



RESEARCH REPORT

Catalyzing Leadership for Equity

Results and Recommendations from a Mixed Methods Analysis of Equity-Focused Leaders and Leadership Development Programs

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This report was informed by a landscape scan, focus groups, and interviews that took place between November 2021 and September 2022, and a virtual convening in October 2022 that brought together equity-focused leaders of color, funders, policymakers, and leadership program administrators to discuss sustainably supporting and investing in equity-focused leaders of color; we are grateful for our participants' valuable contributions.

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Executive Summary

Beginning in the summer of 2020, many public and private organizations and institutions made new internal and external commitments to racial equity. A core component of these commitments are pledges to create or expand diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and to develop comprehensive approaches to advance racial equity within these organizations.

Over the last two and a half years, these organizations and institutions have paid increased attention to the need to recruit, engage, learn from, and invest in equity-focused leaders of color. Many of these leaders have stepped into newly created leadership positions and are working to design, implement, and drive new equity initiatives and investments. While leaders of color have long championed racial equity in government, nonprofit, philanthropic, and corporate sectors, there have also long been leaders at the community level who have advanced racial equity through organizing, advocacy, movement building, and other local efforts.

However, it has been well-documented that the supports, training, and resources available to equity-focused leaders of color, especially community-focused leaders, have not adequately met the needs of these leaders and the communities they serve. In order to better understand this challenge and to develop recommendations for the development, implementation, and investment in equity-focused leadership development programs, the Urban Institute conducted a comprehensive study with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We focused on understanding leadership development programs for equity focused leaders of color and the layered social, emotional, financial, and other supports that these leaders need.

Methods

The study's research design included: 1) a hybrid literature review and environmental scan; 2) one-on-one interviews with leaders in various organizational settings and contexts; 3) focus groups with equity-focused leaders of color; and 4) a convening with a particular focus on grassroots and community-based leaders of color. The research team collected data between November 2021 and October 2022, then analyzed data and prepared this report in November and December 2022. We placed particular emphasis on tailoring recommendations to the needs of equity focused leaders of color, the

organizations and institutions they work in, and the funders who invest in leadership development programs.

Key Findings

Challenges of Equity Focused Leadership

Equity focused leaders of color face several challenges carrying out their equity work. Leaders are often tasked with the following:

- addressing complex issues, often without clear directives
- solving deeply entrenched racial and structural inequities
- transforming organizational cultures to be more diverse, equitable, and inclusive

Leaders are often embedded in organizations where organizational systems are incompatible with equity goals. They often face difficulty navigating the double burden of liberating communities from the same racialized harms that they themselves may have experienced.

Key Findings on Leadership Development Programs

Our landscape scan identified 28 equity-focused and driven leadership development programs. Among these 28 programs, there were several common or shared themes including the following:

- 25 out of 28 identified programs (approximately 89 percent) were targeted to leaders in professional settings (e.g., nonprofit, community, public and private sector).
- 86 percent were individual- versus cohort-based leadership development programs.
- 22 out of 28 programs integrated collective leadership frameworks and components into their training model.

Key Findings on Institutional Shifts

Our analysis identified three shifts organizations working to achieve their equity goals can make to unequivocally support equity-focused leaders:

1. Infuse equity throughout the organization.
2. Build capacity to support equity leaders and their transformative work.
3. Think strategically, implement, and assess.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Leadership Development Programs

1. Center equity in practice.
2. Leverage collective leadership models to support visionary grassroots and community leadership teams.
3. Look beyond elite roles, spaces, and traditional leadership pipelines.
4. Align training with the key needs of equity-focused leaders, recognizing their lived experiences and community ties.
5. Apply team-based and cohort approaches to equity-focused leadership development.
6. Extend support beyond program participation.

Recommendations for Funders and Funding Organizations

1. Recognize where power lies and how it is organized in communities.
2. Listen to the needs of the community rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model.
3. Fund differently and boldly.
4. To exponentially increase the number of leaders, increase funding to existing leadership development programs that already have a collective model in place.
5. Fund innovators of leadership development programs.
6. Sustain funding commitment to advancing equity.

Catalyzing Leadership for Equity

Introduction

For decades, funders, leadership program administrators, policymakers, and others have made investments in leadership programming designed to empower, network, and train leaders of color focused on advancing equity. Despite investments in leaders of color across the country, these leaders are significantly underrepresented in the nonprofit, corporate, philanthropic, and government sectors. Moreover, the supports, training, and resources available to many leaders—particularly those leading in community—have been insufficient to meet the challenges of advancing equity. Since the racial reckoning and broader social movement catalyzed after George Floyd’s murder in 2020, there has been a renewed focus on the need to engage, support, and provide training and resources to equity-focused leaders of color.¹ Scholars have found that the representation of leaders of color across sectors and industries is out of step with the overall demographic composition and racial and ethnic diversity of the nation.

According to a 2021 Urban Institute report on nonprofit trends, nonprofits and community-based organizations have more board members of color than other sectors; however, racialized and systematically and structurally excluded groups remain significantly underrepresented in nonprofit leadership (Faulk 2021). In an ongoing panel study representative of 1.8 million nonprofits across the United States, 79 percent of executive directors and 79 percent of board chairs identified as non-Hispanic white (Faulk 2021). Yet 2020 employment data show that non-Hispanic white people make up 68 percent of the total workforce (Independent Sector 2020). This suggests that non-Hispanic white people are overrepresented in leadership positions relative to their share of the nonprofit workforce.

Similarly, despite efforts in recent years to increase racial and ethnic diversity at the board and CEO levels of for-profit corporations in America, the demographics of the country’s highest level of corporate leaders is nowhere near representative of the overall population (Roberts & Mayo, 2019). According to a recent report, just 9 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are people of color (Larcker and Tayan 2020). Moreover, researchers found that “the representation of racially diverse executives in the C-suite [CEO’s and their direct reports] is slightly skewed toward positions with lower potential for advancement,” which suggests that many leaders of color are relegated to positions that make it challenging to ascend to the most senior leadership positions in an organization, such as chief executive officers or leaders with similar positions of influence.

Also, data continue to indicate the significant underrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, and other persons of color in US higher education (Colby and Fowler 2020). This lack of representation has significant implications for faculty recruitment and retention as well as the access, retention, completion, and academic success of students of color in US higher education (Cross and Carman 2021). This has implications for people of color pursuing professional careers and leadership roles in traditional institutions or sectors.

When organizations seek to advance racial equity, they often turn to people of color to play a driving role in creating and leading programs focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and/or racial justice. In many cases, these roles are core to increasing satisfaction and inclusion among employees of color; to supporting efforts to retain and increase the representation of leaders of color; and to strengthening the organization in terms of its culture, climate, and context. In addition to leading organizations through periods of social upheaval and racial unrest, equity-focused leaders of color are often charged with helping to transform an organization's internal culture and to develop and champion its racial equity goals. At the same time, the talents of these leaders are often not deployed more broadly: their perspectives, skills, and expertise are often not used to influence core business areas beyond advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion and they are often not offered pathways to advancement and other C-suite roles.

To address these needs, leadership development programs designed to center racial equity have emerged as learning communities in which leaders of color can grow and develop their networks, build additional leadership skills, and learn new strategies essential to their communities and to programmatic or executive leadership.

Leadership programs have long focused on building the skills of individuals. But recently, a growing interest in collective leadership—which embraces the idea that many individuals within a system may lead or that groups, structures, and processes may exercise leadership to help networks advance toward a shared goal²—has contributed to the emergence and growth of racial equity-focused leadership programs that promote collective leadership research and frameworks (Eva et al. 2021; Empson 2020; Van Knippenberg and van Ginkel 2022).

Amid new and renewed calls to address and dismantle structural racism, funders have committed to implementing and helping realize more equity-focused practices.³ These practices include supporting equitable grantmaking, funding racial justice-focused initiatives, and providing support and resources to equity-focused leaders of color, many of whom have been called on to take new and evolving leadership roles in communities, organizations, and institutions.

How this Report Is Structured

In this report, we review the challenges facing equity-focused leaders, with an emphasis on the challenges of leaders of color. We then present key findings from our landscape scan, literature review, and interviews and focus groups with equity-focused leaders from across the US. We organize the findings by the central components of our analysis of leadership development: challenges facing equity-focused leaders of color; the landscape of leadership development programs; and what it will take to shift toward collective models of leadership development. We provide examples of emerging and longstanding models of leadership development, institutional shifts, and transformations necessary to support leaders of color in racial equity-focused roles, along with considerations for policy and practice. We conclude this report with recommendations for both leadership development programs and funders to better support, serve, and empower equity-focused leaders of color. Intended primarily for administrators of leadership development programs and funders, our report also may speak to other stakeholders, including organizers, advocates, community leaders, organizational and institutional leaders, and organizations hiring equity-focused leaders.

The Challenges of Equity-Focused Leadership Today

Equity-focused leaders carry not only the responsibility of the “work,” but also the psychological, emotional, and physical toll of engaging in equity efforts that, in some cases, directly impact themselves, their families, and the communities that they come from or represent. In the past two years, this has intensified: since 2020, leaders have had to contend with increasingly complex demands and heightened pressure.⁴ They have been asked to step into newly created roles, existing senior leadership roles, or program leadership positions focused on racial equity or diversity, equity, and inclusion. In many instances, leaders who were hired into demanding, full-time roles have been asked to take on the additional responsibilities of managing racial equity initiatives and commitments while continuing to fulfill their role’s ongoing responsibilities without additional compensation or bonuses.

The equity leaders we interviewed discussed a similar set of challenges regardless of whether they worked with community-based organizations, nonprofits, or businesses in the public or private sector. Many leaders were called upon to produce and apply approaches, models, frameworks, value systems, and methods of interaction to help their organizations navigate the complex issues emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, persistent inequality, and ongoing social unrest. Noted challenges by many equity leaders included answering sometimes unclear, complex questions; solving deeply entrenched racial and structural inequities; and transforming organizational cultures to be more diverse, equitable, and

inclusive so that colleagues from all racial groups feel like they belong. Though these are long-term challenges that leaders have long navigated and endured, these challenges are exacerbated by ongoing uncertainty and an ever-changing sociopolitical context.

Equity leaders also indicated that organizational systems are often incompatible with equity goals. Leaders may enter organizations with an expectation that “things should be different” because they are in charge. However, the extent to which they can enact change is constrained by the institutional structures in which they operate. In many of these organizations, a wide range of structures and norms—such as hiring practices, budget priorities, and dress codes—communicate disregard for the communities that leaders seek to serve. Further, biases, norms, and policies that perpetuate inequity may be deeply ingrained within organizations. As a result, equity-focused leaders find themselves navigating institutions in their current form while attempting to do transformative work within them, often with insufficient support and resources.

For many leaders of color, personal or familial experiences with racial injustice often serve as a catalyst for their leadership goals and platforms. Equity-focused leaders of color are grounded by their character, values, perseverance, and belief in their power to effect change in the workplaces and communities that they serve. These factors have been particularly instrumental as leaders seek to amplify, uplift, and create space for those with lived experiences. Many equity-focused leaders of color have had to disrupt discriminatory practices while being forward-thinking and collaborative in their work with community members, funders, organizational and board leadership, and institutional changemakers. Several of the nonprofit and community-based leaders we interviewed discussed the double burden of liberating communities from the harms and trauma that the leaders themselves have suffered. Against this background, interviewees explained that new leaders must be able to assess whether a role is “worth it,” which includes evaluating whether their goals can be accomplished and impacts sustained. Though not new for many who have been deeply entrenched in equity work, these challenges continue, even after organizational commitments to racial equity in 2020.

A Landscape Scan of Equity-Focused Leadership Development Programs

Before and after the summer of 2020, leadership development programs have sought to work with and train equity-focused leaders. These programs have aligned approaches to leadership training and development with equity-focused principles and outcomes. For example, the article “What Everyone

Can Learn for Leaders of Color,” published in *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (SSIR), endorses the idea that leaders of color, by virtue of being influenced and shaped by the experiences they have had as people of color, have assets as leaders that can be critical to advancing social change (Isom, Daniels, and Savage 2022). In other words, the article states, “leadership and identity are deeply intertwined.” The authors explain that leaders are partially made or developed by their lived experiences, which for some include being a part of the communities that are impacted by the political, social, and economic conditions that these leaders are working to improve or redress (Isom, Daniels, and Savage 2022). Researchers found that leaders of all races could learn the following from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) leadership: motivation, relationships, networks, skillsets, and behaviors—including self-awareness, empathy, and collaborative leadership—along with innovative concepts like radical imagination and an asset-based lens.

In addition to recent research that has focused on the assets of equity-focused leaders (Empson 2020),⁵ philanthropic and corporate funders have shown interest in investing in equity-focused leaders of color through leadership development and organizational transformation. In 2021, Roger Nozaki, the Barr Foundation’s vice president for strategy and programs, published a conversation with Fund the People that describes the Foundation’s investments in leadership development:⁶

“Over the past year, we have seen a critical need for leaders who can improvise, innovate, and navigate transformational change in every mission-driven organization (and by ‘leaders,’ we mean staff across an organization, not just those at the ‘top’). Many organizations have redoubled their efforts to bring on BIPOC directors, board members, and staff, which is an important step. But if we seek fundamental change, our goal cannot be simply to try to advance BIPOC leaders in organizations and structures that remain unchanged.”

As a part of its efforts to advance racial equity, the Barr Foundation has started to explore three key areas:

1. challenging the basic concepts and structures of leadership and leadership development
2. investing in organizations, not just individuals
3. developing approaches that span a region or field

In other organizations, leadership program directors and coordinators have also designed and implemented programs that focus on leaders of color. Equity-focused leaders of color have long found support and training in their communities. Since 2020, new and existing racial equity-focused leadership development programs have convened, trained, and supported leaders of color working to transform organizations and communities around the country.

Through this landscape scan, we identified leadership development programs and approaches to leadership training and development, specifically the program structure, design, curricula, skills developed, and investments that support equity-focused leaders of color. Additionally, our hybrid literature review highlights what organizations can do to create the organizational conditions that ensure equity-focused leaders have the support they need to be successful.

Our landscape scan identified 28 equity-focused and driven leadership development programs. This includes standalone leadership programs and population-specific programs or working groups in broader leadership development programs.

Overall, we noted several descriptive characteristics and components of the identified leadership development programs (see table 1):

- Approximately 89 percent of identified programs (25 out of 28) were targeted to leaders in professional settings (e.g., nonprofit organizations, community organizations, businesses in the public and private sector).
- 86 percent were individual-based rather than cohort-based.
- 11 were local, 3 were regional, and 14 were national in geographic reach.
- 36 percent had a program length of at least 12 months.
- 22 out of 28 programs explicitly integrated collective leadership frameworks and components into their training model.

TABLE 1

Racial Equity-Focused Leadership Development Program Snapshot

Leadership program	Program type	Program modality	Program length	Curriculum features	Program geographic focus	Participant type	Collective leadership components
Advancing Racial Equity on Nonprofit Boards Fellowship	professional	remote	6 months	board governance, financial management, emotional intelligence training	local	individual	no
Center for Community Leadership	professional	remote*	10 months	organizing training, base building, political education, coalitions and campaigns, institutional growth	local	individual	yes
BIPOC Changemakers of Community Equity Program	professional	in-person	9 months	advocate for and advance state-level legislation, engage with policymakers, advance justice at the Capitol	local	individual	yes
Black Leadership Academy, Leadership Essentials	professional	remote	3 months	operations, strategy, networking, marketing, developing growth mindsets	national	individual	yes
BLU Educational Foundation: Black Public Officials	professional	in-person	6 months	public speaking, fundraising, personal branding and messaging, stakeholder and constituency engagement	regional	individual	no
Brave New Fellows Program	professional	in-person	1 year	digital storytelling, production, post-production, research, campaign strategies, outreach, social media	local	individual	yes
Community Change: Power 50	professional	remote*	9 months	self-growth, resiliency, healing justice practices, clarify personal strengths	national	individual	yes
Equity Scholars Program	academic	hybrid	2 years	proposal writing, budgeting, community-engaged research, communication, equity in quantitative analyses	national	individual	yes
Federal Fellowship for Racial Equity	professional	hybrid	12-24 months	public service knowledge, racial equity in the federal agency context	national	individual	no
Fellowship for Serving African-American Communities	professional	in-person	1 year	promoting strong moral character and ethics, mastering arts of persuasion and negotiation	local	individual	yes
Fostering Urban Equitable Leadership (FUEL)	professional	hybrid	1 year	organization management, tools to dismantle racism, professional development	national	cohort	yes

Leadership program	Program type	Program modality	Program length	Curriculum features	Program geographic focus	Participant type	Collective leadership components
FUSE Executive Fellows	professional	remote*	1-2 years	change management, human-centered design, government operations,	national	individual	yes
Kairos Fellowship	professional	hybrid	8 months	digital security, analytics, digital campaign strategy, online organizing, coding, politics, resiliency practices	national	individual	no
Leaders Bridges	professional	in-person	1 year	identity reflection	local	individual	yes
Leaders of Color Project	professional	hybrid	ongoing	skills to build and strengthen partnerships among community-based organizations, families, and youth	national	individual	yes
Nexus Fellowship	professional	residency	1 year	skills to build in-house capacity for race, equity, diversity, and inclusion related work	national	individual	yes
Obama Foundation: Community Leadership Corps	professional	in-person	6 months	community organizing, project management, equity-centered design thinking	local	individual	yes
Othering and Belonging Institute Summer Fellowship	academic	remote*	3 months	multidisciplinary research, strategic narrative work, racial justice	national	individual	yes
Popular Democracy	professional	hybrid	varies	training and development in community organizing	local	individual	yes
Professional Learning Community for Emerging Leaders of Color	professional	hybrid	4 months	equity-driven afterschool leadership, building pipelines for leaders of color	national	individual	yes
Racial Equity Leadership Network	professional	in-person	18 months	executive level school leaders, coaching	regional	individual	yes
Racial Justice Institute Leadership Program	professional	hybrid	6 months	debiasing, legal services advocacy	national	cohort	yes
Repower	professional	varies	varies	digital organizing, data management, fundraising, legislative understanding, resiliency building	national	individual	yes
Resident Leaders for Equity	professional	in-person	8 months	understanding racism, community organizing	local	individual	yes
Rise Academy for Leaders of Color	professional	remote	18 months	nonprofit management, mental health strategies	local	individual	yes

Leadership program	Program type	Program modality	Program length	Curriculum features	Program geographic focus	Participant type	Collective leadership components
Rockwood Leadership Fellowship	professional	hybrid	6–9 months	self-reflection, self-knowledge, collaboration	national	varies	yes
SMASH	academic	varies	varies	stem education, youth focus	local	individual	no
Voices for Racial Justice	professional	varies	≈ 2 hours	racial justice analysis, relationship building	regional	cohort	yes

Source: Author’s compilation based on publicly available program information on organizational websites.

Notes: The information in this table may not reflect the most up to date or comprehensive program information. Hyperlinks for each leadership program are embedded in each program name. * = programs that shifted their modality due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Our analysis of curriculum components revealed that several programs center equity, social justice, and systems-level approaches in their leadership development and training objectives. Here is a brief snapshot of some of the leadership development programs, organizing, and activism-centered training programs that center racial equity at the local, regional, sector-specific, and national levels:

- Rockwood Leadership Institute hosts **Women and Gender Non-Conforming Leaders of Color** for women⁷ working to advance racial justice (Leaders for Action, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d), as well as the **Leaders of Color**⁸ program for leaders committed to advancing racial justice in organizing, advocacy, philanthropy, or other work-related areas.
- **Crossroads Anti-Racism Training and Organizing**⁹ partners with organizations and institutions to dismantle systemic racism by translating community organizing concepts to work within traditional institutions.
- The **Othering and Belonging Institute Summer Fellowship**¹⁰ is a program designed to build the capacity of researchers and community leaders committed to social and racial justice.
- In Atlanta, the Partnership for Southern Equity and the Annie E. Casey Foundation established the **Resident Leaders for Equity**¹¹ program, which targets residents and leaders in specific Atlanta neighborhoods to engage in collective or collaborative leadership to address key issues, including gentrification, the effects of racism on Atlanta neighborhoods, and building relationships with local leadership.
- The **BIPOC Changemakers of Community Equity Program**,¹² which is sponsored by the Wilder Foundation, based in St. Paul, and serves Minnesota residents, has supported more than 100 community leaders and changemakers to advance state-level legislation and build power and solidarity to advance justice in the state.
- **Repower**¹³ provides support to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) leaders with a focus on movement building and investing in leaders of color at the grassroots level. Similarly, the Center for Popular Democracy (CPD) leads a **Members Leadership Academy (MLA)**,¹⁴ which includes training on power, racial capitalism, and mass incarceration, and integrates organizing skills, including outreach, recruitment, mobilization, and action planning.

Through our landscape scan and hybrid literature review, we identified several ways participation in equity-focused leadership programs can shape leaders and leadership contributions (figure 1):

1. **Increase awareness of barriers to progress.** Programs helped increase participants' awareness of how their organizations' cultures need to change or evolve to advance equity.
2. **Provide opportunities to deepen relationships to strengthen equity work.** Relationships developed through equity-focused leadership programs equipped leaders with tools and resources to deepen their work in communities. For example, relationships and networks were important for gaining access to key public officials and stakeholders and securing funding to sustain the work.
3. **Facilitate cross-cutting collaboration.** When they could build upon trusted relationships and networks developed while participating in leadership development programs, leaders became better equipped to engage in the cross-issue collaboration needed to advance equity.
4. **Gain awareness of cultural and historical variation** in leadership development, styles, and experiences and helped leaders identify the unique contributions they bring to the field given their background and context.
5. **Acknowledge that healing is central to leadership development** (i.e., acknowledge burnout and imposter syndrome). Programs provided social support and extended networks for leaders. Additionally, program spaces were viewed as restorative, identifying issues of self-care and healing as central to equity work.

FIGURE 1

What Equity-Focused Leaders Gain from Leadership Program Participation



Source: Framework developed by the authors.

Core Equity-Focused Leadership Program Components: What Works and for Whom?

In our review of racial-equity focused leadership development programs, we found that there are many components that enhance and support the experiences of equity-focused leaders of color. In this section, we outline the program elements that are essential to supporting equity-focused leaders of color. We also identify program elements that have missed the mark (box 1).

COHORT MODELS

Leadership development experts suggest that cohort-based training programs are particularly useful in facilitating creative institutional cultures, which also demonstrate high accountability. By deploying learning methods that are mostly discussion-based (rather than informational or one-directional lectures), cohort-based learning creates the conditions for participants to articulate their goals,

challenges, and skills that they hope to develop, and to meaningfully contribute to the sessions they participate in.

COLLABORATIVE, HOLISTIC APPROACHES

In our scan, we found that participants valued the skills-based training that focused on writing, managing nonprofit budgets, board management, and self-leadership. At the same time, programs supporting equity-focused leaders of color have increasingly included content that focuses on self-reflection, stress-management, and healing, in order to support leaders' well-being and mental health.

SUSTAINABILITY

It is important to cover leaders' costs to participate in programs and to provide resources for them to remain connected with the program following their completion. This helps to build deeper connections and provide more long-term support to leaders addressing longstanding, deeply entrenched racial equity challenges. When leaders participate in leadership development programs, they tend to move on from their organizations because of their growth. So, there is a need to ensure that organizational resources also grow with leaders.

BOX 1

How Have Leadership Programs Missed the Mark in Supporting Equity-Focused Leaders of Color?

- **Inequities in recruitment.** The recruitment processes of leadership development programs typically favor leaders that have had elite educational and professional experiences as well as connections to established networks. Such recruitment processes result in the exclusion of leaders who lack the traditional markers of privilege, such as a degree in business or certificate in leadership and management.
- **Inadequate attention to leaders' differentiated needs.** Too few programs recognize that participating leaders may need different levels of support during the program. This can temper the long-term benefits of participation for some leaders.
- **Limited follow-up with leaders over time.** Failure to provide follow-up after program completion is a missed opportunity to provide ongoing connection and support for equity-focused leaders of color.
- **Failure to account for culturally supportive approaches to leadership development.** Fellowships often fall short of addressing how leadership grounded in the culture and practices of leaders of color—more collective, less individualistic—can be valued, raised, and centered in traditional white leadership structures

- **Replication of traditional models of leadership development in working with leaders of color.** Some models, particularly traditional models, continue to perceive leaders in silos and therefore do not alleviate leaders' burnout. Models must emphasize forms of collective leadership that center task delegation and community-style movement building, both for institutions and during community partnerships.
- **Lack of support for targeted programs that specifically provide support to leaders of color.** Ambivalence to change could even be a reason why leadership development programs have not met the needs of equity-focused leaders of color.

Three Institutional Shifts to Bolster Equity-Focused Leadership

Amidst renewed commitments for transformative action to dismantle systems of oppression and advance equity, public- and private-sector institutions and organizations have sought to increasingly recruit and hire equity-focused leaders in senior positions. Many of these newly recruited leaders were tasked with advancing organizational equity goals. Whether intentional or unintentional, organizational leadership often can view these positions as a “quick-fix” to equity and DEI challenges, without making substantial shifts or investments in the organization’s approach to equity (Kraus, Torrez, and Hollie 2022).

Our interview and focus group data suggest that leaders of color are often brought in to change organizational cultures that may be unprepared in some significant way, including new or longstanding budget constraints, ongoing staff unrest due to hostile or racist working conditions, staff shortages, or unfair wages or compensation. This unpreparedness often exacerbates the challenges faced by equity-focused leaders of color, as these leaders may be isolated and under-resourced yet expected to bring about monumental change. Recent data indicate that, although there has been a push within the last three years to recruit and hire equity-focused leaders, there has since been significant turnover in these positions, both in the private and public sector, suggesting that there is still much to be done to bolster equity-focused leadership.^{15 16}

In the pursuit of supporting leaders as they seek to advance equity in organizational contexts and transform their communities, the role of organizations and funders remains a central focus. In the article “Centering Equity in Collective Impact,” published in SSIR in 2022, the authors outline five

strategies for centering equity that have emerged from their study of collective-impact efforts across issue areas and geographic regions (Kania et al 2022):

1. Ground the work in data and context, and target solutions.
2. Focus on systems change, in addition to programs and services.
3. Shift power within the collaborative.
4. Listen to and act with community.
5. Build equity leadership and accountability.

Building upon this work, our multi-method analysis identified three shifts organizations working to achieve their equity goals can make to unequivocally support equity-focused leaders.

Infuse Equity throughout the Organization

The transformative change that organizations seek requires intention from the organization receiving the change and the leader working to deliver the change. For equity-focused leaders to succeed, equity needs to be part of the organizational mission in a way that touches upon all decisions and processes that the organization engages with. Efforts to infuse equity throughout the organization must begin prior to the hiring of an equity-focused leader. This is not to say that an organization should delay hiring or staffing investments, but that organizations should make comprehensive efforts to transform or solve their equity challenges concurrently with hiring.

Too often, institutions place the burden of change on an individual or designated department to develop and enact initiatives. Ultimately, this strategy undermines both the initiatives' effectiveness and the leader. Organizations have a responsibility to position their leaders not as the sole owners or drivers of racial equity or institutional change, but, as leading and facilitating work that is shared among all, at all levels of the organization. Infusing equity across the organization should be treated as a major change in the management process. Further, the organization should ensure that the infrastructure and resourcing are in place to support leaders and their goals to advance equity. Equity-focused leaders should be positioned alongside other leaders of power within the organization and given comparable authority.

Build Capacity to Support Equity Leaders and their Transformative Work

As organizations seek to advance equity goals, there should be intentional efforts to build capacity in ways that will support equity leaders and their transformative work. According to several interviewees, leaders are often unable to immerse themselves in their equity mandates as that work often competes with the work of “everyday production.” In other words, leaders’ attention can be divided between the equity-focused work they were hired to do and making contributions to other aspects of their organization’s business model. Building capacity includes long-term resource commitment and allocation, supporting organizational policies, and support staff. If organizations want to infuse equity throughout the organization, then long-term resource allocation and commitment must be centered as part of the organizational mission. As noted by many of the leaders we interviewed, capacity-building strategies must align and be treated as comparable to other organizational strategic priorities.

Think Strategically, Implement, and Assess

Advancing equity entails dynamic, continuous, and iterative change processes. It is important that institutions recognize this and think deeply and strategically about their equity goals, engaging in critical reflection about internal and external structures that may impact their organizational mission as well as staff. While incremental goals and measurements for success are imperative to driving action and resource allocation, they should not be prioritized over long-term, more transformative equity work. Long-term goal setting is a key step in addressing the underinvestment in equity work beyond the moment and ensuring compatibility with the overall strategic planning process. Also, it is important for organizations to track progress toward their organizational equity goals, including alignment with the organizational mission and policies.

These goals and commitments can feel broad and more challenging to track, particularly if they sit outside other strategic goals. This can make it difficult to hold leaders and the organization accountable. Equity and DEI commitments can vary across objectives, and it is imperative for organizations to conceptualize tracking broadly, including workforce recruitment, staff retention, and implementation of multilevel initiatives. As part of this process, organizations should explicitly define success across a multitude of organizational functions—the absence of a clear definition of what equity means can constrain action. Our data highlighted three key steps for organizational strategic planning:

- **Invest in an equity audit** to gain an understanding of what existing employees recognize as equity issues in the organization and what they see as priorities for change. Organizations need to be honest about the extent to which racism, sexism, and other injustices persist.
- **Reevaluate the structures** that contribute to and sustain inequitable organizational policies. Organizations should use direct language and communication to address the issues.
- **Set clear goals.** Ensure new equity leaders understand what is required for change in their industry on an organizational level, including what the organization would have to do to accomplish any established metrics. Leaders should also discuss these goals openly with the organization's employees and organizational stakeholders before setting expectations and embarking on projects.

Answering the Challenge: Recommendations for Leadership Development Programs

Center Equity—in Practice

The challenge for many leadership development programs is understanding what “centering equity” may look like within the context of their program. For example, Corbie-Smith and colleagues (2022) outline equity, diversity, and inclusion competencies with personal, interpersonal, organizational, and community and systems core competencies for equity-focused leadership development. Equity is both a process and an outcome. Our discussions with equity leaders highlighted the sentiment that equity must not be viewed as “add-on” and that there must be thoughtful reflection about what equity is “in practice.” Further, leaders noted the need to move beyond language commitments, such as committing to center marginalized identities and committing to the organizational structures, cultures, and systems needed to transform. To effectively center equity, the Equity Leaders Action Network¹⁷ emphasizes five foundational concepts of racial equity leadership development: 1) understanding structural racism and its impacts on communities; 2) advancing racial equity as a process, through systems, programs, and services; 3) thinking and acting systemically; 4) advancing racial equity through intentional action; and 5) responsive networking, collaborating, and partnering robustly. A comprehensive systems approach ensures that leaders are equipped with the tools, competencies, and strategies for effective equity-centered leadership.

Leverage Collective Leadership Models to Support Visionary Grassroots and Community Leadership Teams

The practice of collective leadership cannot ignore that leaders are part of and situated in the communities and organizations that they serve (Contractor et al 2012; Homan et al 2020; Van Knippenberg and Winkel 2022). While there is no singular definition of collective leadership, one definition is a group of people working together toward a shared goal and the processes by which people come together to pursue change (O'Neill and Brinkeroff 2017). Thus, collective leadership is *both* an orientation and a process and involves shared decisionmaking and responsibility. Collective leadership requires that leadership or authority not be held by a single person or organization; rather, leadership is a connected network that encompasses participants within a group, community, or organization. Thus, leaders should be identified by asking communities who they want as their leaders. Leadership development programs should engage people who are already exhibiting leadership skills in their community and who have deep knowledge and expertise of the people, systems, policies, and culture in their communities. The people accessing the resources know how to use them best.

“All good community leaders are community members; you should not try to lead a community you are not a member of.”—focus group participant

Look Beyond Elite Roles, Spaces, and Traditional Leadership Pipelines

Based on our research, we found that equity-focused leaders do not have equal access to leadership development training and programs. Participation in leadership programs may pose a financial burden for many. Strategies to systematically increase access to training for all leaders across will further increase the pipeline of transformative and dynamic leaders of color who are better positioned to advance change in their communities and organizations. Our analysis revealed several considerations for leadership development programs:

- **Centering accessibility while acknowledging leaders' multiple identities and intersections (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, immigration status) is critical to supporting leaders.** This includes access to financial, physical, and emotional support. Leadership spaces are opened by providing supports, such as flexible funding for individual project-based work, consistent meeting spaces that provide food and welcome children, transportation support, and mental health resources. Attention to these issues and

concerns can enable equity-focused leaders to develop initiatives with agency. Also, our interviews reveal that the financial burden of participation in leadership development can be a deterrent for many equity-focused leaders, especially for those coming from community-based organizations, nonprofit organizations, and public sectors. If leadership development programs truly want to increase accessibility, then equitable compensation of leaders should be addressed.

“Privileged institutions find leaders based on who is visible and not based on any accountability to who they are supposed to be leading.”—interview participant

- **Expanding access to leadership development programs might involve providing tiered or phased training and support to the full range of equity-focused leaders.**
 - » Community organizers, for example, might benefit from one-on-one coaching from social movement practitioners and leaders or paid internships with on-the-ground training opportunities in the community.
 - » Nonprofit leaders at the community level might benefit from cohort-based training that focuses on a specific geographic area or population focus (e.g., formerly incarcerated, youth, justice-involved people).
 - » Members of impacted communities (e.g. returning citizens) might require wrap-around services that support their transition back into the community alongside mentorship, technology, and other types of formal leadership skill-building and support.

Deliver Training in Ways that Meet the Key Needs of Equity-Focused Leaders, Recognizing Their Lived Experiences and Community Ties

Leadership development programs should take a holistic approach to investing in leaders, including personal care and well-being. Beyond general support for leaders’ mental, physical, and spiritual well-being, there is also a need for investment in and attention to leaders’ overall well-being and the realities in which they live and lead.¹⁸ For example, several Black women leaders reported participating in programs designed for leaders of color and naturally gravitated toward building a smaller cohort of support and shared experience within their group with other Black women. Often, there is much to be

covered in leadership development and training, but the content can sometimes overpower the conversations that are needed to share these ideas with others. Leadership development programs can be intentional in providing opportunities for leaders to share experiences and reflect, individually and collectively.

“Immerse yourself, stand back, and create space for those with a lived experience to inform.”—interview participant

One strategy for being responsive to the varied and intersectional experiences of equity leaders is codesigning programs with leaders and communities. Our interviews revealed several ways that leadership development programs can both center equity and meet the dynamic needs of leaders:

- Communities of practice, listening sessions, and surveys can help solicit feedback on how well programs have served needs and how they can be designed differently going forward.
- Partnering alongside the leaders and communities that you’re trying to reach, support, and represent can help to integrate lived experiences into program content.
- Rethinking what engagement can mean and branching out from typical partners, leading with outcomes can increase accessibility and inclusivity.

Use Team-Based and Cohort Approaches

Focus group participants said that cohort-based leadership spaces were one of the best and most impactful parts of leadership development programs. One strategy articulated by equity leaders entailed designating or reallocating resources, which provides the opportunity to build the capacity of whole teams. A team-based approach to organizational capacity-building is particularly important for ensuring that the work continues after leaders leave. Our analysis revealed a generative process for many leaders, including that they eventually will pass the baton to others in the community. Reflecting on culturally centered and community-focused approaches, leaders endorsed that leadership is a shared, collective process that is distributed in neighborhoods, across communities, at the local level, and in organizations and institutions. Participants reflected that this mindset requires them to center

others in the community and to teach and support them in their leadership development, in addition to participants' own equity-focused leadership work.

Continue to Offer Support to Participants in Leadership Development Programs

Program administrators need to maintain engagement and follow up with the leaders they support. Continuing to interact with previous participants and alumni while also interacting with current participants could establish a community of practice and provide a network to sustain community-building. There is a need to make sure the community has those benchmark connection points. Our interviews and focus groups indicated several ways that leadership development programs can continue to foster community-building among participants, alumni, and leadership development program staff:

- Provide opportunities for participants to further refine their skillsets to meet leadership goals and organizational needs beyond the time horizon of the leadership development program.
- Provide ongoing investments or interventions, including leadership development and skill building, to participants beyond the timeframe of the leadership development program.
- Offer process-oriented training and support that acknowledges that leadership is a journey that can take years to refine, develop, and grow (i.e., leadership development cannot happen in isolation or on a fixed timeline).
- Foster connection between participants and others sharing similar leadership experiences, including deep peer connections and a sense of community. This may mean allowing space for sustainable networks, such as setting up an alumni stream or program.

Answering the Challenge: Recommendations for Funders and Funding Organizations Investing in Equity-Focused Leaders of Color

“Power comes in two forms—organized people and organized money.”—interview participant

Be Aware of Where Power Lies and How it is Organized in Communities

Funding strategies can include investing in local leadership and organizing, either in the form of general operating support or leadership development programs for community-based and grass-roots leaders who are working to advance equity in their communities, neighborhoods, and respective organizations.¹⁹ As part of this process—and as part of a broader commitment to leverage community strengths—funders can think about innovative mechanisms that provide leaders with the ability to stay grounded in their community while developing skillsets that can bring resources to their community work, such as grant-writing skills.

Listen to the Needs of the Community Rather than Applying a One-Size-Fits-All Model.

For example, our data indicate the need for grants that support capacity building and general operating support. These grants offer leaders flexibility, the confidence to engage in longer-term goals, and the ability to hire individuals to provide capacity support. Also, grantmakers should prioritize long-term investments in community-led or service organizations, particularly those that promote resilience and healing.

Fund Differently and Boldly

To complement the changes institutions are making in their hiring, resourcing, strategic planning, and overall organizational approach to equity, funders must also adjust how they fund and support organizations. Long-term, strategic goal setting is predicated on long-term and stable funding as well as patience from funders with change management processes. Without the fear of funding cliffs, leaders and their institutions can embark on more radical transformative shifts in their approaches and practices and more thoroughly advance equity. Two approaches funders could consider include:

- Increase general operating support to empower grantees' decisionmaking. Supporting equity-focused leaders means supporting and strengthening the initiatives, groups, and organizations they lead. When funders provide multi-year, unrestricted, general operating support, leaders who are already doing work on the ground can determine where and how to invest, as they see fit.
- Commit to providing equity-focused leaders the same set of resources that they themselves rely on for their organizations to thrive (e.g., benefits, good salaries, professional development

resources). These investments can strengthen organizations and provide multiple layers of support to organizational leadership. Our data revealed that funding multiple leadership teams and cohorts within the same organization might be particularly helpful for strengthening organizations and providing multiple layers of support to advance equity-related goals and objectives.

Increase Funding to Leadership Development Programs that Have a Collective Model in Place

Our landscape scan revealed a number of culturally integrated, collective, and responsive models for leadership development. Equity-focused leaders of color have reported long-lasting benefits of engaging with these leadership development programs, including finding a sense of community, broadening their social and professional networks, and developing key leadership skills. Our analysis, however, revealed that many of these leadership programs are smaller, place-based, and less significantly resourced than other leadership development programs. Funders can help collective programs expand their reach and increase the number of leaders by replicating these models in more cities and communities as well as providing more frequent cohort offerings for equity-focused leaders. Funders also can provide direct resources to existing programs, allowing them to increase the number of participants and program offerings.

Fund Leadership Development Program Innovators

Our interviews with equity leaders and funders indicated the need to fund leadership development program innovators. Funders should think about funding at all levels, creating learning and support spaces for people who are funding, running, or evaluating leadership development programs. Additionally, grant recipients should be given room to fail, experiment, test, innovate, and learn from things that don't work. This has the potential to ensure that programs are responsive to leaders as well as industry needs and changes.

Sustain Your Commitment

Grant-makers and funders must maintain the energy and focus on racial justice, with an eye toward new and emerging issues for leaders and organizations. For example, during the pandemic, there was a shift toward providing flexible funding for general operating support and funds that could be put toward restorative practices such as staff retreat space, mental health support, and mindfulness. Three years

into the pandemic, many leaders noted increased workloads, which continue to pressure leaders to respond to greater community needs, giving them little time and space to think about what is needed to support resilience. Funders should also be mindful of a shift away from racial equity after the racial reckoning of 2020. The support for racial-equity focused leaders and programming must be sustained in order to maintain and accelerate progress on equity actions and initiatives.

Appendix A. Study Methodology

Between November 2021 and October 2022, the research team conducted a comprehensive multi-method analysis, including a hybrid literature review and environmental scan; one-on-one interviews with leaders in various organizational settings and contexts; and focus groups with grassroots, equity-focused leaders of color.

- We reviewed publicly available research on leadership development and equity-focused leadership development programs to better understand the structure, curricula, funding, implementation, and follow-up with program participants that best supported equity-focused leaders of color.
- We conducted 13 in-depth interviews with leadership scholars, program participants, equity-focused leaders, funders, and leadership program administrators.
- We held six focus groups comprised of equity-focused leaders of diverse races and genders, many of whom are a part of impacted communities, including formerly incarcerated people, people who have experienced addiction, and people who have experienced domestic violence.
- We held a convening with over 60 equity-focused leaders from across the country to learn more about their experiences in leadership development programs, including what can be done to align, strengthen, and cultivate programs that support leaders of color in advancing racial equity.
- As a part of our research design, data collection, and data analysis efforts, we partnered with community members (OMB 2021), including two community partners who have deep personal experience with and knowledge of challenges facing equity-focused leaders. These partners provided feedback, input, and review of our protocols and analyses and participated in interviews and focus groups.
- Additionally, our research team has diverse demographic representation and lived experiences, including multidisciplinary, community-engaged researchers and those with experiential knowledge of leadership and leadership development in various settings and contexts (i.e., organizational, community organizations, and universities).

Notes

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