

Building Towards an Inclusive Organizational Culture:

*Insights and Lessons Learned from
YES Nature to Neighborhoods*

**The
Lawrence**
Hall of
Science

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Our first brief, Examining Equitable and Inclusive Organizations in Environmental Education: Perspectives from the Field (Romero, Foreman, Strang, Rodriguez, Payan, and Moore Bailey, 2019), drew our attention to an important consideration: that “many equity, inclusion, and diversity initiatives are primarily focused on external-facing programs; that is, organizations are more likely to be thinking about equity, inclusion, and diversity in regard to learning experiences for learners, as opposed to the organizational work environment” (p. 3). The lack of focus on the organizational work environment marginalizes people of color in the field.

The second brief in this series, Intentional Hiring and Recruitment through the Lens of Equity and Inclusion: Insights and Lessons Learned from Crissy Field Center, Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy (Romero, Foreman, Strang, Maybury, Pepito, & Rocca, 2019), highlighted the organizational journey toward mitigating unconscious bias in their recruitment and hiring practices, as a means towards cultivating a workforce that reflects the youth they serve and their organization-wide core values of equity and inclusion.

YES Nature to Neighborhoods is an example of an organization that has been intentionally on a journey to build an inclusive organizational culture. Recognizing this process, we invited Blanca Hernández, YES Program Director, to share this story. The Lawrence Hall of Science offers gratitude to Blanca and the entire YES organization for their time, thoughtfulness, transparency, willingness to share, and critical perspectives throughout the writing of this brief. As well, we thank Laura Rodriguez, Director of Programs at Youth Outside, for her review, advice, and support of this document.

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INTRODUCTION

What we think of today as the environmental education field has historically lacked racial diversity in its workforce (Taylor, 2014; Johnson, 2019). More recently, organizations have taken great efforts towards change by focusing on increasing racial diversity through recruitment and selection procedures (Romero, et al., 2019). Yet we continue to see evidence that organizations are not thinking beyond recruitment to consider how they enact practices and policies that reify the marginalization and oppression of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) within organizations (Johnson, 2019; Romero, et al., 2019). This contributes to a work culture and experience wherein BIPOC are more likely to leave their jobs, thus inhibiting efforts towards achieving greater, lasting diversity within organizations and across leadership positions (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2017; Goulden, Mason & Frasch, 2011; Johnson, 2019). This brief highlights YES Nature to Neighborhood's reflective journey in transforming their organizational culture to intentionally tend to the ways their systems and practices can foster the promotion and retention of BIPOC in the organization.

Context and Background

Environmental education, as it exists in the U.S. today, has been shaped and tailored by and for white people. The field-at-large has systematically enacted policies and practices that displace, marginalize, oppress and exclude Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (Brune, 2020; Purdy, 2015). This historical context is critical to fully understand who is seen, valued, and heard within the environmental education (EE) community. In a 2014 study, Snow & Romero found that nearly all EE organizational leaders self-identified as white. Additionally, research has continued to amplify a narrative that BIPOC experience racism, microaggressions, tokenization, and ostracization within organizations (Romero, et al., 2019; Johnson, 2019). As a field, EE continues to advocate for broadening participation, and these efforts include recognition that the field has failed BIPOC. And yet, if organizations do not expand equity and inclusion initiatives beyond diversifying the workforce to consider how to transform the work environment, then BIPOC will continue to be pushed out of the field.

Scholarship supports a common experience of exclusion,

when organizations focus exclusively on hiring as a tool for increasing diversity. For example, "The 'Problem' Woman of Colour in the Workplace" illustrates the trajectory too familiar to BIPOC, tracing the ways that racism manifests in the work environment, from the moment a Woman of Color enters an organization and throughout her experience, resulting in her departure (Page, 2018). Women of Color must navigate organizational systems grounded in white supremacy and a white dominant culture that perpetuates experiences of tokenism, microaggressions, and marginalization. The current EE field is no exception; we see that BIPOC carry an added burden of navigating institutions embedded with systemic racism and white supremacy.

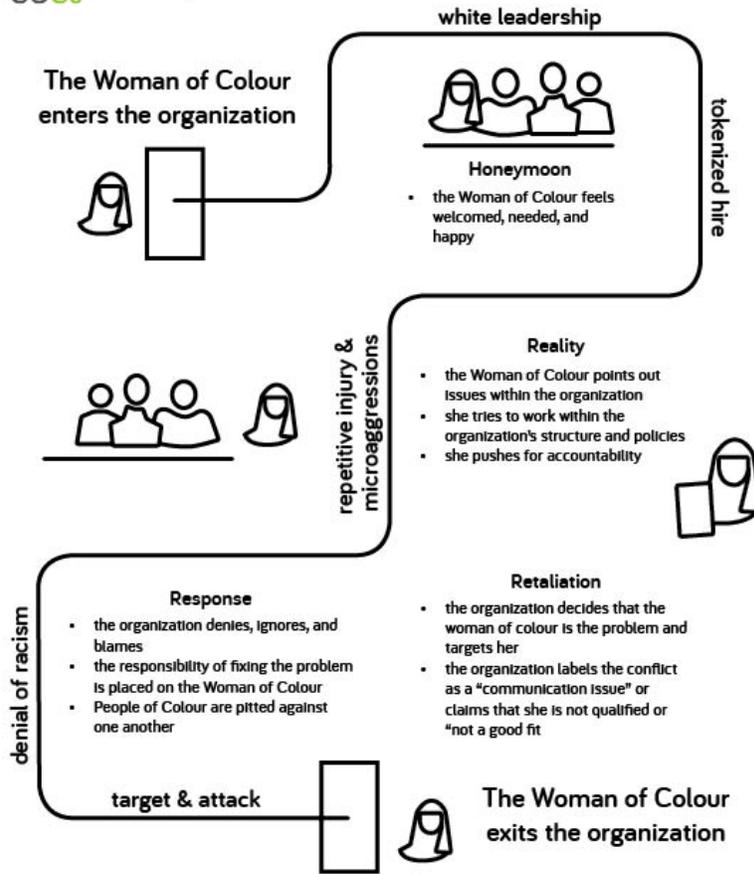
"I feel like, for me, I've only been doing environmental education for two years and I'm over it, I don't want to do it anymore... I feel like my job would have been ideal if I didn't feel so marginalized in the space. I feel like I have two jobs: I feel like I have to go do my job and also exist in a really really white space... I'm the only black male on staff... I've been a professional for a long time, [and then] I started working in environmental education and it is the most racist space I've ever been in my life. Oh my gosh, it's just like so much work to be done. Racist burnout is real."

-Educator of Color as cited in Romero, et al. 2019

Of critical note for program leaders are the "Response" and "Retaliation" steps: despite these very real experiences, organizations often ignore or even deny the reports their BIPOC employees share; when BIPOC experience retaliation, they are forced to exit the organization. Page's work focuses on Women of Color, who experience additional burdens as a result of their intersectional identities, yet all people with marginalized identities experience elements of this pattern when working within a white dominant work



The “Problem” Woman of Colour in the Workplace



Adapted from “The Chronicle of the Problem Woman of Color in a Non-Profit” by the Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence
www.coco-net.org

Figure 1: From “The “problem” woman of colour in nonprofit organizations” by K. Page , 2018 (<https://coco-net.org/problem-woman-colour-nonprofit-organizations/>). Copyright 2018 by The Centre for Community Organizations. Reprinted with permission.

culture. Organizations lose the opportunity to evolve towards equity when they minimize the experiences of BIPOC employees and fail to critically examine systems that contribute to exclusive and marginalizing work environments.

Scholarship also supports best practices organizations can undertake to change institutional culture. *Leaking Talent: How People of Color are Pushed Out of Environmental Organizations*, (Johnson, 2019) highlights that an organization’s top-level leadership, and how the organization, as a whole, values and practices equity, inclusion, and diversity, influence BIPOC’s intent to stay with an organization. And yet, when we situate Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity (EID) work in the EE field, we find that while organizations think EID is a priority (Romero, et al., 2019), initiatives continue to be white-led and limited

to focus on diversity, as opposed to engaging in critical internal reflection on how the organization reinforces and enacts policies grounded in white supremacy at the expense of equity and inclusion. Furthermore, employee perceptions of the fairness in professional development, evaluation, and promotion practices are also contributing factors that influence their intent to stay (Johnson, 2019). BIPOC are more likely to think about leaving their organization when they perceive unfair treatment coupled with the lack of access to professional development and promotions. Collectively, this points to the utmost importance of EE leaders examining how to transform organizational policies and practices that truly embody and advance equity and inclusion. In addition, leaders must recognize that such transformation can only take place when there is an institutional commitment to this long journey, when white leadership and staff are willing to engage

in critical self-reflection and difficult conversations, and the organization enacts system-level changes. In summary: BIPOC stay and thrive in organizations that practice a holistic approach to EID work, and this is why focusing only on diversity through recruitment will never sustain the field.

The Journey of YES Nature to Neighborhoods

YES Nature to Neighborhoods (YES), is a place-based organization in Richmond, California that over our 20-year history has increased outdoor access for youth, adults, and families who have historically been excluded from the outdoors. YES is rooted in the city of Richmond, which occupies the ancestral lands of many Ohlone bands, including the Muwekma Ohlone, Confederated Villages of Lisjan, and others. For the past 100 years, Richmond has been an industrial town, with one of the most prominent features being the Chevron Richmond Refinery, which contributes to air pollution and a high incidence of childhood asthma (Richmond Health Survey Report Communities for a Better Environment, 2009). Richmond's rich history includes its prominent role during World War II, where 747 victory ships were built at a rate of one ship per day; Richmond is home to Rosie the Riveter National Park. In the 1960s-1990s, redlining, divestment, and the drug epidemic brought injustices and hardships to the Richmond community, as well as other Communities of Color throughout the United States. Today, in a community that is home to over 100,000 people, the majority of whom are Latinx (42%) and African American (20%) (<https://datausa.io/profile/geo/richmond-ca/>), we continue to see systems and institutions systematically marginalize, oppress, and exclude BIPOC.

We call on this history to illustrate the context in which

YES exists and to recognize the experiences and trauma that the community has and continues to experience. In addition, we recognize the system in which we are a part — one that has been shaped by white supremacy, and like many organizations, can perpetuate the marginalization and exclusion of BIPOC. Thus, as an organization that centers relationship-building, connection, and belonging, it is imperative that we critically reflect on how to cultivate an organizational culture and practices that disrupt the status quo. At YES, we have been working to build a culture that mitigates these challenges by developing organization-wide core values and practices centered on equity, inclusion, and diversity to attract, hire, cultivate, retain, and promote BIPOC. The work we have done up to this point to build our culture hasn't always been easy, and there have been many challenges and mistakes along the way. This work requires that everyone on the YES team, including its board, make a personal commitment to racial equity, to have the willingness to explore deep self-reflection, to be uncomfortable, to learn, to grow, and, most importantly, to be brave. This journey and critical consciousness enable us to cultivate an organization that sees, values, and amplifies the voices and experiences of our team and Communities of Color.

In the remaining brief, we highlight our journey, naming the strategies and experiences that support us in advancing equity and inclusion within our work environment and also enable us to better engage the participants and partners with whom we work through a lens that is trauma- and history-informed, grounded in racial-, social-, and environmental justice. Here, we share our story, highlighting the strategies and approaches towards building an inclusive organizational culture.

SHARED COMMITMENT: UNPACKING POWER AND PRIVILEGE TOWARDS A COMMITMENT TO DISRUPTING THE STATUS QUO

Understanding Power and Privilege

We began our work by building shared understandings through organization-wide professional learning. We believe this work cannot be done unless everyone in the organization makes a personal commitment. Yet, engaging in this personal yet public journey with

peers and colleagues can feel overwhelming, which can deter people from wanting to engage, especially if individuals don't have shared language, vocabulary, and context as to why we must address these issues. In an effort to provide tools for the YES team so that everyone could participate in these conversations fully and authentically, and to establish common language,

YES consulted with Darlene A. Hall, Ph.D., Principal Owner at Intersections Consulting.¹

Dr. Hall led four, day-long Power and Privilege trainings at YES between 2018 and 2019. Along with teaching the foundation of power and privilege, she provided tools to help the YES team reflect on their defenses and to increase their awareness around verbal and non-verbal communication, especially when engaging in these topics. Through this process, the team came to the consensus that engaging in ongoing critical dialogue about equity and inclusion was imperative to truly embody and carry out work that is aligned to our mission. As a direct result of our learning, we formed a YES Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity (EID) committee immediately after these training sessions.

Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity (EID) Committee Work

The EID committee, consisting of four team members, was charged with continuing to interrogate the ways in which we were addressing equity and inclusion and identifying growth areas related to these topics. At the onset, the committee believed it was important to give voice to staff and their experiences to inform the focus of the organization's efforts. The committee developed an anonymous survey, adapted from the [Strategic Planning for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity toolkit](#) from UC Berkeley's Division of Equity and Inclusion, sent to all employees. Survey results revealed that while the organization had some systems in place and was actively working towards addressing EID issues, findings highlighted a few blind spots and key areas of growth:

“YES will continue to establish itself as a leader in providing sustained access to those who have historically been excluded from the outdoors. We will also lead by ensuring the activities our staff and volunteers provide are grounded in cultural relevance and a historical understanding of how systems of power and privilege have shaped our world and can be undone.”

*- Eric Aaholm, YES Executive Director.
(YES eNewsletter, 2019)*

1. Internal and external communication and mission and vision statements must include explicit and clear goals and values related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
2. Leadership and management positions must proportionally represent historically underrepresented groups.
3. Establish shared values and commitments of equity and inclusion among existing and new board members.
4. Make events and activities more physically accessible to staff and participants with disabilities.

This insight motivated the YES team to address these areas during the drafting of the 2020-24 YES Strategic

YES MISSION STATEMENT

In partnership with Nature, YES nurtures leaders who champion the wellbeing of our community.

We do this by:

- *Cultivating leadership among Richmond youth, adults, and whole families through year-round training, strong mentorship, and profound experiences in nature.*
- *Reclaiming our connection to the earth and embracing the proven power of nature to heal, inspire awe, and develop empowered and compassionate leaders.*
- *Increasing access and breaking down barriers for those historically excluded from the outdoors and collaborating at the forefront of the movement to increase equity and inclusivity in the outdoors.*
- *Creating brave spaces that foster cross-cultural relationships, cultivate resilience in our community, and unite people in common cause.*

¹ Intersections Consulting provides consultation, training, coaching, technical assistance, and facilitation in a wide range of topics such as mental health, organizational development/capacity building, leadership and youth development, power/privilege, and diversity.

YES EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND DIVERSITY STATEMENT

YES celebrates the multiple benefits that spending time in nature offers for all human beings. We also acknowledge there are harmful narratives and generalizations regarding Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in the outdoors that have largely been promoted and perpetuated by white, dominant culture in the United States. This has led to an under-representation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in many local, regional, and national parks both as park users and as professionals within their workforce.

YES seeks to remove the barriers that impede access for youth and families of color, as well as those who identify with other non-dominant backgrounds, so they can connect to nature to access its benefits AND serve as leaders in the outdoors. Our vision, and the actions we have taken, have resulted in YES leading and contributing to the

movement to increase equity, inclusion, and diversity (EID) in the outdoor and environmental education fields. Our role as a leader begins inside our own organization where the YES team participates in regular training focused on the inequities created by power and privilege, delivers EID training to partner organizations, and embeds EID values into hiring, program, and fundraising practices.

We are proud of the EID practices we have undertaken and instituted to attract, hire, cultivate, retain, and promote a workforce that is reflective of the community with whom we engage. At the same time, we commit ourselves to furthering our EID practices, with a particular focus on a set of goals and key action items identified in our strategic plan, and which we invite you to explore further on our website.

Plan. During this process, the YES team and board agreed to expand its mission statement to be more explicit of its EID goals, as well as to write an explicit statement on EID.

In addition, the YES Board worked on setting a metric to diversify its membership. Recognizing the lack of representation of BIPOC on organizational boards, including its own, the YES board committed to recruit and nominate future candidates so that by the end of 2020, at least 50% of the YES Board will be BIPOC who are supported to take on leadership positions during their tenure. YES board members also participate in Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity trainings and roundtables that examine racial equity and white dominant culture at both the individual and institutional levels.

YES aims to be culturally relevant to the community it engages, and intends to build a board that will more deeply reflect the backgrounds of the Richmond community and YES team, the majority of whom are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

Of course, much of this is still a work in progress.

Finally, to keep track of the various moving pieces, the EID committee adapted the framework of Youth

Outside's *Guide to Cultural Relevancy*² to analyze and improve on 1) Organizational Culture, 2) Fundraising Practices, 3) Program Delivery and 4) Team Development. This framework informs and guides our ongoing work.

Articulating Shared Organizational Values

As we previously described above (see "*Understanding Power and Privilege*"), one of the most critical tools in advancing equity and inclusion is for teams to develop a shared language of what equity means and identify associated values. YES's Organizational Values, first drafted in 2013, are the foundational beliefs that guide institutional decisions and policies. Our values are: Inclusion, Integrity, Intentionality, Holistic Approach and Effective Communication. In 2019, as part of the work with the EID committee, we added *Equity* and *Diversity* to the set.

During YES team retreats, staff often revisit and update how we operationalize our organizational values. During the 2019 retreat, the EID committee convened staff to explore how Equity and Diversity showed up in the different areas of our work, exploring how we were already practicing (status quo) or how we aimed to practice (aspirational) these two values.

Using the organizational values, the EID committee

² Youth Outside, 2015 https://youthoutside.org/wp-content/uploads/general-upload/Guide-to-Cultural-Relevancy_Youth-Outside-2015-2016.pdf

then facilitated a series of conversations with YES team members to explore and name how white supremacy practices and dominant culture narratives show up in the organization. These conversations contributed to our critical reflection of how we want to see the organization move forward and continues to shape our work towards identifying strategies to dismantle white supremacy and dominant culture narratives in our work environment. Below, we share our EID values.

Building Stamina Through Challenging Times

This journey does not end with establishing shared values. As organizations and contexts shift, we must continue to commit to engaging in critical conversations. When the COVID-19 shelter-in-place

occurred, and as the YES team went into emergency response mode to support Richmond youth and families, we needed to create group agreements from which we would start our now-virtual meetings in an effort to stay present and to remind ourselves of our EID work and values. The EID committee assigned the team to read *Pushing Back Against Habits of White Supremacy During a Crisis* (Smith, 2020) as a way to provide ourselves critical feedback about whether or not we were reverting to white supremacy practices.

In addition, white-identifying team members read *White Fragility* (Diangelo, 2018), and the whole team read an array of articles, resources, and books such as *How to Be an Anti-Racist* (Kendi, 2019). Staff of Color listened to podcasts such as Code Switch, 1619, Irresistible, Momentum, etc., and participated in

INCLUSION

We exercise this fundamental value by creating a welcoming and collaborative environment where an emphasis on equity, diversity, cultural relevance, and mutual respect allows everyone to have a voice in the shared outcome.

We practice inclusion by:

- Taking the time to welcome people and say “hello” when they come into our office, and interact with them in a genuine way.
- Being open; not stereotyping or making assumptions about others.
- Modeling by sharing our pronouns to encourage others to self-identify.
- Translating all materials into English and Spanish so that participants can have ownership in the work.
- Designing culturally relevant programming with input from community and diverse stakeholders to strengthen cross-cultural and cross-generational relationships.
- Working with community partners on pressing racial, social, and environmental justice issues, knowing our collective impact is both defined and strengthened when we work together.
- Making sure financial and transportation barriers are removed so that participants can access the programs we offer.
- Valuing the process as much as we do the outcome.

EQUITY

We exercise this fundamental value by connecting individuals to opportunity, networks, resources and supports based on where they are and where they want to go in order to reach their full potential.

We practice equity by:

- Recognizing that disparities exist.
- Being willing to commit the time needed to reduce disparities within the realm of the services we provide.
- Getting to the root of what each individual (participant, staff, volunteer, etc.) person needs to succeed based on where they are and where they want to go.
- Understanding that because individuals have unique needs, we value the time taken to uncover root causes in order to provide the appropriate resources needed for each individual to access our and/or partner organizations’ programs and services.
- Meeting our individuals with an open mind, knowing their needs are specific to their life situation and doing what we can to provide individualized support to help them reach their potential within the mission and context of our organizational capacity.

DIVERSITY

We exercise this fundamental value by appreciating individuals in their full, complex, multi-dimensional, and beautiful selves, and by providing space for them to self-express how they want to identify.

We practice diversity by:

- Creating job descriptions that speak to multiple audiences in an effort to invite a variety of candidates into our organization and distributing these job descriptions in the Richmond community, other intentional communities and groups, and beyond our collective networks.
- Hiring people who represent the diverse lived experiences of the community. Valuing people's work experience and focusing on their strengths vs. focusing on their educational attainment.
- Being an organization that is committed to learning and adapting to the changing needs of the community. Showing up in different spaces and supporting collaborative work that will contribute to racial, social, and environmental justice movements.
- Revising outreach and engagement practices to ensure that we are engaging the diversity of the community.
- Identifying, finding, and securing funding, salary compensation, professional development, and resources of time in order to cultivate a diverse team and engage a diverse community.
- Diversifying revenue sources — including foundation, government, individual donors, etc. — and groups — individuals, volunteers, the business community, in-kind supporters, etc. — for the health of the organization and in fundraising efforts.
- Engaging the YES board and team in a wide variety of organizational activities and with a consensus-driven approach for processes such as strategic planning, communications plan messaging, decision-making on revenue sources, etc.
- Engaging the variety of experiences, identities, and cultures that bring in multiple perspectives to gather input and feedback before finalizing new programs, written communications, fundraising plans, etc.
- Engaging with diverse partnerships who are aligned with our mission, vision, and values and who bring unique skills and perspectives that enhance our work.
- Being empowered to communicate with partners when challenges arise that hinder equity, inclusion, and diversity.
- Contributing to the larger goal of diversifying and changing the face of the outdoor and the environmental field and movement.

PGM ONE's³ bi-monthly affinity group sessions.

In late June and early July 2020, the team embarked on three, three-and-a-half-hour-long, non-violent communication workshops led by Roxy Manning and Oren Jay Sofer. The training provided tools to observe our interactions at an external, internal,

and systemic level. The team practiced addressing microaggressions using these tools, and we were inspired to think about how we could consistently hold space and operationalize our practices to process microaggressions and provide feedback to one another in a safe and trusting way.

CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP IN ALL INDIVIDUALS

Strengths-Based and Shared Leadership

The fabric of YES's organizational culture is further fortified by using strengths-based and shared leadership practices. YES's supervision approach promotes individuals to become more aware of

their personal strengths and create awareness of the strengths of others to enhance professional relationships, as well as to create awareness of team strengths to achieve greater success. Research suggests that when we focus on people's shortcomings,

³ PGM ONE envisions a world that centers, values, uplifts, and empowers those who are most impacted by environmental harm and climate change—and in particular black, indigenous, and people of color/of the global majority—to lead the way toward environmental justice and collective liberation. <https://www.pgmone.org/about>

employee disengagement and dissatisfaction increases and can contribute to a negative work environment across the organization (Rath, 2007). At YES, we celebrate individuals' strengths and the contributions that they bring to the organization. We have found that this approach motivates our team to have a positive outlook on their work, which in turn increases their productivity. This approach also cultivates positive relationships across the organization and encourages people to work collaboratively across different departments. YES creates time during the annual staff retreat, during board and staff gatherings, and during team building activities and Sunshine Days (see *"Self-Care as a Radical Act"*) for the YES team to get to know one another at a personal level.

Practicing shared leadership at YES means creating space and opportunity for everyone to lead and for individuals to be recognized for their leadership. This practice moves away from the traditional model of focusing on a single person to lead while others follow (Lopes, 2018). We have found that this practice helps build the confidence level of our team members thereby empowering them to contribute their voice and perspectives during critical organization-wide decision making junctures. Sharing in decision-making distributes power and allows for everyone's point of view to be heard and to influence the ultimate outcome. During these decision-making processes we use group agreements that name the differences in power and privilege amongst YES team members that include norms on how to interact with one another and share space, creating a space for the YES team to contribute and engage in healthy conversations and challenges together.

Here are other examples, as defined during our 2019 staff retreat that illustrate what shared leadership at YES means:

- Carrying the "weight" together
- Stepping in for each other in different spaces and aspects of the work
- Empowering youth, volunteers, trip leaders, and everyone who is part of the YES team to lead program components
- Consulting with other team members who have skills and resources that others may not have

- Cultivating and creating a safe place to practice leadership
- Practicing humility and moving back

Building Capacity to Enact Community-Driven Work

In line with YES's intentional organizational culture, new hires go through rigorous onboarding to learn about the context of our work. This is an intentional effort to build staff capacity to authentically participate in all aspects of the organization and to effectively design and facilitate culturally-relevant programming. Through this process, we center the ways in which systemic oppression, the history of economic divestment, and environmental and health injustices stand in the way of residents with whom we engage and who inform our approach. We highlight these perspectives to acknowledge non-dominant narratives, to value the life experiences of Communities of Color, and as a means towards engaging in work that is asset-based and designed to strengthen participants' leadership.

YES team members learn during the onboarding process that YES's work is grounded in the history and context that have shaped Richmond — a vibrant, progressive, and diverse community whose strengths lie in the power and voice of residents to shape policies, decisions, and institutions to be more equitable and inclusive. In addition, new team members learn about the role our programs play in prevention, and intervention towards the disruption of the school-to-prison pipeline. For example, Richmond's African-American and Latinx communities are disproportionately impacted by the "war on drugs:" prison admissions increased by 486% between 1970-2000 in Contra Costa County, and nation-wide drug arrests for African-Americans rose at three times the rates for Whites from 1990-2003 (Quintero, 2018). Learning about the systemic oppression, economic divestment, environmental and health injustices, and mass incarceration position staff to have a greater awareness of the significant trauma and other mental health struggles that exist in Communities of Color.

The onboarding process also includes the topic of Adverse Childhood Experiences and how these are exacerbated by systemic racism and policies that

impact Communities of Color. New hires learn about YES's trauma-informed healing practices: they learn how to become more emotionally aware of themselves and others, to identify the vulnerabilities or triggers of trauma, and to provide programs in ways that avoid re-traumatization. Lastly, they learn about youth development best practices that draw on a substantial body of research about young people's developmental needs and the role that environment plays in young people's lives as they move through childhood and toward adulthood.

Transformative and Ongoing Professional Development

YES demonstrates to team members that they are valued by investing in each person's professional and leadership development. YES team members are required to participate in transformative and ongoing professional and leadership development which is identified during their annual performance review and which they write into their work plans. The organization supports professional development by allocating an equal amount for each individual in its annual budget.

To date, the YES team has participated in an array of professional development trainings, which vary in length from one day to two years. Training topics often range from youth development, trauma-informed best practices, wilderness skills, naturalist education, and leadership development. Many of these professional development opportunities have been impactful not only to the individual, but also, have helped shape YES's organizational culture to be more inclusive and equitable.

Youth Outside's Rising Leaders Fellowship & Grantee Cohort Series: Some of the most cohesive and transformative professional development in which the YES team has been immersed is with Youth Outside's

“When I started working at YES, I fell in love with the culture. I gained a lot of professional development and started cultivating many friendships along the way. At YES, I felt empowered and able to affect change along with the residents I have grown to love in Richmond.”

- YES Staff

capacity building and cultural relevancy trainings. Youth Outside, a long-time YES funder and partner, engages its grantees in annual learning cohorts. Through these cohorts, YES team members have explored the historical context as to why there is a lack of representation in the outdoor and environmental field, and the strategies needed to make our field more equitable, inclusive, and diverse.

Recently-employed YES program team members are encouraged to apply to Youth Outside's 10-month Rising Leaders Fellowship cohort, a program that builds professional capacity for entry-to mid-level leaders within outdoor organizations. Three YES coordinators have participated in this program since its inception, and YES's newest program team member is currently participating in the 2020 cohort. Leadership trainings like the Rising Leaders Fellowship not only support the personal and professional development of individuals, but also create an affinity space for BIPOC staff from across the field to connect — something that can have a great impact on their experiences in a field that is grounded in whiteness. Further, we also have found that Staff of Color then feel more strongly positioned to challenge the status quo for the betterment of the organization and the work we do with the Richmond community.

SYSTEMS, POLICIES, AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Another aspect of disrupting white supremacy within the organizational culture involves a critical examination of the organizational systems, policies, and structures that inform YES's hiring practices and staff experiences, such as compensation, self-care, and sabbatical.

Hiring Practices

YES aims to hire individuals who represent the diverse lived experiences of the community. At the time of this writing, YES has a team of eight members. Five out of the eight team members identify as Latinx, one

as Asian, one as African American and one as white. Five out of the eight staff members identify as female. Two of the three department leads identify as a Person of Color. The current demographics of staff is a result of an intentional process wherein YES reflected on its hiring practices. A few factors pushed YES towards this path. First, Green 2.0 released a report illustrating the severe underrepresentation of People of Color in the environmental workforce (Taylor, 2014). Further, Taylor notes that the percentage of People of Color on the boards or general staff of environmental organizations does not exceed 16%, and that this percentage is concentrated in line staff versus in lead roles. Second, as a Youth Outside grantee, YES received additional resources (e.g. Guide to Cultural Relevancy) and recommendations. We, along with other participating organizations, were held accountable by Youth Outside's multi-year Grantee Cohort Training Series to adopt the recommendations into our practices and grow the diversity in our teams. As a learning organization, these factors motivated YES to analyze its hiring practices, and move away from processes that perpetuate the alarming statistics revealed by the Green 2.0 report.

Some of the strategies the organization employed to grow its diversity and become a People of Color centric organization were adapted from the recommendations of the Green 2.0 platform (<https://www.diversegreen.org>). YES is intentional about creating job descriptions that speak to multiple audiences in an effort to invite diversity into the organization and the outdoor field. Job descriptions are normally distributed in the Richmond community, at other similar communities and groups, and beyond the organization's networks. YES team members also take time to reach out to individuals who might be a good fit and encourage them to apply.

One of the underlying values of YES lies in recognizing the assets individuals bring through their lived experiences. We know that systems and structures impact the opportunities and experiences the some communities have access to (i.e. white, higher socioeconomic status) and some communities are excluded from (i.e. BIPOC, low-income). For instance, we recognize that one's educational attainment is a construct of power and privilege, and that the organization perpetuates ongoing oppression

when it values education as a distinguishing criteria for qualification. Therefore, our hiring practices take a holistic approach that values people's work experience, cultural background, and differing perspectives. By valuing the person's lived experience, YES is positioned to enhance the richness of the team, which adds relevancy and legitimacy for the participants we engage.

During YES's hiring process, a diverse interview panel is formed. The panel is composed of YES team and board members, youth and adult participants, and potential community partners or other stakeholders. During the interview process, each member of the panel takes turns to engage with the interviewee. They analyze the strengths that the candidate might bring to the program, the team, and the organization as a whole. The panel uses a rubric assessment tool to minimize bias and engages in a consensus process to make hiring decisions. If, after the interview process, the panel decides that the candidates are not suitable for the position, recruitment begins again until another pool of diverse candidates can be identified and interviewed to fill the position. While making the right hire for the position may take longer, sticking to this process has resulted in the current strong and diverse YES team.

In addition, we believe that in order to diversify the EE field, addressing hiring practices must also consider how we build and support pathways to employment for our young people. In our most recent 2020-2024 Strategic Plan, we included strategies that will guide us to create programs for youth who are already engaged in our organization, as well as YES alumni, volunteers and contracted Trip Leaders.

Wage Compensation and Transparency

YES aspires to pay staff a livable and just salary that will retain the current team and attract future hires. Recognizing the high cost of living in the Bay Area, in 2018 YES's Executive Director, the Board Chair, and two additional board members formed a task force and created the YES Compensation Guidelines. The guidelines support the organization in having consistent and equitable compensation practices. For example, the organization aims to pay staff salaries that are comparable to similar sized organizations. Staff who bring additional skills that are essential to

the organization, such as bilingualism, are awarded 2-5% more in starting salary.

Furthermore, YES strives to increase wages for all team members on an annual basis with cost of living (COLA) increases consistent with the annual Consumer Price Index for the Bay Area (3-year averages are between 2.5-3%). YES also awards employees with merit increases (2-5%) in addition to COLA during the first and/or second raise cycle after employment begins, depending on performance and job.

To ensure YES adheres to these guidelines and the values on which they are based, the guidelines are to be reviewed on a bi-annual basis.

Self-Care as a Radical Act

When we give to others but neglect our needs, we can become physically and emotionally depleted. Feelings of resentment can arise and the risk of burnout can increase. Self-care should not be seen as a selfish act, but rather as a radical act that is a necessary part of social change. Practicing and maintaining self-care practices helps individuals sustain their energy and spirit when faced with complex and ongoing systemic issues facing the communities they engage (Khan, 2015).

To this end, YES incentivizes employment satisfaction, and retention, by promoting personal self-care. By virtue of being a placed-based organization in Richmond, a community that is predominantly BIPOC, and given the front-line program YES team being primarily BIPOC, we are keenly aware of the impact of secondary trauma that our team experiences. Such experiences have contributed to our firm belief that without attention and connection to self care, the demanding toll of supporting young people and adults can often leave team members vulnerable to compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma. If left unattended, it can lead people to burnout and potential transition away from the organization.

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

- Audre Lorde

Self-care is emphasized and practiced at YES in the form of meditation sessions, wellness stipends, therapeutic team sessions, and Sunshine Days. Currently, YES’s HR and Operations Manager leads the YES team in weekly 30-minute meditation sessions that are held in the middle of the workday as a way to encourage people to take a break and make time for self-reflection together. The organization also offers an annual wellness stipend that team members can apply towards gym memberships, massages, acupuncture, and other forms of wellness.

YES also partners with Seeds of Awareness, a non-profit that provides social-emotional learning in nature-based settings. Seeds of Awareness provides mental health support for YES participants during Family Camp programming and facilitates therapeutic debrief sessions at the end of the heavy program season with team members.

Lastly, YES team members take turns leading fun and creative activities called Sunshine Days. Sunshine Days activities include hikes, team-building games, going out to lunch, meditating, reflecting on current events, listening to a podcast, and much more. Sunshine Days provide opportunities for our team to connect and strengthen relationships, dialogue about important topics, participate in health and wellness practices, and experience joy.

Sabbatical Program

As a means to incentivize individuals to remain with the organization, and to provide them a concentrated opportunity to engage in the reflection and self-care that is critical to long-term involvement in this type of work, the YES board drafted and passed a YES Sabbatical Policy in 2019. This policy has the potential to 1) support the leadership development of staff and 2) create space for staff to engage in deep self-care.

As mentioned in the previous section, self-care is an important and radical practice at YES. Team members are eligible for a sabbatical after six years of continuous employment at YES and every sixth year thereafter. For those who have committed so many years to the organization, the sabbatical program is a way for the organization to give back to the individual. Individuals are encouraged to plan

out their sabbatical and include doing the self-care activities they have been meaning to do, but simply have not had time to do such as travel, learn a new skill, or be with family.

The YES Sabbatical Policy is intended to create an opportunity for employees to pursue professional or personal development that will deepen their capacity to contribute to YES upon return. The sabbatical is six weeks long, with full pay and benefits, and is taken as one continuous period.

CONCLUSION

The work of building an inclusive work culture never ends. We are as actively engaged in this work as when our intentional focus on workplace culture first began. We continually reassess our shared commitments, look for opportunities to promote strengths-based and shared leadership for the whole team, and seek to transform our systems, policies, and organizational structures to actively sustain, retain, and create a

We see the sabbatical program as beneficial to everyone in the organization. The sabbatical also creates a valuable opportunity for the rest of the YES team who are not on sabbatical. Team members step into the vacated role and gain additional decision-making responsibilities, take ownership of a different job function, support the agency's mission, and learn new skills and competencies. Thus, while one team member gains personal and professional development while away, other team members can enhance their job skills and learn important job functions.

voice for team members. It is through these strategies and approaches that we aim, with intentional focus, to move beyond diversity towards building a work culture that is inclusive of BIPOC staff, youth and community members. While this work greatly benefits our team, it is also an essential component of our program delivery and critical to the overall mission of YES.

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