

# AVOIDING THE GLASS CLIFF

Advice to Boards on Preparing for  
and Supporting a New Leader of Color



**Building Movement Project**

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The Building Movement Project's recent reports, [Making \(Or Taking\) Space: Initial Themes on Nonprofit Transitions from White to BIPOC Leaders](#) and [Trading Glass Ceilings for Glass Cliffs: A Race to Lead Report on Nonprofit Executives of Color](#), identified concerning trends in the way that nonprofit executive directors and chief executives of color experience their leadership roles, particularly when following an outgoing white leader. These findings prompted BoardSource and Building Movement Project to work together to offer insight and advice to boards about how to help avoid these pitfalls, both leading up to a transition and after a new leader is hired.

## BEFORE TRANSITION

Too many boards and organizations have not done the work of building an organizational culture that centers racial equity prior to hiring a new leader and — as a result — are leaving the work of advancing racial equity within their organization to a new leader of color. This places an incredible burden on new leaders and may make it difficult for the new leader to succeed in their new role. For all these reasons, boards that seek to set a possible future leader of color up for success should work to advance a race equity culture before a new leader joins the organization. This includes:

- ▶ **Define what a commitment to racial equity means for your organization.** Why is it important? What does it mean to your organization's work? What does it mean for your board and staff team? What will be different as a result of your commitment? Go deep into a sensemaking conversation about what it really means for your organization to be committed to racial equity beyond simply saying that you are.
- ▶ **Invest in your racial equity journey.** Building an organizational culture that centers racial equity takes time and money. At the board level, it is important to ask questions about how the organization is working to create a diverse, inclusive, and equitable working environment for its team members and supporting the investment of time and financial resources to make change. Equity in the Center's [Awake to Woke to Work](#) is a helpful framework to guide board- and staff-level work.

While the board must avoid engaging in operations at a level that crosses over into micromanagement, it is appropriate (and necessary) for the board to pay attention to how the chief executive is supporting and strengthening racial equity at the staff level. The board should ask the chief executive to:

- » **Track and share organizational demographics.** BoardSource encourages all organizations to track and share information about board and staff demographics via Candid (formerly GuideStar). The board should periodically review these metrics and pay particular attention if the organization seems to have a revolving door of employees of color, and directly engage the chief executive in a conversation about that if there is evidence of that dynamic — particularly at the senior leadership level.
  - » **Share updates on work being done to advance racial equity at a staff level.** The board should invite the chief executive to share how they are working to support and sustain a diverse, inclusive, and equitable workplace for their employees. This includes understanding — at a high level — what is being prioritized in terms of organizational policies, learning, and change.
- ▶ **Bring racial equity into conversations about succession planning.** All organizations should have a policy on succession, both for an emergency and a planned succession. As a part of the work to create those policies and plans, boards should engage with the chief executive around how they are supporting and strengthening the team in a way that may create opportunities to support internal leaders of color. Succession planning is also an opportunity for the board to consider what organizational change might be necessary to attract and retain a new leader, including a leader of color. For example, suppose executive compensation is out of synch with market realities. Succession planning may create an opportunity to proactively identify that dissonance and make changes now versus waiting until transition.

- ▶ **Develop a board action plan — and begin working it.** There will be work to do at both the board and staff level, but some of the things that the board can do on its own include:
  - » **Address board dysfunction.** If you have a board operating in dysfunctional ways — micromanagement, lack of engagement, lack of role understanding, or other critical board challenges — work to mitigate those issues now. These challenges will be exacerbated by any work you're doing to advance racial equity and warrant attention before onboarding a new CEO. A [board self-assessment](#) can be a helpful way to identify and begin addressing those issues.
  - » **Increase board knowledge and understanding of racial inequity.** If you haven't built the board's knowledge and understanding of the impact of racial inequity on your organization, the people and communities you serve, and society at large — the time is now. There is work to do at both the individual and collective levels. [This blog offers some thoughts and resources to help you get started.](#)
  - » **Diversify board composition.** Representation matters, so if your board is not yet racially diverse, now is the time to get serious about becoming more diverse. For advice on doing that well, [check out this short blog.](#)

## DURING TRANSITION & SEARCH

Once an organization is in a moment of transition, meaning they know that their current leader will be stepping down or leaving at a specific time, the board has an opportunity to ensure that the search and entire transition are handled in a way that prioritizes racial equity. Key priorities should include:

- ▶ **Select a search firm that prioritizes racial equity in its search practices.** Equitable search isn't just about identifying a diverse pool of potential candidates (though that is essential!). It's also about ensuring that all aspects of the search process prioritize equity. If the organization plans to use a search firm, boards are wise to carefully interview potential search firms and seek out those that have a demonstrated track record of leading searches in a way that prioritizes equity, including successfully placing leaders of color and demonstrating competence and commitment in identifying and interrupting bias within the selection process. This includes making clear to your search partner that the board will not move forward in the search if the pool of applicants is not racially diverse.
- ▶ **Prioritize diversity, inclusion, and equity within the interviewing and selection process.** Interviewing is inherently relational and can therefore be highly influenced by the personal preferences and styles of the interviewing team. Your board can work to offset the risks of bias by:
  - » educating the board and participating staff about implicit bias in search, and how to avoid it;
  - » ensuring that the search committee and interviewing team are racially diverse; and
  - » ensuring that board members and staff members do not have conversations with candidates outside of the structured interviewing process so that candidates with existing relationships don't have an advantage in the search process.
- ▶ **Adopt equitable compensation practices.** To ensure that any successful candidate is compensated fairly, adopt these practices:
  - » Conduct a rigorous external benchmarking process to ensure that compensation ranges are fair and appropriate based on the position's responsibilities.
  - » Post the salary range publicly when announcing the search.
  - » Avoid asking for or using salary history as a guide for future compensation.
- ▶ **Raise and allocate funds to support the leader's first year.** It takes time for a new leader to establish relationships with donors and funders, and some donors may choose to walk away from an organization after a long-term or beloved leader leaves. This can create challenges for a new leader, especially if they are not already

well-networked within the organization's funding community. Boards can help alleviate the pressures a new leader faces by seeking out and securing additional funds (ideally equal to one year's charitable support budget) to provide a strong runway for a new leader to establish trusted relationships with current and new potential funders.

- ▶ **Prepare the organization for a new leader.** It can be difficult for an organization to adjust to a new leader and leadership style, particularly after a founder or long-tenured CEO/ED. If possible, the board chair or transition committee chair should work with the current CEO or ED to help prepare the organization for a new leader and leadership style. Consider investments of time and dollars that can help prepare the organization for this significant change. The board itself will also need to prepare for change. Boards should prepare themselves for changes in communication patterns, meeting materials and engagement, and expectations for the board-staff partnership. Boards should be vigilant in challenging assumptions about what "must be" versus what "has been."
- ▶ **Be honest with candidates about your organization's "current state."** To be successful in their new role, candidates for the CEO or ED position need to have a clear and accurate sense of the role. Boards must communicate openly and transparently with finalists about the state of the organization, its funding and business model, and where it is on its racial equity journey. Be transparent with candidates about your organization's commitment to racial equity — what it is and what it isn't — so they are clear about what they would be signing up for. And if you don't have a shared sense of the answers to these questions at the board level, take the time to find out before beginning the interview process.
- ▶ **Consider providing an employment contract.** An employment contract can provide confidence to a CEO/ED candidate that they will be treated well by the organization, even if things don't work out. This can help mitigate the risk differential for candidates who may be less capable of absorbing a period of unemployment.

## Moving Past Sticker Shock



It's important to note that benchmarking compensation may create sticker-shock for boards if the outgoing chief executive's salary was significantly below market, which is unfortunately not uncommon. Boards that are serious about racial equity must find a way to right-size executive compensation, or they risk perpetuating inequities in terms of who is willing — and able — to work in nonprofit leadership.

## AFTER A NEW LEADER IS HIRED

It is easy for a board to think that their job is done once a new leader is hired and they can step back. But — with any new leader, including a new leader of color — the board must support the new CEO/ED in a way that sets them up for success. Some good practices to keep in mind include:

- ▶ **Celebrate your new leader respectfully:** While boards may feel a sense of pride in announcing a leader of color as their new chief executive, they should be respectful in how that news is shared and avoid framing that inadvertently tokenizes or undermines their new leader. Boards should consult with the new leader about if and how to talk about the new leader's racial/ethnic identity in the announcement and other early-tenure communications to ensure that the new leader is comfortable with how it is framed. As is true with the announcement of any new leader, it can be valuable to highlight the rigor of the search process and the experience and credentials of the new leader in these early communications. It's also important that a new leader of color not be positioned as the "answer" or the "end" to past or ongoing challenges the organization has faced on its racial equity journey, whether formally or informally.

- ▶ **Provide clear and attainable goals for the new CEO's first 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months.** The new CEO or ED must have clarity about the board's expectations for their first year. These should come from a formalized discussion about goals and priorities at the board level versus informal or individual board member-driven goals that risk creating confusion or moving targets for the new leader.
- ▶ **Anticipate discovery of "legacy issues."** It's not uncommon for a new leader to discover challenging organizational issues that the board itself may not be aware of. Boards must avoid faulting the new leader for legacy issues they didn't create and support them as they navigate through issues that may need to be addressed and faced as an organization. Boards also need to understand that leaders of color may incur more significant damage to their reputations when there are organizational challenges or issues under their tenure, which may mean that conversations and plans of action around how to address or communicate about legacy issues are more weighty and fraught.
- ▶ **Give them space.** Often during transition, the board becomes much more operationally engaged. And it can be difficult for some boards (or board members) to let go of that level of engagement. The board needs to be disciplined about moving back into its governance role once the new ED/CEO starts. Boards must avoid the inclination to micromanage a new leader and instead give them space to establish themselves as the organization's leader. This is especially important in the context of a first-ever leader of color for the organization, as micromanagement could be (or be perceived to be) racialized in a way that penalizes a new leader of color. It may be helpful for a board that anticipates potential challenges to do a refresher on the board's governance role. [BoardSource's Certificate of Nonprofit Board Education](#) is a useful resource. Similarly, the board must give the new leader space to establish themselves with the staff team. The board should create some formalized feedback loops for staff to share feedback about the CEO relatively early in their tenure (perhaps at the 6-month mark) that will be shared with the CEO as an input, but discourage informal feedback from staff to the board.
- ▶ **Offer support.** Adjusting to a new executive leadership position is a big challenge, especially for leaders in their first CEO or ED role (which is the majority of CEOs/EDs, according to BoardSource's [Leading with Intent](#) study). So while it's important to give them space, that's not the same as leaving them isolated without the board's support. Boards — perhaps via the board chair — should invite the new chief executive to share how the board can be most supportive of them as a leader and work to make themselves available in those ways. Boards should also consider providing flexible financial support that enables the new CEO/ED to invest in a leadership coach or other self-identified supports that provide a safe space to work through early-tenure challenges.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

While there's no checklist that can provide a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting a new leader of color, boards have an opportunity to learn from the experiences highlighted in [Making \(Or Taking\) Space: Initial Themes on Nonprofit Transitions from White to BIPOC Leaders](#) and [Trading Glass Ceilings for Glass Cliffs: A Race to Lead Report on Nonprofit Executives of Color](#). Taking the time to consider what can be done before, during, and after an executive transition is an investment in the organization's future and its commitment to racial equity.

**[For more on what boards can do to support new leaders of color, check out this blog from BoardSource and ProInspire.](#)**