



Reimagining Leadership Transitions



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INTRODUCTION

Leadership transitions in the social sector have long been a hot topic, for good reason. Executive Director transitions require resources to navigate smoothly and can lead to instability in organizations, and ultimately, our communities. Traditionally, Boards have approached transitions in an opaque manner, creating distance with staff and the outgoing leader. And, incoming leaders, despite extensive due diligence, are often still surprised by the skeletons that come out after they move into the role. Simply put, poor transitions are harming leaders, organizations, and communities.

But what if there was another way?

This question guided ProInspire Founder Monisha Kapila's leadership transition, which we began preparing for in 2018 and completed in 2023.

ProInspire is a national nonprofit intermediary that is focused on supporting leaders at all levels to accelerate racial equity. Given our work, Monisha had previously heard from executives of color about the challenges in navigating a leadership transition. For her own succession, therefore, she wanted to be intentional in the process. Over the course of five years, ProInspire shifted to a co-leadership structure and communicated openly with the Board and staff about the transition process. We also received a general operating support gift from MacKenzie Scott, which we used to strengthen our organization's culture and infrastructure during this period.

As we entered the final year of our transition, we realized that many of the approaches we took were atypical for the sector. We also were noting that our transition was happening at the same time as a larger trend around leadership transitions across the field.



Since 2020, more and more social change organizations have sought out the leadership of Black people, Indigenous people, and other People of Color (BIPOC).

As these organizations have navigated leadership shifts, there have been new opportunities to test other ways of being and strategies to navigate these transitions, resulting in new learnings and recommendations for the field, as well as unearthing the challenges that leaders of color face when moving into leadership of historically white-led organizations.

So, in writing this report, we sought to offer the field examples of how leaders of color are intentionally, thoughtfully—and successfully—navigating transitions. So much in our work is often framed from the negative and lessons learned, the ways there have been missteps and mistakes. While there's valuable insights to be gleaned, no doubt, we also wondered what might we be missing? Where might there be examples of transitions gone well, and how can we uplift the creativity, joy, and brilliance from these experiences?



METHODOLOGY

This research began with curiosity. Noting both the lessons from our own transition, as well as the larger shift happening in the sector, we wanted to understand what other new practices might be emerging across the field that supported better experiences for leaders of color in transition.

To inform our meaning-making, we conducted a field scan to identify other research and findings around BIPOC leadership transitions. We also conducted 10 interviews with a mix of outgoing and incoming executives of color who had experienced transitions over the past five years, funders, and intermediaries. These conversations focused on bright spots — we invited participants to share examples where they had a generally positive experience coming into the executive role. We also spoke with funders and intermediaries who are



focused on leadership transitions to better understand what emerging practices they are seeing. Finally, we conducted a focus group with leaders of nonprofit infrastructure and Philanthropy Serving Organizations that received funding from MacKenzie Scott (many of whom had navigated leadership transitions).

At the same time as this effort, ProInspire's co-CEO Bianca Casanova Anderson was serving as a core partner for Robert Sterling Clark Foundation's [*Brilliant Transformation: Toward Full Flourishing in BIPOC Leadership Transitions*](#) report. Her participation provided core context for this report, including themes surfaced through focus groups with other BIPOC CEOs.

EMERGING PRACTICES

Through this research, we identified five emerging practices around succession and leadership transitions that are shifting the experiences and outcomes for BIPOC leaders. These practices have implications for Boards, funders, and nonprofit executives to support successful transitions.



1. *Longer Transition Time Periods*

- Building a culture that focuses on racial equity before a transition
- Providing spaciousness for Board and staff to navigate the transition process



2. *Provide Funding for Transitions*

- Providing multiyear general operating support for organizational strengthening
- Supporting leadership transition activities
- Resourcing new strategic directions



3. *Consider Leadership Structure Shifts*

- Building out executive team roles
- Shifting to a co-leadership structure



4. *Intentionally Prepare and Support Executives*

- Current executives investing in future executives
- Boards and funders supporting new executives
- Boards supporting outgoing executives



5. *Reimagine the Board's Role*

- Creating an environment for open and honest conversations about succession planning
- Communicating with outgoing executive, staff, and potential candidates in the selection processes
- Building a strong partnership with new executives well beyond the hiring process

The stakes are high for our sector — smoother transitions will support stronger organizations so that they can continue to drive impact in our communities. We want thriving BIPOC leaders, organizations, and communities.



Longer Transition Time Periods

CEOs should begin thinking about succession planning 3-5 years in advance of a planned transition.

A longer period of time to prep for a transition gives the organization time to address two key challenges: “glass cliff” environments that set incoming leaders of color up for failure and urgency in the hiring process, leading to stress on Board and staff teams. When the average term of an executive director or CEO is about six years for small and mid-sized nonprofit organizations ([Nonprofit Quarterly](#)), this means that succession planning needs to begin much earlier in a leader’s tenure.

Two key strengths of a longer time period are:

1. Building a culture that focuses on racial equity before a transition
2. Providing spaciousness for Board and staff to navigate the transition process



BUILDING A CULTURE THAT FOCUSES ON RACIAL EQUITY

A longer succession period enables the organization to do internal racial equity work to help minimize the effects of the “glass cliff” and burden on future executives of color. The concept of a “glass cliff,” which is related to “glass ceiling,” was initially based on the pattern of women being put into leadership roles under risky circumstances, particularly of struggling or failing companies. The term is also commonly used to describe circumstances faced by people of color and other underrepresented groups who break through the glass ceiling but find themselves in precarious leadership positions.

Building Movement Project’s report [*Trading Glass Ceilings for Glass Cliffs: A Race to Lead Report on Nonprofit Executives of Color*](#), found that a key challenge for incoming BIPOC executives was when prior leaders did not factor racial equity into their succession plans. ***“Reducing the ‘glass cliff’ effect for incoming nonprofit executives of color will require funders, interim EDs/CEOs, capacity builders, board members and current organizational leaders working together to make organizations more racially equitable now.”*** When nonprofit executives focus on embedding racial equity into their organization’s culture, it supports the Board and staff to approach succession and the incoming leader in a more values aligned way.

For example, BoardSource’s longtime CEO, Anne Wallestad, stepped down in 2021 after nine years as President & CEO, and the Board hired Monika Kalra Varma, the first CEO of color for the organization. BoardSource’s Board of Directors had been on a decade-long DEI journey as a group, and staff had also been on their own DEI journey.

Monika shared, *“The Board was in a thoughtful place and had a good composition of board members by the time Anne shared her transition plans and they started a search for their new CEO.”*

The senior team also had group coaching for nine months before the new CEO joined so they were more prepared for supporting the new leader. The organization’s multi-year investment in DEI work gave Monika more confidence that racial equity was a priority in the organization’s culture when she joined as CEO and has helped her drive the change that she is leading for the organization.

PROVIDING SPACIOUSNESS FOR BOARD AND STAFF TO NAVIGATE THE TRANSITION PROCESS

Short succession timelines can lead to organizational trauma, as there is often not adequate time for the Board and staff to prepare for the transition, leaving the organization with a leadership vacuum or rushed search for a new leader. This practice is hurting organizations and destabilizing our sector overall.

There are several reasons why a leader might not voice their transition plan, with the primary one being that they are concerned about job security and fear that they will be terminated by even voicing that they are thinking about a transition. Additionally, white professional norms have set an expectation that leaders should stay put once they’re in a leadership position.

Visionary Black leaders like Satonya Fair, President & CEO at PEAK Grantmaking, however, are modeling other ways of leading.

“I told [the Board] they should expect that in the first year, I would have a plan for how long I expect to stay in this role and what preparation and support we need for the organization. At the one year mark, I made an announcement to staff and Board that I plan to be here for six years. I also laid out a timeline for developing a plan for business continuity for the organization and building out an executive leadership team in my tenure.”

– Satonya Fair

For Satonya, openly stating from the beginning that she did not desire an unlimited tenure represents a different approach from traditional white leadership models, which are often characterized by holding long-term positions without set time or term limits. This transparency also allowed for the Board to name their needs in this process. The Board shared that they would need 9-12 months for a search process, so that was added to the plan. Now Satonya, the Board, and staff have shared expectations and clarity for what needs to be in place in the organization by the end of 2026.

Provide Funding for Transitions

There is no doubt that funders play an essential role in supporting organizations during a leadership transition. Their unwavering commitment can quite literally make or break an organization's future. While there is a wide range of strategies funders can implement during a period of transition, we identified three types of support needed:

1. **Organizational Strengthening Support**
2. **Targeted Leadership Transition Support**
3. **Strategic Support**

Bridgespan's recently released report, [*Nonprofit Leadership Transitions: Four Ways Funders Can Support Leaders of Color*](#), highlights four ways that funders can support leaders of color and their findings are broadly consistent with our research insights.

PROVIDING MULTIYEAR GENERAL OPERATING SUPPORT FOR ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTHENING

There is significant research that demonstrates why multiyear general operating support is a transformative and equitable practice that should be adopted across the sector. When it comes to leadership transitions, this remains true. Multiyear general operating support, as a general practice, supports stronger organizations that are better equipped to navigate leadership transitions.

Said another way, funders resourcing organizations abundantly right now, strengthen their grantees in ways that set them up for a successful leadership transition down the line. Additionally, multiyear unrestricted funding provides predictability and spaciousness so that incoming leaders can focus on culture, strategy, and other initiatives that strengthen the organization overall.

For example, Ford Foundation reported in their [*Building Institutions and Networks Initiative \(BUILD\)*](#) developmental evaluation report that the predictability of their five-year general operating approach, and mandate to use BUILD funds for organizational development, supported those grantees who were experiencing changes in executive leadership by providing stability and financial security to the new leaders. New leaders used BUILD funds to create a strong executive team to partner



with them, develop a skilled board of directors to help guide the organization and support their vision, invest in emerging leaders within the organization to build the next generation, and develop new structures that reflected the organization's values. This funding also came at a time in which grantees were navigating dual crises of the global pandemic and the racial justice reckoning. Flexible, multiyear funding designated for organizational strengthening allowed these new leaders to invest in the infrastructure needed to be resilient in the face of multiple challenges.

In a focus group with CEOs of national infrastructure organizations who received unrestricted funding from MacKenzie Scott, ProInspire heard three key ways that the funding enabled a successful leadership transition:

1. *Resourcing for the new leader to advance strategy*
2. *Hiring for strategic staff positions*
3. *Strengthening internal infrastructure (including operations, people, and fundraising)*



SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

Another way that funders can support grantees is by providing specific, targeted funding for the leadership transition itself.

Historically, many funders have taken a “wait and see” approach during leadership transitions. But this practice creates significant challenges for new leaders and, ultimately, puts grantees at risk. Instead, funders should acknowledge that a leadership transition is a natural part of an organization's history and embrace their role as partners in resourcing a smooth process.

Examples from the field include Cricket Island Foundation (CIF), who launched a Leadership Transition Fund to provide multiyear general operating support



for youth-led social change organizations navigating a leadership transition, with a focus on supporting BIPOC leaders. Grantees receive \$45,000/year for three years, in addition to coaching support and connection with peer grantees.

Through this fund, CIF hopes to be a stabilizing source of support during what can otherwise seem like a vulnerable process in an organization's lifecycle. They also hope to learn best practices for supporting healthy organizational transitions and leadership development in the youth-led social change field. So far, they're learning that it's important to fund in the "before, during, and after of transitions," says Liz Sak, Executive Director of CIF.

For their participating grantees, this has looked like a planning year that involves the outgoing executive director in the first year of funding. In Year Two, organizations focus on the transition itself and includes transition committees, coaching, and other activities. Year 3 is when the new executive comes in, and support is focused on their transition into the role.

Another key learning for the Foundation has been around acknowledging power. They engaged a consultant to manage their Leadership Transition Fund to help address some of the power dynamics that grantees might feel in discussing transition activities with a funder.



RESOURCING NEW STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

Funders also support leadership transitions by providing resources for new executives to lead strategic changes in the organization. Across our research, we found that incoming leaders bring a new vision and need space for making strategic shifts in the organization.

For example, Kyle Caldwell became President & CEO of the Council of Michigan Foundations in 2018, succeeding Rob Collier, who led the Council for 20 years. A big focus of Kyle's early work was leading a strategic planning process that focused on integrating equity generally and racial equity imperatively into Michigan philanthropy's people, policies, and practices. He also wanted to shift the organization's business model towards more unrestricted funding.

"I was blessed to have several members provide transformation grants that were 2-3 year onramps to help me make some redesign in the organization. That gave me the ability to forge a new business model. This meant that I wasn't in starvation mode while trying to do transformation work."

—Kyle Caldwell

Strategic support for new CEOs is one way that funders can embrace learnings from Trust Based Philanthropy and resource the necessary onramps for leaders of color to experiment and succeed.

Consider Leadership Structure Shifts

Leadership transitions present an opportunity for leaders to consider changes in their organizational structure. We identified two emerging practices.

1. *Building out Executive Team Roles*
2. *Shifting to a Co-Leadership Structure*

In both practices, leaders are seeking opportunities to distribute responsibility more equitably and practice power-sharing for the benefit of their own experience in role, team development, and organizations' sustainability.

BUILDING OUT EXECUTIVE TEAM ROLES

Having a strong Executive Team is an important asset for CEOs, especially during a leadership transition. An Executive Team brings historical knowledge and experience, and can support the Board and staff with navigating the leadership transition. In our research, we found multiple examples of CEOs

creating new executive roles — sometimes to support cultivating someone as the next CEO, or to share CEO responsibilities across more roles, making it more manageable overall.

Satonya Fair created a three-person leadership team at PEAK Grantmaking, including a Chief Strategy Officer that focuses externally and a Chief Operating Officer that focuses internally.

"I had trust from the Board to create the leadership team I [needed]. Neither Executive is in line for my role, but they are thinking about business continuity."

—Satonya Fair

SHIFTING TO A CO-LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

Organizations may also consider co-leadership or other non-traditional structures as part of leadership transitions. In some cases, this is part of the transitioning leader's succession plan, and in other cases, it is identified as an opportunity through the search process.

Tamara Woodbury served as CEO of Girl Scouts–Arizona Cactus-Pine Council for 31 years. She spent many years preparing the organization for succession and an intentional shift to a co-leadership structure. Tamara herself had always had someone in a number two position that played an important partner role for her, and she envisioned a co-leadership model for the organization. In 2018,



she promoted Mary Mitchell and Christina Spicer to be Deputy Directors. Christina shared, ***“Elevating us to deputy directors together sent a really strong message out to staff. It signaled that internally something was changing.”*** Over the course of three years, Tamara supported Mary and Christina to learn more about the CEO responsibilities and shared her vision for a shared leadership model.

“Tamara was transparent when she talked about shared leadership and this kind of model as an innovative practice for Arizona Cactus Pine Council. This was part of the legacy she hoped to leave behind in terms of the sustainability of the organization and the impact for the leaders. She talked a lot about the impact running a large nonprofit had on the individual leader’s wellness and what she hoped to happen for future leaders of the organization. Shared leadership is part of our model even in troop leaders and modeling for girls.”

—Mary Mitchell

In 2020, Tamara departed the organization, and Mary and Christina became Co-CEOs of the Council.

Co-leadership structures can also evolve after a leader transitions out of their role. iF, A Foundation for Radical Possibility in Washington, DC went through a leadership transition in 2022, when President & CEO Dr.



Yanique Redwood left after almost 10 years to pursue another opportunity. Yanique wrote an exit memo in support of a shared leadership structure with two internal leaders from iF. At the time, there were mixed perspectives on the Board about whether to pursue a shared leadership model, and which structures they might consider. The Board asked one of the senior program leaders who was not interested in the CEO role to serve as Interim CEO. They also engaged a consultant who had worked with iF on their strategic plan to manage the process.

The Board spent a few months considering options and decided they were open to a shared leadership structure. The iF Board did a limited external search and ultimately selected the two internal leaders who applied together — Temi F. Bennett and Hanh Le. They moved into co-CEO roles at the end of 2022. Temi said, ***“The job as co-CEO is more fulfilling, less isolating, and more humane.”***

Intentionally Prepare and Support Executives

Strong transitions involve preparation and support for leaders across the ecosystem. In particular, we found that organizations with strong transitions had invested in multiple areas, including:

1. Current Executives investing in Future Executives
2. Boards and Funders supporting New Executives
3. Boards supporting outgoing Executives



CURRENT EXECUTIVES INVESTING IN FUTURE EXECUTIVES

Among the organizations we spoke with, those that had an internal leader step into the CEO role intentionally prepared them for 1-3 years. This practice is particularly important for leaders of color because they are less likely to get peer support and on-the-job mentorship than white leaders, according to [Building Movement Project](#). Support for rising leaders can look like exposure to different job functions, engagement with funders and board members, and one-on-one mentorship with the outgoing leader and Board Chair.

At the National Women's Law Center (NWLC), founders and co-Presidents Marcia Greenberger and Nancy Duff Campbell (Duffy) led the organization for more than 40 years and had a long planning period for their transition. The Board engaged a search firm that considered external candidates

as well as an internal candidate, then rising leader Fatima Goss Graves, and ultimately selected Fatima as the new President & CEO in February 2017. The leadership transition was completed in July 2017. ***"I was well-positioned as an internal candidate and to take on the role because I had done many different jobs at NWLC,"*** she says. Over the course of ten years, Fatima had led the education and workplace team, and eventually the whole program team when she was promoted to Senior Vice President for Program in 2015. She served in interim roles when other colleagues were on leave or retired. And, she purposefully attended a number of donor meetings. ***"I was in a lot of fundraising meetings that were with really important institutional donors,"*** she says. ***"Some of it was [Marcia and Duffy] saying, 'Why don't you come in your new role as Senior Vice President for Program?' Some of it was me saying that I want to come to see how you make a pitch."***

Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY)'s commitment to leadership development helped the organization plan a transition from Founder/ CEO Christa Gannon to Chief Operating Officer Ali Knight in 2020. FLY's leadership team had participated in Bridgespan's Investing in Future Leaders Program which helped them create a plan to develop talent across the organization. In addition, Christa was intentional about Ali getting exposure to multiple facets of the organization, including leading the organization's strategic planning process, joining the governance committee so he could build relationships with new board members, and serving as Interim CEO when Christa was on sabbatical in 2019.

Christa shared—

“Ali and I had been in conversation for years about whether he would be interested in the CEO role. Before I left for my sabbatical, Ali wasn't sure if he was interested. While I was on sabbatical, he helped plan our board retreat and spring fundraiser, and really got a sense of leading the organization. He had a great experience and decided that if there was an opportunity to be FLY's next CEO he wanted to be considered. Those experiences also helped Ali build relationships with the Board, who ultimately voted to appoint him as CEO and not do an external search.”

BOARDS AND FUNDERS SUPPORTING NEW EXECUTIVES

A second essential practice is supporting new executives through the first few years in their role. This might look like resourcing them through participating in cohort programs, executive coaching, or Board transition committees.

Brilliant Transformation, Trading Glass Ceilings for Glass Cliffs found that CEOs benefit from coaching and fellowship programs. In our conversations with leaders, particularly those

participating in ProInspire's Catalyst Collective program, we too have heard the value of having a community of BIPOC leaders, and space to explore their own leadership.

“The most important thing I did my first year was Rockwood's Leading from the Inside Out program. I started in October of my first year. The community, [the program is] rigorous, you take time in thinking about what is your leadership stance, what's your vision, and how to have tough conversations. It was a really good investment. I did Rockwood LIO and after attending the program I shifted to work with the executive coach from the program.”

—Fatima Goss Graves



Another way that Boards can support new CEOs is with transition committees — in fact, BoardSource recommends that Boards should set up a transition committee and not a search committee from the start. Monika Kalra Varma found this to be supportive when she joined as President & CEO at BoardSource.





"Transition committees go beyond the search, hire, and first 90 days. While they focused on my transition in the first year, it was flexible as to what I needed in the second year. I shaped what I wanted from the committee — it was literally a support group, I could show up and say anything. I am continuing the committee into my third year because we are embarking on a major organizational shift."

– Monika Kalra Varma



BOARDS AND FUNDERS SUPPORTING OUTGOING EXECUTIVES

A final area for support and preparation is with outgoing executives. A common theme from our conversations was that while outgoing leaders play an essential role in ensuring a smooth transition process, they also need their own support to “let go and leave” (*Brilliant Transformations*). We found that outgoing leaders would benefit from executive coaching, consultants, or cohort programs. In addition, exit packages are a tool that Boards can provide to ease the transition for outgoing executives into their next steps.

Executive coaching can be valuable for outgoing leaders to help them to explore when they are ready to transition, and the many personal and professional aspects of such a change. Outgoing leaders may also benefit from consultant support to help them with the specifics of a transition, including managing a multi-phase process, fundraising,

documenting systems, and communication. Cohort programs for outgoing executive leaders are a relatively new offering for the field. One example is the Leadership Transition Community, founded by Christa Gannon (Founder and Former CEO of FLY) and Scott Warren (Founder and former CEO of Generation Citizen). This six-month cohort program helps leaders create a tailored transition plan, including a timeline, advice for incoming leaders on Board relations, guiding values, a communication plan, and parameters of any engagement with the organization post-transition.

Founding Executive Director of the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth (CFSY) Jody Kent Lavy found that executive coaching and participation in the Leadership Transition Community were important supports during her transition process at CFSY. ***“Transitioning from an Executive Director role can be very lonely. Having to hold it together everywhere made it difficult to acknowledge my true feelings, except in the safe space with my coach who understood the journey intimately. Their support was invaluable during the process.”***

Finally, Boards should be proactive and transparent in clarifying if exit packages will be provided to outgoing executives that meet certain expectations (for example, length of tenure). This is an area where little data is publicly available, which typically means that inequities are more likely to show up. Jody noted that much of her focus in the transition process was on making sure everyone else was okay. ***“In hindsight, I realize I was not thinking enough about what I needed or advocating for that explicitly with the Board. I hope other outgoing executives will try to be mindful of their own needs and advocate for those early and often.”***

Reimagine the Board's Role

In our interviews, we consistently heard that Boards who reframed the traditional mindset that, "it's the Board's job to hire and fire the CEO," towards a more intentional and transparent process were more effective at supporting leadership transitions. We identified three emerging practices that Boards should hold:

1. Creating an environment for open and honest conversations about succession planning
2. Communicating with outgoing executive, staff, and potential candidates in the selection processes
3. Building a strong partnership with new executives well beyond the hiring process

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR OPEN AND HONEST CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SUCCESSION PLANNING

Boards need to build trust with CEOs so they can have ongoing, open, and honest conversations about succession. We recommend that succession planning is a topic that the Board discusses with the CEO at least once per year. This is good governance practice for organizational continuity and helps eliminate fears when the topic is raised. Many nonprofit CEOs don't raise the topic of succession out of concern that the Board may get scared and make rash changes, such as firing the CEO.

Some Boards and CEOs are discussing succession from the onset of a leader's tenure. This was the case at PEAK Grantmaking, where Satonya Fair named succession as a priority in her hiring process. At FLY, the Board was very involved in succession planning with Founder Christa Gannon. As Ali Knight moved into the CEO role, they also asked him to develop his

own succession plan. In a Bridgespan case study, Board Chair Mark Donnelly said: ***"We told Ali that the transition wasn't completed until he had his own plan in place."***

Now the Board is executing against that plan. After ten years at FLY and four as its CEO Ali will be leaving FLY to become the CEO of a national organization, the GreenLight Fund, where he will again succeed a founder. Given the work FLY did on succession, after Ali shared his transition news with the Board they were able to act quickly and have put interim co-CEO's in place (FLY's COO Cassidy Higgins, and FLY's former Board Chair June Wang) who will lead the organization until a new CEO is identified.


COMMUNICATING WITH OUTGOING EXECUTIVE, STAFF, AND POTENTIAL CANDIDATES IN THE SELECTION PROCESSES

Once organizations are actively in a leadership transition, Boards need to focus on transparency with multiple stakeholders. Engaging staff in the executive selection process is a critical area for Boards to focus. Leadership transitions can create tremendous anxiety among staff.

When decision-making for the next leader is held by Board members who have minimal interaction with staff, it can lead to ungrounded assumptions and communication breakdowns. Increasingly, organizations are involving staff members on hiring committees to share power and increase transparency about the process.



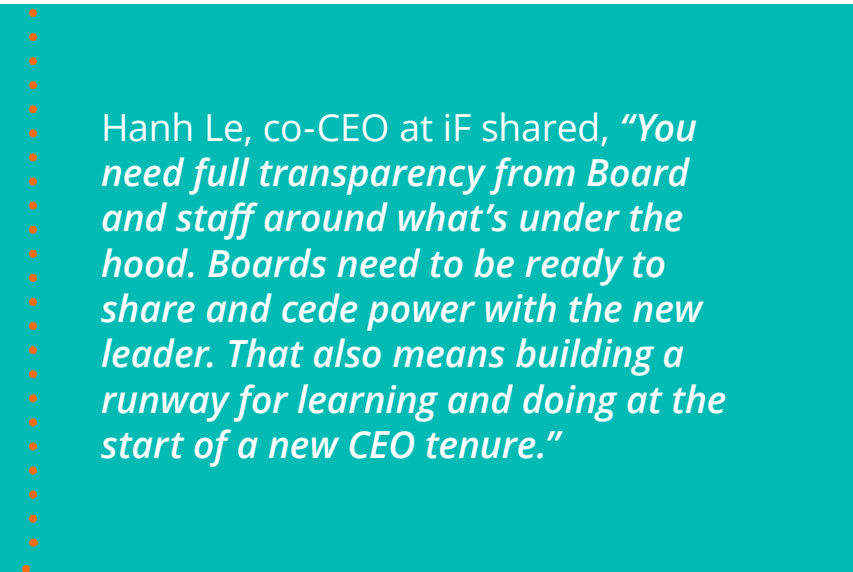
At the very least, Boards should identify 1-2 Board members who are responsible for ongoing engagement with staff through the transition period.



Brilliant Transformations noted: "In the best cases, staff played a key role in the success of the transition, sharing essential knowledge and developing the skills of new leaders, while maintaining key relationships and leading the core work of the organization. These organizations were better prepared for transition because leadership and power were not held by a single person, alleviating the pressure on the new leader. Notably, those whose hiring process included staff also reported better experiences after their transition. Indeed, staff often have expertise about the organization that the board does not possess."

Brilliant Transformations recommends that Boards make a grounded assessment of the organization, its culture, and its ability to fully support a BIPOC leader, as well as be transparent about the challenges facing the organization.

Multiple other studies have found that new BIPOC executives often face heightened expectations and additional burdens around addressing racial tensions within organizations.



Hanh Le, co-CEO at iF shared, *"You need full transparency from Board and staff around what's under the hood. Boards need to be ready to share and cede power with the new leader. That also means building a runway for learning and doing at the start of a new CEO tenure."*

When there is a planned transition, it is helpful for Boards to inform the outgoing executive about the processes and timelines. This helps the outgoing leader to set the organization up for transition to be a champion with staff. Open communication with the outgoing leader can build trust, which can be important so the incoming leader is not coming into a strained Board/executive relationship.

Finally, it is important for Boards to be transparent with candidates in the hiring process to ensure incoming leaders are aware of what they would be coming into.

BUILDING A STRONG PARTNERSHIP WITH NEW EXECUTIVES WELL BEYOND THE HIRING PROCESS

Once a new executive is hired, the Board should be intentional about providing support and ceding power. We heard consistently that the Board's work is not done with hiring, and there should be intentional onboarding support for at least the first year. During the hiring process, Boards often hold more power, as they traditionally select the new leader. As a new executive is onboarded, it's important to clarify roles and how the Board can support the new leader with changes they are trying to create.

In particular, incoming executives noted that the Board should champion the new leader's plans around change management with staff and external stakeholders. New leaders said that the expectations from staff around change were often their biggest challenges — either staff having unreasonable expectations for change or staff resisting change. Boards can play a role to support CEOs with managing expectations around change, whether that is getting behind the new vision or holding patience.

Fatima Goss Graves from the NWLC spoke about how Boards should set expectations for staff and stakeholders to support new CEOs in advancing an agenda for change.

"I think a new leader should be able to come into an organization, make an assessment that is their assessment, informed by others, around the priority of the first things they are going to do in those 100 days. I think especially for Black women leaders, we should be really careful about other people believing they are better suited to set that agenda."

—Fatima Goss Graves

Kyle Caldwell from Council of Michigan Foundations noted there is a movement towards Boards setting up transition committees that support whatever the new leader needs. ***"These committees go beyond the search. They provide ongoing support for the transition, serve as a confidential support group, and can champion change that's needed. There are informal ways that Boards can be helpful in managing external expectations — explain the change, make clear this is where we are going, and point out that this is why we chose this leader."***



CONCLUSION

When we were first embarking on our leadership transition, and the research question it sparked back in 2018, in transparency, we felt somewhat alone in the process. Whether this perception was true or not, at the time, we felt like there were few models of leadership transitions done well, particularly those supporting incoming leaders of color to thrive in their new roles.

Five years later, it is gratifying to be a part of a much richer conversation in the sector. Collectively, organizations, intermediaries, foundations, and others are boldly exploring the ways in which BIPOC leaders are innovating during transitions, and lifting up the glimmers all actors in the sector can experiment with, practice, and evolve. We've learned, and experienced, that leadership transitions can be joyful. They can be resourced, intentional, yet also emergent.

Our metamorphosis showed us the benefits of slowing down, preparing for a journey ahead, tending to the internal, learning

through struggle, and emerging resilient and ready for flight. But while we have emerged as a butterfly, this is the moment our metaphor ends. Because we're not in a "final" state.

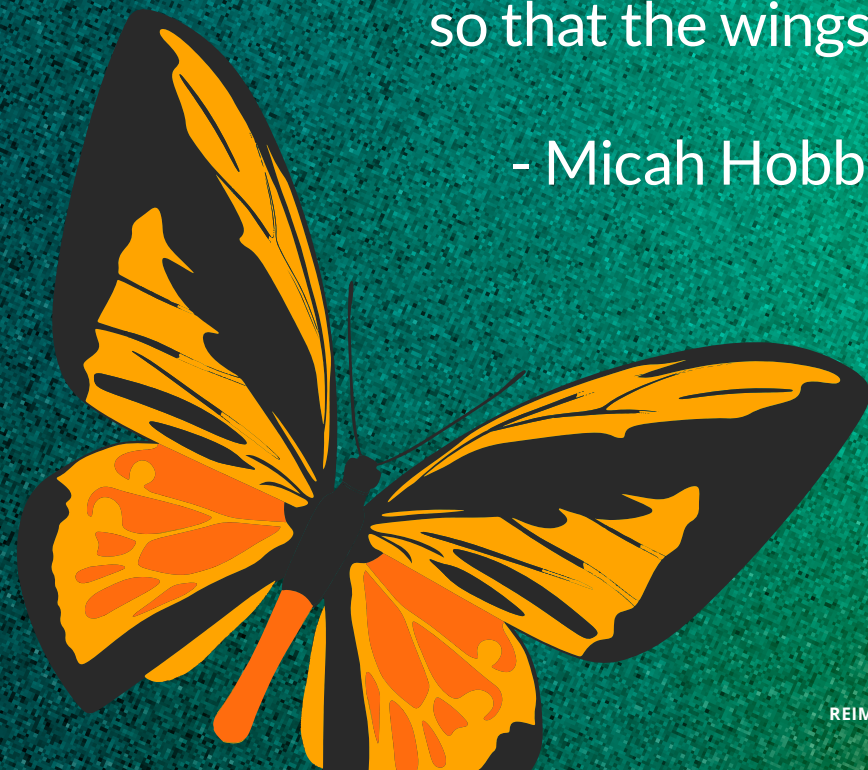
Transformation is not linear. It is a messy, beautiful cycle that leads to more openings, more creativity, more failures (first attempts in learning), and more change. We emerge still experimenting, learning, and experimenting again. We also emerge as part of a much greater, intersectional network in our field that's forwarding narratives of liberation, with creativity, joy, and a focus on the strengths, intuition, and brilliance that leaders of color already have to flourish. Onward!





“And then there is the butterfly, a most magical creature. The wings of the butterfly are already held inside the caterpillar, and as it breaks down its old self into goo, the wings emerge ready to go. That process is amazing and teaches me that as we change and transform, *we also have everything we need already right inside of us.* So my organizing and healing work becomes about building the cocoon that can hold the goo so that the wings can emerge.”

- Micah Hobbes Frazier



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