LEADING

‘I’M MORE THAN ONE IDENTITY’

People of color who have climbed the nonprofit ladder talk about their challenges, coping strategies, successes, and whether they think things are getting better.

By NICOLE WALLACE

PEOPLE OF COLOR have reached pinnacles of power in philanthropy that once would have been unimaginable.

Darren Walker, a gay African-American man, is head of the Ford Foundation, an institution with a $13 billion endowment. La June Montgomery Tabron, an African-American woman, took the helm at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation after 26 years at the fund.

But things are still rough in the trenches.

The *Chronicle* spoke with more than 25 leaders of color at nonprofits and foundations, people at different points in their careers, devoted to different causes across the country. The picture they paint isn’t pretty.

Leaders described feeling isolated, navigating difficult, racially fraught power dynamics with grant makers, and enduring affronts to their dignity — even having people touch their hair. In interview after interview, they talked about the need to prove themselves repeatedly.

“It’s always about going above and beyond,” says Angela Williams, CEO of Easterseals. “You can’t really afford mistakes because they’re not necessarily forgiven. It’s about dotting i’s, crossing t’s, and spending the extra time to prove that you deserve the position that you hold.”

Many talked about speaking out more as they gained experience and became more established in their careers.

“We have to be a lot more courageous about leading with our language and leading with our words,” says Nathaniel Smith, founder of the Partnership for Southern Equity. “If we want to see a new world, we have to be willing to speak it into existence — and talk about what we don’t want to see in this world.”

The leaders are resourceful and proud of their accomplishments. They shared the strategies they use — not just to overcome barriers but to thrive. Many are cautiously optimistic that philanthropy’s widespread focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion could lead to real change in nonprofits and foundations. But there’s also concern.

Lots of organizations are talking about racial equity, but they’re not integrating it into their work or changing how they operate, says Tonya Allen, CEO of the Skillman Foundation. “I don’t want this moment to pass where we can really make change.”

In the following pages, leaders of color share stories of struggle and triumph and insights in how to make philanthropy truly inclusive.

Continued on Page 10

READ MORE

Opinion: Valerie Jarrett and Keecha Harris offer advice to foundations on fighting for racial equity. **Page 34**

LOOKING FORWARD
Making the nonprofit world more inclusive requires courage, says Nathaniel Smith, founder of the Partnership for Southern Equity.

PARTNERSHIP FOR SOUTHERN EQUITY

CHRISTIE GOSHE

‘I would get these code words.’

SAM COBBS

Sam Cobbs first worked with young people at a job with Parks and Recreation in Richmond, Calif. He was hooked. “I would have done it for free,” he says. For 12 years, Cobbs was CEO of First Place for Youth, an innovative nonprofit that provides housing and services to young people in foster care. Last year, he was named president of Tipping Point Community, an antipoverty grant maker in the San Francisco Bay Area.

What it means to be a leader of color. You know you have to work twice as hard. It’s just something that becomes a part of your DNA. The people that I feel bad for are the people who work for me because it means that they have to work twice as hard as well.

When you go to the website, there is a certain bias that comes with seeing a person of color as the leader of the organization, especially an African-American male. The whole organization has to work hard to overcome that bias.

How not to be pigeonholed as an African-American nonprofit. In the beginning of my time at First Place for Youth, I didn’t want predominantly African-Americans on my board because I did not want the organization to be looked at as a predominantly African-American-led or African-American-served organization because I knew that that would send certain messages to people. I began to diversify my board over time, but I didn’t want that in the beginning.

Code words. I would still get those code words like, “Aren’t you guys an Oakland organization?” — which was a code word for “Aren’t you an African-American organization?” I knew I had to overcome that. I made a deal with another African-American leader: He gave me office space in his offices, and I gave him office space in mine so that we could both put each other’s addresses on our letterhead. All of a sudden, I was a San Francisco organization, which then had a whole different feeling to it.

Being left out of informal gatherings. What happens at some of these grantee retreats is there are the organized events that the foundation puts on. But then sometimes there is the meetup at the bar afterward with the program officers and a select few grantees. Those were the invitations that, depending on who the program officers were, never made it to some of us. We would actually get together ourselves and know that we were missing out on that access.

Whether things are getting better. There is a lot of conversation today about diversity, equity, and inclusion. There are a lot of hires that are being made with really good-quality people.

The question is not are those people allowed to get hired? But is the organization going to support them in the same way as it did previous leaders that weren’t of color? Are people going to begin to reduce their investments in those organizations?

‘To build something from nothing is exhausting.’

QAADIRAH ABDUR-RAHIM

When Qaadirah Abdur-Rahim became CEO of an afterschool program near Atlanta called the Future Foundation in 2005, it had two employees and a budget of $280,000. Last year, it had 40 employees and a budget of $2.4 million. It hasn’t been easy. “To build something from nothing is exhausting,” she says. “The stress that grassroots leaders of color and activists take on is substantial.”

Making inroads with foundations. It’s really been hard as a leader of color that didn’t grow up with access to penetrate the private foundations.

Now we’ve had some great wins, and we had 20 percent income growth in 2018 due to two factors. One is that for the last couple of years we’ve been in a fellowship with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which supports promising organizations with leaders of color and helps them demonstrate those promising models’ effectiveness.

Second, two influential white women here in Atlanta said, “Qaadirah, we’re going to help you get a seat at the table.” They helped me start an advisory council that’s been helpful for fundraising. And they’ve just made critical connections that helped grow our revenue.

I’ve experienced where it’s taken me five years to cultivate a substantial gift from a private foundation, and it’s taken me two or three months to generate an equally substantial gift through the referral of a respected person.

Continued on Page 12

AZURE PHOTOGRAPHY

COURTESY OF WINTHROP ROCKEFELLER INSTITUTE

‘People of color have to have way more credentials.’

JOYVIN BENTON

Joyvin Benton is director of development at the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute, an education and conference center in Morrilton, Ark., which is part of the University of Arkansas System.

Having an advanced degree can get you interviews. To be in leadership positions, people of color have to have way more credentials. I have a Ph.D. I’m not sure if I would’ve even been looked at for certain jobs if I didn’t have those extra letters behind my name. I know a lot of other people in the field who’ve been there for years; they don’t have any extra credentials. They just kind of landed in these positions and have been there for a really long time.

FORD FOUNDATION

‘I have more than one identity. I’m a woman of color. I’m an immigrant.’

DIANE SAMUELS

After growing up in Jamaica, Diane Samuels came to the United States and worked at the Rockefeller Foundation for 13 years, starting out as a human-resources assistant. She is currently vice president for talent and human resources at the Ford Foundation, where she has worked for almost five years.

Facing several kinds of bias. I have more than one identity. I’m a woman. I’m a woman of color. I’m an immigrant. In philanthropy, we tend to gravitate toward individuals who’ve gone to the Ivy League. I have not gone to an Ivy League school.

Any challenges that I face have been subtle. It’s being talked over in meetings. There’ve been times where you make a point, and it’s not taken up in the room.

When I’m faced with those kinds of situations, it’s always a question of: Is this because of my educational background? Is this because I’m a woman of color? I’m always asking those questions.

When I started working in the States 19 years ago, I didn’t go to those questions. I grew up in Jamaica, which was 97 percent black, and race was not an issue. When I came here to the U.S., it took me a little while to understand how much color is a factor.

FAMILY INDEPENDENCE INITIATIVE

‘You get a lot of rejections.’

JESÚS GERENA

Jesús Gerena’s first job in the nonprofit world paid $24,000 a year in Boston in the late 1990s. He made it work, living with an aunt just outside the city. “I remember my mom saying, ‘How long are you going to do this?’” But he stuck with nonprofits. In 2010, Gerena opened the Boston branch of the Family Independence Initiative, a nonprofit that believes poor people know best what they need in order to improve their economic well-being. He took the top spot at the national organization in 2017.

Working with white grant makers. I often talk about how taxing it is as a person of color to continuously have to go to an almost exclusively white philanthropic community to ask for support to do our work. You get a lot of rejections.

Sometimes racial comments are made that you see as disparaging to a specific population. How do you handle that in a way that doesn’t alienate the individual that you’re speaking to? I can think of a couple of conversations in the last few years where you’re just like, “That’s a lot.” It’s a really unnecessary burden that I know we have to carry, and we do.

One time I shared our social-media platform with a funder, and it’s populated by the black, Latino, Asian folks in the community we partner with. The person who I was speaking to looked at the feed and said, “Your poor people seem like they’re a lot smarter than the ones that we work with.”

A funder said that in plain English, no hesitation.

That was a white funder in a predominantly black city. What’s funny is if you meet her in a room, you would think she’s the most progressive person. I don’t think that there was malintent, and it’s not what she carries as an agenda. But that speaks to the disconnect in these power structures.

PARTNERSHIP FOR SOUTHERN EQUITY

‘If we want to see a new world, we have to be willing to speak it into existence.’

NATHANIEL SMITH

Nathaniel Smith is founder of the Partnership for Southern Equity, an Atlanta nonprofit that promotes equitable growth and prosperity for all in the American South. In 2017, the group won a $1 million grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to help people of color and low-income people push for clean energy.

The courage to have tough conversations. I have become less and less concerned about how I make white people feel in difficult conversations. We have to be a lot more courageous about leading with our language and leading with our words. If we want to see a new world, we have to be willing to speak it into existence — and talk about what we don’t want to see in this world.

‘If there is a tension in the room, I name it.’

TONYA ALLEN

Tonya Allen started her career in community development and youth nonprofits in Detroit before moving into foundation work. In 2013, she was named CEO of the Skillman Foundation, which works to create opportunity for the city’s children.

Being undervalued. You’re always underestimated. You have to kind of accustom yourself to that. That’s people’s orientation and how they’re engaging with you, how they’re thinking about you, how they talk with you.

Making people aware of bias. What I try to do is always show up and be my authentic self and to say what I mean and to be direct. I also name things. If there is a tension in the room, I name it. But I’ll do it in a way that isn’t combative, in a way that it’s informative.

Even when people make mistakes, and they show bias, I very rarely get angry about it. I try to be aware of it but not to emotionally respond to it. And I don’t attribute that to people’s character. Sometimes it is a character flaw, a really big flaw. And then sometimes it actually could just be something that people aren’t aware of, they haven’t had exposure. I can be their partner in naming and helping them understand it.

Enduring other grant makers who question her stature. A colleague in philanthropy at another organization told me that he was concerned because I had too much influence for the size of my endowment, meaning that my foundation wasn’t big enough for me to have so much influence. And I told him, Well, isn’t that the purpose of having the corpus for any foundation, to make sure that you leverage what you have to create more change, that you want to punch above your weight class?

I think the intent behind the comment was large foundations are generally led by white people, and so if we go by the corpus size, only white people ought to have influence and power. That’s the way I interpreted what he said to me: That if you’re at a smaller foundation, you shouldn’t have more influence than he has.

He wouldn’t say that to a foundation leader who was a white man who was at the same size foundation or a white woman. Maybe he would say it to a white woman, but he would not say it to his peers. I have always been struck by people who say those things and then they’re also very shocked when they’re challenged on what they say.

Continued on Page 14

PAUL ENGSTROM

Tonya Allen joins students on their journey to school.

CICELY BURNS

‘We still trust white folks to tackle black folks’ problems.’

TENÉ TRAYLOR

Tené Traylor started her career at the United Way of Greater Atlanta before moving to the foundation world. For the last three years, she has overseen grant making in Atlanta at the Kendeda Fund.

Grant makers still don’t trust black leaders. We’ve made progress in a lot of ways; we still have a long way to go. We still trust white folks to tackle black folks’ problems.

Philanthropy is really centered on this notion of charity and benevolence to its core. There are assumptions of privilege and power wrapped up in that. For us to see progress, it’s not just about trusting the black leader. It’s not just about having black folks at the table. It’s about right-sizing those investments accordingly. It’s about us trusting black folks to tackle black liberation and black solutions in a meaningful way. We need to continue to have the conversation. Certain folks need to get out of the way.

We cripple our investments in the way we tailor them sometimes. We don’t trust the leadership, so we might not provide the general operating support to the black leaders. You might provide a very specific program grant with specific limitations. That comes with bias because we don’t do that across the board. We also are challenged about who we place our big bets on.

People are scooting over and letting folks come to the table, but they’re not still willing to get up and let somebody else have that seat.

‘I know how to navigate the system based on my life experience and work experience.’

ANTHONY CHANG

One of the biggest challenges nonprofit leaders of color face, according to Anthony Chang: “Who you are, where you come from, the lived experiences that you have are not always welcome.” Chang is executive director of Kitchen Table Advisors, a nonprofit based in Oakland that provides assistance to small-scale, sustainable farmers and ranchers. The majority of the group’s staff are people of color.

Working with other races and ethnicities. As an Asian-American, as a son of immigrants from China and Taiwan, and as someone doing work in Latino and immigrant communities, there’s this very strange experience where I interact with a lot of white folks, and I interact with a lot of black and brown folks. There’s this implicit unsaid, “We know you’re a person of color, but at the same time, we also know you’re not black or brown.”

It’s a very funny and strange dynamic that I don’t have a whole lot of words for, but there’s definitely something there that has been an undercurrent throughout my whole career.

How his “old boys’ network” helps. I know lots of leaders of color that face all sorts of barriers and challenges that are very real. For a number of different reasons, I have had a lot of privilege and luck.

I am a person of color, and at the same time, I have a college education and have worked in white-collar jobs. I know how to navigate the system based on my life experience and work experience. I have the equivalent of an old boys’ network that I can tap into for introductions, for advice, for information.

What it was like to work in majority-white nonprofits. When I was 25, I didn’t notice. It was what I knew from what my parents had either implicitly or explicitly taught me around assimilation. I just kind of accepted it as this is how the world works. But reflecting upon those experiences now, I’m kind of angry and frustrated and sad.

The organization that I work in now is a majority POC staff and a majority POC board. Half the leadership team are people of color. The contrast is like, Oh my gosh, it can be so different. It can be so much better. The work can be better. The culture can be more inclusive.

Continued on Page 16

SARAH TRENT

Anthony Chang (right) advises Rigo Bucio of Bucio Organic Farm, an organic vegetable and berry farm in Salinas, Calif.

‘I don’t take for granted that I have a job.’

SHIJUADE KADREE

Shijuade Kadree is chief advocacy officer at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center in New York. As Kadree has progressed in her career, she’s decided to speak out more and choose workplaces where she can be open about what it’s like to be female, black, and queer.

It’s not yet the norm for a black woman to be a leader. Sometimes people feel like I’m the exception to the rule. They’re not used to seeing a confident, educated black woman applying for senior roles, demanding comparable pay for the work that I do. It’s almost seen as a rebuff that I don’t just appreciate the fact that I’ve gotten the interview or appreciate the promotion that I’ve gotten.

ANDREA SCRIVANICH PHOTOGRAPHY

Learning to speak out — and consider the risks. I don’t think I’ve ever said or done anything in such a manner that I would get fired. But I often will have those conversations with my wife: “I’m going to say this thing tomorrow. Do we have enough in the savings account? Are we going to be OK?”

I don’t take for granted that I have a job, and I never assume that my high performance is a guarantee that I will keep my job. Because people don’t like to be made uncomfortable. Folks don’t like to be questioned.

But I continue to push boundaries.

Earlier on in my career, I was really: Do the work and don’t cause trouble. There’ve been times when people have, I don’t know, touched my hair is a really basic example. You want to explode, but you don’t explode at the office because you don’t want to lose your job.

Now when I mentor young people, I try to help folks navigate conversations authentically, communicatively, and with solutions. So, yes, you should go back and say, “You shouldn’t have touched my hair, and that was deeply offensive. I’m not OK with it.” You don’t have to hold that in.

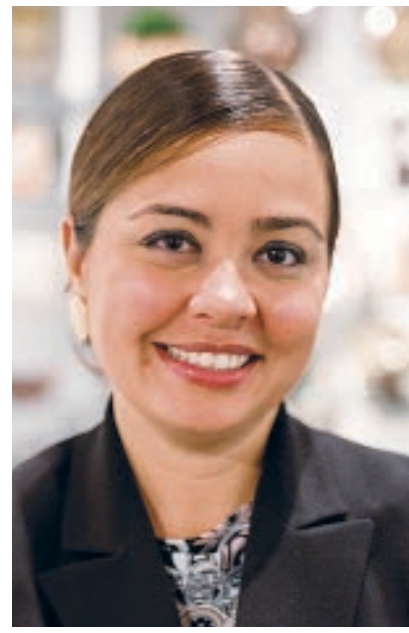
And I also talk about risk mitigation. I know that I don’t have job security, because I know that when I say certain things, it really could be the cherry on top. Like I’m always the person to say something, and I said one thing too many and now they don’t want to deal with it.

I try to talk to mentees about: What is the battle you want to pick? Is there something else that you’d want to highlight? Is this the time to bring it up? Because I don’t think every battle is worth being fought.

‘Millennials are unapologetically expecting more.’

YOLANDA COENTRO

Feeling stalled in her career in social services, Yolanda Coentro completed a certificate program at the Institute for Nonprofit Practice in Needham, Mass., designed to help promising nonprofit leaders develop business acumen and build professional networks. She stayed involved as a mentor and teacher in the program and in 2016 became the institute’s CEO.



LAUREN PAGE WADSWORTH

Avoiding stereotypes. I wasn’t sure about asking people for help. I didn’t know how to leverage a network and feel good about it. I wasn’t allowing myself to get the mentorship and support I needed to grow. I felt like I needed to make my own way. I needed to show people I could do it. I didn’t want to be somebody who needed someone else’s help to rise.

To make sure that we don’t get stereotyped, we sometimes go in the most extreme direction. I wanted people to think I deserve it. And so in working to deserve it, I didn’t allow myself all of the opportunities and privileges that other people take advantage of to rise.

Those who didn’t believe in me are now my champions. You think you’ve arrived, and these challenges are still there. There’s always the next level of assumptions, stereotypes, prejudice to push through.

I started early in my career as an organizer and an activist, and the role was very different. Now as a CEO, I’ve got to push through these challenges in a way where I’m candid and I’m clear and I’m courageous but also in ways that don’t burn bridges and allow room for conversation and understanding across differences.

I want to make sure that how I contribute to the world is to bring people together, and I have some influence over that in my small sphere as a CEO. I could have shut people out for not having believed in me because I didn’t fit the leadership profile that they had in mind. Instead I said, “Here’s how your reluctance about me impacted me. What was going on for you? How do we move through this together?” It’s just very different. The naysayers at the time are now my biggest champions.

A new generation is going to make things better for leaders of color. Millennials are coming into the field unapologetically expecting more. It’s exciting because they’re going to push the needle even further forward.

‘It’s hard to explain how lonely it is.’

KRYSTEN AGUILAR

La Semilla Food Center in Anthony, N.M., works to build a vibrant, sustainable food system in the Paso del Norte region of southern New Mexico and El Paso, Tex. Krysten Aguilar has been at La Semilla for seven years and became co-executive director in 2017.

LA SEMILLA FOOD CENTER

Sharing leadership lightens the load. Being an executive director is really difficult. And then being a woman of color adds another layer. Having a co-executive director to share the load — but also just having a friend and comrade around — has been really fantastic.

I came into the leadership role two years ago now. It’s hard to explain adequately how lonely it is and the weight that ends up on your shoulders when you’re responsible for the entire organization. Especially when you’re talking about an organization doing social-justice work. The weight of it is incredible. I’ve talked to my fellow co-executive director and was like, “I’m not sure I would want to do this as a sole executive director.”

Fundraising is where I need to code switch. That’s the one place I do code my language, shift how I speak about things. Part of me is like we have to be bold and speak our truth. But we have to be strategic about it. Fundraising is the one place where there do have to be filters sometimes.

Although we’ve been pushing ourselves over the past two years to be bold and to push our funders and to really speak the truth that we need to speak. Luckily in a lot of cases it’s also what people need to hear, what they want to hear. I think that by pushing ourselves, there is a payoff, literally and figuratively, but it can be hard. It can be a scary thing to do.

Continued on Page 18

‘Creating a really strong network is a necessity.’

JANINE LEE

Janine Lee worked in addiction treatment and prevention early in her career before moving to foundations. She has been CEO of the Southeastern Council of Foundations in Atlanta since 2011.

Listening is essential for leadership. I listen to the people very carefully, very thoughtfully. I pay a lot of attention to the dynamics of the organization and its culture, how people interact with each other, personal relationships. I read the tea leaves.

I also developed a strong, consistent, and long-lasting network of champions and colleagues and friends that I absolutely trust and can count on and that will be there if I fall and I have to get up and I have to start again.

Because we will fall. You can give 100 percent, and you will fall. It doesn’t even have to be anything you’ve done wrong, but there’s going to come a time when you’re either going to get restructured or terminated, and it will hit you like a ton of bricks. Creating a really strong network is a necessity, especially for a person of color. We’re not going to always land quickly or easily — no matter what our credentials are.

How things can get better. We have to value women and people of color and young leaders more. We have to value their perspectives and understanding and experience more. We’ve got to put more value on folks that didn’t necessarily go to Ivy League schools. There are a lot of people out there with their community-based experience, with the educational experiences that they’ve had, their life and work experience who can bring enormous value to philanthropy because of their ability to connect with people in communities.

SOUTHEASTERN COUNCIL OF FOUNDATIONS

JOSE CRUZ (CENTER) BARRIO LOGAN COLLEGE INSTITUTE

‘Unless I took that step first, nobody was going to follow.’

JOSE CRUZ

Jose Cruz is CEO of Barrio Logan College Institute, an afterschool college-prep program in largely Latino, low-income neighborhoods in San Diego. He’s deeply connected to the work. Cruz, his mother, and his brother left Puerto Rico to come to San Diego when he was 9 years old. “I could’ve been one of the students.”

The emotional challenge of seeking donations. Having to ask for resources so that people from a community like mine can just have equal opportunity, that’s a tough thing. We have egalitarian principles as a nation, and as a taxpayer, I would expect a lot of this to be taken care of without us having to create entities outside of government to address these issues of equity.

That would be difficult for any leader regardless of race, but when you have a personal connection to the mission, it can feel oppressive at times. I’ve had to work through some of those feelings.

Sharing vulnerabilities helps others do the same. Some people say that being an executive director or CEO is lonely. I’ve had moments of that in the development of the organization. I don’t feel that now.

We’ve developed a culture where vulnerability is OK. I always said, “Hey, come to me with your needs. Don’t be afraid. We’ll work and see how we can help each other.” But I realized that unless I took that step first, nobody was going to follow. I had to train myself as a leader to be OK with my vulnerabilities and share that with my senior-level staff. That allowed them the permission and the trust to do the same with me.

Continued on Page 20

CHRISTINE RUCKER

‘We want to see differences around the table yet speak with one voice.’

LAURA GERALD

Laura Gerald is a medical doctor. In 2016, after a career in public health, she became president of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust in Winston-Salem, N.C.

A failure to embrace difference. One of the major problems facing us as a field is that we have not really accepted what it would take to go back and heal the root causes of inequity. At its root is a question about who is valued and who is worthy of positive change and investment.

When we say diversity and inclusion, what we mean is that we want to look around and see something that is different, but we don’t want to really hear anything that is different. We don’t want to really think or approach problems in a different way. We don’t want to give voice to people with truly different backgrounds. We want to see differences around the table yet speak with one voice.

It makes it challenging for people of color to enter into and survive in that sort of environment because you still find your actual lived experience often discounted.

JULIANNA FISCHER

Niaz Dorry (far right) speaks at the Indigenous Environmental Network.

‘Even conflict is a sign of improvement.’

NIAZ DORRY

Niaz Dorry is a longtime environmental advocate. For the last year, she has been director of two organizations based in Gloucester, Mass.: the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance and the National Family Farm Coalition.

Feeling like a token. I don’t look like your typical person of color. My heritage is Iranian. I was at Greenpeace for a long time. We were going through this whole process of dealing with issues of diversity in the early ’90s. It was a very difficult conversation to have in a predominantly white organization.

I found myself in a weird place. In an organization that was trying to figure out what diversity means and how to even talk about it, I was the convenient diversity token. If you wanted somebody on a hiring committee, suddenly I was a person of color, but otherwise I wasn’t. It was really bizarre.

I’ve experienced that quite often, where I feel that I am the convenient person of color when one is needed. It speaks to how even as progressive people working in nonprofit organizations, we’re still uncomfortable with the idea of dealing with color, with race, with cultural diversity. The person who looks most like us is the one that’s easiest for us to talk these issues through with.

Things are getting better. Even conflict is a sign of improvement. We can avoid these conversations. We can brush them under the carpet or pretend that we did our diversity training, and it’s all good and so we must all no longer be racist. Just being very aware that there’s conflict here and let’s see how we can deal with it is what we need.

Note: These interviews have been edited for brevity and clarity.

Advice for Young Nonprofit Professionals of Color — From People Who Have Been There

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES.

Young people of color starting out in the nonprofit world often feel like they have fewer professional connections than their white peers. That might be the case, but they should make sure they avail themselves of all the chances they do have to build relationships, says Sam Cobbs, president of Tipping Point Community. If you get invited to after-work events or weekend retreats, go, he says. “If your CEO is having office hours, you want to make sure that you’re taking advantage of that access to go in and have a conversation.”

Cobbs tells Tipping Point interns that they should never eat lunch alone. “You want to pick people’s brains and learn as much as you can from everybody,” he says.

BUILD A BOARD OF DIRECTORS.

Develop a circle of professionals you can depend on for career advice and insights on how to approach challenging interpersonal issues at the office. Shijuade Kadree, chief advocacy officer at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center in New York, includes both people in the nonprofit world and friends in other fields.

She says that sounding board was particularly important when she worked at groups where she felt isolated because she was one of the few people of color. “I needed to have a trusted group of advisers who could understand what it was like to be in a space like that and help me navigate it.”

FIND A MENTOR.

Advisers who are willing to share what they know can help young professionals of color advance and avoid some of the challenges previous generations faced, says Terri Bradford Eason, who has been director of gift planning at the Cleveland Foundation since 2008 after a career in corporate banking. She encourages young people of color to seek guidance from professionals from all backgrounds.

“Many of my mentors were not of color because they were in limited supply,” she says. “That did not stop me from reaching out to get some thoughts and wisdom.”

MAKE INTERNAL CONNECTIONS.

Diane Samuels, vice president for talent and human resources at the Ford Foundation, says she has almost always had strong supervisors who championed her work. But Samuels says that if she had it to do over again, she would have been more deliberate in building ties to people outside her department.

“Having people within the organization who know your work and know your worth, outside of the person who manages you, is actually really important,” she says.

EMBRACE HARD CONVERSATIONS.

When you’re having a disagreement with a co-worker, open dialogue is better than letting the issue simmer, Samuels says. When she has to confront a difficult interpersonal issue with a co-worker of another race, she takes the advice she gives her employees.

“Even though it’s difficult, I try not to go first to race,” she says. “It may be about communication style. It may be about something else that’s happening with them that I have no insight into.”

CHRISTIE GOSHE

BUILDING NETWORKS
Making connections is critical for young professionals, says Sam Cobbs (bottom right), shown here with young adults in the employment program at First Place for Youth, a nonprofit he ran until 2018.

VALUE YOUR PERSPECTIVE.

When young people start working at an organization, many believe they have to adopt the perspective of the organization to be successful — especially if their race, ethnicity, or economic background isn’t well represented on the group’s staff, says Brennan Gould, CEO of the Charlottesville Area Community Foundation. She encourages them to be true to who they are.

“I have to remind myself of this, too, that my lived experience really does add value, and my perspective is a contribution to the work.”

RAISE YOUR VOICE.

When something doesn’t feel right, say something, says Anthony Chang, executive director of Kitchen Table Advisors, a nonprofit that provides assistance to small-scale, sustainable farmers. “It’s easy for me to say this and maybe harder to have done when I was 25 years old, but I would encourage folks to speak up for what they feel like is right,” he says. “Things aren’t going to change unless each of us speaks up and takes action.”

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.

It’s stressful to overcome bias and break down barriers, and over time that stress can have health consequences, says Laura Gerald, president of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust. “We have to be diligent about how we handle stress so that we’re not burned out,” she says.

Self-care looks different for different people, says Yolanda Coentro, CEO of the Institute for Nonprofit Practice. It can be spending time with close friends you can talk to, finding a passion outside of your work, creating art, meditation, exercise — whatever re-energizes you.

KNOW YOU CAN LEAVE.

Some workplaces are toxic, and you may not have the power to change them, Coentro says. This can be hard to accept, particularly for people who are committed to a cause, she says, but sometimes you have to move on to protect your well-being. “There are a lot of other jobs out there that are very healthy.”

— NICOLE WALLACE