

Inside Philanthropy

Who's Funding What, and Why

New Study Finds Racial Bias in Fundraising Profession

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Fundraisers of color confront racism and bias throughout their careers, according to a [new study](#) by Cause Effective, a fundraising consulting firm that advises nonprofit organizations, primarily in New York.

The study, “Money, Power and Race: The Lived Experience of Fundraisers of Color,” was made possible by a grant from the New York Community Trust. It is based on a literature review, telephone interviews with 50 nonprofit officials, mostly people of color; a survey completed by 110 fundraisers who are not Caucasian, and feedback from 13 experts working in the nonprofit field.

Among the uncomfortable situations and “microaggressions” reported by survey respondents:

- “Over and over, I’ve experienced white organizational leaders wanting to water down fundraising event content out of fear that it might be ‘too black’—so that white people won’t feel uncomfortable.”
- “My last organization had a board of almost entirely senior citizen, wealthy, conservative white men. The amount of direct disregard I felt when speaking to them I will never forget. And I never want to feel that way again.”
- “I was passed over for a promotional opportunity to the point of being told not to apply because ‘as a single parent and Latina,’ I could not build credibility with high-net-worth individuals.”

- “I’ve gone to fundraising events where people would talk to my (white) assistant as if [that person was] the one in charge.”
- “There are white board members at my organization who assume that just because a person is black, that she/he is not a high-net-worth person. They have no knowledge of high-net-worth black people, and think all of us are broke, poor and ignorant.”

One-third of those who responded to the survey reported that they experienced issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion at work. Among that group of development professionals, two-thirds did not feel supported by their supervisors.

“Many longtime professionals expressed both pride in their place in the nonprofit industry and resignation about the racism and microaggressions experienced over the course of an otherwise rewarding career,” the researchers write. Fundraisers of color expect others like themselves to have difficulty with whites in their work. “Wealth,” one fundraiser writes, “is concentrated in white communities, and dealing with them, answering to them, is a chore.”

The study, which Cause Effective noted is intended to capture the insights of development professionals, “leans into the discomfort of racial inequity in fundraising.” And as the organization’s board chair writes, “money, power, and race are complex issues that elicit strong emotions and polarizing viewpoints. Discussions about these topics often raise more questions than are answered. Yet, this is the messy, important work required of us to advance racial equity.”

While the study documents plenty of uncomfortable situations and attitudes toward fundraisers of color, the news is not all bad. “My current job feels like an oasis of diversity and inclusion,” one survey respondent writes. “Whereas in other positions at other organizations, I have fought for my talents to be seen, my current organization has recognized them, continues to nurture them, and I feel wholly supported.”

The study concludes with a series of recommendations aimed at several groups: executive directors, human resources managers, supervisors, board members, donors and funders, white development staffers, professional fundraising associations, and fundraisers of color. “If the first step is to acknowledge the problem, the next is to act,” the researchers write.

For example, executive directors should “make sure there is a mechanism in place to get development staffers’ honest feedback about their working conditions—both internal (transparency and equity in staffing decisions) and external (relationships with board members, donors and other stakeholders),” the researchers advise.

Human resources officers, they recommend, should encourage affinity groups. “Support development staff of color in finding and gaining support from their peers... offering an alternative to the isolation experienced by so many in the profession is extremely helpful.” And for those who supervise fundraisers, the researchers write, “make sure your assessment of development staff of color’s performance is based on transparent, established checkpoints.”

Fundraising professionals of color should “look at board membership and ask about it” when they are interviewing for a new position, the study concludes. “If the board’s composition is not reflective and inclusive of the communities served by the mission area, is there an intention to change that? And beyond good intentions, is there a timeline with concrete next steps and assigned responsibilities?”

Finally, fundraisers of color can leave organizations that cannot or will not improve discriminatory practices, the researchers say. “The experience of senior development professionals of color shows that as a developing fundraising professional, you can find another position in which you will be supported to reach your full potential.”