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JUNE 04, 2019

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# New Report Details the Barriers That Leaders of Color Face at Nonprofits

By Jim Rendon

People of color who lead nonprofits face barriers and challenges that their white counterparts do not, according to *Nonprofit Executives and the Racial Leadership Gap*, a new report released by the Building Movement Project.

The survey was designed to discover why so few people of color advance to leadership positions — and what leadership is like for those who do, says Sean Thomas-Breitfeld, co-director of the Building Movement Project, which provides tools and resources for nonprofits to operate in line with their social-justice principles.

"Do people of color benefit from leadership to the same extent as their white peers?" asks Thomas-Breitfeld, who co-authored the report.

Based on a 2016 survey of 4,385 nonprofit leaders and staff as well as focus-group discussions and a follow-up survey in 2018 with a smaller sample, the report found that the two groups have very different experiences. Higher percentages of people of color reported inadequate salaries, a lack of relationships with funding sources, and a paucity of role models and networks.

The responses from people of color who were executive directors were more like the responses of the staff members who were people of color than their white peers in leadership, fewer of whom had such problems.



Race plays a bigger role than one's position in determining many barriers and frustrations, according to the survey.

### **'It Made Me Sick'**

In focus groups, leaders of color said they felt that they had to work harder and longer to prove themselves before being hired for executive positions. And once there, some said the pressures of their workload resulted in health problems, some of which required medical intervention.

Eric Ward, executive director of the Western States Center, which provides resources for community-based economic, gender, and racial-justice organizations, participated in the survey and focus groups. Ward, an African-American, says that it is almost a cliché that people of color have to work twice as hard as a white people to hold the same position, but it still plays out in politics, business, and nonprofits.

Thomas-Breitfeld says that people of color already experience higher levels of stress because of the racialized environment in the United States. "It is not surprising that the feeling of stress is higher for people of color in leadership positions," he says.

Shari Dunn, executive director of Dress for Success Oregon, which helps women with clothes, job training, and career mentoring, also participated in the survey. She says she had difficulty with some staff and fractured support from her board when she took over the organization four years ago. Dunn, who is African-American, points out that few white people have had a person of color as a supervisor before, which can lead to management problems.

In the survey, only 37 percent of the people of color who were executive directors said their predecessor was of the same race, but 86 percent of white executive directors replaced another white person.

"In a nonprofit, where people who look like me are the clients — the people receiving the services, not the people leading — it is an incredibly fraught dynamic," Dunn says. "It is hard to bridge it."

She says that something as simple as managing staff and pointing out problems can cause unnecessary conflict and stress. "You're really hemmed in in how expressive you can be when you are dissatisfied with something," Dunn says. "Every person is looking for an indication that I am mean or angry."

Dunn says that she has been insulted by a staff member and was undermined by one board member. The job has taken a profound toll on her. "It was a fight. It took all forms of physical and mental energy to get to this point," she says. "It made me sick, all of the constant harassment, pressure, and stress."

## Fundraising Challenges

The smaller 2018 survey, which looked at about 200 groups with budgets of \$100,000 to \$8 million, found that organizations run by people of color had smaller budgets — \$1.3 million compared with \$1.7 million for those run by white executive directors. Those run by people of color also relied more heavily on foundations for support than those run by white directors. Despite that, higher percentages of executive directors of color said they lacked access to foundation donors than their white counterparts — 51 percent to 41 percent.

"CEOs and executive directors of color do not have the same level of access to foundations, and they do not get treated equitably when they do get access," says Thomas-Breitfeld. "Foundations and donors really need to look at their own portfolio of investments and consider in what ways there might be inequity in giving based on the race of the leader of the organization."

Funding inequity is tied to larger issues of racism in society that has led to whites maintaining wealth and power, says Al Richmond, executive director of Community-Campus Partnership for Health, which builds partnerships between academic institutions and the communities they are in. There is also a systemic lack of deep interpersonal relationships across race. "You can't skirt the importance of interpersonal relationships," says Richmond, who is African-American. "People give money to people they know and trust."

Boards of nonprofits and foundations tend to be predominantly white, and until that changes there will continue to be fewer leaders of color, and those leaders will have less access to funding, Richmond says.

People of color were more likely to lead organizations that were focused on racial or immigration identity than whites. Only 30 percent of leaders of color ran non-identity-based organizations as opposed to 68 percent of whites. (The report included two types of identity-based groups, those focused on race, ethnicity, or immigration status and those focused on other groups such as women or LGBTQ people.)

Ward, who previously worked at the Ford Foundation, says that difference in mission may be part of the reason these organizations are raising less from foundations. Most foundations don't focus on funding organizations that represent immigrants or African-Americans, he says. To obtain a grant, these groups must find a program they work on that is in line with a foundation's mission. And so they may get small amounts of funding for that program over a short period.

"Identity organizations have become important, but yet they are not supported in a way that allows these organizations to sustain themselves outside of those projects related to grants," Ward says. The grant-making process is limiting the scope of these groups, he says, forcing them to choose, for example, between immigrant rights and climate justice. "It is unfair," he says. "They should help these organizations to build out."

While people of color who lead nonprofits expressed the highest levels of dissatisfaction with fundraising, white leaders were not far behind. Large percentages of both groups expressed similar frustrations including needing more staff, a dearth of support from their board, onerous grant requirements, and lack of access to support.

## **Role for White People**

It is time for white executive directors to examine the systems that allow them to continue to hold the lion's share of leadership positions, says Judy Levine, executive director of Cause Effective, a nonprofit that consults with charities to improve fundraising and governance, and who helped to test the survey for the report.

"While our individual contribution to social justice may be positive, our collective position at the head of 80 percent of nonprofits is problematic," she says. "We can't just leave it to the sector to do something. We have to think about, each of us, what is our position in this and how can we personally and professionally change the needle."

Julie Wells, the executive director of Partners for Youth Opportunity, which helps young people break the cycle of poverty, says that, like her, most of the nonprofit leaders in her area are white women. A participant in the survey and the focus group, she is helping people of color become leaders by working with her own staff to build leadership skills and to encourage them to become thought leaders in their areas of expertise.

She also started a group that trains leaders of charities with budgets of less than \$100,000 to raise money from foundations and individual donors. Those groups are led primarily by people of color. "The nonprofit sector is a dangerous place to be for people of color who are one step out the door from poverty," she says. "You can work very hard and not make it, and that can set yourself and your family back years."

Thomas-Breitfeld plans to conduct another survey this year and is working on an assessment tool for organizations to help them identify diversity, equity, and inclusion issues within their groups. Cause Effective trains social-justice leaders on fundraising skills, something that boards weigh heavily when deciding whom to hire as an executive director.

The dearth of people of color leading nonprofits, and the powerful frustrations and hardship that those few leaders do experience is a problem for the whole field, says Ward. "The real cost is that we miss a real diversity of vibrant and secure voices."

*Correction: A previous version of this article mistakenly said that Judy Levine herself trains social-justice leaders on fundraising skills. Her organization, Cause Effective, does.*

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