



A Guide to Shared Power in Nonprofit Organizations

companion to the article [The Power of Shared Power: Co-Directing Nonprofits Through Compassion](#)

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Justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion are more than metrics. Use the following checklist to stimulate discussion and change.

You are encouraged to revisit each of these items regularly.

Conduct an internal equity audit as an ongoing commitment.

Discover which historically marginalized identities are not present in the room, then intentionally seek to add people to the board, as a staff person/contractor, volunteers, or as a partner. Think in terms of the scope that pertains to your organization including, but not limited to, age, disability, ethnicity, family status, gender, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation, and veteran status.

Ask yourself some questions:

1. Which communities does your organization serve?
2. How much *power* do communities you serve have in the work you're doing?
3. Can your organization partner with or hire from within communities? Can you add community members to the board?

Don't answer these questions too quickly. Painfully take the time to flesh out responses so that the organization can be congruent with your mission and values.

Shared power fearlessly asks for who is not in the room and invites them to earn an income and to have power and influence within the organization. Shared power seeks to be equitable, *not just within the organization*, but with all stakeholders the organization impacts.

Actively explore who is having to compromise aspects of their identities to fit into your organization.

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Perhaps from the previous discussion, you've learned the communities you serve work together with the nonprofit—as board members, employees, or partners. Here are some questions to ask:

1. Are partners and employees choosing their words carefully, walking on eggshells, or prioritizing *your* sensibilities over *their* comfort?
2. No? Are you sure?

Liberate them from these constraints to celebrate their full contributions to the organization. Have honest discussions—with yourself before anyone else—to evaluate your receptivity to new suggestions that help historically marginalized people feel comfortable to be themselves. Work with your partners to create an environment conducive to shared power.

Have multiple conversations with all the stakeholders about the interpretation of the word *compassion* for different demographics.

What does *walking on eggshells* look like? How do you know it's happening?

People who love to do good are attracted to the idea of compassion. We associate compassion mostly with peaceful, spiritual, and loving exchanges. However, at Compassionate Atlanta, our own nonprofit, we had to acknowledge that varying interpretations of this value did not convey safety to some Black people.

Could manifestations of your compassion be interpreted as requests to deflate, or tone down, the urgency of social justice requests that impact Black lives? Are some of your partners and employees afraid to speak up because of how they will be perceived when they disagree with a well-intention (but harmful) idea?

You might discover that the organization might be promoting a concept of compassion that may not be perceived as inclusive of all people. Shared power looks like accepting new perspectives that an organization may not have considered previously.

Craft and adopt a diversity statement to sustain a vision of equity for the organization with the help of the board.

When you create a diversity statement, focus on what belonging in community looks and feels like, rather than just focusing on diversity metrics. This may take time.

Our own living assertion is publicly available on the [organization's website](#). Everyone in the organization is aware that it will be modified as the organization deepens its inclusive identity.

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Shared power looks like publishing a diversity statement and *asking* to be held accountable to it. Actively measure whether your organization's initiatives, activities, and culture support this statement.

Start each monthly board meeting with an anti-racism learning activity or training that creates vulnerability and shared experiences among the attendees.

Through this exercise, the usual hierarchy of board versus staff becomes flattened. Everyone then sees each other as peers and whole humans. For example, when there is disagreement, each perspective has an opportunity to be heard and validated.

Shared power looks like intentionally breaking down hierarchies without jeopardizing the legal structure and responsibilities of the organization.