

LEADERSHIP IS A RESPONSIBILITY

OFFICIAL DISCUSSION GUIDE

PREVIEW EDITION

Questions for Reflection, Dialogue, and Responsible Action

Featuring Chapter 1 + Chapter 14

Dr. Marisol Capellan

UNDERSTAND • QUESTION • DISCUSS • APPLY

ABOUT THIS PREVIEW EDITION

This Preview Edition offers a substantial introduction to the official discussion guide for *Leadership Is a Responsibility*. It is designed to be useful on its own while giving readers, facilitators, leadership teams, and educators a representative view of the complete 15-chapter resource.

THIS PREVIEW INCLUDES

- Welcome to the Discussion Guide
- Before You Begin reflection questions
- The Big Idea
- Chapter 1 — Preamble and Overview
- Chapter 14 — How to Become a Responsible Leader
- A preview of what is included in the complete guide

The complete guide contains discussion modules for all 15 chapters plus cross-chapter questions, the Leadership Responsibility Audit, a 30-day action framework, leadership-team agendas, book-club formats, facilitator notes, and additional implementation tools.

Copyright © 2023–2026 Dr. Marisol Capellan. All rights reserved. This Preview Edition is licensed only for personal reading, book-club discussion, educational discussion, and internal noncommercial organizational use. COMMERCIAL USE IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED. No consultant, coach, trainer, facilitator, publisher, business, or other person or organization may sell, resell, rebrand, reproduce, distribute, adapt, translate, teach from, facilitate from, or incorporate this guide or its substantive content into any paid service, course, workshop, training, coaching engagement, certification, commercial product, proprietary methodology, database, or AI system without prior written permission from Dr. Marisol Capellan. Permissions and licensing: coaching@marisolcapellan.com.

COPYRIGHT, LICENSE & USE NOTICE

Leadership Is a Responsibility © 2023 Dr. Marisol Capellan. Official Discussion Guide Preview Edition © 2026 Dr. Marisol Capellan. All rights reserved.

COMMERCIAL USE IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED.

- This guide may be used only for personal study, book-club discussion, educational discussion, and internal noncommercial use by an organization that lawfully obtained a copy.
- Without prior written permission, you may not sell, resell, sublicense, rent, republish, distribute, commercially reproduce, rebrand, adapt, translate, or create derivative commercial materials from this guide.
- You may not use this guide, its questions, scenarios, framework, exercises, or tools in paid consulting, coaching, facilitation, training, workshops, certification programs, courses, corporate programs, or any other revenue-generating service.
- You may not incorporate this guide or its substantive content into commercial products, assessments, databases, proprietary methodologies, or commercial AI systems.
- Do not remove, obscure, or alter the author name, copyright notice, attribution, or use restrictions.
- For permissions, licensing, bulk organizational use, or authorized facilitation: coaching@marisolcapellan.com.

WELCOME TO THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

Leadership Is a Responsibility asks readers to look beyond the title, status, visibility, and conventional privileges associated with leadership and consider a more consequential question:

What do leaders owe the people affected by their power, decisions, behavior, and influence?

This guide is designed to help readers move from reading to examination and from examination to action.

The book combines personal experience, research, interviews, workplace analysis, and practical leadership guidance. Its three parts move through a deliberate progression: first, the lived experiences that shaped the author's understanding of leadership; second, the barriers women—particularly Black women, Afro-Latinas, and working mothers—encounter in organizations; and finally, the case for a more responsible form of leadership and the behaviors required to practice it.

The purpose of this guide is not to tell readers what to think.

It is to create better questions.

Some questions will ask you to examine yourself. Others will ask you to examine organizations, systems, traditions, and assumptions that may have become so familiar that they are rarely challenged.

Use the guide to discuss where responsibility begins, how far it extends, what happens when authority is separated from accountability, and what leadership requires when doing the right thing is difficult, inconvenient, or costly.

The goal is not agreement.

The goal is more thoughtful leadership.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before reading—or before beginning a group discussion—answer these questions independently.

1. What makes someone a leader: title, authority, influence, responsibility, behavior, or something else?
2. When a person accepts authority over others, what responsibilities should automatically accompany that authority?
3. How much responsibility should leaders have for an employee's experience at work?

4. Can a leader produce strong business results and still be a bad leader? What would make that possible?
5. Who is responsible for identifying inequities in an organization: the people experiencing them or the people with the authority to change them?
6. How do race, gender, socioeconomic background, caregiving responsibilities, nationality, and other identities affect access to opportunity?
7. When organizations say they value inclusion, what evidence should employees be able to see?
8. What behaviors does your organization actually reward when selecting leaders?
9. When should a leader challenge an established system rather than simply operate effectively within it?
10. What should happen when an organization's stated values conflict with the everyday behavior of people in positions of authority?
11. What is the difference between caring about an injustice and accepting responsibility for changing it?
12. Complete this sentence before continuing: Leadership is a responsibility to _____.

Keep your answers.

Return to them after completing the book.

THE BIG IDEA

Leadership is often discussed through the language of effectiveness.

Can a leader motivate people?

Can the leader communicate?

Can the leader execute strategy?

Can the leader improve performance?

Can the leader influence others?

Leadership Is a Responsibility does not dismiss those questions. It argues, however, that they are incomplete.

Leadership affects human beings.

Managers make decisions about opportunities, assignments, evaluations, promotions, flexibility, recognition, compensation, belonging, and access. Their behavior can influence whether another person develops, advances, speaks, remains silent, stays, leaves, thrives, or struggles.

Leadership therefore carries consequences that extend beyond operational performance.

The book begins with lived experience because leadership is not experienced as an abstract theory by the people subject to it. It is experienced in meetings, conversations, opportunities, exclusions, decisions, silences, promotions, assignments, responses to complaints, and the behavior leaders permit.

Part I traces experiences that shaped Dr. Marisol Capellan's understanding of education, professional opportunity, management, workplace discrimination, and organizational response.

Part II widens the lens. The discussion moves from one person's experience to the structural and social conditions that affect women's careers, with particular attention to intersectionality, invisible barriers, Black women's workplace experiences, Afro-Latina identity, and the working-mother penalty.

Part III then asks what leaders should do with that knowledge.

The book's answer is not simply to become nicer.

Responsible leadership requires examining decisions, caring about people, listening to perspectives different from one's own, translating concern into action, actively promoting inclusion, and accepting accountability for what happens under one's leadership.

The book consequently asks readers to examine leadership at two levels simultaneously.

The first is personal:

How do I behave when I have power?

The second is systemic:

What conditions does my leadership maintain, tolerate, challenge, or change?

Keep both questions in view throughout this guide.

PART I — PARTS OF MY STORY

CHAPTER 1

PREAMBLE AND OVERVIEW

Chapter at a Glance

Chapter 1 establishes the life experiences through which the book's argument about leadership will later emerge. Capellan describes childhood poverty in the Dominican Republic, immigration, instability, educational ambition, professional achievement, motherhood, and her belief that extraordinary effort and performance would produce opportunity. The chapter complicates that assumption by introducing the role of race, gender, accent, caregiving responsibilities, socioeconomic background, access, and organizational power. It also introduces a recurring problem in the book: the distance between institutions that publicly embrace inclusion and the experiences people may encounter inside them. The chapter asks readers to consider whether hard work alone determines advancement—and what responsibility leaders carry when the systems they oversee do not provide comparable opportunity to everyone.

Core Ideas

- Education can create opportunity while not eliminating structural disadvantage.
- Hard work and performance do not guarantee equal access to advancement.
- Privilege includes access to social capital, resources, information, and acceptance.
- Multiple identities can shape how a person experiences the same organization.
- Public commitments to inclusion matter only when organizational behavior supports them.

Key Tension

Merit and effort vs. unequal access to opportunity

Personal Reflection

1. What assumptions about hard work and success shaped your early career?
2. When have you benefited from access, information, relationships, or credibility that another person might not have had?
3. Have you ever interpreted someone's lack of advancement as a lack of effort without examining the environment around them?
4. Which parts of your identity have generally helped you navigate institutions? Which have required additional effort?
5. Where have you seen an organization's public identity differ from employees' everyday experiences?

Group Discussion

1. Why is the belief that “hard work leads to success” both useful and incomplete?
2. What forms of privilege are easiest to recognize? Which are easiest to overlook?
3. How should leaders distinguish between differences in performance and differences in access?
4. Can an organization believe sincerely that it is meritocratic while producing inequitable outcomes?
5. What happens when employees believe the formal rules say one thing but the unwritten rules say another?
6. How can leaders identify barriers they have never personally experienced?
7. What responsibility do leaders have for inequities they did not create?
8. When does organizational silence become a leadership decision?

Leadership in Practice

1. Where in your organization does informal access matter as much as formal performance?
2. Who learns the unwritten rules quickly—and who is expected to discover them independently?
3. What evidence would demonstrate that your organization's inclusion commitments operate in practice?

Discussion Scenario

A financial-services company promotes itself as a meritocracy. Its promotion policy lists performance, leadership potential, and client impact as the primary criteria.

Yet most senior leaders have developed their careers through high-visibility assignments distributed informally by executives. Employees who socialize with senior leaders outside work tend to hear about opportunities before others do. Several high-performing employees with caregiving responsibilities rarely attend after-hours events and have received fewer stretch assignments.

No rule explicitly disadvantages them. Their annual reviews are strong.

A senior executive responds to concerns by saying, “Everyone has the same opportunity. People just have to make themselves visible.”

Discuss

1. Is the system genuinely meritocratic? Why or why not?
2. Where does responsibility lie if no individual policy appears discriminatory?
3. What would a responsible leader examine before defending the system?
4. How could access to opportunity be redesigned without eliminating managerial judgment?

Responsibility Check

Before acting, ask:

- Am I evaluating performance or familiarity?
- Who had access to the opportunity before I made this decision?
- What assumptions am I making about why someone has or has not advanced?
- Would someone outside my usual network understand how to succeed here?

One Action

Identify one opportunity you influence—an assignment, introduction, meeting, project, or developmental experience—and examine who normally receives access to it.

Journal Prompt

Think about an important opportunity in your career. Beyond your own effort, who or what helped make that opportunity possible? What does that reveal about the relationship between merit and access?

PART III — LEADERSHIP IS A RESPONSIBILITY

CHAPTER 14

HOW TO BECOME A RESPONSIBLE LEADER

Chapter at a Glance

Chapter 14 translates the book's argument into a practical leadership philosophy. Capellan identifies six qualities of responsible and inclusive leadership: auditing behavior and decision-making; caring enough to put people first; remaining open to others' perspectives; practicing actionable sympathy; being pro-inclusive; and having the bravery to hold oneself and others accountable. The chapter also examines decision-making biases, listening, psychological safety, sponsorship, social capital, representation at levels of actual authority, and organizational accountability. Responsibility is presented not as a personality trait but as a set of choices that leaders repeatedly make.

Core Ideas

The chapter's six-part framework is:

1. Audit your behaviors and decision-making.
2. Care enough to put people first.
3. Remain open to others' perspectives.
4. Practice actionable sympathy.
5. Be pro-inclusive.
6. Have the bravery to hold yourself and others accountable.

The chapter also argues that:

- written values matter only when decisions reflect them;
- leaders must examine bias in their judgment;
- listening becomes meaningful when it affects action;
- equity will not emerge automatically;
- representation must extend to positions of decision-making power;
- accountability must apply even to high performers.

Key Tension

Good intentions vs. accountable action

Personal Reflection

1. Which of the six practices comes most naturally to you?
2. Which is easiest for you to avoid?
3. What recurring bias most affects your decisions?
4. How do the people you lead know that you care about them as people rather than merely as performers?
5. When did feedback from someone with less authority last change one of your decisions?
6. Who have you held accountable even when doing so was personally or professionally inconvenient?

Group Discussion

1. Why does responsible leadership begin with decision-making rather than aspiration?
2. Can putting people first conflict with business interests? What should happen when it does?

3. What is the difference between listening and allowing what you hear to affect a decision?
4. Why does Capellan distinguish actionable sympathy from feeling concern?
5. What does it mean to be “pro-inclusive” rather than merely non-discriminatory?
6. Why will equity not necessarily emerge through demographic change alone?
7. Should leaders' compensation or advancement depend partly on the culture experienced by their teams?
8. What does bravery look like in ordinary management—not just extraordinary crises?
9. Which organizational systems make responsible leadership easier?
10. Which systems reward the opposite?

Leadership in Practice

1. Audit one significant decision for assumptions, bias, affected stakeholders, and alignment with organizational values.
2. Identify one concern employees have repeatedly raised and ask what action has followed the listening.
3. Examine whether leaders in your organization are held accountable for team culture with the same seriousness applied to financial performance.

Discussion Scenario

A fast-growing startup has publicly committed to building an inclusive culture. Employee surveys repeatedly show that junior employees are afraid to disagree with senior leaders.

The CEO cares deeply about the culture and holds monthly listening sessions. Employees speak candidly. Yet executives rarely change decisions based on the feedback, and one senior leader known for humiliating dissenters continues receiving promotions because of exceptional business results.

Discuss

1. Which elements of responsible leadership are present?
2. Which are missing?
3. Is listening meaningful if nothing changes?
4. What would actionable sympathy require?
5. What would accountability require from the CEO?

Responsibility Check

Before acting, ask:

- Audit: What assumptions or biases are affecting my judgment?
- Care: How will this decision affect the people involved?
- Perspective: Whose view have I not heard?
- Action: What will I actually do with what I now understand?
- Inclusion: Who could be unintentionally excluded?
- Accountability: Am I willing to hold myself and others responsible for the outcome?

One Action

Use all six questions above before making one consequential decision this week.

Journal Prompt

Which of the six dimensions of responsible leadership would create the greatest change in your leadership if practiced consistently for the next year? Why?

INVITE DR. MARISOL CAPELLAN TO SPEAK

Bring *Leadership Is a Responsibility* to your organization, university, leadership team, or professional community. Dr. Marisol Capellan is available for keynotes, executive sessions, leadership discussions, workshops, university programs, and book-centered organizational experiences.

Speaking and organizational inquiries: coaching@marisolcapellan.com

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION**Get the Complete Official Discussion Guide**

This preview includes two of the book's fifteen chapter modules. The complete guide is designed for deeper individual reflection, book clubs, leadership teams, executive education, universities, and facilitated organizational conversations.

THE COMPLETE GUIDE INCLUDES

- Complete discussion modules for all 15 chapters
- Personal reflection and group discussion questions
- Leadership-in-practice applications and original discussion scenarios
- Responsibility Checks, weekly actions, and journal prompts
- Connecting the Ideas cross-chapter discussion section
- The Hard Questions
- The Leadership Responsibility Audit for leadership teams
- 30-Day Responsible Leadership Action Framework
- Personal Leadership Responsibility Commitment
- 60- and 90-minute leadership-team discussion formats
- One-session, three-session, and chapter-by-chapter book-club formats
- Facilitator notes and implementation guidance

DOWNLOAD THE COMPLETE GUIDE

marisolcapellan.com/leadership-is-a-responsibility/discussion-guide/

Access the complete 15-chapter guide and additional resources for applying responsible leadership in practice.

**Leadership gives us the ability to affect other people's lives.
What will you do with that responsibility?**