

The Social Action, Leadership, and Transformation (SALT) Model

Introducing a new leadership framework that accounts for systemic oppression, power and privilege, and culture and identity. The SALT model denotes an explicit focus on leadership that is socially conscious and facilitates transformation to achieve justice.

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National Institute for Transformation and Equity

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Social oppression and systemic inequities are a global problem of paramount importance (Omi & Winant, 1990). Over the last decade within the U.S., the Occupy Wall Street movement, #BlackLivesMatter, and waves of protests have shed new light on old problems related to systemic oppression and renewed calls for justice (Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015). At the same time, those who seek to uphold the current social order have responded to and resisted social movements that aim to advance equity. Given these realities, it has never been more important for society to cultivate leaders who are able to understand these systemic contexts and play critical roles in advancing the well-being of all populations, especially those from underserved and historically marginalized communities.

The vast majority of discourse on leadership does not explicitly acknowledge the aforementioned social and political contexts, or explain how these systems of oppression and inequities intersect with leadership (Dugan, 2017). In response, a handful of researchers have recently underscored the importance of considering cultural diversity, oppression, and social justice as critical concepts in understanding leadership (e.g., Ospina, Foldy, El Hadidy, Dodge, Hofmann-Pinilla, & Su, 2012; Quantz, Cambron-McCabe, Dantley, & Hachem, 2016). Yet, frameworks that take the larger body of knowledge about oppression, culture, diversity, and equity into account and can be easily applied to the design and delivery of leadership development initiatives are still difficult to find.

The current brief introduces a new leadership framework that accounts for the larger body of knowledge related to systemic oppression, power and privilege, and culture and identity. In doing so, this new perspective infuses the concept of leadership with the moral obligation to advance justice and cultivate a more equitable society. The new model—the Social Action, Leadership, and Transformation (SALT) model—denotes an explicit focus on leadership that is socially conscious and facilitates transformation to achieve justice.

Context and Rationale for a New Leadership Model

A wide range of leadership theories have been proposed throughout history (Dugan, 2017). Until recently, however, most of these leadership frameworks were focused on understanding the individual leader or the group that they lead, while failing to account for or explain the role of leaders in creating a better society. Over the last couple decades, leadership frameworks have shifted attention to how leaders can foster positive social change through transformative leadership (Antonakis, 2012; Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Díaz-Sáenz, 2011; Dinh et. al., 2014). The most widely cited and used transformative leadership framework in higher education settings is the Social Change Model (SCM) of leadership (Astin et al., 1996). The SCM delineates the characteristics of leaders who seek positive social change, through developing consciousness of self, congruence between one's dispositions (e.g., values, beliefs and strengths), an orientation toward collaboration, development of common purpose, the engagement of controversy with civility, and citizenship. The SCM has made significant contributions to current understandings of leadership and been a useful tool in helping cultivate leaders who want to have a positive impact on society (Komivies & Wagner, 2016). However, like all models and frameworks, the SCM has limitations. Most relevant to the current discussion are the limitations of the SCM when leadership is considered in the context of systemic oppression and conversations about advancing equity. For example, these limitations include the following:

- It is often not clear what qualifies as positive social change within the SCM. Although social justice is named as a central tenet in the original SCM, the term is ambiguously defined within this model and issues of oppression and equity are not explicitly manifest in the core values that comprise the SCM.
- It is not clear how the interests and voices of marginalized social groups were integrated

into and are reflected in the core elements of the SCM. Evidence suggests that failing to intentionally integrate minoritized groups' perspectives into the core elements of models can function to perpetually marginalize their perspectives in research, discourse, and practice that are grounded in these frameworks (Museus, 2014). This perpetual marginalization can also lead to the development of leaders who espouse deficit perspectives that perpetuate problematic perceptions of historically marginalized communities as broken and in need of fixing (Valencia, 1995).

- As a result of the realities above, while the SCM might be used to facilitate conversations about oppression and equity in some contexts, it can also be utilized to center other types of positive change (e.g., fostering an environment where everyone gets along) without ever meaningfully addressing issues of justice. Therefore, the model can potentially lead to the development of leaders who do not understand how their decisions and behaviors might reinforce or combat problematic and oppressive systems.
- Finally, if the voices of marginalized populations are not explicitly reflected in the SCM, then researchers and practitioners can wind up forcing these groups' perspectives into a framework that does not accurately reflect their realities. This process can lead to researchers and practitioners privileging the ideas embedded in the model while diminishing the importance of the cultural realities and worldviews of minoritized populations that are not manifest in the framework.

The Social Action, Leadership, and Transformation (SALT) Model

To address the aforementioned limitations, the National Center for Institutional Diversity (NCID) at the University of Michigan and National Institute for Transformation and Equity (NITE) at Indiana University have collaboratively developed the SALT model. The process began by analyzing the SCM, which was an ideal starting point given that the SCM was structured in a way that allows leadership development educators to easily identify the critical traits that must be cultivated to foster effective leadership skills. We examined each

core element of the SCM, comparing it with other existing leadership frameworks and research related to issues of power, privilege, oppression, culture, and identity. This process resulted in an alternative set of elements that are different from the values embedded within the SCM, and more explicitly account for the aforementioned systemic realities.

Similar to the SCM, the SALT model delineates the elements of a specific kind of leadership. The assumption is that these indicators of social justice leadership are essential to fostering the capacity of individuals, communities, and society to cultivate a system that is more equitable. We utilize Bell's (2016) widely used definition of social justice:

...the goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The process of attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change (p. 3).

This definition reinforces that the SALT model should not be applied without centering equity in the effort. In addition, the concept of social justice and the systemic forces that oppose it (i.e., systems of oppression) are explicitly reflected in several of the indicators that comprise the model. Due to space limitations, we provide only a brief overview of these elements herein.

1. **Capacity for Empathy:** Capacity for empathy is crucial to developing leaders who are capable of advancing social justice. Leaders who can empathize have a greater ability to understand other peoples' experiences, perspectives, and life situations (Segal, 2011, p. 266-7). Greater empathy—especially for historically oppressed communities—can also allow leaders to better understand how structural inequities impact real lives and thereby develop anti-deficit perspectives that will allow them to empower, more than harm, historically marginalized populations through their actions.
2. **Critical Consciousness:** An understanding of historical and contemporary forms of

oppression (e.g., racism, genderism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc.) that negatively affect marginalized communities is an important element of leadership that advances social justice (Solòrzano & Bernal, 2001). It is important to note that a deeper comprehension of systems of oppression requires individuals to understand their own positionality within these larger structures (e.g., how they are privileged and oppressed through various social systems).

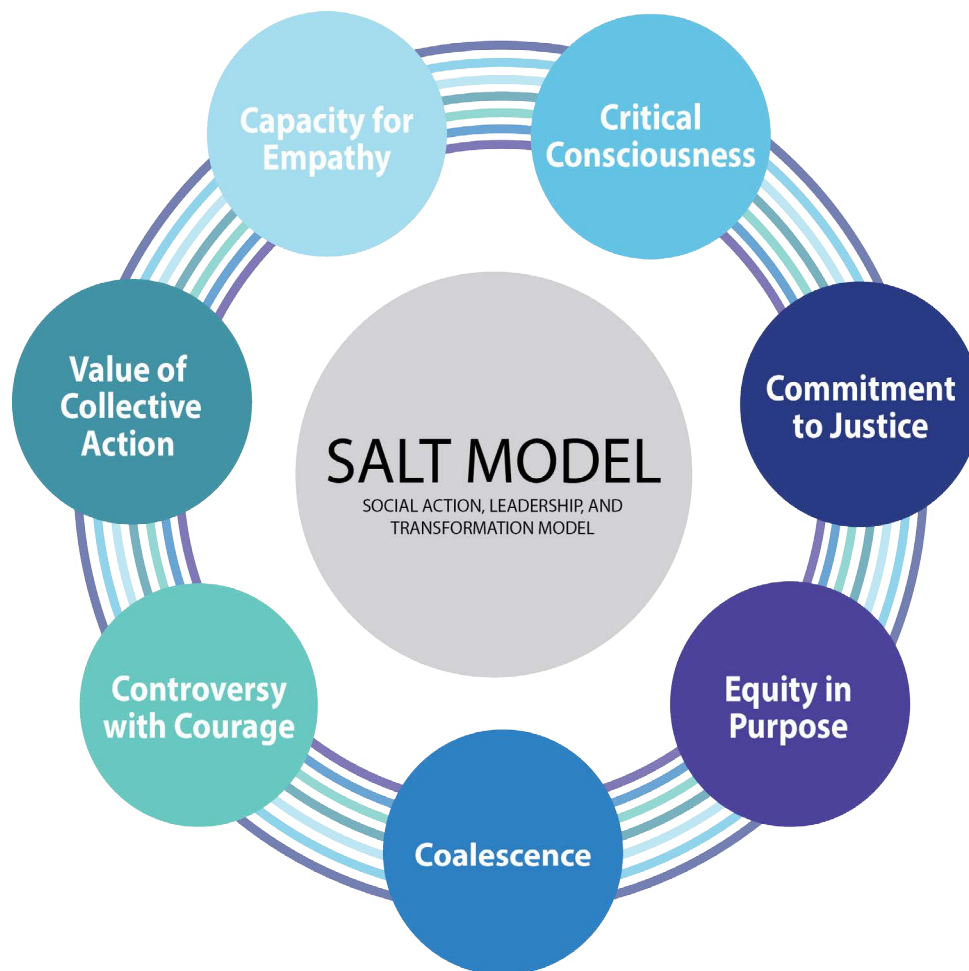
3. Commitment to Justice: A commitment to justice implies a motivation to advance the well-being of historically oppressed communities (Marsh, 2008; Umemoto, 2000). It also entails the prioritization of efforts to achieve a more just society, where all groups are equally valued, validated, and empowered (Fraser, 1999; Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Such a commitment requires the cultivation of agency, or a sense of empowerment, which is critical in developing the

capacity to resist oppression (Moane, 2003).

4. Equity in Purpose: Recognizes that, when groups develop “common” purposes, they often inherently privilege the voices of those in power and marginalize other interests. In contrast, equitable purposes take into account the multiplicity of relevant voices and ensure that the unique interests of diverse groups are equally centered in group efforts (Bensimon, Robert, Dowd, & Harris, 2007).

5. Value of Collective Action: Values of collective action are enacted when leaders work with diverse communities to collectively resist multiple forms of oppression and advance justice for all historically underserved and marginalized communities (Coloma, 2006; Museus & Iftikar, 2013; Umemoto, 1989). These values can allow leaders to contribute to shared or collective agency among other social justice leaders.

The Social Action, Leadership, and Transformation Model



6. Controversy with Courage: Recognizes that, while some level of civility is important, calls for civility can also be used to avoid difficult conversations, vilify those confronting oppression, and inhibit progress toward justice. Thus, social justice leadership requires individuals to engage controversy courageously by embracing discomfort, acknowledging privilege and oppression, and contributing to conversations about significant social problems (Callahan, 2011; Singleton & Hays, 2008).

7. Coalescence: Coalescence refers to the process by which individuals and groups develop a shared understanding that systemic equity or justice is beneficial for all groups, and coalesce around these goals (Reitan, 2012).

Implications for Research and Practice

The SALT model has several implications for research and practice. With regard to research, a psychometric scale has been developed to measure the individual dispositions embedded in the SALT framework. The scale is currently being tested and will be made available for researchers in 2018. Moving forward, researchers can utilize the SALT model to examine a wide range of topics related to leadership. For example, the SALT model can be used to facilitate future research by providing a conceptual lens to do the following:

- Analyze how individuals develop along the dimensions of social justice leadership;
- Examine how social justice leadership development manifests in different communities;
- Study how individuals' social identities shape their development of social justice leadership orientations;
- Identify the mechanisms, including environmental contexts and educational practices, that are effective at facilitating social justice leadership development;
- Excavate environmental and individual barriers to cultivating social justice leadership orientations.

These are just a few examples of potential lines of inquiry that can build on the SALT model and

advance knowledge about leadership. The SALT model also has several implications for practice. These implications include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- If educators designing and delivering leadership development programs want to cultivate leaders who understand oppression and will equitably serve the interests of all groups that they impact, they should consider structuring their leadership development curricula around the core elements of the SALT model;
- Professionals who train future educators can integrate the SALT model into curricula, programs, and activities aimed at developing leadership knowledge and skills;
- Those offering leadership development opportunities can also utilize the SALT framework to understand the limitations of other models that they might employ. For instance, the SALT model might help those utilizing the SCM understand that focusing only on civility in the ways in which leaders address controversy can fail to account for critical traits (e.g., courage) that allow leaders to engage controversy while advancing social justice agendas.

Conclusion

In these politically turbulent times, it is essential that researchers generate knowledge about how educators can cultivate leaders that are committed to eradicating oppression and advancing justice. It is equally critical that society cultivate leaders who can understand larger systemic social problems and effectively lead in ways that do not exacerbate existing systems of oppression, but that move the needle toward equity. While existing leadership frameworks have made important contributions to leadership discourse, they do not practically center these necessities in leadership conversations. The SALT model addresses this significant limitation, and is one useful tool that researchers and educators can utilize to advance a collective social justice leadership agenda.

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