MAKING (OR TAKING) SPACE:

Initial Themes on Nonprofit Transitions from White to BIPOC Leaders

Written by the **Building Movement Project** on behalf of the **Robert Sterling Clark Foundation**

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Foreword

At the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, we know that strong leadership is necessary to create a more equitable and vibrant New York City.

We also know that many of the practices, systems, and structures, which sustain inequality in our communities, also show up in our organizations and our sector, limiting our view of who a leader is and what impactful leadership looks like. As such, while many organizations are eager to transition from white leaders to leaders of color, they often do not have the experience, expertise, commitment, or supports in place to fully embrace new leadership and make these transitions successful or joyful. Too often, it is the new leaders of color who pay the price for under-prepared organizations.

As we continue to understand and move resources to directly support leaders of color during these transitions, we wanted to take a closer look at ourselves and our grantee community. Making (or Taking) Space seeks to inform our question: What, specifically, is the responsibility of organizations with white leaders transitioning out of these roles to support incoming leaders of color?

This report shines a light on one small group of organizations and offers some findings, rather than recommendations. It helps us to better understand the realities of what is happening on the ground as we seek to develop a better set of considerations and capacities for releasing and sharing power that white people in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors must hold themselves accountable to, particularly during this critical period.

Our thanks to everyone who spoke to us for this report, as well as to Erica Hamilton, Rosie McMahan, Frances Kunreuther, Sean Thomas-Breitfeld, and Tessa Constantine, for collecting and analyzing the experiences discussed within. All credit goes to them, and all missteps are ours. This is just one small part in the collective work we are committed to doing with our grantee partners and colleagues across the field to support the conditions for joyful and impactful leadership that leads us to an equitable world. For more information, or to share ideas about this work, please write to info@rsclark.org.

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Introduction

As nonprofit organizations start to examine issues of race and racial equity, more groups are seeking to replace exiting white leaders with a leaders of color. To better support these transitions, the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation (RSCF) asked the Building Movement Project (BMP) to explore the organizational dynamics when Black, Indigenous, or other people of color (BIPOC) are hired into executive leadership roles following the departure of white leaders.

To conduct this inquiry, RSCF identified nine organizations in its grantmaking portfolio that had transitioned—or were in the process of transitioning—from white to BIPOC leadership. Six of the new leaders were women of color, and three were BIPOC men. RSCF invited the exiting or former white executive directors, the board member(s) who oversaw the hiring process, and the incoming leaders of color to each participate in an hour-long interview on their experience and perspective of the transition process. BMP analyzed the interviews—a total of 30 across the nine organizations—to identify some of the common experiences.

BMP found four main themes after analyzing the transcripts of the interviews.

1 Most exiting white leaders and/or boards of directors were intentionally recruiting a leader of color, and it was common that this decision coincided with internal issues related to race/racism.

2 The entering BIPOC leaders were, in almost every case, familiar with the organization and understood that there were internal problems, though the extent was not always clear.

3 The new leaders of color were prepared for the (implicit or explicit) expectation they would both run the organization and address internal equity issues, but they often faced other unexpected problems including funding challenges.

4 Several entering leaders of color noted the responsibility they had for supporting/protecting exiting white leaders.

Each of the themes emerged not only by reading and analyzing the transcripts, but also comparing the interviewees' answers within each organization, where often there were differences—sometimes minor and other times stark—in the description of a situation or an event. A fuller picture emerged by weaving together these varying accounts. There are also some limitations to the findings. It is a small sample, and interviewees were asked to participate by one of the organization's funders, which may have influenced how they answered questions. In addition, we do not have comparison information from white-to-white or BIPOC-to-BIPOC leadership transitions. Previous BMP research on executive transitions found that outgoing leaders often leave a "dirty closet" of items they never had the time, inclination, or ability to address. We hope in the future to broaden this inquiry to continue to explore the unique challenges facing incoming leaders of color.

Themes

1 **Most exiting white leaders and/or boards of directors were intentionally recruiting a leader of color, and it was common that this decision coincided with internal issues related to race/racism.**

Reading through the transcripts showed that outgoing executive directors described leaving their role for a variety of reasons. Some had new positions, others were at the end of their career, and still others were starting a family and wanted a break from the responsibilities that the top leadership role required. Though it was not always the reason for their exit, many of the exiting white leaders believed the organization needed a leader of color. In other words, their departure was "making space" for hiring a BIPOC leader.

There were different explanations given by the exiting executive director and/or board members for hiring a leader of color to replace the white leadership. Some groups that primarily served and advocated for communities of color wanted to better reflect their constituents. There were organizational leaders who believed a BIPOC leader would attract more funders to the organization. Others described how the next leader should demonstrate the alignment between the organization's values and its actions. Five of the nine organizations had board members of color leading the search.

I think that given this board, we were intentional, we were very explicit about our values, we were transparent with one another, we sort of showed up and talked and had the tough conversations. I was really proud of that.

— woman of color, board member

Did she [the incoming ED] check every box, no. To be honest, she had a lot of real positives. . . . For an organization that was in the advocacy space, having an African-American woman was a nice cherry on top of everything, to be honest. Particularly, at the time we were talking to her, we thought this was an excellent opportunity to show a different front [for the organization].

— man of color, board member

However, the decision to recruit a person of color to be the next leader frequently came in the wake of internal organizational strife based on race/race equity. In six of the seven organizations that had more than two staff members, the exiting leader and/or board member told the interviewers that staff had raised questions related to equity, especially racial equity, during the tenure of the exiting director's leadership. In some cases, this was attributed to "difficult" employees; in several organizations, there had been open conflicts between the leadership and staff on issues of equity, with some organizations experiencing a series of departures by staff of color.

It was not always evident that there had been conflicts around race and equity in the organization. Exiting leaders made comments such as, "I think I made that decision [to leave] one year too late," or "There was a lot of feedback around [my] specific management style," or "[I wondered], how long was I going to be the right leader as a white woman," all of which referred to different situations in which staff of color had conflicts with the outgoing leader. These allusions to problems were often couched in reports by the exiting leader about how well-prepared the organization was for the transition. Entering leaders of color and board members were the ones who filled out the meaning of these remarks. In several organizations, board members noted that they were unaware of the extent of the unhappiness of BIPOC staff members until the transitions process. In a few groups, staff issues became evident under interim executive directors who had been brought in during the search and hiring process.

The race and gender stuff in the staff had blown up [under the interim]. It had been simmering to boil for years at that point in time.

— woman of color, entering leader

It was, however, the incoming leader who was able to offer the most information about the issues.

There was a massive staff transition that occurred, and four women of color left the staff within three months. And so, I think partly, that could have contributed to why this transition happened. . . . it felt like a surprise [to the board] that all of these staff members were leaving and were very deeply unhappy, and cited that they're leaving because of power dynamics, racial dynamics.

— woman of color, entering leader

Board members in groups that experienced high levels of conflict between the staff and the outgoing leader reported how staff members requested a significant role in the hiring process for the new executive director, fearing the board of directors would not adequately attend to their issues or needs. Board members were clear that it was their responsibility to hire the incoming leader. However, boards—frequently led by people of color—were willing to give staff a role in the process, ranging from a staff representative on the board's hiring committee to staff talking with and offering feedback on the final candidate(s).

Staff had a very different expectation. They thought that they should have been intimately involved. And for them, it was not just because they knew the organization in many ways better than the board, but also because for them, it was an equity principle. It wasn't an engagement. It was a necessity that they be engaged at that level, and it never occurred to us that we would do that.

— woman of color, board member

2 The entering BIPOC leaders were, in almost every case, familiar with the organization and understood that there were internal problems, though the extent was not always clear.

The hiring process for the new BIPOC leaders varied. There were organizations, especially larger ones, that used search firms. Other groups did their own recruitment. In some cases, the outgoing leader was very involved in the recruitment process, including one organization where the incoming leader was carefully trained by the exiting director for over a year. There were also board members who recruited the new leader.

It was striking, how often the entering BIPOC leaders were familiar with the organization. In four of the nine organizations, the incoming executive directors had worked with the organization either as staff or on the board. In all but one of the other five organizations, the new BIPOC leader had contact, often extensive, with the organization before arriving. Familiarity meant that incoming BIPOC leaders were aware not only of the good work of the group, but also the internal issues and conflicts. In other words, when these new leaders of color made the decision to accept the position, they knew there were weaknesses, especially related to race/race equity, that they would need to address.

Entering BIPOC leaders were also clear about their worth, and most asked for what they saw as fair salaries. In some organizations, these requests surprised board members, especially when the incoming leaders asked for salaries that were higher than what the exiting leaders had earned. The gap between exiting and entering leaders was especially large when the new leader was following an exiting leader who was not totally dependent on their salary for their financial security. Incoming leaders looked at the 990s of similar organizations to see what their leaders had earned before making their request. Some struggled to earn what they believed was fair and would create equity within the organization. Others followed leaders whose earnings were under market because that exiting executive did not need the money.

> I know that they [the board members] were surprised and shocked, I will say. I think they expected to have to increase from the old, the former ED, but didn't expect to have to jump that much. . . . I don't own a house . . . and I send money to seven family members.
>
> — woman of color, board member

Board members rarely negotiated with the incoming leaders. In several cases, the new BIPOC leader was the only viable candidate. In one organization, the board offered what they considered was a very generous salary, which the board chair was sure had far exceeded the expectation of the incoming leader, and the entering leader reported that it was exactly in the range they had expected. Only in one case did the incoming leader argue for a salary that the board had rejected. In this case, the entering leader still feels that the decision was unfair.

There was also an awareness from most of the boards that the incoming leader would need support in addition to fair compensation. Other incentives included coaching, leadership development, and trainings. Contracts were rare (only one organization), showing that there had generally been no contract with the existing leader.

3 **The new leaders of color were prepared for the (implicit or explicit) expectation that they would both run the organization and address internal equity issues, but they often faced other unexpected problems, including funding challenges.**

The entering BIPOC leaders were generally well-prepared coming into the leadership position, but there were still challenges that took them off guard, especially in fundraising. In almost every instance, entering BIPOC leaders knew they would need to work with staff members on race and race equity, though not all entering BIPOC leaders were completely informed about the depth or extent of the problems they would face. The funding and financial issues were often trickier.

Incoming leaders of color were well-versed about the financial status of the organization. Many of the exiting white leaders described how they had left a substantial cushion for the incoming executive director. However, in several cases, the funds that exiting leaders had left behind were rapidly dwindling for a variety of reasons, ranging from one-time gifts that had eroded over time to funding earmarked for specific projects that was not available for day-to-day operations. In addition, several new leaders experienced a period in which philanthropic funders and donors were unsure of whether they would continue to support the organization.

As a result, several new leaders found themselves running an organization where staff were impatiently waiting for long-standing grievances to be addressed, funders were testing whether they felt comfortable continuing their investment, and funding gaps were on the horizon that may not have been evident from looking at the financials.

> I really think DEI work has to be framed as racial justice work, because if you are a person of color leading that work, you are embodying it, you're living it, you are a racial justice warrior in that moment. You don't get to step back. DEI work is racial justice work, and we should reframe it so that we acknowledge the work and the labor that goes into it, and the space and the care.
>
> — woman of color, entering leader

Issues related to race equity were usually tackled straight-on by the incoming director, though the time and energy it took added to an already challenging job. BIPOC leaders were expected to—and did—resolve complicated issues that had to do with staff input into decision-making, pay equity, and the treatment of staff of color. In one case, an interim executive director of color was brought in to address a set of demands by the organization's constituents after an incident with the exiting leader.

Most incoming leaders were expected to heal tensions that had overheated under previous leadership. One new BIPOC leader was warned (by white leadership) that there were difficult staffers (of color). In almost every case, the new leaders were able to retain staff of color and continue to run an organization that was able to thrive. However, the process could take its toll.

It's just absurd. I feel like funders are so excited to have that moment [of hiring a leader of color] and be like, "Yay, look, what's happening." And everybody's like, "Yay," and then they just walk away. And . . . in almost every case that I know of, a staff that has deep seated issues of race and gender and gender identity that nobody has dealt with or unpacked. You step into that role and people are like, "I want this solved tomorrow." . . . We don't have the liberty as black women leaders to say we're going to set that aside and come back to it in a month. Our staff will revolt.

— woman of color, entering leader

Issues of funding were often more challenging for the incoming BIPOC leader. Organizational funding often had both race and class overtones. For example, one new BIPOC leader described how her white predecessor had instructed her in the correct way to behave with donors, including treating them as peers and creating a more relaxed atmosphere. The new leader tried to explain that her race and class background prevented that sort of casual interaction. Another entering leader was given a list of important funders by the previous director to contact in her first months on the job; there was not one person of color, even though the organization had BIPOC funders.

4 **Several entering leaders of color noted the responsibility they had for supporting/protecting exiting white leaders.**

Exiting leaders had a variety of plans. Out of the nine groups, three groups had exiting leaders who were starting a new position in a different organization. In two others, the executives left for other reasons. Of the remaining four, there were two organizations where the exiting leaders remained short-term to help the new incoming executive director—sometimes because their help was needed by the incoming leader and sometimes to ease the exiting leader's transition. In two other organizations, the exiting directors were planning to remain for the long term in discrete roles. The arrangements to keep the exiting leader in the organization, short- or long-term were made, at different points in the transition. In all cases, there was transparency before the entering leader took the position.

Some new executives, especially women of color, expressed concern about the role they needed to play in supporting exiting white leaders through the transition and protecting their legacy. For example, in one case an entering BIPOC leader came into a very difficult situation with few people outside of the organization aware of the extent of the problems.

She found herself having to gloss over the problems publicly so that donors would continue investing in the organization.

> I think that now, just looking back at it . . . I had to care for [the exiting leader] in a way that very often, people of color have to do and were—I don't know what the word is—programmed to do in those situations. . . . And so, I'm trying to kill myself to make all of the white people happy as they go. And also, appreciate them publicly, appreciate them in the right way, and do other stuff. When also, frankly, I feel like I was handed a pretty shitty situation.
>
> — woman of color, entering leader

The caring for the exiting leader was often reflected in the types of expectations and assumptions that entering leaders faced from white board and staff members. The white dominant culture was deeply embedded in many of the groups that wanted to recruit a leader of color, but they were often not ready or prepared for culture change.

What does it mean for a BIPOC leader to enter into a white dominant organization? It often includes the invisible emotional labor of creating a new "space" for the people of color, as leaders, staff and board members, donors, and program participants.

I've observed it with other women, particularly women of color, but when new BIPOC leaders come in . . . that this emphasis on the making of space, like, look how we made space for this person de-emphasizes the person who came in and the taking of space. There's a lot of patting ourselves on the back about, "I, as a white leader, or we as a board made space for this BIPOC leader to come in." But actually, you didn't just make space for the BIPOC leader to come in, which is important. This BIPOC leader came in and took space.

— woman of color, entering leader

Considerations

People of color are interested in and qualified to lead nonprofit organizations, but the sector has lagged in placing people of color in these top roles. As groups begin to examine and address the exclusion of BIPOC leaders, it will be important to understand what it means for the organization, the conditions under which leaders of color take the helm, and the expectations that are placed on the incoming leader. These interviews in the nine organizations offer some important considerations as boards of directors consider replacing white leadership with BIPOC leaders, especially in expectations, fair wage, funding clarity, and culture change.

Expectations

In the surveyed group, the exiting leaders and board members were happy to hire a person of color. They believed it was the right thing for the organization and they all found new leaders who were eminently qualified for the job. At the same time, there often was an expectation—either explicit or implicit—that a leader of color would attend to ongoing tensions related to racial equity within the organization in addition to the other demands of executive leadership. New executive directors frequently deal with the "dirty closet" left by the outgoing leader, items that have not been addressed in the previous leaders' tenure. However, the fact that so many of the groups in this exploration were experiencing deep internal conflict over race made the expectations different for these BIPOC leaders. It is hard to know whether these organizations would have been as committed to hiring a leader of color if there had not been racial strife among the staff.

Fair Wage

The additional expectations that fell on new BIPOC leaders was not always reflected in what the board saw as fair compensation. In most cases, the new leader argued successfully for the salary and benefits they wanted. That did not always mean the board was prepared for the amount of the increase. Some entering leaders had the leverage of being the only viable candidate, so the board of directors assented to the salary request. In other organizations, the board was prepared to offer a high salary based on what the previous leader had made. Few board members, however, mentioned the need for additional compensation based on the expectations of the incoming BIPOC leader to address the internal racial-equity concerns.

Funding Clarity

Funding issues continue to plague new leaders of color. Exiting leaders would report in the interviews how well the organization was financially positioned; however, in several groups, the new leader told a different story. This may partially be a result of how exiting leaders had increased the stability of and grown their organizations, something they were rightfully proud to have accomplished. At the same time, entering BIPOC leaders needed time to connect to and build trust with donors and other funders, which meant even organizations in good financial shape could experience a gap. Boards had a tendency to simply trust the exiting leader's assessment of the funding situation without looking closely at the financials. Several were taken by surprise when they discovered immediate or upcoming financial concerns. During any transition, boards should educate themselves on the funding situation, including the projections for the next few years. At the same time, funders need to lean in to support new BIPOC leaders with unrestricted dollars.

Culture Change

New BIPOC leaders are often welcomed into the organization by staff and board members who talk about the need for a change. Actually going through and implementing a change process, however, is not only hard work, but it also means challenging some of the assumptions the board may have previously held about the organization. New BIPOC leaders asked to address internal racial-equity concerns will no doubt begin to think about the culture and underlying expectations within the organization. In other words, board and staff members who hire BIPOC leaders should not expect that the internal operations or the external work will be the same. Change means change.

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