

Wanted: More Black Leaders

Nonprofit executives examine a growing void and how to fill it.

By Bill Alexander

A critical shortfall in African-American leadership at nonprofits compelled more than 100 people to meet in October at a first-ever conclave to ask, "Who's got next?"

That was the name of the leadership crisis conference, which focused on who would be the next generation of African-American executives at a time when only 10 percent of nonprofits are led by African-Americans, according to a 2006 report by American Humanics, "Workforce Issues in the Nonprofit Sector." The number might plunge even lower, as 65 percent of baby-boomer CEOs nationwide are expected to leave their jobs within the next five years.

But observers say that the effort to draw more African-Americans to nonprofits to eventually rise into those top jobs is hampered by low salaries, unimaginative recruitment campaigns, lack of interest and even by African-American CEOs failing to pick and groom successors.

If nothing is done, "diversity will be the critical issue in the nonprofit field in the next five to seven years," panelist Michael Watson, vice president of human resources for the Girl Scouts of the USA, said at the conference. "Developing a strong pipeline of future African-American nonprofit leaders must begin now."

In January, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation gave American Humanics (AH) a \$5 million grant to create the Next Generation Nonprofit Leaders Program, which funds an internship stipend program for college students preparing to work in nonprofits. The program is aimed at racially and ethnically underrepresented interns who exhibit leadership qualities. With Kellogg's backing, Kansas City, Mo.-based AH co-sponsored the Washington conference with Nonprofit HR Solutions.

Recruitment War

With 640,000 new nonprofit leaders projected to be needed over the next

decade, according to the AH report, and with the nation's work force growing more diverse, there would seem to be room for more African-Americans at the top.

But Lester Salamon, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies and the author of several studies on nonprofits, said in an interview that while nonprofit officers "express disappointment that there aren't more people of color in leadership positions ... when asked, 'Have you done anything special [to recruit]?' far fewer have done anything. You must provoke them to do something about it." (Salamon did not attend the conference.)

Meanwhile, both private and government ventures are luring African-American talent with more money and benefits. There is a "major war" for talent, "with corporations like CitiBank sending 90 recruiters to job fairs and conferences where nonprofits are either not visible or can't afford to do that," Watson said at the conference.

Those enticements often trump whatever nonprofits can offer in the way of their public interest missions, which have long been their major selling point. That's understandable to some, but not so much to William Pollard, a former president of the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), which offers an American Humanics' certificate in nonprofit leadership.

"Too many of the potential black [nonprofit] leadership are more interested in money than in making a commitment," said Pollard, a conference panelist and the husband of a former nonprofit CEO.

Pollard graduated from Atlanta's Morehouse College in the 1960s, and observed in an interview: "Back then, we were taught to serve our community ... to give back in the tradition of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. That is no longer the case."

In the audience was an African-American nonprofit consultant and former UDC student, Villareal Johnson, a graduate of the 12-hour AH certificate course.

Explaining why he's a consultant rather than a full-time nonprofit executive, Johnson said, "I found a way to make more money. You don't have to wait until you're 55 to enjoy the benefits of your labor."

Merlene Mazyck, the AmeriCorps director for the Corporation for National and Community Service, complained after the conference that future black leadership is imperiled because "young African-

Americans are not engaged." Black college students, she said, are "not interested in gaining valuable experience" by becoming an 18- to 24-year-old AmeriCorps volunteer at \$4,000 a year. "They don't want to be poor."

(According to AmeriCorps, fewer than half of the current 46,000 volunteers declared their race on their applications. Of those who did, 3,612 are African-American, while 16,462 are white.)

Leadership Failure

Blame was also laid at the executive suite's door. Robert Woodson, founder and president of the Washington-based Center for Neighborhood Enterprise and an Urban League staffer in the 1970s, noted that old-line black nonprofits often have no leadership succession plans and discourage rewarding young talent with career advancement. "There is a tremendous age discrimination against the young and talented," he said in an interview.

Echoing Woodson was Geoffrey Canada, CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, who said, "Some of us in the black leadership have guarded our positions a bit too jealously."

Neither Woodson nor Canada was aware of the conference, but said they were glad it took place.

Al Laws Jr., CEO and founder of Baltimore-based WIN Family Services, also did not attend the conference, but noted that executives who are not black might not see African-Americans as candidates for leadership. He said expressions of passion by some young black men might be perceived as intimidating, loud and stereotypical, reinforcing the racial perceptions of those who have not had the opportunity to assimilate with other cultures.

That points to a particular concern of Phyllis Wallace, AH vice president of nonprofit partnerships. "The nonprofit leadership sector is predominantly female," she said at the conference. "We need to increase the presence of African-American males as role models."



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Strategies

Developing succession plans, which Woodson and Canada say they have done, is one step in the right direction.

Canada observed that "no one need take a vow of poverty any more" to join the ranks of nonprofit executives. The money is better than it once was, he said, but adjustments must be made to augment the traditional black pathways through the fields of sociology and education to enter the nonprofit sphere. He noted that people must master an "increasingly complex" set of business and management skills to attain leadership positions – skills that can be attained through readily available business courses.

Laws is optimistic as well. He cited national organizations such as the YWCA and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America that have "truly led the way, snaring talented black leaders."

Watson of the Girl Scouts said nearly 45 percent of the organization's senior leadership team and 33 percent of its officials and managers come from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. That, he said, is because the organization's recruitment and retention activities are "aggressive."

Among the recruitment recommendations that came out of the conference:

- Advertise executive positions in black publications, such as Black Enterprise.
- Attend more job fairs.
- Collaborate with nonprofits in a region to present plans to foundations asking for donated expertise, for such things as advertising campaigns and developing succession plans.
- Court young people who are part of the post-civil rights generation who may see the world differently from today's black nonprofit leaders. Find ways to keep young, passionate blood in the organization.

Watson picked up on the theme that a better work environment must be created in order to produce "an excess of leadership." Above all, he said, resolving the problem takes "a commitment from top management."

Contact: Nonprofit HR (202) 546-7202, www.nonprofithr.com; American Humanics (816) 561-6415, www.humanics.org. The AH report is available on the website. Click on "Nonprofit Sector Workforce Coalition," and then "Literature Review."

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Girl Scouts of the USA

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