

Love Work

Liberatory Leadership in Practice

Winter 2025



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**MUSLIMS FOR
JUST FUTURES**

Catherine Bisola Labiran
CONSULTING



Letter from the Editors

Grounded in a desire to radically reimagine our view of leadership, The Leadership Learning Community's 10-month Liberatory Leadership Community of Practice (CoP) brought together eight powerful and inspiring racial and reproductive justice leaders to reflect, discuss, experiment, and embody liberatory leadership practices. Taking place both virtually and in person, this collaborative experience supported participants in expanding their current liberatory practice toolkit by exploring topics including liberatory values, operations, accountability processes, funding, and research.

The Community of Practice aimed to surface, incubate, and innovate liberatory leadership practices to inform each organization's individual work as well as to inform the broader field and move us closer to collective liberation. While visioning this space, two questions anchored our dreamings: 1) Who needs deep time to dream, reflect and vision towards a future of collective liberation, and 2) What does it look like to offer a collaborative, iterative, and experimental oasis to conspire towards a more just and joyful liberatory leadership ecosystem?

We decided to invite in BIPOC leaders focused on changing the world in new and innovative ways. Our mostly virtual gathering space served as a clearing to explore the tools, practices, and capacities needed to practice liberatory leadership and support liberatory leaders, but it also served as a space for us to build deep relationships, surface concerns about dominant habits in nonprofits, and share honest reflections about the state of our movements.

Ultimately, the questions that remained persistent throughout our ten-month practice and beyond, were not limited to movement infrastructure or leadership development (though we discussed that too). They centered on love, on rest and care, on the principles and values that anchor us in our pursuit of justice and equity. As one of the participants, Felicia Griffin, so beautifully put it, "this movement is about more than changing a couple of policies. It is about how we change how we be, how we live, how we are going to get to liberation."

To that we add, it is also about how can we soften our focus on the road ahead and trust, even when the miles keep ticking and the roadblocks are plenty, that there are legions of us doing our just and joyous work in corners we cannot see, whose intentions feed the nutrient-rich soil of our ecosystem, whose effects ripple out and fortify our work in invisible and spine strengthening ways. We may not always be aware of who all is doing work that is scaffolding

our own, but we can trust that when the time is right and when the resources are available, we will find each other in rooms being prepared for us by folks who believe in our visions.

Third spaces like the Liberatory Leadership Community of Practice are as important to the personal transformation of our leadership as it is to the movement ecosystem. It is our hope that more spaces such as these are robustly resourced, and that the leaders in them are given ample opportunity to iterate their liberatory visions. The purpose of this offering is to share insight into the reflections, wisdom, and dreams of the leaders who participated in the CoP.

We hope that this offering will inspire people to begin (or continue) thinking about the role of liberatory practices within their lives, organizations and movements, and to assess if there is room for more spaciousness, imagination, and expansive ways of being. Additionally, we hope to generate conversations and greater transparency about the challenge and reward of practicing liberatory leadership in, and beyond, the nonprofit industrial complex.

See you on our continued journey towards liberation.

With love and gratitude,
Sadia Hassan and Iman Mills Gordon

Overview of LLC's Community of Practice



Defining liberatory leadership

Informed by our engagements with the larger ecosystem, including the members of the CoP, LLC's current working definition of Liberatory Leadership is as follows:

We believe that liberatory leadership means taking responsibility for collectively transforming our freedom dreams into reality by freeing ourselves from oppressive and limiting self-beliefs, harmful interpersonal practices, and divesting from and changing systems of harm that rely on domination and extraction. For those of us leading from within movements and organizations, this means creating, refining, and uplifting life-giving policies, structures, and practices that combat oppression in our organizations and our communities. As a practice rooted in self-love and right-relationship with others, liberatory leadership facilitates the power, joy, and thriving of all people by maintaining that we must do just work in just and joyous ways.

This understanding is inspired by the work of the National Equity Project¹ and our work with the Liberatory Leadership Partnership.

¹ Chatmon, LaShawn Routé. "Wade in the Water." National Equity Project, National Equity Project, 21 June 2023, www.nationalequityproject.org/blog/wade-in-the-water-leadership-imperatives-for-turbulent-times.

With our working definition in mind, we wanted to be in conversation with practitioners about the application of these high-level ideas.

LLC's desire for the Community of Practice was for it to inspire:

- The development of relationships and community among participants.
- A body of shareable and applicable liberatory leadership practices, tools, resources and learnings for the field.

These hopes informed the design and content of the Community of Practice which allowed us to arrive at a clearer understanding of our individual and shared commitments to liberatory leadership.

At the core of each of the participant's vision was a desire for a sustainable, resourced, leaderful ecosystem rooted in collective liberation, justice, and joy for the most marginalized. We returned monthly to our Artifacts of Practices, the tools, practices, and processes of liberatory leadership that have helped us to lead with integrity and care, as well as our Deep Hangouts and Peer Support space where participants learned from each other while helping one another maneuver difficult questions.

Our goal was to create a virtual clearing where participants could surface the questions they've been holding in this political moment while wrestling with resonant questions about the tools leaders need to iterate liberatory values on an organizational level. Many of these questions birthed new lines of inquiry, and we continue to hold some of these unknowns as opportunities for continued exploration.

Programmatic Arc

Rooting in Our Story

What is Liberatory Leadership?

Radical Rest and Sustainable
Organizational Structures

Operationalizing our
Liberatory Values

Addressing Power
Differentials in Service to
Justice

Transitions & Values Aligned
Funding

This is Love Work: Learning
Capture Feedback

Oasis in the Desert:
Trust-Building in Santa Fe

Liberatory Research and
Evaluation

Capstone: Learning
Harvest and Gratitude

Resonant Questions

- How do we redefine rigor with a liberatory leadership lens?
- What does liberatory decision-making look like across an organization that isn't flat?
- What does a sustainable organizational structure that accounts for rest, reflection, and dreaming look like?
- How do we evaluate if we are moving with our values and principles?
- How do we disrupt hierarchy and spread responsibility, leadership, and emotional labor across the organization?
- How are folks dealing with conflict transformation and moving folks through conflict in a way that is healing and generative?
- Is it possible to be a liberatory leader when you do not want to lead, but are doing so because the organization requires it?
- How do we ensure that our leadership values feel true to who we are rather than serve as a reflection of someone else's model of leadership?
- How do we ensure that exhaustion and burnout are not viewed as "badges of honor" for leaders? How do we shift the paradigm so that wellness, rest, and community are valued instead?
- Who holds leaders of color in times of transition and grief?
- How do we combat loneliness as leaders?

Select Tools

- [Liberating Organizations Training Handbook](#)
- [Brilliant Transformations: Toward Full Flourishing BIPOC Leadership Transitions](#)
- [Mosaic & Mirrors: Tool Gallery](#)
- [Creating a Liberated Zone Worksheet](#)
- [A Call for Philanthropy to Move Beyond Trust and Towards Care](#)
- [Work Shouldn't Suck: Decolonizing the Bylaws](#)
- [Language, Practice, Policy, Offering Matrix for Values-In-Action Tool](#) (Hollyhock institute)

Gallery Walk

In the Words of Our Liberatory Leaders



Felicia Griffin (she/her)

Transformative Leadership for Change



What brings you to work at your current organization? What are the passions, interests and experiences that led you to where you are now?

My very being... my creator made me to love others and our current systems teach us to love only ourselves. I reject that. It was purpose that brought me to my current position, with my friend/sister Neha where we get to lead the organization we dreamed of – an organization pouring into BIPOC leaders so they can stand with full dignity as they fight against injustice and fight for our most valuable resource in this world... each other.

What, if anything, was the impact of having the Community of Practice as a space/container to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas? Did participating in the Community of Practice inspire any new thoughts, dreams, or visions for you?

The Community of Practice was a space where I got the opportunity to confirm the path I was taking was the right one. That there were other people not coloring in the lines and who also wanted to transform how we do social justice work.



It feels like sweet music to the ears to realize you are not on an island in your dreams of a new way of moving forward, that you have many members of the movement with you. Also, our struggle remains real – remains in front of us...but we can do it differently.

How have the funds (\$10,000 stipend) received through the LL Community of Practice supported your work?

The \$10,000 allowed us retreat spaces to continue building the concepts of liberatory leadership with ourselves (CO-EDs), with our staff team and with our governance circle. It also supported the time we spent in the Community of Practice meeting space.

Who are liberatory ancestors, teachers, guides, loved ones, and comrades that inspire your work and values?

My mom planted all the seeds (my father did participate in the seed planting lol) but she gets all the credit. She taught me to FIGHT injustice, to believe in my self-worth, to love, and that I deserved to be loved.





Are there any challenges that you have experienced as a result of embodying liberatory leadership in a non-profit organization?

Yes, the non-profit industrial complex culture (NPIC) is strong, it is part of our foundation and how the work has been done for decades. It's very easy to do things as we learned, as the NPIC has taught us and sometimes feels harder and takes longer to do the work in a liberated way. I see organizations make liberatory changes and then with leadership change, or just time, the same old culture returns. We have to put our changes into real practice.

How do you hold yourself accountable to your values?

I try to listen to feedback. Building deep enough relationships to get feedback from those you love is hard. So when I do build those, I make sure to listen to those folks and check-in with them to make sure I'm in my purpose and values.

What seeds of wisdom would you give to someone who is interested in liberatory leadership but does not know where to start?

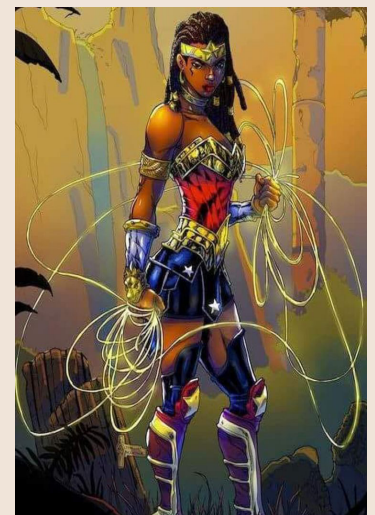
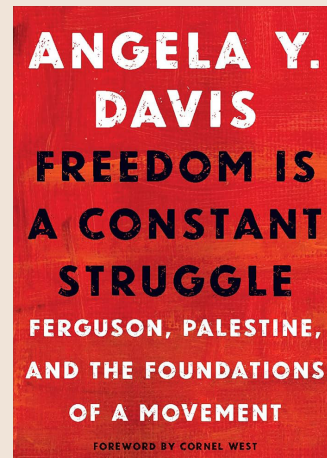
Just a question – is there a better way to do it? One that is rooted in our values and dreams of liberation. Ask it about EVERYTHING!

How do you sustain yourself as you engage in your work? What are the resources, practices, and spaces that support your well-being?

Chickens (lol). I haven't been doing as good at this as I need to lately. But usually, taking time for me to be easeful and to take care of myself. Slowing down makes me feel good. Spending an hour drinking my coffee while listening to the birds sing. Watching my kids play sports, traveling, and being in nature. Getting as much of all of this as I can."

Can you share examples of how your organization practices and embodies liberatory leadership?

We are trying to embody liberatory leadership in everything we do: governance (no more Robert's rules), staff policies (how can our policies be different?), and working in our values (i.e. sabbatical and rest). For more information, [click here](#).



Nadiyah Mohajir, MPH (she/her)

HEART Women & Girls



What brings you to work at your current organization? What are the passions, interests and experiences that led you to where you are now?

I am a romantic at heart (no pun intended) and am always day-dreaming. Despite this, I think the person who was most surprised about me being able to imagine HEART was me. I never imagined myself as a nonprofit executive, let alone in a position of leadership in Muslim communities. In fact, I resisted leading HEART for many years: my discomfort with positional power, my internalized racial oppression that I wasn't charismatic/smart/experienced/ambitious/Muslim enough to be in a leadership position were off-repeated inner dialogue that I had to learn to disrupt.



As a first-generation Pakistani American Muslim, I was raised in a community of contradictions: be bold enough to break through glass ceilings, but not at the expense of domestic responsibilities. Be ambitious, but not ambitious enough to challenge gender roles. Speak up, but only as long as it isn't too disruptive. Exercise free will and critical thinking when it comes to faith, but be careful not to question too hard, otherwise you're risking your Muslim-ness. Address harm, but not if it results in media attention.

The contradictions didn't stop there. Being one of the only brown Muslim kids in a mostly white upper-class middle school, belonging in white suburbia became even more critical for self-worth and self-esteem for me and my Muslim peers. Adding to this confusion, sex ed was presented in a secular, one-size-fits-all approach, leaving little room for different worldviews and approaches

to decision-making (Zakaria 2021). It presented abstinence as the preferred choice during adolescence, while media messaging reinforced the opposite: one is not liberated until they freely embrace their sexuality and have sex (Zakaria 2021). Consequently, I, along with my peers, felt the pressure to choose between our faith's values and fitting in, and the dominant messaging was that these two things were in conflict with each other.

Being raised in a fairly traditional South Asian Muslim household, Islam was typically presented as a formula, and if followed correctly, there would be reward both in this life and the next. It was grounded in fear and punishment, and was rarely presented as a source of empowerment. It wasn't until I was a young adult that my understanding of Islam became more nuanced.

Soon, I found myself as a holder of stories in both my personal and professional life. Some confided that they felt trapped in unhealthy, abusive relationships, not seeking help out of fear of exposing their own “sins” to their families. Others struggled to reconcile their sexual identity with the messaging they received from their faith spaces. The situation for married people was not much different: some shared stories of sexual pain and not knowing who to seek help from, while others navigated difficult reproductive health experiences such as infertility or pregnancy termination and experienced judgment by their communities.

On the other side of the world, there were Muslim women grappling with these same challenges: my dear colleagues-turned-sisters Sahar Pirzada in Singapore and Navila Rashid in New York, and my colleague Sameera Qureshi in Calgary. We began to collaborate on building support systems and accessible educational materials across time zones on Skype, well before Zoom made its appearance. Before we knew it, we had the scrappy infrastructure of organizational hubs in each of our local communities.



What, if anything, was the impact of having the Community of Practice as a container to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas? Did participating in the Community of Practice inspire any new thoughts, dreams, or visions for you?

To be in community with people who share a similar vision for liberatory workplaces is a gift and an invitation to dream big. Most of the time when I leave my HEART bubble, my ideas are received with condescension or being told it is not practical or too naive. It is lovely to be in community with other people who are like minded – it is affirming and gives you the comfort that you are not crazy lol.

How have the funds (\$10,000 stipend) received through the LL Community of Practice supported your work?

The funds were very helpful and came at a time when we wanted to prioritize organizational development and it allowed us to earmark money specifically for organizational development and spend time documenting our values.

Who are liberatory ancestors, teachers, guides, loved ones, and comrades that inspire your work and values?

Our gratitude first and foremost to God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Wise, who has allowed us to advance this important work and has blessed us with the sustenance to continue this work moving forward.

We are grateful to our beloved Prophet Muhammad, may God’s peace be upon him, and the brilliant women who were blessed to be his companions and from our Abrahamic traditions: Khadijah, Aisha, Fatima, may God be pleased with them all. Hajar, Maryam, Aasiya, may God be pleased with them. Our history of practicing reproductive justice goes back to the [beginning of time.](#)



Women’s Forum (NAPAWF), Muslim Women’s League, Queer Crescent, @ VillageAuntie, Muslim Wellness Foundation, Advocates for Youth, Family and Youth Institute, Breaking Silence (film), Hijabi Monologues, Hurma Project, Muslim ARC, Dr. amina wadud, Dr. Shabana Mir, Dr. Alia Azmat, Dr. Kecia Ali, Dr. Laury Silvers, Dr. Zahra Ayubi, Dr. Asma Barlas, Dr. Debra Majeed, Dr. Saadia Yacoob, Dr. Shehnaz Haqqani, Dr. Ingrid Mattson, Dr. Sobia Ali-Faisal, Dr. Azizah al-Hibri, Dr. Kameelah Rashad, Mahdia Lynn, Kamilah Pickett, Dr. Olubunmi Basirat Oyewuwo, Aisha Rahman, Qudsia Raja, Nadya Ali, Dr. Laila al-Marayati, Muslim Women’s Organization, Dr. Sameena Rahman, Muslim Youth Leadership Project, Mariame Kaba, Loretta Ross, Shira Hassan, Urooj Arshad, Tarana Burke, Sarah Jawaid, Michelle Gislason, Nadia Khansa.

How do you hold yourself accountable to your values?

I have a process that involves:

- 1) self-reflection,
- 2) seeking input from values-aligned trusted colleagues,
- 3) not giving into a sense of urgency. By doing this process, it reminds me of what my non-negotiables are and what the impact of my decision-making can be.

How do you sustain yourself as you engage in your work? What are the resources, practices, and spaces that support your well-being?

In some ways, being a mom of three has incorporated some daily practices that have created natural pauses and breaks in the day. For example, lunch has been built into my schedule since the beginning because I had to feed the kids, I fed myself too lol. *Releasing myself of ways I “should” be working - especially early on - many people tried to dictate how to do things differently - if I put my kids in full-time day care then I would be*

Our movement family and brilliant Muslim women scholars: those who came before us and those who work alongside us. Women—particularly Black, Indigenous, brown, Muslim, queer, and trans women and femmes—have been at the forefront of this work for centuries. We are indebted to so many of our sisters in the movement for laying the groundwork for us to do what we do. While there are too many to name, we want to extend our sincere gratitude to some of our organizational partners and teachers who have been particularly critical in our learning as we deepened our analysis of the reproductive justice and anti-sexual violence movements.

These amazing thought leaders, many of whom are Muslim—as well as many more not mentioned here— have laid the groundwork for us to do what we do, and for that we will forever be grateful.

Move to End Violence, Muslims for Just Futures (formerly Justice for Muslims Collective), Peaceful Families Project, FACE, KARAMAH, Black Women for Reproductive Justice, Sistersong, Sisterlove, National Asian Pacific American

able to grow my org at a faster rate, etc. I did not give in to those pressures and instead listened to my gut and took my time to be intentional with the way I wanted/needed to do it. There were many days when it felt frustrating, but looking back it is exactly the journey I needed.

Can you share examples of how your organization practices and embodies liberatory leadership?

HEART was co-founded in 2009 in Chicago by Nadiah Mohajir and Ayesha Akhtar, after launching a day-long workshop for Muslim mothers and daughters to learn about puberty, sex, and healthy relationships. More people than they ever imagined signed up for the event, which brought together many diverse women and girls with their incredible stories. Many left this space asking for when the next workshop would be and Nadiah began planting the seeds for what ultimately became HEART.

HEART is a national non-profit with a team of 8 staff located in cities such as: Chicago, Los Angeles, the DMV, Atlanta, NYC, Houston, and more! Below are core concepts that HEART strategically incorporates into our daily work – from our health education to training to research and advocacy initiatives, we strive to actualize these concepts to move towards prevention, intervention, and narrative- and culture-shifting.

We do so by continuously grounding ourselves as Muslims and most impacted people, holding that:

- there is no one way of being Muslim;
- people who are most impacted are the experts and at the center of our work; and
- we must invest in communities of care to both end gendered violence (including but not limited to sexual violence) and advance reproductive justice (which integrates gender justice, racial justice, and economic justice).

We approach this work with humility and acknowledge the limits of our own knowledge and power before God.

We are grounded in the niyyah (intention) that this work is our amanah (divinely entrusted responsibility).

We build upon the work of those who came before us - our beloved Prophets, Companions, and Black, Indigenous, and brown women - who have been at the forefront of this work for centuries and laid the foundation for us to do what we do. We take seriously this divine calling from God to build communities and workplaces that advance reproductive justice and end gendered violence for all. We renew our intention to use the following principles to guide our work:

We are grounded in niyyah (intention) that this work is our amanah (divinely entrusted responsibility). We do this by:

We cultivate ummah (community of belonging &

solidarity)

We lead with *adalah* (justice & equity)

We provide *inaya* (care)

We respond with *rahma* (compassion)

We seek *‘ilm* (knowledge) continuously

We promote *ridha* (culture of consent)

We approach our work with *adab* (humility & integrity)

The values document [in this link](#) will go into detail of how we apply these values and are in practice of them.

Are there any challenges that you have experienced as a result of embodying liberatory leadership in a non-profit organization?

So many. I think the language of liberatory leadership is becoming more common to use – it’s “sexy” to say you’re leaning into that. And if you don’t do your own deep inner work, in understanding how your own biases and internalized white supremacy and sexism is showing up in your own leadership, you’ll end up merely weaponizing the language but not actually embodying it.

We’ve had a few painful transitions from our organization for this very reason. These transitions are not easy, and in fact, people are harmed in the process and we’ve had to rebuild with the team every time.

Another challenge is finding the right funders and supporters and board members who are aligned with this type of leadership and approach to work, and approach to disrupting white supremacy and dominant culture that shows up in workplaces.

What gives you hope? What keeps you motivated?

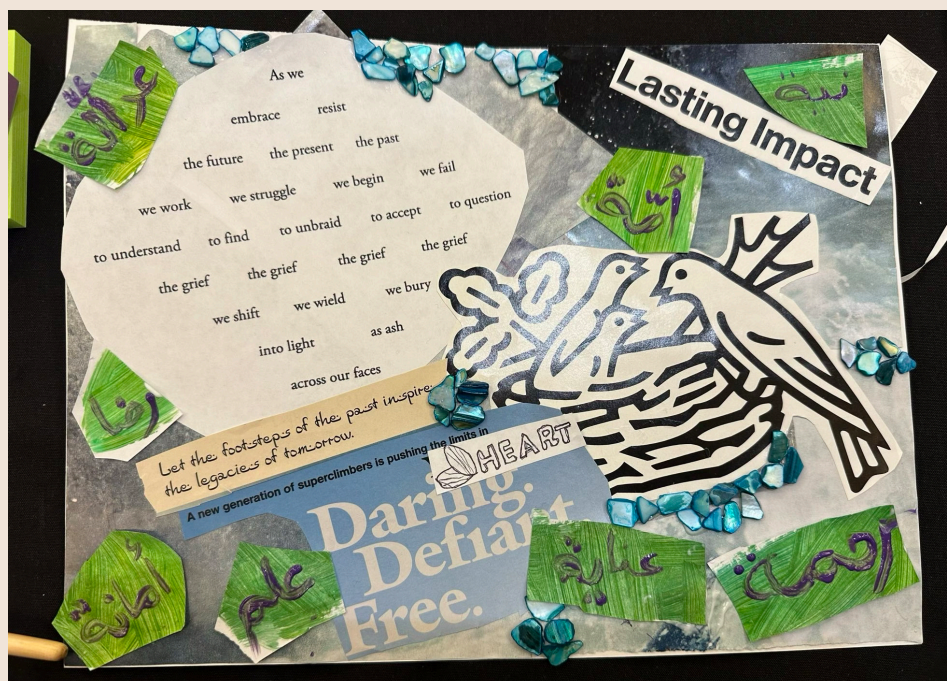
My kids. My team. Sahar and Navila have been my lifeline. The Palestinian resistance and their faith in God. Liberatory stories from Islamic tradition.

What seeds of wisdom would you give to someone who is interested in liberatory leadership but does not know where to start?

To start by knowing yourself and learning about yourself. It sounds cheesy and it has been transformational to my own development as a leader. To find the right teachers. To read, read and read. To take your time. To disrupt the idea that there is only one way.

If you were to lean into your most radical imagination, what does your idea of liberation look and feel like? What is the future that you are building towards?

A world where all people, including Muslims, are safe and exercise self-determination over their reproductive lives in the communities they live, work, and pray in.



Navila Rashid (she/her)

HEART Women & Girls



What brings you to work at your current organization? What are the passions, interests and experiences that led you to where you are now?

The community, the experiences of GBV in my life and those around me, and just recognizing that no one will show up for me if I am not showing up for myself.

What, if anything, was the impact of having the Community of Practice as a space/container to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas? Did participating in the Community of Practice inspire any new thoughts, dreams, or visions for you?

It was refreshing and also invigorating to be a part of a group/cohort of folks who didn't make me/us feel alone in our pursuit of understanding liberatory leadership and also finding ways

to implement/execute. It was so, so necessary to not only bond but also exchange wisdom, strategies, recommendations, and advice on so many different aspects of our work, organization culture, and programming.

How have the funds (\$10,000 stipend) received through the LL Community of Practice supported your work?

Really having us invest in organizational coaches/consultants to continue supporting HEART as we do the intentional, internal work amongst the team, and also to support the larger infrastructure of the organization to withstand a liberatory framework within our policies/procedures/protocols. Please [click here](#) to learn more.

Who are liberatory ancestors, teachers, guides, loved ones, and comrades that inspire your work and values?

Literally all the matriarchs in my life. The ones who are my ancestors, the ones who are indigenous to the land that I occupy. The ones who are indigenous to lands that are occupied by others.

How do you hold yourself accountable to your values?

Having a very strong communication and feedback loop with not only my supervisor but also the whole team. And also ensuring that there is a reiteration of the organizational values.

How do you sustain yourself as you engage in your work? What are the resources, practices, and spaces that support your well-being?

Honestly, being connected to a therapist, ADHD coach, and psychiatrist has been keeping me regulated. On top of that, having an organization with flexible benefits and a partner who can support when things get overwhelming is key. Also having access to nature, and the privilege

to travel when needed/desired is also helpful in keeping me engaged and grounded enough to continue to work without burning me out.

Can you share examples of how your organization practices and embodies liberatory leadership?

Please [click here](#) to see how HEART Women & Girls practices and embodies liberatory leadership.

Are there any challenges that you have experienced as a result of embodying liberatory leadership in a non-profit organization?

One of the biggest challenges will be implementation as it relates to the accountability of staff and board when someone either causes harm internally or externally and it impacts the work. I wouldn't say that the challenges were a result of embodying liberatory leadership, but rather a product of systemic issues and white-dominant cultural practices.

What gives you hope? What keeps you motivated?

When staff say they don't think they can work anywhere else because of the sense of belonging they feel at the organization. Also, how every time we work with community members, the sheer joy and surprise and relief they feel in knowing we exist and offer the resources and support that we do. That keeps me going because I always wished I too had this org when I was in crisis.

What seeds of wisdom would you give to someone who is interested in liberatory leadership but does not know where to start?

Truthfully, it starts from the self. I have seen/witnessed folks try to do liberatory work yet they are still tied down by their own internalized oppression and causing a lot of harm in these movement spaces. *The best thing one can do is address and acknowledge their biases, their power and privilege, and understand that context truly, truly matters in how we move through these spaces. Liberation isn't possible if we are still rooted in oppressed systems and ideology.*

If you were to lean into your most radical imagination, what does your idea of liberation look and feel like? What is the future that you are building towards?

Participant's response is in the form of the following collage.



Darakshan Raja (she/her)

Muslims for Just Futures



What brings you to work at your current organization? What are the passions, interests and experiences that led you to where you are now?

The belief in people power. Faith in a better future and a firm commitment to *when we fight, we win.*

What, if anything, was the impact of having the Community of Practice as a space/container to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas?

It was a beautiful and healing space; it was nice to be in a room with other WOC leaders and EDs and learn from them and their experiences. Thank you for convening and gathering us.

How have the funds (\$10,000 stipend) received through the LL Community of Practice supported your work?

The stipend supported my time in the program and also gave me the space to invest in professional development. Often we don't really think of investing in women leaders of organizations, and my hope is to model that professional development and investment also needs to occur at the top in order to sustain growth. We cannot pour into others if we don't model investing in ourselves as well.

Who are liberatory ancestors, teachers, guides, loved ones, and comrades that inspire your work and values?

My grandparents and the women in my family; they are the reason I am here.

How do you hold yourself accountable to your values?

Surround myself with people who aren't afraid to call me in, and cultivating consistent check-ins with myself and my body to assess whether I am truly in alignment with what and where I want to be.

How do you sustain yourself as you engage in your work? What are the resources, practices, and spaces that support your well-being?

Still working on that but family, music, joy, color, and the water.

Can you share examples of how your organization practices and embodies liberatory leadership?

This is a difficult question because I would actually like to ask my staff this question.

Are there any challenges that you have experienced as a result of embodying liberatory leadership in a non-profit organization?

I think the hardest piece is we are living in racial capitalism and it requires a level of grind and production from our subset of organizations that is unfair, but I have struggled to find an alternative that also allows us to raise funding at the level we need to sustain livelihoods.

What gives you hope? What keeps you motivated?

My family, community, joy, and music.

What seeds of wisdom would you give to someone who is interested in liberatory leadership but does not know where to start?

Cultivate a space for internal check-ins consistently; learn to listen to your body's pain and truly build a deeper relationship with yourself so you can have clarity and feel grounded in how you show up. The internal work supports the external work.

If you were to lean into your most radical imagination, what does your idea of liberation look and feel like? What is the future that you are building towards?

Lightness, gentle breeze, soft waves, warm sun, and sweetness.

Malaika Parker (she/her)

Black Organizing Project



What brings you to work at your current organization? What are the passions, interests and experiences that led you to where you are now?

I came to Black Organizing Project out of a strong desire to support the incredible work toward abolition that the organization was engaged in. I also wanted to support the creation of a culture where organizers specifically, and movement workers generally, had access to balance and sustainability. I have worked in the nonprofit sector for my entire adult career. I have a deep passion for creating a future where our communities, especially our children, have access to joy, connection and care. I am deeply moved by the failures and the potential of our educational system, and have worked from different vantage points to impact the creation of something different.

What, if anything, was the impact of having the Community of Practice as a space/container to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas? Did participating in the Community of Practice inspire any new thoughts, dreams, or visions for you?

It has been an incredibly healing space. Having space to dream and interrogate what is coming up for myself and other leaders has been so important. The spaciousness and the ease of being has been a beautiful respite for me.

How have the funds (\$10,000 stipend) received through the LL Community of Practice supported your work?

We used the funds to support bringing transformative justice practitioners to help us navigate difficult conversations and conflict.

Who are liberatory ancestors, teachers, guides, loved ones, and comrades that inspire your work and values?

I am inspired by bell hooks, Audre Lorde, my mom and my grandmother. My values are centered in participating in the co-creation of a world that I want my children to inherit.

How do you hold yourself accountable to your values?

I try to acknowledge that I am not perfect and that this is hard. I work to be reflective and attempt to make amends when I am not living into my values and learn the lessons that are available to me.

How do you sustain yourself as you engage in your work? What are the resources, practices, and spaces that support your well-being?

A balanced work week, time with family, gardening, and movement. Being in spaces like the

Community of Practice where other folks are struggling/working to move this work forward has helped tremendously.

Can you share examples of how your organization practices and embodies liberatory leadership?

We are trying to move into Transformative Justice as a way to address community cohesion and conflict. We are working to build a shared leadership model. We are working to create transparency in how things move and why.

What gives you hope? What keeps you motivated?

I believe that we are on a path to creating new spaces within organizations and in the movement. I am inspired by the work that so many are doing to make big shifts in how we move collectively.

What seeds of wisdom would you give to someone who is interested in liberatory leadership but does not know where to start?

Don't go it alone, have other folks on your team who are bought in and really believe in the possibility. Have other folks who will defend the practice of liberatory leadership just as much as you. Start with small inquiries about why things are the way they are, and how we can make them more centered on the humanity of everyone involved; the people who are impacted by the work, but also those doing the work. What are the practices, policies and ways of being that move us toward our liberation or further away? Start with small practices and move from there. One big lesson for me is to do a lot of research and political education with the team about this work, so that organizationally folks have a shared understanding of what it is and why it is important.

If you were to lean into your most radical imagination, what does your idea of liberation look and feel like? What is the future that you are building towards?

Liberation ultimately looks like many of the organizations that we work for not needing to exist because we are not fighting for our humanity – it is valued and centered. Liberation feels like people seeing themselves as part of a connected fabric where care and connection are seamless, where we are not asked to choose between family and meaningful work in the world, where we have ready access to joy because we are not mired by the constant struggle for getting our basic needs met.

Aisha (Ish) Al-Hurra

aka 'morena osha' (she/her)

[Intelligent Mischief](#)



What brings you to work at your current organization? What are the passions, interests and experiences that led you to where you are now?

I realized that as I engaged more consistently in embodied practice (Tai Chi, Somatics, Breath Work, Dance) my purpose became more clear, my intuition became stronger, my sense of self became more discernible.

I began to feel a strong and irresistible calling towards art, world-building, storytelling, beauty, imagination, dreamspace, and creativity as viable and important ways to contribute towards transforming our lives.

I woke up to the ways in which our movements, as a result of being overly professionalized in nonprofit organizations, were often embodying the habits and harms of the systems of oppression because we weren't giving ourselves time to understand what it means to return to lifeways that existed before capitalism consumed us all. *I now know that my path to my current work is one guided by ancestors and the Universe, whispered to me in the spaciousness of daily focus on breath, felt in the time space of art making where I learned to listen to my intuition, to live with an assumption of abundance.*

What, if anything, was the impact of having the Community of Practice as a space to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas?

The Community of Practice was a challenging space for me. I felt there was so much allegiance to the container of nonprofit organizations and to management. I see these containers as sometimes useful, but not in an absolute sense. To me, liberation exists outside of these containers too. I didn't always identify with the kinds of issues or challenges expressed by my peers, and often felt that our scale of thinking and imagining was too myopic for questions of liberation in some ways. If anything, it made me deeply grateful for the opportunity to find and embody new ways of being in my own collective, to let go of certain movement habits that cultivate a sense of self and value that are found in overwork, over-identifying with our organizations, self-annihilation etc. It made me more mindful of the language and ways of being that we unconsciously require of folks to feel valid within social movement spaces.

How have the funds (\$10,000 stipend) received through the LL Community of Practice supported your work?

The funds were instrumental in supporting my salary at Intelligent Mischief. We were able to

pay me full-time starting in November of last year. It allowed me to be able to focus solely on my art-making and cultural shift work as a result, and I no longer had to do freelance consulting and facilitation on the side.

Who are liberatory ancestors, teachers, guides, loved ones, and comrades that inspire your work and values?

My work is inspired by Paolo Freire, my great aunt Audrey Jeffers, Stuart Hall, Grace Lee Boggs, adrienne maree brown, Bayo Akomolafe, Black Arts Movement, Norma Wong, Those who jumped from the ships and those who did what it took to survive. The maroons and the petit maroons and the tricksters and those who straddle the boundaries and borders.

How do you hold yourself accountable to your values?

I'm not sure I understand this question. My values are a set of ideas or 'truths' that are important to me, informed by my beliefs and my experiences. I usually act in accordance with my values, implicitly or explicitly. Meaning, my actions are embodiments of my actual values regardless of what I say my values are. I understand that the vision of the world I desire is underpinned by a set of values, some of which are aspirational. I attempt to embody the values that I hold most important.

I hold myself accountable to whether I am embodying my desired values or whether I am embodying another set of values, and try to understand why there might be a gap between what my desired values and my embodied values might be and whether I need to re-assess my values prioritization.

How do you sustain yourself as you engage in your work? What are the resources, practices, and spaces that support your well-being?

By only doing things I enjoy, desire, feel juicy about and feel in alignment with my north star. Reducing the number of things I do out of obligation or because I think I 'should'.

Can you share examples of how your organization practices and embodies liberatory leadership?

I don't really understand what 'liberatory leadership' is exactly. It's jargon that isn't widely understood or accessible. I can say how we practice liberation or embodied freedom in our day to day. *We ensure that we're all working in alignment with our juiciest desires and sense of purpose. We pay ourselves as generously as we can while also stewarding the resources we need to do the work we are excited about. We consciously attempt to compost colonial and capitalistic ways of being while embracing indigenous and intuitive ways of being. We take care when we have to navigate the more colonial and capitalistic structures to maintain our integrity.* We do not work 9-5, 40-hour work weeks. We make art as an integral part of our work. We reject colonial borders and genres and classifications where possible. We make a way out of no way. We trust our boredom and our excitement, we integrate spirit and consciousness and self-allegiance in our day to day.

Are there any challenges that you have experienced as a result of embodying liberatory leadership in a non-profit organization?

I don't understand the term 'liberatory leadership'. It feels jargony and non-profit in a way that doesn't feel like freedom. It doesn't feel expansive but like a middle-class nonprofit way to co-opt the idea of liberation. I don't feel any challenges feeling free in my organization that happens to be using a nonprofit structure but does not identify as a 'nonprofit'.

What gives you hope? What keeps you motivated?

Earth, life, grass, water, indigenous people maintaining and growing sovereignty, children, collective and cooperative structures. Decolonial movements winning. Women of color creating and making life. Worldbuilding, space to dream and imagine.

What seeds of wisdom would you give to someone who is interested in liberatory leadership but does not know where to start?

Don't get confused by the jargon. Engage in embodied practice (dance, breath, meditation, somatics etc.), don't approach it as a heady thing or a framework or a definition. Frameworks and definitions are Cartesian, rationalistic, colonial apparatuses designed to create distinctions and fragmentation. Read poetry. Trust your intuition. *You know what liberation or freedom feels like for you.* Try to give name or movement to that freedom. Feel where your innate understanding of freedom feels conflicted with aspects of your work in an organization or otherwise. Move towards freedom. *With every decision, ask yourself, does this make me feel more free? Do others feel more free? Does it free the Earth? Does it free our minds and souls? Run, run, run, towards that freedom. Strengthen your sense of feeling free so that you recognize your yearning for it. Do something that makes you feel free everyday. Ask those around you what they need to feel free. Help them run towards that. Be curious about where your freedom and theirs converge and diverge.* Be willing to get messy. Breathe, deeply. Put your feet in water. Dig your hands into the soil. Imagine the structures fading away. Watch the animals and insects and trees. Observe their freedom. Discard what does not make you feel free even if it is the term 'liberatory leadership' or 'nonprofit' or 'organization'.

If you were to lean into your most radical imagination, what does your idea of liberation look and feel like? What future are you building towards?

Living in balance with the Earth and all other beings. Autonomous, interconnected communities living in balance. Freedom of movement, freedom to be and to reinvent ourselves as many times as we desire.

Ditra Edwards (she/her)

[SISTA Fire](#)



What brings you to work at your current organization? What are the passions, interests and experiences that led you to where you are now?

What brought me to my current organization is that I am a co-founder of SISTA Fire, and SISTA Fire grew out of a time in my life when I had been living in Providence, caring for my mom because she was given her last six months. After she passed, I took time to reflect on what I was doing in life, and to imagine and think about what was next. I was regularly meeting with a good friend of mine – her name is Chanravy Proeung. She is a Cambodian sister who grew up in Rhode Island. I was reflecting on my mom. She was always asking me to return to Rhode Island and work here, and I couldn't wrap my mind around it. But this moment called me home. I didn't know what that would look like. Chanravy suggested doing one-on-ones, so I did. I talked to about 40 different women to hear what they had to say about their lives and what they

were doing, and I asked them what it was like to be a woman of color here in Rhode Island and what their vision was for what they were doing. The question of women of color challenged some. They would say “What do you mean?” And they would tell me their ethnicity and cultural heritage. They would tell me all these different things about who they were. *I shared that the “women of color” phrase is more about a political destination. It’s about how we, across races, build solidarity with each other to build power and create change.* I shared that I learned the origins of the phrase from Loretta Ross’s talk. In short, she explained that in 1977, a group of Black women attended a women’s conference, and they brought with them a Black women’s agenda to replace a minority women’s agenda at the meeting. At the conference, all the other “minority women” wanted to join the Black women’s agenda. They started working together, but it could no longer be a Black women’s agenda – together, they arrived at a Women of Color agenda.



And so, with that, and with my commitment to my mom, Chanravy and I decided to set off to build SISTA Fire together. *The question of passion is about my commitment to Rhode Island.* The place where I grew up. The place that nurtured me in the context of there was a collective group of women who looked out for me my whole life. Chanravy and I talked a lot about the fact that in Rhode Island, there were a lot of advocates and so many folks speaking for women of color, and not always women of color speaking for themselves, especially not collectively. We were often divided by race. Chanravy and I set out on that journey together to begin to think about what it means to build solidarity, to build power with women of color, and to change the conditions and experiences of women in Rhode Island. For us, that was our love of organizing; our vision for what we could do together was really what brought me to this work, and has kept me in this work.

What, if anything, was the impact of having the Community of Practice as a space/container to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas? Did participating in the Community of Practice inspire any new thoughts, dreams, or visions for you?

I think for myself, it wasn’t always about what’s new as much as it was about what’s possible and what’s needed, right? Because we forget that part of it. I think for myself as a Black woman and as a director right now, in the current climate, there are so many things that we’re pushing up against. Sometimes, it was about just really needing a space where I could be explicit about who I am, how I’m feeling, and what I am dealing with on a day-to-day basis and not have to worry about the backlash that comes because I’m speaking my truth whether I’m talking about race, or I’m talking about gender, or I’m just talking about the struggles that I have to deal



with every day. Or, just the challenges of what it means to actually lead in this context and the tension that exists with how much you love doing the work you do every single day, it's what gets you up in the morning, but it's also the thing that exhausts you. And there's a tension within that and the need and the desire to be able to hear from other folks who are experiencing similar things, yet different – that was really important. This past year, it was really important, especially with all the stuff going on with Palestine to have a safe space for people to talk about the impact of Palestine and what it meant, and for the sisters, for the Muslim sisters, for the Palestinian sisters that were in our space to be able to really show them that Black women and other women of color are standing with them because they are the front lines in the context of the work, but to be able to show up and make sure that we were also doing work around Palestine to show solidarity and to fight this horrible genocide. Unknowingly, the space was able to hold that.

For myself, I had a life crisis in the midst of all of this and just needed a space to be present in. I didn't always want to participate in that moment, but knew I could hear and learn from others by simply being present and listening. And there

wasn't this requirement that I had to do everything. That was important. And to hear from folks doing things from other parts of the country and making connections, seeing the threads, and hearing my story in their story was so important. *The intergenerational aspect of the space was so valuable, learning from folks who are younger than I am and hearing their depth of political maturity highlighted and brought more laser focus to my analysis, my own understanding of the work, was important.* I believe the way in which folks created the container was really important for us. The depth of flexibility and the challenge that the facilitators constantly had of us being in this one dimension called Zoom, and figuring out ways to engage us so that we could feel present and held in the space together.

How have the funds (\$10,000 stipend) received through the LL Community of Practice supported your work?

To be honest, the way it helped us is it allowed SISTA Fire to do mutual aid this year. Mutual aid is a huge part of our work. We work in partnership with women in our membership more often than not. Our communities find themselves in situations of crisis because they're being threat-

ened with evictions. Most recently, we had a sister who had a fire who was dealing with the court system and needed resources that were not making them fill out hundreds of pieces of paper. Just knowing that this one thing doesn't have to make or break them. SISTA Fire could be there in support of them, and so that money allowed us to provide support for folks. In addition, we brought people together this August 2024 to begin to think about what we're calling a Liberated Circle. The Liberated Circle is building a temporary infrastructure where we get to come together to feel joy, celebrate who we are, and think critically about an agenda that we want to build, to change what's happening in our communities. A number of the women that we supported during mutual aid participated. A part of our Liberated Circle is really looking at the economic impacts on our lives and really trying to reframe how we think about the economy. *How do we build a more feminist economy? How do we think about a more rejuvenating and relational economy that really takes into consideration who we are? How are we healing? How are we working jobs that honor who we are, that allow us to build wealth in our families and not just survive?* Through our mutual aid work, we were able to recruit women to really help tell their stories, but also, to help us strategize on how we move forward. In our first meeting, one of the first questions we asked people was, "Why are you here?" One sister started by saying "I'm not an organizer," but yet, she brought three friends with her and she said, "I'm here because I was in a moment of crisis." When she lost her daughter, she said SISTA Fire stepped in. *She said, "I had nothing; and y'all came in without a question." She said, "You didn't even know me and supported me."* I want to be able to do that in connection with other women and really work on changing what's happening.

Finally, we had an elder in the room, and she said, "I've been waiting for women to be organiz-

ing women and really thinking about what we're doing, and I want to be part of that." Therefore, looking at how the work connects and reconnects us all together when we create these different kinds of spaces that do center women of color and non-binary folks of color. We had some queer folks in the space. Our space is also inter-generational, and a safe space that holds work around intersectionality, across race, across gender, that is gender-expansive and willing to see us as our whole selves as we build toward a potential future. For me, the role that the resources played was allowing us to continue to build the foundation of this work together.

Who are liberatory ancestors, teachers, guides, loved ones, and comrades that inspire your work and values?

First, I have to say Adelina Gomes, that's my mama. My family and I always say her spirit is the spirit of SISTA Fire because my mom always created a space of love and protection for women.



When I was in high school, I remember having a friend who got kicked out of her house because she told her family she was pregnant. Her family kicked her out. I brought her home, and I was like “Ma, she don’t have any place to go,” and she was like, “Okay, but I just have to call her mother so her mother knows she’s here.” My mother had a long talk with her mother, and it took time, but I think it was that connection between mother to mother. My mother reached out to her and really listened to her struggle and created space for her daughter. Eventually, she was able to go home. That was always my mama’s spirit! She always looked out for younger women in our family and all of her granddaughters, and she always shared her story with them. My mother always challenged me to come home and do the work. I think for me, my mother was part of the reason that I am doing this work.

Another elder who has inspired me, always in deep leadership and with direction from directly impacted people, was Ella Baker. Ella Baker always talked about organizers as a core part of investing in young leaders, helping to build organizers who are willing to change our communities locally. I really try to think about that in the context of how I practice my work.

As an organization, we have really looked at the Combahee River Collective. Their statement of purpose around their work really gave us a framework and a path to think about how to approach SISTA Fire. It really helps to unpack our values and the way to approach our work, which means to center Black women, to have an analysis of capitalism, and what it means to build solidarity and work collectively with other people, as a few of those things.

I’ve been blessed to have just amazing people in my life. Finally, my friend Makani Themba, who, before she was my friend was my manager... in so many ways she was my political mentor. She created a political home for me. She real-

ly helped me learn and understand how to build community, how to build family in the context of that and the movement. She really showed me the importance of communities defining and developing policy that is led from the ground up, and the important role that policy can make in changing the conditions of our lives. She always taught us about narrative, about how we tell our own stories, and the strategies to do that.

How do you hold yourself accountable to your values?

That’s every day. Every day that I wake up, I put my feet on the ground, and I say “thank you, Lord Jesus, guide me, guide me” and I try to walk in my truth. I try to walk in honesty. With SISTA Fire’s staff, I always really try to not just talk about our values but to say, what do they look like in practice? I really tried to be clear about what they look like in practice, and when we bump up against them. And what happens when I make mistakes? Whether I’m making a mistake in the context of how I’m managing, or if I’m making a mistake because I’m frustrated. I am an Aries, and I am all fire, and the fire comes out before the love comes out. I try to back it up. I try to back up and own my mistakes and stand in front of that person and apologize. I take accountability for what I did. I always try to talk it out. Here’s what I should have done, and moving forward here’s how I see myself changing and doing better. I really try to listen and hear from SISTA Fire staff because they’re all really brilliant, amazing people and they have taught me so much. We try to work towards transparency as much as possible. When we’re able to do that, I think that people have much more love and respect for who we are as an organization. People have more love and passion and willingness to be in relationship with us. *At the end of the day, everything that we’re doing is about the relationship. And so we have to really honor that.*

How do you sustain yourself as you engage in your work? What are the resources, practices, and spaces that support your well-being?

My most important practice is really my prayer life and being in collective prayer, so I have a prayer partner. I have a prayer book. I try to commune with the ocean as much as I can, but it's not something that I've always done well. *I feel like I'm constantly learning how to be better.* I came up during the time when it was about a grind. It was about really trying to get things done, and it was about constant hard work. I think I've had to learn to reframe my understanding of those things, especially when you're building an organization. Building a vision and a collective vision with folks helps to build sustainability for the organization. It becomes really important about what you put in place. So I think for me, I really have tried to put in place things inside of SISTA Fire that make it more public of how I need to take care of myself because I'm asking other people to take care of themselves. We've been really working on integrating more healing practices inside the organization, and we do a lot. On my own, I've had to really be intentional and find partners to do this with. With my sister, we book a vacation together every single year and it's a time that we come together with friends, and I know I have those two weeks for the purpose of my health. I really try to get up in the morning, after my prayer time, and do some walking and stretching. But really building in things that are public and private to myself. I'm not always that good at it. That's why it's a practice!

Can you share examples of how your organization practices and embodies liberatory leadership?

It's really clear to me within the context of SISTA Fire that people come in at so many different levels in terms of their skills and knowledge. So, identifying what the core skills and knowledge



are that we all have together. It really helps create a balance around the work. There's a set of core skills and knowledge in the organization that we're working on and developing together. One example of that is: how are we working? How are we planning? How are we project managing? We are trying to build that knowledge across the organization and having people try that out in different ways, and really helping people not have fear because they don't know how. A lot of people in organizations keep things hidden because they're fearful of the challenge or the trouble that they will have, but I really try to talk to my staff about what's important is that you're trying and you're taking the time to do the reflection that's needed to help you figure out what's working and what's not working, and what are the potentials for change and taking accountability, right? So, how I try to support them is really identifying where their growth has been, what vision they have for themselves, and what they want to work on so they have the space to be able to do that. *One significant practice is truly giving them the space to lead. Sometimes, people don't always believe that they can. If you don't try,*

then you won't ever get to master it. So, how do we create a container that allows them by helping them build their skills and knowledge, but also then stepping in and trying it on. We do a lot of work around shared leadership and so really partnering with other folks, helping folks learn about, what does it mean to have a team? How does the team support the leadership? How do you support the team itself?

We talk a lot about our values. How are our values helping us? How do we always lead with our values? What is the relationship between our values and our actions? How do we make decisions? Who are we? How do we make organizational decisions?

I really try to create space for members and staff to have input on challenging situations that we have to make decisions about. Earlier this year we had to make hard decisions about our work around Palestine and what it means for us to do that. How are we going to lead, and what kind of capacity do we have to lead? We recognized the potential threat of what funders were saying about people who were doing work around Palestine, and that we had to sit and really understand what it would mean if we did work and the impact it could have on us financially. This process is consensual, if we were all in agreement, what is this work replacing? Once everyone was in agreement, based on who we are as an organization, based on what our values are, we would continue to do what we were doing. SISTA Fire stands in our values, and we understand that building collective power is an iterative process that takes time.

Are there any challenges that you have experienced as a result of embodying liberatory leadership in a non-profit organization?

It's always a challenge to wonder how hard to push when things don't feel like they're in alignment. Is it something that you put your energy towards or not? Spending time with our staff discussing what we see and what are each of their perspectives. We are generationally different, we're really different in culture, race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation... Sometimes, their perspective is different from mine, but we are often aligned... For example, last year we had to make a collective decision. We were turned down for a grant that was around racial equity. We were really unclear why we were turned down, given that the work we do is beyond equity. When I started to touch base with other organizers who were leading organizations, they shared with me that they were being turned down. I pulled my staff together to talk to them about the moment we were in. I really tried to talk to them openly, to share my difficult leadership questions because they're gonna have the same leadership questions in the future.

Part of my job is preparing them to fully lead the organization. My role is not to always be the Executive Director. We can't wait until 10 years down the line to prepare people. You have to prepare people to lead now..how are we preparing? I brought this dilemma to them and talked about what they thought we should be doing. They said, we have to do what we always do – we organize the people. We started organizing the other executive directors who had the same experience in order to call a meeting with the foundation and say, “we need to understand why all of these women of color organizations were not funded.” There are organizations led by white women that are funded. What's the analysis around racial equity that you're holding that we're not able to see? Unfortunately, nothing came of that for us because the analysis is too different and mis-

aligned. In this moment, the practice of solidarity and deepening relationships was critical for us to move forward.

What gives you hope? What keeps you motivated?

I am Black in America, and all my hope was seeded by my ancestor's before me. I will say this, "We are our ancestors' wildest dreams." That quote always touched my heart because I've never been able to put it into words. I know that every day the work that I'm doing is contributing to a vision and possibilities for change for another generation, but yet, it's also creating change every day. And that hope lives in me because I also believe deeply that, SISTA Fire was given to us as a vision of possibility for my mom's spirit and I know God doesn't make any mistakes. We live in purpose. *As the saying says, "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams" and I hope to be somebody else's ancestor someday, and so I'm just trying to do my role in what's possible, for what's to come.*

What seeds of wisdom would you give to someone who is interested in liberatory leadership but does not know where to start?

I think the biggest thing for me is understanding who you are, and understanding your place and purpose in the world. Do you do that in relationship with others? Liberatory leadership is about living in your practice, living in your freedom now and trying to hold that and cultivate that, not just in yourself but in others, wherever you are. You may not be an organizer like I am. Your work may be something else. But it's about how you do your work in the present moment that's really creating the potential for future change. That you're never doing it alone, you are doing it with people, and you're investing in those around you and building because we're never going to have liberation or freedom if we're not willing to do it with others. Our work that we do, it's more *than survival work, right? It's living work. It's growing*

work and taking the steps to learn how to be accountable. Taking the steps to be self-reflective, being willing to make the adjustments, and learning to self-regulate, to really, to be critical of what you see around you, but also have a balanced analysis. I say balance, I just mean that you're not going so far off in one direction that you're just willing to leave other people behind you. You can't be liberatory in understanding, and if you don't have analysis around the implications of capitalism in our lives, in whatever way it is, that's a challenge. Because it is the beast, and the secret, and non-secret all of the time that is killing us because it morphs into new things, and to understand what that means in the context of how we do our work and what the other alternatives to those things really are. I think that we have to really lift our heads up and pay attention to what is going on in the world and be actively engaged in that, right? Not engaged on your own, and not feeling that you're not accountable to anybody but we have to be accountable to our communities and to the collective people that we are in this work with.

If you were to lean into your most radical imagination, what does your idea of liberation look and feel like? What is the future that you are building towards?

I don't know for me if it's radical, what it is, is just. I want our people to be able to live a whole life. To live a life that they have quality housing—the type of housing they need. They have good water, they have healthy food, and they can go in their garden that we're building and grow food together. It doesn't need to be a utopia. But there is a deconstructing of the oppressive systems that are here, that are not of our making. We are willing to operate together in a way that is relational, that is, about building and creating space for all the people around us. I think there's an assumption that we can't have those things, and it's so radical. Maybe, it's radical in the context of deconstructing capitalism. If that is the

thing that's holding us back, I'm for it. I'm mostly for, though, what it means to build healthy relationships, a healthy space where we honor Mother Earth, that we invest in Mother Earth, we invest in our children, that we invest in each other, and create community with one another that allows people to show up as their whole self. That we're not being predefined by something that is no longer or never should have been part of who we are. That we're taking white supremacy out of our existence. We get to see everyone for their beautiful expansive genders, that they are their beautiful, brilliant selves. *For me, I feel like we could have so much of that right now, and what I'm fighting for and trying to build is the foundation for that to exist.*



Neha Mahajan (she/her)

[Transformative Leadership for Change](#)

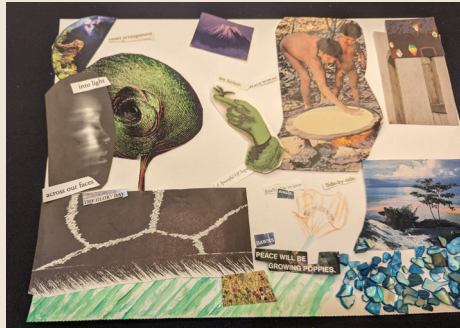


One of our participants, Neha Mahajan, Co-Executive Director of Transformative Leaders for Change, went on sabbatical towards the end of our community of practice. We commend her for living into the liberatory practices of rest and abundance. Unfortunately, we don't have a profile for her, but she informed our thinking and being together in many ways that live beyond the written word. Thank you, Neha!



Photo taken at our cohort gathering in Santa Fe, NM.
May 2023

Key Learnings



Several key themes emerged during the Community of Practice due to the depth of our conversations, the expertise of our participants and their passion for doing this work. Below you will find a non-exhaustive list of some of the key themes that were identified during our time together. These themes are further articulated by the participants themselves in their profiles beginning on page 9.

Liberatory values: Identifying and committing to a set of values is a vital practice for liberatory leaders. By knowing our values, we are able to assess if we are moving with integrity. Values provide us with a standard to which we can hold ourselves accountable. This standard helps us evaluate our alignment with the organizations we work for or wish to partner with or receive funding from. Being able to discern similarities or differences between personal and organizational values gives us the language to describe feelings of ease or tension that may arise while trying to do the work. Through having this language, we may be better positioned to advocate for necessary change.

Leading with Love: Participants articulated in many ways that love was the renewable resource fueling their integrity tank. In speaking to this point, our CoP participants named a few things in particular. According to Navila Rashid, Director of Training and Survivor Advocacy, it was important for [HEART Women and Girls](#), a reproductive and survivors' justice organization serving Muslim communities, to develop an organizational framework rooted in the Islamic concept of Rahma, Arabic for compassion, that was resonant with their Islamic values. For Ditra Edwards, Executive Director at [Sista Fire RI](#), love was simply part of the culture of SFRI in ways that undergirded the organizational infrastructure. Ditra takes her cue from Ella Baker's edict to "love the people." When the group was asked: "how does love inform your work?" Ditra Edwards answered: "to walk this earth, I have to understand the love between my mother and I. To be black in America is to be loved. A better question is: how do you let your love and vision lead you?"

Structure and flow: One of the key themes that emerged from the Community of Practice was the need for organizations to embody both structure and flow. Participants shared that there are times when more emergent and fluid strategies are necessary, as well as times when having a structure or container is useful. For example, many participants indicated that their organizations are hierarchical; however, they remain committed to and interested in shared decision-making processes. While they recognize the value of hierarchy within their organizations, they also see the importance of distributing responsibilities and labor. Rather than viewing structure and flow as a binary choice, the two can complement each other, much like how water is guided by a riverbed. Flow without structure can lead to indecisiveness around key issues, while structure without flow can result in power hoarding.

Making room for imperfection and continuous learning: Leaders, regardless of their level of expertise, are still learning.

Acknowledging the humanity of leaders means recognizing their capacity to make mistakes and understanding that they, like many of us, show up in movements with both hope and heartache. When mistakes are expected, it becomes easier to normalize and operationalize accountability processes. Additionally, when leaders are acknowledged not only for what they do but also for who they are, it creates space for more authentic relationships to develop between leaders and the communities they serve. This acknowledgment also allows leaders to release perfectionism and operate with greater transparency about their work, behaviors, and emotions. When leaders commune in a space like the Liberatory Leadership Community of Practice, they can seek wise counsel from one another and provide advice rooted in care and compassion. By being open about their imperfections, they model a more liberatory vision of leadership—a version that does not require leaving one’s whole self at the door.

Collaboration over competition: The nonprofit industrial complex is designed so that organizations will compete with each other for resources. Consequently, it is easy for organizations to lose sight of their mission, goals, and the magic that could happen if they saw aligned organizations as partners rather than competitors. Through centering collaboration, organizations have the opportunity to form genuine relationships, build upon each other’s strengths, and be in solidarity with each other’s causes.

Capacity assessments and rest: Capacity assessments allow us to consider more just practices of dividing labor and care which can prevent overextension, burnout and chronic illness. Capacity assessments allow us to practice what it feels like to ask for support when we are tired or stretched thin. By acknowledging our limited capacity, we lean into the acceptance that we are interdependent and that we cannot do it all. Additionally, through having deeper conversations about capacity, we can assess organizational and movement-wide practices around rest, time off, sick days, wellness stipends, and sabbaticals to see if there is room for expansion.

During the Community of Practice, participants engaged with the [7 types of rest](#) which invited them to consider more nuanced opportunities to deepen their rest practices.

Intergenerational conversations: By creating spaces that include people of all ages, we make room for the exchange of wisdom, insights, and experience. Intergenerational conversations allow us to challenge ourselves by acknowledging differences and similarities across generations. If held well,

intergenerational spaces should empower youth to know that they too are wise and elders to know that they are not disposable.

Multidisciplinary spaces: Our movements thrive when we include people from a variety of disciplines, including artists, healers, and organizers. By having a wide range of skill sets, perspectives, and talents at the table, we create space for the cross-pollination of ideas—making what we produce more engaging, irresistible, and accessible. Additionally, by including individuals from different sectors, we expand our definition of what it means to do liberatory work and who we believe should or could be involved. For example, by intentionally including artists, we assert that art is an essential component in moving us closer to liberation.

Global solidarity: Throughout the Community of Practice, participants had their hearts and minds stretched between domestic issues and atrocities occurring in places such as Palestine, Sudan, Congo, and Haiti. Initially, we grappled with the tension of what it means to talk about liberation in a time of widespread violence. Ultimately, it became clear that, due to the persistence of violence, there is no better time to discuss liberation than now. Participants had the space to express their emotions, discuss the actions they were taking, or simply be held in the presence of others. Importantly, they spoke about their decision to continue advocating against the genocide in Palestine, despite the backlash they understood they could face from funders for doing so.

Healing-centered approaches: Participants in the Community of Practice discussed the importance of personal healing work, as well as the healing that is necessary across organizations and movements. Several participants mentioned utilizing somatics, prayer, and other healing strategies to release trauma, heal, and maintain hope. For many of our participants, liberatory work is inherently spiritual.

Conflict transformation and accountability processes: Several participants expressed curiosity about what it means to accompany people through conflict transformation processes in a way that is generative and healing-centered. How do we create organizations and movements where there is a readiness to address harm and a collective commitment to repair? There was a deep interest and commitment to moving away from punishment as a response to harm.

Liberatory documentation and learning capture processes: During the Community of Practice, we spoke about the importance of documenting our learnings for the sake of individual and collective memory. We reflected on how our individual and

organizational stories are gifts that we can give to ourselves and our movements. By documenting not only what we do but also how we do it, we create a roadmap for ourselves and others who are interested in drawing inspiration from our work.

Black and Muslim Solidarity as part of Building Movement Infrastructure: One critical benefit of the Community of Practice has been its ability to serve as a container, bridging leaders working towards racial and gender equity. One clear example of the power of connection happened during our July gathering in which Executive Director, Darakshan Raja shared Muslims for Just Future’s Theory of Change, inspired by Black Abolitionists and Divest/Invest strategies meant to combat criminalization in Muslim communities. Ditra Edwards, Executive Director of Sista Fire RI, shared how Muslims for Just Future’s framework, which includes formulating policy demands, replenishing mutual aid funds, and collecting oral histories, mirrored Sista Fire RI’s framework in that it addresses “government abandonment and the implication for our communities.” Ditra continued sharing, “We are the social emergency. If we don’t band together to fight for our own liberation and freedom, we will not survive this.” Ditra’s thinking was Inspired by the work of [Design Studio for Social Intervention](#).

Value of Third Spaces: Our peer support space for leaders of Black and Muslim racial equity and gender justice organizations have deepened participants’ learnings on the work each organization is moving forward and the principles, frameworks, value systems, and organizational structures necessary to operationalize liberatory leadership. As one of our participants offered, the Community of Practice has been a space where participants could “lead with values and vision rather than crisis, to move towards identifying solutions.” It is our hope that more spaces such as these are robustly resourced and that the leaders in them are given ample opportunity to iterate their liberatory visions.

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- Nadiah Mohajir, MPH, Executive Director, HEART Women & Girls
- Aisha (Ish) Al-Hurra, Artistic Director, Intelligent Mischief
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Cover Image courtesy of Aisha Shillingford, Artistic Director of Intelligent Mischief. “Untitled” by [Aisha Shillingford](#)

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Catherine Labiran is a New York-based, London-raised, Nigerian poet, researcher, social justice advocate, and somatics practitioner. She is particularly interested in the relationship between creative expression, healing and liberation. She believes that art and liberation are inseparable and interdependent and that the process of moving towards liberatory futures requires our most radical, creative, and expansive imaginations. Catherine holds a BA in Psychology from Emory University, an MA in African Studies from Yale, a certification in Data Science from HarvardX and two certifications from the Embody Lab: one in Somatic Attachment Therapy and another in Embodied Conflict Resolution. **Catherine supported the Liberatory Leadership Community of Practice by providing evaluation and learning capture support which led the creation of this document.**



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