State of Women in the Nonprofit Workforce

by Mishka Parkins

Just in time for Women's History Month, the Building Movement Project revisits data gathered from its 2016 survey—Nonprofits, Leadership, and Race— extrapolating and analyzing findings unique to women of color (WOC) in the non-profit sector. The resulting report, Race to Lead: Women of Color in the Nonprofit Sector, adds much-needed depth to existing but limited research on the nonprofit workforce. The report presents findings that confirm gender- and race-based disparities we have long assumed –such as the continuous underemployment of highly-educated women of color, or stereotypes and biases that hold women of color back from advancement. More importantly, the findings shed light on more nuanced implications of the intersectionality of gender and race in the nonprofit workforce. For example:

- Latinx women were found to work more in immigrant-identity-based nonprofits than all other women of color. Also, all women of color that work in identity-based nonprofits are more likely to view their race or ethnicity as a positive to their career advancement.

- Close to half (46%) of Asian/Pacific Islander (API) women consider race and gender as prohibitive to their career growth despite the "model minority" stereotype they are often measured against. In fact, the "model minority" stereotype often leads to API women being assigned a disproportionate share of work that did not translate to promotions or raises.

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- Black women are least likely to report having had mentors within their organizations, especially when there is an internal shortage of people of color in leadership positions. Instead, black female professionals compensate for the lack of internal support by establishing a support system outside their work environments. So much so, that women of color in leadership positions are often overwhelmed by requests for guidance from other women of color.
- Native American/Indigenous women are most concerned about their ability to thrive in non-identity based nonprofits. While Native American women found that their race and gender supported career advancement in organizations related to their culture, they expressed concerns about being restricted when operating outside of native organizations.

Across the board, most women of color expressed feeling tokenized and pressured to be the "representatives" of their race. Many have likely heard of these sentiments expressed by friends or peers – now they are proven facts.

So how do nonprofit leaders ensure they don't hinder the advancement of women of color? The report offers valuable recommendations for nonprofits to begin to address the barriers faced by WOC. Many missions will need to uncover deeply embedded race-and gender-biases in their talent management practices then uproot them. From a talent management standpoint, here are a few places race- and gender-bias tend to show up:

- In the hiring process: There remains a tendency to judge. Don't judge job candidates based on where they went to school, their names or other information provided in their application materials. Using a candidate's salary history to determine their compensation perpetuates underpaying WOC especially considering that women aren't typically paid what they are worth. It is also illegal in some jurisdictions. Also, keep in mind that current pay inequities impact the life-long earning potential of all women much more than we thought.

- On your leadership team: Consider how well your professional development opportunities and culture support the advancement of WOC. Are women of color underrepresented in your nonprofit's leadership? When women of color do assume leadership roles, they often find themselves navigating demoralizing stereotypes or encounters with colleagues that question their expertise and merit due to implicit biases. Many nonprofits would benefit from training/education for all levels on staff on implicit bias and how it impacts the way they look at and interact with women of color in leadership positions.
- The exit process: The exit process is a way to capture information about your shortcomings and wins when it comes to creating a diverse culture. Exiting employees may be more likely to share insights they would otherwise feel uncomfortable sharing. Of course, care must be taken to extract this information for it to be useful in planning. If WOC are leaving because they do not feel supported or find that opportunities for advancement are lacking, you definitely want to capture and address that feedback in your policies and practices.

What is insidious about racism, inequality and oppression is that they are so deeply embedded into systems, practices and cultures that they appear normal. Even people of color have to be mindful of perpetuating injustice. Yes, working toward a culture of inclusion is an arduous journey but on that must be bravely championed by nonprofit leadership teams.

Equity must be considered a process. It is a journey of learning and unlearning. Then learning and unlearning, again. One off diversity training won't cut it. Inclusive practices must be embedded into all talent management practices for equity to exist in our workplaces. Until then, organizations will experience high turnover of WOC or will never tap into the strengths and perspectives that these women bring to their roles.