

Confronting Racism in the Interim Leadership Profession

A State of Interim Leadership Position Paper

September 2026

OUR POSITION

Racism in the interim executive profession requires coordinated structural action across every part of the profession's ecosystem. Third Sector Company's 2023 and 2026 *State of the Interim Profession* reports concluded that trust is extended unevenly to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) interim leaders. Over the three-year period, interim executives reported that the gap is widening, not closing. The 2026 findings suggest that these worsening conditions are being compounded by a broader disinvestment in diversity, equity, and inclusion across the nonprofit sector. BIPOC interim leaders report being held to a higher standard of proof, facing slower and more scrutinized trust-building with boards, and carrying the ongoing burden of managing how much of themselves they can safely bring to the work.

Addressing racism in interim leadership requires more than awareness. It requires changes in how interim leaders are recruited and supported, how boards work with interim leaders, how interim leadership is taught and practiced, and how the profession holds itself accountable. Equity is a core concept of methodical and strategic interim leadership and should not be taught or portrayed as a separate initiative.

Third Sector Company has a particular responsibility within this work. As an organization that prepares interim executives, supports boards and organizations in transition, conducts research, and convenes practitioners, we have both an opportunity and an obligation to help the profession move from acknowledging these challenges to actively changing the conditions that create them.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Interim leadership is a distinct professional practice. Unlike traditional temporary positions, interim leaders enter organizations during periods of transition, uncertainty, and change with an expectation that they will quickly assess complex situations, establish credibility, build trust, and provide effective leadership within a finite period of time.

Their success depends not only on their experience and expertise, but also on whether boards, staff, and others are willing to recognize their authority and trust their judgment. Much of what shapes that trust is not written into a job description or measured through credentials alone. It is

shaped by perceptions of leadership style, communication, presence, and the often-unspoken question of who is viewed as credible in the room. Because these judgments are frequently subjective and rarely examined, they create opportunities for bias to influence how leaders are evaluated, listened to, and allowed to succeed.

These dynamics are particularly consequential in interim engagements. Organizational uncertainty, heightened emotions, compressed timelines, and decision-making authority concentrated among a small group of people create conditions in which racial bias can have significant impact.

For BIPOC interim leaders, the challenge is not limited to gaining access to these roles. Many report that the burden of proving competence continues throughout the engagement, affecting how their assessments are received, how their authority is recognized, and how much trust they are afforded. The experiences documented through Third Sector Company's research are not isolated incidents or individual misunderstandings.

The consequences extend beyond individual leaders. When qualified BIPOC interim leaders are unable to fully exercise their expertise because trust, authority, credibility, and support are unevenly extended, organizations lose access to the full value of that expertise. The cost is not borne only by BIPOC interim professionals. It is borne by the organizations and communities they are leading through change.

For a profession built around helping organizations navigate consequential moments, we have a responsibility to change these conditions.

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

Dr. Orletta Caldwell | Detroit, MI

WHAT WE KNOW

Third Sector Company's understanding of racism in the interim profession has developed through research and practitioner experience.

What our research tells us

The inaugural 2023 State of the Interim Profession report, based on a survey of 600 interim professionals from across the country and presented at the 2023 National Interim Leadership Summit, included a dedicated section documenting the experiences identified by BIPOC interim leaders. Recurring comments included:

- Having to perform at a measurably higher standard than White colleagues to be perceived as equally competent.

- Slower trust-building with boards, accompanied by disproportionate scrutiny of financial judgment and donor relationships.
- The ongoing labor of managing their authentic selves and continuously gauging how much of their life and professional experience they could safely bring into an engagement.
- Long-standing exclusionary cultures, exacerbated by boards and previous executives who were unaware of how their own behavior reinforced the exclusion of BIPOC executives from significant policy discussions and board caucusing.

The report also identified the need for safe peer spaces, mentorship structures, and a guide to help White interim allies act in support of BIPOC colleagues.

Three years later, the 2026 report measured the same dimensions and found an overwhelming perception of deterioration rather than progress.

Two findings were particularly significant:

The Roles and Values of Equity and Diverse Lived Experiences. This was rated worse than in 2023. The report noted that structural inequities continue and, in many cases, are getting worse because of disinvestment in diversity-related programs. BIPOC interim leaders also reported unique challenges in board dynamics.

The Nonprofit Workplace, DEI and Funding. This was also rated worse. Burnout, staffing shortages, scaled-back DEI investment, and funding instability were identified as compounding factors that make organizational transitions more complex for the interim leaders entering them.

Taken together, the two reports do not describe a static problem requiring continued awareness. They describe movement in the wrong direction. Our research clearly points that race has a broad impact on the effectiveness of interim engagements, leadership transitions, board relationships, and, ultimately, organizational outcomes.

Practitioner experience adds context

Following the release of the 2026 State of the Interim Profession report, Dr. Orletta Caldwell, an experienced nonprofit leader and graduate of Third Sector Company's Interim Executives Academy, wrote "Qualified, Credentialed, and Still Overlooked: How Racism Shows Up in the Interim Profession."

Dr. Caldwell's paper addressed the reality of lived experience and data that identified the prevalence of racism in the profession and a call to action to White professionals who are serious about demonstrating their commitment to antiracism. Her paper underscored a critical reality: being qualified does not always translate into being supported. A successful leadership engagement requires more than hiring someone who is competent. It requires conditions in which that competence could be exercised with authority and trust.

"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."

Dr. Orletta Caldwell | Detroit, MI

On June 17, 2026, Third Sector Company convened a National Interim Executives Forum to move the conversation from diagnosis toward committed action. More than 70 aspiring and practicing interim leaders participated in the Forum, which was deliberately titled to name racism directly rather than through softened language.

Participants were encouraged to read both State of the Interim Profession reports and Dr. Caldwell's paper in advance. The Forum was facilitated by Kate Tibone and included commentary from experienced BIPOC interim practitioners Juan Pablo Berrizbeitia, Aiko Pandorf, and Dr. Gary Damon, Jr. Dedicated caucus spaces were provided for BIPOC participants and White allies. The Forum closed with each participant identifying a specific commitment and an accountability partner.

For purposes of the conversation, participants used a shared definition:

Racism is the operation of systems, structures, norms, and practices that consistently produce unequal outcomes for BIPOC interim leaders, regardless of anyone's intent or individual prejudice.

The purpose of the Forum was to move from naming the problem to acting on it. The conversation focused on both individual accountability and structural change.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR INTERIM LEADERSHIP

Throughout the Forum, BIPOC interim executives shared lived experiences of racism that illustrated the realities many BIPOC leaders face. Their experiences demonstrate that racism in an interim engagement is not a single event. It is a mechanism that recurs, in different forms, at every phase of the work.

Looking at racism through Third Sector Company's Six Phases of Strategic Interim Leadership shifts the focus beyond hiring. If we only examine racism at the point of hiring, we miss much of what BIPOC interim leaders experience. The six phases allow us to see how inequity can show up throughout the entire leadership journey: in accessing information, in building trust, in exercising authority, in making decisions, and leading through a transition.

The six phases also identify where action can occur, creating an opportunity for the profession to move from recognizing the problem to changing the conditions that allow it to persist.

“If we only examine racism at the point of hiring, we miss much of what BIPOC interim leaders experience. The Six Phases allow us to see that inequity can show up throughout the entire leadership journey: In accessing information, in building trust, in exercising authority, in making decisions, and leading through a transition. This phased framework to interim leadership creates an opportunity for the profession to move from recognizing the problem to changing the conditions that allow it to persist.”

Kate Tibone | Seattle, WA

PHASE ONE: ENGAGEMENT

Creating shared buy-in about the roles, expectations, and deliverables of an interim leader prior to engagement.

Getting an interim executive position relies heavily on informal referral networks. These networks are predominantly White. As a result, BIPOC candidates are not merely disadvantaged in competition. They are frequently never considered because they sit outside the networks where opportunities circulate.

Credentialing requirements are also applied unevenly. BIPOC candidates report being asked to substantiate their qualifications more often than White candidates with comparable experience. This is not simply about increasing representation; the profession needs to broaden how it defines leadership readiness and recognize that referral networks reproduce themselves.

The engagement phase is also a critical point for establishing trust. Board leadership has an obligation to demonstrate trust for the transitional leader. This is particularly important when a candidate does not resemble the majority of people within the organization.

“Given how networks operate in the nonprofit sector, organizations that place interim leaders have a responsibility to demonstrate recruitment strategies that provide organizations with diverse candidates that may not be located through traditional means, but offer perspectives, life experiences, credentials, and professional accomplishments that open up possibilities for strategic leadership that is truly transitional, if not transformational, in the outcomes created.”

Erick Seelbach | Tacoma, WA

When diversity, equity, and inclusion is not discussed openly in the engagement phase, BIPOC interim leaders report that unspoken expectations and behaviors set the trajectory for their entire short-term tenure.

PHASE TWO: DIAGNOSIS

Forming a shared reality of the current status of the organization. Through data collection and interviews, current challenges and opportunities emerge that point to long- and short-term strategies to evolve operations, culture, and community reputation.

The diagnostic phase requires an interim to assess the organization quickly and be trusted in both the process and the results of the assessment.

Some BIPOC interim leaders report that board trust builds more slowly during this phase. They report disproportionately higher levels of scrutiny of their financial judgment and their capacity to manage donor relationships.

This additional scrutiny can require BIPOC interim leaders to establish both the credibility of their findings and their own credibility as the person presenting them. Practitioner Aiko Pandorf describes this as a cycle of “biased credibility.”

“A crucial early responsibility of an interim once engaged is to communicate findings regarding the financial stability of an organization to the board and to take appropriate action. The board comprises individuals who are deeply invested in the organization’s financial solvency, and they often express their desire for a more comprehensive analysis.

However, presenting critical findings can be met with resistance and skepticism, often first directed towards my analysis or even the financial data. In such situations, I have found it beneficial to bring in an external “expert.” It cannot be easily overlooked that a white consultant is more quickly heard and less frequently required to defend the findings or their skills. This perpetuates the cycle of biased credibility.”

Aiko Pandorf | San Francisco, CA

PHASE THREE: PLANNING

Constructing a shared, iterative approach to addressing the findings of the organizational assessment process that would benefit from transitional leadership interventions and the immediate operating priorities of the organization.

Initial plans created by some BIPOC interim leaders face significantly more questions, pushback, and scrutiny, with an inference that personal bias may exist in their proposed strategies.

BIPOC practitioners also report that equity-related findings they raise risk being interpreted as advocacy or “having an agenda,” while the same finding raised by a White interim may be received as objective analysis. This dynamic undermines the interim’s credibility and the impact of an analysis that needs to become organizational reality.

“I want to be honest about what I actually know. I can’t be certain that a White interim would have their diagnosis and interim work plan received differently by the Board. But I do know that during some of my engagements as interim, I had to establish the credibility of my observations before I could act on them. I developed the practice of making my process explicit and sharing it. I shared the data points and reasoning that supported every assessment and recommendation for action. This extra layer of work was substantial, frustrating and exhausting. I’m not sure if it was necessary because of who I am or other reasons. It’s not simple to distinguish. But I am certain that it was necessary for me to get through the engagement with this Board.”

Juan Pablo Berrizbeitia | Staunton, VA

PHASE FOUR: ALIGNMENT

Managing a set of iterative strategies that builds shared responsibility, celebration, and accountability throughout the organization for success.

Building internal buy-in requires the exercise of authority. BIPOC interims report that authority is not extended evenly.

Communication styles read as truth-telling from a White interim may be read as decisive, while similar communication from a non-White interim may be seen as aggressive or difficult. This is reported as a particularly difficult challenge for BIPOC women who expend additional uncompensated labor navigating how to effectively exercise their duties and expertise.

In practical terms, BIPOC interims have to repeatedly establish authority and prove themselves before being allowed to do the day-to-day work of the position.

“On one occasion, after I finished my interim ED engagement, I had coffee with the successor ED who came in after me. We were both highly educated and capable professionals. But we were different in that he was White and culturally aligned with the board, and I was culturally foreign to them. We had a great collegial conversation. We shared our reads on the organization and its culture. They were almost identical.

After the coffee, I asked myself: what makes the effectiveness of our leadership different? It wasn't the organizational diagnosis, because we were seeing the same things. I think it was because of his cultural alignment with the board, which I didn't have. He didn't have to translate his observations and decisions into a language that the board could find culturally “neutral”. I had to. His authority was probably automatically extended, but I had to repeatedly prove my authority for every significant decision.”

Juan Pablo Berrizbeitia | Staunton, VA

PHASE FIVE: TRANSFORMATION

Leveraging the information, processes, and outcomes of the engagement to begin building a picture of what is next for the organization and the type of leadership needed to create that collective aspiration.

Surface-level change can mask deeper structural inequity, particularly when the board overseeing the transformation has not examined its own racial dynamics.

BIPOC interims are often best positioned to identify these dynamics, but they may also bear the highest professional cost for naming them.

“Throughout my interim engagements, I have learned that organizations can successfully change structures, policies, and leadership while leaving underlying power dynamics untouched. Surface-level progress creates the appearance of transformation, but sustainable change requires boards to examine themselves with the same rigor they expect of staff.”

Dr. Gary Damon, Jr. | Montgomery, AL

Some BIPOC interim leaders describe a gravitational pull to “wait until the next leader is hired.” This inhibits the interim’s ability to achieve the outcomes the transformation phase is intended to provide to the organization and its next leader.

PHASE SIX: TRANSITION

Facilitating an off- and onboarding process that completes the bridge between a nonprofit’s prideful past and hopeful future in service to the community.

Closure determines what gets carried forward and who receives credit for it. Many BIPOC interim executives report that organizational memory of an engagement is not race-neutral. More challenging findings raised by a BIPOC interim are more likely to be quietly set aside in the final organizational narrative. Because future placement depends heavily on referral, this phase often returns the cycle to Engagement, reproducing the same network-based exclusion that shaped the leader’s entry into the work.

“I have found that the final days of an assignment often have the greatest influence on what endures. Transition is not simply about transferring knowledge; it is about ensuring honest lessons, difficult decisions, and meaningful progress are not lost in the handoff.

In the end, BIPOC participants agreed the six-phase framework matters as a methodology to call out the multitude of issues as well as begin to identify specific actions in each phase that have the potential to significantly change the current trajectory of incidence of examples of racism in the profession.”

Dr. Gary Damon, Jr. | Montgomery, AL

Taken together, the six phases shift the conversation away from the topic of racism as an occasional, isolated incident and toward racism as a property of the system’s ordinary operation.

Each phase represents a distinct point of structural intervention; addressing only one phase, such as initial hiring, leaves the other five untouched and the underlying pattern intact.

This provides a way for the entire interim profession to change the landscape for all professionals and the nonprofit who benefit from their skills, expertise and commitment.

“This is a break-through finding for the interim profession as it shifts the conversation away from the topic of racism as an occasional, isolated incident and toward racism as a property of the system’s ordinary operation. Each phase represents a distinct point of structural intervention; addressing only one phase, such as initial hiring, leaves the other five untouched and the underlying pattern intact. This provides a framework for the entire interim profession to change the landscape for all professionals and the nonprofit who benefit from their skills, expertise and commitment.”

Jeffrey Wilcox | Head of Faculty, Interim Executives Academy | Seattle, Washington

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

In addition to creating a shared understanding of the prevalence, complexity, and harms associated with racism experienced by many BIPOC interim professionals, a critical outcome of the National Interim Executives Forum was individual and group commitment to take action.

Forum participants identified several areas where interim professionals could help drive change.

Board Relations & Governance

This was the largest cluster of interest among Forum participants, consistent with the high levels of concern expressed by all interim executives in both reports.

Commitments included interim leaders:

- Influencing board training, board meeting agenda, and board committees to identify and rectify inequitable practices and examples of bias.
- Appropriately calling out in the diagnostic phase, and “taking the heat” to speak the truth about examples of racism and inequity reported and observed.

- Advocating for an intentionality to recruiting and considering a diverse pool of candidates for its next chapter of leadership.
- Creating resources and tools that help boards recognize how implicit bias can shape perceptions of credibility, leadership style, communication, and decision-making before an interim engagement even begins.

Interim Engagement & Placement

This cluster was aimed at looking at networks, groups and organizations that serve as purveyors of potential interim candidates to nonprofit organizations seeking interim leadership.

Commitments included interim placement leaders:

- Tracking racial and other demographic data in placements to document employment trends and biases associated with the profession.
- Assuring BIPOC interim executives are included in virtually all referrals of potential candidates for consideration by a nonprofit organization.
- Significantly elevating and highlighting BIPOC interim-led organizations as references to other nonprofits considering an interim executive.
- Advocating that boards have a diverse candidate pool rather than a general statement about commitment to diversity.

White Allyship & Professional Connection

This cluster was aimed at individuals who identify as Caucasian interim professionals seeking to advance the entire profession and their BIPOC peers.

Commitments included White interim leaders:

- Identifying their own “blind spots” that are unintentionally using their race, as opposed to skills or experience, as a competitive advantage over other applicants.
- Leveraging their position as a White interim executive to be direct about how inequity is showing up in the organization and incorporating actions in the planning and alignment phases to remove barriers and change behaviors.
- Forming relationships with BIPOC interim executives to create increased racial understanding within the profession and to lean on one another for tough conversations and help to overcome personal harm.

- Participating in regional and national networks to build a strong national community of peers to tackle tough issues like racism.

THE ACADEMY'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Third Sector Company holds the position that addressing racism in interim leadership requires coordinated structural action across every part of the profession's ecosystem.

Awareness efforts alone, repeated without structural change, have contributed to a documented worsening of conditions over three years.

This means, in addition to the commitments made by the participants, the Interim Executives Academy must actively facilitate or help advance the efforts of others to:

- Create avenues for interim executives to access training, coaching, and consultation to help them evolve board practices away from institutionalized bias and focus on modern-day equitable board governance of community-based organizations.
- Integrate consideration of race, power, history and organizational culture throughout the Interim Executives Academy methodology. Equity is a core concept of methodical and strategic interim leadership and should not be taught or portrayed as a separate initiative.
- Coordinate a national data-gathering effort to profile the racial composition of interim placements.
- Form and support BIPOC-led interim executive networks that create a peer-based resource to effectively compete with existing informal relationships that are currently less accessible to BIPOC interim executives seeking employment.
- Structure future professional research to disaggregate BIPOC experiences from the general findings of the profession and include BIPOC interims in the structuring of questions, analysis and reporting.
- Emphasize to funding organizations the power of BIPOC interim leaders to change the course of bias and racism that holds back the nonprofit sector from reaching its potential as a community developer and encourage their investments in networks to create high levels of professionalism and outcomes.
- Build shared accountability to advance the commitments made by interims outlined in this report to effectively change how racism is currently showing up in the profession.

These commitments do not represent a complete solution. They identify where Third Sector Company can use its own role, resources, and influence to contribute to change.

CONCLUSION

Two reports, three years apart, have now described the same harmful situation moving in the same direction: worse, not better. The evidence is not in question. A national Forum of practitioners and organizations that advance interim leadership has named concrete commitments in response. What remains in question is whether interim leaders and the profession as a whole will treat this evidence as a call to structural change or allow it to settle, once again, into the category of acknowledged but not acted upon.

The implications extend beyond individual leaders. The interim profession exists to help nonprofit organizations navigate some of their most complex moments when clarity, stability, and experienced leadership are needed most. If qualified BIPOC leaders are unable to fully exercise their expertise because trust, authority, and credibility are unevenly extended, then organizations and communities ultimately bear the cost. Creating equitable conditions for interim leaders is not only a matter of fairness but also essential to ensuring that nonprofit organizations have access to the full range of leadership talent and experience needed to serve their missions.

At Third Sector, we anchor to the Six Phases of Strategic Interim Leadership because the logic model provides a roadmap for where change can occur. Each phase represents an opportunity for boards, placement partners and hiring teams, interim leaders, and the profession itself to interrupt patterns and to change how qualified BIPOC leaders can lead with authority, trust, and the support necessary to succeed in these roles.

We know the Forum is one conversation in a much larger arc. The data that led us here didn't change overnight, and it won't be undone by a single gathering either. What we can do is keep measuring it honestly, keep convening the people doing this work, and keep building the kind of accountability that both lasts and creates change.

Our hope is that when this profession measures itself again, the story will be different. We hope the data will reflect measurable progress: stronger systems of accountability, more equitable access to interim opportunities, greater trust and support for BIPOC interim leaders, and a profession that has moved from acknowledging these challenges to actively changing the conditions that create them.

IN GRATITUDE

This work was informed by the practitioners who contributed to the planning and facilitation of the National Interim Executives Forum, shared their experiences with colleagues, and helped move the conversation toward action:

Juan Pablo Berrizbeitia — Staunton, Virginia

Dr. Orletta Caldwell — Detroit, Michigan

Dr. Gary Damon, Jr. — Montgomery, Alabama

Aiko Pandorf — San Francisco, California

Erick Seelbach — Tacoma, Washington

Kate Tibone — Seattle, Washington

Jeffrey Wilcox — Seattle, Washington

Third Sector Company extends special appreciation to Dr. Orletta Caldwell for issuing a call to action with the publication of her article and co-facilitating this topic at our National Interim Executives Forum. Thank you to Kate Tibone for helping co-facilitate the national discussion and editing this document.

***Special thanks to Erick Seelbach for coordinating
the National Interim Executives Forum and co-authoring this position paper.
Nancy Bacon and Jeffrey Wilcox, Contributing Editors***

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

By Orletta E. Caldwell, *Beyond Existing Enterprises*, for Third Sector Company

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.

About the Author. *Dr. Orletta Caldwell is a nonprofit executive, consultant, and educator with more than 35 years of experience in nonprofit management, leadership, and organizational development. She is the founder of Beyond Existing Enterprises, which helps mission-driven organizations strengthen their strategy, governance, compliance, and sustainability. Her work is grounded in a deep commitment to equity, capacity building, and advancing stronger leadership within the nonprofit sector.*