

VISION FOR CHANGE:
A New Wave of
Social Justice Leadership

Helen Kim & Frances Kunreuther

BUILDING MOVEMENT PROJECT

The goal of the Building Movement Project is to build a strong social justice ethos into the nonprofit sector, strengthen the role of nonprofit organizations in the United States as sites of democratic practice, and promote nonprofit groups as partners in building a movement for progressive social change.

To accomplish its goals, the Building Movement Project makes use of four core strategies:

- Changing the discourse and practice within the nonprofit sector to endorse social change and social justice values.
- Identifying and working with social service organizations as sites for social change activities in which staff and constituencies can be engaged to participate in movement building.
- Supporting young leaders who bring new ideas and energy to social change work.
- Listening to and engaging people who work in social change organizations—especially grassroots and community-based groups—to strengthen their ability to shape the policies that affect their work and the communities they serve.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

HELEN S. KIM is an organizational development consultant, leadership trainer and coach with over twenty years of experience in working with social change organizations and leaders. She is a co-author of *Working Across Generations: Defining the Future of Nonprofit Leadership* and has facilitated many regional, national, and international convenings on social justice movement building strategies and supporting the next generation of nonprofit leaders. She is a trainer and coach for Rockwood Leadership Institute, team member of Building Movement Project and consultant member with the Evelyn & Walter Haas Jr. Fund Flexible Leadership Investment Program and RoadMap. Helen also served as a lead trainer for the Bridge Builders Fellowship at the Women's Funding Network and Lead the Way Fellowship at the Women of Color Policy Network, NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. A 2009 Gerbode Fellow, Helen aspires to live and work with generosity of spirit and passion for justice.

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INTRODUCTION

From designing strategic campaigns and building lasting coalitions, to fundraising and managing staff and volunteers, executive directors are expected to inhabit a wide-range of skills and demonstrate many facets of leadership. Over the course of several months, we interviewed seventeen US social justice leaders under 40 who serve as the executive or co-director of an organization. Our goal was to learn more about the experiences of younger leaders committed to large-scale change. The executive directors we talked with are an impressive group—creative, thoughtful and speaking from their hearts. It was clear from the interviews that they are driven by their commitment to their organizations. They are executive directors in order to contribute to a larger movement for social change.

Yet, younger leaders in the social justice movement are facing big challenges such as economic crises impacting communities, reductions in funding especially for local groups, and race and gender dynamics that create even more barriers and pressure. Their experiences – and their needs – speak to the changing landscape of the social justice movement, and shed light on the infrastructure needed to create sustainable leaders, organizations, and networks for years to come.

This report details the specific findings of our conversations with these diverse younger leaders, focusing on what it takes to do their jobs and makes recommendations for concrete change that will support their visions, and help to build a stronger progressive infrastructure for all stakeholders.

FOUR KEY FINDINGS

The leaders we interviewed have an inspiring vision for large-scale change, including new methods for organizing, working across boundaries, and building scale. Their ideas of where they want to take their organizations' work are both wide-ranging and forward reaching. For example, leaders described their goals of changing the industry labor standard for low-wage and vulnerable workers; making policy changes at state and national levels; reframing the narrative around immigration reform; and having a coordinated strategy for organizing in the South.

The pull of the work and vision, the ability to build power, the strategic alliances they are able to create, and the connection to community, give them a high level of satisfaction with the job. And, as a generation of leaders who grew up in the social justice movement, they have a lot to offer their current organizations and the field. We focus on four areas where we could accelerate support for new social justice leadership and offer them the tools and leverage they need to get the job done.

1. STEERING THE SHIP WHILE CHARTING THE COURSE: THE ROLE OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Those we interviewed are honored to be in positions of leadership, but they also struggle with them. Younger executive and co-directors – like their older peers – are being asked to balance many roles: holding the vision and strategy of the organization and at the same time managing staff, fundraising, and other day-to-day activities.

One way they have addressed these conflicts is through support and in many cases intensive training on how to be transformational leaders, that is, how to focus on the impact they can have in the larger social change field. They are using their leadership skills to create bold programs that make significant change both locally and nationally.

“I go through different waves. Sometimes motivated, proud, energized, this is a dream job; then, moments when the pressure, magnitude and the difficulty wear on me. I get discouraged.”

However, the internal work – especially finding and developing the right staff, overseeing financial and organizational growth, and creating diverse revenue streams – often consumed young leaders who had little experience or support in these areas. Many expressed the need for better management skills as they sought to implement internal organi-

zational changes to move towards their vision. And for many, mentors and past supervisors who serve as guides, supports, and role models for how to manage were seen as the critical factor in their ability to lead effectively.

Overall, however, the lack of hands-on management training and experience has left many of the directors feeling handicapped in their ability to run and grow their organization and they worry about the time and energy it takes to address internal issues, especially related to staff.

There were three main staffing issues that were mentioned in the interviews:

- Supervising the staff to maximize their effectiveness and to meet the goals for the organization;
- Finding the right people to do the work; and
- Not having enough people to get the work done.

The most common issue – one facing almost every director we talked with – was supervision of staff. Several respondents are struggling with how to be good supervisors, but even those who feel they excel in this area talked about the time, effort, and energy needed for this part of their job. These issues take up both the thinking time and the work time of many directors who want to create good workplaces and still have impact, while dealing fairly with staff.¹

For some people, it means creating spaces where people can receive real and productive feedback. For others, it’s managing expectations. There are directors who noted staff resistance to change, or the need for staff to think bigger and show more tangible results. The bottom line is that even highly competent directors felt they lack the training, support, and experience to make these changes. As one person put it, “I need some support in building out the next tier of leadership. I’m good at finding roles they’re interested in, but when they need challenges or more support, it’s hard to struggle with accountability.”

While most directors have a strong sense of how to be social justice leaders, there is a lack of integration, and balance, of both transformative leadership skills and concrete management skills.

Staff issues extend beyond the numbers. We frequently heard respondents talk about the need for the *right* staff especially to reach large ambitious goals. Directors are looking for people who support culture change and can help increase organizational impact. Some leaders inherited staff from previous directors and found that as they took the organization in new directions, there were staffers who did not have the capacities needed to do the job. One respondent offered current employees the opportunity to learn new skills and to help them “evolve.” But she also realized, “As we get into certain capacity building arenas, it’s clear we need specific skill sets... in some cases, [that means] helping people move on so we can hire people that are a better fit. And that’s always hard.” Not only is changing staff hard, so is identifying people who have the capacity, skills, outlook and experience that is needed, especially at the salaries being offered.

There is also simply the need for more staff, which is closely related to funding but it also reflects the structure and expectations of running a social justice organization. More positions are essential to achieve big goals. Respondents often mentioned how stretched people were in meeting their targets. A big vision and ambitious goals are motivating to the staff; however, the lack of people capacity to reach the scale of success organizations seek can end up exhausting everyone.

“I tend to see myself as a transformational leader and I need to get better at the transactional part of it.”

In addition to staffing concerns, respondents noted the need for help on administrative issues such as finances, regulations, and of course fund development. Yet few had received help with skills often associated with management. Most turn to trainings, mentors, and coaches. A small number talked about attending general manage-

ment trainings aimed at nonprofit leaders. Though these could be useful, our respondents often were alienated in trainings that did not take into account the goals of social justice groups such as member leaders, democratic practices, and non-traditional structures.

The need for social justice oriented management training is partly a result of groups expanding their reach and impact. Leadership programs that support a transformative vision may set off an organizational transformation that can cause some internal turmoil. This often leaves leaders without the skills or supports to move forward. And the time and energy it takes to address these issues can often take leaders away from other vital work.

RECOMMENDATION

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MANAGEMENT TRAINING: Leadership training programs that focus on visionary and transformative skills needed to lead have been foundational for social justice movements. However, to some this means that management skills are viewed as secondary. We believe this is a mistake. To lead organizational transformation, the younger leaders we talked with are looking for skills to be able to manage culture change whether it is setting expectations for staff members or coming up with an ambitious fund development plan. Making sure that leaders have access to both transformative leadership training and management training would augment new leaders’ skills and provide them with the comprehensive help they need to run their organizations. Coaches and consultants who are skilled in this area could be important additional supports.

2. DEMANDS OF IDENTITY: RACE AND GENDER MATTER

The people interviewed for this report were leaders under age 40, primarily leaders of color (over 70%) and women (just over half). In our analysis of the interviews, we looked at race and at gender to see whether these markers had an impact on the leadership challenges facing younger leaders. We did not specifically ask about race or gender directly, but it was not surprising that respondents raised issues related to how race and gender had a significant impact on their work.

There were three main ways issues of race manifested:

- Extra demands placed on people of color;
- The difficulty in gaining legitimacy; and
- The need to find and support additional (younger) leaders of color.

It was clear from the interviews that younger leaders of color are simply asked to do more because of their race/ethnic identity, whether it is to sit on advisory committees, present on panels, or speak at conferences. One respondent told us how she is tapped to be on national committees when they need a person of color. She is aware that she is attending as a “token,” but she also gains valuable information and insight by being exposed as a relatively new leader to higher-level decision-making forums.

Younger leaders of color are aware that being invited to the table to represent people of color does not translate into receiving more support and resources. Interviewees of color expressed their frustration at being held to a higher standard than white-led groups especially in their quest for funds. A few people noted that white allies of all ages in social justice often do not understand the differences in how people of color groups are viewed. White leaders who work with low-income communities of color might be excellent collaborators on campaigns, but they are perceived as receiving more attention and support than leaders of color.

Younger African-American leaders described the particular burden they face both within their community and in social change work. As one leader put it, “there are not a lot of black leaders who are leading nonprofits, so because of that you get called on a lot when people need a black leader in a certain space, on a board for example. Pickings are slim so there’s a tremendous amount of external pull.” Later, this same person talked about the need to invest in “cultivating black leadership so I’m not alone.”

Some of the respondents talked about the double jeopardy of leading a social justice organization and being a person of color. “In the South, being a black-led organization that is grounded in radical politics, that’s a 1, 2, 3 against us in terms of getting resources, respect, and reputation.” On the flip side, one young white leader working in a predominantly African-American community noted her legitimacy is often questioned unless black leadership lends their support. Though most of the people we interviewed are struggling to raise the funds they need to operate their organizations, it turns out white leaders in our small respondent pool headed the few organizations with more secure and high-level funding.

Finally, we noted a commitment from many of the leaders of color to support and encourage new leadership and to expand their numbers. This was echoed by several of the other leaders of color, especially women. A few of our interviewees mentioned attending leadership programs particularly designed for leaders of color, either within a specific identity group such as black leadership or Latino leaders, or combining different people of color communities.

It is important to note that issues of gender were most often brought up by women of color who talked about the intersection of race, gender and, sometimes, age. One woman spoke about the issues she faces in going to funders, noting that, “In the past, [funders] have been particularly dismissive of our staff

“I’m a nurturing person, which can be a strength and a weakness. Strength-wise, it’s allowed me to create space to help support other young leaders, especially young people of color. It’s really important to me.”

because we're young and female and women of color. It's gotten a lot better." She attributed the improvement to the organization's success. Gender often came out indirectly as women raised issues that were not mentioned by men. These ranged from dealing with lack of confidence as a leader to the difficulties in addressing conflict among staff and in coalitions, to observing that their leadership style results in receiving less credit or recognition for their contributions. Some women noted this as an issue of gender but others simply reported these as part of the struggles they face in their social justice leadership.

Social justice organizations run by younger leaders of color face many constraints, some based on the type of work they do and others based on issues of race. Younger leaders of color can feel isolated and overlooked. These interviews, though, made us more aware of the types of demands facing these young leaders as they are sought after to represent race in a variety of social change settings. We also note that despite the number of women leaders, the issues faced by women – often compounded by race – leave them feeling that their work is under recognized.

RECOMMENDATION

EXAMINE EXPECTATIONS PLACED ON LEADERS OF COLOR AND WOMEN: There has been a targeted effort to increase the leadership training and skills of leaders of color. These programs have been invaluable. However, once in their positions, the extra work these leaders take on in order to represent people of color within the social justice movement often goes unrecognized. Leaders of color could be offered support by compensating people of color asked to serve on committees/advisory groups; and being able to access extra organizational supports that take into account the extra demands of younger leaders of color. On a systems level, a review of the amount of money contributed by funders to people of color and women-led organizations compared to the total funding would help verify (or dispute) anecdotal evidence of obstacles to raising funds.

3. LEADING CHANGE FROM WITHIN: SUPPORTING YOUNGER LEADERS

Making large scale change requires mobilization of all our resources. But the leaders we talked with were struggling with creating boundaries and balance that could keep them in the work for the long haul.

There are two ways this struggle was particularly evident for this group of leaders:

- The balance between work and family life, and
- The lack of time to reflect on the work.

Respondents frequently spoke about the difficulty of making the job sustainable given the workload and the pace. This was especially true for younger leaders who have or who are planning to have children or have other personal demands. One executive director who is also a new mother noted that she rarely saw other young women in her position who were raising children. She also noted how hard it is “to manage the emotions of feeling like you're a mom to an organization all day and a mom to a child at night.” Another executive director who is thinking about having children worries that she will not have the kind of support she needs to be able to do both well.

Given the challenge of sustainability, it was not surprising that many leaders talked about needing time. However, respondents often talked about the need for space for reflection in order to be more strategic and effective

in the work. One leader expressed her frustration at not having the space, “to reflect and analyze what our needs are. When you’re in constant survival mode, it’s hard to think clearly.” Many others talked about wanting to step back, reflect, and write so they can capture what they are learning and share their thinking with others in the organization and field. However, given the hectic, seeming unending current pace of their job, many feel this will be possible only after they leave their current positions as executive director.

“After four years, I can finally feel that the ground beneath [me] is stable and [I am] on a path.”

Even though many of the leaders we talked to had broad and long-term visions for their organization, when asked where they will be in five years, most people imagined they would be transitioning out of their current position. Few had a concrete idea of

what they will be doing next, though they were committed to working for social change. Most of the leaders we spoke with thought it was ‘good practice’ to leave after a certain amount of time. There were some that acknowledged that staying longer might make sense.

It’s clear from our interviews that these young leaders are rising to the challenge of being executive and co-directors with eagerness to learn and make a difference, both internally in their organizations and externally in the field. The challenge for leaders in this position is how to stay in such a demanding place and remain fresh and strategic.

RECOMMENDATION

STRENGTHEN AND EXPAND LEADERSHIP: The problem of work/life balance is not new. Another generation is seeking structural supports for taking up leadership roles that allow them to also have a vibrant personal life, especially for those raising children. More strategies are needed to support young leaders to have better work/life balance so they can do the work for the long haul. This may include providing space to reflect and write while still on the job (such as mini-sabbaticals) in order bring renewed energy and insight to their current jobs and movement work. Supporting and encouraging distributive models of leadership that share tasks among multiple decision-makers is another way to sustain movement leaders and their organizations for the long-term.

4. SUSTAINING THE MOVEMENT: MEETING ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

As noted earlier in this report, financial sustainability and the need for increased resources was a consistent topic among many of the interviewees. For some leaders, maintaining the financial viability of their organizations in this economic downturn is a key challenge. Others were looking for resources to help them achieve impact and scale, especially at state and national levels.

Several key themes emerged from these discussions:

- The need to look for new ways to attract higher levels of funding for the long haul;
- The resources needed to attract and sustain more people who are critical to the work;
- The importance of paying attention to local level and base building work;
- The ways funding can support younger leaders’ bold vision and innovative work; and
- The importance of ensuring that younger leaders of color have increased access to resources.

When asked about their most pressing problems, many younger leaders talked about identifying new funding and diversifying sources of support, especially given the scale they want to achieve and the economic downturn. There were concerns that as some of these organizations are being ‘cycled out’ of grants, there are no new sources to replace these

funds. Smaller groups, and those in more conservative parts of the country, are having an especially difficult time attracting resources and several were talking about how to cut back on their work. Others were exploring new ways to diversify funding streams, including for-profit venues for income generation.

Respondents emphasized that in order to have a strong social movement, grassroots organizing and leadership development work needs to be supported at higher levels as well.

Groups that were in the process of expanding were looking to hire new staff with more expertise and skills, which translated into offering higher salaries. “I need an influx of resources so I can make the hires I need,” one leader commented. Some leaders talked about raising staff salary levels in order for staffers (and leaders) to make incomes that they could live on. One organization that worked with youth was deeply concerned about being able to provide regular stipends at a time when no other job opportunities are available.

All respondents lauded foundations that offered multi-year general support, but there was a clear difference between base building organizations and networks, alliances, and advocacy groups. Interviewees who lead base building groups pointed out that funders give more money to national advocacy and intermediary organizations over organizing. Even base building groups that are combining grassroots organizing with voter engagement or policy advocacy work are often overlooked by grant makers.

“I need folks to take a risk on me and my leadership.”

Respondents were also seeking funders that could share their bold and long-term vision (including tangible results) rather than smaller campaign and election-related infusions of money. One executive director said she and others struggle to garner the level of funding needed to fully launch a national campaign. Another stated, “this generation

takes more risks but we’re not necessarily supported to do that...we’re up to being much more nimble and opportunistic – to be innovative – and we don’t necessarily have the support or structure to be able to do that.”

Even those who were engaged in voter mobilization noted that they were waiting until the middle or the end of the election cycle for funds. One leader talked about the need for this funding a year ahead so they can have more time to plan.

Finally, even in our relatively small interview pool, there is disparity between white leaders and people of color on how successful they are in accessing foundation support. Of the interviewees, the white men appeared to have more access to funding, something that might be interesting to explore in future research. Almost all the people of color leaders we spoke with raised the issue of fundraising as a challenge, including transferring donor relations or developing relationship with funders. One woman of color leader said, “you have to work to establish yourself” and felt she had to be the smartest person in the room to do this. To hone her skills and confidence, she was supported by a funder who conducted a mock site visit and provided feedback to her. Another leader of color talked about the difficulty of being authentic when under pressure to raise money. He worries that this is not sustainable and is not something that a young person can easily step into.

As we often hear in the nonprofit sector, fundraising is a challenge. In addition to the oft-heard recommendations to diversify and grow funding sources, there are specific needs to address when it comes to supporting younger leaders, especially leaders building the impact of community-based efforts. On-the-ground groups should not be overlooked in favor of larger networks, policy, or technical assistance groups. Finally, our interviews indicate that the challenges of raising funds are experienced differently by people of color.

RECOMMENDATION

NEW MODELS OF FUNDING: There has always been a strong need for increased resources for social justice organizations. However, these younger leaders are pointing to the need for diversifying funding streams to lessen dependence on foundation support, and at the same time pressing foundations for increased multi-year general support grants to enable longer-term planning and ease the burden of constant fundraising. Increased funding is needed for local base building and organizing work, in addition to what seemed to be the favored venue of support for national advocacy and intermediary networks. In addition, some leaders wanted to insure that there were funding streams for the long-term vision (including tangible results), rather than only campaign and election-related infusions of money. Entrepreneurs, innovators and funders can work with younger leaders to develop new models of giving and collective approaches for leveraging resources.

CONCLUSION

We chose to interview younger leaders because they embody the future of the social justice movement in the U.S.—they have big visions for change, and they need support and flexibility in order to build scale and impact. They are working and organizing during a time of both great opportunity and great need. Looking to build strategic partnerships, expand base building and leadership development, and increase organizational strength and sustainability, all pose a complex challenge. It was clear from our conversations, however, that these leaders are more than willing to take up the work, and are already moving the ball forward in impressive and far reaching ways. These younger leaders have many things to teach the broader movement.

While resources will always be an issue, these new leaders need funders that are willing to take calculated risks in order to have a larger impact on social change. We found that younger leaders need support to push new boundaries in building power and making changes. They are ambitious and are looking for new ways to reach bigger scale and work across different sectors. It is clear that younger leaders need support in partnerships, visibility, and funding to make big leaps.

The recommendations made in this report just scratch the surface of work that could benefit these younger leaders, and in turn, the generations of leaders that have paved the way and those that will follow.

RECOMMENDATION

VALUE SUPPORT NETWORKS: Leaders consistently pointed to the necessity of having support systems in place to help with the challenges of their role. Some of the leaders we interviewed have already put into place an informal network of peers to share information, skills, and support. But others need more help with how to connect with other younger social justice leaders. Many younger leaders talked about how mentors and coaches offer invaluable help especially with management issues. Women of color leaders emphasized that mentors have been critical to their development, and helped them generate strategy, ideas, collaborations, and support. The coach is often someone the director can turn to for specific help, especially on issues related to staff. Organizations and funders can encourage and normalize all of these support networks as part of how they can help sustain younger executive directors.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

After speaking with our cohort of talented social justice leaders, several questions beg further research on how to best harness and support their work moving forward:

1. What is sustainable funding?

While attracting increased resources to the field of social justice is one part of creating a thriving movement, there is still more work to be done on the processes by which those resources are harnessed and leveraged. For example, while some foundations commit multi-year general support grants, it is not a widespread practice. And, though many organizations have increased their outreach to individual donors and focused on attracting major gifts, the time necessary to make traction is enormous. How can fundraisers maximize their staff capacity, and how can funders better leverage their collective resources?

2. How do we develop management training specifically geared towards social justice organizations?

As stated earlier, many social justice leaders are asking for concrete management skills to enhance their day-to-day leadership. Some have been through management courses that were geared towards large social service organizations, not for social justice groups. What does a management training look like that takes into consideration the desire for democratic decision-making, or the other values through which social justice organizations operate?

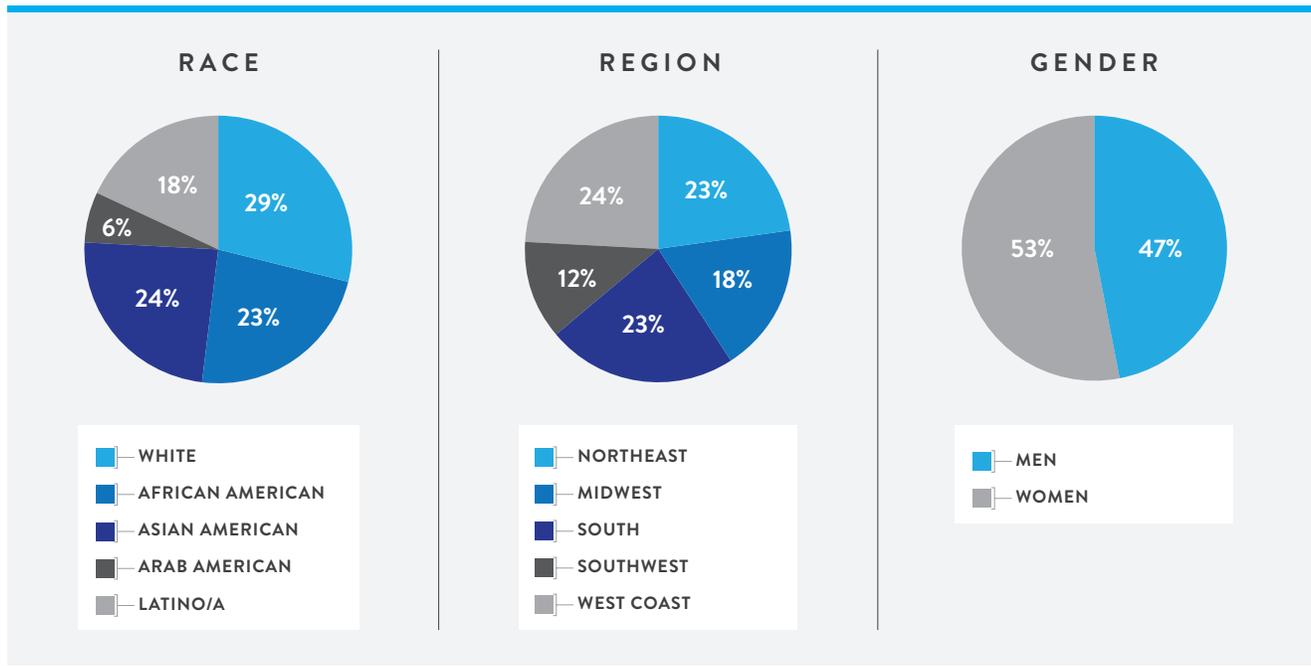
3. What are other models of leading, and how would these models increase the sustainability of individuals and organizations?

Increasing numbers of social justice organizations are adopting operating structures that are alternatives to traditional hierarchical leadership, and integrating practices that intentionally distribute decision-making and major responsibilities amongst multiple staff members. Despite this trend, there is still a lack of sharing of best practices, and how these practices can increase effectiveness and impact. What would be the impact of mainstreaming distributive leadership models and practices?

It was astoundingly clear from our research and interviews that younger social justice leaders are an exciting group and that it's in the best interest of all movement stakeholders to invest in their vision for the future.

INTERVIEW COHORT

One of our interests in this report was the changing demographics in the U.S. This is reflected in the demographics of those we interviewed. Twelve of our seventeen interviewees were people of color (23% African-American, 24% Asian American and Pacific Islanders; 18% Latino and 6% Arab American). The respondents were almost evenly divided between male and female (8 and 9 respondents, respectively), and they are working in different geographic regions of the U.S., although most are based on the West Coast (24%), Northeast (23%), or the South (23%). The sample was not meant to be representative of young leaders in the nonprofit sector, and it will be interesting to compare the results of our interviews with others conducting research on similar groups.



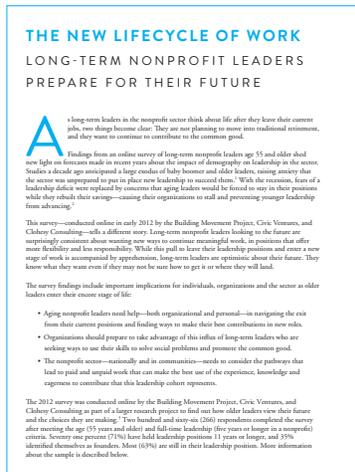
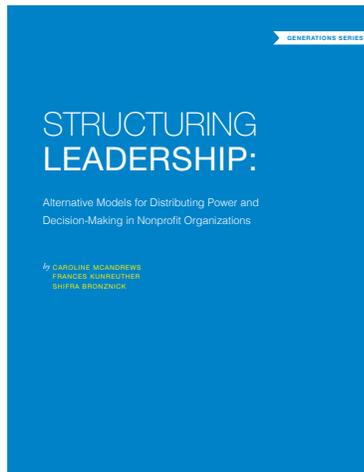
NOTES

1. More information on leading staff in social change organizations can be found in Chetkovich and Kunreuther, *From the Ground Up: Grassroots Organizations Making Social Change*.

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