the space of differences in perspective and opinion, and intends to support skill development to inclusively to constructively engage when divergences in socio-cultural identities exist. This Tool takes a *self-first* approach, meaning it asks you to examine what is going on within you first; it does this by asking you to reflect on your communication and conflict background and beliefs, then on your communication and conflict approach and style in a current situation. Overall, this Tool seeks to support leaders in increasing their self-awareness; aligning action with intention; improving the quality, authenticity, and problem-solving capacity of their relationships; and improving equity-focused action.

In doing so, this *Equity Tool* relies on a handful of vital assumptions:

- First, a goal of *mutual understanding and mutually acceptable outcomes* is desirable, and accordingly, trying to *win* or prove superiority is destructive (Radd, 2021).
- Next, differences of any kind tend to prompt an emotional reaction that is typically unacknowledged, yet highly powerful in influencing actions and outcomes (Patterson et al., 2012; Stone et al., 2010). People can improve their experience of differences, as well as their relationships, if they recognize and understand their emotional reactions, and take responsibility to act constructively.
- We can't change others, but we can change ourselves, our beliefs, and our actions; doing so will influence the quality and outcome of our interactions with others.
- We can interact with others, drawing from a spirit of compassion and abundance, even in conflict; in doing so, we are more likely to contribute to improved outcomes and relationships.



[Image description: a group of people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds sitting in a circle.]



User's Guide (cont.)

A note about positionality: The term *positionality* refers to the sociocultural identities a person holds, and how those identities result in privilege or marginalization in any given situation¹. My primary positionality related to this tool is as a white cisgender female with a significant amount of formal education. This is important to note, because although (1) I have spent decades studying and leading for educational equity; (2) much of my scholarship and practice address the impact of whiteness; and (3) my personal and professional circles are multi-racial, I still see the world through a white-informed lens. Even when I am persistent in considering the influence of my white lens, as I am in writing this Tool, I may not notice its impact. Thus, while I write this Tool with the intent that it can be useful for equity-focused leaders and educators with a wide-range of identities, both privileged and marginalized, I recognize that some principles may not extend effectively across identities and seek the reader's engagement in considering effective, equity-promoting modifications. (Radd, 2022, 1-2)

Instructions

This *Equity Tool* is divided into four sections:

- Excavating & Examining Your History
- Preparing for an Interaction Across Differences
- Participating in an Interaction across Differences
- Learning from an Interaction across Differences

In the first section, ***Excavating & Examining Your History***, you to prepare for an interaction across difference by engaging deep reflection and critical consciousness about your Self, your background, your emotions, and your thoughts.

The second section, ***Preparing for an Interaction Across Differences***, offers tips and strategies to use while interacting across differences.

The third section, ***Participating in an Interaction across Differences***, provides tips and strategies for helping your interaction proceed as constructively and meaningfully as possible.

¹For more on positionality, see Moore, T., Jackson, R. G., Kyser, T. S., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2016). Becoming an equity-oriented educator through critical self-reflection. *Equity Dispatch*. Great Lakes Equity Center (GLEC). <https://greatlakesequity.org/resource/becoming-equity-oriented-educator-through-critical-self-reflection>



User's Guide (cont.)

The fourth section, ***Learning from an Interaction across Differences***, structures your opportunity for more reflection after your cross-difference interaction in order to identify what went well, what could have been improved, and what you can learn from the interaction for future interactions. In each section, the Tool is intended to help you learn, grow, and connect meaningfully with others over time.

In each section, you will find questions to support your reflection and growth. You will gain the most from this Tool if you set aside time to complete each section in its entirety. Use an electronic device, paper and writing utensil, or the notes section of this tool to record your responses.

This Tool can be used repeatedly over time to continue to reflect on your beliefs, skills, approaches, and experiences. Use of this Tool is intended to grow your ability to connect meaningfully and constructively across differences, as well as to lead, connect, and teach in a more inclusive manner.



Section 1: Excavating & Examining Your History

A person's communication and conflict skills, as well as their understanding of the role, importance, and means to engage with difference, originate in one's early experiences (Rogoff, 2003). As you consider your **current** approach and skills in working through difference, it is helpful to surface and reflect on how your beliefs and behaviors developed, and have changed, over time. To that end, please record your responses to the following questions and prompts:

1. What were you taught in your **early experiences** about differences among people? These could be physical differences, differences in sociocultural identities, and/or differences in perspective or opinion. Consider scenarios you witnessed or were a part of, as well as messages you heard from the people around you. The table on page 9 provides spaces for you to record your experiences and reflections according to context and time (by virtue of each row), as well as
 - the messages you received from others about the right and wrong way to think and act related to difference, conflict, and communication
 - how you think and act, as well as what expectations you have related to communication and conflict; and
 - what you learned from and believe as a results of those experiences
2. What are common and divergent themes across settings and time?
3. How has this profile changed over time?
4. What are your strengths and difficulties related to difference, communication, and conflict **at this current point in time**?
5. What new insights do you have after completing this section? How can those insights help you improve your ability to connect meaningfully and constructively across differences?

Exercise: Think about the feeling of *getting hooked*²; think of three or four times in the recent past when you experienced that feeling. What was the situation? How soon after getting *hooked* did you realize it had happened? What prompted that feeling of getting *hooked*? In considering the prompt, identify what happened externally (i.e., outside of

²An emotional and/or physiological reaction activated in response to perceived threat and in a way that constricts, or even commandeers, one's thinking process and thoughts. Importantly, the event or circumstance that triggered this response is not the *cause* of the response; the cause resides within one's inner life.



Section 1: Excavating & Examining Your History (cont.)

you) and what happened internally (i.e., what did you think that statement/event meant about who or how you are)? What are your tendencies when it comes to getting *hooked*? What successful strategies have you used to *unhook* yourself in the past?

| Context | Patterns & rules related to difference, conflict, and communication | Your role, actions, and/or expectations in communication conflict | Your take aways from these experiences re: difference, conflict, & communication |
|--|---|---|--|
| Family of origin | | | |
| Academic settings over the course of your lifetime | | | |
| Social relationships over time | | | |
| Family of creation | | | |
| Professional settings and relationships | | | |
| Community involvement | | | |



Section 1: Excavating & Examining Your History: Notes Page



Section 2: Preparing for an Interaction Across Differences

Often, the opportunity to connect across differences comes up without warning, and you will engage without preparation specific to the interaction. However, when the situation allows, it is helpful to complete pre-work in order to anticipate and prepare for the interaction to occur as constructively as possible. Below are steps to preparing for an interaction; complete each in order to fully examine your Self, your goals, your approach, and how you can best set yourself and the other person(s) up for a constructive and meaningful interaction.



[Image description: A masculine-presenting white person standing with their hand on their chin, surrounded by question marks.]

Assessing the Scene:

1. Name and describe the situation.
2. What are the perceived differences that you believe exist between you and the other person?
3. What is your primary purpose for this interaction? What do you most hope to accomplish?
4. What fears, anxieties, and/or defenses, if any, do you have in anticipating what will happen in this interaction?
5. When the interaction concludes, what do you hope to say about the process? The outcome? What is the best possible outcome you can imagine?

Review your responses above. Where, if at all, does your ego³ show up?

Examining Your Self:

Scan your thoughts, emotions, and body for any current or potential moments when you feel defensive, offended, as if you need to stand your ground. What is coming up for you?

- What do you feel in your body, and where?
- What emotions do you notice in yourself?
- What thoughts are arising in your mind?
- What is the worst possible outcome that you are imagining? Can you accurately assess how likely that outcome is?

³A functional structure within each person that mediates the relationship between one's Core Self and that person's interactions in the world, as well as the relationship between one's whole self and other people.



Section 2: Preparing for an Interaction Across Differences (cont.)

- How will your thoughts, emotions, and physiological reactions contribute to the quality of the interaction? Will they make it more likely or less likely that you will achieve your best possible outcome (as identified in #5 in the previous section *Assessing the Scene*)?
- What shifts in your thoughts would cause a shift in your emotions and physiology, and improve the chances of a positive outcome?

The purpose of the questions and reflections in this section is to help you examine and reduce your reactivity, so you can interact with the other person as constructively as possible.

Assessing for Power:

Take a mental inventory of the different forms of power that exist within your relationship with the other person. Are there formal/positional power⁴ differences? What types of informal power differences exist between you and the other person? What identity-related forms of power are present?

- Tap into the spaces where you have power, and consider: how can you think and act with compassion, generosity of spirit, and regard for the self-determination & humanity of the other person? Consider (though don't assume) that a person with less power may not be interested or willing to connect across differences; prepare yourself to accept and respect that possibility.
- Consider those aspects of your identity, position, or self where you feel less powerful, more vulnerable, and potentially at risk for harm. Assess as accurately and neutrally as you are able the degree of the imbalance. What are the true risks? What outcomes do you fear, and how likely or unlikely are they to happen? If they did happen, what would be the negative impact for you? What is your bandwidth, and what are your existing resources, to manage negative outcomes?

⁴The ability to compel another's actions or circumstances with or without their consent; takes many forms along a continuum of formal and positional power on one end, to informal and social on the other end. While the possession of power does not equate to the use of power, the presence of power differentials has impact in relationships and across contexts.



Section 2: Preparing for an Interaction Across Differences (cont.)

These considerations are important because in guarding themselves against a perceived risk, people often end up contributing to other negative dynamics, such as reduced trust or increased conflict. This is especially problematic if/when the risks are nominal, the negative outcomes unlikely, or the negative impact would be minimal. In other words, people can go to great lengths to protect themselves against something that probably would not happen, or if it did happen, it would not really hurt them.

At the same time, people with marginalized identities⁵ and lesser amounts of formal or informal power are more likely to receive negative experiences and impacts due to the insensitivity, lack of concern, lack of critical consciousness⁶, or bigoted attitudes and actions of others, and thus are likely to spend time and effort in considering how they might balance being open-hearted without exposing themselves to unnecessary harm.

Building on Past Successes:

Recall a time you sincerely connected with someone in the space of differences, and you were grounded in your Core Self⁷:

- How did you feel? What types of things did you say? How can you bring that attitude and those skills into this interaction?
- What did the other person do that made it easier for you to connect with one another, and stay grounded in your Core Self? Can you ask the person you'll be interacting with if they would engage in the interaction using those behaviors or attitudes (for example, "I want to talk with you about something, and I hope that you can listen with an open mind. Please know that I am sincerely trying to solve the problem")?

⁴The ability to compel another's actions or circumstances with or without their consent; takes many forms along a continuum of formal and positional power on one end, to informal and social on the other end. While the possession of power does not equate to the use of power, the presence of power differentials has impact in relationships and across contexts.

⁵A sociocultural identity (or intersection of identities (Crenshaw, 1989)) that lacks privilege, thus, is disproportionately subject to identity-targeting microaggressions, discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, and/or violence (e.g., LGBTQIA+, disability, non-White, woman/girl, non-Christian, etc.).

⁶An active state of seeking to identify the beliefs and language that obscure systemic inequities (Radd & Macey, 2013, p. 2).

⁷One's innate self, who a person is at their core.



Section 2: Preparing for an Interaction Across Differences (cont.)

Identifying Shared Values and Goals:

As you begin to connect across differences, it is vital to remember that both similarities and differences exist and play a role in the quality of your interaction and subsequent outcome. To that end, what do you and the other person/party have in common? Create a list, paying particular attention to shared values, purposes, and goals.

[Watermark image description: People sitting around overlapping thought bubbles. Shared conversation concept.]



Section 2: Preparing for an Interaction Across Differences: Notes Page



Section 3: Participating in an Interaction Across Differences

As the time for a planned interaction across differences nears, block off a few minutes before your scheduled time to recall your reflections, priorities, and goals; to calm your fears and worries; and to connect to your Core Self. Then, whether you have scheduled your interaction in advance, or you find yourself with an unanticipated opportunity to connect across difference, aim to practice the following:

| Internally | With the Other Person |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay connected to your heart and your desire to connect and understand. • Stay open to, and respectful of, the other person’s desire – or lack of willingness – to engage across differences. Be ready to back up without malice or frustration if the other person chooses to opt out. • Keep aware of how your body is reacting. If you feel tightening or racing, pause and take a deep breath. • Step into trust and consider taking risks in your questions and your sharing. • Stay conscious of, and accurate about, the type of information you are exchanging. • Recognize and pause if you feel yourself getting <i>hooked</i>. • Avoid autobiographical assumptions, in which you compare the other person’s or experience to your own. Instead, listen for what they are telling you. • Try to achieve clarity and increased understanding of the full picture, for yourself and the other person. • | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share your purpose. • Invite, but don’t expect nor demand, a conversation. If you have formal/positional, or identity-based power, consider offering the invitation for the other person to initiate a conversation at a later date. For example, “If you’d like to talk further about this, please know that I’m always willing.” • If given consent, surface the assumptions that you have, or that you hear, in the conversation, in order to name them as such and test their accuracy. • Stay sincerely curious and use inquiry questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Can you describe a typical example? ⇒ Can you help me understand your thinking here? ⇒ Where does your reasoning go next? ⇒ What leads you to your conclusions? ⇒ What information did you take into consideration in coming to that conclusion? ⇒ What is the significance of the information you just shared? ⇒ Invite power and resource – sharing: If you have privileged identities, consider how you can diffuse, rather than constrain power. If you have marginalized identities, what types of power-sharing can you ask for that would be useful and meaningful? |



Section 3: Participating in an Interaction Across Differences: Notes Page



Section 4: Learning from an Interaction Across Differences



[Image description: A feminine-presenting white person, in a side-view sequence of four, with four different symbols on each figure: a question mark, gears, a lightbulb, and an exclamation point.]

After your interaction, take some time to reflect on what went well, what could have been improved, and what you can learn from the experience. Reflect on these questions:

- How did the interaction feel?
 - ⇒ How did you feel entering the interaction? How did that feeling shift as the interaction continued? What other emotions did you experience?
 - ⇒ Were there moments when you felt *hooked*?
 - * If so, what was the prompt for you feeling this way?
 - * Recognizing that when a person feels *hooked*, the current interaction has tapped into an old message, frame of reference, or wound, what did this experience tap into?
 - ⇒ Were there moments when you noticed that you felt and acted with generosity of spirit? What prompted you into that space? How did it feel? What effect did it have?
- What do you think you did particularly well in the interaction? How do you know it was constructive in the interaction? Do you think the other person would agree?
- What could have been improved?
- What did the other person do that made it easier for you to connect with one another, and stay grounded in your Core Self?
- What can you learn from this interaction that will be useful in the future?

Remember, there is not one right way to connect across differences. It's vitally important to see the humanity in others, and to find commonality as those qualities are platforms to acknowledge and work with differences in a constructive and relationship-building manner.

Section 4: Learning from an Interaction Across Differences (cont.)



Assessing for Equity Implications

Your final step towards improving your ability to connect across difference is to focus your intention on the equity⁸ implications. This is not to negate the importance of focusing on equity throughout the planning and experience of the interaction, but to be sure you specifically assess for the implications before you conclude.

- Review all of your responses from this tool. Where do you see evidence of concern for equity? Where do you see a need for attention to equity implications that you didn't recognize at the time?
- How has this process increased your equity consciousness?
- What will you do more of, less of, and/or differently in the future as a result of your learning from this experience?



[Image description: Keep Learning written on rural road.]

⁸When policies, practices, interactions, and resources, are representative of, constructed by, and responsive to all people such that each individual has access to, can meaningfully participate, and make progress in high-quality experiences that empower them towards self-determination and reduces disparities in outcomes fully inclusive of individual characteristics and cultural identities (Fraser, 2008; Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012).



Section 4: Learning from an Interaction Across Differences: Notes Page



Key Terms

All definitions are from *Complexities of the Self: Inner Work for Equity Leaders*, unless otherwise noted.

Altered Self: A self that is disconnected from one's core self as a result of interactions and experiences in the world; a compromised sense of self that reduces one's ability to accurately perceive circumstances and the present moment as they are.

Core Self: One's innate self, who a person is at their core.

Critical Consciousness: An active state of seeking to identify the beliefs and language that obscure systemic inequities (Radd & Macey, 2013, p. 2).

Ego: A functional structure within each person that mediates the relationship between one's Core Self and that person's interactions in the world, as well as the relationship between one's whole self and other people.

Equity: When policies, practices, interactions, and resources, are representative of, constructed by, and responsive to all people such that each individual has access to, can meaningfully participate, and make progress in high-quality experiences that empower them towards self-determination and reduces disparities in outcomes fully inclusive of individual characteristics and cultural identities (Fraser, 2008; Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012).

Getting Hooked: An emotional and/or physiological reaction activated in response to perceived threat and in a way that constricts, or even commandeers, one's thinking process and thoughts. Importantly, the event or circumstance that triggered this response is not the cause of the response; the cause resides within one's inner life.

Internal (or Inner) Life: What goes on inside a person: their thoughts, emotions, physiology, paradigms, values, and meaning-making processes outcomes; how those inner dynamics interact with one another; and how those dynamics and interactions influence one's outward actions.

Marginalized Identity: A sociocultural identity (or intersection of identities (Crenshaw, 1989)) that lacks privilege, thus, is disproportionately subject to identity-targeting microaggressions, discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, and/or violence (e.g., LGBTQIA+, disability, non-White, woman/girl, non-Christian, etc.).



Key Terms (cont.)

Positionality: The sociocultural identities a person holds, and how those identities result in privilege or marginalization in any given situation. For more on positionality, see Moore, T., Jackson, R. G., Kyser, T. S., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2016). *Becoming an equity-oriented educator through critical self-reflection. Equity Dispatch.* Great Lakes Equity Center (GLEC).

Power: The ability to compel another's actions or circumstances with or without their consent; takes many forms along a continuum of formal and positional power on one end, to informal and social on the other end. While the possession of power does not equate to the use of power, the presence of power differentials has impact in relationships and across contexts.

Privileged Identity: A sociocultural identity to which "systemic power is currently and durably attached;" in the United States, this includes people who are "White, cisgender male, heterosexual, English speaking, Christian, US-born, and temporarily able-bodied" (Radd et al., 2021, p. 50).



About the Author

Dr. Sharon Radd is Associate Professor and Program Director for the MA-Organizational Leadership Program at St. Catherine University. She is co-author of the book *Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership* (ASCD), a Senior Partner with The Five Practices Group, and Principal Consultant with ConsciousPraxis, partnering with education, public, and non-profit organizations and leaders to foster effective and inclusive leadership.

Prior to her current work, Radd was a public school administrator, professional development facilitator, and school social worker for 23 years. Her research centers on the unique practice of leadership that aims to advance social justice, particularly in the public and non-profit sectors; she explores this practice from the theoretical, conceptual and empirical study of adult learning, organizational change, and discursive functioning of individuals, groups, organizations, and societies.



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