

Supporting historically excluded leaders in Minnesota's nonprofit sector

Suggestions from Nonprofit Leaders



This summary highlights responses from more than 280 Minnesota nonprofit leaders to a question about how the nonprofit sector can better support historically excluded leaders. Their insights reflect lived experiences and expertise and, although their suggestions are not presented as evidence-based, many align with DEI best practices. For clarity, Wilder Research staff organized the themes using a pathways and pipelines framework.

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01

Who gets in?

Build equitable pathways into leadership: These practices help shape who can access opportunities and become part of the leadership pipeline.

- a. **Equitable hiring and promotion practices:** Ensure transparent, fair, and inclusive hiring and promotion processes. Remove unnecessary barriers (e.g., rigid educational requirements), post compensation ranges, and conduct culturally responsive and bias-aware performance reviews. Develop welcoming, strengths-based job descriptions.
- b. **Community engagement and active recruitment:** Build authentic relationships and partnerships with the communities served, and intentionally recruit, hire, and promote from within those communities.
- c. **Address pay inequities and strengthen benefits:** Ensure equitable and competitive compensation and benefits to attract, retain, and promote diverse leaders and reduce disparities within the workforce.
- d. **Recognize lived experience as valuable expertise:** Affirm lived experience, cultural knowledge, and community-rooted expertise as meaningful and legitimate qualifications.

02

Who moves up?

Support growth and advancement: Once individuals enter the organization, these structures help them grow and not just survive.

- a. **Mentorship and sponsorship programs:** Ensure leaders from underrepresented groups have consistent access to mentors and sponsors who actively advocate for their growth, onboarding, and retention.
- b. **Training and coaching:** Provide leadership development, coaching, and skill-building programs that are tailored to the strengths and needs of leaders from historically excluded populations.
- c. **Funding for professional development:** Dedicate sustainable resources to ongoing professional development, including training, conferences, coaching, and leadership programs.
- d. **Affinity groups and networking opportunities:** Create and sustain peer support groups, affinity spaces, and networking opportunities where underrepresented leaders can connect, share experiences, and access culturally relevant support.

“We have to address the systemic racism that exists in our nonprofit cultures, and create spaces for people of color, women, and people with disabilities to succeed.”

03

Who stays?

Create an inclusive environment where leaders can thrive: These conditions help determine whether leaders remain, grow, and feel they belong.

- a. **Foster an inclusive organizational culture:** Create a culture that welcomes and values diverse leadership styles and communication approaches. Expand the definition of "strong leadership" to include relational, collaborative, reflective, culturally grounded, and non-dominant leadership frameworks.
- b. **Flexible and accessible work environments:** Provide flexible work arrangements, including remote options, adaptable schedules, and proactive accommodations to meet diverse needs.
- c. **Anti-bias, cultural humility, and sensitivity training:** Provide regular, high-quality training that equips staff and leadership with the skills to challenge systemic bias, disrupt inequities, and contribute to inclusive, respectful workplaces.
- d. **Shared responsibility for equity work:** Ensure DEI work is a shared responsibility across the organization. Avoid placing disproportionate burden of DEI work on historically excluded leaders.

04

Who influences?

Share power: A pipeline is not just about who enters, it's about who shapes the organization.

- a. **Decision-making processes:** Challenge traditional structures of decision-making. Center marginalized voices to ensure diverse perspectives meaningfully shape organizational planning and strategic decisions.
- b. **Representation at the organizational and board level:** Ensure organizational and board composition reflects the demographics and lived realities of the communities served.

05

Who is accountable?

Sustain equity over time: These suggestions ensure that equity is not just episodic but institutionalized.

- a. **Accountability & transparency:** Commit to ongoing accountability and transparency in policies, processes, and decision-making. Regularly review performance evaluation tools, criteria, and organizational practices, to ensure they are culturally sensitive, do not provide advantages for dominant groups, and actively identify and address systemic biases.
- b. **Align resources with equity goals and ensure sufficient funding:** Ensure that expectations for equity and DEI work are matched with adequate staffing, resources, and unrestricted funding. Equity efforts must have dedicated budgets and organizational authority to be effective and sustainable.

“From my experience as a woman, a strong and supportive board, a highly skilled coach, and a peer circle have all been essential in my support.”

“Women’s leadership is different from men’s leadership. We often are viewed as being indecisive or even ‘flaky’ when we take the time to hear a range of ideas, or support staff even when they are not following through. Helping staff thrive in a ‘both/and’ leadership context is hard work and takes time. Recognizing placing value on this time instead of assuming it happens around the edges would be helpful.”

Background: Wilder Research and Bush Foundation partnered with the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits to survey leaders (Chief executive officers, executive directors, and presidents) to collect demographic data to supplement estimates of people serving as nonprofit leaders across Minnesota. The survey was open from November 14–December 16, 2024 receiving 284 responses from the 8,138 invites (a response rate of 3.5%).

Please visit our website for additional resources on leadership:
www.mncompass.org/who-leads-mn

Leadership Program Directory:
www.mncompass.org/leadership-program-directory

Leadership Toolkit:
www.mncompass.org/leadership-toolkit



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