

Leadership Learning Community Annie E. Casey Research Project

Lessons from the Field of Leadership Development “How to Increase Leadership Opportunities for People of Color”

Background Problem Statement:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has identified a dramatic shift that could take place in the leadership of the non-profit sector as the baby boomers enter retirement age over the next 5-10 years. Based on an analysis of available demographics, it is possible that by the year 2010, as many as 24,000 non-profit executives will retire. There is reason for concern about how these positions will be filled given a lack of middle management training, executive career paths and mentoring opportunities within the sector. Many variables (e.g. retirement age or the contributions of emerging leadership training strategies) make it difficult to predict the extent to which this transition could create a leadership void. It is clear that there will be a significant transfer of leadership and that there may be an opportunity to positively influence the diversification and preparation of the next generation of leadership.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation partnered with the Leadership Learning Community (LLC) to draw on the combined experience of more than 100 leadership programs to extract lessons about how to effectively support and expand leadership opportunities for people of color. There are many organizational development strategies, high school career orientation programs, non-profit management degree programs and diversity programs that make important contributions to issues of recruitment, organizational receptivity and cultural change that support people of color in leadership. Significant change will require orchestrated change on many fronts. LLC's contribution to the research is through the lens of leadership development.

Research Methodology:

Framing the Inquiry: The framing question for the research project evolved based on early interviews with key informants and a scan of the literature. The original framing question was:

What can be learned from the experiences of the leadership development field about how to more successfully recruit, develop and sustain people of color in senior management positions in the non-profit sector?

There were some surprising challenges to the assumptions embedded within this framing question. The literature review analysis offers a number of alternate views about the extent to which people of color have increased influence and access to power by virtue of

attaining management level positions in the non-profit sector. Several sources suggest that leadership positions can be a set up when the internal environment is not supportive of change and leaders cannot effectively represent his/her constituency. Some opt for starting new organizations rather than attempting to change the culture of existing organizations. One participant asked why we were not looking at leadership of broader change strategies, coalition, movements, community development, *“Non-profit leadership is such a narrow slice of community. Why are we not more interested in developing entrepreneurship?”* To address these issues LLC created a framework of explicit assumptions for the research project:

Our inquiry assumes that:

- People of color are underrepresented in leadership positions in the non profit sector, and especially in large organizations with sizeable budgets.
- Diversification of the non-profit sector will have positive outcomes.
- Leadership development programs can help to increase leadership opportunities for people of color.

We are not assuming that:

- Non profit organizations serving and led by people of color will have equitable access to resources and power.
- Leadership within non-profit organizations is the only or best way for people of color to exercise increased influence over community agendas.
- People of color want leadership positions in all non-profits, e.g. many have a history of paternalism, bureaucracy, or racism.
- Leadership development strategies alone can address the legacy and multiple manifestations of institutionalized racism.

The framing question has been broadened to ask leadership development programs and funders, *“What have you learned about how to increase leadership opportunities for people of color?”* The question was broadened to learn from and surface a full spectrum of practices that could be applied specifically to non-profit leadership in addition to other arenas of change leadership.

Literature Review: The research project was initiated with a review of current literature. A letter was sent to 25 foundations and management service organizations asking for relevant literature. In addition, web research was conducted to locate literature on all of these sites. An analysis of 12 articles and studies has shaped the framing of the interview and focus group protocols. (See Appendix II, Literature Review) All of the programs interviewed were asked to share their evaluations to provide supporting documentation of the impact of leadership interventions and strategies. Requests were followed up by email and phone. Six evaluations were shared and reviewed as part of the research. Leadership programs were assured that the results of their evaluations would not be cited in our report unless we requested their permission in advance to use the findings as a positive illustration of their work. Still, we had a very difficult time getting programs to send us their evaluations.

Interviews: Interviews were conducted with thirteen leadership development program directors and funders who represented over 15 different leadership programs with a specific focus on developing the leadership of people of color. Of these programs, three served specific ethnic minority groups (African American Women and American Indians), five of the programs were specifically for people of color, and the remaining programs covered a spectrum of objectives (resident leadership, boundary crossing leadership, women’s health, support of Executive Directors) and were predominantly people of color. The interviews were designed to deepen our understanding about the obstacles that prevent people of color from achieving leadership positions within the non-profit sector and to identify strategies that are successfully addressing these obstacles.

Focus Group: The LLC held a special session of the Bay Area Regional Learning Circle (its strongest circle in the country) to test out the preliminary findings from the literature analysis, program review and interviews. The focus group was attended by programs serving specifically Asian Americans, predominantly African American and Asian American Resident Leaders, American Indians, and Executive Directors of Color. The focus group confirmed and deepened the findings of the interviews and program review.

Leadership Development Matrix Tool: The research identified a set of leadership development strategies and program design elements that have been associated with helping participants of different ethnic minority backgrounds to prepare for, gain access to, and succeed in leadership positions. The programs reviewed during the research project were then charted into a matrix to indicate the extent to which they have integrated the elements that will enable them to better meet the leadership needs of people of color. The matrix can be used by leadership programs to help them audit themselves and can also be translated into recommendations for effectively serving ethnic minority populations.

The findings are presented in two categories: Obstacles that limit leadership opportunities for people of color and leadership development strategies that have demonstrated some success in expanding leadership opportunities for people of color.

What obstacles limit leadership opportunities for people of color?

Manifestations of Institutionalized, interpersonal and internalized oppression: High on the list of obstacles articulated were the many forms of institutionalized racism that are manifested institutionally and interpersonally.

Systemic racism: At the society wide, system level, people of color experience intrinsic economic disparities that limit career and leadership options.

- Disadvantage in Economic Status: Family responsibilities, high student loans make unpaid internships, low paid and unstable jobs impossible
- Disparity of opportunity in access to education and training programs
- Exclusive networks that recruit and perpetuate white leadership
- Exclusive dominant culture model of leadership
- Historic violence against leaders who challenge systemic racism

Interpersonal discrimination: The literature and interview respondents describe both overt and subtle discrimination that takes place to create obstacles at various junctures on the leadership path in the non-profit sector.

- Predominantly white boards and executive directors hire people who look like themselves and demonstrate a leadership style like their own
- Leadership skills of internal candidates of color are overlooked in hiring
- People of color experience unwelcoming, exclusive or hostile environments
- Recruitment pipelines favor white candidates

Internalized oppression: Many of the support and development strategies focus on internal work to address forms of internalized oppression that can prevent people of color from seeking positions where their leadership can be fully exercised.

- Lack of self-confidence
- Leadership is associated with abuse of power
- Lack of role models, mentors and success stories
- Disempowerment: loss of faith in the opportunity to make a difference

Contributing problems intrinsic within the non-profit sector: It is important to understand the level of obstacles to leadership recruitment, development and advancement that are inherent within the current structure of the non-profit sector. One respondent from a leadership development program stated, *“There is no upward mobility in non-profits or salaries and benefits commensurate with management positions.”* It will be difficult to create development and advancement strategies specifically for people of color without addressing fundamental problems that could affect any transfer of leadership.

Non-profit management positions are unattractive: Issues of financial sustainability are largely unresolved. As a result salaries are low and positions are often unstable and very stressful. Time demands are incongruent with the culture of the whole person. The positions generally attract only those with a high sense of mission who lead at considerable personal costs.

Limited Career Paths: The leadership of non-profit organizations is frequently externally imported. Non-profit organizations are often small, offering no career advancement paths or mid management training opportunities. There are no term limits on Executive Director’s who can become gatekeepers. The sector lacks transparent mechanisms for transition, recruitment and promotion. Hierarchical undemocratic structures limit internal development opportunities. Division of labor does not allow those in non-profit organizations to develop broad skill sets. The organizational isolation (silo phenomenon) limits mid level networking and inter-organizational career development paths.

Organizational Challenges: Leadership development strategies often focus on supporting an individual to be a catalyst for organizational change. The literature review, specifically lessons from the Babcock Foundation and Southern Empowerment Project,

point out that individuals often face an organizational culture and bureaucracy that will be resistant to change, and that this resistance will be intensified by organizational racism if not openly addressed. They suggest the use of external organizational consultants. Several respondents suggest that it is unrealistic to expect an individual to successfully engineer change without the support of strategies that engage the organization in a change process. The director of a foundation administered community leadership program shared his concerns, *“I worry about the sense of frustration that comes with trying to represent an underrepresented group in an impossibly imbalanced system.”* There is a dangerous assumption in some strategies that the normative model of leadership will change and adapt to tap the talents of people of color when they are hired and promoted. A diversity of participating individuals can be mistaken for an authentic shift in culture and without appropriate organization work, result in tokenism.

What leadership development strategies claim success in contributing to expanded leadership opportunities for people of color?

Mentoring: Mentoring emerged repeatedly in the literature review and in interviews as an extremely important way to support increased leadership opportunities for people of color. Mentoring was acknowledged as a form of being connected to new resources and networks through a mentor. One participant who acknowledged the value of mentor programs said, *“A strong mentor program connects emerging leaders with the various kinds of power structures who already have access.”* Mentoring is specifically valued for its hands on training capacity to help a new manager negotiate difficult situations. A couple of respondents pointed to the benefits of being mentored by someone from the dominant culture who would be able to help the person being mentored access their networks. Another participant pointed to the need for cross organization mentoring: *“We need a mentoring program that pairs top leaders in one organization with emerging leaders in another organization. There are not enough mechanisms for mentoring relationships.”*

When mentors are also people of color there is the increased value of role modeling, support and coaching from a successful manager who understands the specific challenges of operating successfully from a non-dominant cultural experience and perspective. There was overwhelming consensus that there is a serious lack of mentorship opportunities that could help people of color both access and succeed in leadership positions.

Networking/Relationship Building: It has been widely supported by research that jobs are more commonly filled through personal connections, even when applicants utilize seemingly competitive application processes. The increased use of consultants also circumvents transparent recruitment mechanisms. Exposure to expanded networks can help people of color compete more effectively with advance knowledge of leadership positions, internal advocates, and new venues through which to cultivate important relationships with influential decision makers. One interviewee had this to say about the

importance of access to expanded networks: *“All of the isms play themselves out in limiting ones network and this is probably the most critical piece.”*

Leadership development programs that build sustainable networks of participants create these new network opportunities for their graduates. The director of a national fellowship program, in describing the important role of networking, stated, *“Our program recognizes that in addition to skills and training, it’s important who you know. You need to have the right connections with people who will get to know you, your work and reputation. Our graduates have been helped by their connections with people from around the country.”* In addition, these networks can also provide a continuous source of peer learning and support for those taking up new leadership challenges.

Cultural Competence of the Leadership Program: The cultural competence of a leadership program staff will have a tremendous impact on how successfully the program prepares specific minority groups or people of color in general for leadership positions. Competency can often be assessed by the composition of the board, program leadership and training staff. Are they representative of the participants being served? One foundation officer said, *“We ask if leadership programs are inclusive of the communities they serve, do they have a diverse board?”* In addressing the significant role board diversity plays, another participant stated, *“If the board is diverse, they will look for diverse candidates.”*

In negative examples the leadership model was not culturally appropriate and failed to integrate an understanding of the cultural context in which participants exercise their leadership. If the program is serving a diverse group of participants it is important to promote different cultural leadership models. In describing her organization one respondent said, *“Almost 100% of our faculty are people of color. We create a setting where people do not have to explain who they are. Where no participant is seen as ‘the other,’ a program that builds on the values and shared and distinct cultures of the groups represented.”*

Recognition: Some leadership programs believe that they can and should use the prestige of a leadership program to help level the playing field for participants of color. They build publicity around their program in the hopes that the prestige of the award will highlight the leadership accomplishments of those who are often unrecognized because they don’t fit the dominant culture’s model of leadership. The increased exposure can help these leaders advance to new positions, enhance their authority in current positions and sometimes attract new resources for their work.

Skills Development: Many leadership programs operate within the context of a specific field or issue and focus knowledge and skill development specific to health, education, etc. The interviews focused on extracting those skills that have specific significance for increasing the agency and effectiveness of people of color across a number of fields. The most common general areas of skill identified were policy, management, and cultural awareness.

Policy: The need for policy training has been most clearly articulated in the report produced by PolicyLink and discussed in the literature review. (Appendix II) This view was echoed by many of the interviewees: *“People of color need to be represented when policy is made.”* and *“There is an important disconnect between what people need in communities and the decision making process.”*

Management Training: Executive Directors also need management training and development, as reflected in this statement by the Executive Director of one program, *“It is important to provide basic management skills: fund development, board governance and personnel.”*

Cultural Competence: All of the leadership programs serving specific ethnic minority populations or people of color agreed that it was critical to take up issues of culture and oppression as part of the leadership program development experience. In addressing this issue, a respondent said, *“We were surprised that identity was such a big thing. We are dealing with a cultural clash with mainstream America and we have to take this up for every generation. It is especially important for communities of color where your history is not present in history textbooks.”* All of the programs also acknowledged the critical importance of creating a safe space where issues of power, race and oppression could be explored and openly discussed.

There were a number of strategies and approaches to taking up this work described by leadership program staff.

- We create a safe environment for discussing isms.
- We focus on building interethnic capacity and coalition building.
- We need to reaffirm our own cultural values and cultural identity.
- We look at civic engagement for the African American Community post civil rights.
- We identify specific strengths of women of color and tap their talents.
- We create quality relationships that tap into the diverse talent and perspective of fellows.
- We help people learn to relate across differences.

Cultural competence and developing cultural esteem were also identified by the focus group. They supported and deepened many of the ideas surfaced through the interviews about important curriculum areas and development strategies.

- Identify/articulate different cultural models of leadership
- Incorporate an anti-oppression, anti-racism framework
- Develop Multiculturalism/Interethnic capacity/boundary crossing
- Build multi-racial coalitions and develop collaborative approaches
- Learn to balance identity group interests, organizational priorities and broad community agenda
- Utilize self assessment tools and individual learning objectives

Whole Person Development (Inside out approach in a safe environment):

“Leadership development is about the whole person. We have to deal with the healing process. I was listening to Native Americans deal with oppression and the energy required to be bi or multi-racial. We need to deal with historical trauma. This is not therapy to make people white or take their anger from them but to give expression to internal and external oppression so that the energy can be released and used rather than using the person.”

The terminology “inside out” refers to the need to pay attention to how participants address issues of healing, developing cultural esteem, personal financial stability, renewal and rejuvenation and self-confidence. Interviewees described the following curriculum elements, objectives and integral parts of their leadership development approach.

- Healing: Addressing internalized oppression/historical trauma
- Reaffirming Cultural Identity: Learning to lead with ones authentic voice
- Opportunity for reflection and attention to self-growth
- Attention to financial competency, personal survival and resource management.
- Building confidence

Program Design: Leadership program staff described the importance of developing a program approach that gave some ownership of the process to the participants. An emergent design allows a program to evolve in response to the specific needs of participants. A great deal of value was placed on programs that were anchored in experiential learning utilizing internships, study trips, learning projects and collaborative projects. Given the added stress for people of color in leadership positions, many programs suggest a retreat environment that is supportive of rest and reflection. By cultivating an intentional learning community of participants, fellows of these programs will be able to turn to each other as a continuous source of learning and support.

Intentional Recruitment Strategies: If leadership programs do not develop creative strategies for identifying candidates of color, they will perpetuate the lack of diversity in the non-profit sector. *“We came into being because the metropolitan area was importing leaders from outside the community, overlooking the opportunity to develop local talent.”* Some of the more interesting strategies rely heavily on community representatives in the nomination and selection process. The composition of the selection team will have an enormous impact on who gets chosen. Arguments are made for nominating committees that may encourage individuals with talent who do not think of themselves as leaders. And, arguments are made for self-nomination so that those overlooked by traditional approaches can advocate for themselves. To create opportunities for self-nomination by the unusual suspects will require the development of new pipelines: *“A lot of non-profits are not aggressive enough in their recruitment practices. You have to think about where to advertise opportunities.”*

Financial support/Awards: Financial components of leadership programs can begin to address areas of financial disparity that make it difficult for people of color to pursue non-profit careers. Financial awards that contribute to the financial stability addressing

the needs of the ‘whole person’ can build and unleash the capacity of leaders. Financial awards can also support individualized and action learning opportunities. In some programs, funds are set aside for collaborative projects. Social entrepreneurial leadership programs make awards available to emerging leaders who want to launch a new project, idea or in some cases organizations. This can be a way for people of color to create new organizations that can be drawn on their own cultural models of leadership.

What Impact Are Leadership Programs Having on the Leadership of People of Color?

While it is difficult to solidly attribute advancements and accomplishments to specific training or leadership support strategies given the many variables that contribute to an individual’s achievements, there is growing acknowledgement within the leadership development field that these stories are important. Below are some highlights from several of the programs who have participated in this research. They capture personal accounts of increased confidence and monitoring of career developments.

As result of our program, participants describe themselves as more hopeful, broadly connected, sophisticated about finances and able to pool resources on behalf of the common good.

We have stories from each group of fellows about victories they have been involved in, e.g. one of our fellows led the California Family Leave Act and another was involved in a court settlement for \$5,000,000 on behalf of victims of a slaughter in Venezuela, another created more access to financial education for Latinos.

New funders are paying attention to the importance of leadership development and boundary crossing. Based on our reputation, people see our program as worthwhile and are making commitments of personal time to participate.

Of 150 graduates of our program, 10 have become elected officials, some have returned to our community and participants use each other.

Participants of our program are repackaging our curriculum and replicating it with different communities.

We scan our alumni to find out where they have been and our anecdotal evidence shows that 75 – 80% of them attribute their professional growth to this program as a key point in their lives that helped to launch their advancement.

We conducted a 32-month evaluation looking into the organizational, individual, and community benefits that [our] fellowship helped to achieve. 98% of the Fellows reported enhanced leadership and management skills, 84% reported an increased likelihood of staying in the field, and 88% report joining other Fellows in cooperative projects. Of 56 Fellows who have graduated to date, at least 46 (approximately 82% of our alumni) have either sustained their leadership position or have made a professionally lateral or

upward move in another nonprofit agency. In addition, our retention rate is nearly 83%, substantially high in comparison to CompassPoint's Daring to Lead study of Bay Area executive directors.

A post-program survey revealed that 54% of participants felt that their time away gave them new perspectives/ideas that have benefited their organization. In addition, 61-72% felt that the program is effectively encouraging innovation, and helping to keep experienced organizers in the field.

On the personal transformation level, many organizations cite anecdotal evidence of success. For example, they hear from participants who have gone from occasionally attending public meetings to running for public office. These development programs also lead to respectful new working relationships within communities.

What Limitations Are Leadership Development Programs Facing?

Despite documented and impressive success in supporting career advancements, every leadership program cited funding as their primary obstacle. Leadership development strategies are not broadly funded in philanthropy, in part because of the evaluation limitations described and in part because there is little understanding of the importance of leadership investments and their strategic contribution to different fronts of social change work. If leadership development strategies offer an important vehicle for diversifying the non-profit sector, given the pending transfer of leadership, it may be more important than ever to make a compelling case for the importance of leadership development.

Summary

The research project has identified many lessons about how leadership development strategies can increase leadership opportunities and success for people of color. Participants in the research shared a depth of understanding about the obstacles that people of color face. Many of the ideas and approaches suggested have been tested with some success. While it is clear that the scope of institutionalized racism will require a set of strategies on many fronts and over time, there are some definite leveraging opportunities to make a real difference. The research alone can make a contribution by helping current leadership programs learn how to increase their cultural competency and capacity to contribute to the success of people of color.