

LIBERATORY LEADERSHIP

Centering Care, Artistry, and Experimentation
at BlackStar Projects



What is the issue?

Staff-related challenges, including burnout, staff attrition, and internal and cultural issues, are widespread in the nonprofit sector. While not without strain, media-arts organization BlackStar Projects successfully navigates these challenges through a leadership model that prioritizes staff's artistry and creative development and codifies the organization's values of care.

What is the research context?

BlackStar began 15 years ago as a Philadelphia film festival and grew into the media-arts organization BlackStar Projects in 2020. In addition to the annual film festival, the organization now produces year-round programs, including film screenings, exhibitions, a filmmaker seminar, a film production lab, and a journal of art & visual culture. BlackStar Projects' staff and reach has grown amidst shifting funder priorities, competition with larger, predominantly-white film festivals, and gentrification-driven changes in the local audience base.

Research Approach

This case study is based on focus groups and individual interviews conducted with BlackStar Projects staff between March and July 2023. Researcher Davinia Gregory-Kameka refers to the focus groups as Gatherings, as the meetings were organized around meals and discussions were recorded during meal breaks.

What are the research findings?

BlackStar Projects' leaders lean into experimentation, embrace creative strategic thinking, and demonstrate an openness and willingness to make mistakes. Study participants said the organization's founder, Maori Karmael Holmes, focuses on shifting power to the community and prioritizes cultivating new collaborative, connective ways of working with other arts organizations that

Brief based on *BlackStar Rising: The Purpose, Location, and Relationships that Constitute a Black-led Media Arts Organization* by Davinia Gregory-Kameka, Ph.D., of Teachers College, Columbia University

contribute to community well-being, over working alone in the interest of sector dominance.

Many arts organizations rooted in communities of color are led by artists, which the researcher argues can lead to innovative and subversive leadership models. In BlackStar Projects' case, its leaders strive to enact their value of liberation, which centers on shifting power and positioning artists to be the architects of a world guided by creativity, community and the breakdown of destructive hierarchies. The organization aims not only to develop the careers of filmmakers and artists through its film festival and exhibitions, but also to nurture the creative and professional development of its staff members—many of whom are also artists maintaining active creative practices. BlackStar Projects' leaders prioritize their staff's artistry and see a benefit to the organization when staff bring creative thinking and their full selves to their work. They believe paid work should support rather than diminish a person's overall well-being.

The organization's policies and benefits demonstrate a commitment to staff well-being. For example, staff reported that in the run-up to their annual film festival—the most strenuous period of their programming year—the organization supported staff well-being by providing lower-cost access to bikes, as well as stipends to cover health care costs not covered by insurance. BlackStar Projects also offered staff an annual three-week break following the festival, which staff said was central to their overall well-being. Gregory-Kameka concludes that BlackStar Project's prioritization of rest supports employee retention in a sector where burnout is prevalent.

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Why does this matter?

Many leaders of arts organizations rooted in communities of color are creating new leadership models to support staff resilience and prevent burnout. Funders and other supporters should consider:

- Supporting alternative leadership models, particularly if they show positive outcomes related to staff outcomes.
- Centering artist-led organizations as knowledge producers and elevating artist-leaders and staff as advisors and field contributors poised to shape sector strategy.
- Supporting leadership development initiatives that center human capital development and wellness in addition to organizational development.
- Supporting collaboration between peer arts organizations to incentivize partnerships, shared infrastructures, and cross-organizational learning.

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