

LEADERSHIP BULLETIN

What is Intersectionality? (And Why is it So Important?): A Q&A with Opal Tomashevsk

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As part of our commitment to Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, CUNA Mutual Group strives for a “people first” mentality where our employees know their opinions, thoughts, and personal experiences matter. It’s important to discuss the topic of Intersectionality with our teams and colleagues so we can better acknowledge and appreciate our different life experiences and how discrimination and privilege impacts certain groups.

We sat down with **Opal Tomashevsk**, Director of CUNA Mutual Group’s Multicultural Center of Expertise (MCOE), to learn more about her experience with intersectionality and how she incorporates her knowledge of the topic into her leadership practice



Opal Tomashevsksa, Director, MCOE

What is Intersectionality?: Q&A with Opal Tomashevsksa

Q: What does “Intersectionality” mean?

A: "Intersectionality is a term coined by [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) in 1989. It refers to intersecting or overlapping social identities. In other words, all the things that “make us up.” When we use the term “multicultural” in the MCOE, we mean all these things – race, ethnicity, gender identity, age, income, ability, and so much more. It’s also about how all these intersections are impacted by the power structures that exist within society. "

Q: What does intersectionality mean to you?

A: "To me, it’s what makes us unique, but also the places we find common bonds and real connection. For me, I am a bi-racial Black woman, who is also a first-generation college graduate and corporate leader. I’m also a mother who has spent many years living in poverty but am privileged to be an emerging leader within the financial industry. I am Wisconsin born and raised, but my family has Mississippi roots. Intersectionality is all these joints and junctures, how they impact who I am, how I see the world, and how the world sees me."

“As a leader, understanding and being aware of intersectionality in ourselves, peers, and team members allows us to appreciate everything we bring to the table in terms of background and experiences.”

-Opal Tomashevsk

Q: Why should leaders be aware of intersectionality?

A: "As a leader, understanding and being aware of intersectionality in ourselves, peers, and team members allows us to appreciate everything we bring to the table in terms of background and experiences. It is also imperative that, as leaders, we understand the systems of power that oppress and advantage people in the workplace and beyond. (For example, the wage gap)."

Q: As a leader, how do you approach your team through the lens of intersectionality?

A: "I hold space and time for people and put them first. As a leader, do your best to listen and appreciate when people share their identities and stories with you. There's an emotional strain that many of us face due to intersectionality. Offering that time and space is not only beneficial to our employees, but to the success of CUNA Mutual Group, as a whole."

Q: What steps has CUNA Mutual Group taken to become more inclusive around the topic of intersectionality?

A: "Talk about it! We do this, internally, with DEI speakers, ERGs, and MCOE to gain deeper consumer insights. I have loved seeing this show up in our communications, as well as on social media. When Bob said "Black Lives Matter" last summer – that was huge. Our posts about stopping Asian hate, and the impact world events have had, not only on our customers, but our employees, are amazing to me. "

Q: Lastly, how can leaders learn more about intersectionality?

A: "You can find resources in our [DEI Library](#) and [speaker series events](#). I would also recommend Googling it! There are so many great resources out there. Start by reading reliable resources, and talking to others about it."

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