

An Inclusion Leader Playbook for the Next Phase of AI



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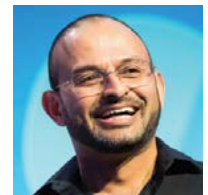
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Executive Summary

Use of artificial intelligence (AI) has moved beyond the pilot phase in many organizations. No longer confined to experimentation or isolated productivity gains, it is already reshaping how work gets done, how credibility is built, and how evaluation takes shape. For the past two years, most organizations have treated adoption as the headline story at work, focusing specifically on how often employees are using AI and to what degree. **A more consequential issue is now emerging: As AI moves deeper into everyday work, it is also beginning to redistribute power in the workplace—power over who gets access, whose judgment carries weight, and who benefits first.**

Workers can feel that shift already. Recent [Pew Research findings](#) show that over half of employees feel more worried than hopeful about the future use of AI in the workplace, and nearly a third think it will eliminate job opportunities in the future, even as employers report productivity gains in some use cases. And yet, despite these documented gains at the task level, many organizations have yet to see enterprise-wide productivity shifts. Recent research shows that surface-level fluency is advancing faster than the systems, norms, and support needed to make AI effective at scale ([FRAIM, 2026](#); Seramount, 2026). While organizations remain focused on productivity and performance, those goals will be hard to attain unless employees experience AI as fair, valuable, and trustworthy.

This paper argues that the contributions of inclusion leaders are essential to ensure that organizations govern AI at work successfully, especially as it reshapes organizational design, workforce access, and institutional trust. Drawing on current research and interviews with senior leaders working across AI and inclusion, this paper identifies five operating priorities for how inclusion leaders can and should shape the next phase of workplace AI. Inclusion leaders need to:

- 1. Develop practical fluency.**
- 2. Embed inclusion where AI decisions are made.**
- 3. Make the learning curve more equitable.**
- 4. Define human accountability early.**
- 5. Put AI to work in the moments that already shape fairness and opportunity.**

AI amplifies existing systems, both good and bad, and the earlier you remove bias, the more effective and inclusive AI will be. The window to shape this transition is still open, but it is narrowing quickly. Organizations that act now will be better positioned to build trust, strengthen adoption, and keep early AI gains from following old lines of advantage.

Why Inclusion Is the Next Mandate

AI is already part of the operating system of work. In many organizations, that shift is visible in generative uses—such as drafting and analysis—but also evaluation and decision-making. With that said, enterprise-wide execution remains uneven ([Seramount, 2026](#)). Some workers use AI every day. Others have barely touched it. Some are learning with support and permission. Others are improvising in the dark. Some organizations are building policies, training, and guidance related to AI practices. Others are realizing that use is spreading faster than leadership oversight.

In addition, AI is not culturally neutral. Many workplace tools reflect dominant-language, dominant-market assumptions about communication, authority, professionalism, and risk. That matters even in organizations that are not building AI themselves. Inclusion leaders may not control model design, but they can still ask who a tool was built for, how it performs across regions and groups, where it may flatten difference, and where human review is nonnegotiable.

“ It’s not just about a poor user experience, it’s about perpetuating systemic inequity.”

Courtney Heldreth, PhD

That unevenness makes this moment consequential. Organizations need to make decisions about who gets early access to tools and training, which roles are expected to adapt and transform first, where human oversight remains essential, and whose judgment continues to carry weight as workflows change. The decisions made in response to these concerns may not land evenly across the workforce, and over time, disparities shape who builds capability and who gains visibility. As Courtney Heldreth put it, “**Inclusion is not the default.**” Left to their defaults, AI systems optimize for efficiency and majority patterns, not equitable outcomes. That is exactly why inclusion cannot be treated as a late-stage correction once adoption is already underway.

Inclusion thus belongs on the AI agenda for four practical reasons.

First, trust will shape adoption. Employees will look to official AI policy for guidance, but they will decide whether AI feels legitimate based on whether its use seems transparent and fair. Inclusion leaders are often more aware of how people experience change than are most executives and can likely discern where trust is fragile, where communication is falling short, and where historically excluded talent may feel uncertainty or vulnerable.

Second, access will shape capability. Early differences in training and manager support can become larger differences in confidence, productivity, and advancement. That makes inclusion leaders' insights a critical component of the AI conversation well before any formal talent decision is automated. They can help organizations spot readiness gaps early, while there is still time to address them.

Third, AI is already affecting how opportunity is distributed. As AI moves into hiring and promotion, operating choices can have outsized effects. Inclusion leaders can help organizations identify where AI is already influencing employee standing, where review needs to be stronger, and where guardrails need to be clearer.

Fourth, influence matters most while the rules are still taking shape. Most large-scale changes stall when the people closest to workforce experience are brought in too late. Inclusion leaders can connect employee sentiment to rollout strategy, surface blind spots early, and help decision-makers build adoption that is more credible across the workforce.

This paper focuses on what inclusion leaders can do in the next 90 days to shape workplace AI inside organizations that are adopting, buying, and governing AI, not building frontier models from scratch. In short, AI already belongs on the inclusion agenda, but inclusion leaders may still need to make that case. As Michael Boone observed, **"Historically, voices of inclusion leaders have not been affirmed and amplified."** And yet, **"So many amazing contributions came out of people that found the right moment in time to be able to assert their voice into the conversation and assert their influence."** This is that kind of moment. Inclusion leaders do not need to own AI to shape what it becomes. Rather, they need to be close enough to the work, clear enough in their perspective, and bold enough in their influence to help steer it.

Three Signals Inclusion Leaders Cannot Ignore

Trust Is Becoming the Fault Line in Workplace AI

Employees are forming views about workplace AI before many organizations have built clear norms for accountability or learning. Recent research suggests that employees' trust in workplace AI is declining—only 46 percent of people globally say they are willing to trust AI systems at all ([KPMG, 2025](#)). According to [Edelman's 2026 Trust Barometer](#), 54 percent of low-income individuals and 44 percent of middle-income individuals feel that they will be left behind by generative AI. At the same time, employers still hold unusual institutional credibility. For instance, Edelman also found that “my employer” remains one of the most trusted institutions globally. With that, organizations still have an opportunity to establish trust with their employees—but not for long.

That trust gap is already shaping behavior. According to [KPMG](#), half of workers say they use AI at work without knowing whether it is allowed, and 44 percent say they knowingly use it improperly. While adoption moves ahead, organizations have yet to address adequately how to write and enforce AI policies in ways that boost employee confidence and trust in organizations. When governance feels unclear, adoption does not slow—it becomes harder to see. And when use goes underground, organizations lose visibility into how judgment is being shaped, where risk is accumulating, and who remains accountable for the decisions that follow.

For inclusion leaders, trust is an operating issue. It grows when organizations make AI use legible, especially in consequential decisions.

The Learning Curve Is Already Uneven

Better AI outcomes depend on more than access to a tool. They depend on training, role-specific guidance, manager support, and room to experiment. Yet those supports are far from universal. In the United States, only 12 percent of workers have received AI-related job training ([Pew, 2025](#)). Furthermore, AI use is far more common among executives and managers than among individual contributors ([Perceptyx, 2025](#)). And finally, [SHRM](#) reports that two-thirds of HR professionals think their organizations have not done enough to upskill employees for an AI-powered future ([SHRM, 2025](#)).

This pattern has broader inequality implications. Research on workplace adoption found that women were 25 percent less likely than men to use generative AI at work, while younger and more educated workers were also more likely to be users ([Otis et al., 2025](#); [Pew, 2025](#)). Noting an additional organizational layer, [Lean In](#) found that women are 25% less likely to be encouraged by managers to use AI and less likely to be praised or promoted when they do.

But AI's unequal effects are unlikely to stop there. Existing gaps in training, sponsorship, and language are likely to shape who can build AI fluency early and who is left to catch up. In that sense, race, ability, socioeconomic status, and global context belong in this picture too, even if the strongest evidence today is often about exposure and access rather than direct workplace use. These disparities matter not only for professional advancement, but also for the quality generative AI itself. Large language models (LLMs), in particular, learn from existing human inputs, creating a risk that unequal participation will shape what knowledge is produced and which stereotypes are reinforced.

The early AI divide has already spotlighted fluency gaps ([Seramount, 2026](#)). People with earlier exposure, clearer expectations, and stronger support have proven that they can build capability faster. Over time, that uneven start can produce uneven productivity and eventually widen existing capability gaps within organizations.

AI Is Moving Into the Systems That Shape Opportunity

AI is not staying inside productivity workflows. It is moving into the systems that shape how people are hired, assessed, monitored, developed, promoted, and paid. [SHRM found](#) that among organizations using AI in HR, more than half are using it in recruiting tasks such as résumé screening, candidate search, job targeting, and applicant communication. [OECD research](#) suggests use of algorithmic management tools is also spreading across the workplace more broadly.

In response, the labor market implications are becoming clearer. [Brookings](#) estimates that over 37 million workers are currently working in highly AI exposed occupations, including many with lower adaptive capacity if disruption accelerates. Those workers are not distributed evenly across the workforce. Within the most vulnerable group, 86 percent of those workers are women, concentrated largely in clerical and administrative roles. Recent research also suggests that AI pressure may weaken gateway roles that support entry and mobility, especially for early-career talent and workers without four-year degrees ([Brynjolfsson, Chandar, and Chen, 2025](#)).

Collectively, these findings point to a more grounded conclusion than either AI hype or AI panic allows. The early AI divide is showing up less in headline displacement than in how advantage is being distributed across the workforce. Therefore, intervention should focus on proving inclusion belongs on the AI agenda and then shaping that agenda before those early gaps become harder to reverse. If organizations treat AI as a tool rollout rather than a workforce transition, they are likely to repeat a familiar transformation mistake: adoption will move ahead faster than the trust, capability, and management systems required to make it work well.

What Leaders Should Notice

AI is spreading faster than organizations are building trust and governance around it. The result is an uneven transition: Some workers gain access, confidence, and visibility early, while others face more uncertainty and less support. For inclusion leaders, the challenge is to shape that transition before those early gaps become harder to reverse.

Five Operating Priorities for Inclusion Leaders

PRIORITY 1

Build Practical AI Fluency

Inclusion leaders do not need to become technologists. They do need enough practical fluency to shape AI use credibly. Familiarity will not carry enough weight. What earns influence is direct experience with the tools, including where they add value, how they flatten nuance, when they overstate certainty, and—most importantly—why human judgment still must oversee a decision.

The research signal here is governance. [NIST](#) finds that responsible AI use depends on how organizations design, deploy, use, and evaluate AI systems. That raises the stakes for practical fluency. Inclusion leaders do not need technical mastery, but they do need enough firsthand understanding to question weak outputs, spot flawed assumptions, and influence how AI is being applied in real work.

How Leading Inclusion Leaders Are Shaping AI at Work

The strongest interview guidance in this paper starts with praxis, not policy. Cynthia Tee put it plainly: **“The first thing that any leader needs to do is to just use it. And use it daily.”** Her point went beyond basic experimentation. Leaders need to understand enough about AI’s strengths and failure modes to work with it critically, not casually. As she put it, **“You can’t really influence it unless you know its power—including where it will hallucinate—and you’ve actually experienced it helping you and hurting you.”**

“Go use these products, go figure out what the challenges you’re experiencing are, with a diverse group of folks, and then bring it up and fix them.”

Sid Mathur

That kind of hands-on use also changes how inclusion leaders are perceived inside the organization. Abhishek Sarathy described how being transparent about his own learning helped other employees and his AI counterparts see that he was **“in the journey learning too.”** When inclusion leaders are visibly learning and adapting, they do more than raise concerns. They connect inclusion outcomes to adoption outcomes in a way other executives can hear.

What Inclusion Leaders Should Do Now

- Use one AI tool regularly in your own work.
- Compare outputs across real tasks.
- Notice where the tool distorts, simplifies, or overreaches.
- Pay attention to where human review changes the result.
- Then bring those observations into AI conversations in practical terms.

Practical fluency signals readiness to shape the transition from inside the work

PRIORITY 2

Embed Inclusion Where AI Decisions Are Made

The second priority is to embed inclusion's influence where it matters most. AI decisions are already being made in cross-functional forums tied to governance, workflow redesign, learning, procurement, legal review, change management, and talent processes. Inclusion leaders do not need a separate AI lane. Rather, they need to be in the rooms where operating norms are being shaped so they can influence how oversight is defined.

Many organizations still lack a single permanent home for AI. [McKinsey](#) notes that AI decision-making is often distributed across technology, business, people, legal, and transformation functions. That makes embedded influence more important than formal ownership. The org chart will vary; the principle should not.

How Leading Inclusion Leaders Are Shaping AI at Work

Michael Boone emphasized that influence must stem from listening and learning—staying curious. When it comes to how AI decisions are made, **“being a fly on the wall, and bringing yourself to the table, is half the battle.”** Tamika Curry Smith echoed the need to be strategic. Rather than forcing a separate inclusion conversation, she believes that the stronger move is to embed inclusion in the normal AI conversation, and

often. Michael Novasio raised the bar further: **“I think you have to have inclusion leaders who are deeply embedded in the technology and the teams responsible for it.”**

“ Rather than us elbowing our way into having something separate, the more we can embed inclusion and have it a part of the normal conversation about AI, the better.”

Tamika Curry Smith

What Inclusion Leaders Should Do Now

- Identify where AI decisions are already being made, especially around governance and risk review, learning and development, and talent processes.
- Then assess where inclusion expertise is missing, delayed, or treated as secondary.

The goal is to shape the work while it is still being designed. Influence often begins with proximity to the decisions that matter.

PRIORITY 3

Make the Learning Curve More Equitable

One of the earliest AI divides at work may not be job displacement but rather unequal access to learning. As AI becomes part of everyday work, the people who get earlier exposure, clearer guidance, and more room to tinker will build confidence and capability faster. Over time, that uneven start can become an uneven distribution of performance and eventually advancement.

The research base supports that concern. [OECD](#) finds that AI training and consultation are associated with stronger reported outcomes for performance and working conditions. Yet formal AI training remains limited, and adoption is uneven across levels and demographic groups ([HBR, 2026](#)). The issue reaches beyond tool access. It includes access to the conditions such as mentorship and training that encourage and facilitate meaningful use.

How Leading Inclusion Leaders Are Shaping AI at Work

Several interviewees described AI learning as an inclusion issue, not just an enablement issue. Mike Novasio put it clearly: **“This is not just some interesting iPhone that’s being launched. It’s changing the way people communicate. It’s changing the way people learn.”** AI, thus, requires building AI adoption training in more inclusive ways to help people buy in and better adapt to change. Abhishek Sarathy raised the stakes for historically excluded talent. In his organization, that concern led to a deliberate push through employee resource groups: **“We actively promoted early AI tools, training, and use cases to our employee networks... because we cannot perpetuate systemic lack of access.”**

“How are we making sure that employees who face systemic barriers are included early in the AI learning curve, so gaps in trust, capability, and advancement don’t widen over time—and no one is being left behind?”

Abhishek Sarathy

Others made the same point in more operational terms. Cynthia Tee warned that if organizations leave AI uptake entirely to personal choice, they may end up with “very uneven productivity” and very uneven ways of working. She also argued that organizations learn more when access is broader: **“I think your use of the tool will be richer if you have a more diverse set of people using it. Because then you’ll understand, here are some of the barriers, here are some of the issues.”**

What Inclusion Leaders Should Do Now

- Assess who has access to AI tools, training, role-specific guidance, manager reinforcement, and a safe space to experiment.
- Treat uneven learning conditions as a strategic risk, because that is how capability gaps become opportunity gaps.

The key issue is broad readiness, not isolated access.

PRIORITY 4

Define Human Accountability Early

The most risky uses of AI at work are often the most routine ones: using AI to automate job candidate short lists, draft performance reviews, or generate productivity scores that shape how employees are evaluated. Because these uses can quickly become routine, it can seem easy to treat the output as if it speaks for itself—authoritative and truthful. That is where accountability can slip. Inclusion leaders can help prevent that by making sure organizations define, early and clearly, where AI can support a decision and where a person must still own it.

Recent research sharpens this concern. AI can speed up drafting and analysis, but it does not reduce the need for evaluation and ownership ([Seramount, 2026](#)). Though production times dramatically decrease with AI, the need for human strengths in metacognition is only becoming more important ([Seramount, 2026](#)). As such, human judgment must be built into the design, use, and evaluation of AI systems, especially when those systems influence opportunity and employee trust.

How Leading Inclusion Leaders Are Shaping AI at Work

Sid Mathur suggested one of the strongest frames: How we treat AI should be no different than how we treat junior employees. **“The accountability doesn’t change,”** he said. **“A manager is accountable to those who report to them... AI is the same way.”** He affirmed the notion of human-enabled AI work or keeping “humans in the loop” to prioritize human judgment. With that in mind, a decision about how one decides to lean on AI should be formed in the same way one would determine how to lean on their staff: **“Say for instance, I report to you, my manager...if [I’m] not learning, you fire**

[me]... AI should be treated the same way.” In his framing, trust does not come from treating the tool as neutral or self-governing. It comes from managing it the way you would manage a capable but developing employee over time.

“ The way you learn to trust in AI is exactly the way you learn to trust your new employee.”

Sid Mathur

Defining accountability is where inclusion leaders can add critical value. They are often best positioned to help distinguish where AI can inform a decision but where a person must still make the decision. They can help set expectations for when managers need to review and evaluate the reasoning behind an output rather than simply accept it. They can also push for visible paths for employees to question or appeal an AI-influenced outcome. Courtney Heldreth captures the risk clearly: AI has the ability to take on tasks that may be **“best suited for humans”** because these tasks require human judgment. That matters most where AI starts shaping decisions about rewards and advancement. As Cynthia Tee put it, **“We are increasingly using these tools to automate hiring, promotions, performance feedback.”** Once AI enters those decisions, human review cannot be assumed. It must be defined clearly and enforced consistently.

“ Here’s the difference between designing for automation versus designing for collaboration. If you’re designing AI for collaboration, AI becomes a partner, it becomes something that augments, not replaces humans.”

Courtney Heldreth, PhD

What Inclusion Leaders Should Do Now

- Distinguish where AI should automate, where it should augment, and where decisions should remain human-only, especially when employee standing is at stake.
- Define who owns the final judgment.
- Identify how employees can question or appeal AI-influenced outcomes.
- Update policies, templates, and workflows where AI is already touching hiring, promotion, pay, performance, discipline, monitoring, or access to opportunity.

The aim is to make accountability explicit before it becomes hard to trace.

PRIORITY 5

Put AI to Work on the Moments That Matter

The strongest inclusion posture is proactive, not reactive. AI can create risk, but it can also help organizations review important decisions more often, see patterns sooner, and intervene earlier in the moments that already shape fairness and opportunity. Too much of the public conversation still frames AI as a choice between hype and harm. A stronger inclusion question is more useful: **Where can AI help organizations see the patterns they already struggle to detect more quickly?**

How Leading Inclusion Leaders Are Shaping AI at Work

Tamika Curry Smith offered the clearest version of that argument. Rather than talking about AI in general terms, she advised other inclusion leaders to focus on **“the moments that matter.”** With AI, leaders can make review and analysis faster, more frequent, and more actionable: **“We do an internal analysis and also use an external third party to review pay equity, promotions, etc. We look across a number of areas to ask, is this equitable?”** What had once happened one or two times a year could now happen more often with AI because **“it’s faster, it’s more efficient.”** And that matters because **“if it’s able to surface those inequities faster, that could allow us to have quicker interventions in the moment.”**

Michael Novasio reinforced that point from another perspective. He argued that **“AI has a serious marketing problem”** when too much of the public conversation centers on what will be lost. **“Harm has to be addressed,”** and inclusion leaders must help here, but he emphasized how they also have an opportunity to push for asking a more grounded, useful, and innovative question: **“Where can AI help us make better, fairer decisions in the places that already matter most?”**

What Inclusion Leaders Should Do Now

- Start with a short set of high-value use cases, such as pay equity review, promotion pattern analysis, and/or project access.
- Use AI to improve visibility and assess opportunity gaps.
- Then focus on where faster review can lead to faster intervention.

The goal is to see more clearly—and act sooner—in the places that already matter most.

A Better AI Use Case

Use AI to surface patterns in pay, promotion, stretch project decisions, or manager evaluations faster than periodic review cycles allow. Finding these use-case frames will help inclusion leaders leverage their expertise beyond providing generic responsible-AI language. These kinds of strategies move discussion away from abstract fears and toward specific organizational decisions that already carry inclusion consequences. **They also create a stronger standard for leaders: Do not stop the discussion with the question of where AI might create harm. Go deeper and ask where it can help you see the patterns you already struggle to detect quickly.**



What to Do Now: A Quick-Start Guide for Inclusion Leaders

Inclusion leaders do not need a fully mature AI strategy to begin shaping better outcomes. The strongest early moves make AI use more visible, surface readiness gaps, and clarify where oversight matters most. Use this section as a practical initial agenda for the next 90 days.

1 Get a Clearer View of Current AI Use

Before shaping strategy, get visibility into how AI is actually showing up across the organization. Official rollout plans rarely capture the whole story. Some teams are experimenting openly, while others are using AI quietly or without guidance. Visibility is the first step toward influence. Inclusion leaders should:

- ▶ Identify where AI use is visible/invisible in day-to-day work.
- ▶ Look for informal, unsanctioned, or hard-to-track use.
- ▶ Surface which teams feel energized, uncertain, or exposed.

2 Spot Early Readiness Gaps

AI access quickly turns into a readiness issue. A license alone does not build capability. Training, guidance, manager support, and learning opportunities determine whether employees can use AI with confidence. Inclusion leaders should:

- ▶ Review who has training and who is learning in isolation.
- ▶ Look for roles or groups with access to tools but with little support.
- ▶ Ask where managers are reinforcing AI learning and where they are silent or unsure.

3 Identify Where AI Is Shaping Opportunity

AI is already moving into the workflows that shape visibility, evaluation, and advancement. Small changes can have large effects once they touch opportunity. Inclusion leaders should:

- ▶ Map where AI is used in hiring, performance, promotion, or pay.
- ▶ Identify whether AI is influencing work allocation or project access.
- ▶ Pay close attention to how managers monitor tool use in ways that affect employee standing.

4 Get Close to the People Making AI Decisions

Inclusion leaders gain influence by getting close to the work. That means knowing where rollout, governance, learning, and risk decisions are being made and where inclusion perspective is missing. Inclusion leaders should:

- ▶ Identify who is shaping AI adoption and oversight today.
- ▶ Join existing governance or transformation discussions where possible.
- ▶ Clarify where inclusion input is missing from key decisions.

5 Outline What Human Oversight Looks Like

Once AI influences consequential decisions, broad principles need to become operating expectations. Clear oversight strengthens trust and keeps accountability visible. That work should begin in the pilot stage, where diverse early adopters can surface limitations and shape responsible use before usage scales. Inclusion leaders should:

- ▶ Clarify which decisions require human review and who owns the final decision in AI-influenced workflows.
- ▶ Ensure pilot groups are diverse and help shape broader rollout.
- ▶ Identify which policies, templates, or expectations need updating.

What Early Progress Looks Like

In this next phase, progress will look like stronger visibility rather than perfect governance. Leaders will know where AI is being used, where readiness gaps are emerging, and which decisions need closer oversight. That clarity is enough to shift AI from a being a diffuse concern to being a purposeful focus of leadership.

Conclusion: Making AI a Force for Good at Work

This paper has argued that the next phase of AI at work will be defined by whether organizations can build trust and governance as AI moves deeper into everyday work. Across the research and interviews, one point is unmistakable: **AI is already reshaping how work is done and how opportunity is distributed, even as the conditions surrounding its use remain uneven. In that sense, AI is also becoming part of how power is distributed at work.** That makes inclusion essential.

The next phase of AI at work requires inclusion leaders to help shape how AI is introduced and applied so that its benefits do not flow only to those already closest to power. **The question now is whether organizations will let AI inherit old patterns of advantage or use this moment to build something better.** If inclusion leaders shape the transition deliberately, leaders will have an opportunity to widen participation, strengthen decision-making, and build a future of work that is both more innovative and more equitable. As Courtney Heldreth puts it, designing for inclusion **“does not slow down innovation. In fact, it creates more business opportunity. More people means more business.”** Inclusion, in that sense, is not a constraint on AI adoption. It is part of how organizations build broader value from it.

Much about AI's long-term effect on jobs, teams, and career pathways remains unsettled, and that uncertainty can feel overwhelming. But it also creates an opening. **As Tamika Curry Smith put it, AI “can be a force for good.”** To realize that promise, inclusion leaders will need to influence the systems, norms, and decisions that determine how AI takes hold inside organizations. That work is not always immediate or visible. As Michael Boone put it, **“I am focused on a long-term arc—planting trees under whose shade I may not sit and doors that may open after my formal leadership.”**



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