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Missing Persons

Why do so few black men hold top leadership jobs at nonprofit groups?

By Jennifer C. Berkshire

In the five and a half years that Jerome Grant has worked for the YWCA of the City of New York as its vice president for development and external affairs, he has grown to appreciate just how seriously his employer takes the concept of diversity. "The YWCA has a policy of really trying to seek out diverse hires and does a good job in this regard," says Mr. Grant.

But there is one demographic group with which the charity has failed to make much headway: his own. Mr. Grant is the lone black man on the group's senior staff.

It is a reality that Mr. Grant says has become all too familiar since he first embarked on a career raising money for charities 13 years ago. In the multiple jobs he has held, primarily at arts organizations, Mr. Grant has never encountered another black man in a senior-level position. In fact, he says, he has never met another black male fund raiser — period. "I don't think there are any," he says.

That estimate may not be off by much, according to data from the Association of Fundraising Professionals, in Alexandria, Va. A 2007 survey by the organization found that only 2 percent of the group's 30,000 members are black.

Mr. Grant's story is far from unusual, say charity experts. Despite a three-decade-long effort to diversify the nonprofit work force, black men aren't missing just from the top ranks of charities but from the rank and file as well.

"We know from studies of nonprofit leadership that black men are underrepresented at that level," says Loren Harris, a program officer at the Ford Foundation who got his start running an employment-training program in East Harlem. "I think it's also safe to say that their numbers in the sector certainly don't reflect the proportion of African-Americans who are served by nonprofits."

The precise number of black men who are employed by charities is difficult to determine. Studies have tended to look at race or gender — not both. And government employment data, though they keep track of the relevant categories, aren't specific to the nonprofit world. Still, black male charity workers say that they don't require detailed statistical analyses to see the obvious: Their numbers are few.

The dearth of black men in the nonprofit world is the result of a simple supply problem, say experts. Relatively few black men have college degrees, and that means fewer qualified applicants for charity jobs. But black men who hold such jobs charge that charities are not doing nearly enough to recruit potential candidates. As a result, they say, black male charity workers often face a lonely time on the job.

One of a Kind

Randal Rucker has gotten used to breaking down barriers. In 1963, when he was in the second grade, his parents transferred him from an all-black school in Nashville to an entirely white one. "I was the first and only," says Mr. Rucker.

Nearly a half-century later, Mr. Rucker, now chief executive of Family Service of Greater Boston, continues to play a trailblazing role.

"I can't tell you how many times I am the only man of any color in rooms where there are topics of great importance to children and families being discussed," says Mr. Rucker, the first man and first member of a minority group to head the 173-year-old organization.

The experience is so common, he says, that it has begun to feel almost normal. "People in my world have gotten used to seeing one black man at the table: me."

Gregory Brown can relate. In the course of his 17-year-long nonprofit career, Mr. Brown has encountered plenty of people who share his commitment to community development — but rarely any who look like him.

"I'm often struck by the fact that I have virtually no counterparts," says Mr. Brown, who recently left his post as executive director of the Center for Community Solutions, a public-policy and advocacy organization in Cleveland.

The experience of being the lone black man at charities dominated by white men — or, more typically, white women — also has career consequences for the men who choose such jobs, says Mr. Brown. "It's difficult because there aren't a lot of mentors in the field to model what a successful career looks like," he says.

In the 11 years that he has been working in the nonprofit world, the Ford Foundation's Mr. Harris says that he has both seen and experienced just how isolating — even alienating — life for black male charity workers can be. Worst of all, he says, is that the sense of remove can interfere with the very passion and commitment that draw black men to nonprofit work in the first place.

"What's striking to me is the isolation that African-American men feel and how it impairs their ability to identify with their work," says Mr. Harris, who plans to leave the Ford Foundation later this year. He wants to start a consulting firm that will work with grant makers who aim to improve quality of life for black men.

A Pipeline Problem

Charity experts often attribute the relatively small number of black male workers to what they term a "pipeline problem": fewer black men in the pool of potential applicants relative to other groups translates into fewer black men hired.

"The vast majority of jobs in the nonprofit sector require college degrees, and if you have fewer black men attending and finishing college, that accounts for a big part of the disparity," says Tracey Webb, founder of Black Gives Back, a blog created in Washington that follows black philanthropists.

Fewer than 37 percent of black men from the ages of 18 and 24 are currently enrolled in college, compared with 42 percent of black women and nearly 45 percent of white males in the same age group, according to U.S. Census figures. Black men also have the lowest graduation rate of any group. Yet those black men who earn diplomas are also likely to find themselves heavily recruited in the lucrative fields of business, law, and medicine — offers that may prove hard to resist.

Handy Lindsey, president of the Cameron Foundation, in Petersburg, Va., says that the issue is more complicated than a paucity of candidates, however. "When you examine the pipeline, you start to see that there is so much more to it," says Mr. Lindsey. "There's a lack of opportunity, a lack of access to social networks and professional networks. The net result is that exclusion is very much institutionalized."

Mr. Lindsey argues that black men and their white counterparts are confronted with different opportunities, expectations, even odds of survival — starting from a young age. "Statistically they're less likely to make it to age 24 than white kids, even if they come from similar backgrounds," he says.

He draws on his own experiences by way of example. Mr. Lindsey came of age in St. Louis's Pruitt-Igoe projects, a housing complex so dangerous that the city opted to demolish it in 1972. The son of a single mother on welfare, Mr. Lindsey says that most of the kids he grew up with ended up dead or in jail. He went on to get three degrees, including one in business and another in social work, but even after 30 years spent working for and leading charities, he still feels like he is an exception. "I escaped the odds," he says, "but an awful lot of black men don't."

Recruitment Failures

But others charge that charities aren't doing nearly enough to recruit the black men who do make it into the pipeline. Quincy Williams, a program adviser in the School of Public and Nonprofit Administration at Grand Valley State University, in Allendale, Mich., argues that charities are far less effective at recruiting black male candidates than for-profit companies are.

"It's frustrating," says Mr. Williams. "Corporate America makes sure that it's represented at the historically black colleges and universities. Where are the nonprofits? Almost 20 percent of African-Americans who attend college go to one of these institutions. Wouldn't it make sense to go there and recruit?"

As a student attending the University of Missouri at Kansas City, Byron Brooks regularly encountered recruiters from Fortune 500 companies, but he had no idea that working for a charity was even an option. "I thought that nonprofits were for volunteers or for the wealthy who had a lot of disposable income to give," he says.

Then Mr. Brooks found his way to American Humanics, a nonprofit leadership-training program with headquarters in Kansas City, Mo., that helped him land several internships with charities, including one with a local Boy Scouts affiliate.

"I ended up in the nonprofit sector because someone helped me get there," says Mr. Brooks.

Today Mr. Brooks works for the United Way of Greater Kansas City as a liaison with the local organizations that the charity supports. He considers himself something of a salesman for the charity world — he is always trying to persuade other young men to consider working for organizations like his. But Mr. Brooks also bemoans the lack of diversity in the profession he has chosen: "In this era of multiculturalism, it's a sad statement that you're pleasantly surprised when you encounter a minority executive director."

Nor does he let his own employer off the hook. It rankles him every time he sees an advertisement for the United Way that features black people being served, but never doing the serving. That image is indicative of a nonprofit culture, says Mr. Brooks, in which charities that work on behalf of minorities are often headed by white people.

"You have so many whites making decisions affecting minority populations," he says. "Why hasn't the nonprofit world stood up and said, 'We need to make a change'? It's almost as though nonprofits don't want diversity among decision makers."

Deborah W. Foster, executive vice president for strategic alliances and inclusion at the United Way of America, in Alexandria, Va., doesn't agree with Mr. Brooks's assessment of how the United Way reflects the people it serves. "There's certainly more that can be done," she says. "But the larger issue is that we need to bring in more men — period." She notes that of more than 9,000 United Way employees, 78 percent are women: "It's important to understand that nonprofits of all kinds tend to be heavily female."

Mr. Brooks says that he regularly hears charity leaders complaining about the difficulty of attracting minority candidates — especially black men — to their organizations: "My question is always, 'Where are you looking?'" While the organizations may differ as far as their mission or scope, the answer he gets tends to be the same, says Mr. Brooks. "They'll tell you that they posted an ad in the black community newspaper, but you can't just post," he says. "It isn't enough."

He suggests that charities not only recruit from the country's most diverse campuses, but that they also establish relationships with the "divine nine" — historically black sororities and fraternities that place a strong emphasis on service. Assembling a more diverse pool of volunteers, says Mr. Brown, can only aid a charity's efforts to hire more black candidates.

Compensation Challenges

But even charities that do succeed in attracting black male candidates can quickly run up against a difficult reality. The salaries and benefits that most charities can afford to offer typically fall far short of what black male college graduates may expect to earn. "When I've got that piece of paper and I'm ready to be employed, I'm going to look for whatever set of opportunities are going to offer me the most security for my future," says Mr. Lindsey. "I'm not going to look for a job in social work if I can find one in business."

Cultural pressures often drive that calculation, says Patrick Corvington, a senior associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in Baltimore. "The definition of what success is for black men includes a compensation piece," he says. "You're expected to take care of your family, but that might include a lot of folks — aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews. What it comes down to is that you might have more responsibility than your white counterpart."

The YWCA's Mr. Grant says he can relate all too well to such cultural pressures. He can still recall his own mother's unhappiness when he announced his intention to pursue a nonprofit career.

"She wanted me to go where I could make the most money," he says, "which meant that I had two choices: law or medicine."

Today, says Mr. Grant, his mother has long since come around, but he wonders just how many other young black men have chosen the corporate route when they really wanted to work for a charity. "If it's been ingrained in you from the beginning that this is something you shouldn't do," he says, "it can be hard to move past that."

Alvin Sinckler did exactly what he was supposed to do. Mr. Sinckler, a native of the Crown Heights neighborhood in Brooklyn, N.Y., took a job in financial services after he graduated from college and ultimately ended up as an operations manager at the Bear Stearns

financial company, in the robust years before its recent collapse. Still, something was missing, says Mr. Sinckler: "I kept wondering, years from now would I be remembered for the work I did in accounts reconciliation?"

Inspired by his involvement in a church-run mentor program, in 2006 Mr. Sinckler began exploring the idea of working for a charity, something he had never before considered. With his financial background and interest in working with minority youth, it wasn't long before Mr. Sinckler had his first job offer: chief financial officer at Boys Town New York, an affiliate of the child-welfare organization.

He took the job, trading the big bonuses of his Bear Stearns days for something richer.

"When I talk to the kids we work with, they're hungry for knowledge about what it took for me, a young man who grew up in Crown Heights, to get where I am today," says Mr. Sinckler.

"Who knows? Maybe they'll grow up to lead a nonprofit someday," he muses. "That would be awesome."

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