Trading Glass Ceilings for Glass Cliffs:

A RACE TO LEAD REPORT ON NONPROFIT EXECUTIVES OF COLOR

RACE TO LEAD

An initiative of
Building Movement Project

About the Building Movement Project

The Building Movement Project (BMP) supports and pushes the nonprofit sector by developing research, creating tools and training materials, and facilitating networks for social change. Since 2016, BMP's *Race to Lead* initiative has brought critical analysis and extensive data to the growing discussion about the racial leadership gap in the nonprofit sector. Through sector-wide surveys, focus groups, and organizational assessments, BMP explores how nonprofits can transform internal structures and systems to become more equitable workplaces and tackle the most significant social issues of our times.

Acknowledgements

Building Movement Project

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Introduction

The Building Movement Project's *Race to Lead* series has investigated the challenges faced by people of color as they reach for senior leadership roles in nonprofit organizations. This report, however, focuses on leaders of color who have already attained the top position in their organizations.

The data demonstrates that the proverbial glass cliff [1] is an all-too-common reality for leaders of color in the nonprofit sector. Ascending to an executive position does not end a leader's struggles with racism, and sometimes increases those challenges. This report shines a spotlight on:

1 | The racialized barriers that leaders of color overcome to attain their executive positions.

2 | The persisting challenges experienced by people of color who hold executive leadership positions.

3 | The heightened struggles faced by leaders of identity-based organizations.

4 | The added burdens placed on leaders of color who follow a white executive director or chief executive officer.

5 | The potential next wave of executive leaders transitioning out of their positions.

Methodology

In summer 2019, the Building Movement Project conducted its second national *Race to Lead* survey, gathering responses from more than 5,200 respondents nationally.

This included a subset of 1,190 respondents who self-identified as their organization's executive director or chief executive officer (ED/CEO). BMP also conducted separate focus groups with executive leaders of color and white EDs/CEOs in Albuquerque, Austin, Boston, Memphis, and Milwaukee between November 2019 and February 2020.

Since the data that forms the basis for this report was collected before the multiple crises of 2020, it is reasonable to speculate that many of the challenges facing nonprofit leaders of color were exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health crisis and its far-reaching social and economic impacts.

Demographics

The number of nonprofit EDs/CEOs who responded to the 2019 *Race to Lead* survey was large enough to make comparisons on the basis of respondents' self-identification as a person of color (POC), but not specific racial/ethnic identities. *Figure 1* shows that 31% of the respondents to the 2019 survey in ED/CEO roles were leaders of color and 69% were white; the composition of survey respondents in staff roles was 43% POC and 57% white. The contrast between the proportion of respondents of color in executive leadership roles and those in staff positions illustrates the racialized barriers to advancement explored in the *Race to Lead Revisited* report published in mid-2020. Nonetheless, this subset of ED/CEO respondents is likely more diverse than the leadership of the sector in general, given other recently published surveys of nonprofit EDs/CEOs.[2]

Comparing the ED/CEO subset to respondents in staff positions, executive leaders were more likely to be white, male and/or straight. For instance, while 76% of the ED/CEO subset overall identified as women, 82% of survey takers in staff roles were women (*Figure 2* shows respondents' gender identity disaggregated by role as well as self-identification as people of color).[3] Sixteen percent of EDs/CEOs self-identified as LGBTQ+ compared to 23% of survey respondents in staff roles.
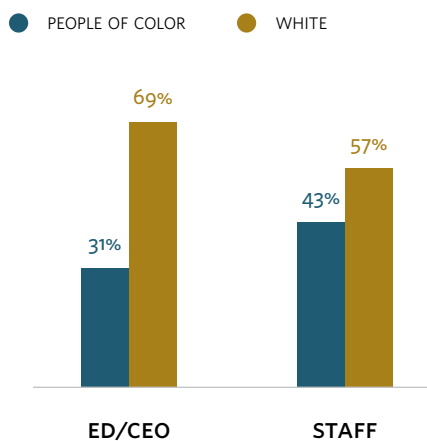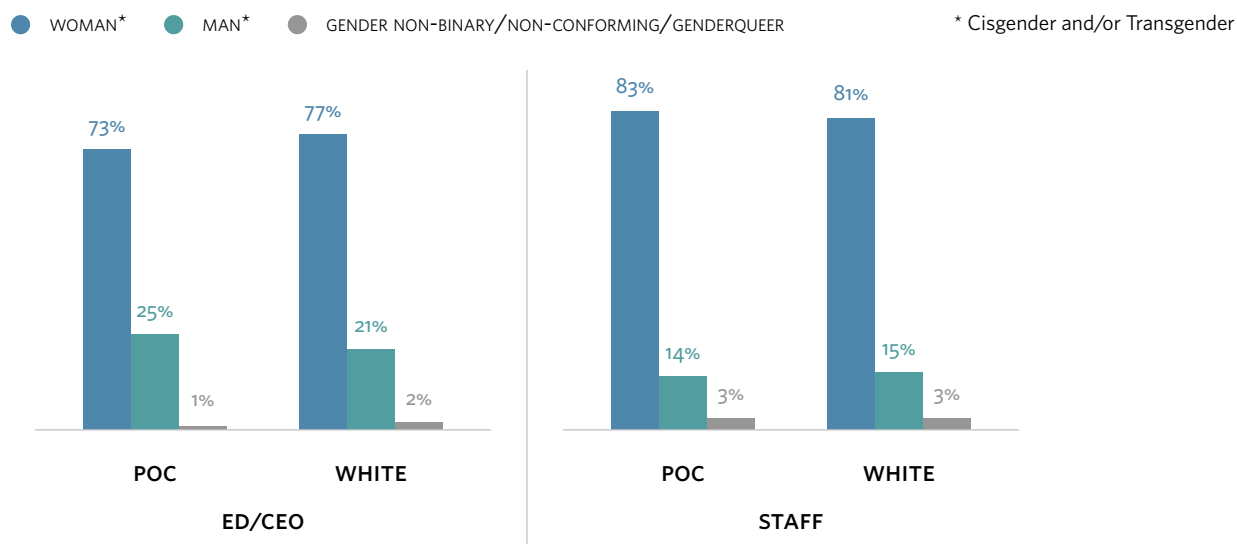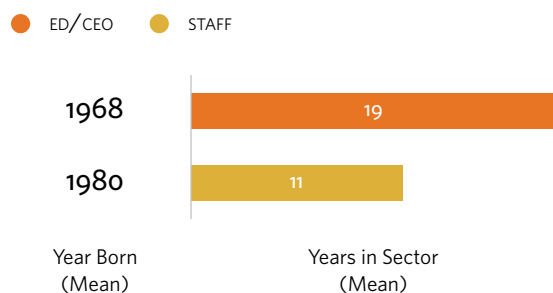
FIGURE 1 | CURRENT ROLE/POSITION

FIGURE 2 | GENDER IDENTITY

WOMAN* • MAN* • GENDER NON-BINARY/NON-CONFORMING/GENDERQUEER   * Cisgender and/or Transgender

Not surprisingly, the subset of EDs/CEOs were, on average, more than a decade older than those in staff roles and had more years of experience in the nonprofit sector (*Figure 3*).

FIGURE 3 | AGE AND YEARS IN SECTOR

● ED/CEO ● STAFF

1968	19
1980	11

Year Born (Mean) — Years in Sector (Mean)

Nearly two-thirds of all EDs/CEOs reported having attained master's degrees or other terminal degrees (PhD, JD, etc.)—higher than the educational attainment of survey respondents in staff roles (*Figure 4*). This suggests that formal schooling provides one pathway to advancement in the nonprofit sector.

A key finding from the Building Movement Project's report based on the 2016 *Race to Lead* survey titled *Nonprofit Executives and the Racial Leadership Gap*, was that the types of organizations respondents led differed based on their self-identification as a person of color or as white. These findings were confirmed in the 2019 survey. Notably, nearly 6 in 10 executive leaders of color worked for identity-based organizations compared to just 2 in 10 white EDs/CEOs (*Figure 5*). The analysis in Finding 4 of this report demonstrates that EDs/CEOs leading identity-based nonprofits have very different leadership experiences than those running non-identity-based organizations.

FIGURE 4 | EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

● ED/CEO ● STAFF

Degree	ED/CEO	STAFF
Associate Degree or Less	6%	8%
Bachelor's Degree	31%	42%
Master's Degree, PhD, JD, MD, etc.	63%	49%
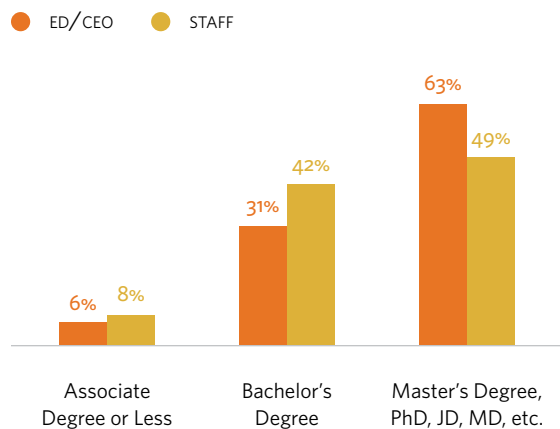
FIGURE 5 | TYPE OF ORGANIZATION LED

● IDENTITY-BASED ORGANIZATION ● OTHER ORGANIZATION TYPE

ED/CEO OF COLOR: 45% Other, 55% Identity-based

WHITE ED/CEO: 22% Identity-based, 78% Other
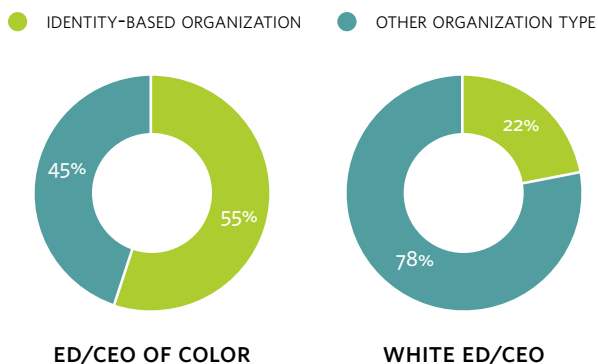
New questions in the 2019 survey pinpointed stark contrasts between EDs/CEOs of color based on their predecessor's race. *Figure 6* shows that the majority of respondents in the ED/CEO subset—regardless of race—were part of an executive transition. A small proportion (8%) of white EDs/CEOs followed a predecessor of color, while nearly half (46%) of leaders of color took over organizations that had been white-led.

FIGURE 6 | WHETHER FOUNDED ORGANIZATION OR FOLLOWED POC/WHITE PREDECESSOR

● FOUNDER ● PREDECESSOR OF COLOR ● WHITE PREDECESSOR

	FOUNDER	PREDECESSOR OF COLOR	WHITE PREDECESSOR
ED/CEO OF COLOR	20%	33%	46%
WHITE ED/CEO	11%	8%	81%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%
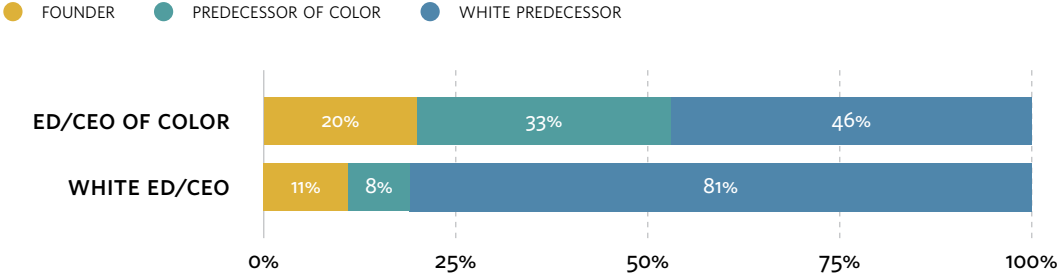
FINDING 1: Executive Leaders of Color Need Supports, Not More Training

As *Race to Lead Revisited* emphasized, nearly half (49%) of people of color indicated in the 2019 survey that their race had negatively impacted their advancement, up from roughly one-third (35%) in the 2016 survey. *Figure 7* shows that the responses of EDs/CEOs in 2019 were nearly identical to respondents in all other staff roles. In several cases, leaders of color commented on their frustrations and experiences with racialized barriers as they tried to advance in the nonprofit sector and overcome racial biases on the path to their ED/CEO roles.

EDs/CEOs of color indicated that they had received the same—or fewer—forms of support and training that are often considered a given when preparing nonprofit workers for leadership roles. *Figure 8* (on the next page) shows the differences by race in the kinds of supports and trainings that EDs/CEOs received over the course of their careers.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"

Prior to my current role as a nonprofit CEO, I'd hit the glass ceiling several times ... I found myself being passed up for roles while less experienced white women or male leaders of color ascended into promotions. I grew weary of having to constantly advocate for myself while others had institutional 'sponsors' lobbying on their behalf.**"**

—Latinx Woman ED/CEO Survey Respondent

FIGURE 7 | IMPACT OF RACE ON CAREER ADVANCEMENT

● PEOPLE OF COLOR   ● WHITE

ED/CEO
- People of Color: 49% | 15% | 36%
- White: 3% | 28% | 68%

STAFF
- People of Color: 49% | 20% | 31%
- White: 4% | 29% | 67%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

People of Color: ● — ● — ●
Negative Impact   No Impact   Positive Impact
White: ● — ● — ●
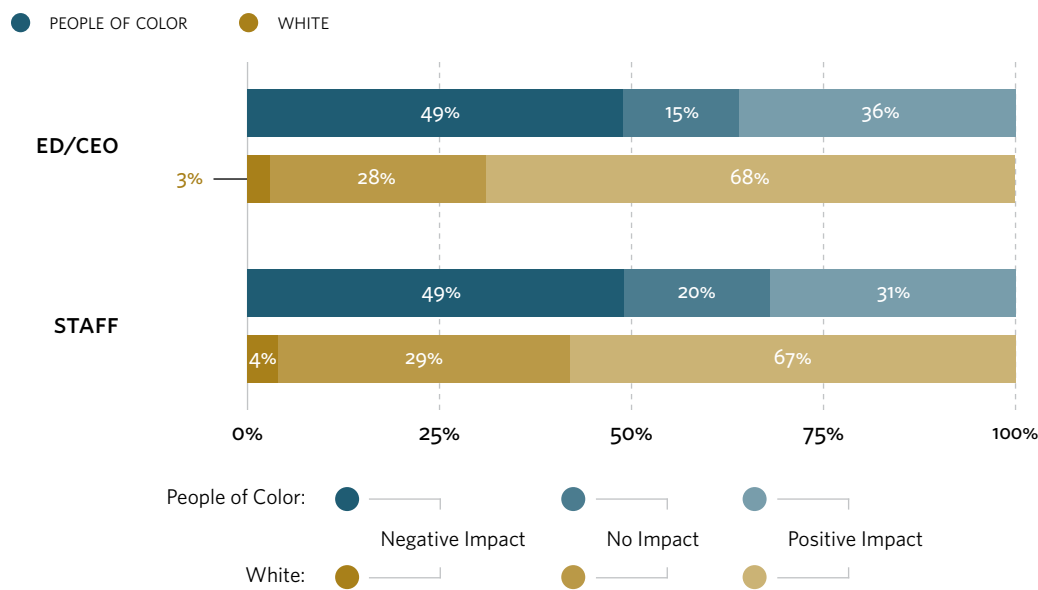
Specifically, peer support and on-the-job mentorship were both types of support/training that EDs/CEOs of color were much less likely than white leaders to have received.

There was a ten percentage-point gap between executive leaders of color (62%) and white EDs/CEOs (72%) who indicated they received support from peers and affinity groups over their careers. Even when leaders of color had participated in affinity groups, they often noted challenges when engaging with white peers leading other nonprofits in their communities.

FIGURE 8 | SUPPORTS AND TRAINING RECEIVED

● ED/CEO OF COLOR   ● WHITE ED/CEO

	ED/CEO of Color	White ED/CEO
Peer support/affinity group meetings or online discussions	62%	72%
Mentor(s) at my job/organization that provide advice, support, connections	47%	58%
Mentor(s) outside my job/organization that provide advice, support, connections	75%	73%
Coaching/Executive Coaching	59%	49%
Financial management/budgeting training	47%	49%
Fundraising training	53%	58%

Another gap was evident between EDs/CEOs of color (47%) and white EDs/CEOs (58%) related to whether respondents received mentorship from people within organizations where they had worked. However, the survey recorded nearly identical percentages of EDs/CEOs of color (75%) and white EDs/CEOs (73%) reporting they received mentorship from beyond their workplaces over the course of their careers.

The contrasting access of leaders of color to on-the-job mentorship compared to their reliance on the advice, support and connections provided by people from outside of their jobs, demonstrates the continued lack of support that people of color experience within nonprofit organizations. While all mentorship is valuable, internal mentors are likely better positioned to open doors within an organization. It is also notable that executive coaching was the only form of support EDs/CEOs of color (59%) were much more likely to receive over the course of their careers than white EDs/CEOs (49%). The higher reliance of people of color on coaching may be an emerging strategy for aspiring leaders of color trying to narrow the gap in access to the kind of mentorship and peer support white respondents receive.

For the remaining kinds of training shown in *Figure 8*—on financial management and fundraising —respondents of color and white respondents in ED/CEO positions reported similar likelihoods of having received those supports. This parity in the rates of training related to the financial sustainability of organizations demonstrates that leaders of color are equally equipped to take on the fiscal oversight responsibilities that come with executive management roles, and that there is no legitimate basis for funders to have less trust in leaders of color than in white leaders when it comes to fiscal management.[4]

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"

In my leadership position it is a difficult task being the only person of color represented in decision-making, as I am forced to make a case for the communities we serve because the circumstances surrounding our constituents is not common knowledge among my peers."

—Black Woman ED/CEO Survey Respondent

"

I've had people who've had executive coaching or professional coaching responsibilities who have helped support me as I walk through some of this stuff, and have also helped share the race lens with me … At this point, there's a lot that I could give in mentoring another woman of color leader, knowing that this will likely come up in her career."

—Participant in Focus Group with EDs/CEOs of Color in Albuquerque

"

As an immigrant and as a woman, I have had too many examples to count where I have been undervalued and underestimated in my work … Believing in myself and having wonderful human beings that mentored and supported me to keep going … created in me fortitude to carry on."

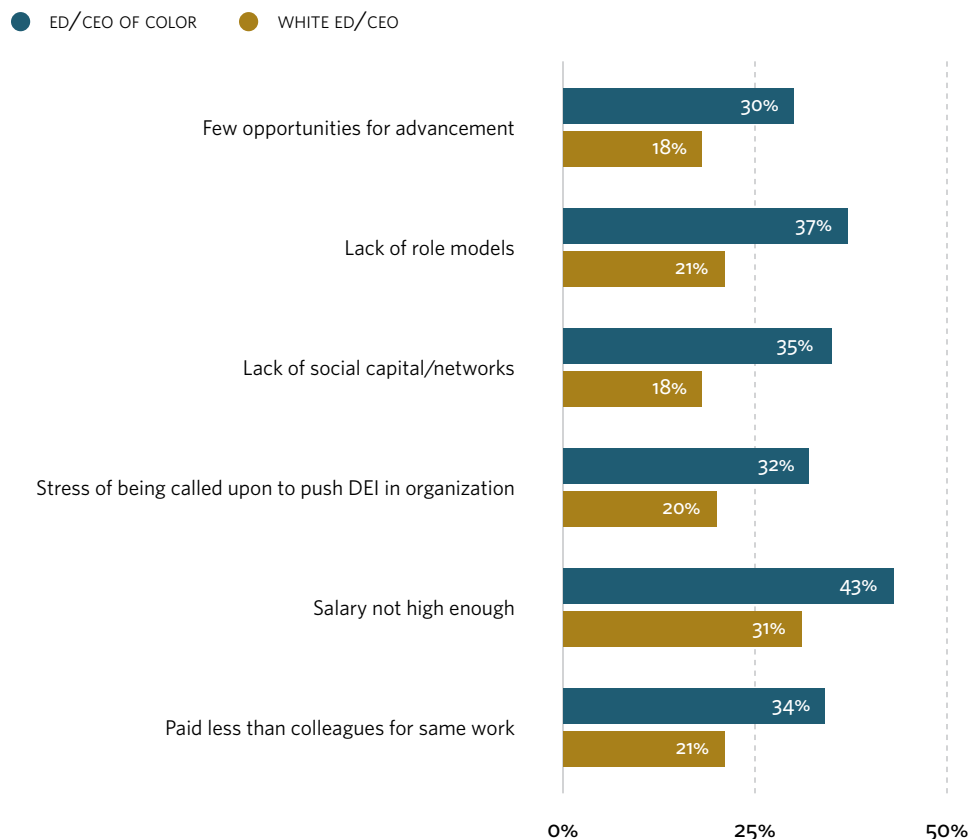—Latinx Woman ED/CEO Survey Respondent

FINDING 2: EDs/CEOs of Color Take on Added Burdens Without Additional Compensation

The Building Movement Project's earlier report, *Nonprofit Executives and the Racial Leadership Gap,* showed that executive leaders of color did not reap the advantages of holding the top position in their organizations to the same extent as white EDs/CEOs. Common frustrations and challenges among nonprofit staff (e.g., few opportunities for advancement, few role models, insufficient salary) persisted for leaders of color, while white executives reported lower frustration levels than people of color in both leadership positions and staff roles, as well as white respondents in staff roles.

The 2019 data on workplaces challenges demonstrated yet again that common challenges and frustrations experienced by people of color across the sector persist even when they attain top executive positions.

As *Figure 9* shows, nearly 1 in 3 executive leaders of color "often" or "always" felt that they lacked opportunities for advancement compared to fewer than 1 in 5 white EDs/CEOs. Moreover, demonstrating that executive leaders still need support and guidance from peers, more than a third of EDs/CEOs of color were "often" or "always" frustrated with a lack of role models (37%) and lack of social capital (35%), compared to well under a quarter of white EDs/CEOs (21% and 18%, respectively).

FIGURE 9 | CHALLENGES AND FRUSTRATIONS FACED ON THE JOB

● ED/CEO OF COLOR   ● WHITE ED/CEO

Challenge	ED/CEO of Color	White ED/CEO
Few opportunities for advancement	30%	18%
Lack of role models	37%	21%
Lack of social capital/networks	35%	18%
Stress of being called upon to push DEI in organization	32%	20%
Salary not high enough	43%	31%
Paid less than colleagues for same work	34%	21%

0%   25%   50%

The survey results also demonstrate that the burden of making nonprofit organizations more racially equitable largely falls on people of color. EDs/CEOs of color were more likely than white leaders to report that they "often" or "always" felt challenged by the stress of being called on to push diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts in their organizations (32% and 20%, respectively).

Notably, the added responsibility to make organizations more equitable does not lead to added compensation for nonprofit leaders of color. As shown in *Figure 9*, 43% of EDs/CEOs of color reported "often" or "always" being frustrated that their salary is not high enough. In contrast, less than one-third (31%) of white EDs/CEOs reported "often" or "always" being frustrated with inadequate salaries.

When ED/CEO survey respondents were asked how often they were frustrated with being paid less than colleagues doing the same work, a similar racial gap emerged. Roughly one-third (34%) of EDs/CEOs of color reported that they were "often" or "always" frustrated by such inequities in their pay, compared to 21% of white executives.

This data demonstrating that pay concerns are racialized is particularly salient in light of the other findings about the added stresses and burdens people of color often take on when assuming executive leadership positions.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"

There is a lack of understanding of the value of my work and urgency to financially provide for my family ... [leading] an organization I love led me to take on a heavy workload with a salary almost half of peers with the same position."
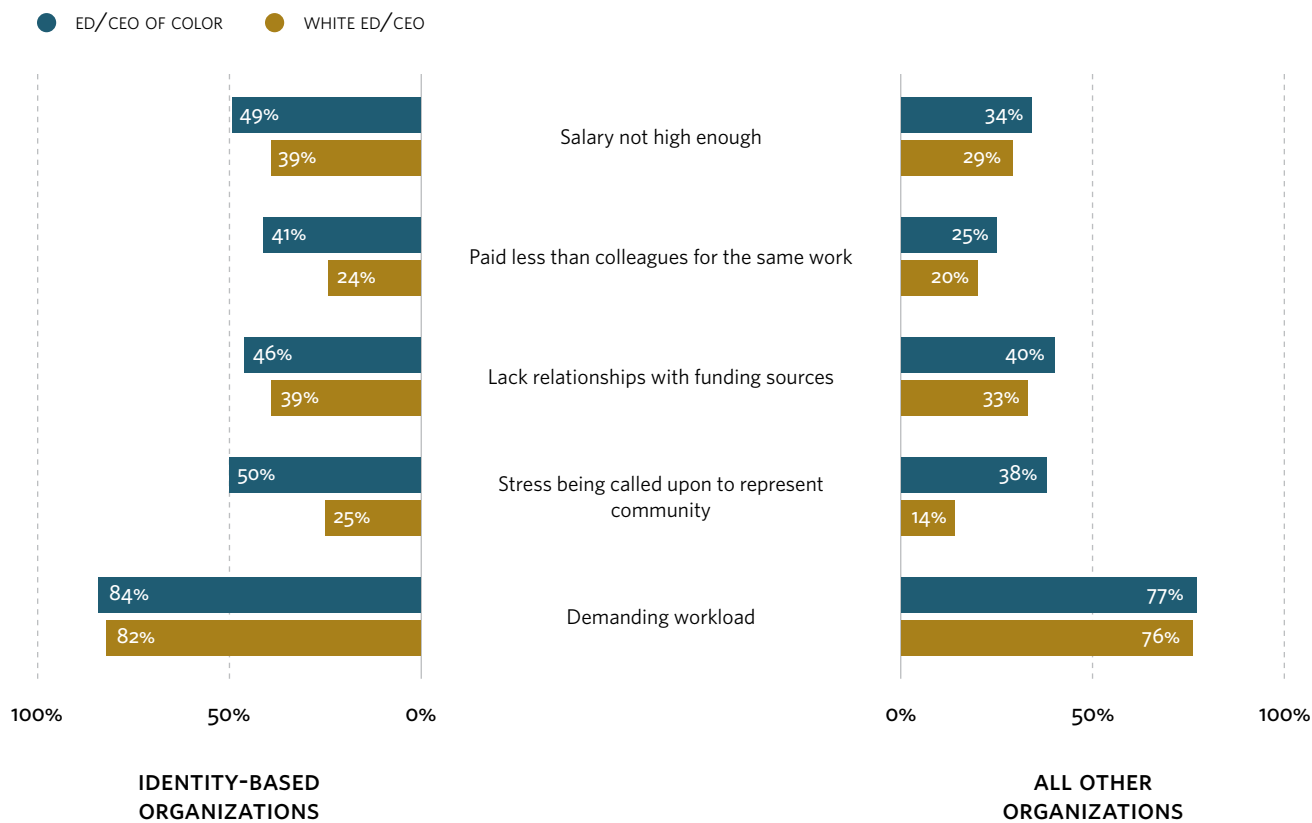
—Latinx Woman ED/CEO Survey Respondent

FINDING 3: Leaders of Identity-Based Organizations Face Distinct Demands

The 2019 survey data demonstrated heightened pressures on leaders of identity-based organizations that reinforce concerns about the lack of philanthropic investment in organizations working with groups that are often marginalized in our society.

As noted on page 3 (*Figure 5*), 55% of executive leaders of color worked for nonprofits focused on particular racial/ethnic groups, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community or other identity categories, in contrast to 22% of white EDs/CEOs. These leaders of identity-based organizations expressed more frustrations with compensation than other EDs/CEOs. *Figure 10* shows that nearly half (49%) of EDs/CEOs of color leading identity-based organizations reported that they were "often" or "always" frustrated with their salaries not being high enough. Reports of inadequate salaries dropped by ten or more percentage-points among white EDs/CEOs of identity-based organizations (39%) and leaders of color running non-identity-based groups (34%). Fewer than one-third (29%) of white EDs/CEOs of non-identity-based groups were frustrated with the level of their pay.

FIGURE 10 | CHALLENGES AND FRUSTRATIONS BY WHETHER LEAD IDENTITY-BASED ORGANIZATION

- ED/CEO OF COLOR
- WHITE ED/CEO

	IDENTITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS		ALL OTHER ORGANIZATIONS	
	ED/CEO of color	White ED/CEO	ED/CEO of color	White ED/CEO
Salary not high enough	49%	39%	34%	29%
Paid less than colleagues for the same work	41%	24%	25%	20%
Lack relationships with funding sources	46%	39%	40%	33%
Stress being called upon to represent community	50%	25%	38%	14%
Demanding workload	84%	82%	77%	76%

A similar pattern was evident in the responses to the question of whether EDs/CEOs felt they were paid less than colleagues doing the same work. Among EDs/CEOs of color leading identity-based organizations, 41% reported being "often" or "always" frustrated by pay inequities, compared to just 25% of EDs/CEOs of color leading non-identity-based groups.

The gap between white EDs/CEOs on the basis of whether they led an identity-based organization was much smaller: just 24% of white EDs/CEOs of identity-based organizations and 20% of white EDs/CEOs of non-identity based organizations reported being "often" or "always" frustrated with inequitable salaries.

The financial concerns expressed by EDs/CEOs relate to their personal well-being as well as their organizations' sustainability. As advocates for redressing "philanthropic redlining" have made clear, ethnic-specific nonprofits and organizations led by people of color too often are "denied access to funding due to eligibility, staffing, and/or grant monitoring requirements that are either unattainable or arduous."[5]

The 2019 *Race to Lead* survey explored leaders' relationships with funders and found a nine percentage-point gap between the share of executive leaders of color and white EDs/CEOS who "often" or "always" felt that a lack of relationships with funding sources was a challenge for them (43% and 34%, respectively).

Figure 10 shows that executive leaders also differ on the challenge of relationship-building with funding sources, depending on whether or not they lead an identity-based organization. Almost half (46%) of EDs/CEOs of color leading identity-based organizations indicated that they "often" or "always" felt challenged by a lack of relationships with funding sources, followed by 40% of other EDs/CEOs of color, 39% of white EDs/CEOs of identity-based organizations and 33% of other white EDs/CEOs.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"

Our organization is a Black-operated organization serving Black and Brown clients. It is my belief that we are discriminated against for funding opportunities (grants, government funding) and that we are often overlooked regardless of the quality of work we perform."

—Black Woman ED/CEO Survey Respondent

"

The foundation piece is, by far, the hardest to break through. It's been extremely difficult … And I think that with foundations there's also very much a power dynamic that is so hard to confront. From their application process, to their funding process, to how they come up with their funding priorities."

—Participant in Focus Group with EDs/CEOs of Color in Boston

"

I know that for a lot of Black-led organizations in this city, whether they were maybe founded more recently or maybe they even have a longer history … but what POC organizations versus what white-led organizations are getting is drastically different."

—Participant in Focus Group with White EDs/CEOs in Memphis

It is not surprising that leaders of identity-based organizations were more likely to report feeling the "stress of being called upon to represent a community," given their organizations' greater focus on specific identity groups, whether racial/ethnic, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community or other communities. Overall, 45% of EDs/CEOs of color "often" or "always" felt this challenge, compared to only 16% of white EDs/CEOs.

Examining the differences between the subset of nonprofit executive leaders in *Figure 10*, 50% of EDs/CEOs of color who led identity-based organizations and 38% of the remaining leaders of color expressed frequent frustration with the stress of representing a community—significantly more than white EDs/CEOs of identity-based groups (25%) and non-identity-based organizations (14%).

The challenge that may best sum up why many believe nonprofit ED/CEO roles are not sustainable is the "demanding workload" nonprofit leaders face. Overall, 8 in 10 EDs/CEOs (79%) reported that their workload was "often" or "always" a challenge or frustration, compared to 63% of respondents in staff roles.

Concerns about burnout among nonprofit EDs/CEOs in general are amplified for leaders of identity-based organizations. As *Figure 10* shows, the demands of leading identity-based organizations are more intense than those of non-identity-based organizations and outweigh any racial gaps between EDs/CEOs generally.
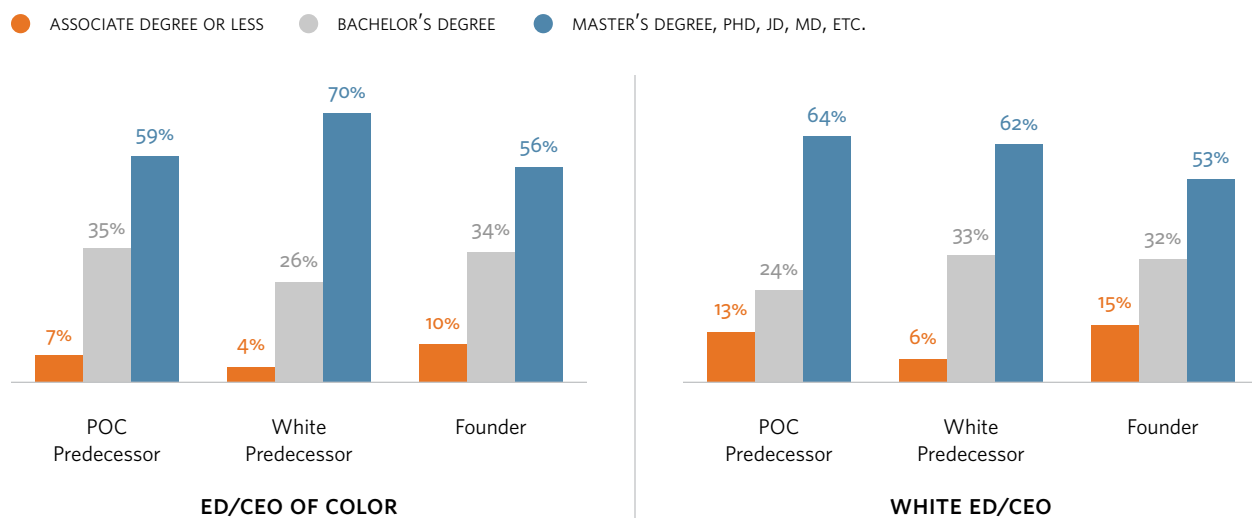
Over four-fifths of EDs/CEOs of identity-based organizations reported that they were "often" or "always" challenged by their demanding workloads (84% of EDs/CEOs of color, 82% of white EDs/CEOs). By contrast, roughly three-quarters of EDs/CEOs of non-identity-based organizations expressed feeling this challenge "often" or "always" (77% of EDs/CEOs of color, 76% of white EDs/CEOs).

FINDING 4: Challenges Come with Taking Leadership from White Predecessors

In the 2019 Race to Lead survey, ED/CEO respondents answered additional questions about their leadership experiences, particularly related to dynamics with their staff and board. The data revealed that leaders of color faced contrasting management experiences based on whether their organization's previous executive leader was a person of color or white. As noted on page 4 (*Figure 6*), almost half (46%) of EDs/CEOs of color reported that their organization was previously white-led.

Leaders of color taking over organizations from outgoing white leaders had the highest levels of educational attainment. As *Figure 11* shows, 70% of leaders of color whose predecessor was white reported having a master's or terminal degree, compared to 59% of EDs/CEOs of color who followed another leader of color. In contrast, there was little difference in the educational attainment of white EDs/CEOs, regardless of whether their predecessor was a person of color or white (64% and 62% had a master's degree or higher, respectively). Founders of color and white founders were somewhat less likely to report having this top level of educational attainment (56% and 53%, respectively).

FIGURE 11 | EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY WHETHER FOUNDED ORGANIZATION OR FOLLOWED POC/WHITE PREDECESSOR

● ASSOCIATE DEGREE OR LESS   ● BACHELOR'S DEGREE   ● MASTER'S DEGREE, PHD, JD, MD, ETC.

ED/CEO OF COLOR

	POC Predecessor	White Predecessor	Founder
Associate degree or less	7%	4%	10%
Bachelor's degree	35%	26%	34%
Master's degree, PhD, JD, MD, etc.	59%	70%	56%

WHITE ED/CEO

	POC Predecessor	White Predecessor	Founder
Associate degree or less	13%	6%	15%
Bachelor's degree	24%	33%	32%
Master's degree, PhD, JD, MD, etc.	64%	62%	53%

The data showing that leaders of color taking over organizations from white leaders had higher levels of educational attainment than white EDs/CEOs add evidence to anecdotal reports that leaders of color are held to higher standards when succeeding a white leader.
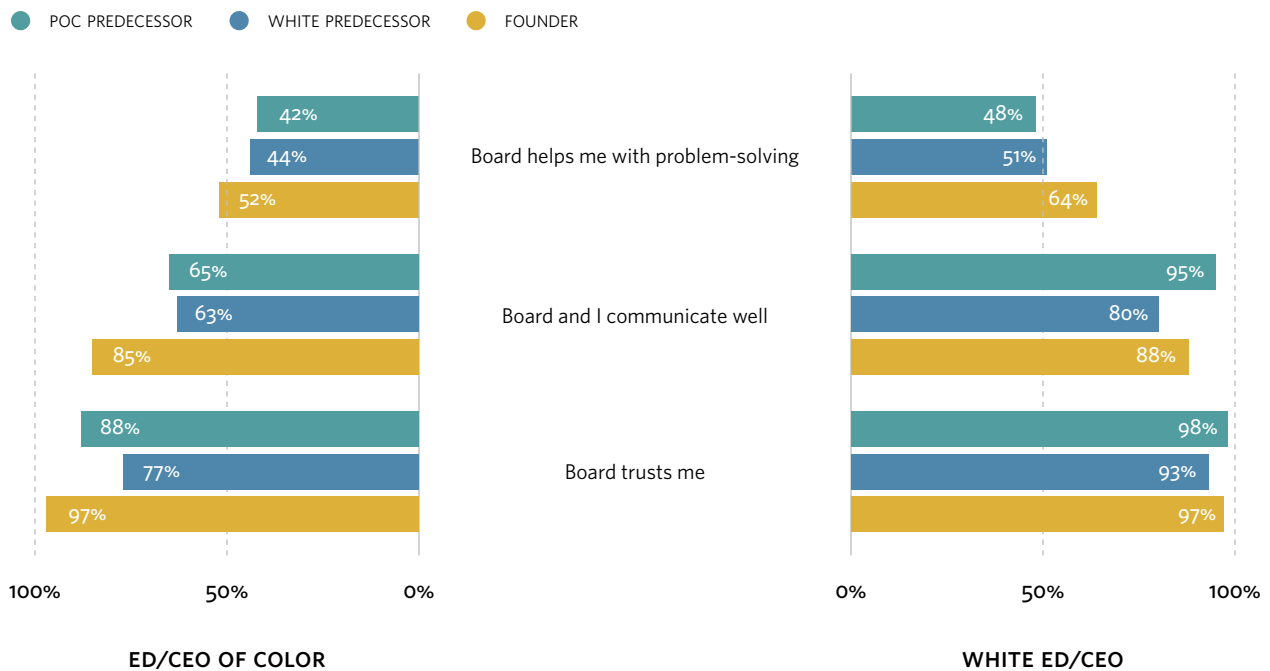
The frustration of facing more scrutiny as a leader of color following a white leader was reflected in the survey responses from EDs/CEOs about their relationships with board members. The partnership between executive leaders and boards of directors is a critical aspect of nonprofit leadership. Research from BoardSource has demonstrated that boards impact the job satisfaction of nonprofit EDs/CEOs in various ways, ranging from the extent to which the board adds value to strategic conversations to the amount of money board members contribute to the organization.[6]

As *Figure 12* shows, the relatively small proportion of EDs/CEOs who founded their organizations reported more positive board dynamics, despite a notable gap between founders of color and white founders regarding whether their board helps address problems. Among EDs/CEOs who took over their organizations from a predecessor, the racial gaps were relatively small based on whether respondents indicated that their boards "often" or "always" help with problem-solving, but much larger regarding whether they have good communication with their board.

Also, racial differences in the share of executive leaders of color who indicated that their organization's board "often" or "always" trusts them were largely driven by leaders of color who followed a white predecessor. At least 90% of white EDs/CEOs—as well as leaders of color who founded their organizations or took over leadership from a previous ED/CEO of color—indicated that their board "often" or "always" trusts them, but only three-quarters (77%) of EDs/CEOs of color who succeeded a white executive leader reported feeling that same level of trust from the board.

FIGURE 12 | BOARD DYNAMICS BY WHETHER FOUNDED ORGANIZATION OR FOLLOWED POC/WHITE PREDECESSOR

- POC PREDECESSOR
- WHITE PREDECESSOR
- FOUNDER

Board helps me with problem-solving
ED/CEO OF COLOR — POC Predecessor: 42%, White Predecessor: 44%, Founder: 52%
WHITE ED/CEO — POC Predecessor: 48%, White Predecessor: 51%, Founder: 64%

Board and I communicate well
ED/CEO OF COLOR — POC Predecessor: 65%, White Predecessor: 63%, Founder: 85%
WHITE ED/CEO — POC Predecessor: 95%, White Predecessor: 80%, Founder: 88%

Board trusts me
ED/CEO OF COLOR — POC Predecessor: 88%, White Predecessor: 77%, Founder: 97%
WHITE ED/CEO — POC Predecessor: 98%, White Predecessor: 93%, Founder: 97%

ED/CEO OF COLOR   WHITE ED/CEO

The contrast in the leadership experience of EDs/CEOs of color with white predecessors was also evident in response to statements about leaders' experiences working with staff, as illustrated in *Figure 13*. EDs/CEOs of color who took over leadership from white leaders were substantially less likely to indicate that their staff "often" or "always" supports their leadership than all other groups of EDs/CEOs across racial identities. The same pattern emerges in response to the survey question on whether "staff accept me holding them accountable for high performance."

While the majority of nonprofit executives feel their organization's staff support their leadership and accept being held accountable, the finding that EDs/CEOs of color following white leaders face less support from staff was reflected repeatedly in the write-in responses of several survey-takers, as well as in other anecdotal reports about the added struggles of EDs/CEOs of color following executive transitions where the exiting leader was white.[7]

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"

[My predecessor] was a white woman. No one called her 'hun' or 'sweetie.' They see me, and they think that they can talk to me like that because I am a young woman of color, because I'm not white. That is not skills-based."
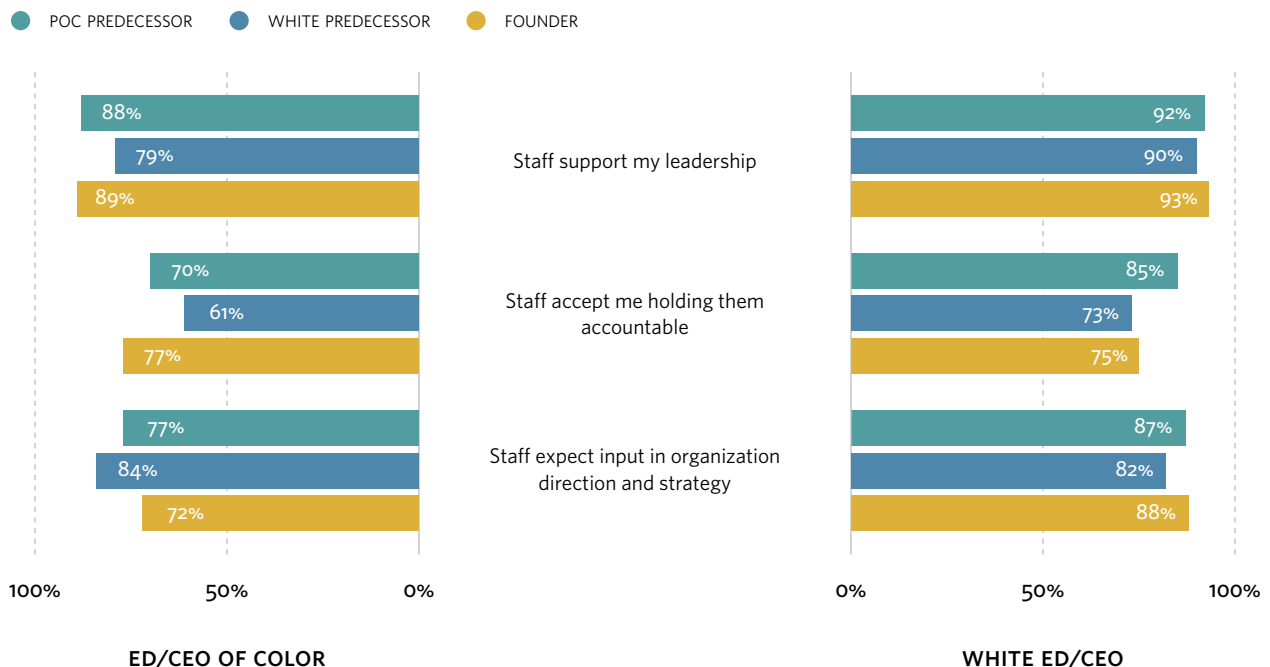
—Participant in Focus Group with EDs/CEOs of Color in Boston

"

[I] do not feel my leadership is supported by the board, nor always respected the way a man's/white person's leadership would be. I have dealt with it by working harder and harder to win their approval."

—Latinx Woman ED/CEO Survey Respondent with a White Predecessor

FIGURE 13 | **STAFF DYNAMICS BY WHETHER FOUNDED ORGANIZATION OR FOLLOWED POC/WHITE PREDECESSOR**

● POC PREDECESSOR   ● WHITE PREDECESSOR   ● FOUNDER

ED/CEO OF COLOR

Staff support my leadership	
POC PREDECESSOR	88%
WHITE PREDECESSOR	79%
FOUNDER	89%

Staff accept me holding them accountable	
POC PREDECESSOR	70%
WHITE PREDECESSOR	61%
FOUNDER	77%

Staff expect input in organization direction and strategy	
POC PREDECESSOR	77%
WHITE PREDECESSOR	84%
FOUNDER	72%

WHITE ED/CEO

Staff support my leadership	
POC PREDECESSOR	92%
WHITE PREDECESSOR	90%
FOUNDER	93%

Staff accept me holding them accountable	
POC PREDECESSOR	85%
WHITE PREDECESSOR	73%
FOUNDER	75%

Staff expect input in organization direction and strategy	
POC PREDECESSOR	87%
WHITE PREDECESSOR	82%
FOUNDER	88%

The pattern in response to last statement in *Figure 13* regarding "staff expect input in organizational direction and strategy" was more nuanced. Leaders of color with white predecessors were more similar to white leaders than to other EDs/CEOs of color. Eighty-four percent of leaders of color who had a white predecessor reported that their staff "often" or "always" expect input on organizational direction and strategy—a rate comparable to white EDs/CEOs (82% to 88%). Meanwhile, only 72% of EDs/CEOs of color who founded their organizations and 77% of those who took over from other EDs/CEOs of color reported that their staff "often" or "always" expect input.

These findings support anecdotal reports of nonprofit leaders feeling heightened challenges coming from their staff teams. Complaints from EDs/CEOs that routine management practices are misinterpreted as examples of an oppressive workplace may simply reflect the fraying of team cohesion in organizations that have struggled to adapt to the myriad crises confronting nonprofits in recent years.

Even so, commonplace frustrations of executive leaders in general may generate a heavier emotional toll for EDs/CEOs of color, particularly when experiencing tensions with staff members who are also people of color. Furthermore, staff sensitivity to the style and demeanor of EDs/CEOs who are people of color may trigger particular dissonance when current leaders of color suspect that the direct and/or authoritative leadership styles of their white predecessors had been accepted without question or consternation.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"

Racial stereotypes continue to cloud the perception of my leadership approach. I have been cast as an 'angry black man,' … I now know that I cannot operate by the same rules as my counterparts of other races. I don't get the benefit of the doubt."

—Black Male ED/CEO Survey Respondent with a White Predecessor

"

Some have characterized what I've faced as insubordination at times, and have made comments that certain attitudes, behaviors, words would not have been conveyed to a director who was a white man or woman."

—Asian Woman ED/CEO Survey Respondent with a White Predecessor

"

I am often looked at suspiciously by my own people if I am too accepted by the dominant culture—as if I am a traitor. This is the most difficult and negative aspect of my experience working in nonprofits."
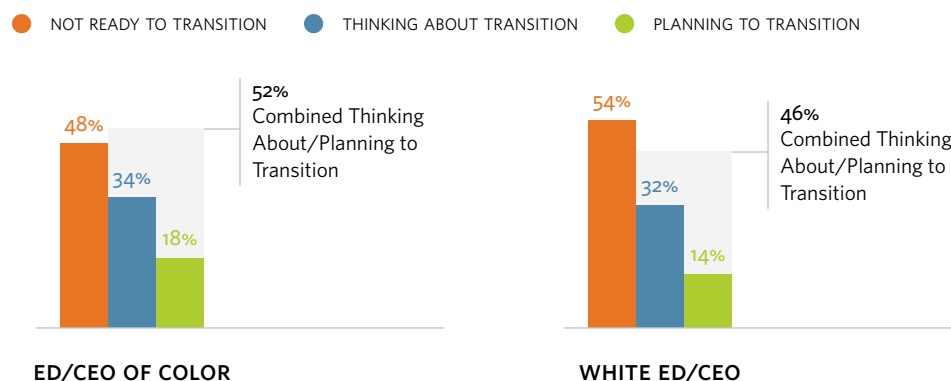
—Black Woman Survey Respondent Planning to Transition Out of Her ED/CEO Role

FINDING 5: Too Few White Leaders Factor Race Equity Into Their Succession Plans

Forecasts about impending executive transitions have been overblown in the past. For instance, projections in the mid-2000s that older nonprofit leaders would soon retire were curtailed by the economic crisis of 2008. Nonetheless, the survey data suggests that large shares of executive leaders are contemplating next steps in their careers.

Roughly one-third of leaders of color, as well as white EDs/CEOs, indicated that they were thinking about transitioning out of their current role (34% and 32%, respectively); additional EDs/CEOs indicated that they already had plans to transition or had initiated the process of leaving their role at the time of the 2019 survey (*Figure 14*). Altogether, approximately half of EDs/CEOs of color (52%) and white EDs/CEOs (46%) reported that they were either thinking about transitioning or planning to move on from their ED/CEO role.

FIGURE 14 | LEVEL OF INTEREST IN TRANSITIONING OUT OF CURRENT ED/CEO ROLE

● NOT READY TO TRANSITION ● THINKING ABOUT TRANSITION ● PLANNING TO TRANSITION

ED/CEO OF COLOR: 48% (Not Ready), 34% (Thinking), 18% (Planning) — 52% Combined Thinking About/Planning to Transition

WHITE ED/CEO: 54% (Not Ready), 32% (Thinking), 14% (Planning) — 46% Combined Thinking About/Planning to Transition

Unfortunately, the 2019 data also revealed that a large share of white EDs/CEOs were not attending to issues of race and equity in their organizations or factoring those considerations into their eventual transitions.

Nearly three-quarters (72%) of white EDs/CEOs reported that their organizations were engaging in DEI activities generally. However, this percentage dropped precipitously when survey respondents were asked to indicate the specific strategies being pursued.

Out of a list of eight potential DEI strategies, the only strategy being implemented by more than half (59%) of white EDs/CEOs related to increasing diverse representation on the organization's board. Although 43% of white nonprofit leaders indicated that their organizations were developing "new recruitment and outreach strategies to increase staff diversity," this strategy did not seem to extend to the transition plans of white leaders.

Figure 15 shows how ED/CEO respondents who reported being in some stage of contemplating their transition factored race equity into their plans. While 49% of EDs/CEOs of color were actively mentoring staff of color as part of their plans for identifying a successor, only 23% of white EDs/CEOs planning for their transition were providing mentorship to people of color in their organizations. The gap between leaders of color and white EDs/CEOs narrowed somewhat in response to the possible strategy of "widening the organization's networks in communities of color," but there was still an eleven percentage-point difference.

Even the most thoughtfully prepared executive transitions can be fraught, but the data on the staff challenges of EDs/CEOs of color who followed white predecessors—combined with the data on the lack of DEI efforts being taken on by white EDs/CEOs—appears to bolster personal accounts by leaders of color who felt that they inherited a staff team, board, and funder relationships that resist and resent being led by an ED/CEO of color.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"

There's two parts to winning [in an executive transition]. There's getting your colleague of color into that position, but then the hardest thing is making sure that she has the support to succeed."

—Participant in Focus Group with White EDs/CEOs in Boston

FIGURE 15 | HOW RACE EQUITY FACTORS INTO PLANS FOR SUCCESSOR (AMONG EDS/CEOS INTERESTED IN TRANSITIONING)

● ED/CEO OF COLOR   ● WHITE ED/CEO

- Actively mentoring staff of color — ED/CEO of color: 49%, White ED/CEO: 23%
- Widening organization networks in communities of color — ED/CEO of color: 44%, White ED/CEO: 33%
- Actively recruiting/connecting with leaders of color — ED/CEO of color: 40%, White ED/CEO: 24%
- Encouraging board to consider leaders of color — ED/CEO of color: 29%, White ED/CEO: 26%
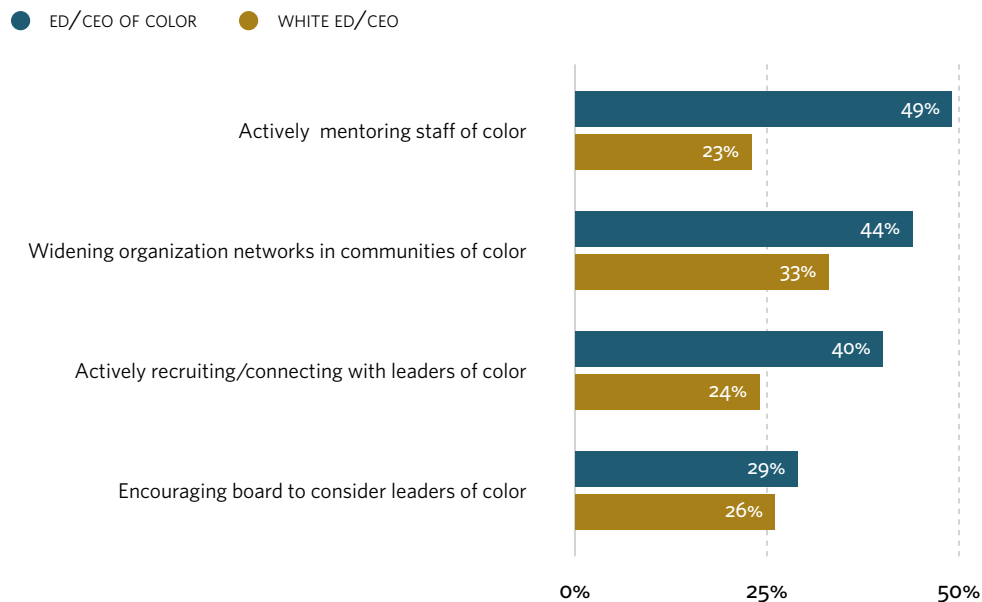
The survey data and quotes show that EDs/CEOs of color face added challenges on their ascent to executive positions and in their leadership of nonprofit organizations, particularly when heading an identity-based organization or succeeding a white predecessor.

The data from the 2019 *Race to Lead* survey likely underestimates the scale of the challenges faced by nonprofit leaders of color today. Many anecdotal reports suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to burnout and sustainability concerns at many organizations, particularly those led by people of color. Even before the multiple crises of 2020 and beyond, leaders of color and EDs/CEOs of identity-based organizations faced deep and chronic gaps between the needs of their communities and the financial resources flowing to their nonprofits.

Taken together, the findings may help explain the large percentage of leaders who are contemplating their transitions (see page 17, *Figure 14*). Executive leadership in the nonprofit sector is notoriously difficult, but too often, this work is made much harder for people of color.

Burnout among nonprofit EDs/CEOs may be a perpetual concern. But it would be progress if EDs/CEOs of color—particularly those leading identity-based organizations—faced the same ordinary (yet substantial) leadership challenges, pressures and frustrations as their white colleagues running more mainstream organizations...rather than also being called upon to cope with the many added challenges and inequities described throughout this report.

The opportunities noted below can help funders, capacity builders and other key players in the nonprofit sector take meaningful steps to ease the pressures that leaders of color face.

OPPORTUNITY 1

Support On-Ramps and Off-Ramps for Nonprofit Leaders

In the past three years, several foundations, including funders of identity-based organizations, have dedicated more time and attention to exploring how to best support the growing numbers of grantee organizations experiencing executive transitions.[8] One possibility is helping current leaders—many of whom are white and contemplating their next steps—identify off-ramps from their executive leadership positions.

Funders could consider providing financial support to experienced executive leaders who can provide mentorship to aspiring leaders, particularly by sponsoring younger staff of color who are at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing mentors. Such a mentorship matching program would retain the knowledge and wisdom of organizational leaders, while supporting the next generation of diverse leaders the sector is

clamoring for—a double-win. Cross-racial mentorship may involve some complications, but these nuances could be opportunities for learning, training and research about effective mentorship across generation and race.

OPPORTUNITY 2

Fund Peer Supports for Leaders of Color

As shown on page 6 (*Figure 8*), EDs/CEOs of color received less mentorship and peer support over the course of their careers, while reporting more frustrations with limited networks and access to role models in their executive-level positions. To address this challenge, some local foundations and nonprofit support organizations have convened affinity groups and communities of practice to support EDs/CEOs and/or aspiring leaders.[9]

Cohort-based leadership development programs are not yet widespread, and their impact may not be easily quantifiable. Nonetheless, when peer support groups are well-facilitated and well-funded, the combination of emotional support, empathy and flexible funding can lessen the psychological burdens of taking on executive leadership positions.

OPPORTUNITY 3

Double-Down—Don't Wait and See

Another key lesson shared by funders is that times of executive transition are opportunities to increase their investments in organizations. These financial investments can be additional resources to support the transition or general support dollars to meet the increased needs that come with executive transitions.

Funders can implement a wide range of strategies to support organizations during a period of transition, but one thing foundations and donors should not do is take a "wait and see" approach to determining whether or not the incoming leader is successful before providing new or renewed funding to the organization.[10] Disturbingly, the survey data revealed that among respondents who had been part of an executive transition, 29% of EDs/CEOs of color and 19% of white EDs/CEOs reported that funding was withheld or withdrawn when they started their leadership position.

OPPORTUNITY 4

Factor Race Into Executive Transitions

The racial gap in the percentage of EDs/CEOs who reported funding concerns when they started in their executive roles confirms that new leaders of color are too often set up to fail. Moreover, the 2019 survey data revealed that EDs/CEOs of color who follow a white leader face additional struggles in their management of staff and relationship with board members. In the focus groups and survey responses,

leaders of color described their frustrations with complicated organizational dynamics and internal issues as taking a toll on their mental wellness—while requiring them to expend precious time and energy on management headaches.

White EDs/CEOs are best positioned to ready their organizations to support the leadership of a person of color in the future, but the survey data shows that many current EDs/CEOs are not taking up this leadership responsibility.

In response to these challenges, some funders have focused on putting pressure on grantees to diversify their organizations (e.g., changing the composition of an organization's board of directors). Other funders have invested in racial equity practitioners to resource those consultants to support nonprofit organizations.[11] Reducing the "glass cliff" effect for incoming nonprofit executives of color will require funders, interim EDs/CEOs, capacity builders, board members and current organizational leaders working together to make organizations more racially equitable *now*.

OPPORTUNITY **5**

Invest in Organizations That Already Center Identity

While it is certainly important to diversify the leadership of nonprofits overall, reducing the added concerns about salaries, organizational funding and general workload that fall particularly hard on EDs/CEOs of color who lead identity-based organizations should be a key equity commitment for the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors.

In the current political moment of increased polarization and outright attacks on the rights of women, immigrants and people of color, nonprofits that meet the material needs and build the power of marginalized communities are particularly essential.

The racial reckoning that occurred in the spring of 2020 challenged the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors to make real commitments to addressing underinvestment in organizations led by people of color due to prior practices of philanthropic redlining.

However, advocates for more racially equitable philanthropy have cautioned that even when foundations have utilized the language of racial justice and social movements, they have remained unresponsive to the demands of movements and actual funding levels have not even begun to match the headlines.[12]

Identity-based organizations are critical to the nonprofit ecosystem and merit funding commensurate with their impact on their communities and contributions to the social movements that drive change across this country.

Endnotes

1   The "glass cliff" term was initially coined in reference to the phenomenon of women being put into leadership roles under risky circumstance, particularly as new business executives of already struggling or failing companies. The term is also commonly used to describe circumstances faced by people of color and other underrepresented groups who break through the glass ceiling but find themselves in precarious leadership positions.

    See: Morgenroth, Thekla; Teri Kirby; Michelle Ryan; and Antonia Sudkämper, "The who, when, and why of the glass cliff phenomenon: A meta-analysis of appointments to precarious leadership positions," Psychological Bulletin, 146(9), July 2020 www.researchgate.net/publication/343178704_The_who_when_and_why_of_the_glass_cliff_phenomenon_A_meta-analysis_ of_appointments_to_precarious_leadership_positions and Rosette, Ashleigh Shelby; and Robert W. Livingston, "Failure is not an option for Black women: Effects of organizational performance on leaders with single versus dual-subordinate identities," Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48(5), 2012, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103112000832.

2   For example: In *Leading with Intent: BoardSource Index of Nonprofit Board Practices (2021)*, 87% of chief executives surveyed were white (Washington, D.C.: BoardSource, 2021), www.leadingwithintent.org.

    Similarly, in the Urban Institute report, *Nonprofit Trends and Impacts 2021*, 79% of nonprofit executive directors surveyed were non-Hispanic white (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2021), www.urban.org/research/publication/nonprofit-trends-and-impacts-2021/view/full_report.

3   Differences in this report are statistically significant unless otherwise indicated. Due to rounding, some percentages that appear in the Figures throughout the report may not precisely reflect the absolute numbers or add to 100%.

4   See: Rendon, Jim, "Nonprofits Led by People of Color Win Less Grant Money with More Strings (Study)," (The Chronicle of Philanthropy: May 7, 2020) www.philanthropy.com/article/nonprofits-led-by-people-of-color-win-less-grant-money-with-more-strings-study/ and Dorsey, Cheryl; Jeff Bradach; and Peter Kim, *Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table* (Echoing Green and The Bridgespan Group, 2020), www.bridgespan.org/bridgespan/ Images/articles/racial-equity-and-philanthropy/racial-equity-and-philanthropy.pdf.

5   For example: Emergent Pathways LLC and ABFE: A Philanthropic Partnership for Black Communities (December 2019), *The Case for Funding Black-Led Social Change: Redlining by Another Name: What the Data Says to Move from Rhetoric to Action*, www.blacksocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/BSCFN_BLSCO_Report.pdf.

6   *Leading with Intent: BoardSource Index of Nonprofit Board Practices* (Washington, D.C.: BoardSource, 2021), www.leadingwithintent.org.

7   See: *Making (Or Taking) Space: Initial Themes on Nonprofit Transitions from White to BIPOC Leaders*, written by the Building Movement Project on behalf of the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation (September 2021), www.buildingmovement.org/reports/ making-or-taking-space-initial-themes-on-nonprofit-transitions-from-white-to-bipoc-leaders/.

8   See: Bartling, Holly, "Trust in Practice: Shifting Our Stance on Leadership Transitions," *Trust-Based Philanthropy Project*, July, 30, 2021, www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/blog-1/7-30-2021-shifting-our-stance-on-leadership-transitions and Leadership Transitions Funders Group of Philanthropy New York, www.philanthropynewyork.org/leadership-transitions-funders-group.

9   Farmelo, Martha and Victoria Wigodzky, *In Support of Those Who Take the Leap: Lessons on Leadership Transitions from the Open Society Foundations' New Executives Fund* (Open Society Foundations, 2021), www.opensocietyfoundations.org/ publications/in-support-of-those-who-take-the-leap.

10 Fund the People, "Invest in Equity Inside the Nonprofit Workforce," www.fundthepeople.org/toolkit/inclusivity/equity/.

11 For example: Borealis Philanthropy's Racial Equity to Accelerate Change (REACH) Fund, www.borealisphilanthropy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/0617_BP_Reach_FactSheet.pdf.

12 Devich Cyril, Malkia; Lyle Matthew Kan; Ben Francisco Maulbeck; and Lori Villarosa, *Mismatched: Philanthropy's Response to the Call for Racial Justice* (Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2021), www.racialequity.org/mismatched.

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