Hiring People of Color

My plea is not only to hire people of color, but to also give them the support and resources needed to succeed.

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Change is hard. It requires great effort and lots of anxiety. Many White-led HIV and LGBTQ agencies recently hired their first person of color to lead the nonprofit. I'm very proud because so many have fought for so long for this representation. At the same time, I worry for our new colleagues' success. Will these leaders be judged by a different standard? The unfortunate reality is "yes."

There are no playbooks for how to be the first leader of color of a mostly White agency. I know, because I was the first person of color in too many rooms during the early days of the epidemic. Suki Ports and I would joke that we were a caucus of two at most HIV conferences. Back then, leaders of color started their own agencies because they did not see their reflection in the boards or staffs of AIDS service organizations and/or health departments.

The inequity became a flashpoint. It's taken decades but change is happening. How should our movement support leaders of color? I talk about race because of its impact on leadership. Our movement needs to fund leadership development for people of color not because it is politically correct, but because it is the right solution. It is not easy to manage white people. I am still amazed at White fragility. Also, too many people of color living with HIV have fallen out of care. Too few people of color benefit from PrEP. I'm not saying throw the baby out with the bath water because there is lots of good. I'm just asking for leadership development to support people of color in key management roles in the organizations working to end the HIV epidemic.

There are so many sad stories of agencies who hired their first leader of color only to have it blow up in everyone's face. Nobody wins those fights. Agencies need to do internal work before hiring their first executive of color. When you've hired one person of color, you've hired one person of color. You have not solved racism in the agency, community, or planet. Unreasonable expectations make excitement about new hires go off the rails. While I am grateful to all the health departments and community based organizations who are hiring people of color, please make sure it's not just entry level positions.

Our community is so quick to judge when someone makes a mistake. As an executive director who has made many mistakes, I appreciate that my board understands the challenges of leading while colored and who understands that people are going to get mad because I lead with race and call out White privilege. It is a very difficult line that leaders of color must walk, particularly when they

are new. Many are accused of overusing racism as an excuse but, once again, we all live in different worlds with very different realities. As a person who walks in both, some of you are not as “woke” as you think. It takes work to understand, work that too many are not willing to do.

Thank you to all the agencies committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is an important next step, but there is still more to do. Too often values and systems in the workplace continue while clients and staff change. Too many HIV meetings happen where community is diverse, but government is not. Health departments are not exempt from the need to be diverse. Besides color, that diversity must include gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and NMAC wants to talk about education.

As a highly educated individual, I think educational requirements for employment are bogus, particularly in the HIV field. Our work requires staff to know communities that you can’t learn about in textbooks. Sometimes lived experience is more important than a BA. It’s time to value community. Another reason I talk about race is that our work is missing too many. Systems led by community need to be supported and valued. Professional standards are not necessarily community standards. Existing systems retain 49% of all people living with HIV in care, but they do not reach everyone needed to end the epidemic. Once again, we need to keep the good and use new funding to figure out ways to reach those who have fallen out or are not reached by existing systems. It is time to expand our business model to include the urban market.

My plea is not only to hire people of color, but to also give them the support and resources needed to succeed. Things you take for granted may not be their reality and vice versa. Too many executives of color have experienced horror stories of donors that are friends to the movement but less than understanding on race or gender identity. Unless you’ve been there, it’s almost impossible to appreciate the trauma these meetings create, having to smile while a person with wealth says, “you’re one of the good people of color.” This really does happen. I have too many stories and too many names of donors who just don’t get it.

It comes down to dignity and respect. It’s what we all want and deserve. In the ideal world everyone would be treated like cisgender White heterosexual men while also keeping their community identity and values. Until that day, it is important to understand that our worlds are not the same. Being a leader of color is hard, especially when people say they don’t see color. There are no roadmaps for how to lead a predominately White agency as an authentic person of color. But understand you will be judged based on values that are not yours and/or you may not even know. Pass these life lessons to the next generation. Hopefully, there will be a time when no one is judged by the color of their skin. A boy can dream! Thank you for the privilege of saying difficult things.

Yours in the Struggle,

Paul Kawata

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