

# HUMAN RESOURCES AND JUSTICE:

Addressing Racism and  
Sexism in the Workplace



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# Human Resources and Justice: Addressing Racism and Sexism in the Workplace

## Introduction

Human resources (HR) management runs through every vein of an organization, either directly or indirectly. If an action touches or impacts the people in the organization, then HR is involved, from strategy to workforce planning to organizational culture to people development. Unfortunately, the dominant model relied upon by too many mainstream HR professionals focuses solely on the administration of recruiting, hiring and onboarding of staff. This approach is a lost opportunity for HR to play a productive role in creating equitable organizations.

Studies<sup>1</sup> show the nonprofit sector is still predominantly white-led (over 90% in some studies) and that the root cause is systemic racial barriers. In addition, while about 73% of nonprofit employees are women, only 45% of nonprofit CEO roles are held by women. When it comes to pay, women leaders make just 66% of male salaries.<sup>2</sup> Human resource work, if not done through an explicit lens of racial and gender justice, perpetuates these structural biases. That said, human resource professionals are in an optimal position, through formal and informal roles and practices, to begin to dismantle systemic racial barriers.

RoadMap seeks to support nonprofits with HR management practices that center racial justice. We would do so by developing a comprehensive, integrated solution that:

- Embeds HR professionals who employ an equity and inclusion lens within organizations to support and build organizational capacity to practice human resources management with a racial justice lens
- Develops guidelines that distinguish which HR activities can be done by non-HR professionals and which need a higher level of HR expertise to protect against potential liabilities
- Supports client engagements, where appropriate, by assigning OD and HR consultants and coaches, to integrate a multi-disciplinary approach to undoing systemic racism across all levels of organizations, movements, and the sector
- Offers templates, trainings and support to HR staff who are committed to transforming their in-house practices to reflect racial and gender justice

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<sup>1</sup> Daring to Lead (2011), The State of Diversity in Nonprofit and Foundation Leadership (2017), Race to Lead: Confronting the Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap (2017).

<sup>2</sup> <https://topnonprofits.com/women-nonprofit-leadership/>

The document was written by RoadMap network member Rita Sever, with input from network members Mala Nagarajan, Terrill Thompson, Scott Lowther and Emily Goldfarb.

## **Background**

The practice of human resources, like the history of our country, is rooted in a system of an oppressive mainstream culture. HR is often, perhaps inadvertently, the method by which systemic racism and sexism is replicated and authorized. HR has too often replicated a practice of meritocracy defined by white and mainstream measures. We cannot ignore that harassment, gender bias and sexism exists and often thrives in nonprofits as well.

While HR is charged with compliance and protection, that cannot be viewed as a limited scope of work. Without a comprehensive and intentional commitment to employee engagement and satisfaction, an organization is more vulnerable to lawsuits and disruption. That commitment must acknowledge the veins of racism and sexism that snake through our organizations and actively work to repair those veins and build a system of racial and gender justice.

In order for HR to truly be a facilitative partner, the role and function of HR must be redefined and reimaged. We can no longer be seen or perceived as working for and protecting management. We must return to the original intention of HR as a protector and supporter of the employees. We must be recognized as a true partner to every employee.

In service to this idea, RoadMap sometimes refers to HR as “People Practices.” We are committed to reclaiming the broader understanding and practice of HR that is designed to support the success and accountability of our organizations’ number one asset: the people.

## **Human Resources as a Driver of Racial and Gender Justice**

By bringing a focus of racial and gender justice to HR, we broaden that concept and the practice of HR to focus on the full recognition, participation and valuing of every employee. HR can work to systematically eliminate the barriers that restrict the employment opportunities and satisfaction as well as working to eliminate the present effects of past discrimination and practices. HR can demonstrate that equal employment opportunity is more than a policy statement but an active practice that requires affirmative steps to ensure the full representation at all levels of qualified people of all backgrounds.

HR can work in partnership with all employees to build organizations in which people work effectively and joyfully. When employees are connected and engaged and happy, they will seek direct means of reconciliation and restoration when problems arise. And most importantly, they are more likely to work collaboratively in service to the mission.

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This Statement is focused on a particular issue of concern in HR and is not intended to address or negate other forms of EEO practices and inclusion.

With every voice contributing and heard, with full participation and engagement, our organizations can be welcoming and more effective in serving their missions and in transforming our society.

## **Principles**

### **Justice**

Repairing practices that hinder or harm people of color (POC) from full participation in our organizations. Considering the impact of policies, practices and decisions on women and people of color. Facilitating every voice to be heard when decisions affecting staff are made. Paying careful attention to distributive and outcome justice during any determination or adjustment of any compensation, benefits, perks, practices, flexibility etc. Working actively to hire and promote and retain POC and women.

### **Connection**

Without a personal connection, change is fragile and tentative. We must bring our minds, our hearts and our spirits to this work. Relationships are the strength and the vehicle for our work as social change organizations. Therefore, we must see, value, hear and respond to every person in our organization and coordinate strategies for all components of staff, management and boards to connect with each other. True connection requires self-awareness, self-management, empathy and strong communication skills. Particularly for white leaders, men and white staff, an intentional practice of reflection and consideration of the impact of our action is critical to stop harming and start supporting women and our colleagues of color.

### **Clarity**

Ensuring that expectations, feedback and every other organizational dimension is understood and fully vetted in a manner that prioritizes mission and collaboration. Values do not thrive in an organization until there is understanding, clarity and implementation throughout all levels of the organization.

### **Consistency**

Analyzing policies, practices, procedures and impacts, to ensure that all staff are treated in a consistent and equitable manner across all levels and identities. This does not mean that all staff are necessarily treated exactly the same in every situation but that there are standards and understanding of when and how flexibility is appropriate and good.

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## **Learning**

Lasting transformation happens when behavioral change is rooted in people's hearts, minds, and core values and people are resourced with structural supports (e.g., training and development, organizational policies, changes in resource allocation). There must be a clear commitment and accountability. A commitment of resources to support individual and group learning not only supports the value of racial justice but invests in our staff to be stronger, more engaged and more effective staff in their work with each other and in the world.

## **Sample Practices**

There are some key practices that can show good faith in starting to address past oppressions. This list is not exhaustive but demonstrates the breadth of the role that HR can play in building the capacity of organizations to center racial and gender justice in their work.

## **Organizational Structures**

1. Each organization must develop, display and enliven their own statement of racial and gender justice which is touted from leadership to line staff and implemented throughout organizational practices and culture.
2. All policies and practices must be analyzed and updated to remove practices that have a disparate/adverse impact on marginalized communities, with particular attention to race, gender, and disability.
3. The development of thoughtful, legal, fair and creative benefits such as help repaying student loans, support for current education, on-the-job training and coaching, training on and in hidden rules of advancement, paid parental leave, sabbaticals, and workable infant and child-friendly policies.
4. Recognition that resources must be allocated to support the transition to an organization that centers the value of racial justice. This includes time, money, coaching, training, patience and process.
5. Standards of supervision and leadership are developed that distribute power and privilege across the organization and that don't replicate oppressive practices.
6. Intentional space is created, and facilitated, to help people talk about and process racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, gender conformity etc. in organizational activities.
7. Recognition and attention to the components of a truly inclusive culture that build a sense of belonging.
8. The telling of stories regarding the founding, history, and culture of the organization including stories of inclusion and stories of failures – and the lessons learned from these events. Storytelling connects people and continues the learning and the conversations that need to happen.

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## **People Development**

1. All recruiters and interviewers must be trained in and account for implicit bias. Racial and gender justice values must be highlighted in recruitment and integrated into the interview process. Unless required by licensing or funding, educational requirements should always include “or equivalent” to open the door to those who have not had the opportunity for higher education.
2. All managers are trained in effective supervision which includes attention to power, privilege, and oppression. All supervisors are trained in giving and receiving feedback, in providing ongoing strength-based evaluations, and in having courageous conversations.
3. Self-awareness, self-management and empathy are recognized as essential leadership skills and practices.
4. Training for all staff in implicit bias and recognition of unconscious practices, training in conflict resolution (to help each voice be heard) and training in having difficult conversations.
5. Development of a coaching culture to support development and advancement of all staff.

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