SYSTEMIC BARRIERS WOMEN OF COLOR FACE IN LEADERSHIP: ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY & ECONOMIC INCLUSION

A collaboration with:

SFF San Francisco Foundation

LeaderSpring Center
Creating Equity + Transformation

When we say equity, we are **not** just talking about representation

Purpose:

LeaderSpring Center and the San Francisco Foundation partnered to identify systemic barriers that women of color face in attaining leadership roles and advancing racial equity and economic inclusion once they hold such positions.

Women of Color Executive Directors and Chief Executive Officers in the nonprofit sector are navigating turbulent waters

What if, together, we can increasingly make visible and normalize conversations about what is causing the turbulence?
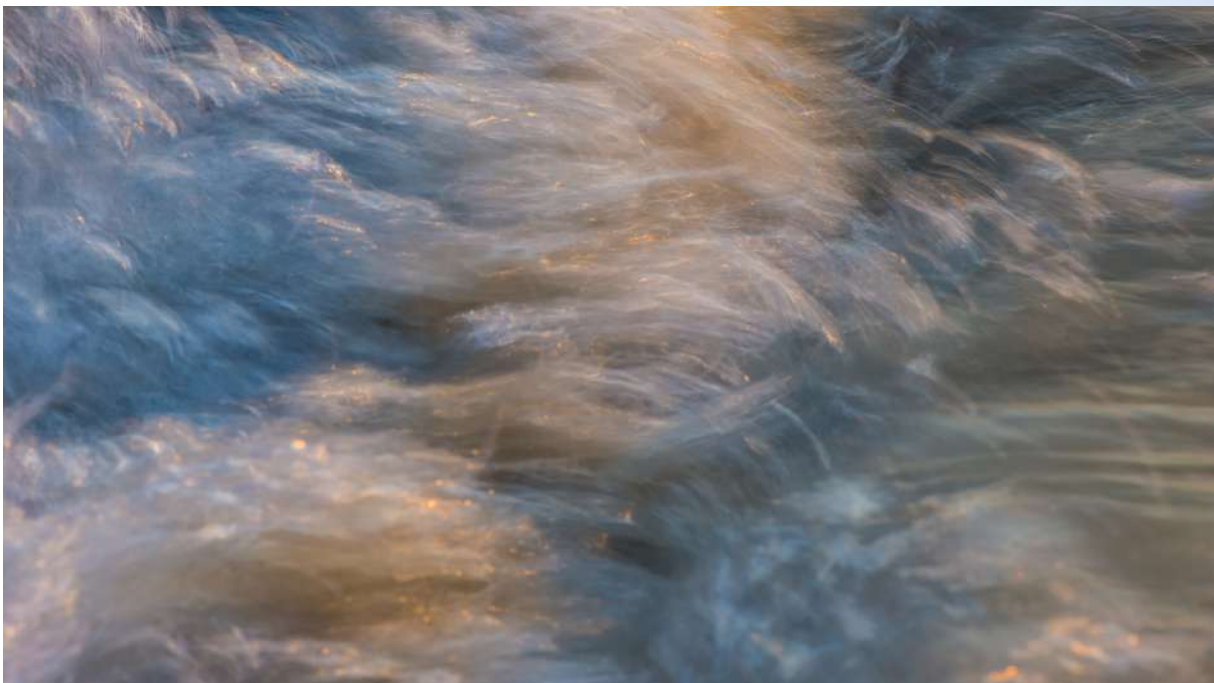
The Invitation

(1) Individuals representing **organizations that focus on supporting women/people of color with a racial equity agenda to attain leadership positions in the nonprofit sector were considered. While we focused on local organizations, national organizations were considered if they have a local presence or access** to local data.

(2) **Individuals with sufficient longevity** to observe and articulate local and/or national systemic trends and patterns across leaders & candidates **at organizations who possess a "bird's eye view", a throughline of systemic barriers WOC face** could be invited even if they don't directly support WOC leaders

Note: Individual WOC that currently hold positions of power in these areas (other than leaders in the organizations identified below) were not our intended participants for this focus groups.

With Gratitude to the Contributors

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Building up an individual is insufficient to shift systems.

It's crucial to simultaneously address the structural issues.

Goals for the Focus Groups

1 **Analyze**

To analyze key systemic challenges to women of color attaining CEO or Executive Director positions, and to help advance a racial equity agenda while holding those positions.

2 **Identify**

To identify creative interventions

3 **Collect Data**

To determine SFF's and LeaderSpring's roles within a larger ecosystem of support for WOC with a racial equity agenda

4 **Document Findings**

To generate a document that details key themes, to be shared among all focus group participants

Mental models informed by worldviews of racial superiority directly bear on the structural design of our systems, and manifests as alienation and isolation of WOC leaders.

Focus Group Questions:

Referring to the iceberg graph that we sent you as part of the prep work – Which are the most significant patterns of behavior, systemic structures and mental models that create impediments for WOC to attain leadership positions or advance an equity agenda?

What stands in the way of support for WOC nonprofit leaders to implement community-driven agendas?

What stands in the way of WOC leaders with a racial equity agenda to build power among themselves?

If you could be free to design a new governance structure for nonprofits in alignment with a racial equity agenda, what might that look like? What's inspiring this vision?

What are some examples of how WOC EDs/CEOs strategize successfully to transform the status quo system(s)?

Board Structure:
Superficial Understanding of Equity Permits Biases to Permeate Processes and Procedures

Ways this Shows Up During the Interview Process:

- Valuing the presence of WOC in the applicant pool more than selecting them for the leadership role
- Resisting and reacting to the Board being interviewed by the candidate
- Failing to recognize the value of the candidate's lived experience

Ways this Shows Up Once the WOC is Onboarded as ED or CEO:

- ***Unwillingness to consider strategic shifts or challenge the status quo***
- Inhospitality to WOC
- Failure to allocate resources or invest in WOC
- Micromanagement and heightened scrutiny of ED/CEO
- Expectation that ED/CEO overwork, do things fast to prove themselves, and/or to clean up the mess they inherited

Board Structure:
Superficial Understanding of Equity Sets Up the WOC to Fail During Executive Transitions

Failing to incorporate/center the outgoing leader in a transition plan to set the incoming leader for success.

- Failing to acknowledge the historical knowledge, sacrifice, experience of outgoing leader

- Failing to support incoming leaders with budgets & funding

- Funders only have relationships with the outgoing ED, resulting in a loss of revenue for the organization

- The new leader is in the shadow of the former leader's reputation

Board Structure:
Superficial Understanding of Equity Sets Up the WOC to Fail During Executive Transitions

Develop Toolkits for WOC Candidates:

- Toolkits on how to spot red flags at Board interviews, how to interview the organizations for values alignment, and how to anticipate and prepare for pushback
- BoardSource is developing resources for BIPOC leaders who are going through a search process

Promote Equity Work Tailored to Boards

- Boards can hire an interim leader if board has not conducted its own equity training and implementation
- Distinguish DEI from equity work that addresses actual behaviors
- Coach Boards to recognize the expertise of lived experience
- Prepare Boards to be interviewed – nonprofit search consultants or recruiters can help to assess Board readiness
- Define what it means to trust WOC like white men

Assess and Advocate to Support Change

- Compile the data needed to track where we're at & growth areas
- Existing group of leadership development folks can advocate for this

Boards Supporting WOC to Succeed

Design from equity alignment

- Develop strategic responses to transitions
- Provide a 2-3 year runway for incoming leader
- Have outgoing leader make a clean cut when the transition is over

Mentor/Coach

- Mentor incoming executive leaders
- Coach them to develop resilience to able to stay on when there is buy-in for long-term change
- Replace supervision with coaching

Offer comprehensive support

- Provide structural support, not just programmatic support, especially when the executive transition will involve restructuring
- Support changes proposed by the WOC
- Support the incoming leader to work with emerging WOC leaders

Allocate time to learn & process

- Time for reading, studying, writing, learning – a few days a month as part of work
- Learning adaptive skills, not just technical (ie., how do you make a judgment call?)

Offer resources

- Offer incoming leaders the resources and opportunities to assess and realign the organization to its intentions
- Move them out of isolation and into supportive groups

Nonprofit Structure: Nonprofit Industrial Complex

- Nonprofit industrial complex structure:
  - Comprised of **colonized business models & practices**
  - Equitable change does not happen from within this structure
  - Need to dismantle it.
- It's hard for WOC to "fit" inside the traditional nonprofit model:
  - Roles may be associated with disempowering norms that WOC don't want to replicate
    - "Fitting in" is inauthentic
  - Premised on scarcity

THE NON PROFIT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: a profitable graveyard for social movements

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NONPROFIT STRUCTURE: CHARITY

Being structured as a nonprofit charity makes it difficult to think about and plan for long-term sustainability of our orgs. Thinking about ways we are getting revenues (1 or 2 years at a time) with the expectation that we have solved the deep historical issues of racism, classism, police violence, mass incarceration... – results are many years out especially when we think about orgs that deal with change (racism, violence) – in a one-year grant cycle is not sustainable.

Charity mindset needs to shift to a social change business mindset.

Internalized Bias Impedes Infastructure of Support

Access issues:

- Exclusive meetings
- No knowledge or resource sharing
- Professional development tied to roles and tied to loyalty to the organization
- Difficulty filling the roles that the WOC is leaving behind by taking a promotion

Undervaluing what is outside traditional norms:

- Expertise in practices sourced in alternative models is under-recognized
- The WOC leader feels isolated from organizations that are applying alternative models
- The WOC faces pushback when advancing changes – there is no support for doing things differently
- Emotional labor of racial equity work is not recognized and is therefore unaddressed
- Professionalization of roles changes the relational culture of work started in community

Institutional Leadership is Not Designed to Support Co-Leadership

When organizational structures and norms fail to recognize that WOC are not all the same, they fail to prepare for the possibility that different racial/ethnic groups could regard each other's agendas as competing with one another (for time, resources, etc.).

When organizational structures do not explicitly and intentionally reflect culture norms aligned with the values of unity and manifesting full potential across racial/ethnic differences, they can foster competition and distrust between WOC co-leaders. This undermines their individual and collective efforts to succeed.

Moreover, organizations may not be set up to transform conflict, or to foster solidarity and collaboration for equity across racial/ethnic groups.

Governance & Organizational Capacity

Support Alternative Governance Models

- **Community ownership** models that are community rooted, slower & more relational
- Learn about the **worker self-directed nonprofit** model
- Engage conversations with other organizations applying under-recognized practices
- Experiment with co-directorship and leadership circles
- Interrogate language: disengage with colonizer language, **use new language for new structures**

Redefine Success

- Embrace innovation, creativity & joy
- **Normalize a growth mindset** and support behavior change, rather than punish **mistakes**
- **Embrace intersectionality** as power building

Validate a holistic approach

- Bring in legacy, lineage, ancestors, a multigenerational approach. A more relational way of being as opposed to a transactional one.
- Incorporate cultural & spiritual connection as part of professional development

Support co-leadership to succeed

- Build solidarity & foster bridge building
- Offer 1:1 coaching AND coaching co-leaders together, **aligned with a vision of mutuality**

Financial Sustainability

Attend to business aspects of social cause

- Envision the impact of systems change 7 generations later
- Develop long term plans: 3–5 years, or longer
- Learn new business models
- Coach women to fundraise

Shift Mental Models

- From isolation to power building by having thought partners in fundraising
- From scarcity to abundance
- From secrecy to transparency when talking about money

Host Retreats

- Between funders and leaders, to have critical conversations around shared responsibility & mutuality
- Among nonprofit leaders to explore becoming one another's donors – community ownership model

What Funders Fund Undermines WOC Leaders

Not offering support in the areas that the leader struggles with the most: budgets & funding

WOC EDs have no time to get to be thought leaders – there is not enough space to dream.

Nonprofits face shortages in unrestricted funding and general operating support. Need to build in 20-30% margin on staff because people are out. Parental leave, medical leave, caretaking. Can't expect people to work at 100%.

WOC ED may not have competitive pay & benefits - may be a first-generation family member to get a bank account!

How Funders Fund Undermines WOC Leaders

Things WOC have done are not valued by funders, who are asking organizations to conform to their own values and views

- Foundations are aligned with the status quo of nonprofit structures.
- Funding is not available to be reactive AND proactive

To lead differently, WOC need to experiment with new ways of doing things; funding limits or restricts their flexibility and creativity

Funders say there are "not enough" resources

- The perceived scarcity of funds encourages WOC to seek funds that involve taking on more than they have the capacity to do.
- It also encourages competition for resources. They are not considering who they are responsible to – is it the individual grantee, or the entire ecosystem? No equity analysis about who is left out. Funders play favorites and express preferences based on the leader's relationship with the program officer

Shift Funding Structures: "The What"

Offer general operating support

- Instead of project-based support
- Help build 20 to 30% margin on staff

Support power building

- Fund time for WOC Leaders to develop synergistic strategies to build power among them

Invest in changing structures in philanthropy & nonprofit

- Recognize it's not possible to build power within the existing infrastructures
- Add community organizers to philanthropic boards

Shift Funding Structures: "The How"

Shift to trust-based philanthropy practices

- Give multi-year unrestricted funding
- Do the homework
- Simplify and streamline paperwork
- Be transparent and responsive
- Solicit and act on feedback
- Offer support beyond the check

Re-consider who foundations fund & bring in equity analysis

- Identify who's left out
- Review competing commitments to depth & reach
- Clarify who the funders are responsible to – their grantees or the ecosystem?
- Shift in favorites. So many people left out of funding because they have no relationship with a PO

Build transformational relationships between grantees and funders.

- Shift from a transactional to a relational approach
- Allow space for vulnerable & frank conversations
- Have conversations for reciprocal accountability – Transform the "not enough" conversation
- Shift from referring to nonprofit leaders as "grantees" to calling them "partners."
- Shift from evaluation to valuation. Hold healing as a value. Define values & definitions of success around relationships & less on data

Funding Structure Supports Experimentation

Eliminate the gatekeeper

- Funder's role is to support without guidelines or preferences
- Create plan of action based upon what the grantee needs. How much this fits into the Foundation's guidelines does not matter
- Add community organizers to philanthropic boards

Fund WOC to Take Risks and Learn from Failure

- Doing the same thing will not get us a different result
- Fund to experiment to see what it takes for a Board to make equity-aligned decisions
- Fund orgs to have dedicated space & time to identify what it takes for them to experiment – what would they need?

Fund structures that recognize the impact of trauma

- Support new organizational structures that address trauma collectively instead of individually, such as:
  - Policies allowing the ED/CEO a month off to rest
  - Policies that support a 4- day workweek for nonprofits

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Thank you