



# GSA

NETWORK

A Model for Decolonized Leadership

**FROM YOUTH LED, TO YOUTH DRIVEN,**  
**TO YOUTH LED:**

*GSA Network's Decolonized Leadership  
Model for Creating Sustainable, Constituent-  
Led, Racial & Gender Justice Organizations*



# INTRODUCTION



For many youth serving nonprofits, the idea of a youth led organization remains elusive or aspirational. Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network, (a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Two-Spirit - LGBTQ2S - youth leadership organization) recently transitioned from an adult alumni Co-Executive Director to a youth alumni Co-ED.

Over the past several years, GSA Network has embarked on a transformation of leadership. Initially a white-led nonprofit organization with a majority Black, Indigenous and People of Color front-line staff and membership base, the organization made a shift to a Co-Executive Director model in 2015, under the leadership of Ginna Brelsford (Co-Executive Director, Finance, Administration & Communications) and Geoffrey Winder (Co-Executive Director, Programs, Policy & Partnerships), beginning the process of shifting to a BIPOC leadership that more reflected the base constituents of LGBTQ2S members in GSAs around the country. But this was only the beginning.

Many nonprofit institutions, in an attempt to address systemic issues of leadership, power-sharing and decision making, will move to hiring BIPOC leaders to replace white led organizations who often have majority BIPOC front-line staff and a base membership. And often, this shift in leadership can bring new ideas, thinking and a different viewpoint on issues like strategic direction and organizational culture.

But often, simply replacing a white executive director with a Black, Indigenous, Latinx, or Asian leader can cover what are issues that extend beyond racial representation.

The increased calls for unionization of nonprofit workplaces, and battles over justice for nonprofit workers that have become more pronounced in many LGBTQ2S, HIV and other movement organizations over the years, represents a crisis in more traditional, corporate-run nonprofit organizations. Many nonprofit workers, especially those working on the programs side of the work, are rarely given training in nonprofit management so that they understand the fiscal, administrative, fundraising, board development/engagement, human resources/benefits, and operational aspects of the organization.

They are also often not even considered as possible candidates to fill leadership positions for lacking these skills, but provided few opportunities to develop those skills in order to be ready to take on leadership positions.

GSA Network not only moved towards a BIPOC, shared leadership model in the hire of its co-executive directors, but also realized that in order to build a more just, more sustainable organization that strives to make all workers feel heard, valued, and able to see themselves in a career path that could lead to promotions and more leadership, the organization needed to create more structures for communication, transparency, leadership development and decision-making at all levels. *Built through practice over time, GSA Network considers this shift a move towards a “decolonized” leadership model.*



# GSA NETWORK


## ON SHARED & DECOLONIZED LEADERSHIP FROM GSA NETWORK'S CO-ED JOB DESCRIPTION:

GSA Network believes in the power of young people, the power of our community and in our collective ability to reach liberation. GSA Network believes in the leadership of young people and believes that with proper pipelines and support trans and queer young people can lead our organization and work. GSA Network also believes that to be as effective as possible our work must be sustainable across the organization and especially in executive leadership. To that end we believe in a shared executive and distributed leadership model that acknowledges unrealistic expectations of sole executives and often sets people of color and trans and queer folks up to fail, feel inadequate, or burn out. As an organization GSA Network is committed to supporting its executive leadership through a model of development and growth and supporting and expanding the internal leadership pipeline. For these reasons we seek to continue to be a Co-Directed organization.

At GSA Network we are also practicing decolonized leadership, which means we believe in and practice embodying leadership that:

- Is shared and that as stewards of the work and community, we develop and uplift other leaders
- Centers community and collective knowledge as the path towards the best ideas
- Actively counters dominant narrative and cultural ways of assessing achievement, success and leadership qualities
- Welcomes generative critique and challenges as part of a continual growth process
- Identifies toxic components of dominant work culture and replaces them with practices that are authentic for the community we serve.

# HOW THIS REPORT WAS CREATED



This report was made with the generous support of Ford Foundation. The report process began in 2019 with discussions about the goals and objectives of this report with the co-executive directors, who also shared documents about the organization's mission, vision, and leadership and decision making structure. A set of interview questions were developed, and then as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, The process was halted to deal with the other organizational planning needs to adjust to remote work and other issues connected to the pandemic. But interviews with 10 staff and board members, representing all levels of staff, were conducted in late 2020 through mid-2021. Out of those documents and interviews, key findings about the organization's leadership and decision making model were identified, as well as the perceptions of the strengths and challenges of this model. Finally, what interviewees felt should change about the model were also identified.

Oftentimes organizations will conduct these internal assessments for their own planning purposes, but GSA Network felt it is important to share their model and these findings with social justice movements, to create more dialog among social justice organizations and funders about what decolonized organizational models look like. The publishing of this report may help the field begin to not just discuss policy, legislative and "issue-based" wins that are often seen as external to the institutions fighting for those victories, but what it means to think more deeply and act with more intention about the very nature of nonprofit organizational structures, so that the field ends the perpetuation of harms inside, that we often are fighting to end outside.

*Note: This report was updated at the end of 2022 to reflect the culmination of the model with a new youth alumni Executive Director*

# I: MAKING THE CHANGE FROM ONE LEADER TO CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

2015 EBAR article announces new Co-Directors

Prior to adopting a co-director model, GSA Network had a founding executive director. When they resigned, the board hired an interim ED, who also left. This created a leadership vacuum at the top of the organization, but two staff members came together and decided to propose to the board a different structure.



## GSA Network names new leaders

A San Francisco-based nonprofit that helps LGBT and allied youth has selected two staffers, who are people of color, to lead the organization as it addresses racial justice and other issues. [\(read more\)](#)

In many ways, the organization prior to this transition mirrored many traditional nonprofit organizations, especially those that serve youth. A white executive director at the top of the pyramid, with mostly staff of color beneath, and a base constituency of youth, that was becoming increasingly majority Black and Brown.

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Geoffrey Winder, who started initially as a youth member of GSA Network and moved up as a youth member of the board, and then an adult member of the board. In 2008, Winder took a staff position as an administrative manager, and then later became the leading staff member of their racial and economic justice work. During that time, he began building out the racial justice programmatic work, which attracted more Black and Brown students (many from schools that were majority nonwhite), as Winder started to tackle the disparities in support and resources of GSAs that were majority students of color. In addition, Winder had expanded the policy advocacy work so that it moved beyond the anti-LGBT bullying frame, which had historically pitted LGBTQ2S students against their peers, and instead shifted the focus to racial and economic justice issues in the education system, while adding a queer and gender justice lens to those issues (e.g. policies that end suspension/expulsions which disproportionately impact Black and Brown students when they get into trouble more than their white counterparts). Furthermore, LGBTQ2S students were also disproportionately likely to be punished when defending themselves against bias related bullying and violence, so getting more districts to end zero-tolerance policies and invest more in restorative justice policies and procedures that support a safe environment for all students help connect GSA Network to other coalitions and networks of education justice organizations that many LGBTQ2S education groups had traditionally not been a part of.



Brelsford  
Joined GSA  
Network in  
2011.

"I had no aspirations to be an executive director when I joined GSA Network. When considering the possibility of taking on the role, I knew I did not want to, nor could I, take on the organization's challenges alone. Seeing the ways communities of color have long favored the collective over the individual, I knew there was a different way to lead and hold power. The co-leadership model allowed both Geoffrey and I, as new and "non-traditional" executive directors, to learn the job and develop our own forms of leadership" ~Brelsford

## CONTINUED


But in the midst of doing the external programmatic work, Winder began to think about what racial and economic justice meant in the context of how the organization functioned internally?

When Winder moved into the racial and economic justice project manager position in 2011, he was replaced in the administrative manager role by Ginna Brelsford, handling most of the administrative support functions, before being promoted to Director of Finance and Administration in 2012. When the founding ED left the organization, and an interim ED left after 8 months and a failed search for a permanent ED replacement, Brelsford and Winder decided that with their combined years in the organization in the fiscal and programmatic work, they should approach the board about moving the organization to a shared leadership model. While the board was initially skeptical, they ultimately were convinced the two combined possessed complementary skill sets, and already had working relationships with the funders, which would go a long way toward trust in the organization's overall stability. So they were ultimately appointed as Co-Executive Directors in 2015.



Winder, a youth leader in 1998, joined  
GSA Network staff in 2008.

# WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT



Changing to a co-director model was becoming more common in social justice organizations in the early/mid 2010s. For one, very rarely are people skilled at both the programmatic work of most social justice organizations, with equal skills in fundraising, organizational development, fiscal management and operations. And because executive directors are ultimately mostly seen as the fundraising and fiscal stewards of an organization, that role usually shuts out most Black, Brown and/or poor/working class candidates. Many times, people of color who become active in social justice work, are often encouraged and supported to join as organizers, or program staff, but few leadership development opportunities exist that help them develop skills or explore what might be an underdeveloped talent for fundraising, fiscal management or other administrative skills. And instead, many EDs may come from professional backgrounds where they may have less understanding or skills that pertain to the programmatic work, or the lived experiences of the communities they're organizations are organizing or advocating on behalf of. So many traditional executive leadership staff end up being mostly white people with a professional degree like a Master's in Social Work, or Master's in Public Administration, or a Juris Doctor (law degree). And this perpetual cycle can exacerbate tensions between executive leadership and the front-line staff and membership.

Co-Executive Director models can help bridge the gap towards more equitable power and can provide ways for people who aren't usually considered for those positions to both lead and learn from one another. While not the end solution for more racial or gender equity in nonprofit organizations, this model can really help build more Black/Brown executive directors from communities most impacted, and can prevent leadership burnout within the organization.



# Becoming Co-Eds

Both Winder and Brelsford were appointed co-executive directors by the board of GSA Network in 2015. Winder focuses more on programs, policy and development, while Brelsford focuses on finance, administration and communications. While both supervise staff and have most of their roles divided as such, Winder also does communications and Brelsford does maintain some programmatic work—particularly their work that involves Two-Spirit/LGBTQ work with Native American/Indigenous youth. (And, over time the work has become more fluid between them as the needs arise for each to take on the other's work from time to time.)

But once they convinced the board that a co-director model was actually more sustainable model for the organization and were appointed, they then had to convince funders that this was a valid model of leadership—there is still a prejudice towards more hierarchical, single executive director models in the nonprofit field, and while growing as a model, is still somewhat rare and frowned upon by many funders. But Brelsford and Winder were able to create a marketing plan around the leadership transition, and use it to talk to funders and reassure them that GSA Network was worthy of investing in.

They were in financial jeopardy as an organization, and needed funders to be reassured the new leadership could manage and see its way out of it. They successfully convinced their existing funders they had a plan that would help steer them back to financial health. So they closed their expensive offices in San Francisco and went remote for a while until an affordable lease in Oakland could be found.

But now that they were in place as two people of color as executive directors, racial, gender and economic justice was still not fully achieved. Too often, many nonprofit organizations when shifting to Black and/Brown leadership, or even if they start that way, assume that just having people of color in leadership roles is where the diversity, equity and inclusion work ends. But GSA Network went further in developing their organizational structure to try to make the organization practice internally the liberation values it taught youth leaders externally.

GSA Network's structure has some more traditional elements as well as some nontraditional elements.

The organization is not entirely flat (i.e., non-hierarchical), or fully consensus based in terms of decision-making. The different groups of stakeholders that make decisions include the Co-Executive Directors, Board of Directors, The Director's Team, and The Leadership Team.



## II: TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP & DECISION-MAKING ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION

GSA Network's structure has some more traditional elements as well as some nontraditional elements. The organization is not entirely flat (i.e., non-hierarchical), or fully consensus based in terms of decision-making. The different groups of stakeholders that make decisions include the Co-Executive Directors, Board of Directors, The Director's Team, and The Leadership Team. The Leadership Team is a participatory leadership structure, and serving a term per calendar year is included in all full time job descriptions.

# DIRECTOR'S TEAM

The Director's Team is composed of the Co-EDs, and every director-level staff in the organization. It also includes all associate or assistant director-level staff. While meetings of the department director's is pretty standard in nonprofit organizations, adding the associate and assistant directors is not typical. But this can add more places for collaboration and more voices in the decision-making at the highest staff level. When GSA Network moved to the Co-ED model, they relied heavily on the Director's team as the two new organizational leaders adjusted to their new roles, and tried to manage the fiscal challenges and other issues that needed their attention. Building a cohesive team in which a great deal of trust and decision making could be distributed to directors without feeling they had to check in with the Co-EDs and that Co-EDs would support their decisions was a critical step in moving the power of decision making away from a sole-executive. However, the Director's team meetings are mostly updates from each director on things happening in their purview. Sometimes there are larger decisions taken up by the Director's Team, for instance, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Director's Team took up the decision on how to close the office, and set up the conditions for remote work.

But the Co-Eds soon realized that as two people of color now in the top leadership roles, some of the staff power dynamics had been addressed, particularly where race was concerned. And there was still some frustration with the existing structure that left many issues about the programmatic direction, HR and fiscal management policies, and other strategic decisions to a small number of people at the top of the hierarchy and within that, other power dynamics along age, cis-privelege and education status remained. And after a few years of trying to work with the existing structure, I realized that just having people of color Co-Eds and PoC staff, does not in and of itself, solve the power or representational dynamics between director-level staff and the rest of the team. Whether the tensions were about transparency in decision-making, or non-director level staff wanting to be included in more conversations, process and decisions, it was clear to the organization more needed to be done to provide more leadership and decision-making opportunities for more staff.

# DIRECTOR'S TEAM CONTINUED

One of the reasons Brelsford and Winder gave to the GSA Network board as to why they should become Co-EDs was about the organization needing to invest in the leadership development of the members and other staff. In their analysis, organizations that do not ensure the development of membership and staff to move into leadership positions can be unsustainable, drift away from their mission, and some cognitive dissonance gets created between the mission of the work, the base constituency and the leadership. Often leadership development work within nonprofit organizations for members or front-line staff (who are often not far removed from the life circumstances of the constituent base) is really about supporting them to become better spokespeople, organizers or in some programmatic role. But rarely are members or front-line staff trained in, or given opportunities to learn about the fundraising/development, fiscal management, HR, operations/administration or board development parts of nonprofit work. And rarely are they empowered to be engaged in those discussions, and participating in making decisions in those areas. Brelsford and Winder felt that creating structures that allows for a more comprehensive leadership development beyond the external or programmatic work would result in more investment in the organization from all staff, reduce turnover, and potentially save money by reducing the need for expensive executive search consultants and hiring processes if you're constantly developing leaders internally. So in 2018, GSA Network added a Leadership Team that would become the container for creating more shared leadership and decision-making for more staff.



“It became clear quite early that despite the massive and rapid changes GSA Network was going through demographically in terms of our leadership, it wasn’t enough to fully dismantle white supremacy culture or keep up with the changing dynamics of our sector.” Winder

# LEADERSHIP TEAM

Winder and Brelsford worked with the directors team to determine all decisions that weren't essential to be held by the directors team, but were held out of habit, tradition or gatekeeping. The Leadership Team would be tasked with taking up all the decisions that weren't determined needed to be held by the directors team. The Leadership Team is staff from all levels of the organization, which allows both for some senior staff with more nonprofit management expertise to participate in the work, and can provide some mentorship and guidance for other staff who may not understand some legal or regulatory boundaries of what the organization can do. At the same time, non-director level staff may provide insights into programs, operations and HR issues that may enrich internal policy development/implementation and provide new and innovative thinking. For everyone, the Leadership Team provides an opportunity for staff morale and cohesion, as people who in normal nonprofit structure who wouldn't have a reason to work together, now can collaborate on issues that cut across all levels of the organization. The Leadership Team has to be at least one-third of non-director staff. The terms of service is 4 months, which allows for all staff the opportunity to serve on the team. And service on the Leadership team comes with an additional increase to employees base salary each time they serve. . And the kind of work the Leadership Team takes on varies, and it is a place where sub-committees are sometimes formed to support policy making in the organization. Their work involves agenda setting and facilitation of staff meetings and staff retreats, engagement and feedback on the annual budget, HR issues like changes in benefits package, employee handbook updates, fundraising, etc.

This may seem like a simple idea to some. Some may see it as an inefficient way to make critical decisions and planning. But GSA Network sees it as critical to their mission. If developing LGBTQ2S youth into leaders, GSA Network sees helping them not just develop their ability to serve as program staff, but also to understand how their role fits into the larger organization. Second, many LGBTQ2S young people of color may not have had the opportunity to be exposed to what it means to run an organization, and it can help them in their lives if they choose to continue to work as program staff in nonprofits, or do other kinds of employment in other sectors of the economy, boost their skillset should they decide to pursue higher education, or they may in fact discover that they have an affinity toward and an skill set for finance, administration, program management/development, operations and human resources. Very few leadership development programs within organizations (or external to them) focus on building the kinds of skills that can really support a young person's lifelong career prospects, like reading fiscal documents, organizational or program budgeting, strategic planning, board/staff engagement, etc.

One of the benefits as noted by GSA Staff and Board, is that the policies that are adopted by the organization after the input of the Leadership Team is that they're grounded in the real-life needs of staff, so that the policies become living, breathing documents that serve the staff's real life needs.

# III: WHAT WORKS ABOUT THIS MODEL

GSA Network Staff 2018

## **SKILLS BUILDING AND PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

GSA Network's organizational structure and decision-making bodies allows for the organization to do in-house professional and leadership development in real time for front line staff.



Very rarely in nonprofit orgs that have young people or front line staff (who are often from poor and working class communities), are the front-line program staff afforded the opportunity to work on budgets/fiscal management, strategic planning, HR policy making, and development/fundraising, which can become a barrier to moving up to more senior positions within those organizations, or to have any career mobility when they seek employment in other institutions. In addition, more senior administrative and finance staff who often come from more academic or professional training programs often don't have experience as community organizers, or other roles that involve the more public-facing programming, and sometimes can make budgets, raise money or set internal HR policies with little consultation or consideration of the needs of front-line staff. This leadership development can help front-line staff or young people see themselves as having capacities beyond the outreach, organizing and program role.

Organizations may spend less resources on external HR recruitment strategies if staff are already being developed to take on positions with more responsibilities and more leadership. Many nonprofit orgs have experienced tensions when manager or director-level positions become open and staff within the organization who want to apply for those are discouraged, often for not having the skill set, but have never been given the professional development opportunities to be ready when other positions become vacant.

## **STAFF COHESION AND HEALTHIER ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE.**

In addition to building more leaders from the people already on staff, another benefit of GSA Network's structure is that it creates more staff cohesion and a healthier organizational culture. Working in structures like the Leadership Team gives everyone an opportunity to present ideas that may be taken up by the organization, no matter what your position in the organization, which can make more staff feel invested in decisions and the overall work of the organization. And using this model, GSA Network doesn't wait for annual staff retreats to build more staff cohesion and investment, it happens on an ongoing basis.

# STAFF COHESION AND HEALTHIER ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE CONT.

More capacity. Often in organizations, while director-level staff are paid more because they have more administrative and management responsibilities (sometimes in ways that aren't named in a job description), making certain kinds of work the entire organization's responsibility by serving on Leadership Team or other ad-hoc committees takes some of that workload off of one or two people, and spreads it more evenly across the organization. Decisions aren't always coming from the directors, which in addition to adding capacity, builds more cohesion and trust among staff. This is not to say that some people, including directors are not empowered to make certain decisions, but when all staff have the ability to engage in decision-making for strategic and emerging issues, some decisions left to some director level staff may seem less dictatorial—and other staff sometimes tell directors that they can make some decisions without involving non-director staff.

## IV: WHAT REMAINS CHALLENGING

### Decision-making Takes Longer

One of the challenges of this structure is it adds additional time to make decisions. In most office settings, people will often walk over to a colleague's desk and have an impromptu conversation to plan, resolve a burning issue, or simply ask a question. And in most organizational hierarchies, many decisions are made among the director-level staff without much or any discussion or feedback from the rest of the staff, even if they're major stakeholders, or the results of decisions have more implications for front-line staff. But with the Director's Team, Leadership Team or any number of subcommittees that get created to handle certain issues, decisions often involve more time, more meetings and more discussion to get the buy-in across staff before moving forward. But one of the things that GSA Network has decided is that while decisions can take longer to make, there's more benefit to having more ideas and issues on the table from a cross-section of stakeholders, which means there is often more buy-in from staff on those decisions, where more people are able to set policies/procedures or make strategic decisions.

# CONTINUED

## Which Team Own What Decisions

With such an intricate and more complex structure, it can sometimes take time to decide which decision-making body should take on an issue. This can also be challenging for director-level staff, who may feel they have the right knowledge and expertise to make certain decisions, and it means directors must keep the larger vision in mind for shared leadership and leadership development. And that means letting go of some aspects of control, and being able to accept when decisions do not necessarily go the way of the Co-Eds and other directors, as long as those decisions don't harm or put the organization in any legal or ethical jeopardy.

## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IS ONGOING

It takes a lot of time, patience and person-power to do the kind of leadership development necessary to make this model work most efficiently. In many youth-serving organizations, or organizations that serve people traditionally marginalized from working in these kind of settings (but who are the most-impacted group that the organization serves, advocates on behalf of, or organizes), people from these groups are sometimes called upon to serve on boards, or lead in some capacity, but haven't been given the proper training and support to engage fully, and are sometimes simply tokenized for their life traumas and experiences. Implementing a leadership development model that actually provides training and support while allowing for staff to engage as leaders in critical decisions can be difficult.

And once some staff serve on Leadership Team and begin to develop some skills, they cycle off at 4 months, and then Leadership Team members still serving have to work with the newer members to get them up to speed and work with them. So doing this kind of leadership development, where all staff have an opportunity to serve on the Leadership Team, can mean that the leadership development work never stops.



And as staff leave the organization and are replaced, new hires then come, and the work starts over. Furthermore, some decisions are made at a specific time and place with a specific set of people, and if there is staff turnover, newer staff may not see some of the previously set policies and procedures as beneficial, and so it can be difficult to set certain decisions over time.

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The benefit to this however is that the organization, while setting some standards, can be dynamic and really respond to emerging conditions, as opposed to the difficulties of making necessary changes in more hierarchical institutions where making change is often more difficult and met with incredible resistance, even when the changes needed are necessary.



GSA Network Staff 2019

# V: HOW COVID IMPACTED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT/DECISION-MAKING

At the time the COVID-19 pandemic became real for most people in the U.S. in March 2020, GSA Network was thriving, but part of their structure had fallen off. The Director's Team had ceased meeting, largely due to capacity issues with so many other meetings happening within the organization. Perhaps it felt redundant with the Leadership Team in place. But when the pandemic hit and the organization needed to make some decisions about going fully virtual and what that would mean for the programs, staff supervision/support, employee benefits and compensation, GSA Network reconvened the Director's team to make some of these decisions in collaboration with the Co-EDs about the operational changes with going fully virtual. These kinds of decisions needed to be made more quickly than the Leadership Team's more slow and deliberate approach. And for the first year of the pandemic, the Leadership Team did not meet. For many, the realities of adjusting to the pandemic both in their individual lives and in their work roles, was stressful enough. So once people were able to settle into remote work, The Leadership Team began to meet again in 2021.

Another way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the organization's structure is that it helped level the playing field among staff. Because GSA Network is a national organization with an office in Oakland, CA, some staff were working from the office, and some staff were working remotely in other parts of the country. With everyone moving to remote work, all staff could now understand the dynamics of in-office vs. remote staff, and the organization had to help those not used to working remotely adjust. This process included encouraging all staff to use the instant messaging platform more often to get answers to questions or concerns quickly.

Overall, while COVID-19 has been challenging for everyone emotionally, economically and professionally, GSA Network's investment in deep relationship building and leadership development across all staff led to the level of trust and an already existing support system which made the transition to remote work easier than it may have for organizations that despite technology, have long been resistant to allowing people to work remotely.





## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### **BIPOC Executive Directors Is One Step, But Not Enough**

The structures that BIPOC EDs often inherit from their predecessors are often not set up for those leaders to best succeed. Many BIPOC leaders do not have the same connection to foundation program officers, wealthy individual donors, or the educational and/or professional backgrounds to successfully manage an organization. Boards of directors must be willing partners with BIPOC EDs to change, adapt, and “decolonize” structures that create unrealistic expectations of their leaders, isolate leaders from their teams/communities and unnecessarily insert positional power into staff relationships. Similarly, just transitioning to BIPOC leadership is a step towards diversity, but not in and of itself a form of racial justice. Part of the work of moving towards a racial justice vision is to both create strategies to employ and retain BIPOC leadership, but also has to include re-thinking how power is shared and decisions are made among staff who are not at the director level within the organization. Organizations should strive to build structures and processes that acknowledge and cultivate the leadership potential of BIPOC staff and build clear pathways for advancement within the organization.

### **DEVELOPING PATHWAYS FOR LEADERSHIP AND SHARED DECISION MAKING**

The potential for BIPOC staff who are on the front lines of the organization to shape, enhance, and embody the organizational values in practice in many organizations remains untapped. Harnessing the power of a leaderful organization takes time, preparation and consent. Many BIPOC staff are often hired to be the front-line staff that implement the programs, campaigns and projects of the organization, but are rarely given any pathways to build their skills in program planning and evaluation, fundraising/development, fiscal management, human resources, board development, operations and staff management. Organizations need to provide opportunities for staff who often come from the same communities that they are organizing and working in, the skills to be able to move up within an organization, or to be hired in other positions with more responsibilities and higher pay. Incentives need to be built into the budgets of organizations for training and for support as frontline staff begin to take on more organizational culture leadership and development roles in addition to their discreet job tasks. This distributed leadership structure can help staff feel that their expertise, opinions and leadership is valued.'

# YOUR NEXT GEN LEADERS ARE ALREADY HERE

Believing that we have the leaders we need already and creating the structures that can support that leadership development is crucial to racial justice organizational development. Organizations often spend precious resources on executive searches because they haven't done transition planning for EDs and director-level positions. Instead, all staff, no matter what their current job title or role is, should be thought of as a potential leader for more senior positions.

Conversations with new staff and existing staff about their current skills, skills they want to develop, and what roles they see themselves taking in the future can help with staff retention as they may feel that the organization is invested in their leadership, and is actively creating pathways for their continued growth. Tapping into the leadership potential of all staff and the desire to build an organizational culture in which everyone's leadership is valued starts from the beginning. New staff should be introduced to the idea that all staff shape the culture and that their voice is valued and heard.

For a constituent member to become a senior leader, their leadership must be invested in from the beginning. Conversations from supervisors and other senior leadership that reinforce the strengths and skills that staff have exhibited can be as simple as saying "I could see you one day becoming an ED someday. Is that something you're interested in? If so, let's talk about how we can start supporting you to build skills to help you achieve this goal."

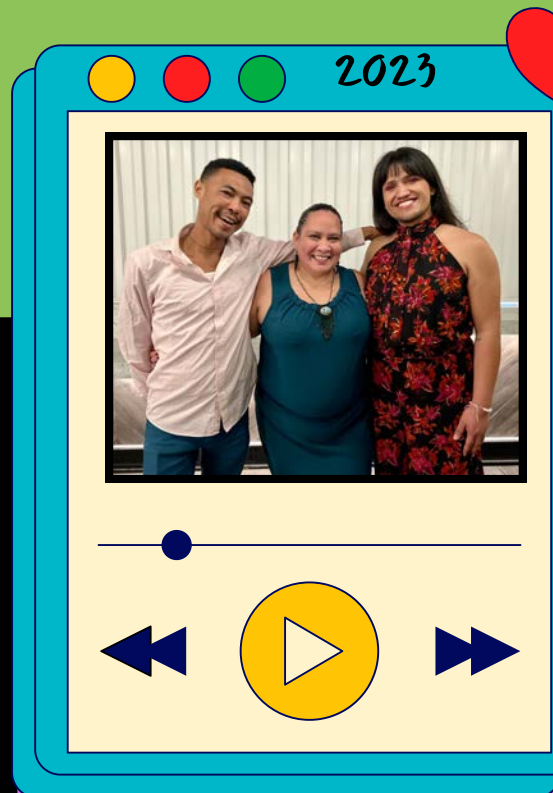
But the board can play a key role here, too! The board must be invested in the distributive leadership model, and when a leadership search needs to happen due to staff transition, the board must develop, implement, and commit to a serious strategy that allows for other staff to apply to those leadership positions.

## Gia Loving, new Co-Executive Director 2022



"I am proud to be the new Co-Executive Director and second alumni leader of GSA Network. Given how my life started, it would have seemed implausible that I could become a Co-Executive Director, at this stage in my life, as a young trans latina woman and mother. But that's the power of investing in youth leadership to its highest levels. However challenging, it is possible, with intentional leadership development practices and pipelines, preparation, and hard work for organizations, and youth organizations in particular, to be led by their constituents and former members."

Loving, Co-Executive Director, 2022-present



# Conclusion

Starting in 2020 the GSA Network board worked with Winder on a 2 year long transition process. This long and intentional process allowed the board time to adapt to transition and to the possibility of an intergenerational co-leadership structure. Additionally this gave the outgoing Co-ED team time to prepare potential incoming Co-ED candidates. In spring of 2022 GSA Network announced to the staff Winder's transition and the board's intentions to do an internal candidate search first and began an internal hiring process. The organization hired a transition consultant to advise Winder on putting together an internal search and hiring process. This rigorous process included two qualified internal candidates and resulted in one being offered the position of Co-Executive Director. In September 2022 Gia Loving, a former member and an emerging young trans movement leader who had been on staff at GSA Network for seven years, became the incoming and next Co-Executive Director of GSA Network.

This next transition for the organization was a good moment to reflect on key lessons about building constituent leadership. First founders, executive directors and other senior leaders need to understand when the time is right to make way for emerging leadership. Ideally this happens organically, and senior leaders work with their teams on a thoughtful and strategic transition plan.

Additionally, organizations and their executive directors must make a commitment to let the next generation of leaders lead when the time and conditions are right. This means speaking to emerging leaders early and often about senior leadership as a goal; and means prioritizing leadership development opportunities for folks at every level of an organization as well as being proactive in developing leadership pathways and leadership plans.

Lastly, organizations must put in the work to genuinely create leadership pathways and actively prepare new leaders all the time- not just when a transition is pending. This includes addressing internal barriers to access to organizational decision making and management experience. Not only will this build a pipeline for new senior leadership that is cultivated within organizations but it recognizes that the leaders one organization may develop will have important contributions to make on other teams and in other movements.



Winder in 2022, having been at GSANetwork in some way for 24 years, dances at his goodbye party.

