

LEADERSHIP IS CAUSE; EVERYTHING ELSE IS EFFECT

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As a first-generation millennial Black woman, I have been heartened by the rare but important professional spaces where leaders of color are equally valued for their work skills and life experience. But generally, I have found senior leadership in philanthropy and the social sector to be overwhelmingly white-led and Eurocentric in its values, priorities, and vision. This trend, in turn, influences who receives funding and who does not. To buck this trend is not easy, but during my eight-year tenure as Director of the Child Well-being Program at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (DDCF), it was essential to our mission of creating a world where all children and families have the opportunity to thrive.

To do so, I worked with colleagues, peers, and grantees explicitly to draw attention to the need for investments in the leadership and professional development of social sector leaders of color who bring both personal understanding and natural affinity for the needs of residents, and will put their needs at the center of decision making related to policies, practices, and programs. Often, such leaders of color will shoulder the responsibility of the expectations of their job while also enlightening their white counterparts as to where systemically racist practices exist and how they can be disrupted. In this way, hiring leaders of color creates positive ripple effects across the

entire organization, including the way it goes about gathering evidence of social impact.

These ripple effects remain in short supply at a time when they are most needed. The COVID-19 pandemic and the interrelated financial and social justice crises have further reinforced the need to develop a cadre of entrepreneurial-minded social service leaders of color who can realize their visions to transform the social service sector in ways that can truly better the lives of the individuals, children, and families they serve.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF SOCIAL SECTOR LEADERS

We need to get better at addressing root causes of social ills that reinforce multi-generational poor health and well-being outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic and related crises have exposed, yet again, deep fissures in our social fabric. Social and health crises like homelessness, opioid misuse, gun violence, obesity, and so many others continue to disproportionately affect children and families of color or those living in low-income environments. Sadly, our social and human service systems are not designed to address the root causes of these ills nor the complex contextual factors that continue to trap communities and families in unjust and unhealthy circumstances for generations.

We need to think globally and learn from other countries. The global nature of the pandemic also has reminded us that no country's GDP can inoculate its government and citizenry from the need to invest in responsible, equitable, and empathetic leadership. We need such visionary and collaborative leadership to build a strong social fabric, resilient to adverse conditions and actors. And we need to look beyond our own borders to find and make connections with exceptional social sector and community leaders around the world tackling similar issues.

For example, through the DDCF *African Health Initiative*, we have observed our colleagues in Africa commit to and exercise evidence-driven decision making and leadership, while also investing in the next generation of leaders who are better prepared to transform social service cultures and norms. They continue to serve as a refreshing resource on how to truly support leaders who envision changing a system. The *Child Well-Being Program* has applied important leadership lessons from our work in Africa to our U.S.-focused work in the social and human services

sector to support root-cause solutions that will speed child and family well-being.

We need to serve needs as we also work to solve problems. This takeaway is particularly important as leaders now have two jobs—to respond to increasing needs and demand for services while also responding to calls to dismantle and/or transform systems that perpetuate racist and discriminatory practices. Few leadership and professional development programs provide adequate support to prepare leaders to meet these challenges.

For example, in 2018, our Child Well-Being Program invested in a portfolio of national leadership and professional development programs to expand opportunities and positively reinforce networks of racially and ethnically diverse mid- and senior-level social service leaders. These programs aim to increase the visibility of leaders committed to transforming policies and programs, building and strengthening community and agency partnerships and making sustained improvements in the well-being of children and families in the United States.

Quickly and radically improving well-being for children and families in the United States requires transforming systems and strengthening local, state, and federal supportive safety nets that better and more equitably serve them. The complexity of this undertaking requires visionary, diverse, collaborative, adaptive, and entrepreneurial leaders and teams to implement and sustain new ways of thinking and working. Unfortunately, there is a lack of coordination and opportunities for skills building for leaders in the social and human services sectors, primarily because there are limited resources and incentives in place to support them.

We need to invest in the leadership, professional development, and networks for leaders of color. Making explicit investments in the leaders of color is key. Though they have suffered and continue to carry the brunt and the burden of bringing attention to their work and their communities, they persist. They, in fact, exemplify the type of resilience essential to navigate the complex social challenges our country faces today. Furthermore, recognizing the emotional and social toll of working to serve children and families in need, direct investments need to be made in supporting networks for leaders of color.

We need evidence-building methods that center a gender and racial lens. Poor health and well-being outcomes disproportionately disadvantage children and women of color. These outcomes reflect both the symptoms and results of historical and ongoing systemic racism. In recent decades, policymakers

and practitioners have increasingly embraced and demanded evidence-based solutions that center equity in improving outcomes for children and families, yet the research methodologies and practices that generate the evidence do not adequately account for race and its role in driving these outcomes.

While researchers now routinely collect data that disaggregates by race and ethnicity, a growing body of researchers recognize the critical need to lead with a racial and gender equity lens in other dimensions of the research process. This will enable them to strengthen evidence-based interventions and provide much needed data for policymakers to reduce racial disparities and advance equity in child and family outcomes.

HOW A NEXTGEN LEADER BUILDS NEXTGEN EVIDENCE

To quote Angela Jackson, “Leaders who arise from the communities and issues they serve have the experience, relationships, data, and knowledge that are essential for developing solutions with measurable and sustainable impact.”¹

To build next generation evidence, the next generation of leaders need intellectual curiosity and a clear *vision*; they are *creators and dreamers* on the constant quest to achieve the ideal world—where every human is cherished, beloved, and enabled to lead self-determined lives.

They are *resilient* and impervious to naysayers. They have the data and evidence on their side, so they must be able to persist. And they have a willingness to mentor and develop the next generations.

They must be *storytellers*—not simply good communicators—who can weave a story to compel others. This is a rare skill, but one of the most important. Relatedly, they must be credible messengers—often those with lived experience and/or those who directly reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the people they are serving.

They must be *collaborative*—willing to engage others in their thinking—particularly the suspects not in their regular circles. Collaboration is an underrated and essential skill. It takes a sense of *confidence and humility*; it requires patience and thoughtfulness. When collaborating well, there is also a need to support conversations around success and failure.

They must be *courageous* and willing to disrupt narratives, leaning into data and evidence while also making that evidence accessible.

Where to find these leaders? Community organizers tend to have these skills. We need to invest in them explicitly, along with social entrepreneurs

who know how to move from vision to building on and adapting that vision as needed.

These leaders also must excel at systems thinking. There is often an assumption that bureaucrats or those working within systems automatically have the skills, bandwidth, or interest to tackle complex systems challenges. Just as we recognize physician scientists as practitioner scholars—with academies in place to recognize and preserve their leadership (for example, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine)—the same standards and expectations should be set for practitioners leading the way in building evidence in the social service sector.

There is an essential need to support the next generation of practitioner-scholars in the human and social service sectors. They will be the ones best positioned to inform conversations and apply evidence to advance equitable transformation and strengthen the systems meant to serve people. They bring a human-centered and scholarly lens that is often overlooked and, consequently, underapplied.

EXEMPLARS OF NEXT GENERATION LEADERSHIP

I can name a plethora of evidence-driven leaders whose impact and visibility has grown due to our commitment to their development and investment in all parts of their leadership:

Dr. Clinton Boyd² refers to himself as an activist researcher. In addition to a number of other awards, he earned a competitive DDCF-funded fellowship through the Doris Duke Fellowships for the Promotion of Child Well-Being. He continues to advance in his career and is gaining much-deserved recognition as a next generation leader promoting supportive services for Black fathers—an often ignored and excluded population. He is bringing his expertise to the University of Chicago-Chapin Hall as a faculty member while also taking on a community leadership role at Fathers, Families, and Healthy Communities.

Aisha Nyandoro,³ CEO of Springboard To Opportunities, which supports residents of affordable housing, and innovator of the organization's Magnolia Mother's Trust. Not only does Aisha lead the first ever direct cash assistance program that directly applies a gender focus, but also influences policies at the state and national level to ensure that the experiences and voices of Black Mothers are authentically valued and incorporated in the design of policies and programs.

Dr. Koku Awoonor Williams⁴ began his career working at the district level in Ghana and then serving as a regional health director. Because of his leadership, vision, and positive impact on the lives of millions of Ghanaians, he was placed to serve as director of policy, planning, monitoring, and evaluation at the Ghana Health Service to strengthen the community-based system of care. Throughout his leadership trajectory, he has mentored and supported several generations of burgeoning Ghanaian leaders at all levels of the health system.

With his vision and DDCF support, Dr. Manzi Anatole⁵ was able to pursue his graduate studies at the University of Rwanda and at Harvard Medical School but continues to focus his work and vision in the African context, and in Rwanda specifically. He recently was awarded the prestigious Aspen Institute New Voices Fellowship to enable him to deliver on his passion for mentorship of the next generation of leaders.

In these examples, I think it important to note that we not only invested in their training and professional development, but also championed and gave greater visibility to their work. This is critically important, as the bulk of formal investments in leadership focus solely on the individual, but we believe it is equally important to fund and facilitate their work and the communities they are focusing on as well. Further, we found that leaders of color in this space often feel lonely or isolated in their work. We intentionally work to respond to their requests to connect them to other powerful networks of leaders, where they are not simply observers but are leaders in the conversation.

These leaders are just a few examples of the next generation of leaders whose influence and impact will have ripple effects in communities around the world. Despite their brilliance as individuals, they still struggle to gain the deserved visibility, funding, and access to global platforms that their white colleagues receive. It is our collective responsibility as leaders to trust them, invest in them, champion them, and work in solidarity with them.

WHAT SHOULD/COULD FUNDERS DO TO SUPPORT THE NEXT GENERATION OF EVIDENCE-DRIVEN LEADERS OF COLOR?

There is an urgent need to support the growing cadre of accomplished scholars of color who work to expand the perspectives reflected in research and to design more equitable and racially and ethnically representative policies

and practices based on program evidence. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that in fall 2018, just 4 percent of full-time professors at degree-granting postsecondary institutions were Black and 3 percent were Latinx. Among assistant professors, 8 percent were Black and 6 percent were Latinx. These data indicate that 50 percent of Black and Latinx scholars fall out of academia before achieving the highest rank. Additionally, Native American faculty represented less than 1 percent of all faculty from degree-granting institutions.

Researchers of color are more likely to account for racial disparities in their research design and analysis. Researchers from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds and lived experiences are uniquely equipped to partner with under-researched and underserved communities to develop and implement research approaches that reflect and elevate the backgrounds, needs, and cultural and linguistic practices of Black, Indigenous, and other diverse populations. Researchers of color are more likely to drive research and implement research methodologies that take into account racial disparities and cultural context. Furthermore, they are more likely to identify, value, and understand the protective value of culture and community and seek authentic partnership with communities to inform their work. Authentically engaging community stakeholders—including parents, young people, and community residents who are experiencing the challenges the researchers are interested in understanding—is critical to defining locally relevant research questions, designing inclusive data collection and analysis tools, and interpreting and equitably disseminating results.

We need to build the capacity of research institutions and/or networks to increase funding and direct support to researchers of color and the teams that they lead and nurture. Researchers of color are more likely to face bias and discrimination and less likely to receive adequate recognition and support from their academic institutions and funders, making it difficult for them to enter and remain in academic settings as well as to promote and increase the use of their important work. As a component of advancing their research agendas, researchers of color also need clear financial and nonfinancial incentives to ensure that they are supported in their academic journeys. For DDCE, this has meant funding the individual researcher, their research, and the development of networks of other researchers of color. We also incent, with matching funds, the development of research centers of excellence or institutes within their university or organization that emphasize a focus on the lived experience of people of color as well as offer support for executive

vouching and mentoring to strengthen their leadership and advance their professional development

For example, in recent years, the DDCF *Child Well-Being Program* has contributed to efforts to support researchers of color through direct investments in their research; promoting training, mentorship, and pipeline building; and facilitating a space and platform for funders to discuss and collaborate on increased funding opportunities. Grants have supported the National Indian Child Welfare Association to evaluate a parenting program developed by and for Native communities, and the Scholar Development Program through the Society for Research in Child Development to help researchers of color successfully navigate the complex process of obtaining NIH awards. In partnership with the William T. Grant Foundation, the Child Well-Being Program also co-founded a funders learning community of more than fifteen public and private funders committed to reducing racial gaps in research funding and improving career advancement for scholars of color.

CONCLUSION

In the not-so-distant past, it has felt unsafe to speak truth to power, to name the things that are wrong and the roles race and racism have played in social ills. Today, I am proud to acknowledge that I feel more welcomed and more confident to be vocal on these matters. Because of the next gen leaders of color around me, I am refueled, reignited, and energized, even as I share in feelings of deep exhaustion from responding to calls for input and wisdom at a time when the country and the world still feels it is rallying against people of color in so many intentional and entrenched ways. Still, I am privileged to be part of a loud and proud army of leaders and champions who are demanding systems transformation that authentically values the expertise and experience of leaders of color in the social service and research sectors.

NOTES

1. Angela Jackson, John Kania, and Tulaine Montgomery, "Effective Change Requires Proximate Leaders," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, October 2, 2020, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/effective_change_requires_proximate_leaders.

2. See the Clinton Boyd Jr. page at the Zero to Three website, www.zerotothree.org/our-team/clinton-boyd-jr.
3. See the Aisha Nyandoro page on the Springboard To Opportunities website, <https://springboardto.org/about/leadership/>.
4. See the e-Health Africa Conference page at the Anadach Consulting Group website, www.anadach.com/blank-t7407.
5. See the Anatole Manzi page at the University of Global Health Equity website, <https://ughe.org/meet-the-team/anatole-manzi>.