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The Concrete Ceiling of Nonprofit Leadership

Leodis William Aaron Turner
Grand Valley State University

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The Concrete Ceiling of Nonprofit Leadership

Leodis William-Aaron Turner

A Project Submitted to
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in Social Innovation

Integrative, Religious, and Intercultural Studies (IRIS) Department

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The signatures of the individuals below indicate that they have read and approved the project of Leodis William-Aaron Turner in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Innovation.

Melanie Shell-Weiss, Project Advisor Date

Denise Goerisch, Graduate Program Director Date

Kimberly McKee, Unit head Date

Abstract

This paper draws on a series of four in-depth interviews with African American executives who lead large non-profit organizations in West Michigan to argue that Black men and women in particular, and people of color more generally, experience a concrete ceiling to nonprofit leadership. The analysis is guided by a social innovation framework. In this case, that includes identifying the intervention needed (symptom to cause), designing methods (imagining solutions), developing solutions (prototyping), creating a plan to systemically innovate (recalibrating the nonprofit leadership pipeline for people of color and in particular, Black people), and scaling the plan (organizational growth and replication of the innovation beyond west Michigan) to sustain these possible solutions. Beginning with an overview of recently published literature on non-profit leadership and a summary of primary research findings, the work concludes with a summary plan for training curriculum that could be implemented to address systemic issues within the nonprofit ecosystem and create actionable solutions to more equitable nonprofit leadership opportunities.

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Project Overview & Data Collection

This research draws on a decade of reporting and academic research coupled with five open-ended interviews with local non-profit executives to explore why African American/Black men and women are so under-represented among non-profit leaders in West Michigan. The interviews not only provide a window into the state of the non-profit system as it pertains to inclusive leadership, but they also provide real-time and real-world examples of experiences faced by Black leaders. By using publicly available resources such as non-profit websites, data from I-9 tax reports, anecdotal information, funding information from the United Way and local foundations, this paper suggests actionable solutions that non-profit organizations can use to create more equitable space for Black professionals to realize the dream of leadership. Designed as a case study; focused on four Black nonprofit C.E.O's/Executive Directors in West and Southwest Michigan. The leaders, and the organizations they represent, are as follows:

- Bill Manns, President/C.E.O Bronson Health Systems of Kalamazoo, Michigan
- Scott Lewis, President/C.E.O, Grand Rapids Metropolitan YMCA
- Tasha Blackmon, President/C.E.O Cherry Health Systems of Michigan
- Bill Pink, President, Ferris State University

Each of these individuals consented to be identified by name and institution, along with their stories, as part of this research. The interviews were arranged and executed over a two-week period in June 2022 using a variety of methods: The interview with Tasha Blackmon was via Zoom. I interviewed Bill Pink by phone. Bill Manns and Scott Lewis were interviewed in person at their organizations. With all of the interviews, I utilized the record function in Zoom, recording all of the interviews for accuracy with expressed permission from the interviewees. Each interview lasted approximately two hours and participants were asked the same set of

questions (see Appendix A). The questions covered a wide array of biographical data about the interviewee, where they attended college, their introduction to the nonprofit sector, their employment experiences within the sector, as well as specific leadership related inquiries. The questions were designed to explore the subjects' educational attainment, as well as their on-the-job experiences with promotion, retention, and advancement. I also left space in the interviews for more open-ended responses. This is where interviewees shared their views on the current nonprofit landscape, obstacles and struggles, and supported additional conversation surrounding this research project. The responses were not coded by theme or iteration and no attempt has been made to generalize from these individual stories. Rather, the unique stories of these individuals are highlighted here as a way of exploring the first-hand experiences of African American/Black leaders.

These individual experiences are contextualized using peer reviewed research on such subjects as “DEI in nonprofit leadership”, “nonprofit leadership for people of color”, and “nonprofit leadership for Black/African-American people”. Professional journals such as *Nonprofit Quarterly*, *The Stanford Social Innovation Review*, and *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, related articles, blogs, and opinion pieces were also consulted, in addition to surveys such as the *Race to Lead* white paper series that I reference throughout this paper. This topic is currently receiving a great deal of attention from the nonprofit sector and my work joins a growing body of research that has grown over the past 3-5 years. I chose the secondary sources based on the relevance to the subject, the clarity in which their points were made, the credibility of the publication, and the methodology of their data collection. I also prioritized highlighting work published by authors of color when and, where possible, those that included solutions rooted in actionable steps or that addressed the root causes of leadership inequities.

My primary research on non-profit leadership provides a foundational perspective on the history and purpose of nonprofit organizations, highlighting how the non-profit leadership model has evolved out of corporate structures. The changing impact of nonprofit organizations on local communities, especially communities of color, highlights the enormous gap in the cultural competency of the local, community nonprofit organization as referenced in the article *How White People Conquered the Nonprofit Industry* (Thomkin, 2020). According to Thomkin (2020) there is evidence of the still and steady “whitening” of leadership in nonprofits despite sector-wide claims of progress. Overall, we continue to see that there is awareness, but academics and practitioners alike struggle to come up with actionable solutions.

The published research brings to bear the first step of social innovation: recognizing that there is a problem that needs to be addressed and beginning to ask the question of “Why”? Why is nonprofit leadership so homogeneous and who is not at the leadership table? The question is profound since the research makes clear that this paucity is not based on the volume of available candidates for positions, but rather the implicit bias that maintains this leadership gap.

Project Goals

A lot of nonprofit and philanthropic organizations in America operate under a system of ideals that have been handed down for generations. This system was defined by early American tycoons of industry such as Dale Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller and they were birthed out of a charity model where well to do citizens carried a responsibility to help the less fortunate, as stated in *The Difficult Art of Giving* (Rockefeller, 1908). When it comes to nonprofit organizations embracing the collective good of diversity, equity, and inclusion, often times we fail to look at our communities through a lens that reflects what the community is going through, who makes up the community, and what their needs are. According to *Transforming the Social Sector* (Newprofit, 2020), Black and Latino/a/x individuals comprise 30% of the United States population, but only 10% of nonprofit organizations' executive leadership and 6% of foundations' executive leadership. How are we making place for the community to feel seen and valued if the leaders seldom reflect those in the community? These situations and scenarios lead us to see that there are many factors that can paralyze an organization and an employee.

As an example, when a system that has always worked for a specific group of people is called into question, it takes on a defensive posture, and remains resistant to dismantling. There is a lot of ebb and flow that happens when the dominant culture uses their power and privilege to increase their place at the destruction of others. In the article *The Challenge of Negotiating Race in Cross-Sector Spaces*, Tabitha Bentley (2009) uses the term "racial negotiation" to describe the way individuals and organizations leverage the power of race to achieve a goal. In this case, the goal is to keep those with dominant identity in power. While Black professionals also have power to leverage by way of the talent they bring, an abundance of negative narratives and barriers make this difficult.

In order to see a larger percentage of Black people in nonprofit leadership, we have to look at all of the systems that are preventing a pathway that is possible to navigate. The pathway begins with looking at what the pipeline looks like for Black candidates, and also asking the question: Are organizations truly ready for diverse leadership? Do people of color receive the support that they need to be successful? And, what is the long-term plan of organizations to create systems of opportunity instead of barriers? In the space of nonprofit leadership, there is a need for change and an urgency to truly address the systemic issues that cause persistent inequities in leadership. Are we managing, solving, or willing to dissolve the system as it currently exists?

In the Chronicle of Philanthropy article, *After 25 Years of Talk, Are Nonprofits Ready to Act on Diversity* (Sandoval, 2018) shows that nonprofit sector still isn't asking itself the right questions and still keeps making the same excuses such as, "there's not enough talent" or "we want qualified candidates", or even using dissonance in saying that they do enough already to promote diversity and that they even go as far as to claim "color-blindness". The nonprofit sector needs to look through a lens of empathy to the plight of those who are not seated at the table. It is time for the industry to create new equitable systems that will be the standard for the next generation of nonprofit professionals entering the industry.

Analysis and Findings

Growing up, my parents, teachers, and mentors taught me that leading an organization was a rite of passage reserved for the most talented, skilled, and dedicated employees. Rooted in an abiding valuing of meritocracy, this perception of what is needed to be successful, has been a steadfast part of U.S. culture for centuries. This leadership narrative has been periodically challenged, but not to the point of actual change, even as the racial demographics of the overall workforce has evolved. Within the non-profit sector, these patterns are particularly well entrenched as we have yet to fully address the root causes and biased systems that shape who can become a non-profit C.E.O. in the United States. Birthed from corporate structures, the nonprofit sector claims to be community-focused and heart-led, yet in many respects it has developed hierarchies and biased norms that are every bit as rigid as its forebearers. Throughout history, organizational leadership has been reserved for predominately White men, with a few women, and very few people of color slipping through the concrete and glass ceilings and making it into the executive levels. In an age and era where social justice and social consciousness seem to be more present in the public discourse and attention, this is still largely voluntary work by a few in an organization, non-systemic, and therefore there are few levers to force the hand of the holders of power.

In the last 20 years, we have seen more white women move to the forefront of leadership, but this ascension has still left out people of color and especially women of color. According to a recent Johnson Center for Philanthropy study and webinar “Philanthropy’s Quest for Equity: Past, Present, and Future” (Spicer, 2021), it was pointed out how we must address the past 150 years of American philanthropy to be able to grapple with and chart a course for what equity has to look like in practice, process, and vision.

The striking nonprofit leadership gap for people of color

Recent reports such as *Daring to Lead* (Bell, Moyers, & Wolford, 2006) highlight the leadership evolution of non-profits, including who has been admitted and omitted from leadership. As diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts have gained traction within our cultural consciousness, research has moved from basic questions about system perpetuation to the intersectionality of leadership, which includes generational diversity, white women coming back to the workplace after having a family, and women of color. In a leadership-based approach as seen in *Working Across Generations, The Future of Nonprofit Leadership* authors Kim, Kunreuther & Rodriguez (2008) address some of the long-held truths about who has traditionally belonged in non-profit leadership. This book addresses the history and trajectory of leadership as it relates to the demographics of race, age, and experience, and argues that the nonprofit sector needs to figure out what true leadership transfer looks like for individuals and the organizations that they serve. The book also highlights that the nonprofit sector is not prepared for a shift away from who has been in leadership to who should have the opportunity to be in leadership. We see that long-held beliefs about leadership have impacted our past and continue to impact our present and future. Biu & Ofonama (2016) in *Race to Lead revisited: Women of Color in the Nonprofit Sector* look at specifically the plight of women of color in non-profit leadership. The report showcases that women of color face barriers above and beyond their white counterparts and men of color. Key findings in this report emphasize that race still matters as a factor that impacts whether or not they can progress. This research is very important to my question of how can community serving non-profit organizations shrink the leadership gap that exists for Black people and other people of color? Women of color often make up the majority of frontline work of non-profits, but rarely make it into the C-Suite of leadership. This research also shines a light

on the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality is defined as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage” (Crenshaw, 1989). As it relates to non-profit leadership, the equity gap is made most apparent through the intersectional relationship between both race and gender. The report “The Building Movement Project’s Race to Lead” seeks to understand why there are still so few leaders of color in the non-profit sector. It shows that “the percentage of people of color in the executive director/CEO role has remained under 20% for the past 15 years, even as the country becomes more diverse.” (Kunreuther & Thomas-Breitfeld, 2017).

The quantitative data has shifted throughout the years, but consistently the research has shown that we are not making marked statistical progress. In the Philanthropy News Digest article *The Diversity Gap in the Nonprofit sector* (Medina, 2017) points out “ a 2015 study by Community Wealth Partners, for example, found that only 8 percent of nonprofit executive directors were people of color, while a 2013 study conducted by D5 found that 92 percent of foundation executive directors were white”. While I have not been able to find other quantitative data with the overall estimated number of people of color in the non-profit sector, based on this data, it would seem that the needle is not moving or at least has not been moving in the past 15 years. *Race to Lead*, which are a series of studies that were all part of the Building Movement Project speaks to the increasing awareness of the problem and an effort to dig into the very organizations and interviewing leaders in them. Additionally, in *Race to Lead: Confronting the Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap*, authors Kunreuther & Thomas-Breitfeld (2017) point out that “ in the focus groups with people of color, participants consistently explained that they expected—or experienced —extra scrutiny of their skills based on their race/ethnicity”. The

Race to Lead series is based in a mixed method approach. The findings in these reports give actual numbers, but also offer insights about why these equity gaps exist.

The changing impact of non-profit organizations on local communities, especially communities of color, have highlighted an enormous gap in the cultural competency of the local, community nonprofit organization. As shown throughout the research, we are beginning to unpack why the leadership of these organizations is overwhelmingly white, and how there is a large deficit in the connection to the importance of representation and belonging. In *How White People Conquered the Nonprofit Industry* (Tomkin, 2020), we see that the awareness of the problem is growing, but there are still pieces missing from a social innovation approach. Recommended action steps have not been enacted to address and possibly deconstruct this system that fails to recruit, hire, train, mentor, and retain people of color in nonprofit organizations.

This is further support in *The Leadership Deficit* (Tierney, 2006) where awareness is acknowledged, but it is clear that academics and non-profit practitioners alike struggle to come up with solutions that will result in meaningful, measurable change. The overarching premise of this article is that nonprofits are resistant to change because they often don't have the fiscal resources or the knowledge to deploy the current resources to create leadership diversity. Current executive directors, that are baby boomers and mostly white, are retiring and are not being replaced them with a new, more diverse pool of potential leaders.

These articles are important, because they underscore first step of social innovation, which is recognizing that there is a problem that needs to be addressed and beginning to ask the question of "Why"? We also have to be more forthright in asking the question of "who is not at the leadership table"? Importantly, the research makes clear that this issue is not based on

volume of available candidates for positions. In *Contributions and Barriers to Developing Black and Latino Leadership in the Public and Nonprofit Sectors of the Economy* (Halpern, 2006) we see that the problem is not about a desire from people of color to be in leadership, but rather a system that is not prepared to adjust to the best talent available. When a healthy climate and culture for inclusion is not built, people of color lack a sense of belonging and are not retained. Core to culture is looking at the gaps in mentoring and professional development that exist and continuing to make explicit the homogeneity of spaces that preserve a system of inequity. This requires an acknowledgement of the real impact of racial homophily, which is the tendency of people to associate with others who share their own racial and ethnic backgrounds. This definition was derived from the base theory of homophily, which was introduced and coined by social scientists Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in 1954. (Lazarfield & Merton, 1954). A lack of implicit bias awareness (which is both conscious and unconscious) keeps the status quo of power and leadership.

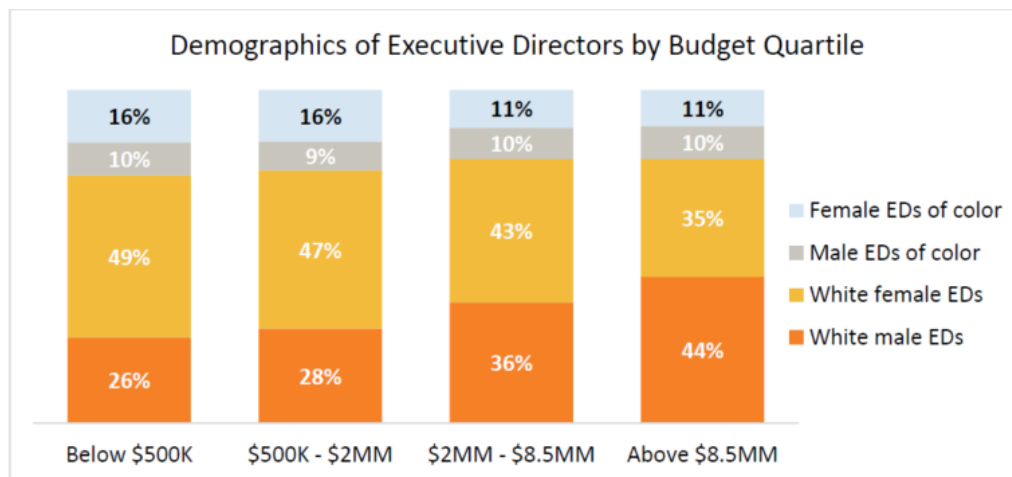
Sounding the Alarm! The gap is real

Fortunately, as the nonprofit sector begins to come to grips with its past, its present leaders' (while not necessarily reflecting the diverse demographics that they service) are beginning to see some of the longer-term implications that now diversifying the leadership pipeline can bring. In the report *Making (Or Taking) Space: Initial Themes on Nonprofit Transitions from White to BIPOC Leaders* (Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, 2021) we see that nonprofits are seeking to open up the leadership pipeline by looking at the capacity of current white leadership to share and concede leadership to people of color. This study is very interesting because it not only highlights the need, it reflects partnership with national nonprofits as they begin to address what their gaps have been in capacity, hiring, culture, mentoring, and overall access.

Through these partnerships, we see that there has been an attempt to turn words into action. This report also looked at the role that implicit and explicit bias plays in the hiring of people of color. Nonprofit Executive Directors (EDs) understand that there is a need and importance of having diverse staff and leadership teams, but those EDs are still using a very slanted and biased definition of the word "diverse." In a system that has not been challenged to truly deconstruct systems of whiteness, there has been an effort to focus on the layers of diversity that can happen passively. With this, executive directors and boards are looking to gender diversity, regional diversity, experience levels, education background, and age. While these categories are important, and in the true sense of the word, are accurate descriptions of diversity, they fall short of structural and organizational change when it comes to actively creating space for people of color.

According to the article *Reflecting on Leadership Diversity in Today's Nonprofit Sector* (Buteau, 2019):

“Despite 55 percent of nonprofit CEOs believing that it is “very” or “extremely important” for the senior leadership team to reflect the population the organization seeks to serve, only 23 percent believe their senior leadership team reflects the population they seek to serve “very” or “extremely well.”



(Figure 1. *Demographics of Executive Directors by Budget Quartile.*)

This is important because we see that the issue of having diverse leadership is important most groups, but yet we still see a tremendous gap in execution of that important vision.

As we see in Figure 1. Above, the alarm bell is ringing loud, but it seems that generations of status quo is making those bells difficult to hear in a lot of cases. The case is there, but progress has been very slow over the years. According to *After 25 Years of Talk, Are Nonprofits Ready to Act on Diversity?* (Sandoval, 2018) it is noted that although people of color lead major foundations such as the Ford Foundation, white people still account for 90% of the top executives. The few Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), executives that shatter the glass ceiling still only make up a small percentage of leadership. So, we see that the nonprofit

sector is well aware of the problem, but still lacks the overall skillset to fix it. The reality is that a lot of these organizations are addressing diversity in a non-diverse echo chamber. The organization leadership and board leadership, who are mostly white, are trying to solve the problem themselves. While in theory, change should come from within, it is also difficult to have the distance and objectivity to fully see ourselves. These organizations understand the purpose and premise, but have not adopted the urgency. Change is difficult and according to *Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996) there are eight steps to change, and the first step is urgency. We are seeing awareness, but no real urgency to change the leadership paradigm in the nonprofit sphere.

Social Impact & Prevailing Themes

The leadership gap experienced by Black people and people of color, can impact the overall mental, emotional, and financial growth of a person. In *the Race to Lead* series (Kunreuther, Suarez & Thomas-Breitfeld, 2016 & 2019), the authors argue that there are some pieces missing in how we are viewing this gap. We have allowed ourselves to simply believe that the problem is the lack of desire for racially diverse leadership, but these studies show plainly that these gaps are not the result of individual choice. The authors write:

“The prevailing theory of change has been that there needs to be more attention on finding or convincing People of Color to consider leadership positions, keeping those who are qualified from leaving the sector, and offering training to the others to prepare them for taking on the top job. Underlying this logic are the assumptions that People of Color are less interested in nonprofit leadership than their white counterparts, that qualified leaders of color will leave the nonprofit sector, and that those who stay do not have the skills to be competitive (without help) for top leadership jobs” (Kunreuther & Thomas-Breitfeld, 2019).

This quote is very poignant as we begin to unpack the experiences of people of color in DE positions. The assumptions above permeate throughout the interviews I conducted and echo throughout my own experiences.

Each of the four individuals I interviewed are very accomplished in the nonprofit sector, leading very different types of organizations:

- Dr. Bill Pink is the president of Ferris State University. As a public institution, universities provides a lot of insight into the theme of research. Dr. Pink is one of few Black professionals to lead a large, 4-year, public university in the Upper Midwest. His

experience is important because he, like the rest of the people I interviewed, had never had thoughts of being in the leadership seat in a nonprofit as a goal.

- Tasha Blackmon, who is the president and C.E.O of Cherry Health Systems which is a federally qualified health center. Tasha's introduction to nonprofit work was very common. She actually worked for Cherry Health as a site manager 18 years ago. She went to college to become a clinical physician and evolved in roles to more deeply connect with her passion. Her commitment to the organization and interest in business led her to a number of roles in the organization, but according to Tasha my intent was never to run this organization. I actually never thought about it". Tasha said during the interview that she was not "even made aware of leadership opportunities within the organization" (T. Blackmon, personal communication, June 3, 2022). Tasha's inclusion to this group was intentional and unfortunately unique to the nonprofit ecosystem. Tasha was the only Black woman in my interviews and as we have seen by recent studies and statistics, Black women still make up less than 5% of the nonprofit executive directors in the country according to data from the Leading with Intent report from 2021.
- Scott Lewis is the President and C.E.O of the Metropolitan Grand Rapids YMCAs. Similar to Tasha, Scott became aware of the nonprofit sector via working at the YMCA. Scott started working at the YMCA when he was 15 years old and has remained. Scott also had the experience of moving around the country to various YMCAs and was able to learn about the nonprofit sector in a myriad of settings. Like all of the leaders interviewed, Scott never saw being an executive director as a viable career path. In fact, Scott said that he saw his ceiling as being maybe a C.O.O. of a large YMCA and staying

in operations. It was not until he became a C.O.O. in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania that he actually realized that he had the ability to lead the organization.

- Bill Manns is the President and C.E.O of Bronson Health Systems based in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Like Tasha, Bill began his collegiate career wanting to become a doctor and then after a fateful fellowship moved to healthcare administration. Bill began his journey in nonprofit by working at Mercy Health services, an organization that he would eventually lead. He began his career with Mercy Health/Trinity Health as a cost analyst. His second job with Trinity was as a financial analyst. As with the other leaders, Bill saw himself as maybe a director of VP, but never as president and C.E.O. To a person, leadership was not something offered, nor expected.

I want to point out that there was intentionality in interviewing Black executive Directors of predominantly and or traditionally white led organizations. I felt to truly understand the journey of where the leadership gap truly lies, I needed to connect with individuals who had been able to navigate the “concrete ceiling” and become leaders of nonprofit organizations. Their stories and experiences as Black professionals was pivotal to this research.

During the interviews, three key themes emerged. The first theme was that the education system as a whole has failed to create awareness and a viable academic advisement to nonprofit leadership as a viable career path. In speaking with Bill Manns about this topic, you could sense frustration in how our educational system connects with students of color. “I believe that people of color are usually not directed to seek out these types of roles and positions,” he explained (B. Manns, personal communication, June 15, 2022). This lack of mentoring creates systemic inequities that favor groups that are either guided towards leadership aspirations or are exposed to people who mentor them.

The other aspect when looking at our educational system is the concept of academic readiness, which can also make teachers and advisors look at Black students in a lower regard and neglect to offer aspirational opportunities, but rather advise students based on the academic path of least resistance. Scott Lewis explained this well when he reflected, “I don’t think our education systems are even thinking about promoting nonprofit as a career path. Mostly master’s level. Not high school or undergrad” (S. Lewis, personal communication, June 9, 2022). None of the leaders I interviewed ever looked at nonprofit leadership. At best, all of them viewed their trajectory as maxing out at a director level, not progressing to become C.E.Os or Presidents within their organization. Non-profit leadership was also not encouraged for many of these individuals either because, as Tasha explained, “There just wasn’t knowledge about nonprofits as careers, and even when they were, they were not seen as lucrative career options” (T. Blackmon, personal communication, June 2, 2022). We see over and over that our education system is not equitably setting up students of color for success in non-profit work.

All of my interviewees were mentored primarily by white men and women, with one exception. This was a second key theme that emerged across the interviews. Scott Lewis had both a Black woman and white woman as mentors. Dr. Bill Pink, also had a white woman as a mentor. While white women’s mentorship is important to note, they were far outnumbered by white men serving in mentoring roles for these individuals. Few or none of my interviewee’s mentors were Black. The overall revelation of a preponderance of white mentors unfortunately did not surprise me. I interviewed three Black men and one Black woman and the sentiment was relatively the same. They performed, they were the only person of color within their organization, and a white person in the C-suite –because all leadership in the organization was white – saw the potential in them. Whether out of true value, optics, or any additional number of

reasons, these leaders were plucked to be mentored and hence this put them on a trajectory for their talent and options to grow. It is all too common for Black professionals to ascend into leadership as a result of white people who got to know them personally and were able to create a pathway because of relationships and potential. Another primary point to add here, is that we are speaking about BIPOC individuals who are talented and if all things were equal, would have the notice of leadership. Not asking for a hand out to the leadership table, but to have equitable opportunity to connect and have the sponsorship of people who can easily open doors for them via mentoring and professional development. This also rang true with my personal journey of only having white men as mentors in my own non-profit journey.

The third theme that emerged is that there are not more Black nonprofit C.E.Os because of the lack of awareness of leadership opportunities, mentorship, exposure to and access to leaders within the nonprofit sector, and the culture and climate within the organizations that are often times rife with conscious and implicit bias that defeats the moral and will of people Black people to maintain. The sentiment was also presented that often times Black people were qualified for promotions and leadership, but were frequently overlooked. Each of my interviewees acknowledged the problem of representation, especially within the communities of color that they serve. In each case, there was a lengthy journey to the C-suite. Tasha Blackmon's journey from entry level to C.E.O was 13 years. Scott Lewis's journey took 16 years. Bill Mann's journey was 17 years, and Dr. Pink's journey was 27 years from his first faculty position to becoming the president of Grand Rapids Community College. When I asked each of them the question, "Why are there such a small number of people of color in nonprofit executive/ leadership roles?" each had very similar answers. "In some searches, organizations didn't even have people apply, or have open position searches that would allow for a diverse group of

candidates. There is also an awareness issue. Lack of knowledge of what the positions are and what the organizations really do. Never really saw any applicants of color. In higher ed, there is definitely an awareness issue. There is still a “good ole’ boy” system of hiring.

Disenfranchisement and not creating opportunity,” Bill Pink explained (B. Pink, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

Tasha stated, “There is a lack of opportunities and credit for the experience and work that has already been done. Black people are not invited to the table, and as a Black woman, the pay equity issue is a real issue. Also, boards of directors are not involved or aware of the need for diverse leadership, so the hiring systems remain the same” (T. Blackmon, personal communication, June 3, 2022).

Bill’s answer was that there are “no real examples of people of color in those positions. No access, and lack of understanding. No pathway or guidance to the unwritten and unspoken rules of making it into leadership” (B. Manns, personal communication, June 15, 2022). This is a narrative all too common for BIPOC individuals. Aspiration is usually quelled with the reality of lack of representation. Generationally, our elders were not given a seat at the table, so we never learned the rules to succeed in a space not meant for us.

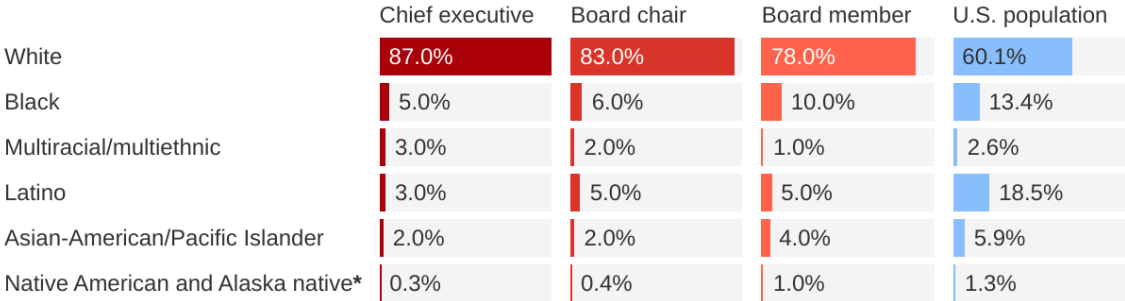
Finally, Scott said, “Part of it is opportunity, access, and growth path. The organizations don’t teach staff how to be a C.E.O. It’s considerably different than operations. You also have to have mentorship and there is a severe lack of mentoring and lack of people of color recognizing that they may need a mentor” (S. Lewis, personal communication, June 9, 2022). Unfortunately, a lot of BIPOC people lack mentoring in their pursuit of executive leadership. To take that a step further, many people may not know how to even seek out mentoring, or what a mentor/mentee relationship looks like. This is another by product of generational and systemic oppression.

The nonprofit sector has not accelerated its pace or desire to make sweeping changes in diversifying leadership succession practices. The ability to create equitable spaces still plagues nonprofit organizations, and what adds insult to injury is that they are usually under resourced to do true organizational assessment by an outside, neutral party. Assessments are necessary to point out spaces where gaps exist and could help the organization create a better plan of action. Many nonprofit organizations cannot see beyond what is the immediate need is to be addressed.

Systems work requires objective and most times external review of processes and procedures. In the 2019 *Race to Lead Revisited: Obstacles and Opportunities in Addressing the Nonprofit Racial leadership Gap* report, it shows that “people of color were substantially more likely to state that race is a barrier to their advancement, while white respondents were more likely to agree that their race provides a career advantage” (Kunreuther & Thomas-Breitfeld, 2019). Without consciously addressing the culture and climate of the organization, things that could be implicit or unconscious can perpetuate inequities that can have lasting impact on the achievement of leadership equity.

The diversity of nonprofit leadership in 2019

87% of U.S. nonprofit chief executives, 83% of board chairs and 78% of board members were white, versus 60.1% of the country's population, according to the most recent data. Underrepresentation is more severe for some communities of color than others.



Census data for whites exclude people who identify as being Latino and white.

Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: BoardSource, U.S. Census Bureau

(Figure 2. Demographics of Chief Executive Directors by race.)

As we see in Figure 2 above, as of 2019, we are still operating at white people making up 87% of nonprofit C.E.O's. This is still a very sad reality and going forward, we need to align with our educational institutions and funders, both foundations, and individuals to force the needle to move towards progress.

Why Should Non-profits Care?

One of my primary sources is *The Race to Lead* series (Kunreuther, Suarez & Thomas-Breitfeld, 2016 & 2019). The Building Movement project argues that the issue is structural including practices and biases within the organization studies, not about training or lack of available candidates. I also see that the leadership gap is still increasing, even with more attention being placed on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In *The Leadership Deficit* from the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Thomas J. Tierney moves to further analyze where the nonprofit sector is heading with its leadership gaps (Tierney, 2006). This article makes the case for how nonprofits are going to have to be creative in how they recruit and retain talent. Looking at categories of people that have not usually risen to the top of recruiting. The review speaks about the need to increase the traditional hiring scope to include people of color and that basic understanding lies in what the new make-up of the workforce will look like. To meet the need for new leaders, the nonprofit sector has little choice but to think and act in new ways.

Recruiters of the nonprofit sector will have to explore previously untapped and undervalued and utilized networks of talent, including mothers returning to the workforce after raising their families, new empty nesters after their children have left home, baby boomers shifting out of corporate work, mid-career executives looking for a change after the burn out of corporate life, officers retiring from the military, and community minded and philanthropically motivated young graduates wanting to make their careers in the nonprofit sector. In addition to the new influx of talent into the nonprofit sector, just as important, nonprofits will have to work on retaining their best leaders, providing them with opportunities for career development and advancement, both within individual organizations and across the sector.

In order for the nonprofit sector to survive, it must look at leadership in a fresh way and create opportunities for previous overlooked people (Tierney, 2006). In the case of my research, this would definitely include people of color! So, we see that the business case shows that there will be a gap in leadership, and that gap in leadership means fewer non-profits and fewer social safety nets to help our most vulnerable communities. The non-profit sector cannot ignore that while its work is social in nature, the bottom line is still that revenue keeps the doors open. Funders have not held non-profits accountable to move the needle beyond optics when it comes to executive leadership and board representation. Our government and private sector have been slow to change, but our public and non-profit sector can make the case for movement. According to *Delivering through diversity*. (Dixon-Fyle, Hunt, McKinsey, Prince & Yee, 2018), there is definitely a relationship between diversity and business performance. It seems to me that there is a large connection to financial performance outcomes and diversity. Diverse leadership opens companies to think broader and be more relevant in this economy. Also, there is a strong case for pointing out that leadership roles and who holds them, matter. As the authors argue: “Companies in the top-quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 21% more likely to outperform on profitability and 27% more likely to have superior value creation. The highest-performing companies on both profitability and diversity had more women in line (i.e., typically revenue-generating) roles than in staff roles on their executive teams.” (Dixon-Fyle, Hunt, McKinsey, Prince & Yee, 2018)

The non-profit sector must continue to realize that a representation matters and community support will continue to evolve with the shift of wealth that is coming from Millennials and soon to Gen Z. Younger generations are expecting more from nonprofits and

want more impact with their dollars. The very survival of non-profits hinges on their ability to make these changes a reality, soon.

Summary of Key Themes

My research has shown me that there is still a huge problem in the nonprofit sector as it pertains to leadership. The prevailing themes that I continue to encounter is that our communities continue to neglect Black people, and our educational institutions continue to under-educate and under expose Black children to a wide-array of possible career opportunities and tracks. Our nonprofit sector is still battling its ability to market to Black people for leadership positions, create entry points for them, onboard them with any level of intentionality to create early success, create a culture and climate that welcomes, appreciates, and allows success of Black employees. Also, the sector has a lot of work to do in creating mentoring and professional development. Finally, the sector, based on my research has just not paid attention to this inequity in leadership. Nonprofits are aware for their general program staff, but not for leadership diversity. So, looking at this from a systems, historical, and present space, it seems like the deck is stacked against Black people and people of color, but I still think there is hope for the future.

Proposed Changes in Practice and a Call to Action

To disrupt a system that is resilient to change and always adapts to sustain and maintain itself is a difficult task. How do we create a controlled forest fire that regenerates while keeping the best of what was, while infusing new life and energy? This is a great illustration of what ideal social innovation would look like, but also shows the reality of what is and usually what persists. Is there a way to manage, solve, and dissolve parts of this broken and antiquated system? The changes that I would recommend seem lofty, yet very common sense. Most of the solutions center around acknowledgement of a problem. If you do not see a reflection of the communities that you serve reflected in your leadership, there is a problem. This is not to say that every organization that serves the Black or LatinX community needs to have a CEO of that same race, but there should be accountability from within the organization and within the community to see that leveled within the top tier of leadership and board of director representation. The growth of an organization is often times evaluated on its ability to adapt and thrive. It is incumbent upon the leadership of organizations to make sure that they are operating not in the best self-interest or perpetuation of a system, but truly going into this process with eyes, mind, and heart open to the winds of change that will hopefully create some level of inevitability. In understanding the methods of social innovation that can begin to move towards real progress, I have sought out the collaboration of two organizations that will be able to create a stronger alarm for this work going forward and create a space within the west Michigan region. The first step is presenting the data to current nonprofits and make them aware of the gaps and disparities in leadership. Working with the Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University on creating a curriculum and workshop for current nonprofit leadership to attend that doesn't just talk about D.E.I, but really unpacks what a diverse organization looks like from top to bottom. Starting with the board of directors , to the C.E.O, to the C-Suite, direct program staff, and volunteers. This

training will look at intentional recruiting, hiring, onboarding, evaluation, mentorship, professional development, leadership pipelining, and finally retention. In addition to working with the Johnson Center for Philanthropy, I am working with the Grand Rapids Community Foundation. The community foundation currently is doing a lot of work in creating a more equitable funding model for potential grantees. Not just asking a nonprofit how many staff of color they have, but actually asking about the board of directors and executive leadership. This aligns with this research and project. As a board member for the Grand Rapids Community Foundation's, Fund for Community Good, I have first hand knowledge of the intentionality that the foundation is doing to make nonprofit organizations in the region aware of the need to create more opportunities. Resources usually drive change and the Community Foundation putting the community's resources towards the growth, vibrancy, advocacy, equity and service will continue to move this region into a better space. Working with the Johnson Center for Philanthropy and The Grand Rapids Community Foundation will be vital first steps in ensuring that the nonprofit sector in this region are made aware and held accountable in the creation of a more equitable nonprofit leadership model for Black people and other people of color. Here are additional solutions that will further this work with nonprofits:

- Recognize, acknowledge, and eliminate internal barriers and cultures that prevent ascension of people of color into leadership positions. Looking at a top down and bottom up approach.
- Looking past the optics of diversity, equity, and Inclusion and actually creating an environment and culture that values, supports, and champions diversity at all levels. This goes beyond just hiring diverse candidates!

- Understanding what generational traumas exist within employees that may discourage them from attempting to ascend to leadership positions, even if qualified. Asking if the system ever worked for them. Checking your internal professional development resources to see if people of color have mentoring and resources available to amplify their voices? Making sure that the organization is creating a viable and actual path to leadership! Doing the work to see if the organization addresses and acknowledges the psychological trauma that could be inherent with speaking up and self-advocacy.
- Ensuring that the boards of directors in these organizations, who are often times responsible for hiring the Executive Director/CEO, are truly aware of how to live in and lean into an inclusive leadership model.
- According to Social innovation pedagogy, ask why these systems are so resilient and resistant to change? Why does their very optics of adaptation usually fall flat?
- Having difficult conversations with stakeholders on if the organization is purely motivated only by revenue and not by creating a win/win for the organization and the welfare of employees.
- Making sure that organizations are making DEI a part of their DNA. Providing workshops, trainings, surveys, and self-assessments that allow a true understanding of the social and financial benefit of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Understand that organizations may not be culturally creating a safe and brave space to retain quality employees of color and therefore decreasing the opportunity for more diverse leadership. Also, are the people of color in the

organization that may hold a leadership position supported and given the same access and grace as White employees? This speaks volumes to the true commitment.

- Actively seek to dismantle the “good old boys” network and the underlying overt White privilege and perpetuation is White supremacist ideologies and practices that come along with it.
- Make sure that organizations and HR departments are not still holding people of color to a higher standard of “professionalism” and forcing them to not be authentic to themselves. Not implying or forcing BIPOC employees to “Whiten” themselves in order to fit and access opportunities.
- Start having the real conversations around racism and having “difficult conversations” that organizations need. This is also very necessary in creating an Anti-Racist ideology and framework.
- Tie organizational performance and evaluation goals to inclusion vision goals and hold the full organization accountable.
- Create and include trainings, workshops, and other opportunities for employees to learn about the impact of implicit bias and systemic racism and lead by example by engaging them with vulnerability and transparency on where the organization needs improvement and will require more work. Set a strategic plan!
- Incorporate DEI goals associated metrics into the annual/quarterly goals of any staff person, who supervises staff or participates in hiring. Make raises and bonuses dependent upon reaching these goals as appropriate.

Research Limitations and Consideration for Future Studies

Given more time, I feel that it would have been impactful to open the scope of this project to examine the experiences of the larger BIPOC community in regards to nonprofit leadership. For this research I also reflect on the fact that Black professionals were who I had the most access to based on relationship, so therefore their stories and experiences were amplified, but not in the non-recognition of other people of color. I also would want to interview a sample set of current white C.E.O's and ask them the same interview questions and find the similarities and differences in their experiences especially around education, mentoring, and culture and climate. There is also so much more to examine when you look at the structure and framework of varying sized nonprofits and their access to training and resources. I also would want to move into the board of directors' role in creating equitable spaces for more diverse nonprofit leadership. The board plays such a major role in the governance of the organization. As the community's ambassadors, the board has the ability to act on behalf of the well-being of the organization's service. With the social awakening and reckoning around race, it would have been impactful to see this topic from a non-staff view.

Conclusion

In conclusion we see that there is a glaring gap in the number of people of color in leadership positions in nonprofit organizations. Based on the data from my primary and secondary resources and articles, along with conversations with friends and colleagues that are Black, it is easy to see that this is an issue that needs to change and change quickly. The dream of being an Executive Director or CEO should not be reserved for a select few and should continue to be a vivid part of the goal for people of color to live into their version of success. We have systems that have perpetuated for generations and given the moment in time we are in, there has to be change. We see the system as it currently is and envision a better system that provides equity and diversity. We empathize with the plight of BIPOC's who find their presence omitted in the executive leadership of the very nonprofits that we support and work for. We feel for those who have been traumatized by a system that wanted BIPOC's but failed to create actual space for them to thrive, and not just survive. We continue to define what the systems level issues are and call out the behaviors that are problematic. We have to also call out the people, who may be explicitly or implicitly perpetuating a system that creates inequities. We have to probe the system and look for weaknesses and spaces where we can infuse new modes of operation and policies. Disrupt the system and further create the case for BIPOC's to have a seat at the table of leadership. We have to show and prototype the design that can work. We will not be able to overhaul a system in a day. We will not be able to escape systems level change without making a few mistakes along the way. I hope that through it all, we will be better for doing the work of creating equitable spaces for all people that have the ability and desire to lead! Representation matters and we need to see diverse representation in our leadership in order to create a better system.

Appendix A

Nonprofit Executive Director of Color Interview Questionnaire

1. What was your college major/area of study?
2. Where did you grow your knowledge of the nonprofit sphere?
3. What was your first nonprofit job?
4. How did you learn of that job opening?
5. What was your onboarding process?
6. How diverse was the first nonprofit that you worked in?
7. Do you feel that the culture/climate of the organization created an environment for you to be successful?
8. Who were your nonprofit mentors? What race and gender were they?
9. Do you feel that you received the same professional development and mentoring within your organization that others did?
10. Do you feel that you were made aware of leadership opportunities within the organization?
11. Did you feel that you could actually be the C.E.O of that organization?
12. From the beginning of your journey into the nonprofit sector, how many years did it take you to become an executive director?
13. Why are there such a small number of people of Color in nonprofit executive/leadership roles?
14. What are barriers and systematic factors that cause this phenomenon?
15. Is our education system withholding exposure to nonprofit as a viable career path for people of Color?
16. Is the philanthropic sector biased against people of Color?
17. Do you feel that the philanthropic sector is still too unaccepting of people who don't look like them when it comes to trust and giving support and leadership development?
18. What are the social, geographic, financial factors that keep philanthropy and nonprofit leadership largely in the hands of White men.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form



Participant Consent Form

Title: How can community serving non-profit organizations shrink the leadership gap that exists for people of color?

Researcher: Principal Investigator: Aaron Turner, Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Integrative, Religious, and Intercultural Studies Dept.

Purpose: The goal and purpose of this study will be to draw upon the past 10 years of reporting and academic research to give an overview of the state of the non-profit system as it pertains to D.E.I in leadership, but to also real-time and real-world examples of experiences faced by current leaders of color in the non-profit field

Procedures:

- I _____, voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves...[an in person or web interview of approximately 15 questions that will be taped and will take roughly an hour to complete.].
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this study.

- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially, unless otherwise stated.
- I understand that extracts from my interview may be quoted in the data from the interview, project, thesis, research project presentation, and published materials.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in an audio recording device and stored securely until the study has been done, reviewed, presented, and completed.
- I understand that under freedom of information legislation, I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher Date: _____

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