

Leadership New England 2026

*Building a Diverse, Sustainable, and Equitable
Leadership Pipeline in the Region's Nonprofit Sector*



Introduction

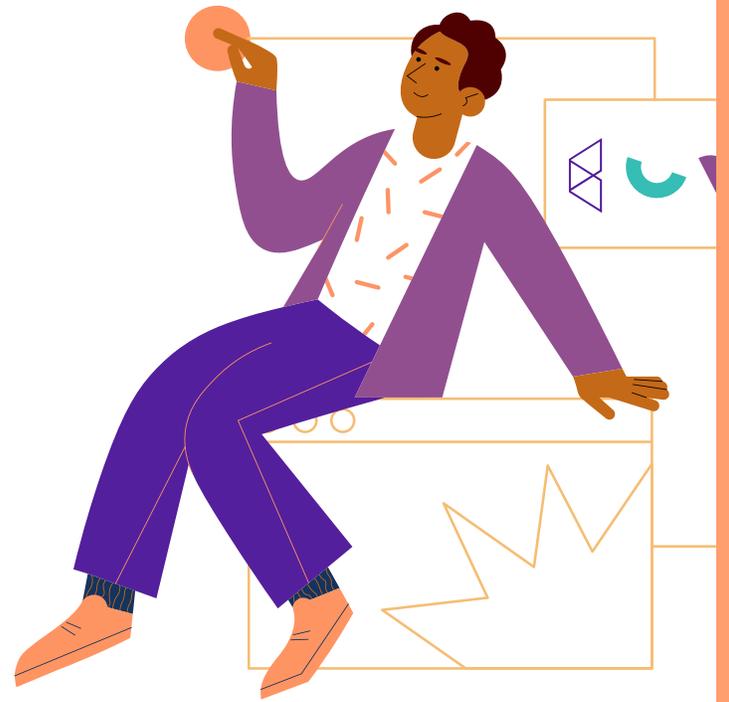
In the summer of 2025, Third Sector New England (TSNE) conducted an extensive literature review of the state of nonprofit leadership, surveyed the 2021-2024 alumni of TSNE's What's Next Leadership Transition Program, and invited nonprofit leaders from across New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont) to share their leadership experiences amidst a challenging socio-political backdrop. Through these focus groups of early-career leaders (1-5 years in leadership), mid-career leaders (5-10 years), and senior-career leaders (10+ years) our team set out to verify and build upon the findings of the literature review and better understand challenges and opportunities specific to New England leaders at different points in their career journeys. Our team identified core challenges facing nonprofit leaders today—especially amongst leaders of color—and surfaced key recommendations for building more resilient, equitable, diverse, and sustainable leadership pathways in our region's social sector.

What we heard was unambiguous—leaders are articulating a clear and consistent set of priorities. They continue to call for multi-year, unrestricted funding that fully covers the true cost of work; fair and transparent compensation practices; and a sustained investment in leadership development—particularly for leaders of color and those leading small and mid-size organizations. Leaders emphasize the critical role of building equity-centered and diverse boards that open doors through shared networks, steward thoughtful succession, and stand behind organizations through periods of external pressure. Above all, nonprofit leaders challenge funders to lead differently: to ease administrative burdens, affirm wellness and rest as essential to impact, and coordinate resources so that funding flows more equitably to under-resourced communities.

At-a-Glance

01

Identifying Barriers, Examining Solutions



What it Takes to Sustain Equitable Leadership in New England's Nonprofit Sector

In 2014, TSNE's original Leadership New England report identified several key barriers to nonprofit leadership in the region, including chronic under-investment in the sector, growing financial pressures and anxieties among nonprofit leaders, and an anticipated wave of leadership transitions.¹ More than a decade later, we find these challenges continue to persist in significant ways. At its core, chronic under-investment in the sector, especially for BIPOC-led and serving organizations,² remains the root cause of many downstream challenges, creating significant barriers to building sustainable leadership pathways in the sector.

Through our focus groups and research, leaders describe a range of barriers to accessing, enduring, and advancing in nonprofit leadership roles, with most falling into three broad categories: 1) systemic barriers, 2) institutional barriers, and 3) socio-political barriers. In particular, leaders of color describe experiencing these barriers more acutely, noting that racial bias, uneven support, and disproportionate emotional labor make these challenges

even harder to navigate. These barriers are compounded by long-standing systemic challenges: high staff turnover, burdensome funding requirements, under-investment in leadership development and well-being, sustained funding uncertainty, and maintaining effective partnerships.³ Focus group participants and research pointed to institutional barriers such as high rates of burnout amongst staff,^{4,5} limited capacity to execute large bodies of work, bias against leaders of color,^{3,6,7} managing varied expectations from board members, and an increasing need for leaders to take on new technical skills. Additionally, participants resoundingly pointed to the compounding impacts of racialized emotional labor—especially related to lack of follow through around diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) commitments—and the current political landscape as detrimental on their ability to effectively manage their roles and support their teams.⁸ Taken together, these conditions are pushing leaders out of the sector and shrinking leadership pathways, especially for leaders of color.

What We Heard

Overall, leaders described escalating pressure, isolation, and a workload that has grown significantly over the past few years.

“There’s not yet a culture built of... we can stay in this lane, and then let’s actually partner with people who are in the lanes next to us, to be able to more like horizontally support ourselves and our communities, rather than feeling like each of us is sitting on an island.”

— **MID-CAREER LEADER**

“It feels like I’m a wartime executive director right now where it’s just like bam, bam, bam, bam!”

— **MID-CAREER LEADER**

“The loss of jobs and programs, but [knowing] the reality of what it took to build some of these things over the last 10 or 20 years. These programs, infrastructure, relationships, and systems. You can’t just add water and bring it back, even if the situation changed.”

— **SENIOR-CAREER LEADER**

“I feel like starting January 20th [2025], I added like 10, 15, to 20% workload, depending on the week, to my job. Our work is focused on education, and within that, immigrant communities, youth of color, disabled youth, and so on. Just by being a nonprofit, by those being our mission areas, our substantive work is impacted. Now I just feel an obligation to be tracking things from a risk management side, and like, will we get our 501c3 status taken away if we say the wrong thing in our 990? Things I never thought I would be thinking about or assessing.”

— **MID-CAREER LEADER**

“Building consensus in a nonprofit is tricky enough in easy times; far trickier in difficult times. For example, we have a lot of immigrant families that we serve, and so we have some board members who feel very strongly that we should not try to get any press at all...for our programs, to not put a target on our back, and then some board members who think, ‘Well, it’s good to get press because you get money.’ And so, I think it’s highlighting the dispositional differences among our board and staff, and I think both of those arguments have merit, but it’s very hard to make a decision that has a hundred percent buy-in, because no one knows how it’s gonna go...”

— **MID-CAREER LEADER**



Recommendations from the Field

- Explore alliances and collaborations across partner organizations to respond collectively to political and economic upheaval, advocate for policy change, and share strategies for organizational resilience.
- Reexamine funding practices that create competition and scarcity; support collaborative models.
- Examine internal structures to support leadership development opportunities for staff, especially for leaders of color.
- Build structures for internal learning on issues of race and equity, ensuring that the organization is continuously reflecting on its own practices and work, and staff have competencies to operate with equity lens. White leaders, in particular, should ensure they are not placing the burden of organizational learning around race and equity on their colleagues of color.

02

Removing Barriers, Building Pathways

Strengthening Nonprofit Leadership Pathways in New England

To overcome the systemic, institutional, and socio-political barriers that so many nonprofit leaders face today, existing leaders must intentionally create equitable, well-resourced pathways for leadership development, support, and advancement.¹⁰ Our research and conversations surfaced a clear and consistent message: meaningful progress requires existing nonprofit leaders to actively share power and access to influential networks with aspiring leaders. This includes a deliberate commitment to building pathways for people to move towards leadership, especially for people of color.



What We Heard

Focus group participants described the importance—but also difficulty —of dedicating intentional time for coaching and developing aspiring leaders. Additionally, participants noted the importance of creating space to share power and networks, critically examining onboarding practices through an equity lens, and ensuring diverse representation across organizational leadership.

“I’ve encountered a lot of leaders who...safeguard their network, but especially with the board, they’re uncomfortable with sharing their board contacts with other staff, and safeguard them from others...”

— **MID-CAREER LEADER**

“Boards and organizations should be training themselves on what it means to onboard a BIPOC leader,” availing themselves of readings and data put out by nonprofit organizations that study leadership, DEI, and related topics.”

— **SENIOR-CAREER LEADER**

“You know, one of the things we don’t teach [is] how to network. We don’t necessarily teach how to engage across sector, geography, gender, pocketbook size, etc. And it’s really incumbent upon us as senior leaders to create those on ramps, to create opportunities for young folks to come in and be able to create those relationships and networks that they can leverage over time.”

— **SENIOR-CAREER LEADER**

Recommendations from the Field

- Democratize access to professional networks and funding networks—move beyond concentrating relationships at the executive and board level. Proactively build access to donors, funders, partners, and sector leaders for aspiring nonprofit leaders, in turn building organizational capacity and reducing gatekeeping.
- Make representation a clear and measurable priority. Establish explicit commitments and accountability mechanisms to ensure leadership and board membership reflect the identities and lived experiences of staff and communities served.
- Embed leadership development and succession planning into strategic planning processes. Plan for transitions and treat leadership continuity as a core organizational responsibility.
- Invest intentionally in leadership development and prioritize thoughtful onboarding—with attention to the unique challenges and power dynamics faced by leaders of color.²
- Align governance practices with stated equity values by regularly examining board policies, decision-making processes, and power structures to ensure they reinforce the organization’s commitments to equity.

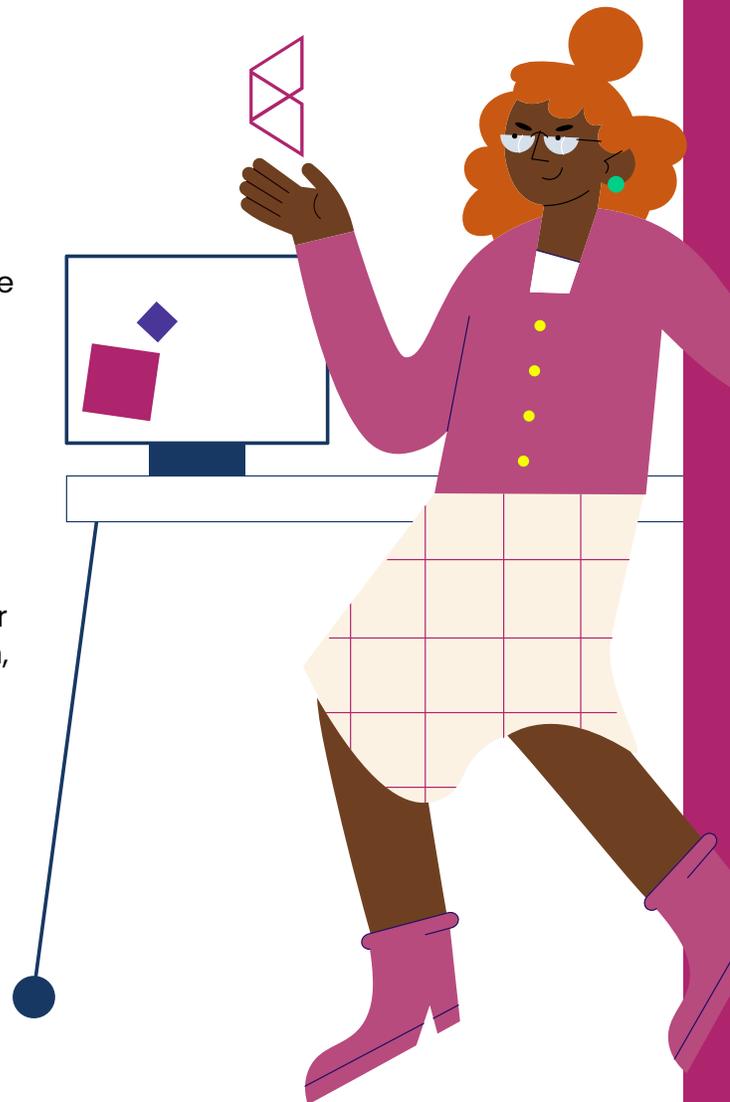
03

From Intent to Practice

Laying the Groundwork for an Equitable Workforce Culture

Organizational culture is the result of intention, not coincidence. It is purposefully shaped by leaders through their values, policies, and daily behaviors.⁶ When leaders recognize employee contributions, model healthy work habits, and embed DEIB into everyday practices, they lay the foundation for a thriving, supportive workplace.

Our research and focus group conversations underscore that an equitable workforce culture that prioritizes staff well-being is essential to building strong leadership pathways, especially among leaders of color.¹¹ Overwhelmingly, early career leaders, particularly leaders of color, raised concerns over psychological safety, clear processes for reporting harm without retaliation, and overall leadership strategies grounded in cultural identity. Leaders across career stages shared the importance of building a sense of belonging in the workplace, developing clear internal growth pathways, and modeling healthy boundaries.



What We Heard

Leaders described the importance of modeling rest and wellness, prioritizing conversations around leadership development, and setting clear growth pathways for staff.

“Each week with younger staff, we have time where we discuss leadership development. I don’t want to lose them. And then with my older staff, it’s a lot about how they downshift into retirement in a way that is with integrity and respect for the work that they’ve done for many, many years, and that that feels good to them.”

— **MID-CAREER LEADER**

“We also put this pressure on ourselves to be constantly fixing, doing, making things better...and so I think the onus is really on nonprofit leaders to model what it genuinely means to take care of yourself, and to take breaks. This has been so hard for me to do, because I acknowledge, that was not the culture that I was raised in. I just think our sector needs to stop doing more with less.”

— **SENIOR-CAREER LEADER**

“There is a funder in the area with an incredible new grant program for movement building organizations to engage in rest and healing in a really targeted way. If more funders were to look at investing in healing as a key element of productivity and, and rest as a key element of productivity, I think we could really achieve some incredible things.”

— **MID-CAREER LEADER**

“Make sure you have the infrastructure to create pathways for advancement within the organization, rather than just like some, amorphous mystery... Potentially you’ll get a raise, potentially you’ll get a ‘promotion,’ things like that. Who knows what that means? Having it be an equity minded structure allows people to actually advance internally.”

— **EARLY-CAREER LEADER**

“Creating a work-life balance strategy isn’t something that is a nice to have, but essential for retaining me and [other] new leaders.”

— **EARLY-CAREER LEADER**

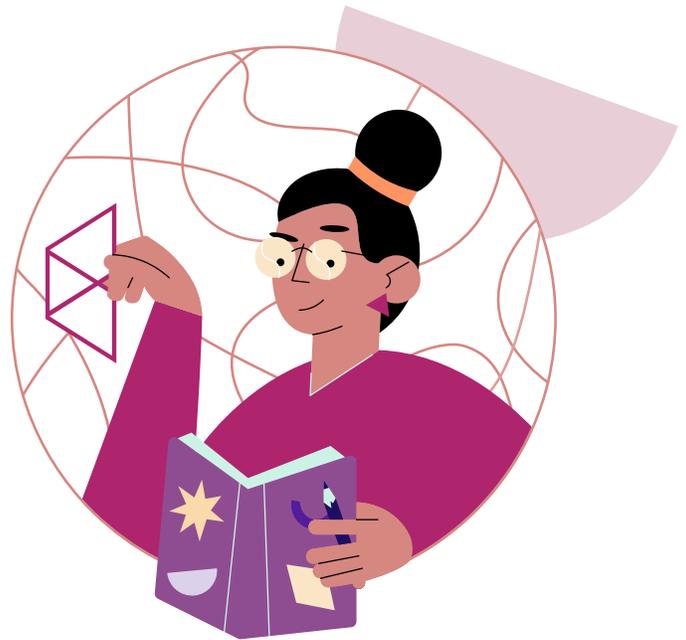
Recommendations from the Field

Develop a Holistic Wellness Strategy

- Treat psychological safety as core leadership competency. Cultivate psychological safety so staff can care for their mental health without stigma, and offer confidential supports such as counseling stipends, Employee Assistance Programs, mental health days, and access to culturally responsive, trauma-informed providers.
- Pilot options such as quarterly paid breaks, short-term sabbaticals, or organization-wide rest periods, scaled to budget and role type with explicit attention to frontline and seasonal staff, so rest is not limited to senior roles.
- Audit and revise hiring, promotion, evaluation, and grievance processes to ensure they do not reproduce harm or reinforce elements of white supremacy culture, such as fear of open conflict and perfectionism. These processes should be co-designed alongside a diverse team.

Model Healthy Leadership from the Top

- Practice and normalize rest and self-care: take visible breaks, set boundaries, and talk openly about why rest matters.
- Regularly review flexible work policies in conversation with staff and refine practices that support both well-being and organizational goals.



Embed Leadership Development into Organizational Culture

- Offer leadership development opportunities at all levels, from early-career to senior-career leaders. This includes training, cross-functional projects, and access to internal or external coaching. Make leadership development a budgeted, strategic priority.
- Develop and implement clear advancement frameworks that outline how staff can move into new roles, with criteria for raises and promotions, approximate timelines, and access to mentorship or coaching, designed with an explicit equity lens.

Design Tiered Leadership Development Pathways Across Career Stages

- **Early-Career:** Skills-building, external relations and visibility, structured mentorship
- **Mid-Career:** Stretch assignments, sponsorship strategies designed to increase leaders' visibility and networks, and cross-functional roles that prepare staff for executive and senior positions
- **Senior-Career:** Support for knowledge transfer, dignified transition, and role re-design to allow experienced leaders to downshift with respect and purpose

04

Funding for the Future

Philanthropy's Role in Building Diverse and Sustainable Leadership Pathways

Philanthropy can play a key role in supporting, sustaining, and developing a diverse leadership pipeline in the region's nonprofit sector. From shifting reporting requirements, to revising funding practices that create artificial scarcity, and offering networking and professional development opportunities—fundors can ensure that tomorrow's nonprofit workforce is supported, developed, and networked—especially at a time when the sector is under tremendous strain.^{10,12}

What We Heard

Leaders called for funders to practice trust-based philanthropy, invest in nonprofit leadership development, and re-examine funding practices that create competition and a false scarcity mindset.

"My experience is that funders have asked for lots of different types of reporting as different types of data, which have stretched capacity. But there are specific [funder-dictated] parameters in place that are expectations connected to that."

— MID-CAREER LEADER

"We're all being pitted against each other for limited resources."

— MID-CAREER LEADER

"Having more flexible funds allows [you] to have the resources to invest professionally and...allows you to create that kind of internal infrastructure that might match your values in a way that you know."

— EARLY-CAREER LEADER

Recommendations from the Field

- Adopt practices of trust-based philanthropy: Increase multi-year, unrestricted and general operating support for nonprofits so organizations can stabilize core operations, invest in infrastructure, and plan for leadership succession and transition.¹²
- Invest in leadership development programs, peer-learning opportunities, networking, mentorship, and coaching—prioritizing leaders of color and those in small and mid-sized organizations facing complex transitions and evolving community needs.
- Convene nonprofit leaders and funders to build shared analysis, reduce power imbalances, and shape responses grounded in community experience.
- Reexamine funding practices that create competition and scarcity, support collaborative models such as shared initiatives and pooled funds.⁵
- Engage in collective action with peer funders by coordinating shared priorities, and mapping resource concentration and gaps. Commit to addressing gaps across the nonprofit sector.
- Invest in coalition-building and regional alliances to enable leaders to respond collectively to political and economic upheaval, advocate for policy change, and share strategies for organizational resilience.
- Support nonprofit leaders in their work to implement equitable compensation strategies and treat wellness supports and rest as legitimate, fundable infrastructure for organizations.¹





Conclusion

Our surveys and focus group conversations with New England nonprofit leaders echo national research and public dialogue on the barriers leaders face, surfacing a picture of an ecosystem where commitment and creativity remain strong, yet burnout,^{3,5} financial fragility, and political demands are pervasive. Nearly a decade after our original Leadership New England report, the leadership challenges it identified continue to persist, compounded by new demands. Our focus group participants emphasized that this new context makes nonprofit leadership even more challenging today. Sustainable leadership in this context entails more than individual resilience and self-care—it requires reshaping the systems and policies that support our region’s vital social sector. Nonprofit leaders and funders must work in partnership to build stronger pathways for our future leaders—by centering leaders of color, shifting dollars and decision-making, building cultures of well-being, and equitably resourcing the infrastructure that holds the sector together. In partnership, we can protect what we have built, repair and remediate existing harm, and create opportunity for the next generation of leaders to flourish.

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