

20 ways majority-white nonprofits can build authentic partnerships with organizations led by communities of color

Like



[Image description: A tiny, very yellow, and extremely fluffy duckling sitting on the ground. It is seriously very fluffy, like it just went down one of those plastic slides and charged itself up into a little yellow ball of static electricity. What does this duckling have to do with this post? Nothing. I was searching for a more relevant picture but ended up distracted by pictures of ducklings. From pixabay.com]

Hi everyone, before we begin today's topic, please take time to fill out this new survey, which seeks to identify ideas and practices for investing in intersectional racial equity in the nonprofit workforce. It's part of a larger initiative from our friends at Fund the People. They've partnered with the Center for Urban and Racial Equity to help funders and nonprofits "lower barriers and increase support for diverse people to gain entry to nonprofit work, sustain ourselves and advance in nonprofit careers, and ascend to management and leadership." In particular, they are currently seeking more responses from people of color.

Since they used the Oxford Comma, I think we should help them out. Thanks for taking the survey today. It's due September 7th.

Despite the pervasiveness of the Nonprofit Hunger Games, we nonprofits are way more effective when we work together. However, partnerships can be challenging when there are clearly differences in culture, resources, and power. As someone who works with a lot of leaders and communities of color, I often get asked by thoughtful colleagues who work at majority-white nonprofits how they can support and work with organizations that are led by communities of color without causing inconvenience, or annoyance, or actual harm to those communities.

So here is some general advice, divided into four categories. This list is not comprehensive; please feel free to add to it in the comments. Special thanks to my friend Allison

Carney, who also gifted the sector with the term Bizsplaining, for pushing me to write about this and for adding her thoughts. (Also, although this post is focused on partnership with communities-of-color-led nonprofits, it also applies to partnerships with organizations led by marginalized communities, such as communities of disabilities, as our colleague Julie Reiskin points out in the comment section).

Increase your knowledge and self-awareness: Do not go into a community without doing some research on the community and self-reflection on the potential dynamics you may be contributing to. It is actually extremely irritating and not helpful when busy leaders of color have to stop their work to explain basic concepts to potential partners. You don't go to a job interview without doing some research on the organization you're applying to, and you don't call up a foundation to ask questions about a grant without at least perusing their website. Apply the same principle here.

1. **Get a grounding on the org and its cultural context:** Skim the organization's website, annual reports, and media articles. Google the community that they work with to see what historic and current challenges they have been facing, as well as any cultural context you should be aware of, such as, for example, whether people of different genders should shake hands. It's impossible to learn everything, but even a little bit of knowledge, along with the fact that you put some effort into learning, will make things go a lot smoother.
2. **Read up and attend trainings on race, equity, diversity, inclusion.** Besides the cultural context, you need to be aware of your own privilege, as well as the privilege your organization holds. Examine your own unconscious and conscious biases. My own organization once called for a one-time POC-only leadership meeting to address some challenges. The white volunteers who had done the work understood why that was necessary and were supportive; the ones who had not had these discussions got offended and quit. Many organizations find it burdensome to host volunteers and partners who have not done their work in this area.
3. **Check your underlying assumptions:** I've seen white volunteers get frustrated because they try to partner with an organization of color and that organization does not seem to be as "organized" or "responsive." The leader was always late; email responses sometimes take weeks. But your organization may have 20 full-time staff and you're partnering with an org that has a half-time ED and all volunteers. Remind yourself that the POC organizations you are trying to work with probably are handling extremely complex challenges with a tenth of the resources usually given to majority-white organizations.
4. **Listen to what partners want and need:** It is easy and natural for us all to begin with what would be best for our own organizations and projects. But when there is disparity in resources and influences, it leads to one-directional partnership. To balance this out, start by asking partners what they want and need. Learn to listen for unspoken requests. In some cultures, it is not the norm to be direct, so you may have to ask a few times before partner organizations will tell you what they need.
5. **Be on the ground, out in the community:** There was one large organization that tried to open a branch in a predominantly-POC neighborhood. It failed. The biggest reason is that it didn't have the awareness of community dynamics, or the relationship with the community-based organizations there. A common complaint was that even though this was a large and well-known organization, no one ever saw its staff or board members at any of the community events. Your presence, when it is helpful and not intrusive, greatly matters to awareness and relationship building.

Provide resources, don't ask people to do stuff for free: One of the most irritating things we face as organizations led by communities of color face is getting asked to do people's work for free, under the well-intentioned but misguided idea of partnership. We get asked to provide outreach, translation, interpretation, and expertise, and people are shocked when we ask for compensation. If you want authentic partnership though, awareness is not enough; funding distribution must be equitable:

6. **Build it into the budget:** If you want to be good partners, your budget must reflect this. We've seen too many majority-white organizations get a ton of funding to do something, but they never thought to allocate funding to potential partners. So then the partners get asked to do stuff for free, or for token amounts. Don't do that. Put yourself into the perspective of the organization, and try to calculate the actual costs to the partner. Do not low-ball. Chances are, the partner organization, who is so used to being scrappy, will under-ask, so be a good pal and provide them with equitable compensation.
7. **Buy a table at partners' events.** For many organizations, their annual galas and other events serve as some of their most significant revenue generators as well as community-building events. By buying a table, you can strengthen relationships while also helping your team learn about this community. Invite your donors and board members.
8. **Have events out in the community:** Book community centers and other venues that are controlled by communities of color. For many organizations, this is also an important source of revenue, and they get asked to donate this space all the time. Book it, pay for it.
9. **Hire local POC-owned vendors for your events:** Try to get catering and other services from local businesses owned by people of color. Supporting these businesses helps you and your organization develop relationships with these communities.
10. **Provide payment to orgs when asking people to be on committees:** Leaders of color get asked to sit on advisory committees and taskforces for free all the time. This takes us away from our work and fundraising for our organizations. Compensation to our organizations for our time is extremely helpful and appreciated. A general guideline is to pay people how much you would pay consultants per hour. Build it into your budget.
11. **Pay keynote speakers and panelists:** Leaders of color get asked to speak for free all the time. Sometimes it is incredibly ironic, like a colleague of color being asked to keynote a conference on equity for free. You may think you're doing someone the honor by asking them to keynote, but it's like asking artists to donate their time and talent for "exposure." Let's stop doing that. If you value something, respect people's time and skills and pay for it.
12. **Pay for interpreters and translators:** Please do not ask us to interpret or translate for free. That's really irritating and insulting. Quality translation and interpretation require a lot of time and effort, and it's not like we don't have our regular work to do. It is best for you to hire a professional translation/interpretation firm, or else state outright what funding you have available.

Use your privilege to help partner orgs fulfill their missions: One thing that white allies and majority-white organizations have that many POC and POC-led organizations do not have are connections to funders and donors, as well as a higher level of trust among the public. Use your privilege and influence to help communities-of-color-led organizations:

13. **Introduce communities-of-color-led orgs to your donors, funders, and volunteers:** Warm introductions to potential donors, funders, volunteers, and board members are very helpful and much appreciated and demonstrate that you are serious about building authentic partnership. Help set up meetings. Send email introductions. Invite donors to come with you when you attend partners' events. My organization has monthly meetings with our current donors where we feature the work of one partner organization. It has been not only great for partners, but donors and volunteers are also very appreciative to get to learn about other organizations' work.
14. **Highlight the work of communities-of-color-led orgs:** This is another great and easy way to be helpful and build strong relationships. Highlight partners' work in your newsletters, social media, and blog posts. Ask your members and donors to donate to the orgs, attend their events, volunteer, or whatever the organizations may need. Publicly give credit to partner organizations when partnerships go well.
15. **Speak up on issues that affect partner organizations and the communities they serve:** Show up for public hearings and provide testimonies on issues affecting partner organizations. Work with them to write op-eds or articles in local publications to highlight the issues they're working on. Your support and influence may help carry the organizations' message and reach different audiences.

Know when to step back: Just as actions are important, so is knowing when to step back and allow partner organizations the space to breathe, as well as the opportunity for resources and influence that would otherwise go to you and your organization.

16. **Be OK with not attending some meetings and events.** As Jon, one of my org's supervolunteers, writes in his blog post "[Six Lazy Rules to Help White People Thrive in POC-Led Nonprofits](#)": *"People with a shared context can make faster progress when they don't have to constantly slow down to explain what they mean to outsiders. People managing trauma need somewhere they can feel secure. People share more, more quickly, when temporarily relieved from having to navigate white/PoC interactions."*
17. **Recognize when you should NOT speak in meetings:** I've been to a lot of meetings where the most vocal people are from majority-white organizations. Be thoughtful about when you should talk and when you should not. Look around and see who has not had the chance to speak in a while, and ask for their thoughts.
18. **Turn down some funding opportunities:** In the competitive funding game, this seems like blasphemy. But to be authentic partners, we must all be thoughtful about how much our actions affect other organizations, especially the ones who may have less privilege and influence. This means that larger organizations, which tend to be majority-white, should be thoughtful and be willing to occasionally NOT apply for a grant. That 25K or 50K grant might be helpful for your organization, but to a smaller org, it may be life or death. Help these organizations get the grants.
19. **Volunteer to do the "boring" stuff:** You may be an amazing lawyer. Your org may have just gone through an incredible strategic thinking process and you would love to share your lessons and be helpful in that way. But right now, maybe the organization just needs you to stack some chairs at their annual dinner, or manage the registration table at a workshop. Learn when to reel back your ego in service of the community organization you would like to develop a strong relationship with.

Finally

20. **Get over your guilt, and use your privilege for good.** Many white allies and majority-white organizations are racked with guilt about their privileges, resources, and influence, sometimes to the point of paralysis, which prevents them from examining harmful practices such as Trickle-Down Community Engagement. You do important work. This work, however, is not about you. So understand the role that you and your organization play in the sector. Be OK with making mistakes. Use your and your organization's power and privilege to build strong, authentic partnerships needed for our sector to fulfill its collective mission.

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Vanessa Chase · a year ago

Bookmarking this for a few clients!

One of the best things I've done in my nonprofit career was going through a mandatory anti-oppression training for a board that I was on. It wasn't a small commitment at 120 hours of training, but it was necessary for me to develop a better lens for organization's work and allyship. The impact this training had on me and my work runs deep and it continues to motivate me to learn more, build new playing fields, and support and highlight the work of leaders and communities of color.

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John Mulvey · a year ago

Great post.

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Julie Reiskin · a year ago

As always great points and practical advice—the exact same principles apply to all dominant organizations seeking to mitigate the inappropriate power imbalances in the nonprofit world. We need to be supporting constituent led organizations, where those with lived experience are running the show. When the lived experience is something like disability or poverty, we need to remember that POC experience the double whammy of discrimination, exclusion and oppression

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