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Strengthening Women of Color in Fundraising and Philanthropy

By Abby Schultz



Yolanda F. Johnson, the first African-American president of Women in Development's New York chapter—an organization for philanthropy professionals—wanted to make sure that her efforts in elevating diversity, equity, and inclusion extend beyond her time at the helm.

So, in the past two weeks, Johnson has launched Women of Color in Fundraising and Philanthropy, or WOC, pronounced *woke*, as well as Allies in Action, an organization for “non people of color,” to “champion, support, and celebrate” these women.

“For me, there’s far too much at stake,” Johnson says.

These dual efforts could go a long way in shifting the landscape of philanthropy by strengthening and elevating women of color in nonprofit leadership roles, and by moving more donation dollars to nonprofits that champion racial equity or support women and girls of color.

Johnson spearheaded a task force through Women in Development New York chapter two years ago focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), that has since been able to implement several recommendations including making DEI a “core value” of the organization.

The task force had two key intentions. First, to ensure that Women in Development consciously provided access for women of color to its “powerful network” of 500-plus members. And secondly, to raise the visibility of women of color with a goal of shifting perceptions about their leadership capabilities in development and philanthropy.

WOC builds on these efforts by creating a global network of peers who can rely on one another for professional development and advice, says Jeannie Sager, director of the Women’s Philanthropy Institute (WPI) at Indiana University’s Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, and a member of WOC’s advisory committee.

That there’s a need is clear: A virtual launch event this week attracted more than 600 attendees. But there’s also this sobering statistic: As of 2016, only 1.6% of donation dollars went to organizations focused on women and girls alone, according to WPI.

For Sager, an Asian-American woman who worked in fundraising as a practitioner in the education and health care fields for 25 years, the kind of networking available through WOC is crucial for women of color who often haven’t had peers who look like them, and often find themselves working with donors who don’t either.

“It’s important in order to identify in a career or a profession, to be able to see and learn from people who are like you—just from seeing yourself physically in that mirror, in that space,” she says.

For women of color in philanthropy, it's also important to go beyond mentoring younger women in the field to sponsoring them, to "really lifting each other up," she says. "Lots of mentoring has happened, but maybe we need to push a little further."

A goal of WOC is also to expand the number of overall women in philanthropy, and to ensure equity both in their nonprofit roles and in their compensation.

One result of WOC could be to attract more donors of color as well. Just a few years ago, the concept of a philanthropist may have conjured up an image of white, male donors, but today, with the prominence of female philanthropists like Melinda Gates, that image is shifting and making more women realize they can take on leading roles as donors, Sager says.

A similar shift is possible among women of color with wealth. "The more they can start being more visible with their giving, owning that title, then that will grow as well," she says.

That shift would be helpful in channeling more dollars to nonprofits led by people of color generally, and women in particular.

Recently Echoing Green, a nonprofit that supports emerging social entrepreneurs, and Bridgespan, a nonprofit philanthropic advisory firm, looked at the "highest-qualified applicants" in Echoing Green's applicant pool of early-stage leaders and organizations and found, on average, that "the revenues of the Black-led organizations are 24% smaller than the revenues of their white-led counterparts," according to a May report on this research published in the Stanford Social Innovation Review.

Even "bleaker," the article said, is that unrestricted financial support to organizations with Black leaders is 76% smaller than those led by whites. "The stark disparity in unrestricted assets is particularly startling, as such funding often represents a proxy for trust," the report said.

The research, which included conversations with 50 leaders in the nonprofit sector, also revealed that leaders of color consistently hit barriers—such as "inequitable access to social networks"—when it comes to fundraising.

The barriers are a form of “unconscious bias,” that the report authors say is “unintentional, for the most part, but pernicious nonetheless.”

One reason for this systemic racism in fundraising is that many major donors want to invest in large, well-known organizations, Sager says. But, she notes, many women of color, in particular, “are leading very local, very grassroots efforts that are actually the ones that are really able to have a larger impact on the actual cause.”