The Social Justice Sector has an Internal Racism Problem

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Nine months into a nonprofit job that I loved – where I was the first woman of color in an executive role – I was forced to leave due to discrimination, exploitation, and retaliation from the young, liberal, white, woman executive director. After much reflection on my entire career, and countless healing conversations with other black women in leadership roles at "progressive" social justice organizations, I now understand what happened to me is indicative of a much larger problem in the entire sector.

Leaders at the forefront of the fight for social justice need to learn to lead courageous dialogue about race. When social justice organizations are unable or unwilling to advance conversations about racial equity, both internally and externally, everyone loses: the community served, the frontline staff, and the donors who support their work.

I am a black woman, immigrant with a Latinx accent, who grew up in near-poverty, and went on to excel academically and professionally, in both the private and nonprofit sectors. Naively I thought that my contributions so the social justice sector would be enthusiastically welcomed. But I eventually realized that for my ideas and contributions to be taken seriously, they had to be delivered through my white male colleagues. Many of them were amazing allies and co-conspirators in navigating systems with racial and gender imbalances, and others were just happy to get credit for someone else's ideas.

One common thread that I noticed in white-dominated leadership structures is a strong resistance to dialogues about race. Even as diversity and inclusion are becoming mainstream as a way of strengthening teams, conversations about diversity tend to be superficial and mostly focused on gender inclusion. In my experience, these cosmetic efforts result in people of color feeling unable to express all the ways in which our contributions are disregarded and our leadership invalidated, leaving us unable to participate in the development of a culture of inclusion and belonging.

Women of color, and particularly black women, are often left to deal on our own with the harm of conscious and unconscious bias in the workplace. But we shouldn't have to deal with it in the first place. Here's how the industry – and especially the executive leadership teams – can create meaningful change:

Beware of the "angry black woman" racial trope

I have had a supervisor tell me that members of my team were afraid to talk to me. She also must have been afraid to talk to me, because she only mentioned this to me in our final conversation at the organization. I consider myself to be a driven, fun-loving, deeply spiritual,

and genuinely self-aware person working tirelessly to improve the lives of others. So why was it easier for my supervisor to tolerate gossip from some of my team members, than to hold them and herself accountable to having necessary conversations directly with me?

Through my conversations with my black, woman colleagues, I've learned that co-workers often miscategorize our communication, mood, or emotions. When we communicate a different perspective, we are quickly labeled as "not a team-worker" or the "angry black woman." Our "tone" is off-putting or our "communication skills" are lacking. I gradually learned to push back and ask for concrete examples to the vague blanket criticisms. But rarely could they provide exact instances, confirming my theory that it was not what I said, it was who said it: a confident black woman in leadership.

Unfounded fear of black people has been one of the most damaging ways in which our white-dominated society has dehumanized and criminalized the very act of being born with an abundant amount of melanin. In the workplace, claiming fear provides a way out of dialogue, and license to gossip about the black woman's "communication style" or "tone" without needing to face or talk to us.

Value and remunerate adequately black women's work and contributions

A past employer unapologetically expected me to do three jobs for the price of one, asking me to complete work well outside of my job description. When I offered to work together to resolve this problem, she responded with a disciplinary action for "lack of teamwork and collaboration." Her actions demonstrated that she did not value my work.

My conversations with other black women leaders working toward social justice leave me convinced that this kind of behavior is not the exception, but the norm. I could not help but ask myself: "Would I be treated this way if I were white or male?"

The exploitation of black women's labor in the U.S. has been consistent throughout history, and the social justice sector is no exception. Neither my impeccable work ethic nor a prestigious graduate degree could protect me from such harmful discrimination. If such blatant and illegal treatment can be expected in the senior ranks of leadership, you can only imagine what are the types of traumatic and reprehensible behavior that younger frontline staff endure daily.

Demonstrating respect for a black woman's work means to properly remunerate her for the value that she brings into an organization. If work must be added to someone's plate due to organizational and budget constraints, the respectful thing would be to ask their opinion, work to find alternative solutions, or increase their pay or provide a bonus when additional work is significant and merits higher compensation. It is well documented that women make less for equal work, and this is compounded by race and place of origin. Equity work requires us to value everyone's time, experience, and contributions equally.

Empower and validate black women's leadership

The most common way that a black woman's leadership is invalidated is by bringing her into a leadership team to add diversity, then proceeding to ignore her ideas and contributions. Teams that have never before reported to a black woman tend to resist our leadership, resulting in a toxic environment for all involved. Unless the rest of senior leadership is culturally competent, and willing to train staff on equitable norms and practices, chances are the black woman leader will need to prematurely exit the organization.

Senior leaders must set the tone at the top by validating and supporting the black women they hire. It is also important to understand that internalized white supremacy is commonplace, and that people of color may also demonstrate resistance to being led by a black woman. Training staff and building organizational cultural competency must be part of the professional development of every organization.

The voices of black women must not only be heard, they must be centered and amplified. It is very possible that our personal experiences with poverty, discrimination, and injustice will provide the needed proximity to the very problems that nonprofits are trying to solve.

When an organization fails to attract, empower, and retain the leadership of black women, everyone loses. Many white dominant systems of charity and international development have been failing – despite massive investments – to significantly reduce poverty and advance justice in communities of color. Perhaps being willing to listen to us and create more spaces for our voices to be heard and believed is a good place to start.