

# The Call of Leadership Now

## BIPOC Leaders *in a* Syndemic Era

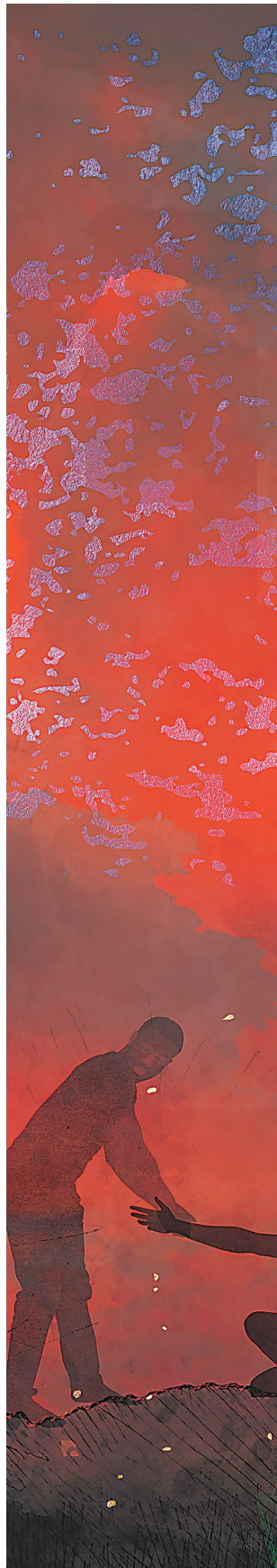
*by Neha Mahajan and Felicia Griffin*

Transformative healing work is essential to getting us from the world that exists to the world we are calling in. We do this work from the belief that we will hit a tipping point when leaders who truly want to transform our conditions, the ecosystem, and the way we lead reach a critical mass.

**W**e are living through a syndemic—a time of multiple crises causing seismic economic, political, environmental, technological, and social shifts, which are long from being settled.<sup>1</sup> Black, Indigenous, people of color, and Global South communities are at the frontlines and faultlines of these changes that are reshaping the world. Institutions, hierarchies, and forms of leadership rooted in Western colonial ideology are failing, being renegotiated, and getting deconstructed—even in the face of intense backlash.

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. In 2016, six women of color in the Colorado organizing and social justice movement ecosystem came together and formed Transformative Leadership for Change.<sup>2</sup> We were struggling with burnout, lack of sustainability, unaddressed trauma, conflict









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and competition, and internalized/systemic oppression. Frustrated with leadership programs that are rooted in our “deficits” and that reinforce dominant culture “hard skills” to navigate—and perpetuate—the nonprofit industrial complex, we envisioned a space that centered BIPOC experiences, collective healing, transformative relationships, abundance, creativity, proactivity, radical vision, and embodied practice.

### **A PRESSURE COOKER**

The rise of transformative programs offering leaders tools to heal and re-vision our movement work is not simply a trend; it is a healthy response to the pressure cooker of conditions that BIPOC social justice movement and organizational leaders are facing: White supremacist violence, COVID-19, climate crisis, unprecedented global wealth inequality, decades of defunding the social safety net, intensifying surveillance and militarization of our communities, growing authoritarianism, and rollback of civil and reproductive rights—to name a few. Leaders moving work through nonprofit organizations are also contending with the “great resignation” and major shifts in the workforce;<sup>3</sup> unprocessed grief from the pandemic and years of escalating racial violence; and short-lived performative responses by philanthropy to the events of 2020.

We have also reached a moment in time of almost complete co-optation of our work by the nonprofit sector. The professionalization of social justice organizing work, which began in the 1970s, has now become the place where the vast majority of our movement work lives.

Movement leaders of previous generations made the intentional decision to use the nonprofit organizational status as a vehicle to raise funds and sustain livelihoods—but this has now become the default way of operating overall. And as nonprofits moved away from their member-driven and member-funded mutual aid and organizing roots, they took on a hierarchical structure modeled after corporate culture, became dependent on grants from foundations/

government, and became run by “expert” staff to provide services or lead advocacy efforts. Very few leaders entered this work in order to build a professional career, but many of us have reluctantly or even unconsciously channeled our energies into surviving the nonprofit and philanthropic industrial complex as an end in itself.<sup>4</sup>

It is no surprise that social justice organizations are imploding under the stress of the current moment and the contradictions of existing in the dominant system while simultaneously advancing visions and values for change. We are pulled in many directions that uncomfortably exist at the same time. Are our social justice and movement-building organizations places to win concessions from existing power structures on a macro level? Are they spaces to heal trauma and experiment with radical new ways of being on a micro level? Are they political and community homes, places to find belonging and identity? Are they places for economic mobility, attracting resources that don’t exist in our surrounding communities? Are they primarily workplaces, sites of labor and management struggles? Are they vehicles to build one’s own celebrity, brand, and social media following, fueled by the pressure to gain attention from academia, philanthropy, and the political elite? Are they places to overwork, sacrifice, and martyr ourselves to avoid deeper trauma in our lives?

TLC is holding up a mirror to ourselves and our peers, asking these and other hard questions. TLC formed as a place where leaders of color could address the issues that get pushed aside to the shadows of our day-to-day work (trauma, burnout, ego, conflict, abuse, systemic inequities) until they explode—fracturing leaders, organizations, and even whole communities with the fallout. It has become clear to us that spaces are both required and missing that cultivate deep healing and transformation to help leaders move through this shadow work and rise to the leadership this moment demands.

The transformative spaces we are seeking and building include room for healing, both individually and in community,

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and for both self- and community care; teaching and practicing principles of transformative justice and generative conflict; frameworks of decolonization and re-Indigenization; land- and earth-based practices; body-based (somatic) and trauma-informed work; authentic relationship and movement building across BIPOC identities, issue areas, tactics, and other silos; and proactive visioning.

This is a significantly different approach from “leadership development” programs that implicitly or explicitly reinforce corporate models of success. While fundraising trainings, management courses, DEI consulting, strategic planning, and even executive coaching can be useful, they are often superficial remedies for the deeper, endemic issues described above. Even when these skills are applied toward sustaining social justice organizations, they need fertile soil in which to grow. For example, fundraising skills will thrive best in a leader who also experiences healing and empowerment in their relationship to money, as we describe in more depth below. But beyond this, the real goal is for leaders to radically shift their approach to reclaiming and stewarding wealth, in line with our movement values, to create economies centered around collective care. The aim of these transformative programs, in other words, is to create space for leaders to nurture the ways of being, thinking, and doing to create the world we want—not to create a pipeline of professional nonprofit executives as an end in itself.

### **TLC’S THEORY OF CHANGE: FOUR LEVELS OF TRANSFORMATION**

TLC’s core program is a yearlong fellowship that brings together a cohort of 20 BIPOC social justice nonprofit leaders across the state of Colorado. (TLC is committed to a place-based strategy—building deeply and over time in one state ecosystem and at multiple levels of leadership within organizations.) TLC fellows come from organizations that are building long-term power for and with BIPOC communities. This includes strategies of community organizing,

public policy and advocacy, civic engagement, cultural/arts organizing, land/food sovereignty, healing justice, and more. Their organizations work at the intersections of multiple social justice issues, including voting rights, criminal justice, economic justice, education justice, environmental justice, food justice, healing justice and mental health/trauma-informed care, im/migrant rights, labor rights, LGBTQIA+ liberation, racial justice, and reproductive justice.

We ask fellows to step away from their day-to-day organizational duties and participate in two multiday healing retreats and monthly daylong sessions. After going through the fellowship experience, leaders graduate into an alumni network, where they continue to access programming and work together on ecosystemic needs. While we started with leaders serving in executive director roles, we have also led cohorts of non-ED senior staff and are planning a cohort for community organizers. We see our organization and fellowship as a complement to our local movement ecosystem by nurturing healthy and sustainable leaders and organizations.

The core of TLC’s programming is a journey of healing in community. Using ancestral and culturally rooted practices, we work to create a deeply supportive container where individual healing journeys can be witnessed and held by the collective. We invite BIPOC leaders to step out of the organizational roles with which we are often highly identified and into a space where we can be present with one another’s whole humanity.

The healing and support individuals receive in a one-on-one therapeutic relationship—in which mental patterns and stories can be brought to light and met nonjudgmentally and with empathy—is magnified tenfold when it is received and offered back in community. This is especially true when creating a space to address any kind of collective trauma, such as racism. The practice of creating a community of belonging, vulnerability, story sharing, trauma release, and celebration—anchored by ritual and ceremony—is a

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powerful magic that opens up all kinds of possibilities of transformation that go far beyond our individual journeys.

The type of transformation we can begin to seed in organizations, collaborative tables, coalitions, and campaigns—and throughout the ecosystem—is much more possible, creative, and expansive when it is based on this foundation of individual self-reflection and healing held in community.

TLC's theory of change requires transformation on four levels: **individual, organizational, collaborative, and ecosystemic.** All rely on a foundation of deep inner work and healing—both individually and in community. We do not believe that it is possible to lead external transformation without significant internal transformation. Western colonial and patriarchal paradigms have siloed these aspects of our liberation, but many of us are creating spaces to incubate new leadership models, organizational models, and social change models that weave both internal and external transformation work together.

Take the leadership challenge of raising resources for BIPOC-led social change organizations, which are systemically underfunded. We have had well-meaning funders and partners tell us that training BIPOC leaders to learn hard skills around fundraising is the primary solution to this issue.

The TLC approach is to start with **individual** transformation: exploration around healing that is needed regarding wealth, class, and race—within the collective container of TLC. How do we shift scarcity mindsets that are rooted in deep and real experiences with poverty and oppression? What is our relationship to money that has been extracted from the colonization, exploitation, slavery, and genocide of our communities? How do we stand in our power in terms of what we need and deserve for our lives and our communities?

This then starts to open up questions regarding **organizational** transformation: How does our relationship with money impact how we interact with funders and donors? Are we valuing our labor? Are we asking for what we truly need

to do transformative social change work? How do we steward resources coming into our organizations in ways that align with our values?

These inquiries lead to explorations in transforming our **collaborative** spaces, as well. As leaders move out of a scarcity and competitive mindset, we begin to take small but radical collaborative actions, such as sharing our budgets and funder lists/relationships, applying for joint grants, advocating for one another to receive funding, and demanding that funders stop pitting organizations against each other through competitive grantmaking.

And, ultimately, we come full circle to the **ecosystemic** level, where we recognize that the entire ecosystem—including philanthropy—needs to transform if we are to thrive in our leadership. Our deepest challenges with funding don't stem from individual deficits or lack of skills; they are rooted in the very origins of White supremacy and capitalism. Standing more in their power around their relationship to race, class, wealth, and philanthropy, the last cohort of TLC fellows came together to compile a list of recommendations (which may turn into demands) for Colorado philanthropy to be in a more transformational relationship with BIPOC movement leaders. From reparations and land back to radical changes in investment and grantmaking practices, they put forth a bold call to action that cannot be easily dismissed when coming from a collective of organizations. This platform for change was presented in a forum where funders were invited to the TLC fellowship, on our terms, to build authentic relationships with leaders that go beyond the transactional power dynamics of the grantmaking relationship.

The ecosystemic level is also where we do vision work toward reclaiming and collectively stewarding wealth, land, and other resources for our communities. In TLC's first cohort of fellows, we experienced a shared revelation when we looked up from the thousands of dollars in our individual budgets to see a scale of the millions of dollars contained

in our collective balance sheet. What could we achieve if we invested all of our organizational budgets into a community credit union that reinvested back into our work and social justice fights? What if we bought land and buildings together as a collective? Beyond sustaining our individual organizations, we now have the potential to share and align resources; sustain a larger social justice movement made up of interdependent organizations; build small-scale cooperative and regenerative economies; and create interventions in extractive capitalism, divestment, and gentrification of BIPOC communities.

Another major impetus for creating TLC was the level of burnout, sacrifice, and lack of sustainability that we experienced as women-of-color movement leaders and nonprofit directors. Unlike White male executive directors in our ecosystem who successfully stayed in their role for years and even decades, we watched women of color cycle through leadership roles at huge cost to themselves and their lives. We explored the solution of an organizational sabbatical policy, understanding from our lived experience that such a policy would not work in a vacuum. We knew we would need a significant internal, collective, and institutional culture shift for even one of us to take advantage of a sabbatical.

So, in this case, we began again at the **individual** level. Recognizing that healing is required for many of us to even access the desire or ability to say yes to time off, we explored and began the process of releasing intergenerational racial trauma around our relationship to work, rest, health, our bodies, boundaries, and—ultimately—our worth. As leaders begin to decolonize their relationship to work, it becomes much easier to advocate for their organizations to create sabbatical policies for themselves and their staff (the **organizational** level). Being able to work through this collectively with peers allows leaders to compare policies and coach each other around moving this to their boards; but it also creates a culture shift in which leaders encourage each other to take time off, rest, and honor their vacations and sabbaticals, instead of being in a negative competition of martyrdom—which is how we found the ecosystem as we entered it (the **collaborative** level).

This decolonization also allows leaders to jointly tackle the barriers to taking sabbatical leave, such as lack of funding or of interim/senior leadership who can run the organization in an executive director's absence. Since we started having

these conversations in TLC, we have seen a marked increase in BIPOC-led organizations adopting sabbatical policies, and local philanthropy responding with some new sabbatical funding streams.

TLC has also created fellowship cohorts to invest in senior leaders, directors, and managers, and to deeply support them for interim and future executive leadership roles (the **ecosystemic** level). Additionally, we support the exploration of codirector and other shared leadership models, which can allow for much greater sustainability and support for organizational leaders when done well.

This arc of individual to ecosystemic transformation is our theory of change for truly improving the conditions for BIPOC movement leaders—whether we are tackling fundraising through inequities, lack of sustainability, and burnout; succession and transition planning; conflict and coalition building; staffing and team-building; and any number of other shared leadership challenges.

In addition to improving conditions for leaders and organizations across the ecosystem, TLC's work has translated directly into stronger BIPOC-led coalitions and campaigns that have resulted in tangible organizing and policy wins for our communities—from increasing the minimum wage to winning paid family medical leave for Colorado workers. TLC organically fostered the space for deep trust building, conflict resolution, and creative strategizing among BIPOC organizational leaders outside of the campaign tables. Our fellows were then able to show up to historically White-led ballot measure and legislative policy tables in a united push for more racial equity in campaign leadership, resource distribution, and skills training; greater accountability to organizing groups representing grassroots BIPOC communities; and to stop policy compromises that would disproportionately carve out the most directly impacted BIPOC workers. In both campaigns referenced above, TLC fellows strategized to support each other in taking key leadership positions away from historic White power-brokers instead of fighting each other for control, money, and visibility. As a result, they were able to both shape the outcome of the policy win itself and how the policy was won, leaving a lasting influence on how progressive campaigns are run in our state.



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TLC is emerging from its start-up phase. After running three-year-long leadership fellowship cohorts, we are now 60 leaders and 45 organizations deep in Colorado. As we move into our fourth cohort, we are seeing more organizations sending a second or even third person through TLC as it becomes a rite of passage for leaders in our local movement. We have already witnessed powerful ripple effects from work that has been seeded within the TLC fellowship cohorts; other visions remain latent with possibility until conditions are ripe.

We continue to experiment and learn from much trial and error. Even with promising examples of change, we are still watching our peers burn out, leadership transitions fail, organizations self-destruct, and communities get torn apart by conflict. However, we are committed to the wisdom we have earned through our own personal, political, and organizational journeys: *transformative healing work is essential to getting us from the world that exists to the world we are calling in.* We do this work from the belief that we will hit a tipping point when leaders who truly want to transform our conditions, the ecosystem, and the way we lead reach a critical mass.

In this spirit, we are calling on our movement peers to face our individual and collective shadows. We know from our lived experiences that BIPOC leaders feel tremendous pressure to meet superhuman expectations in our roles. We know there is a healthy debate around the role of social justice organizing and movement-building organizations in creating a space for healing, on top of every other fight we are carrying on our backs. It is not our job to become therapists for our teams or to resolve trauma that is beyond the scope of our organizations' capacities and expertise; however, let us move away from reactionary and scarcity thinking, which leads to feeling like the problems are all on our individual shoulders, and instead move toward collective and interdependent solutions.

We can come together in the spirit of mutual aid to build the types of leadership spaces we need. We can invest in deep

transformative partnerships with local healers, practitioners, and direct-service providers who have become deradicalized and siloed from our work. We can experiment with new organizational models that contain an infrastructure for care. We can bring ancestral, relational, body-/earth-based, and intuitive forms of knowledge to balance the logical, technical, theoretical, and academic forms of knowledge that are important but overemphasized in dominant Western culture. We can create spaces that bridge the challenges of running the organizational vehicles we have inherited with new experiments around structures to hold movement work. We can use the current global conditions of crisis as a unique opportunity to make the radical changes we have been calling for.

This is the level of leadership that is required, and we are here for it. In the words of Lakshmi Nair, 2021–2022 TLC fellow:

At this critical moment, healing is not a choice, it is an imperative. There's no more time left to let petty ego issues hamper our work. There is no healing of the world without healing of self and there is no healing of self without healing of the world. The separation is an illusion. This is what is so powerful about TLC. It brings together the micro- and macro-level healing. I can't imagine any more important work right now, and I'm deeply grateful to be a part of it.

TLC welcomes reflection, feedback, exchange, and support from others who are in this work with us.

*TLC is in deep gratitude to the wider community of largely queer and femme BIPOC strategists rooted in lineages of healing and transformative justice, who have offered both loving critiques and potential solutions for our current movement challenges. We especially want to acknowledge some kindred organizations: Standing In Our Power; Coaching for Healing, Justice and Liberation; and Liberatory Leadership Partnership for helping us to develop TLC's framework, curriculum, and overall orientation to the work.*




## NOTES

1. “Syndemic theory focuses on the adverse interactions between diseases and social conditions, specifically drawing attention to the mechanisms of these interactions.” See Kristina E. Rudd, Christina F. Mair, and Derek C. Angus, “Applying Syndemic Theory to Acute Illness,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 327, no. 1 (January 4, 2022): 33–34.
2. These are Cristina Aguilar, Carla Castedo, Lizeth Chacón, Candace Johnson, and the authors.
3. Kim Parker and Juliana Menasce Horowitz, “Majority of workers who quit a job in 2021 cite low pay, no opportunities for advancement, feeling disrespected,” Pew Research Center, March 9, 2022, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/).
4. This knowledge came out of movement discussions in the mid-2000s, in spaces Neha Mahajan participated in, hosted by such groups as INCITE! (which published *The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017]) and Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training. In these discussions, movement elders passed on the oral history of why they had chosen to use nonprofits as vehicles for their work, and debated the unintended consequences of those decisions for present times. For more on this, see Michael Haber, “The New Activist Non-Profits: Four Models Breaking from the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” *University of Miami Law Review* 73, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 863–954.

**NEHA MAHAJAN** (she/her) is the daughter of South Asian immigrants, and brings nearly 20 years of experience fighting for social justice. As a young activist, Mahajan developed political consciousness in movements such as immigrant justice, youth organizing, ending violence against women of color, and dismantling the prison-industrial complex. Over the last 15 years, she has led multiple philanthropic and community organizations in the Colorado ecosystem. She has supported a number of local organizing campaigns, from police accountability to housing justice, and played a critical leadership role in building the campaign that won paid family and medical leave for Colorado workers. She also worked at the national level to center the leadership of women of color, invest more deeply in grassroots organizing, and work more intentionally at the intersection of race, class, and gender. Mahajan helped to found Transformative Leadership for Change in 2017, and became coexecutive director in 2020. **FELICIA GRIFFIN** (she/her) has had the privilege to serve in many leadership roles during the last 20 years of working in the nonprofit sector. Griffin has worked on the local, state, and national level to pass policies that provide critical support families need to thrive. She is deeply committed to opening the doors of opportunity for communities and people who have been left out of the “American dream.” Griffin is cofounder and coexecutive director of Transformative Leadership for Change, and president of Sweet Magnolia Consulting.

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