

## **Leadership, Diversity and Inclusion: Building the Case for What Works**

“Leadership, Diversity and Inclusion: Building the Case for What Works” is an innovative research project that will generate practical strategies to increase diversity in the leadership of nonprofit and public organizations. The Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) at NYU’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service and the National Urban Fellows (NUF), a 40-year old institution founded to counter the under-representation of people of color and women in leadership, bring their unique competencies and resources to this project.

### **Motivation**

The leadership of the field of public service does not reflect the diverse richness of the US population. Without a multiplicity of voices at the highest levels of nonprofit and public leadership, we are in danger of closing off opportunities to foster more democratic environments and build healthier, more vibrant organizations with greater impact. Yet, prior research to understand and address leadership diversity have been too narrowly focused – leadership research too often focuses on white leaders while overlooking the experiences of leaders of color, while the diversity literature doesn’t include a focus on leadership. As a result, these findings, however valid, either had limited “real-world” relevance or too little institutional will for implementation, or both.

Research focused on both leadership and diversity at the individual and organizational levels and that draws on scholarly and practitioner wisdom holds the promise to uncover not only the most widely applicable recommendations, but also to generate a strong consensus for implementation in creating more diverse and inclusive public service organizations.

### **Approach**

Using an “embedded case study” approach, RCLA will develop rich narrative histories with 8–12 leaders at two nonprofits and two government organizations, exploring their life and career trajectories, critical turning points and the role of leadership development in their journeys. Recognizing that the racial construct does not apply solely to leaders of color, we will compare four categories of leaders: 1) people of color in positions of power, 2) people of color who have reached a career plateau, 3) white people in positions of power, and 4) white people who have reached a career plateau.

The same study will look at systems, procedures and dynamics at the organization in which these leaders work. Through a parallel case study methodology, the research team will interview a broad cross-section of organizational staff and review the organization’s policies and practices on diversity and inclusion. In particular, the approach will help to reveal both the amplifiers and the obstacles that are embedded in the organization’s taken-for-granted ways of operating.

The type of in-depth qualitative analysis we propose is necessary to surface deeply held assumptions and make explicit often unconscious or unspoken institutional and individual dynamics that can amplify or undercut established policies. Contrasting the experience of people of color with white counterparts is also important for understanding how race as a social construct affects both groups. In addition, this research serves as an important corollary to such seminal works as *Breaking Through: The Making of Minority Executives in Corporate America*, from Harvard Business Press, one of the first in-depth studies to focus on minorities who have made it to the highest executive levels and the crucial connection between corporate culture and the advancement of people of color.

## Participating Organization(s) in the Study

The study will take place from May 2012 to January 2013. As we begin the research, RCLA is looking to work with one organization with the following characteristics:

- Nonprofit or government organization in greater New York or DC area with at least 50 people on staff.
- Staff includes two to three individuals in each of the four categories specified above, preferably handling core rather than support functions.

Interested organizations should consider the following:

- *The time commitment* – From 30-36 hours of combined interview time and a few hours to react to findings. Data gathering is expected to take place in the period July – October 2012.
- *The motivational commitment* – The leadership team has a deep and genuine interest in diversifying its top-level echelons and is willing to consider significant changes in organizational and individual practices to make that happen, even if the organizations sees itself as being at the forefront. The organization should also be willing to share pertinent information and data with researchers in a transparent and trusting manner.
- *The learning commitment* – Openness to tough questions, engaging in difficult conversations, and learning things about the organization that may make staff and board uncomfortable. Participating in the research can be a process of exploration and discovery if approached as a learning opportunity, but it will not be easy.
- *The partnership commitment* – RCLA is engaged in the same challenges as other public service organizations, including being committed to diversity in its own leadership, and is, therefore, not immune to the dynamics of diversity and inclusion efforts. The research team is itself diverse, including researchers and practitioners, immigrant and native-born, and people with multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. The team members strive to be objective observers who, at the same time, are engaged in the same pursuit as that studied. Therefore, RCLA is looking for authentic partners in a learning process that can help advance our shared efforts.

Despite the challenges, participating in the study could greatly benefit the participating organization. Most importantly, it offers:

- An opportunity for its members to engage in deep reflection and dialogue about a topic that is critical both to social justice and to organizational effectiveness.
- An in-depth review of the organization that offers insights in the same way that a 360-degree review can help individuals better understand their strengths and areas for improvement as part of becoming more effective leaders.
- The potential for significant organizational change, including greater numbers of people of color in leadership positions as well as the development of a more inclusive culture, based on the assumption that the organization translates its learning from the research into a commitment to deepen its efforts or try new approaches to advance diversity and inclusion.

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