

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE BECOME “THE MAN”?! (for EDs & ORG LEADERS)

Curriculum designed and piloted by Aida Cuadrado Bozzo, Trish Adobea Tchume, and Viveka Chen, as part of [Calling In & Up](#)

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Description: One of the deepest challenges we hear from Women Identified POC leaders centers around the disappointment and resistance they face from other staff of color for not being able to instantly transform oppressive organizational culture. On the staff end, we hear frustration over what they see as Women Identified POC leaders adopting oppressive behaviors as soon as they assume positional power or become ‘THE MAN’. We offer [a companion session](#) for staff and organizational leaders to explore this dynamic collectively, but this session is designed especially for organizational leaders and makes space for them to reflect honestly and openly about their unique experience.

What does it look like to continue the transformation journey once you’re “in charge” and colleagues see you as a source of oppression? How do you stay accountable to goals and values that center transformation and liberation when you’ve also got an organization to run and hard decisions to make? This session is designed to explore these questions using the Wise Counsel model where participants take turns giving and receiving guidance.



about the session

Purpose: To create space for organizational leaders to build a practice of sharing challenging experiences in community. To create space to think **interdependently** and strategically about how to continue transforming oppressive organizational structures as we move through positions of power.

Outcomes:

- Participants give voice to their experiences and emotions tied to assuming positional power as Women Identified POC.
- Participants have greater awareness of the shared challenges facing Women Identified POC as they step into positional power.
- Participants have practiced and understand the value of Wise Counsel as an available tool for navigating complexity.
- Participants have strategies for continuing the process of transforming oppressive organizational structures while moving into positional power.
- Participants deepen their connections with a circle of peers.

Process: 165 min

Connection to Vertical Development:

- **Awaken:** *This exercise creates space for Executive Directors to be seen and affirmed in their individual experiences as EDs while also placing that experience in a shared context.*
- **Unlearn/Discern:** *Here we disrupt the limiting leadership approach that EDs have to act alone in negotiating positional power. We begin to practice and deepen our commitment to interdependence by asking other leaders to hold discernment and support space for us.*
- **Advance:** *Through the wise counsel practice, we identify areas of further investigation and practice - both for our own leadership practice and for us to invite staff members into.*

facilitator preparation

Designed for both in-person and virtual facilitation

For more on moving sessions online, check out [Dynamic Meetings from Training for Change](#), [Training for Change tools for online facilitation](#).

How to Integrate Into Agenda/Program:

- Because this session is designed for leaders with positional power from different organizations, a person holding a facilitation role could offer this as a breakout conversation during a larger conference or gathering.
- This guide could also be used by any ED or organizational leader looking to “call a circle” of other leaders virtually or in-person in order to make meaning of things they are experiencing in their position.
- Whoever is holding the space, we recommend at least a 15 minute buffer between this session and whatever content is next in order for participants to process and regroup after an experience of shared vulnerability.

Preparation:

- Using the POP above, create an invitation for a group of organizational leaders that could benefit from wise counsel. Include one or two of the articles below in the invite.
- Review the Framing and identify a couple stories that will make this more personal or relevant for your group
 - If possible, prep a participant to share their story of “becoming the man” with the large group
- Prepare Wise Counsel groups (at least 4 people each)
- Determine whether you would like to create group agreements with the group or if you would like to review a prepared set of agreements and ask participants to agree.
 - [See here](#) for examples of community agreements that tend to support women identified people of color well.
 - For more about how to hold space, see Section 8: Tools & Spaces for Embodying New Practices [\[LINK\]](#)

Materials:

- A playlist
- Consider offering this [handout](#) with more details on how to hold a Wise Counsel
- [Slides](#)

How to keep this session fresh and relevant?

A lot of folks have been talking and thinking about this topic recently! Check out some of the work that we’re following here:

- [Building Resilient Organizations | The Forge](#)
- [When All Of Our Tools Are Weapons](#)
- [Stop Drowning Us, And Stop Making Us Disappear. A Critical Report on the State of Black Women Leadership](#)

- [Making \(Or Taking\) Space: Initial Themes on Nonprofit Transitions from White to BIPOC Leaders - Building Movement](#)
- [The Call of Leadership Now: BIPOC Leaders in a Syndemic Era - Non Profit News | Nonprofit Quarterly](#)
- [Paving a Better Way: What's Driving Progressive Organizations Apart and How to Win by Coming Together - Non Profit News | Nonprofit Quarterly](#)

process (165 minutes)

Introduction/Welcome/Group Agreements (15 min)

- Welcome participants
- Review POP & Vertical Development (**slides 3-7**)
 - Share Purpose
 - Walk through the Vertical Development Goals
 - Share the Outcomes and Process
- Group introductions (ie. name, pronouns, organization, role, one prompt from the ["I Am" poem](#))
- Review group agreements

Framing & Field Context (35 min)

- Explain that after sharing some quotes and stories from the field, we're going to ask folks to name one thing that resonated with them. So they should listen with their bodies in addition to their ears for what they are connecting with.
- If you have tapped a participant to share a story about their "Becoming the Man" experience, have them share it now. If not, share the sample story below.

SAMPLE STORY:

- Totianna is in grad school, gets hired as an intern at a statewide immigrant rights organization that was started by a WoC
- Totianna immediately falls in love with the organization - she loves the founder, she loves the immigrant member leaders they are building power with, she loves the vision
- So she stays. And eventually the WoC founder goes off to do bigger and better things in the fight for immigrant rights
- After her leaving, the culture of the organization really starts to shift - A new leader who is a man of color is promoted from within the organization, many of the organizers and new hires are white and formally educated, not from the communities they are building power with
- And the staff who are paying attention and understood that the power and vision of that organization actually came from centering the leadership of women of color, decided to push back and really push for new hires, policies, and organizing frameworks that would re-root the group in that culture.

- Totianna took the lead - making the case, organizing the staff, getting outside facilitators to come in and build the staff's shared analysis around the internal anti-racist culture that would support their external vision.
- It took years but it worked! Today this state-based organization is seen as a pillar in the national immigrant rights movement, the staff is majority women of color - particularly in the executive leadership positions - and Totianna's leadership was celebrated all along the way. Staff loved her, the board applauded her, external partners wanted to work with her, even the org leadership she was pushing against admired her.
- So much so that she was eventually selected to be the head of this organization. And she was so proud. She herself was the child of immigrants and now here she was - having gone from intern to ED of this beloved organization and she had transformed the culture along the way.
- And then, the staff started to whisper about her
 - At one point in her position she had to fire a POC staff member who was just underperforming
 - She wasn't able to be as present anymore in the internal conversations about culture and alignment as she once was
- She came to one of our retreats and was just burnt. This is during the Trump era so she's leading an immigrant rights organization during one of the most politically ugly periods of American history. And her staff, the people she came up with, her comrades - are resisting her direction because they say that she's sold out.
- So she posed this question to us, "I've spent my whole career externally and internally fighting "the Man." But what happens when you become, "the Man"?"

- We've been seeing this dynamic play out more and more as more people of color assume leadership of previously white-led organizations
 - Robert Sterling Clark Foundation recently worked with the Building Movement Project to explore this question of what happens when POC assumes leadership of an organization, especially from white leaders. The findings are captured in a report that was just released called Making/Taking Space ([Making \(Or Taking\) Space: Initial Themes on Nonprofit Transitions from White to BIPOC Leaders - Building Movement](#)) and one of the key themes was this impossible expectation that leaders of color both run the organization well and immediately solve decades-old issues around racism within the institution.
 - In 2022, a group of organizational development and capacity building consultants who have been supporting social justice and movement organizations like ours gathered to reflect on what they were seeing across organizations and captured those reflections and their recommendations into an NPQ article called [Paving a Better Way: What's Driving Progressive Organizations Apart and How to Win by Coming Together](#). In the article they say:
 - **[Slide 8]** *"The cycle of disconnection is often set in motion when ideals about movement work are dashed by the reality of nonprofit workplaces. Staff, particularly those newer to the workforce, have expectations informed and* What happens when WE become "the man"?! (EDs and Org Leaders) [\[Calling In & Up - 2024\]](#)

shaped by rhetoric about the societal changes organizations seek (for example “centering those most impacted,” “breaking norms of White supremacy,” and so on). However, those progressive values sometimes rub against the tendency of leaders to enact traditional management and governance practices, particularly as the size, scale, and complexity of organizations grow.

[Animate through Slide 9 while sharing this] *As the cycle of disconnection causes tensions to rise, staff and leaders grow further apart and climb up their own “ladder of inference” (Chris Argyris and Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 1994). Each camp begins making assumptions about the other, behaves as if those assumptions are true, and ends up in greater opposition to the other. For staff, frustrations over the gaps between public rhetoric and internal operations can lead to public callouts of leadership, open letters, and work avoidance. These forms of staff resistance often trigger fears among leadership about losing issue campaigns, falling short on base building or turnout metrics, and other reputational risks. Sometimes leaders remain silent or do not respond directly to staff concerns in a misguided attempt to avoid conflict. Other times, leaders respond defensively and increase their reliance on the very top-down management tactics that staff are reacting to in the first place (for example, holding decision-making about big things—budget, expanding or sunseting programs, hiring and firing—at the most senior levels). These patterns of entrenchment perpetuate the disconnect staff experience between their aspirations and the reality of the workplace. Rinse and repeat.”*

- From [The Call of Leadership Now: BIPOC Leaders in a Syndemic Era - Non Profit News / Nonprofit Quarterly](#) **[Slide 10]:** “In this liminal time, BIPOC leaders are being asked to simultaneously dismantle the past, survive in the present, and create an alternative future. Our leadership, needed now more than ever, is being tested like never before. We are tasked with fighting for short- and long-term goals in tandem. We are called on to hold space for grief, trauma, and despair while also uplifting hope, courage, and vision. We have to navigate the scarcity created by economic, racial, and gender inequality while tapping into an abundance mentality to demand what we need. We must lift up our unique histories and conditions while also stepping up our practice of transforming conflict, resisting divide-and-conquer tactics, and deepening solidarity with one another. This is the call of leadership this moment requires, and many of us are answering.”

- **Resonance**

- Pause and have the group take a collective breath. Have them do a brief body scan at their own pace to see if the resources and stories are landing anywhere in their bodies.
- Ask participants to raise their hand if any of the quotes or stories resonated with them
- Model what resonance looks like:

- It's not interpretation or story telling
- It is simply naming when you connected with something that was said.
Format, "I was with you when..."
- If the group is small enough (10 or so people), have everyone go around and have each participant share 1 resonance.
- If the group is larger (10+ people), have 3 to 4 people share to give the group a flavor of what's coming up amongst their peers.
- Close the resonance by sharing:
 - As leaders of organizations, you have an important role to play in implementing vision, culture, and structures that can address the complexity that we're naming here, but these issues are bigger than you and they are bigger than your organization. As leaders we can get into, "If I could only just..." mode.
 - So today we're welcoming in Wise Counsel - a practice for looking at what's happening in our orgs and discerning what is ours to address and what must be addressed collectively.

Intro to Wise Counsel (25 mins)

- Name that wise counsel is an intentional practice of interdependence. What do we mean by that and why is it important? (slides 5 & 4 [from this doc](#) from collaborator, Bethel Tsegaye - in that order)
 - **Dependent** leadership cultures operate with the belief that people in authority are responsible for leadership.
 - **Independent** leadership cultures operate with the belief that leadership emerges out of individual expertise and heroic action.
 - **Interdependent** leadership cultures operate with the belief that leadership is a collective activity to the benefit of the whole.
 - Interdependence is rooted in indigenous and non-western cultures
 - White supremacy culture rewards independence rather than interdependence
 - Interdependence often happens behind the scenes
- So offering this practice of interdependent leadership is being offered today because we think it speaks to the reality that we don't hold problems in isolation and we can't be transformed in isolation.
- That said, acknowledge that folks come into the room with different personal and professional experiences around trust and how okay it is to open yourself up to a group.
 - Remind folks that the invitation will be to move from choice about what they share - they get to choose their level of depth and vulnerability.
 - Remind group of the community agreements - how we've committed to be with each other in this space. Name that as facilitator you are available AND they are deeply trusted to self manage. Add a note about different levels of comfort with trust.
- General Description: A wise counsel is an organized process for calling together a group of peers to offer advice on a strategic question. It supports participants to embody a leadership grounded in purpose, strength, centering and resilience, while practicing interdependence. The group is not necessarily a standing group - you can pull together any
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configuration you desire. We recommend doing a wise counsel with at least 4 people and around strategic questions where you are able and open to receiving broad feedback.

- Reiterate how we'll be using Wise Counsel today: Today we're welcoming in Wise Counsel as a practice for looking at what's happening in our orgs and discerning what is ours to address and what must be addressed collectively.

Describe the Wise Counsel Structure

15 min/person Process

In each round, one participant is the "client," the others are "consultants." One consultant times the stages and keeps the overall process to 15 mins .

- **Step 1:** Client shares their question (the challenge and the help needed from you "consultants") **2 mins**
- **Step 2:** Consultants ask the client clarifying questions. **3 mins**
- **Step 3:** *The client turns around with their back facing the consultants or turns their camera off if in a virtual setting. (Inviting the client to turn around and sit facing away from their consultants once the question has been shared and clarified deepens curiosity, listening, empathy, and risk-taking for all. The alternative of not turning around is an option).* Together, the consultants generate ideas, suggestions, and coaching advice **8 mins**
- **Step 4:** Client turns back around and shares which ideas really resonated/what was most valuable about the experience/offers gratitude to consultants. **2 mins**

Groups switch to the next person and repeat steps till everyone has had the chance to be a client.

Tips:

- When you are in the client seat, try to stay present and focused on what you are hearing, seeing, and intuiting.
- As a consultant, try taking risks while maintaining empathy.
- As a consultant, you can offer questions in addition to advice. "I wonder if [Y] has considered the possibility..." Like with peer coaching, *questions* that spark self-understanding or self-correction may sometimes be more powerful than *advice* about what to do.

Forming and Sharing Strategic Questions

- Before breaking into groups, give participants a moment to consider what their strategic question might be and to hear what strategic questions others are holding.
- Clarify what a strategic question looks like: With Wise Counsel, it works best if your question is specific enough for people to comment on but broad enough to be strategic. So you might use a little bit of time to give context about who you are/your organization then an example might be:
 - "As one of the few Black women on staff, I had to take real leadership on getting our organization to actually examine its internalized racism. The organization is finally open and eager to do this but they keep looking to me to chart the course around our undoing racism work. I care about what What happens when WE become "the man"?! (EDs and Org Leaders) [\[Calling In & Up - 2024\]](#) **8**

- happens but that's not my job! How do I make sure this happens the right way without having to be the project manager for this whole thing?" Or;
 - "We learned about the habits of white dominant culture as an organization and agree that we do not want to default to those behaviors even though we are used to them. But now it's causing some tension – like if I ask people to be on time, it can feel like I'm leaning into white dominant culture. But we haven't really figured out new measures for holding ourselves and each other accountable without relying on those habits."
- Play soft music and give participants **3 minutes** to reflect and formulate a strategic question.
- Have 5-6 volunteers share the strategic question they will be bringing into Wise Counsel. (No need for commentary from the facilitator or group.)

Wise Counsels (in groups of 4) (60 mins)

- 15 min/person Process

Post-Counsel Reflection & Sharing (25 min)

- As participants are returning, invite them into a brief somatic gesture that allows them to check in with their bodies. (i.e. a breath, a stretch, etc.)
- Once participants return to the large group, play soft music and give them 10 minutes on their own to journal on the following prompts:
 1. How am I feeling? What's a warm & wise response?
 2. What am I (un)learning?
 3. What do I need more time or help with? How could I source that?
 4. What is one upcoming opportunity for me to practice wise counsel? What else might I practice on purpose? (1 or 2 specific and do-able ideas)
- Have each participant share one piece of wisdom they are carrying out of their experience today. It can be an insight from the wise counsel or something that emerged through journaling.

Close (5 mins)

- Remind participants that today was not about solving major problems but about having them move deeper into interdependence by introducing them to the practice [Wise Counsel](#). Wise counsel is a tool that is available to them at any time.
- Close with quote from [You Were Made For This](#) by Clarissa Pinkola Estes
 - *"Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely....We know that it does not take everyone on Earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth gale."*
- Ask participants to come on camera or make eye contact with others in the circle (if in person) and make a gesture of gratitude and connection.

related resources from Calling In & Up

- Companion Session: [What Happens When WE Become “The Man”?! \(for Whole Org\)](#): In this companion session, staff and organizational leaders have the opportunity to think interdependently and strategically about how to continue transforming oppressive organizational structures together as they move through positions of power.

attribution

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Calling In & Up is written by and for [women identified people of color](#). This session is built on shared knowledge. Learn more about the lineage and creators of this knowledge [here](#).

Our work continues to be a living document for women identified people of color and their comrades. We welcome you to use this work widely, share it freely, and attribute the people who shaped this work. As you adapt this session guide for your own, please:

- Make a copy
- Attribute Calling In & Up as a source and tag #Calling InandUp on social media
- [Let us know](#) about your experience with this guide, including any adaptations you made, especially around language access!
- Continue to hold the [Root](#) of our work