

Prince

Introduction of a new breed leader

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In his 1981 song 'Sexuality', Prince declared that the world needed 'new breed leaders' to marshal it into a different direction. In a career that traversed five decades, Prince emerged as one of those leaders. While countless discussions have contemplated the legacy of Prince's inimitable career, few have explored it from the perspective of leadership. However, to fully appreciate Prince's enduring impact, we must contemplate his role as a leader. When analysed within the context of recognized leadership frameworks, we can conclude that Prince was one of the most influential and successful leaders of the last half-century.

As arguably the greatest self-contained musical talent of all time, few deny Prince's artistic genius. He blurred lines, eviscerated boundaries and blended styles to create a sound that was unmistakably Prince. However, his impact extends beyond his sound. More than any music artist before or during his time, Prince was a game changer whose influence beyond music is unsurpassed. From presenting alternative depictions of Black masculinity (Cummings; Thrasher; Whiteneir Jr.) to upending staid music industry business models (España), Prince was 'a beacon of fluidity and rebellion' (Potts 165). He reimagined the world and courageously redefined it for many by constantly breaking new ground on and off the stage. In addition to empowering those around him, he inspired people from all walks of life to reach their highest selves by freeing themselves from the social constructs that prevented their elevation. Morris explains, 'He was being authentically himself in a way that some of us could recognize and appreciate, some of us could love and adore, and others of us tried to emulate because we understood it as an absolute reflection of the things we're all capable of' (qtd in Long). This alone qualifies Prince as a leader. However, utilizing various leadership frameworks to examine his work reveals that, as was the case with his art, Prince employed a hybridized leadership style. It was a unique fusion of thought, transformational, soulful and servant leadership. By merging these distinctive leadership styles to realize his vision of the world, Prince established himself as a new breed leader.

An overview of leadership and Prince

Regardless of the domain or style, there are some basic universal truths about leadership. Leadership is predicated more upon action than upon position or title. This is why political leaders are not the only people we think of when discussing leaders. In fact, much of the discussion of leaders in the last half-century has shifted away from those who hold political offices. For example, some of the most revered leaders of the last fifty years in the United States have included Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, none of whom ever held a political office. Even legendary heads of state Fidel Castro and Nelson Mandela were successful leaders long before taking office. This is because the greatest leaders gain the confidence of their followers through both their words and their actions.

Leaders make a decision to 'influence the thinking, behavior, and development of others' (Mosaic 1). In short, leaders choose to be leaders and followers choose to follow them. That is the simple equation of leadership. Of course, to lead successfully one needs to not only attract followers but gain their trust as well. In other words, leaders have to persuade followers to both accept their vision and their ability to achieve that vision. Because leadership is an evolving practice, leaders will evolve as will their relationship with their followers. However, as long as the leader has established himself as authentic, open, trustworthy and passionate about the mission, his followers will continue to believe in him (Mosaic 2).

An intentional analysis of Prince's career reveals he decided early on to be the new breed leader he summoned in 'Sexuality'. At his 2004 *Rock n Roll Hall of Fame* induction, Prince stated, 'When I first started out in this music industry, I was most concerned with freedom: Freedom to produce, freedom to play all the instruments on my records, freedom to say anything I wanted to' (Nolfi). As a result, Prince signed an unprecedented recording contract that gave a virtually unknown seventeen-year-old complete artistic control. An early indicator of Prince's leadership, his 1978 debut album *For You* introduced the world to the phrase 'Produced, Arranged, Composed and Performed by Prince' – a phrase that would inspire a future generation of self-contained artists to follow in his footsteps. With his artistic freedom, Prince established himself as a one-man musical phenomenon with his first two albums. However, on his third album, *Dirty Mind* (1980), he not only radically expanded his R&B-Funk-Rock sound to include new wave; he also overtly integrated politics into his music, signalling that politics would be integral to his art. The lead single 'Uptown' represents a utopian alternate reality that embodies Prince's vision for the world. Although Uptown is an actual neighbourhood in Prince's hometown of Minneapolis, the song suggests that it could also exist anywhere, especially in one's mind.

Prince's political beliefs undergird his work as much as sex and spirituality. He wrote about the world he lived in alongside the one he envisioned. 'Sexuality' from the *Controversy* (1981) album is significant because it both explores Prince's politics and establishes his desire to lead his listeners. It builds upon the sociocultural criticism and themes of freedom, individuality and racial harmony that he introduced in 'Uptown'. 'Sexuality' sees Prince implore his listeners to let him lead them to the

place he envisions as being free from the world's pitfalls and constraints. Given that leaders 'are keenly interested in changing the world around them' (Mosaic 3), in presenting an alternate vision of society, Prince conveys his desire to change the world in 'Sexuality'. In the decades that followed, he worked to realize that change. Woodworth offers, 'It is nearly impossible to analyze his music without making reference to his statements and public actions' (39). Importantly, his leadership was not confined to his music or even his industry. As such, his impact is almost unquantifiable in its breadth and depth. It extends to areas such as poetry, film, fashion, technology and politics.

Mosaic identifies several 'truths about leadership' that are applicable to Prince. One truth is that credibility is the foundation of leadership. Prince's unrivalled talent and the sheer quality and quantity of his work earned him the utmost credibility as a master of his craft. Moreover, his work ethic, uncompromising standard of excellence and integrity in addition to his activism, philanthropy and willingness to make personal sacrifices to challenge injustices cemented his credibility. Another leadership truth is that 'values drive commitment'. Prince exhibited his values of freedom, love, equality and compassion in his work. In addition to embodying these values himself, he demonstrated his commitment to them in his inner world, which reflected his belief that neither race nor gender should dictate what one can do. Evidence of this is seen in the musicians and personnel he often employed in roles that defied race and gender stereotypes.

'Exemplary leaders – the kind of leaders people want to follow – are always associated with changing the status quo' (Mosaic 11). Prince was committed to changing the status quo. The list of ways he did so artistically and culturally is seemingly endless. For example, he shattered perceptions of what styles of music Black artists were expected to play and challenged recording industry norms regarding artists' ownership of their music. According to Mosaic, 'Leadership is an affair of the heart [and] love is the motivation that energizes leaders to give so much for others' (11). Love is a term that is inextricably linked to Prince's work. Whether it was love of music, love of God, love of self or love of mankind, love was a driving force in Prince's work. It is no coincidence that he named his charitable organization Love4OneAnother or that the unpronounceable symbol that was once his name is also known as the love symbol.

Finally, 'leaders inspire others and connect to their dreams and aspirations' (Mosaic 5). Prince led his mission to create a world of freedom, self-determination, equality, love and compassion by an example that ultimately had an intergenerational, intercultural and interdisciplinary influence. Countless fellow musicians have cited the groundbreaking trails he blazed artistically and professionally as inspirations. Singer Alicia Keys suggests, 'He is the inspiration that generations will return to until the end of time' (Nolfi). Further, musician Lenny Kravitz describes Prince as 'the one who showed me the possibilities within myself' (Bartleet). Likewise, many of Prince's followers have credited him with inspiring them to boldly approach life as he did. Gadenne reflects, 'He was unique and transgressive, and this has shown me how to be fearless ... he was creative and flamboyant, and this taught me to recognize freedom' (Potts 184).

Racial context

One must venture beyond Prince's hit songs to fully comprehend the circumstances that fuelled both his vision as a leader and his mission to realize it. Burdett argues 'of the tools of leadership none is more important than language' (8). Through his lyrics, Prince professed an unwavering belief in love, spirituality, equality, freedom and self-determination. One could argue that freedom and self-determination are chief among these tenets. From 'Uptown' (1980) to 'Free Urself' (2015), these themes recur throughout his massive catalogue. Psychoanalyst Thomas Szasz asserts that 'the law of the human kingdom is to define or be defined' (65). There is likely no better embodiment of this theory than Prince who defied pre-constructed notions of genre, race and gender to self-define his sound and image.

While self-definition may be a universal desire, it is important to acknowledge the racial context of Prince's fight to define himself. For Black people in America the need to self-define is a vital concomitant of the ongoing battle for freedom and equality. It is one that is both internal and external. Therefore, as a Black man born in America, Prince's need to 'define or be defined' was undoubtedly rooted in the continued struggle for Black people in America to be liberated from the restrictions imposed by racism. As Prince challenged limited and often distorted preconceptions of Blackness in the music industry, he confronted the reality that the constrictions of racism plague Black people collectively and individually regardless of wealth, fame, talent or physical appearance. Therefore, to properly contextualize Prince's fight for self-definition, Williams (301) argues the importance of applying Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, which posits that the 'two-ness' of being both Black and American results in Blacks seeking to reconcile these often 'warring' identities in a manner that makes it possible 'to be both [Black] and an American ... without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in [one's] face' (Du Bois 2–3). Williams explains, 'Dubois's theory of double consciousness speaks to Prince's defying of stereotypes, power relations, and simplistic binaries' (301). Likewise, Perry applies Dubois' theory of double consciousness to Prince, drawing parallels between the life experiences of both men: 'Like DuBois, Prince's experiences of growing up in a largely [w]hite environment were still those of a [b]lack person – with race as a looming issue from childhood throughout life' (203).

Prince represented a new member of the Black freedom movement. He embodied the rebellious spirit, confidence and self-determination of the Black freedom fighters who preceded him. '[He] was that shining example of a Black person who had won his freedom on a number of levels' (Neal). However, for many Black people, particularly those who came of age in the 1980s during his meteoric rise to fame, Prince was the first real example of Black self-definition and individuality with whom they could relate. McInnis points out:

It is this notion of individuality ... which resonates in Prince's work. It is accepting the notion that the [1980s] was a time for the struggle of the black individual – a time when he would break out and free himself of all the chains of race, class, and gender. This is why Prince's work spoke to so many of us. ... If it is true that black

music is black history, then Prince is an irrefutable part of that history. (McInnis Jr. xxiii–xxiv)

Prince used his music to communicate the ongoing struggle for Blacks in America. In doing so, he also reiterated his identity as a Black man and his connection to the Black community. From oblique references to race in songs like 'Raspberry Beret' and 'Breakfast Can Wait' to explicit commentary on topics such as slavery, systemic racism, Black love and resilience in such songs as 'Avalanche', 'Don't Play Me', 'Dear Mr. Man', 'Family Name' and 'Black Muse', Prince's catalogue includes numerous songs that depict the Black experience in America.

However, Prince's Black consciousness was not limited to his lyrics. When he wrote 'Slave' on his face during his epic battle for emancipation from his record company, he drew a profound connection between modern-day labour inequities and the past enslavement of Black people in America. 'During the dispute, Prince took his personal battle with the record company, his general ideas about the value of work, and his ideas about the work of musicians and particularized all of this within the race-specific context of the African American history of slavery and economic exploitation' (Perry 205). It was an iconic act that further endeared him to Black audiences, many of whom were his earliest and most ardent followers because of the ways he modelled Blackness. Emerson explains, 'we were proud that he was fighting the system when he was writing slave on his face and changed his name to the symbol. ... He was doing these things for other people who would come along later, not just himself' (qtd in Italie).

As Prince's career progressed, his references to racism became increasingly more explicit, which is not unlike the trajectory of many Black leaders before him who became increasingly disillusioned and frustrated with the lack of progress in eradicating systemic racism. His philanthropic support of organizations that worked to empower Black people and to fight racial injustice bespeak his Black consciousness and commitment to his community. 'He was a reflection of us. ... He knew it would take a revolution, and through his life he tried to show us what revolution could look like' (Garza).

A widely circulated quote attributed to Prince by a former manager relates that early in his career Prince asked his record label to 'not make him Black'. Although the quote is often misinterpreted to denote a desire to disassociate from his race, it highlights that even as a young artist, Prince was keenly aware of the ways Black artists are mistreated and marginalized by the music industry. A direct correlation can be made between Prince's desire for control of his music, image and career and his experiences as a Black man in America (Woodworth 42). Given that the entertainment industry is a microcosm of society, it is clear that Prince's desire to not be made Black was actually a desire to be freed from the imposition of racism, not a desire to disassociate from his racial identity or community.

Neal notes, 'In art, business and philanthropy, [Prince] kept an investment in the Black aesthetics and communities that provided him with both his voice and vision' (Neal). Moreover, Henderson explains, 'black leadership does not simply emerge from or respond to a commonality of struggle against White supremacy, but more