

# Talking Shop: Confronting Bias

To build more inclusive spaces, start by listening and learning, but be willing to speak out

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Credit: Bill Dabney

When Anthony Heaven first started in advancement in 2014, he'd look around at conferences full of fundraisers and see very few African Americans. That sparked the idea for his 2017 dissertation research at the University of Texas at Austin: how race shapes Black fundraisers' experiences. Here's some of what he uncovered.

**In your dissertation research, you interviewed Black fundraisers at predominantly white institutions. What challenges did they share?**

Isolation and covert racism were two big themes. We know this from research: People gravitate towards homogeneity. I'll give you an example. One of my study's participants talked about being in all-staff meetings with 60 people where she was the only African American in the room. She talked about having to insert herself within conversations because people didn't go and introduce themselves to her first. She talked about how lonely that was for her and how she had to find common ground in other ways to create community. A couple of participants talked about how, over the course of their 10-to-20-year career, they were the only African Americans at the leadership table in advancement, and how they were looked to provide a voice for all African Americans.

One African American woman participant shared this disheartening experience that has stuck with me to this day. She shared that she was pregnant when the Trayvon Martin [who was fatally shot in 2012] ruling came out. Usually her colleagues (predominantly white women) were a supportive community around motherhood. But that day, she shared how the ruling disturbed her and she was worried about raising a Black son in this era. Her colleagues dismissed her thoughts, saying this wasn't something she needed to worry about. After repeatedly having these experiences, she realized she had to lobotomize her professional identity from her personal identity. That's the word she used: lobotomize.

Beyond the isolation, they talked about acts of covert racism. Like office colleagues talking about, say, Latinx folks moving into their neighborhood and saying they needed to prepare to move out "because you know what that does to the community." There was this sense that people aren't purposely doing it to be malicious, but they

have a flippancy around these prejudiced beliefs.

### How did fundraisers you talked with say race can shape interactions with donors?

Covert racism plays out in meetings with donors. Fundraisers might encounter donors who don't want to have a certain type of conversation with you because you are Black. They may have these prejudices and biases about Black people before they even really get to know you.

One story [from one participant] really shocked me. One African American fundraiser said that a white, male donor in his 70s or 80s had a little bit too much to drink at an event and grabbed her waist and said, "They didn't make them like you when I was a student here at the university." Fundraisers talked about how they did not feel supported. If they mention to their supervisors that this occurred, the donor would be reassigned and that's the end of the conversation. It's time for institutions to think critically about how we support our development officers, but also how to have those conversations with donors about what's appropriate.

### At CASE's Diverse Philanthropy and Leadership Conference in 2020, you talked about how a donor code of ethics can help those situations. How?

A donor code of ethics can empower development officers when they face those situations. For example, I've had two donors use the n-word—not in reference to me, but in telling a story. It was very uncomfortable. What is your response? Do you ignore it? Do you say, "Actually, we don't use that type of language at the university anymore"? A donor code of ethics not only helps to hold donors accountable, so they know what is appropriate, but it also empowers our development officers in those moments to not feel like they can't say anything if they hear something racist, homophobic, or sexist. It gives everyone the same script to follow and protocols of what behavior is definitely off-limits and what to do about it.

### What are some of the ways Black fundraisers in your study cope with these challenges?

Participants talked about several ways in which they stay motivated. They mentioned having great colleagues who were supportive. Also, most of them said, "I cannot work for an organization or institution that I do not believe the vision of the organization or the institution that I work for." We face too many issues within the field to not be a hundred percent on board with the impact of where we're working.

One development officer that I interviewed talked about how, on particularly hard days, she would go to the student center to talk to students and see the impact of our work. I do that now too. That reminds me of why I'm in the field in the first place.

They talked about the necessity of investing in themselves (spiritually or through relationships with people), advocating for themselves, and learning when to pick battles. Sometimes there is this expectation that African Americans will educate people when they are doing things wrong. There are some battles that you can try to fight but know that you only have a certain amount of capital, so you have to be very strategic about what you will and won't take on.

### What role does mentoring and connecting with peers play for Black fundraisers?

That's key. They talked about how they categorize relationships in a couple of groups:

- **Sponsors** are people who are really invested in creating diverse organizations and are intentional about creating pathways for diverse professionals.
- **Mentors** provide general oversight. This could be a person at another institution that you call occasionally to catch up or talk about career advice.
- **Coaches** are more hands-on. This is someone who offers insight on how to navigate situations and spaces
- **Allies** are of course the people who listen and offer support.

They talked about having those type of relationships, as well as conferences and spaces where people can share best practices.

### What can managers do to help create inclusive spaces?

The number one thing is to build relationships. Amid the Black Lives Matter protests, so many managers asked if



they should call their Black colleagues or staff members and check on them. But in the future, it'd be great if you built such solid relationships that you wouldn't hesitate to check on them.

The second part is creating a space where people feel like they could openly communicate about challenges within the organization, whether it be from the African American, LGBTQ+, or Latinx perspective. That's huge. We're in an era now where people want their employees to open up and have these dialogues. But if you have not built the atmosphere for those type of conversations, then people won't feel like they can come forward and talk openly about these issues.

Find ways to be supportive of your people and understand that there are systemic factors at play that affect them and their environment differently. Don't make your Black employees educate you on today's issues: Be well-read and well-informed about what's going on and think critically about our office spaces. [We should] start to step outside of ourselves to see other people's experiences and work proactively to address office climate/culture.

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Anthony Heaven

### What can teams do to be inclusive?

Advocate for your diverse folks and don't be silent. Now it's important to lean into being a good ally, which involves not just supporting but also amplifying the voices in the space. So if there's someone who says something blatantly racist in a meeting, take the time to say, "Hey, I don't know if that's appropriate. Let's talk about that." It should be a team effort.

Be present. As a team, take in what's going on think critically about your work and your biases. I love to tell people everyone should take the implicit bias test. Even if you never share your results, which most people won't, it can serve as a place of reference for you when you're making decisions and interacting with people. I use it as a compass to help me figure out how I can eliminate my bias.

Teams should not just completely ignore what's going on. I think that that's a poor decision. I've heard other African American colleagues say their office hasn't done or said anything—and that's a horrible idea. It's tough and it's emotionally taxing for some people within our spaces right now, so offices have to be responsive.

### More broadly, what kinds of conversations do higher education and advancement need to be having about race now?

When we look at the bigger picture, there are very few African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx people in this space, so we have to have a conversation about the advancement pipeline. Everyone talks about how most people fall into the profession. So, how can we be more strategic about that? Some of that involves making sure that we're exposing diverse students to advancement, whether it's encouraging employees, once a quarter, to do a presentation for a student group or for the multicultural center on campus about development. We have to think about the entry point: Who are the people being exposed to development as a profession? How are we recruiting, even from other industries or from other institutions?

Second—and I say this without hesitation—all offices need to make sure that our professionals receive bias training. That should be mandatory, just like any other mandatory training within our offices. Also, people who serve on hiring committees should be required to participate in inclusivity training about how to make sure hiring committees are inclusive. When we talk about institutional fit, that usually means people endorse people who are like them. Whiteness reproduces whiteness. So, we have to branch out from that framework.

Third, we have to figure out as institutions—and some are already doing this extremely well—how we engage

African American alumni and how we incorporate them more into the fold of events or processes. That means diversifying our boards and our committees. Research shows that African Americans are some of the most philanthropic people, but we do not have high rates of giving in African American communities because we're not reaching them in a way that is most impactful. Teams need to have at least someone on their team who is briefed on the research who can help inform research-based development practices and think strategically about how to do this work. This applies for other demographics as well!

Let's make sure our Black alumni know we care and support them—and take it a step further to invite them to conversations with us about how to better serve diverse alumni. It's the perfect time to start those conversations.