WHAT WE TALK ABOUT AMONG OUR PEERS

Building High Impact Nonprofits of Color Through Peer Learning Circles

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Roberto Arjona, Sharice Davis and Cat Goughnour for their contributions to this report.
Abstract

Question:
What do nonprofit leaders of color talk about when they gather in safe spaces?

Answer:
The same things the rest of us do, plus a lot more. This is the central lesson from a six-month long pilot program run by Prosperity Now and Symphonic Strategies. Leaders of color have a lot to talk about and they need safe spaces where they can navigate and unpack a complex array of social, organizational and personal concerns that can test the effectiveness of even the most capable leader.

In many cases, leaders of color struggle with many of the same issues as their White counterparts—fund development, board engagement, partnerships, measuring impact and succession planning. But then there’s that other agenda—the stuff that lurks in the background, serving as an additional burden on the shoulders of already weary warriors.

In 2018, Prosperity Now and Symphonic Strategies set out to determine what it would take to establish an environment where nonprofit leaders of color can prosper—where they can flourish in ways that allow them to recharge spiritually and emotionally, to build and to strengthen their social capital, and to exchange knowledge and ideas to help them overcome known challenges. This is what we learned and what it may potentially mean for the social sector in general.

The leaders engaged in this Peer Learning Circle project had each previously been a member of a cohort for the Building High Impact Nonprofits of Color (BHINC) program which aims to strengthen the services of participating organizations through technical assistance and capacity-building support. This includes targeted and individualized training to build leadership and organizational capacity, asset-building and racial inequality workshops, and networking and convening opportunities. Having completed that curriculum, there was still a need to provide support for the common challenges and opportunities faced by leaders spearheading their respective organizations. The relationships built as a part of the BHINC program provided the foundation to launch an approach that would allow leaders in the space to think strategically, share challenges and receive peer mentorship and emotional support. Prosperity Now defines a nonprofit organization of color, as an organization where most staff, executive leadership and board members are and have historically been people of color. The organization is also focused on serving communities of color.
Building High Impact Nonprofits of Color Project

In response to the significant financial insecurity facing families and communities of color, Prosperity Now, in partnership with JPMorgan Chase, launched the Building High Impact Nonprofit of Color Project. Since 2015, the staff of the Racial Wealth Divide Initiative at Prosperity Now has worked to build a national network of leaders of color, collaborating with local nonprofits to strengthen their capability and access to resources. In our assessment and work over the years, we have learned that nonprofits of color, in particular, are well-positioned to serve communities of color. These organizations are knowledgeable about the history and presence of financial and economic trauma in their affected communities and can develop programs, advocate for policies and share practices that are informed by the community.

Communities of color need nonprofits of color with high-impact asset-building services to address the national challenge of a broad and deep racial wealth divide. It is through this lens that we approach the work of the Building High Impact Nonprofits of Color project. The goals of the project are to:

- Build an understanding of the intersection of income, assets and racial economic inequality
- Expand and establish social networks across sectors to advance social change;
- Improve the ties and relationships between organizations of color, local organizations and asset-building institutions
- Prepare and equip organizational leaders of color to lead local and national dialogues on racial economic equity and asset-building

The Building High Impact Nonprofits of Color Project focuses on three pathways to build the capacity and resilience of organizations to harness public, private, philanthropic and political partnerships as they build power to serve their clients and strengthen community-level assets.

**Organizational and Leadership Development Training:** We have created an organizational development approach designed to build leadership and organizational capacity and provide targeted and individualized training to cohort organizations. This training is provided by consultants of color and those who engage capability-building work through a race-conscious lens.

**Asset-building and racial wealth equity workshops rooted in data:** We produce Racial Wealth Divide City Profiles to support both leaders of color and local stakeholders as they improve their understanding of the connection between assets and the racial wealth divide. Leaders of color are trained on the importance of leveraging data to show that socioeconomic inequity is a result of systems that perpetuate inequality, rather than the behaviors or choices of individuals.

**Networking and Convening Opportunities:** We provide networking and convening opportunities so organizations of color can build relationships within and across networks. These opportunities also increase their access to key influencers and decision-makers in their respective cities and beyond.

It is in the spirit of this first pathway—Organizational and Leadership Development Training—that we launched the Peer Learning Circles (PLCs), a four-city engagement to further build the capacity of nonprofit organizations of color.
Peer Learning Circles (PLCs)

Prosperity Now partnered with Symphonic Strategies to continue supporting the growth and development of these organizations by providing peer learning to address their capacity building needs. Together, we set out to establish a learning network for 20 nonprofits in New Orleans, Miami, Chicago and Baltimore. The operating budgets of these organizations ranged from $1 million to $5 million, and the experience of the senior leaders in the organizations also varied widely. Our goal was to create a safe space where these leaders could come together to exchange ideas, encourage each other and emerge with practical tools to help them lead their organizations.

We separated the 20 organizations—and the senior leaders within those organizations—into four distinct cohorts called Peer Learning Circles (PLCs). As a peer-learning model, PLCs are designed to bring together organizations that are facing similar challenges and opportunities. With the guidance of a coach and input from their peers, PLCs provide participants with a space where they can craft actionable plans to address the situations and scenarios before them (i.e., a personal playbook for their organization).

PLCs are usually comprised of four or five individuals of similar competence and capability who face similar issues. In some cases, we placed the executive director of an organization in a different PLC from their deputy director to offer some privacy for both individuals. In other cases, two or three senior leaders from the same organization were placed in the same PLC, and they essentially acted as one voice when articulating their organization’s primary issue or challenge.

PLCs met in “working sessions”—typically 90-minute conversations—focused on an issue or situation raised by one member of the group. Each organization in a PLC had at least one opportunity to bring an issue of concern to the group for discussion and feedback. The working session focused entirely on their issue. Participants grew, not only when it was their turn to bring a situation or an issue to the group, but also as they were exposed to the issues brought by others.

Most PLC working sessions follow five steps or phases:

1. Listening to the problem owner’s problem
2. Clarifying the issue
3. Developing potential solutions
4. Outlining commitments to action
5. Reflecting on the lessons of leadership and peer coaching gained during the session

PLCs allow individuals, teams and even coalitions of multiple stakeholder groups to come together to think and plan strategically for action. It is a form of applied foresight where we guide participants through a process to help them anticipate obstacles and challenges standing in the way of reaching their goal, objective or destination—for themselves and/or for their organizations.
Early Findings

One of the most powerful things we found during these Peer Learning Circles was that many leaders of color so often find themselves mired in complex environments and what appear to be urgent situations that it is difficult for them to be able to look two or three steps ahead. Putting out the fires of the day coupled with the sober task of keeping the lights on makes it extremely difficult for leaders—of all kinds—to cast their gaze forward in anticipation of the known challenges and opportunities that will appear tomorrow once they’ve rounded today’s corner.

This concept is known as foresight and is best described as the ability to anticipate the cascading impact of an action or event. It is a critical skill for any leader to master. For leaders of color, however, foresight is fundamental to their organizations’ ability to survive and flourish. Leaders of color who are working in nonprofit organizations that are far more likely to be under-resourced and disconnected from sources of power must have foresight if they are to thrive.

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The ability to predict or the action of predicting what will happen or be needed in the future.

Stanford Foresight & Innovation,
https://foresight.stanford.edu/

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We all know that it’s certainly not that simple. How do you cultivate foresight in environments where the immediate and the urgent demand so much of a leader’s time and attention? How can you practice foresight when you find yourself isolated and seemingly reinventing solutions to problems that appear, at least on the surface, to be existential threats to you and to your organization? How do you acknowledge that you don’t know the answer to a problem, or the way around an obstacle, when your very presence is being subtly and, in some cases, overtly, contested by others?
These are the questions that leaders of color bring with them to PLCs. They want to know how to diversify their funding sources and how to deal with their White counterparts who talk about racial equity but who steadfastly compete with them on a tilted playing field. They want to know how to build an effective board and how to deal with program officers at foundations that “mean well” but are disconnected from the real priorities of low-income communities of color. They want to know how to develop a strategic plan and how to deal with the anger and stress of working with power brokers in systems that don’t fully acknowledge their bias or racist roots.

Leaders of color are dealing with many of the same tactical and strategic challenges as their White colleagues. But that’s just half of what’s on the plate. The volume and complexity of the issues that leaders of color face can easily overflow and quickly overwhelm. We learned through this four-city engagement that it is imperative for us to create safe spaces where leaders of color can come together and discuss not only what’s on their plates, but what’s coming next.

In fact, it is that inability to find the time or the mental bandwidth to deal with yet another problem that can weigh leaders of color down. It is the relentless mental battle of having to deal with so many issues on top of those that naturally come with running a nonprofit organization that can force many out of the sector, or worse, into emotional bunkers. When leaders of color retreat into emotional bunkers, they find themselves doing just enough to get by or to not get fired. And for individuals who are deeply connected—personally and emotionally to the people and issues in the communities they serve—this can be a devastating and traumatic experience.
Few leaders of color realize that they’re in an emotional bunker. When they do, most would prefer to escape from that bunker. But the challenge of learning how to run an organization in a sector that is dominated by relationships that are too often not predicated on merit or achievement is daunting. Peer learning circles where leaders of color can connect, recharge and exchange wisdom is one way to pull people out of emotional bunkers and hopefully prevent others from falling prey to them. For organizations of color, peer learning circles are actually peer healing circles.

Peer Healing Circle

Influenced by Dr. Kijakazi’s approach, Prosperity Now’s RWDI staff provided safe, culturally representative spaces for the exploration, interrogation and development that were critical to their authenticity and success. As Dr. Kijakazi notes:

“Seclusion was critical during the period when the participants were examining the perspectives of their communities, exploring the impact of the larger environment on their communities, solidifying as a group and choosing a focus for their work.”
Key Topics for Nonprofits of Color and Their Leaders

There were several topics and themes that emerged over the course of the cross-city engagement that you should know if you’re planning to run your own peer learning network. Among them are the following:

**Resource and Fund Development**

We were not surprised that fund development was the single most widely cited challenge across all of our PLCs. Like their counterparts, leaders of nonprofits of color are concerned about finding ways to diversify and to sustain their revenue. No one feels comfortable being dependent, or nearly dependent, on a few sources of income. Unfortunately, for many nonprofits of color, this is a reality and a constant source of concern. It creates a great deal of stress, understandably, for organizations of color that are struggling to simply make payroll each pay period.

This is certainly not something that is unique to nonprofits of color. But we found that nonprofits of color have not had the opportunity to acquire and to develop the kinds of financial management or social capital skills that are required to successfully operate an organization in the midst of continuous uncertainty. One of the leaders shared that, “The challenge for nonprofits of color, aside from not having money like larger institutions, is that they get awarded grants that don’t cover pre-development costs, creating gaps that no one else sees. It’s hard to communicate this issue to the funders or secure gap funding, and the lack of reserves presents an issue when looking to secure reimbursable grants or to cover fees.” The difficulty of creating cash reserves is a major impediment to the long-term viability of nonprofits of color, and leaders across our PLCs talked candidly about their discomfort in this area. From access to lines of credit to the use of general operating funds, the tactical toolkits for nonprofits of color are limited. Very few of the nonprofits of color in this project have endowments and even fewer knew how to begin creating one.

It is important to create a safe space inside of your PLC to talk about money, in general, and resource cultivation, specifically. Nonprofits of color are looking for strategies on how to meet both the long-term and short-term financial needs of their organizations. This will require an ability to define terms that may not be familiar to some within your PLC, such as gross margins, cost of goods or services, net profit and more. It will also require an ability to shift the mindset away from short-term financial indicators to longer-term financial scenarios and financial milestones. This won’t happen easily and will require testimonials and a little encouragement from some of the more experienced members in the PLC. You will need to change the mindset before you can change the financial behaviors. Strive to create conversations about organizational and community wealth and you may find that the breakthroughs come faster and more intensely.

There were three additional issues that surfaced in the area of resource and fund development:

- Managing the power dynamic with funders
- Leveraging social networks
- Expanding the donor base
Organizations of color are keenly aware of the power dynamic that exists between their organizations and their funders. The power dynamic is heightened when the funder is a predominantly White organization with clear views on who they want to fund and how they want their money spent. Leaders in our PLCs talked about various ways they navigate those relationships and how they attempt to re-orient the power relationships at play. Many of them naturally extended those conversations into ways that they could leverage their social networks to connect to other people of color who might be working in foundations. Inside of our PLCs, we discussed the importance of finding someone inside of the foundation who understands you and your community and who is willing to be an internal advocate for your organization.

Board Engagement

Board engagement is another topic that repeatedly surfaced across many PLCs. The leaders expressed some frustration, understandably, with the engagement of their boards. One of the most frequently cited complaints was the lack of substantive engagement by board members, especially when it came to giving money and providing strategic direction to the organization. Now, we know that board engagement is a common challenge that is not unique to leaders of color or to organizations of color. But that challenge is compounded when board members tie their status or power in the community to their seat on your board.

Often, for many people of color, there are few opportunities for us to attain power or to occupy positions of high status or prestige outside of where we reside. Unfortunately, this heightens the “big fish in a small pond” phenomenon. When we are unable to improve our status outside of our community, we compete inside of our communities for the few vehicles by which we can establish ourselves as being someone of importance. Churches, social clubs and board positions become prime vehicles for the elevation of social status and for the attainment of power.

To be clear, this does not apply to everyone on the board. In fact, it might only apply to a small fraction of your board members. And predominantly White nonprofit organizations also confront the same challenge. But stripping someone on your board of a prized and respected position that conveys power and/or status is very different in communities of color. The reaction and resistance to you and to your efforts to restructure your board can lead to some very intense and personal battles. We heard several members in our PLCs talk about the reluctance they had to confront board members who were occupying a seat for the wrong reason. Another leader expressed concern for losing board members when trying to shift the existing culture around engagement. “I spoke with someone on the board that I thought was less engaged and she expressed that she felt she was an active member. This made me reluctant to roll off people that were moderately engaged, but I was also fearful that other board members that do participate would voluntarily walk away if nothing was done to alleviate their burdens.” The fear of challenging someone who has so much to lose is real for leaders of nonprofits of color.
Roles and Responsibilities of Board Members

One of the fundamental challenges that far too many board members and boards have is that they don’t have a strong understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Board Source¹

In your PLCs, it is essential to have honest discussions about how power and status are conveyed in your community as well as what it means to have empathy for those who may be conditioned for social performances that benefit themselves and not their communities. It is also important to separate individual board members from the systems of oppression in which they have been conditioned. It is equally important, however, to discuss positive and proactive tactics for setting and reinforcing clear performance expectations for your board members. Talking about how to differentiate between the under-performers and the non-performers, how to have different kinds of conversations with them and how to find ways to help non-performers “save face” on their way out are imperative.

Partnerships, Collaboration and Collective Action

A third category of issues that surfaced throughout our PLCs revolved around partnerships, collaboration and collective action. Organizations of color have been encouraged by funders to collaborate more, but collaboration can be tricky to manage. We found a number of leaders who were searching for practical guidance on how to explore potential partners, how to create partnership agreements and how to get out of bad partnerships.

One of the keys to a successful partnership is not only the fit but the resources your partner is able to bring to the relationship. For organizations of color, finding suitable partners can be a challenge. Even more, presenting yourself as a viable partner can also be difficult for organizations of color. In some cases, leaders of color will need to shift the mindset of those around them to be able to move away from the hyper-competitive world that often characterizes the nonprofit sector. All of these issues are worthy of discussion, and the PLC format is a great way to tackle them.

¹ Board Source: Roles and Responsibilities https://boardsource.org/fundamental-topics-of-nonprofit-board-service/roles-responsibilities/
A particular challenge in this area is what one person described to us as the problem of achieving “collective solidarity.” Organizations of color often are forced to confront the challenge of working with other organizations that appear to be myopic in their worldview or who are single-issue focused. There are so many “problems” to be solved in communities of color that we splinter into single-issue enclaves and struggle to find the overlap and intersectionality amongst ourselves. Make sure your PLCs create room to talk about how to achieve collective solidarity and how to sustain it once you do.

**Impact**

The fourth category that we experienced in our PLC engagement revolves around impact—achieving impact, measuring impact and communicating impact. This is, again, not a challenge that is unique to organizations of color. All nonprofit organizations deal with the need to demonstrate their impact, whether on an issue or a community. Many of the leaders in our PLCs found themselves so preoccupied with theories of change, logic models and assessment instruments that they had not given themselves the time necessary to think about having an impact on the narratives that fuel and support many of the oppressive systems that they are attempting to change.

Organizations of color are, perhaps, uniquely suited to craft new narratives that explain how communities of color came to experience many of the challenges they now confront. They are also uniquely positioned to offer new narratives that advance holistic and universal value systems like those espoused by racial equity. But developing and articulating new narratives that force us to redefine what impact truly looks like is yet another responsibility that too often falls unfairly on the shoulders of leaders of color.

One leader that works with an affordable housing services nonprofit discussed the challenge of highlighting qualitative impact when funders are focused more on numbers and the bottom line. “It’s difficult to effectively demonstrate our value to funders or report on milestones, specifically related to our community engagement work that lends itself to homeownership in the long term. Our impact is further upstream than funders usually look, and they are often less willing to focus on the longer and bigger picture in favor of short-term results. They fail to realize that without our organizations, residents, mostly of color, would be pushed out of the city, negatively impacting both the individual and the economy and limiting their opportunity to create generational wealth.”

Put simply, many of the predominantly White foundations that fund social justice issues are, themselves, not fully ready for explicit conversations about race, racism and racial equity. The burden, therefore, of broaching the topic is placed in the hands of those who have been wounded the most by the sector’s failure to confront its own complicity. Make sure your PLCs create spaces for participants to seek comfort and counsel when they’ve been retraumatized by interactions and conversations with others who are not able or not willing to talk about race, racism and racial equity.
Learning Tailored to Leaders of Color

In 2018, David Ehrlichman and David Sawyer published an article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) titled “Learn Before You Leap: The Catalytic Power of a Learning Network.” In it they write:

“Learning networks are a form of collaboration that enables groups of stakeholders to cultivate connections across communities and organizations and to strengthen a whole system simply by focusing on the potential for participants to share information and learn from one another. And while new collaborative action is not the primary goal of a learning network, action is often a byproduct of the deeper connections and shared learning that result. In this way, building a robust learning network can itself serve as an effective strategy for creating change.”

Of course, Ehrlichman and Sawyer are not the first to tout the potential power of learning networks. In fact, there is a long scholarly tradition that explores learning networks in general, and social networks in particular.

We, however, are interested in one particular element that we believe peer learning networks can offer specifically to leaders of color: a new frame of reference. Leaders of color are often troubled by the dilemma of having to “play the game” in a White dominant culture that routinely discounts the ideas, values and beliefs of non-White communities. Whether it is that feeling of having to “go along to get along” or feeling like a “guest” in someone else’s space, leaders of color often express distress at having to negotiate what many believe to be inhospitable conditions. The frame of reference for many is one of being “trapped,” “unappreciated” or even “exploited.” It is not a healthy frame of reference, and it does little to build resiliency among leaders of color.
By establishing a safe space where leaders of color can talk candidly about their experiences, we can create opportunities where they are able to forge a new frame of reference—one that encourages them to tap into their intuition and their spirituality, as opposed to suppressing them; one that allows them to reinforce the meaning and purpose of their work, as well as the inherent value of how they approach that work; one that is rooted in struggle and resistance as opposed to compliance and subservience.

One leader that participated in the PLCs reflected that she felt they opened doors for communication amongst the leaders while creating and strengthening a network that allowed them to bridge connections both internally and externally. “For me, the overarching value was in affirming some things that I was dealing with as challenges but also improvising really tactical considerations that I could deploy as I tried to work to resolve this issue.”

Traditional leadership and professional development programs that do not enable leaders of color to examine many of the attitudes and behaviors that they’ve inherited do them a disservice. Through our PLCs, we deliberately tried to create a transformative learning experience that could reshape attitudes and behaviors. It was an approach informed by adult learning theories, like the one articulated by Jack Mezirow who is credited with articulating a theory that emphasizes shifting the way adults interpret their world. It encourages learners to “negotiate and act upon” their “own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others.”

Implications for Racial Equity and the Racial Wealth Divide

Success as a Precursor to Voice

Let’s face it. Leaders of color who run nonprofits of color often do not have a podium from which their voices can be heard—at least not one equivalent to that provided to their White counterparts who run larger and more powerful nonprofits. Often, this voice comes with occupying a position or running an organization that is widely seen as being “effective” or “proven.” We all know that, unfortunately, these are among the coded words and phrases that are used to justify the exclusion of nonprofit organizations of color from the party.

That said, this is the world in which leaders of color must maneuver, and we must equip them with safe spaces and new frames of reference so that they’re able to successfully navigate these turbulent waters. It is time to initiate a broad-based conversation about how we can leverage peer learning networks to reposition those leaders of color who run nonprofit organizations of color to be more impactful in their work and on the issues that so often disproportionately affect communities of color. This is going to require a model of peer learning that draws on the best cultural and spiritual traditions that exist within communities of color. It’s going to require a return to the value and belief systems that have been systematically attacked by the very institutions through which these leaders have passed.

2 (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).
About Prosperity Now

Prosperity Now believes that everyone deserves a chance to prosper. Our mission is to ensure that everyone in our country has a clear path to financial stability, wealth, and prosperity, particularly people of color and low-wealth families.

To advance our mission, we create and support programs and policies that foster an economy that offers an opportunity to those who have not had it before. Additionally, by focusing on assets and savings, we make sure people have the tools they need to build wealth and a better future. Finally, through research, solutions, and policies, we fight for economic mobility for everyone in the United States.

For the past 40 years, Prosperity Now has been at the forefront of launching new initiatives aimed at improving economic mobility for low-income households, from researching and supporting children’s savings accounts—which make it easier for low-income children to build savings to get to and through college—to building the capacity of hundreds of organizations to provide financial stability services to their communities. Prosperity Now has an extensive history of researching, designing, and testing solutions aimed at increasing financial security and economic mobility for everyone in the United States, and looks forward to continuing to bring all of our approaches to bear on the growing racial economic and wealth disparities plaguing our country.