

Whiteness & the Nonprofit Sector

Are white nonprofit leaders in the wrong roles?

By Tegan Lecheler

Nonprofit organizations are often lauded as “the good ones,” the organizations doing the grueling work required to further social equity and repair the damage left in capitalism’s wake. This is a comfortable and blissful idea, one that makes us feel good about having chosen to dedicate our lives to the nonprofit sector. The reality paints a different picture, and it’s one overlooked by many of us pursuing jobs in the field.

A study by Community Wealth Partners (communitywealth.com) found that 87% of nonprofit executive directors or presidents are white. This is not at all representative of the clientele these organizations serve and has turned the modern nonprofit organization into a vehicle of white supremacy. Whiteness perpetuates whiteness, and organizations that have mostly white staff will continue this patterning because of the toxic environment and biased recruitment it creates.

I have applied for jobs that should have been filled by a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color) individual and I have taken roles that should have been filled by a BIPOC person. We all have. But we can’t do it any longer.

White allies, if we are ever going to further racial equity and make even the smallest dent in systems of oppression, we need to be more intentional about the roles we are taking. A nonprofit organization’s leader must reflect those accessing the organization’s resources. Surely this is a radical proposal and the idea that we might jeopardize or step away from our careers in the name of equity may seem preposterous, but white folks can no longer take up space not meant for them, including but not limited to the head of certain organizations.

I am fiercely passionate about ending homelessness and have dreamt for years of being the executive director of a nonprofit organization with this mission. I even enrolled in a master’s program studying nonprofit leadership so that I might one day be qualified for my dream position. As I’ve navigated the nonprofit sector, however, I’ve discovered that this is not my role to play. I do not come from poverty, I have never experienced homelessness, and I am not a part of the demographic that housing insecurity most severely affects. Running this type of organization is simply not my place.



It’s hard to consider that the most helpful thing you can do for a movement you’re so passionate about is to step aside, but that’s not to say we must sit idly on the sidelines. Instead, white allies, let us fund BIPOC led organizations. Let’s listen to leaders of these organizations who tell us what they need, and then let’s do that.

White people absolutely play a role in these movements and organizations, but sometimes it’s not the starring role, and that can be a tough truth for us to face. For white people committed to racial justice, there’s the individual, and then there’s the greater goal of weakening white supremacy. These positions are often at odds and require conflicting behavior.

As we begin applying for jobs and looking for our dream positions, I hope we can remember our role. Ask yourself and the organization’s hiring manager what demographic the organization serves, and how representative the staff are of this community.

By taking this job, are you serving yourself, the individual, or the greater mission of dismantling dominant culture? In what way can you be useful to the movement without colonizing workspace or perpetuating violent systems? There’s a role for everyone in the nonprofit industry; the key is to find the one right for you. 

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