

The background features several thick, wavy lines in a palette of blue, red, orange, and teal. These lines are arranged in a way that suggests movement and flow, framing the central text. One line starts at the top left and curves towards the right. Another starts at the bottom left and curves upwards. A third starts at the bottom right and curves upwards. The colors are solid and vibrant, creating a modern and dynamic feel.

The Vital Role of Executive Leadership on Organizational Equity Journeys

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By Minna Jung

About Learning for Action (LFA)

LFA's mission is to partner with social sector organizations to strengthen their learning culture and practice, in service of equity and justice. We do this through **strategic reflection and learning/evaluation, organizational development, and capacity building**.

We support our clients to tackle complex problems, push for structural and systemic change, and address the root causes of inequities. We hold diverse content area expertise, including **healthcare, education, economic mobility, immigration, advocacy, leadership development, arts/cultural programs, and building the capacities and power of communities**.

Our work is **person-centered, grounded in equity, and data driven**. We engage deeply with our clients, collaborating on and facilitating processes that draw on all partners' strengths, while also providing guidance and recommendations based on our extensive experience. We use inclusive and participatory processes that amplify and center the voices, perspectives, and stories of those closest to the work

Over the course of our 24-year tenure, we have conducted more than **900 evaluation, capacity building, and consulting projects for organizations, foundations, and government and county agencies** across the social sector. We have staff in all regions of the United States and experience with organizations doing work everywhere from their own neighborhoods to internationally.


About PEG

Public Equity Group (PEG) is a diverse practice of strategy and management consultants mobilized to help visionary leaders and organizations achieve impact. PEG works with partners poised to make a demonstrable difference on the "big issues of the day" — in service of equity. In particular, we look for clients with the following qualities:

- Deep equity/justice commitment and compatible organization values
- High potential for national or global impact, scale, and/or replication
- Strong leadership (strategic thinking, management, implementation)
- High organization capacity to implement (staff and board quality; planning, monitoring, operations, and systems quality)

About Funder

RWJF is a leading national philanthropy dedicated to taking bold leaps to transform health in our lifetime. To get there, we must work to dismantle structural racism and other barriers to health. Through funding, convening, advocacy, and evidence-building, we work side-by-side with communities, practitioners, and institutions to achieve health equity faster and pave the way, together, to a future where health is no longer a privilege, but a right.



“ If executive leaders are not involved in the work of centering equity across an organization, the work will not move as fast or as far as it should.

– **Karen Jean Minyard**
CEO, Georgia Health Policy Center

Introduction

Most organizations, whether large, medium, or small, have a hierarchical structure, with the topmost layer usually referred to as executive or management teams. These individuals are tasked with leading areas such as organizational strategy, budget and finances, administration, and people management on behalf of the whole organization and their teams and departments. With so many different areas to manage, one of the most important roles executive leaders can fulfill is to guide staff in understanding how projects and tasks should be viewed and prioritized in terms of strategic importance, alignment with the organization’s mission and values, and degree of urgency. Therefore, when organizations are engaged in equity work—specifically, racial equity work—executive-level staff are critically important in shaping what the work looks like, what the commitment entails in terms of staff time and other resources, and how the work will be sustained over the long term.

In early 2021, nearly 40 organizations funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) embarked on a collective effort to build their organizational capacity around advancing racial+ equity¹. This project, called the Equity Learning Lab (ELL), involved organizations that were already working on some dimension of health equity in their work. For these organizations, the ELL presented an opportunity to more deeply center racial+ equity in their work alongside a cohort of other organizations. The opportunity also came with robust support in the form of multiple types of coaching and consulting services, a curated and extensive curriculum of resources and tools, and a project structure that encouraged peer learning across multiple organizations of varying sizes and types, all of which were focused on some aspect of improving health care and health care systems.

Through an evaluation, case studies, and other content developed for dissemination, the experiences and work of the ELL participants are being captured in the hopes that other health equity organizations and funders will find different aspects of the ELL interesting, and even replicable, within their own contexts. This case study highlights the perspectives of executives who were either directly involved in the ELL work at their organizations or who specifically empowered other executive-level employees at their organizations to lead this work.

¹ The term “racial+ equity” refers to the fact that while racial equity was the primary focus of this project, organizations also had latitude to address other dimensions of equity.

This case study does not address the question of whether executive leaders should play an important role in organizational equity work. Instead, this case study examines how several executive leaders approached their roles in relation to organizational equity journeys, both in general and the specific work of the ELL. The question of “whether” has been addressed extensively in both the social sector and through the design of the ELL project itself. In a piece on the Nonprofit HR blog, a senior DEI consultant stated:

Regardless of experience or depth of knowledge on how to move the needle on DEI metrics, executive leadership is always an essential component of advancing the work through their networks of influence. Two actions that every executive leader can and should perform include advocating for the work and being involved in the work. Advocacy of senior leadership is critical since they are uniquely positioned to articulate the vision of change and model how change will occur.²

In the invitation to RWJF-funded partners to participate in the ELL, an FAQ document stated that the team leading ELL-related work at an organization should include “at least one person in a formal leadership role. Ownership and buy-in for this work among leadership is critical for ensuring the work is prioritized, progress is being made according to the Action Plan, and the work is leading to meaningful change in your organization in the area(s) that are identified as priorities for focus.” Lastly, the role of executive leaders was a point of focus in both the extensive curriculum developed for ELL participants and in the coaching services made available through the ELL for different purposes.

This case study also does not offer prescriptive judgments on which executives proved to be more or less effective in positively impacting their organization’s equity work, and why. Executive leaders are individuals who lead across a wide array of organizational sizes and contexts. Because those occupying these roles bring their unique beliefs, values, and lived experiences into their work, much of the ELL’s design and curriculum encouraged reflection on how participants’ individual equity journeys integrated with organizational equity journeys. While another case study will exclusively focus on the interplay between personal equity journeys and organizational equity journeys—an especially salient theme in this case study, too—it is very clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to how executives can or should lead these efforts.

This case study focuses on how several different executive leaders perceived and responded to the opportunities and challenges presented by the Equity Learning Lab. Common themes emerged, such as the balance between active leadership of organizational equity efforts versus enabling and supporting others doing the work; mindfulness about what a leader brings from one’s own personal equity journey to an organizational effort; and the role of trust in how an executive leads this type of multi-dimensional work. By presenting these themes in leaders’ own words, our hope is that other executive leaders leading organizational equity efforts will see themselves in these stories. This, in turn, may help other executive leaders better understand where they are in their own equity journeys, motivating them to move forward in leading organizational equity journeys.

² Dr. Antonio Cortes, “The Role of Executive Leadership in Advancing Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion,” Nonprofit HR’s Blog, May 21, 2021.

Interviewees For This Case Study

Executive Leadership	Organization	Focus of ELL Work
<p>Shonta Chambers Executive Vice President Health Equity Initiatives & Community Engagement</p> <p>Angela Walker Chief of Talent Management</p>	<p>Patient Advocate Foundation & National Patient Advocate Foundation</p> <p>PAF is a 200+ person organization that provides case management services or financial aid for patients to help them access care and overcome financial hurdles during the most vulnerable times of illness. NPAF is PAF's sister organization that advocates for solutions to common patient problems surrounding healthcare access and affordability.</p>	<p>ELL work focused on supporting an internal staff affinity group focused on centering equity in three areas and on overhauling HR practices and policies with an equity lens.</p>
<p>Karen Jean Minyard Chief of Talent Management</p>	<p>Georgia Health Policy Center</p> <p>Located in the Andrew Young School of Policy at Georgia State University, GHPC provides evidence-based research, program development, and policy guidance to improve health status at the community level.</p>	<p>ELL work involved the entire executive team going through the ELL's curriculum modules and working through the organizational assessment tool to determine how future efforts would align and complement existing equity-focused work.</p>
<p>Caroline Fichtenberg Co-Director</p>	<p>Center for Health & Community at UCSF</p> <p>The mission of SIREN (Social Interventions and Research Network) is to improve health and health equity by advancing high-quality research on health care sector strategies to improve social conditions.</p>	<p>ELL work involved the entire executive team going through the ELL's curriculum modules and working through the organizational assessment tool to determine how future efforts would align and complement existing equity-focused work.</p>
<p>Melissa Monbouquette Executive Director</p>	<p>BUILD Health Challenge</p> <p>BUILD is a national multi-funder, multi-sector initiative housed at the deBeaumont Foundation that is creating sustainable health improvements and advancing health equity by supporting community-centered, multi-sector partnerships across the U.S.</p>	<p>ELL work involved deepening BUILD's work with communities on centering health and racial equity and examining how operations and grantmaking practices could center racial equity.</p>
<p>Brian Castrucci President & Chief Executive Officer</p>	<p>The de Beaumont Foundation</p> <p>The de Beaumont Foundation works to improve health at the community level by investing in tools, partnerships, policies, and the public health workforce.</p>	<p>The de Beaumont Foundation houses the BUILD Health Challenge, the national initiative that led ELL-supported work on behalf of the foundation.</p>

De-centering Oneself as a Leadership Practice

Executive leaders are viewed by staff and by external audiences as the team members charged with the greatest amount of responsibility for the organization as a whole. While they are sometimes seen as people who delegate, rather than execute, discrete tasks, almost all executive leaders are still required to be deeply engaged in and aware of all the work that takes place within and external to an organization.

Embedding principles of equity throughout an organization, not just on one team or department, requires executive leaders to maintain a finely-tuned balance between active leadership of and involvement in this work, while also making space for others to engage and lead. Most of the executives interviewed for this case study referred to this as a practice of de-centering themselves in the work. In conversations that took place as part of the ELL, leaders intentionally focused on listening, rather than speaking, and specifically empowered others to lead the equity-focused work. Executive leaders who de-center themselves intentionally focus less on their own wants, priorities, beliefs, and experiences, and instead create space for others to engage in the work and, in so doing, cultivate their own leadership.

For Karen Jean Minyard, the CEO of Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC), de-centering herself was an important threshold component of becoming involved in the ELL. GHPC works to improve community health and health policy through research and policy development. The majority of GHPC's staff is Black; Minyard is White. The center is housed within the Andrew Young School of Policy at Georgia State University. Andrew Young is a storied figure in the history of American civil rights who served as a close confidant of Martin Luther King, Jr., and is still an active presence at the school and in the work of GHPC. When the dual crises of the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd occurred, Young's message to GHPC staff was straightforward: do what you can with the resources you have.

At the time, GHPC was already engaged in two internal initiatives focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, both involving staff with diverse roles and responsibilities. When the ELL opportunity arose, Minyard felt that it represented an opening for the executive team to engage in equity-focused work as a group. As a result of her direction, the executive team spent three years engaging with the ELL's organizational equity reflection tool (OERT) and going through all of the ELL curriculum modules.

The practice of de-centering can look very different for executive leaders based on their position and tenure within an organization and their own race/ethnicity. Most of the White leaders interviewed for this case study felt it was important to acknowledge the privilege inherent in their own race/ethnicity and how that could be perceived in work that, in many cases, seeks to address inequities that disproportionately affect people of color, particularly Black people. However, it can also be challenging and complex for an executive leader to figure out the right balance between de-centering oneself in organizational equity work versus active, influential (for staff) involvement.



For Minyard at GHPC, this involved listening for feedback regarding when she had stepped back too much from the work. “I’ve had experience with many equity-related initiatives, and I’ve worked with colleagues who have lots of DEI experience but who center themselves too much in the work,” she said. “However, I believe that for this work to take hold, you can’t have just one person at the center. So as an executive leader who had intentionally de-centered myself in this equity work, I realized that I had to sometimes be an active leader to help other people do the same. There’s always a balance to consider, between de-centering oneself in equity work and then realizing, oh actually, I’ve actually got to be very active on this. This requires my presence and my leadership.”



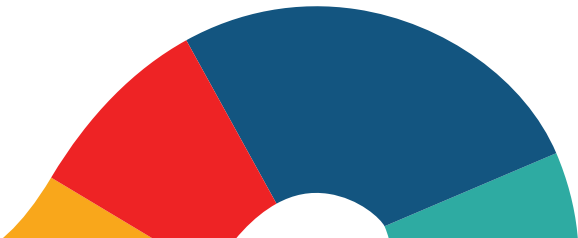
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– Karen Jean Minyard
CEO, Georgia Health Policy Center

Minyard admitted that she sometimes took de-centering too far. “We had a project focused on Black and Indigenous leaders and health equity,” she said. “This is an area in which I’ve done a lot of work—led research efforts, worked with communities, etc. But someone had to specifically prompt me to share what I had learned from my experience and research in this area because I was so focused on de-centering myself, I had somehow overlooked the idea that I had a lot of experience with this topic.”

For executive leaders, de-centering as an intentional practice often runs counter to many conventional leadership norms and practices. For the most part, executive leaders ascend to executive roles after accumulating years of experience in leadership and management and in specific content areas. Many leaders also display certain characteristics, like having the ambition and ego to occupy a role that comes with heavy responsibilities and major commitments of time and energy. In addition, executive leaders are charged with providing strategic guidance and communicating clearly and consistently with internal and external audiences. In other words, the incentives for executive leaders are weighted far more toward speaking up and taking a position than they are toward listening and de-centering themselves.

Shonta Chambers, Executive Vice President of Health Equity Initiatives and Community Engagement for Patient Advocate Foundation, felt that the ELL work taught her a great deal about when she needed to de-center herself and engage more staff versus when she needed to be a more active voice and presence in leading and communicating about the work. Chambers was hired in 2014 by PAF to focus specifically on health equity for PAF’s patient population, who often faced challenges in accessing and/or paying for health care for chronic illnesses. Therefore, her entire role was already focused on health equity but with a focus on PAF’s external impact, not on their internal culture and operations.



For Chambers, the ELL invitation felt like an opportunity to think beyond what PAF aimed for with respect to the patients served by the organization and consider how the organization was living up to its philosophy internally. “It became a question of, how does our philosophy regarding equity and how we help patients translate to our operations? How do we hire, develop, manage, and promote our employees? This felt like an opportunity to try and mirror internally what we wanted to achieve externally,” she said.

As part of the ELL work, Chambers led the creation of a staff affinity group focused on health equity and intentionally opened up the affinity group to anyone from PAF’s 200-plus staff who wanted to participate. The staff affinity group took on some of the core activities of the project, such as completing the tool that helped staff determine which equity areas to focus on with ELL resources. Ultimately, the affinity group chose three areas: communications and messaging, evaluation and learning, and culture and values. In addition, Chambers worked with another executive leader, Angela Walker, Chief of Talent Management, on a separate but related effort to revise PAF’s policies and practices in its employee manual with an equity lens.

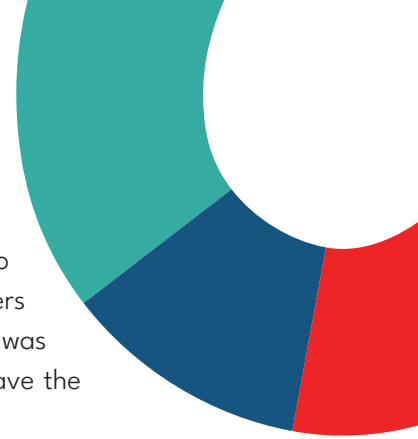
Chambers, who is Black, often found it necessary to not de-center herself in PAF’s ELL work. She said that the experience of working with the affinity group, and with Walker on the HR overhaul, taught her about the influence of her own voice and leadership within the organization. For example, she created a video message to encourage all staff to take the organization’s first-ever survey on diversity, equity, and inclusion. “I got feedback that the video message I had done had reassured people about the importance and the confidentiality of the survey,” she said. “But more than that, I think I learned that my voice was needed to help remind people what this equity work is and isn’t. Any type of equity work involves role-modeling patience and learning. I encountered so many assumptions about me as a person of color, so much discomfort, still, when it comes to talking about racism. And I had to lean into that discomfort and role-model the type of learning and engagement I wanted to see. There were days I found that frustrating and exhausting. There were days when I was constantly reminding people, equity work is a comma, not a period. We are not planting the acorn; we are planting an oak tree.”



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– **Shonta Chambers**

Executive Vice President
Health Equity Initiatives & Community Engagement, PAF



Angela Walker, who is White and has served as PAF’s Chief of Talent Management since 2010, was an ally and partner in encouraging Chambers to use her voice more to lead the organization’s equity work within the ELL. At the same time, Walker was also clear-eyed about the challenges in overcoming power dynamics that exist when other executive leaders proved to be less intentional or thoughtful about taking up space. The affinity group formed by Chambers included staff from all levels of the organization, including executives and entry-level staff. “It was hard to get the entry-level employees to participate in that group, given that they didn’t have the experience or confidence,”

Walker said. “Unless they are naturally super-extroverted or completely without fear, they’re not going to feel comfortable speaking up. And then executives and other leaders in the group, they don’t necessarily recognize and check their own privilege and power. I remember when I sat in on those group discussions, I had to be so, so intentional about not speaking. After all, HR is not an ideal role you want present for these discussions—HR roles tend to dampen openness. But Shonta and I tried our best to empower the entire group, even though we didn’t always succeed.”


The experiences of executive leaders involved in the ELL indicate that White and Black executive leaders face different considerations when it comes to de-centering. For White leaders, the practice of de-centering needs to be balanced against an awareness of their privilege and the requirements of a leadership role. For Black leaders, who are more likely to have experienced racism and bias in both workplaces and personal spaces, de-centering may require a different set of considerations that enable them to take up space and elevate their voices without being assigned or burdened with a disproportionately heavy share of organizational equity work.

The Importance of Reflection, Acknowledgement, & Individual Work

Executive leaders face overflowing plates of work and responsibilities that, like any other employee, need to be balanced against personal lives and responsibilities. Yet executive leaders are granted less latitude to show cracks in their composure, or falter in their leadership roles. Thus, it seems especially critical for executive leaders who are actively involved in organizational equity journeys to make the necessary space to reflect on their own personal equity journeys. This space can help executives make more intentional, informed decisions about what work they need to do “on” and for themselves, vis-à-vis their own leadership of organizational equity work.

Equity journeys are, by nature, both personal and professional, individual and systemic. In other words, racial equity is about people—people who have had individual experiences with racism and bias who live in a society where systems and institutions also reflect racism and bias. “I don’t know how your organization can bring people forward without acknowledging that one of the foundation stones of health disparities is race and racism. If you have mountains of data telling you that African Americans are not getting the same quality of breast cancer treatment that White Americans are, that seems pretty clear,” said Shonta Chambers of PAF. “And yet, I still find myself, when leading organizational equity work, encountering a degree of discomfort when we talk about race. I can only lean into that discomfort and try to open people’s minds to learning.”

The coaches who worked with the executive leaders featured in this case study consistently noted one quality in particular: the ability to reflect on their own equity journeys and make intentional, thoughtful decisions about how their own journeys would influence their leadership of the ELL equity work. While no single blueprint exists for how to manage one's own equity journey in relation to organizational equity work, all of the executive leaders interviewed spoke about the need to acknowledge the work they were doing on their own personal equity development. They were transparent that this was a critical part of being an executive leader engaged in this type of work.



Through reflection, coaching, and therapy, I realized that there were many things about my history and upbringing that have an impact on the way I see the world...You need to do the work of getting comfortable with who you are before you can engage in and lead organizational equity work.

– Karen Jean Minyard
CEO, Georgia Health Policy Center

Caroline Fichtenberg is one of three co-directors for the Social Interventions and Research Network (SIREN), an organization focused on improving health and health equity through research initiatives. For Fichtenberg, who is White and the director most actively involved with leading the ELL work, understanding her own equity journey is a critical part of leading the organization's equity journey. "In our co-director structure, we are pretty open with each other and with our small team about our struggles. We are constantly faced with questions about the language we use in our research that reflects our values about health equity and social justice," she said. "I try to be thoughtful, but as a White woman, I still second-guess myself as both a leader of SIREN and the most active leader for the ELL work. Sometimes, I feel discomfort. And I have found that naming the discomfort is one of the things I found to be the most helpful—just acknowledging that it exists, and that I'm willing to talk about it or not, depending on the circumstances. The ELL coaching I received helped so much with this—I will never forget the day that our coach said, 'As a White person leading this organizational equity work, ask yourself—what pressure can you take off of yourself and others that is not useful to the work?' I found that so reassuring."

Melissa Monbouquette, executive director of The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD), also found it essential to both reflect on her identity as a White person and to acknowledge her dual role as a leader and a partner to the communities her program serves. BUILD is a multi-site, multi-sector community health initiative supported by a collaborative of funders, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation among them, and housed at the de Beaumont Foundation. Each community in BUILD involves leaders from different health-related sectors, ranging from large hospital systems to health insurance plans to community-based organizations. In addition, BUILD communities are located in different states across the country, each with different cultural norms when it comes to talking about race and equity.

"For me personally, it has been really important, both for leading the BUILD work and for leading the ELL work, to specifically acknowledge that, as a white woman, I have not had the same experiences as people of color," said Melissa Monbouquette, executive director of BUILD. "And in acknowledging that difference, I also found it important to be vocal about being an ally and a partner in equity-focused work, and to be transparent about how much I have learned from BUILD's community leaders of color."



For me personally, it has been really important, both for leading the BUILD work and for leading the ELL work, to specifically acknowledge that, as a white woman, I have not had the same experiences as people of color...and in acknowledging that difference, I also found it important to be vocal about being an ally and a partner in equity-focused work, and to be transparent about how much I have learned from BUILD's community leaders of color.

– Melissa Monbouquette
Executive Director of BUILD

At the time the ELL opportunity came up, Monbouquette was then the deputy director for the BUILD Health Challenge, reporting to an executive director, Emily Yu. Yu, in turn, reported to Dr. Brian Castrucci, the president and CEO of the de Beaumont Foundation. Monbouquette said that she had strong executive support from both Yu and Castrucci to leverage the ELL opportunity on multiple levels—both to center racial equity in de Beaumont's operations and grantmaking policies and practices, and to connect with BUILD's community leaders to find ways to address racial justice in BUILD's work.

Monbouquette described Castrucci as someone who believes in empowering leaders to make decisions on their own. "He is someone who believes in, and practices, supporting his team to take risks, think differently, and find innovative ways of doing things. The ELL team felt that we needed to create a space to have deeper conversations about what it meant to really operationalize equity in all our practices, not just in our external work. And we knew that Brian trusted us to lead that."

Castrucci, while not the primary leader of the ELL work for BUILD, agreed to be interviewed for this case study, in part to share reflections about his own equity journey and how that led him to a place of learning from and empowering others to lead on equity. Castrucci said that he struggled, at first, with understanding and processing the rhetoric and conversations

in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's murder. "You had some very well-known experts on racism and DEI saying that the only way to make progress on equity was for white CEOs to resign," he said. "I didn't agree with that. I worked very, very hard to earn my position as CEO. But looking back, I now realize that I was triggered by what those experts said. I thought to myself: 'I don't want to resign my position. I want to lead this organization and make a real difference in the communities we serve.' But to do that effectively, I knew I had to use my position of power to uplift the diverse voices, perspectives, and expertise of the de Beaumont team and our partners."

Castrucci has spent ample time processing his own feelings and thoughts about racial equity, the evolution of discourse around organizational equity journeys, and how equity work aligns with the organization's mission and focus areas. As he put it, organizations like de Beaumont can't achieve their community health goals without addressing barriers and challenges that have been used to prevent communities of color from achieving optimal health. While he understood this alignment between community health and health equity, he now realizes, after much reflection in the years since George Floyd's murder, that he can lead by making space for others to lead. "I think it's helped that I'm very transparent with all my staff that I'm learning, and that we all have a great deal to learn, from outside experts and each other. I don't know how CEOs can lead unless they are willing to say, 'I don't know everything. But I will make space for us to learn together.'"

The executive leaders' observations about their own identities and equity journeys point to a conclusion about the importance of reflection when it comes to executive leaders and organizational equity work: the importance is in the reflection itself, not in the outcomes or actions that result from the reflective process. Simply put, executive leaders' increased understanding of their own identities, beliefs, values, and equity journeys helped them, in turn, clarify their leadership of their organizational equity journeys. In some cases, it resulted in leaders making a more intentional effort to create space and empower others to lead. In others, it helped them understand how to better calibrate between learning, listening, and actively leading.

The Role of Trust in Organizational Equity Work

Building trust is an essential ingredient for executive leaders to take on organizational equity work. To illustrate this point, here are several permutations of how the element of trust showed up for the executive leaders featured in this case study:

TRUST FROM SUPERVISORS TO LEAD THE WORK: Three executive leaders interviewed for this case study did not occupy the president/CEO position in their organizations. All of them felt that the president and CEO of their organizations communicated to them very clearly that the ELL opportunity, and health equity in general, was an important priority for the organization. At PAF, Angela Walker, Dr. Alan Balch (the president and CEO), and Shonta Chambers were all longtime employees—Walker started in 2010, Balch in 2013, and Chambers in 2014. Walker remembers that they all came to PAF with a significant amount of DEI experience from their previous jobs, and that one of Balch's first priorities was to create the position of Vice President for Health Equity and Community Engagement, which Chambers holds to this day.

When the ELL opportunity from RWJF arose, the invitation to participate initially crossed Balch's desk, not Chambers'. Chambers remembers the day she received it from Balch, with a message saying, "We need to look at this seriously." In re-telling the story, Chambers said, "You could just hear the urgency in the message. You could tell this was a priority for him. And I heard that clearly, and that he trusted me to do something with this opportunity. I believe that you need leadership to ignite this type of opportunity, and you need trust between executive leaders that shows that the people you hire can lead and empower others."

TRUST BETWEEN ALLIES AND PARTNERS IN LEADING EQUITY WORK: Leadership roles can feel isolated and lonely. So much information held and shared at the top levels of an organization is confidential in nature, and while executives can in theory act as peers who support one another, there is often a turf dynamic between executives that arises from clashing personalities and competition for limited resources.

However, the complex and intersectional nature of organizational equity work creates a strong case for executive leaders to overcome these turf dynamics and build trusting relationships that enable them to support one another in doing the work. In the case of PAF, when the affinity group decided on three different areas of work for the ELL,

Chambers went to Walker and convinced her to undertake a separate effort to reform PAF’s HR policies and procedures with an equity lens. “I had done a few things in HR around equity, here and there, like changing some of the eligibility requirements for internal promotions so highly qualified candidates could be considered,” said Walker. “But I didn’t dream that we could do so much in the HR space until Shonta talked to me about it. When she was hired, I remember a moment when I put aside my role as HR lead and advised her to advocate for herself. And I think that planted the seed of our relationship where we know we have each other’s backs and we can encourage each other to do big and ambitious things on equity, like how we ended up overhauling our entire manual of HR policies and procedures to center equity.”

TRUST IN WHAT ONE HAS LEARNED, AND GAINED, BY UNDERTAKING EQUITY WORK: As noted earlier, when Melissa Monbouquette began leading the ELL work on behalf of BUILD and de Beaumont, she was at the time the deputy director of BUILD and has since become the executive director. The deputy role, however, gave Monbouquette the opportunity to work closely with the community leaders who were a part of BUILD. “I am so grateful for the learning I did during my time as deputy director,” she said. “Building trust within the foundation and with our communities, combined with the ELL resources, helped me understand what I had learned about centering equity—what felt like enough, what felt like not enough, what I knew, what I still didn’t know. When I became the executive director, those trusted relationships and all that I learned from the BUILD communities helped me clarify what I should be speaking up for as the leader and public spokesperson for this initiative. For example, we did a listening tour with BUILD communities and alumni, and as a result, I pushed for BUILD to refresh our strategic vision so racial justice could be at the center. And we now have a plan for how we are going to advance that vision.”



Conclusion

The themes that arose from the interviews with the executive leaders featured in this case study do not translate easily into directives. Instead, the themes highlight how executives have prioritized the strategic importance of organizational racial equity work. The leaders interviewed for this case study endorsed, actively led, or enabled others to lead the ELL work at their organizations. In organizations both large and small, that level of leadership support undeniably matters when it comes to moving equity work forward.

One final insight: Few of the leaders, when asked, reported clear-cut outcomes or impacts from their organizations' participation in the ELL, but they also recognized that organizational equity journeys don't always yield conventional outcomes in the short term. What they did recognize was that this work is complex and challenging, and that the practices of de-centering, reflection, and building trust helped them lead more effectively. For executives, who are often conditioned by commonly-held organizational norms, resisting the temptation to offer up key performance indicators and time horizons to achieve concrete goals is often not easy. For those who do invest in this work over the long term, the hope is that leaders will see measurable and tangible improvement in both organizational decisions and strategies and through the results organizational leaders strive for, both internally and externally.

In the wake of the Supreme Court decision on race-based admissions in higher education, there has been growing evidence of a backlash against any work on diversity, equity, and inclusion across multiple sectors and organizational contexts, beyond academic institutions.³ However, the leaders interviewed for this study gave a glimpse of another side of this issue—where executive leaders who have already had considerable experience in diversity, equity, and inclusion work are staying the course and continuing to find ways to move forward on centering racial+ equity. Given the uncertainty of what lies ahead in terms of legal challenges to organizational equity work, the need for executive leaders to speak up for the value and relevance of organizational equity work cannot be overstated.

³ Nicholas Confessore, " 'America Is Under Attack': Inside the Anti-D.E.I. Crusade," N.Y. Times, Jan. 20, 2024