

Qualified, Credentialed and Still Overlooked: What BIPOC Interim Leaders Know Too Well

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The recent [State of the Interim Leadership Profession report](#), published by Third Sector Company, confirms what many of us have been experiencing in real time: Interim leadership is becoming more visible, more connected, and more clearly defined as a professional practice.

The environment in which all nonprofit leaders serve has become more difficult; yet, burnout, board dysfunction, funding instability, organizational trauma, and the scaling back of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) commitments has made transitional leadership more complex, not less.

That reality deserves a more honest conversation, especially where BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color) leaders are concerned.

I write this not only as a nonprofit executive and consultant, but as someone who has spent decades doing the hard work that the sector says it values. I built experience. I led organizations. I strengthened systems. I earned credentials. I invested in formal study. I developed the judgment that comes only from years of navigating real organizations, real boards, real staff dynamics, and real community expectations. And yet, like many others, I have had to confront a painful truth:

Sometimes you can do everything right and still find that the opportunity, trust, and support do not materialize through no fault of your own.

That is not simply disappointing. It is deeply discouraging.

The Situation Is Not Getting Better for BIPOC Interims

The report notes that the DEI environment for inclusive and equity-informed interim leadership has worsened over the past three years. It also states plainly that BIPOC interim leaders are facing especially difficult challenges with boards around credibility and

sufficient support during leadership engagements. For those of us living this reality, that finding is not abstract research. It is lived experience.

The issue is not just that the nonprofit sector is dialing back DEI investments. The issue is also what that rollback reveals. In many cases, it shows that equity was easier to discuss than to practice. It shows that some colleagues are comfortable affirming the language of inclusion, but far less willing to share power, extend trust, or challenge bias when it matters most. It shows that allyship is often strongest in concept and weakest in action.

That gap has consequences.

For BIPOC leaders, credibility is too often not assumed. It must be repeatedly earned, defended, and re-earned, even when the résumé is strong, the record is proven, and the assignment itself calls for seasoned leadership.

Board readiness is one of the greatest influences on whether a leadership engagement succeeds. That matters because when a board enters a transition confused, reactive, or unprepared, the leader is already carrying a difficult assignment. When that same board also struggles to recognize the legitimacy, authority, or expertise of a BIPOC leader, the work becomes heavier still.

This issue is not theoretical for me. I left a leadership role after it became clear that the board chair, with just 6 months of nonprofit experience, was unwilling to work with me or trust my expertise, while placing confidence in an executive director with no nonprofit experience. Experiences like that are difficult to dismiss as mere differences in style or perspective. They reflect a deeper problem around who is granted credibility, whose judgment is trusted, and how expertise is valued in practice.

The Profession Must Speak of the Injustices to Its Own with Candor

We often describe leaders in transition as stabilizers, capacity builders, bridge builders, and guides through change. That is true. But we should also say plainly:

BIPOC leaders are often asked to do this work inside organizations carrying unresolved harm, identity tensions, broken trust, and uneven commitments to equity. In those settings, the leader is not only managing operations. They are navigating culture, power, and perception in real time.

That matters because transitional leadership requires boards to move quickly toward trust, clarity, and support. If they cannot or will not do that, the engagement is compromised before it has a fair chance to succeed. Leadership in transition should be treated as a strategic tool, not merely a crisis response. I would add that boards must also treat the

leader as a strategic professional, not as a placeholder to be second-guessed, contained, or symbolically welcomed while substantively unsupported.

The Sector Must Grapple with the Emotional Cost of this Dynamic

There is a particular kind of hurt in being told, directly or indirectly, that preparation is the path, only to discover that preparation is not enough to overcome bias. There is a particular fatigue in watching less qualified individuals move with greater ease because they are perceived as a more natural fit for leadership. There is a particular frustration in hearing organizations speak the vocabulary of justice while failing to practice the habits that justice requires.

This is not a call for sympathy. It is a call for honesty and accountability.

If the nonprofit (and the interim executive profession) sector truly values equitable leadership, then it must do more than publish statements and host conversations. It must examine how boards assess credibility, how trust is extended, whose expertise is presumed, and whose leadership is treated as provisional, even when fully qualified.

We must understand that transitions are not equity-neutral moments. There are moments when power is often concentrated, anxiety is elevated, and bias can become even more pronounced.

There are useful recommendations for moving forward, including stronger board education, greater attention to equity and cultural awareness, mentoring and support for new and BIPOC leaders, and deeper collaboration across the profession. Those are important steps. But recommendations alone are not enough. The profession will only move forward when practice catches up to principle.

It's Time For the Profession to Stop Talking and Do Something About It

We need a sector willing to admit that being qualified does not always translate into being supported. We need colleagues willing to examine whether their allyship is visible only in rhetoric or also in risk, advocacy, sponsorship, and action. We need boards willing to understand that a leadership engagement succeeds not simply because they hired someone competent, but because they created the conditions in which that competence could be exercised with authority and trust.

BIPOC leaders do not need lowered standards. We need fair standards applied consistently. We do not need symbolic inclusion. We need real engagement, real credibility, and real support.

We do not need to be invited into difficult work only to be burdened by the very inequities the sector claims it wants to dismantle.

Leadership in transition has the potential to strengthen organizations at pivotal moments. The question is whether the sector is ready to strengthen the conditions under which all leaders, including BIPOC leaders, can fully do the work they have prepared themselves to do.

If it is not, then the problem is not a lack of talent. It is a lack of will.

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