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In 2011, I embarked upon a new position in donor relations with great expectations and optimism. But my excitement soon dissipated when within six months both of my Associate Directors left for other positions within the University—one for a higher position while the other made a lateral move. Still a newbie to the field of higher education, I was more than a little dismayed at the loss of two experienced staff members. My discomfort was heightened when I received a call from HR asking if there was something I had done to prompt their departures.

Huh?!

I wondered if that question would have been put to a white director upon the defection of two black associates. Perhaps it would have been, or at least should have been.

Nevertheless, I re-grouped with the realization that there was an opportunity to build the kind of team that I wanted to lead: one that would be recognized as high-performing, that would advance the visibility of our unit and the importance of stewardship communications to the fundraising cycle, and would also open the door to employment and promotion within the field of higher education advancement for young professionals of color.

With only one other person of color among the entire central development communications department of about 13 (five of whom reported directly to me), anyone could see that there was work to be done. Within a few years I personally enhanced the University's diversity record with four new professional-level hires (two of whom advanced to positions beyond my unit) and built a cross-trained, interdisciplinary team of seven whose work has expanded to include personalized donor communications for the University's top leadership. In 2019, the team—diverse in ethnicity, gender, life experiences and skills—was recognized with our institution's Models of Excellence Award, and cited for best practices in “editorial quality, timeliness and collaboration” resulting in positive outcomes for the University.

If you care about racial justice in employment as well as high performance and its accompanying rewards, here are four tips for building your top-flight team.

1. Hire and Promote Boldly: I'm not just talking to white managers here. Have you ever come across a BIPOC who is afraid to hire or promote another BIPOC for fear of how it might look to others, or that the candidate might not work out? Don't be that person! When my first two Associate Directors left, the most senior staff member remaining was a young African American man, a Staff Writer, who had been at the University for 7 years, the last 2 in our department. When I said I wanted to promote him to the Associate Director position I was rigorously grilled, by HR and the department head, who questioned if this person was “ready.” Given our intricate review process and communications tracking system, in which I was not fully versed myself, I knew that this writer would be called upon to train two people who would walk in the door with more authority and making several thousand dollars more than he. Anyone who has been in that position knows the resentment it can provoke. So I continued to adamantly make my case about the promotion. And we won. That Associate is still with me, highly regarded for his institutional knowledge and my right hand in steering our team's success.

2. Go Beyond the Easy Fit: Instead of focusing solely on someone who will “fit in,” with the current culture, think about what's missing on your team— like someone who is good at maintaining data, or editorial, or who has institutional knowledge, or is good at developing and monitoring processes and systems. And put away your implicit bias about the kind of person who will bring a specific talent to the table. Your IT geek might be a black woman. The person who best captures the voice of your company's female leadership might be a guy. When differences are acknowledged and valued, everyone brings their “specialness” to the workplace and everyone does their best. And, a team that is diverse in ethnicity, background, personality, life experiences, and interests, can speak to a donor population who is, as well.

3. Be Fair With Plum Assignments: Nothing disengages an employee more thoroughly than being continually ignored. When high visibility projects come along make sure you assign them equitably among your staff, which builds loyalty while offering

professional development. In our case, as team members gain proficiency in producing quality writing assignments they are given projects that capitalize on their strengths, extend their skillset, and put them in line to work directly with development leaders across the organization—and perhaps find their next level-up position.

4. Make Inclusion Necessary For Success: So you've pulled together this diverse and talented group of individuals who constitute your team. But are they really a team or are they working in virtual isolation, with little interaction among them? Or, are a few like-minded souls working together to the exclusion of others? One way we avoid this is ensuring that no written document leaves our shop without a rotating peer edit and final review. Project coordinators must include the contributions of teammates for successful project completion—even those eager beaver coordinators who would prefer to do everything themselves. The strategy is to design workflow so that everyone remains connected—to the work and to each other.

My experience has made me a strong believer in the value of racial justice and workplace diversity—in hiring, promoting, and the day-to-day management of exemplary teams.



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