CREATING SPACES FOR REST AND REFLECTION FOR LEADERS OF COLOR
Healthy villages are raised by healthy leaders. The definition of a healthy leader, particularly when assessing leaders of color, will depend on the cultural lens through which they are viewed. Capitalistic leadership is often pro-white and values competitiveness, productivity, and a person’s ability to ascend to lofty positions of authority and power at any cost. These lenses cannot be accurately applied to the world of activism, organizing, and healing. Nevertheless, institutional philanthropy largely uses similar measurements when assessing the success or effectiveness of community leaders of color.

The term “village” does not always translate into Western notions of “thriving” or “civilized.” This is a mechanism of dehumanization in which white-led institutions undermine leaders of color. They do not believe leaders of color know what is best for their communities because their solutions do not align with Western constructs of success. In order to sustain their organizations, leaders in communities of color are pressured to translate their work or develop programs to fit the Western models of thriving that philanthropy and white-led institutions deem “worthy” of funding.
LEADERS OF COLOR ARE NOT SUPERHUMANS, EVEN THOUGH THEY POSSESS SUPER POWERS

When we speak of the traits, definitions, strengths, and challenges of leaders of color, we are not portraying them as a monolith. However, they have a shared history with colonialism, imperialism, and racism and work to disrupt the dehumanization at the root of those traumas. Whether their pathway to leadership is via formal training and education, cultural training programs, or community organizing, leaders of color must contend with the impacts of the aforementioned histories along with the ongoing crises they are seeking to resolve through their work. The superpowers of leaders of color lie in their ability to simultaneously hold all of these truths as they continue their personal journeys of healing, growing, and thriving. In many cases, leaders of color make a lifelong commitment to the work of healing their communities with the full awareness that they will never fully combat the issue in their lifetime. They simply focus on moving the needle forward just a bit for the generation of leaders coming behind them. A compadre from our Forward Promise village refers to these lifelong leaders as “long walkers.”

Professional development and training for cultural healers, organizers, advocates, and activists often occur outside of universities or executive training programs. Very often, they arrive to a position of leadership from the expertise of their lived experiences in a particular community or with a specific crisis or trauma. Although there are also many formally trained and educated experts and leaders of color, many of the executive and/or professional skills needed to operate an organization (finance, budgeting, marketing, communications) are acquired by leaders of color after the work has already begun. These varied pathways should be viewed equitably and with the same esteem.

In reality, philanthropy rarely acknowledges the expertise and sacrifice of leaders “forged by fire.” Not only do they have to prove their effectiveness as leaders, they are constantly asked to prove the value of their healing practices which are rooted in the cultures and values of their communities. Thus, organizations and initiatives led by people of color (POC) are woefully underfunded while they are “patted on the back” for being able to make a big impact with few resources. They must continuously seek and apply for funding from an extremely limited pool of resources and fight for even small changes, reforms, and supports. As leaders of color straddle the chasm between unfolding crises in their communities and the ever-shifting ground of funding opportunities, they must translate the effectiveness of their work and the urgency of their community’s needs into terms that meet the approval of those who are typically many steps removed from the issues.

Limited philanthropic investments (8-9 percent) target communities of color\(^3\). Even fewer of those dollars are allocated to POC-led organizations. Though it is, indeed, remarkable that leaders in communities of color have been able to create and accomplish much with little, their extraordinary effort does not make them superhuman. It is time that their leadership be trusted to effectively manage larger budgets for the good of their communities.

THE COST OF LEADERSHIP FROM A PUBLIC HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

When crises of all sorts (community violence, state violence, natural or manmade disasters) arise, leaders of color instantly become “first responders” in their communities and will be found on the front lines providing life-saving services, interventions, or supports. Regardless of the focus of their work or mission, they must often pivot to the critical need. In most cases, we think of a crisis as acute and ending. But the harm of racism and colonialism rooted in dehumanization is life threatening and ongoing. The mental and emotional impact of acute crises or disasters is magnified for leaders of color who must navigate multiple crises without the time, opportunity, and resources to heal.

Those who choose racial healing, organizing, and advocacy as their life’s work pay a hefty price because they are experiencing the same dehumanization and racial trauma in their daily lives that they are fighting against. To both demand that leaders of color continue to emerge and organize amidst great adversity and to applaud their physical, mental, and emotional martyrdom is unfair and truly dehumanizing. The stress and exhaustion leaders of color experience is very real and it is important to their longevity in the field, as well as to the sustainability of movements and community progress, to support their well-being.

The data that shows the long-term negative impact of racism on the health of POC and its correlation to chronic disease is increasingly clear; however, little has been documented as it specifically relates to leaders fighting for racial equity and social change. Our understanding of the mental, physical, and emotional toll these leaders experience can be drawn from the research on PTSD in first responders and

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military veterans. However, racism is an ongoing system that leaves leaders of color without any reprieve from retraumatization. In fact, they often come to the work because of their lived experience with the trauma they are working to help others to heal from. Philanthropy can acknowledge the sacrifices of leaders of color by allocating general operating support to the time and space they desperately need to take off the cape and heal from their traumas.

Key Takeaways

• Data shows the long-term impacts on leaders of color are akin to the effects of PTSD on first responders.
• Philanthropy must reject the notion that sacrificing one’s physical, mental, and emotional health are synonymous with great leadership by funding the time and space they need to sustain their efforts.

We cannot truly advocate for healthy villages that nourish healing, growing, and thriving while neglecting frontline leaders who have spent years throwing themselves into the line of fire. We are losing our leaders to exhaustion, burnout, and chronic mental and/or physical illness and it is imperative that we acknowledge and uphold the humanity of leaders of color.
A HUMANITY-AFFIRMING APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Leaders of color must often push through, compartmentalize, and set their own needs aside to serve the needs of their communities and families. The challenges, burdens, and expectations they shoulder are extensive, unyielding, and carry an invisible cost in order to be sustained. It relies on a destructive and dehumanizing superhuman stereotype.

Holding space for self-care, joy, celebration, and rest is necessary in order to sustain the work. Still, philanthropy has been slow to recognize or address the burdens that leaders of color shoulder. We cannot truly advocate for healthy villages that nourish healing, growing, and thriving while neglecting frontline leaders who have spent years throwing themselves into the line of fire. We are losing our leaders to exhaustion, burnout, and chronic mental and/or physical illness and it is imperative that we acknowledge and uphold their humanity. They are critical levers to increasing sustainability and building/sharing power.

Traditional leadership development models typically approach this work in two ways: 1) grow leaders’ executive skills and abilities through the lens of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism via their focus on organizational management, scaling, and capacity building and 2) use them to extract or to appropriate the leaders’ cultural knowledge, expertise, and experience so that the institution or philanthropy can present themselves as the thought leaders. There are, of course, many leadership institutes that engage in deep personal exploration and development as a mechanism to enhance the efficacy of leaders or to develop a specific theory or approach to leadership. However, these approaches do little to honor the unique histories of leaders of color and the precariousness of leading in communities of color.

“The number one thing that sets the Fellowship apart from any other fellowships I have been in, is that it prizes and privileges and protects the space and time to reflect.”

-- Forward Promise Fellow
Forward Promise centers healing in our approach to leadership development. Not only do leaders of color deserve space and time to rest, reflect, and recover as frontline soldiers in a never-ending war, the time and space is critical to their sustained ability to carry the work forward and to build momentum in their movements across time and generations. If we want to support a culture of health in communities of color, we must help leaders prioritize their health and demonstrate to others that health and wellness are not just luxuries for wealthy or better-resourced communities. This, too, is part of our commitment to disrupting the cycle of dehumanization for people of color.

Our approach to leadership development is responsive to the ever-changing landscape of the expressed needs of leaders of color. To hold space for their lived experiences, needs, and burdens, Forward Promise creates cohorts that become communities of care and safety where members are authentically and unapologetically supported. We are committed to including diverse representations of leadership in communities of color—especially to leaders who are typically underrepresented. Further, members of the cohort come from many walks of life, levels of experience, and areas of expertise. This adds tremendous value to the collaboration process as values, needs, experiences, and solutions intersect. From this intergenerational, intersectional community comes the organic creation of new partnerships and mentorships free of traditional power dynamics that can inhibit self-expression and/or vulnerability.

Within this healing-centered community of care, we provide curriculum and content to build their capacity to address the specific challenges they face in their individual work and/or organizations. We help them to develop highly effective, culturally responsive solutions for their communities. We then assist them with strategies for communicating their learnings to community partners, stakeholders, and funders.

“Forward Promise really put us at the center of the human journey, realizing that if we [are] not committed, if we haven’t got communities of care, communities of healing for ourselves, then we won’t be able to do this work for any sustainable period of time.”

-- Forward Promise Fellow
Through this approach, we realize the following goals:

- **Redefine and Build Power**: There are many definitions for “power” and approaches to building it. Our approach to building power is drawn from communities whose cultures of origin are historically rooted in communalism. In these communities, power is shared and distributed as they engage in activism, resistance, and self-defense. We define power for leaders of color in terms of their ability to remain authentically and unapologetically true to their core values and missions while being adequately resourced and supported. Their power is manifested in their influence to determine and direct positive change in their communities.

- **Lift Up Best Practices**: To increase the transformational power of their work, we facilitate opportunities for leaders of color to both share and be exposed to existing and emerging best practices rooted in research, healing-centered engagement, and culturally responsive healing practices.

- **Make Space for Restoration**: Because the health of leaders of color suffers under the demands of leadership in addition to the taxing nature of racial trauma and toxic stress, they must reclaim and nurture their humanity with space to rest and recover. We provide such a space for leaders to engage in their own healing, growing, and thriving. It is the thread that weaves in and throughout the experience and is critical to the sustainability and efficacy of POC in leadership.

- **Increase Visibility and Partnerships**: We are intentional about leveraging our partnerships in the field to increase the visibility of leaders of color and to amplify their work among philanthropy, systems leaders, and their peers across the nation.

- **Safeguard the Sacred Circle**: Developing communities of safety and care among leaders of color facilitates healing and allows collaboration to take place in a safe container rather than through competition for resources. Leaders of color often understand and share similar struggles with isolation. They lack opportunities to express and/or process their vulnerability and need for support. In order for leaders of color to show up authentically and with vulnerability, it is important to safeguard the privacy and intimacy forged within the community of care (also known as the “sacred circle”). Once the sacred circle has been formed, we give careful thought to who the facilitators of the program are and how we introduce those outside of that sacred circle. This includes, at times, foregoing the presence of our staff to reduce the likelihood of introducing subconscious or perceived hierarchy of power and authority.

**Key Takeaways**

- Mental, emotional, and physical health is not a luxury reserved for better-resourced communities and organizations. Philanthropy should help racial healers prioritize their health.

- Philanthropy should fund leadership programs and communities of practice that are responsive to culture and value health and restoration, authentic power-building, best practices in community engagement, and increased visibility for leaders of color.
SUMMARY

Across generations and spanning continents, healers, activists, and advocates of color have (and still) work tirelessly to reclaim the cultures and assets that have been stolen, extracted, or destroyed in their land and communities while working to heal the wounds caused by these ongoing and recurring traumas. This work comes with the danger of retaliation from those who seek to uphold the structures that perpetuate harm to people of color. Leaders of color remain in this struggle despite criticism from within and outside of their communities. They do so with far too little resources doled out by the very systems and institutions that created the harm and damage. And they do so under the scrutiny and doubts of purse holders who do not value or understand their approaches to leadership and who do not believe in their expertise.

It is paramount for philanthropy to understand that the historical and present demands that many leaders of color face are an extension of the ways in which communities of color are dehumanized and harmed. Leaders of color are not superhuman and should not be expected to work without reprieve until their demise. We advocate for funders to reject the notion that martyrdom and the sacrifice of a person’s physical, mental, and emotional health are synonymous with great leadership.

To truly value the leaders of color transforming communities across the nation and around the world, grantmakers must invest in their health and well-being by funding the time and space they need to sustain their efforts.

Forward Promise is committed to reclaiming the humanity of our leaders and believes that healthy villages are raised by healthy leaders. Our approach to leadership development actively demonstrates our commitment to the well-being of leaders of color and provides them with communities of care that act as safe and supportive incubators for their work. Through this approach, they build their power to demonstrate the efficacy of their work, increase their sustainability to continue their work, and amplify their voices in the work.