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Generational Differences in Racial Equity Work

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In law school, I was trained to spot issues within fact patterns. In simplest terms, one's grasp of the relevant law was ascertained by the degree to which one could read a set of facts and determine the applicable case law. Being able to exactingly cite the specific holding in a specific case, including the year, by the specific judge along with their rationale won one the highest grade.

In my equity consulting work, I rely heavily on that training. In fact, if you were to ask me what my consultant superpower is, I would say pattern recognition. Through surveys, listening sessions, and workshops, I seek and sift for the common stories that are being held and told—explicitly and implicitly—within an organization. Once I feel (and to be perfectly candid, it is a feeling) that the story—"only people who show up in this way can succeed here" or "this way of doing things is the problem"—has enough evidence to support its legitimacy, I share it back with the organization. At that point, the work truly begins.

Usually, at least some people in the organization already knew the story. When I ask for their reactions to the often-unpleasant DEIB* data (or JEDI**, or EDI***, etc.) I am presenting ("BIPOC staff agree or strongly agree at three times the rate of their white counterparts that they can't bring their whole self to work" for example), we invariably hear things like, "I'm not surprised." Frequently, those voices are not senior leaders; therefore, their rendering had either been disputed or simply ignored for one reason or another prior to last summer. Maybe they didn't have the requisite "line of sight" or they lacked the "tenure" to truly know and understand what's going on. Another common canard: the critical voices lacked the "objectivity" to speak with authority—meaning because they have a stake or, possibly, a perceived axe to grind with management, they can't be trusted to be truthful. As an outsider, an expert, my analysis may be an exact, albeit dressed up, duplicate of one that's been offered for years by others, but because I am presumed (and indeed strive) to be disinterested, it is given validation.

For the past year, I have had a unique window into dozens of social justice nonprofits spread across this country (and beyond) that are all in the midst of a common social and economic inflection point. They have all been thrust into the virtual work world by COVID and rocked by a racial justice reckoning. And while I am not a trained researcher *per se*, I

do have enough of a background as an investigative journalist to recognize the unusual opportunity for cross-organizational data collection and interpretation that this moment has presented. And what I have witnessed in hundreds of Zooms is a pattern of generational conflict manifesting in myriad ways:

- **Distrust** that those in formal authority roles are really committed to change

- **Disbelief** that the voices critical of "the way we do things around here" truly represent the people

- **Despair**, especially among senior leaders of color who have found themselves at odds with younger versions of themselves, showing up as feedback fatigue

Arguably, much of the discontent preceded summer 2020. Perhaps the racial justice trainings and conversations simply licensed people to put their true feelings out in the open. Be that as it may, the crux boils down to this: our organization put out anti-racist statements and held space for emotional conversation, but how is that translating to our work—both what we do and how we do it? *Are we actually interrupting and dismantling white supremacy, or are we just giving lip service while feeding the systems of oppression that have harmed generations of people?*

For those asking the question, the stakes couldn't be higher. The taint of complicity weighs heavy. They chose their work to enact change, not feed into a structural paradigm that prizes norms and behaviors associated with whiteness as the sole standard of excellence.

By and large, the critics are younger, often of color, though also white allies. They are newer to the workforce and in direct service roles that power the organization's mission. Often, they identify with the very people the organization is set up to serve. In short, they are the people closest to the work, yet they find themselves furthest from the decision-making tables that define the strategy, design the delivery model, and determine the core objectives. In my observations and interactions, the most outspoken of these are very familiar with the characteristics of white supremacy culture and anti-oppression pedagogy. And what they are feeling, seeing, and saying, is that, in their view, white supremacy abounds.

- The organization "whitens" as you get closer to the top of the organizational chart. Rather than hire from within when coveted positions open up, the organization looks externally for talent.

- Wealthy white men (some of whom might be Republicans or even Trump supporters) occupy a disproportionate share of the board seats.

- Staff performance is judged and promotions based on metrics that don't tell the whole story of their work. Relatedly, perfectionism is celebrated while progress is ignored.

- Overwork is glorified.

- Professionalism is code for white.

- The default development strategy feels exploitative of communities of color and/or obscures the role that systemic racism plays in shaping the problems nonprofits are set up to address .

For those being questioned—the elders, we'll call them—the onslaught of feedback feels unrelenting and unwieldy. No matter what they say or do, someone on their team is guaranteed to find fault and somehow tie it to their being out of touch. They hold, I have sensed, a tinge of resentment, likely born out of frustration with not being able to tame the cacophony of criticism. Some of these organizations, were it not for the white benefactors that their staff hold in contempt, might have buckled under the weight of the global pandemic. The leaders know this. They look at the pipeline and balance sheet every day. In April and May 2020, they were staring down the barrel of mass layoffs. That they not only survived but are thriving a year later is a feat worthy of celebration, and indeed, while their staff seem to have nothing but shade to throw, boards are heaping CEOs and EDs with praise.

These elders have their own prisms through which they see and experience the world. And while they, too, acknowledge that systemic racism is real, they came up in a world in which things like white supremacy and systemic oppression were not openly discussed. Code switching and self-censoring were the norm. In order to ascend to leadership within a neoliberal nonprofit industrial complex, one figured out how to survive. Surviving meant adopting and perfecting the practices of the dominant group that was funding the work, which, increasingly, became the financial sector or its charitable byproducts. This wasn't selling out so much as making it work. Which is to say, those who stuck around and rose in the ranks accepted that the nonprofit sector wasn't a space for radical systems change

work. These elders saw the warts but believed that the ends justified the means, that changing lives, even if it took "tainted" money, was on one hand better than the alternative and, on the other, the very essence of the progressive pragmatism that Obama would ultimately embody.

There's much more to the story and this isn't the forum for a history lesson, nor am I the best person to tell the story in full. What I will say is that the late nineties was already an era in which dissent was unpopular. Back then, being a young activist or someone perceived as such wasn't a badge of distinction. The kids who challenged the World Bank and the IMF in Seattle and DC weren't heroized. They were demonized as anarchists and dismissed as losers and whiners. Globalization and the go-go years of the dot.com era promised a 21st-century gold rush. My own twenty-something consciousness was suffused with status hungry hip-hop celebrating the good life. Then, on the heels of a recession that is barely remembered because of the magnitude of the system shocks we've witnessed since, came 9/11 followed by the wars abroad. There was little appetite for, or attention given, to a broad, sustained critique of American race relations, let alone capitalism's role in perpetuating our racial caste system. Perhaps most importantly, the platforms that would allow for borderless community building and mobilization were still in their infancy, marginal players at best peddling what were considered extreme minority viewpoints. If you lived through this period, none of what I'm saying is new for you.

Elders I work closely with rarely share this story with their younger staff. For whatever reason, they resist talking about what they endured and how they struggled to keep the promises of social justice afloat when resistance movements were at their nadir. I have a theory as to why. They forgot. Which isn't to say that they have no memory of their youth. What they have forgotten was the context that surrounded their young adulthood. In plain English: *the people leading nonprofits today were molded and shaped, promoted and rewarded within a social and political context that was fixated on procuring accountability through metrics*. They came of age against a backdrop in which the Right was chipping away at the sprawling public sector that had been built by FDR's New Deal and LBJ's Great Society. Metrics promised to reel in the bloated, wasteful public sector, which, as we know, meant nonprofits as well.

The organizations that could produce the best and most objective-appearing impact numbers won. Winning meant funding. That funding enabled survival and spurred organizational growth. That growth became a seal of success, confirmation of competence. That success generated more funding, which in turn reinforced the organizational focus, and that of nonprofit management programs, on finding and feeding more "hard" data to those financing the organization. Hungry to prove their mettle and legitimize their work, to scale the program, organizations funded randomized control trials that allegedly proved not only that their program model made a difference in the lives of their participants, but how, exactly, they did so—causation! They fed those peppy findings into a performance management dashboard (Salesforce, I'm looking at you) that purported to capture and track the key impact indicators but more often than not counted that which could be counted while ignoring everything that couldn't (like how much time it really takes to do the job, for example). The people who were good—either by disposition or training—at the stuff that the dashboard captured were paid more, promoted, and are now the ones in charge.

This is an admittedly crude characterization, but it's not that far afield, and anyone who's spent any amount of time in the nonprofit sector knows it. The struggle that I see with many of the leaders I come in contact with is that they've done it the way they've done it for so long that they a) don't remember that this push for accountability was a Trojan horse to privatize the globe and discredit public institutions, and b) legitimately can't wrap their heads around doing things differently (innovating) and still achieving high-quality results. In other words, leaders have been conditioned into believing, against their own better judgment and common sense, that the most important aspects of mission-driven work must be quantifiable and that their highest purpose is to ensure the organization hits those numbers. When challenged, they say things like, "the model works." They talk about the importance of model fidelity, dosage, etc. They seek to turn what was inevitably an art—working with people always is—into a science.

And now these leaders find themselves facing a young, connected, and outspoken generation that is questioning the very foundations upon which their careers have been built. The up and comers believe (sometimes correctly) they have innovative ideas that should be implemented now. They are indifferent toward staid organizational hierarchies and hold in contempt traditional status markers, especially those that reinforce oppression.

So, what is to be done? A lot. On both sides of the divide. But here are some top-line observations and insights from the field.

First, the elders:

Tell the story better. Not the story of the organization's founding myth. Tell the story of the sector. *Help younger people in the sector understand your journey within the context of our larger societal journey.* We didn't just arrive at a point where too many nonprofits mirror or aspire to mirror the corporate sector. This was imposed on the sector by a combination of social and political forces that sought to mold the sector into a colony of the free market.

Address your performance metrics. The very notion of quantitative measurement as the gold standard of managing and motivating employees is rooted in capitalist industrialism, the focus of which was mass production by any means, including the exploitation of labor. *If you call yourself an anti-racist organization, figure out what's worth measuring and let the other stuff go.*

Ease up on the feedback gathering. Your people have probably spent the past year telling you what's not working and offering ideas for how to work differently. *You shouldn't need another round of feedback to shift, if that is truly the intention.*

Clarify decision rights. Let people know which decisions are on the table and which are not and why. A solution: *let people know when and how they will be included in decisions as well as who has ultimate decision rights.* Also, consider letting people know if they are being included for input gathering purposes only, and let them decide if they want to play that role.

The pain people feel is real. In your heart you may feel that the things young people are griping about are nothing special or simply overblown. You may think, "I had to deal with worse, so what makes you so different? This is just how the world works. Get used to it." As tempting as this feeling is, *maybe what you experienced wasn't okay and just because you endured (low pay for long hours; slights to your dignity) doesn't mean others must accept those conditions as well or are somehow weak because they are expressing their discontent.*

Be more upfront with potential employees. A young employee at a national nonprofit said in an interview that he felt "catfished" by the organization. It sold itself one way only to flip the script once he began. *Organizations need to be clearer in their pitch to potential candidates. Tell folks where you are on the racial equity journey. Tell them where you are headed. Tell them where you are not headed.* Just be honest so people can make an informed choice before they commit themselves to something that they may later resent.

Be more upfront with the board: Despite all that has taken place over the past year, I've noticed that senior leaders continue to protect their boards and donors from the internal conflicts within organizations. I chalk this up to reflex. Senior leaders are conditioned to spin. "Everything is fine. We have it all under control." To suggest things might be otherwise (even when it is not the leader's fault) is to invite doubt in their leadership. But an opportunity for deeper dialogue and important learning is being squandered. *In a recent training I led, a board chair wondered aloud if the program staff were "ahead" of the board on racial equity issues. It was refreshing. It opened up possibilities for dialogue. We need more of this.*

Even if you think you aren't checking a box, you still might be checking a box. If you say you are open to change but persistently put up guard rails, qualifiers, conditions, or otherwise undercut any uncomfortable discussions or change efforts that would shift power, *you may be checking a box.*

Second, the up-and-comers:

Purity can be its own form of perfectionism. We can't ask everyone else to see our nuances but not allow for the nuances in others. If you find yourself finding fault with every choice the leader makes, check in with yourself. Are you holding this person to an exacting standard that no one can attain? *To advance in any field, one has to be able to work within imperfect systems. Give people the grace and space you would want to be imperfect.*

Your nonprofit may never be as radical as you want it to be. Your organization isn't an extension of your personal values. In mission-driven work, it's easy to conflate one's values with the values of the organization. You start to impute your beliefs onto the organization, finding fault whenever the organization falls short of your expectations. *It's still a business.*

Know when it's time to move on. As I've listened to young people express their frustrations with their organizations, I've wondered one thing: why stay? *If you're so unhappy with the leadership or with the way the work is done, then it's time to go. Rather than force an organization to become what you want it to become, look elsewhere. Better yet,*

create the thing you want.

Create better boundaries. Connected to the two previous points above, *establish better boundaries. If you live with, date, vacation, and spend the majority of your "downtime" with your colleagues*, I'm talking to you.

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Leaders and staff have to be able to talk to one another. Elders hold valuable earned knowledge and wisdom. They know the terrain. Younger workers have fresh minds and hearts. They see old problems with new eyes. Both are necessary for addressing our biggest problems. The key is being able to sit in space with one another without turning away, shutting down, or blowing up. That can only really happen once trust has been established. And trust is born out of truth-telling.

Notes

* Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

** Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

*** Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dax-Devlon Ross's award-winning writing has been featured in *Time*, *The Guardian*, *The* …