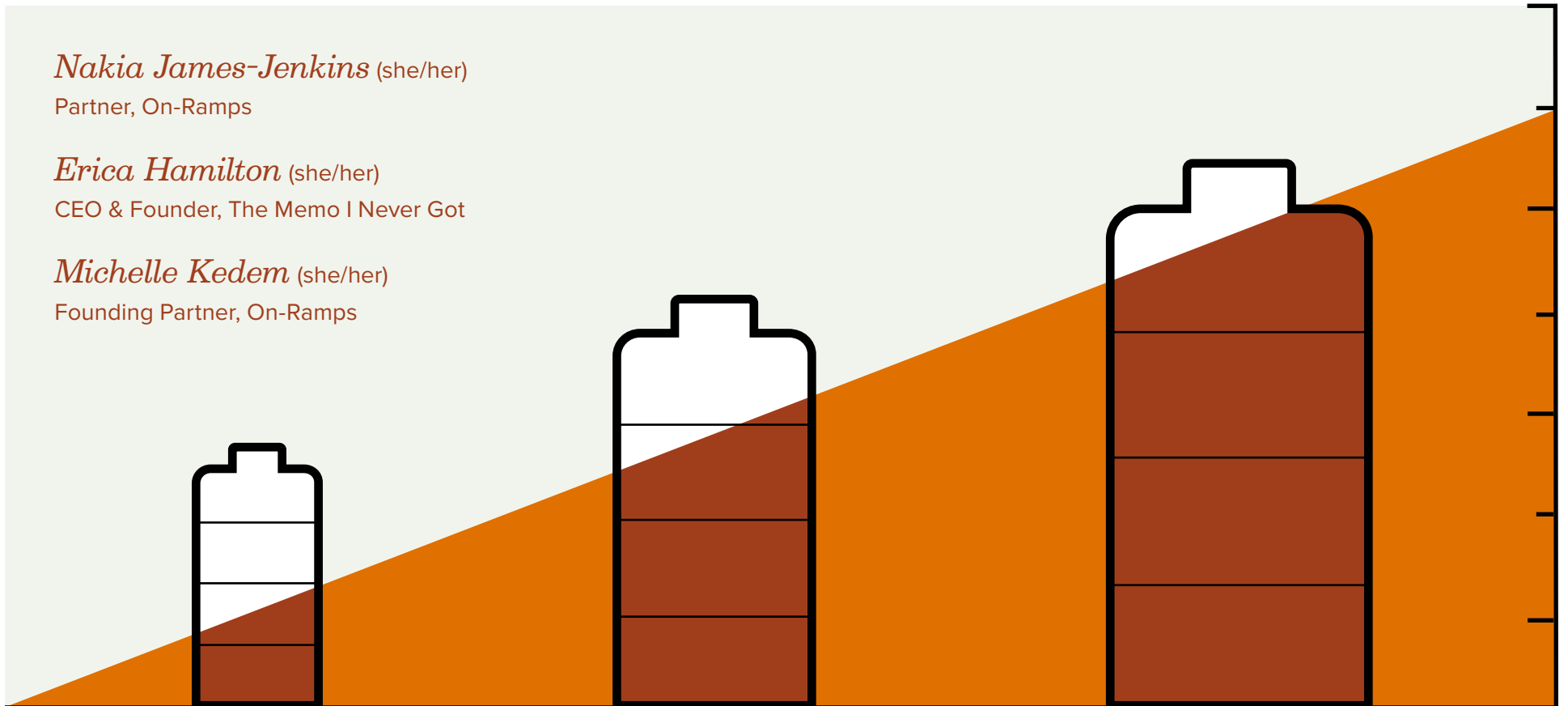# Sustaining and Retaining Senior Leaders in the Social Sector

Nakia James-Jenkins (she/her)
Partner, On-Ramps

Erica Hamilton (she/her)
CEO & Founder, The Memo I Never Got

Michelle Kedem (she/her)
Founding Partner, On-Ramps

Introduction and Executive Summary

This report is born from our desire to dig into a deeply concerning trend in our sector: **Senior leaders at mission-driven organizations are burning out at shocking rates and leaving roles because they don't feel supported.**[1] In fact, 62% of respondents to our survey have considered leaving their organization in the past three years.

Because building meaningful solutions is paramount to us, we wanted and needed deeper knowledge about the specific causes of, and recommended solutions to, this trend. So we turned to the senior leaders of organizations in our community. We conducted a survey and compiled our analysis of the results into this report. **Our findings have revealed critical insights into senior leaders' experiences, challenges, needs, and requests for support—and the intersectional dynamics that influence them.**

A NOTE OF GRATITUDE

We'd like to express our deep appreciation to the senior leaders who responded to our survey. We appreciate your time, thoughtfulness, and ability to share facts and feelings that, while so important to helping our sector improve and evolve, may have evoked feelings of vulnerability for you.

We'd also like to thank all the senior leaders working in the sector who are dedicating their time and labor to uplifting the individuals and communities they serve.

1. The Center for Effective Philanthropy. "State of Nonprofits 2024: What Funders Need to Know," n.d. https://cep.org/report-backpacks/state-of-nonprofits-2024-what-funders-need-to-know/?section=intro.

Introduction and Executive Summary (continued)

KEY FINDINGS

1. Intersectionality critically impacts experience.

Across the board, we were struck, in surprising and unsurprising ways, by the profound effect of identity on senior leaders' experiences in their roles, as well as the capacity for that impact to be magnified with an intersectional lens. Looking solely at race or gender, for instance, masks important variations between leaders of different identities—most prominently for BIPOC women. These differences emphasize the need for a more comprehensive and urgent approach to providing support and shifting organizational and sector "norms."

2. Representation is table stakes, not a panacea.

Having leadership that mirrors staff and community is critical, not a cure-all. We examined whether leaders fared better when other leaders in their organization shared their identity, and saw essentially no impact. Leaders, especially leaders of color, need substantive support in raising money and meeting their goals.

3. More board support is needed!

For about a third of Executive Directors in our survey, lack of support from their boards was a significant challenge. When asked what kind of help would benefit them most, the answer was clear: fundraising! Almost half of them said support with raising revenue would be the most useful avenue of support, so it's absolutely critical for boards to increase their engagement in this area.

4. Community and networking are vital.

Peer networking and a sense of belonging emerged as essential factors in senior leader retention. The majority of senior leaders emphasized the importance of building and maintaining networks as a critical component of their job satisfaction.

5. Salary is a concern, and the gender pay gap persists.

The gender pay gap is a well-documented issue, and our survey affirms the impact it has on senior leaders.[2] While a quarter of them shared inadequate salary being a top challenge, almost twice the percentage of women reported it compared to men.

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2. Kochhar, Rakesh. "The Enduring Grip of the Gender Pay Gap." *Pew Research Center* (blog), March 1, 2023.
https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/03/01/the-enduring-grip-of-the-gender-pay-gap/.

Introduction and Executive Summary *(continued)*

Particular attention must be given to senior leaders earlier in their tenures and BIPOC women who were the most likely in the survey to say their salary was inadequate to support them.

6. Inability to use paid-time-off benefits is a root cause.

Though senior leaders in our survey greatly valued their vacations and sabbaticals in theory, they did not feel empowered to take them, and could not fully disconnect when they did. This is especially concerning because leaders consistently explained the crucial role that having time to nurture personal relationships plays in their ability to energize and restore themselves.

7. Key areas warrant further research and discussion.

While our survey shedded light on senior leaders' experiences, it also demonstrated the necessity to do more than simply collect and analyze data. It is imperative to actively engage leaders in solutioning, especially those who make up a small proportion of responses to surveys like this one. For example, lower response rates from senior leaders identifying as transgender and/or

non-binary, BIPOC men, or White men limited the depth of analysis for certain topics—a gap that must be addressed with efforts to understand not only their needs and experiences, but also the potential influences to their showing up in this work. These results also form the basis of a broader invitation to include other stakeholders (i.e. Board members and funders) in solution building. We share this point as a call to action to other leaders in the field who have the capital to finance additional studies to further explore these dynamics.

Our findings demonstrate that improving senior leadership retention in mission-based work will require addressing the intersectional experiences of leaders, enhancing board engagement, and providing substantive, rather than symbolic, support. We're hopeful that our report will serve as a jumping off point for important conversations among funders, board members, and organizational leaders about how they can better invest in supporting and sustaining senior leadership—and inspiring institutional and sector change.

Methodology and Respondent Demographics

METHODOLOGY

For four weeks during the spring of 2024, we surveyed senior leaders at mission-driven organizations of various sizes, sub-sectors, and structures to learn what challenges they've faced, what types of support have helped sustain them, and what they need to thrive.

We drew on our collective expertise in executive search, organizational consulting, and DEIB—as well as our tenure serving as C-Suite leaders within and outside of the social impact and philanthropy sectors—to analyze the survey results.

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Definition of "senior leader"

All respondents fit into one of the following categories:

- People with at least 12 years of full-time work experience, including at least 2 years in senior leadership, that meet one of the following criteria in their current role:
  - Executive Director/CEO/President at their organization
  - C-Suite (reports to the CEO, ED, or President)
  - Direct report to the C-Suite
- People who lead a program area that constitutes over 40% of the organizational budget.

Total number of respondents

293 senior leaders from 263 organizations responded to the survey, with no more than 4 coming from any single organization.
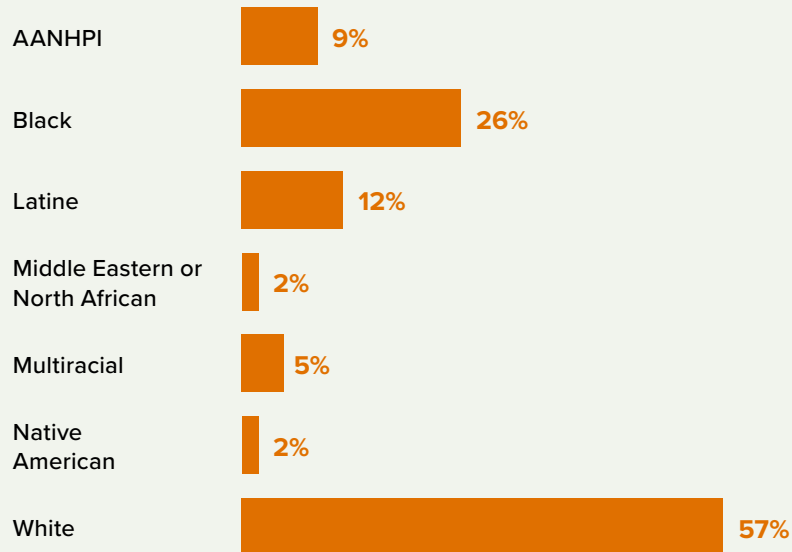
Sub Sectors

Operating Nonprofit	221
Advocacy	31
Philanthropy	26
Other/Unknown	15

Methodology and Respondent Demographics *(continued)*

Survey Respondents by Race (select all that apply)

AANHPI	9%
Black	26%
Latine	12%
Middle Eastern or North African	2%
Multiracial	5%
Native American	2%
White	57%

Survey Respondents by Gender (select all that apply)

Cisgender	19%
Genderqueer	1%
Man	17%
Nonbinary	2%
Transgender	1%
Two-spirit	0%
Woman	79%
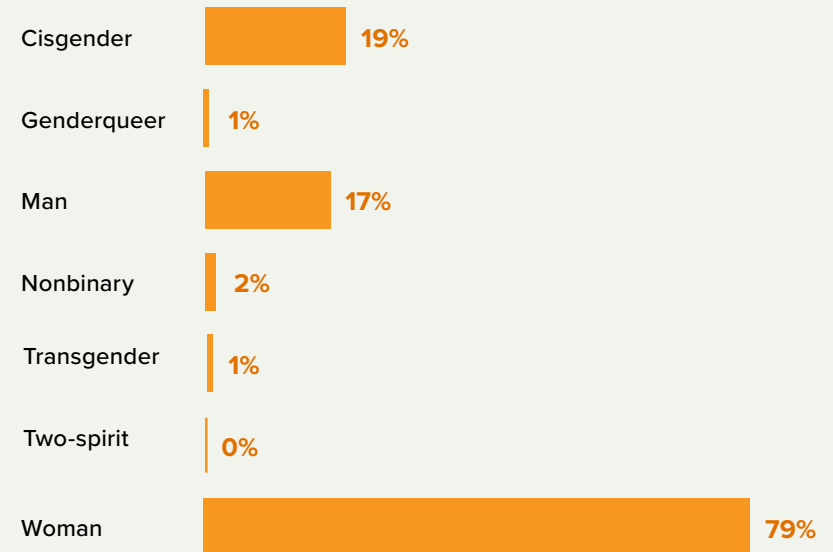
Survey Respondents by Age (select one)

39%	**42%**	**18%**	**1%**
50+	40 – 50	< 40	Prefer not to say

NOTE: Categories are listed alphabetically where applicable on this page.

The Urgency of the Issue

A lack of effective support for senior leaders in the mission-driven and nonprofit sectors contributes to burnout and high turnover rates, and negatively affects an organization's ability to achieve its goals. In fact, 62% of respondents to the survey have considered leaving their organization in the past three years. This phenomenon is especially harsh for leaders of color who face additional racial barriers.[3]

Further, it has worsened in recent years, especially for some leaders from historically excluded and marginalized groups. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, many women took on additional caregiver duties,[4] making it more difficult to keep up with their careers. In addition, the rush to expand DEIB initiatives following the racial equity movements of 2020 has, in some cases, led to Black leaders being asked to take on additional labor[5] to educate others, spearhead programs, or hold the feelings of their colleagues.[6]

Have you thought about leaving your organization in the past 3 years?
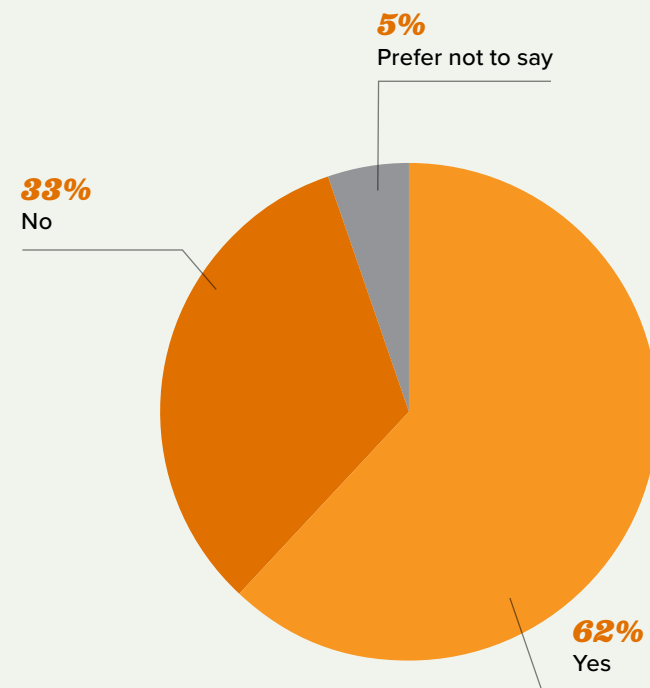

5%
Prefer not to say

33%
No

62%
Yes

3. Building Movement. "Trading Glass Ceilings for Glass Cliffs: A Race to Lead Report on Nonprofit Executives of Color," n.d. https://buildingmovement.org/wp-content uploads/2022/02/Race-to-Lead-ED-CEO-Report-2.8.22.pdf.

4. Stefanova, Vasilena, Lynn Farrell, and Ioana Latu. "Gender and the Pandemic: Associations between Caregiving, Working from Home, Personal and Career Outcomes for Women and Men." *Current Psychology* 42, no. 20 (July 2023): 17395−411. https://doi.org/10.1007/ s12144-021-02630-6.

5. Miller, Jennifer. "Their Bosses Asked Them to Lead Diversity Reviews. Guess Why." *The New York Times*, October 12, 2020, sec. Business. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/12/business/corporate-diversity-black-employees.html.

6. King, Danielle D., Abdifatah A. Ali, Courtney L. McCluney, and Courtney Bryant Shelby. "Give Black Employees Time to Rest and Recover." *Harvard Business Review*, February 22, 2021. https://hbr.org/2021/02/give-black-employees-time-to-rest-and-recover.

The Urgency of the Issue *(continued)*

"I wear many hats in the organization; at times, I have been the only one doing all the work. This has made me feel overextended, exhausted, and unable to unplug from work. I can't remember the last time I went on a vacation that wasn't interrupted by work."

"My personal relationships with my family and spouse take a back seat to the needs of my employees and agency because of the amount of pressure I feel to make sure my staff team all keep their jobs and get paid as well as to make sure my agency continues to operate through the pandemic so that thousands of families and youth do not lose us as a support system."

Of those in this survey who considered leaving their organization but still remain in their positions, connection to the organization's mission was by far the most commonly cited motivation for their decision (84%). The second most mentioned factor was support from coworkers (54%).

"I have been offered several other leadership opportunities throughout my tenure....At the end of the day, the mission and the impact I know we are having on our community keeps me at my current organization."

In order to retain leaders like these, it is important to understand the dynamics that push leaders to consider leaving their organizations in the first place. While alignment with the mission often encourages leaders to stay on, their choice may be short-lived if their situations don't improve. We wanted to know more about the needs senior leaders feel are going unmet, so we asked them to explain some of the most influential challenges in their roles.

"I love the work. I really love the work and the impact we have on families and communities. I would like to do it at a humane pace,... with a coach to support me, and have funders (individuals, foundations, and corporations) fund intersectional work and... Black-led and Black-and-Brown serving organizations.... That would be transformative."

Role Impact on Mental and Physical Health

A large proportion of senior leaders in this survey felt the impact of their role on their physical (39%) and mental (29%) health was entirely negative.

Senior leaders commonly cited stress, a manifestation of physical symptoms, and insufficient time or energy to pursue physical wellness behaviors (ie: adequate sleep, balanced diet, and regular exercise). These experiences were consistent across identity, demonstrating the parallels in leaders' perceptions of the impact their roles have on their wellbeing.

> "My roles (current and previous) have been so demanding of my time and energy, that it's difficult to find time to exercise, be active, and really take care of myself in the ways I would like."

> "Staff, board, and high net-worth donors rarely have a sense of how emotionally demanding their needs are; how I feel and how a leader needs to respond are often at odds, so my own feelings are typically unaddressed or have to be tamped down."

Please explain how your role has impacted your physical health in the past three years.

Considered stress to be a major factor
39%

Associated work with increased physical symptoms
38%

Said they struggle finding time to exercise
28%

Noted difficulties getting enough sleep
22%

Job Impact on Mental and Physical Health (continued)

INFLUENCE OF RACE AND GENDER

The responses of BIPOC leaders in this survey show that they are more likely to feel adverse impacts to their health—far beyond that of their White counterparts.

> *45% of BIPOC respondents felt their job had an exclusively negative impact on their physical health, 29% said the same of their mental health.*

Impact to Physical Health by Race

Impact to Mental Health by Race

Legend: All, BIPOC, White
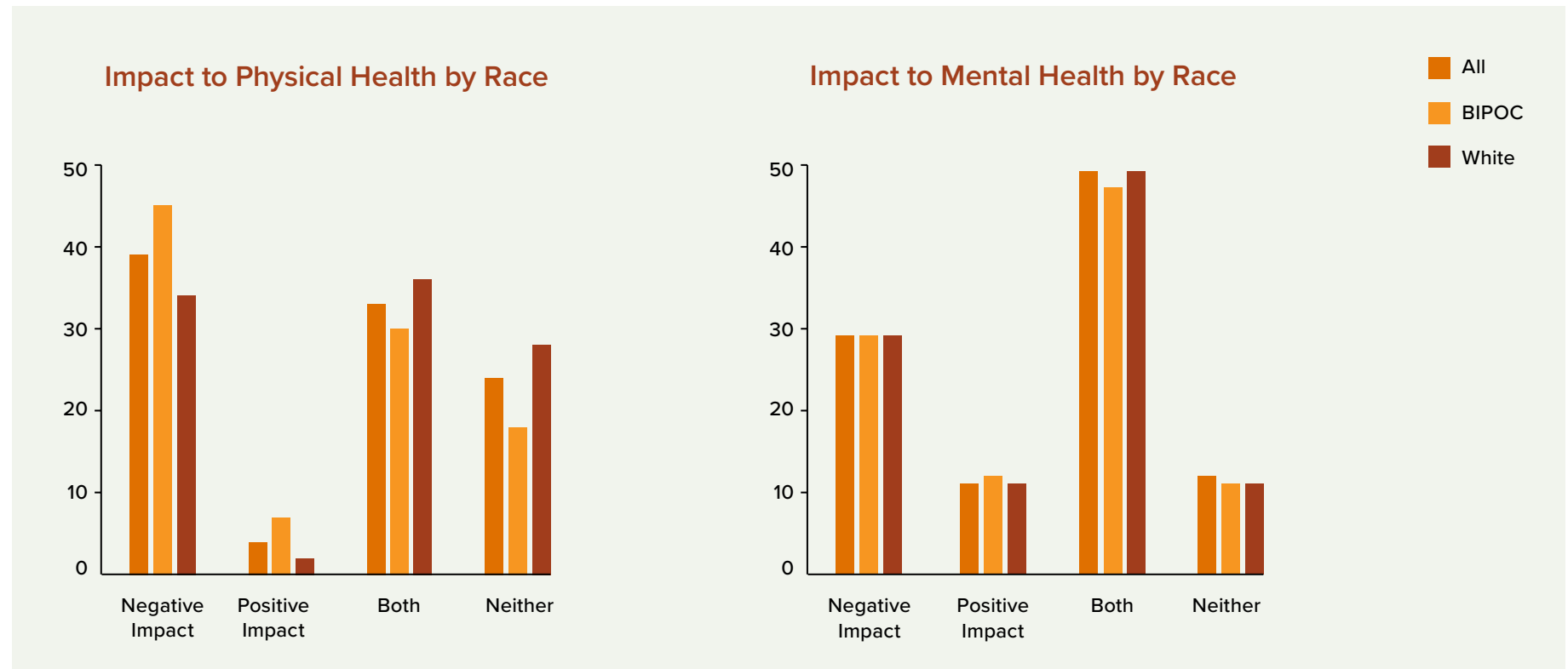
Job Impact on Mental and Physical Health (continued)

Women in the survey were also much more likely than men to report harmful impacts to their health. BIPOC women in particular were the most likely of all races and genders to mention entirely negative impacts to their physical health.

47% of BIPOC women said their role had an exclusively negative impact on their physical health, 31% said the same of their mental health.
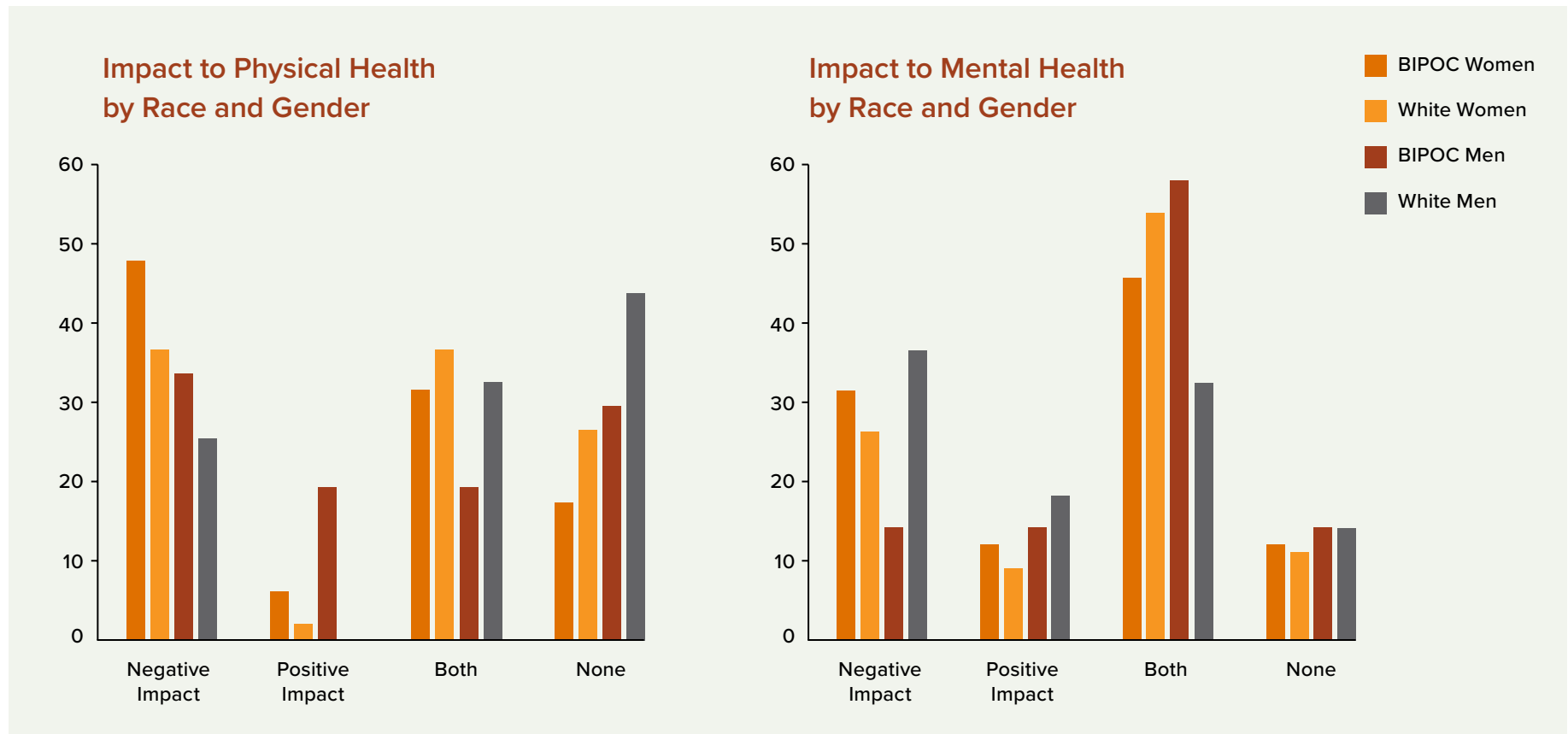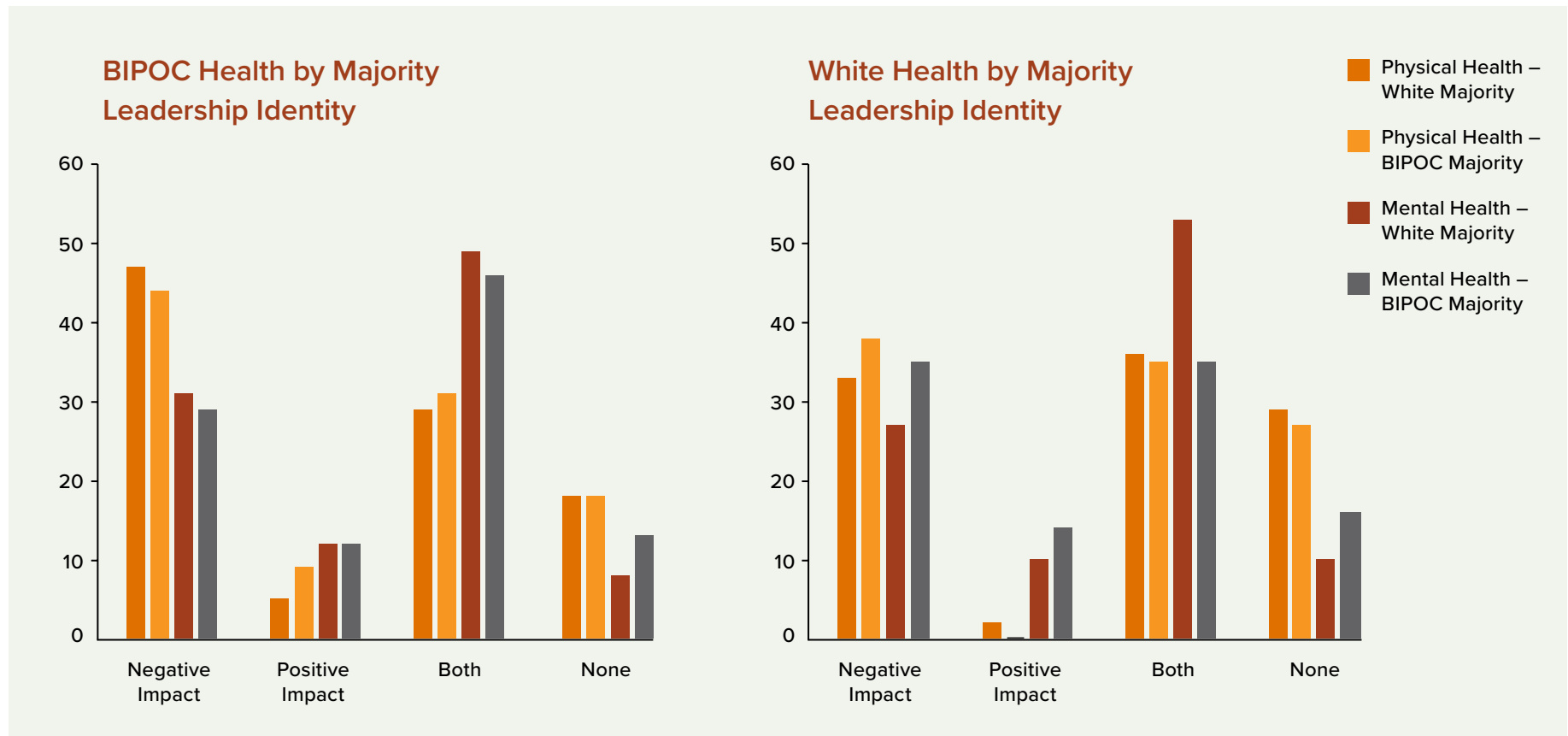
Impact to Physical Health by Race and Gender

Impact to Mental Health by Race and Gender

Legend:
- BIPOC Women
- White Women
- BIPOC Men
- White Men

Job Impact on Mental and Physical Health *(continued)*

We also explored how the racial identity of the leadership majority impacted responses. We found that having the same identity[7] as the majority of senior leadership at their organizations did not consistently relate to a better sense of wellbeing for BIPOC or White senior leaders.

While diversity is undoubtedly critical, this finding supports what many of us already know: ***Diversity is not a cure-all for structural inadequacies. In addition to representation, leaders need substantive support that addresses their concerns.***

BIPOC Health by Majority Leadership Identity

White Health by Majority Leadership Identity

Legend:
- Physical Health – White Majority
- Physical Health – BIPOC Majority
- Mental Health – White Majority
- Mental Health – BIPOC Majority

7. BIPOC or White racial identity

Job Impact on Mental and Physical Health *(continued)*

INFLUENCE OF AGE AND TENURE

Regardless of age or tenure, senior leaders reported, to varying degrees, feeling their roles had a singularly negative impact on both their mental and physical health. It's also noticeable in the findings that younger (40 and under) and early tenure (between 1 – 5 years) leaders were feeling solely negative impacts to both their physical and mental health at the highest rates, which is alarming.

Age

Senior leaders in the survey aged 40 and under were the most likely to report feeling their roles had an entirely negative impact on both their mental (38%) and physical health (47%). And although senior leaders over the age of 40 reported feeling their roles had an entirely negative impact on their overall health at lower rates (36% – 38% for physical; 25% – 28% for mental) than younger leaders, these leaders responses demonstrate senior leaders of all ages feel harmed in regards to their physical and mental well-being.
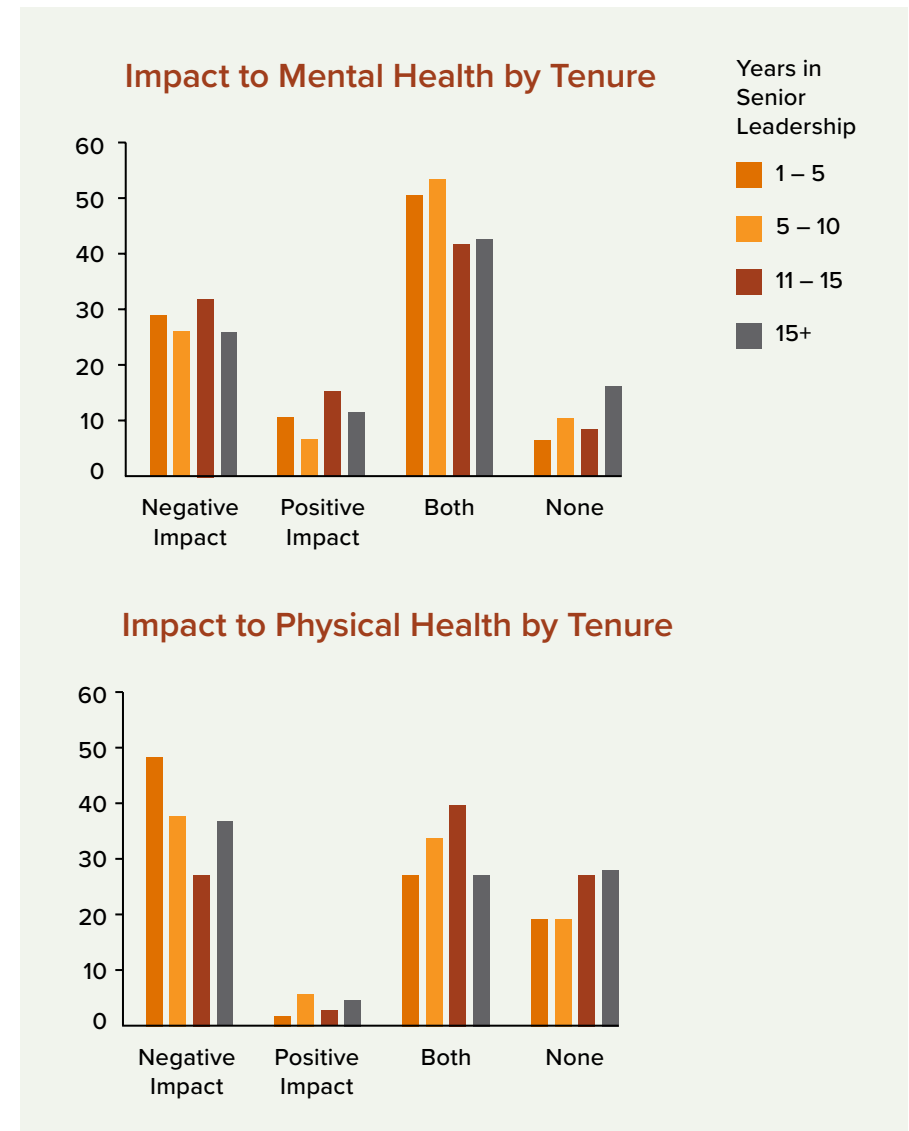
Impact to Mental Health by Age

Age (years)
- < 40
- 40 – 50
- 50+

Impact to Physical Health by Age
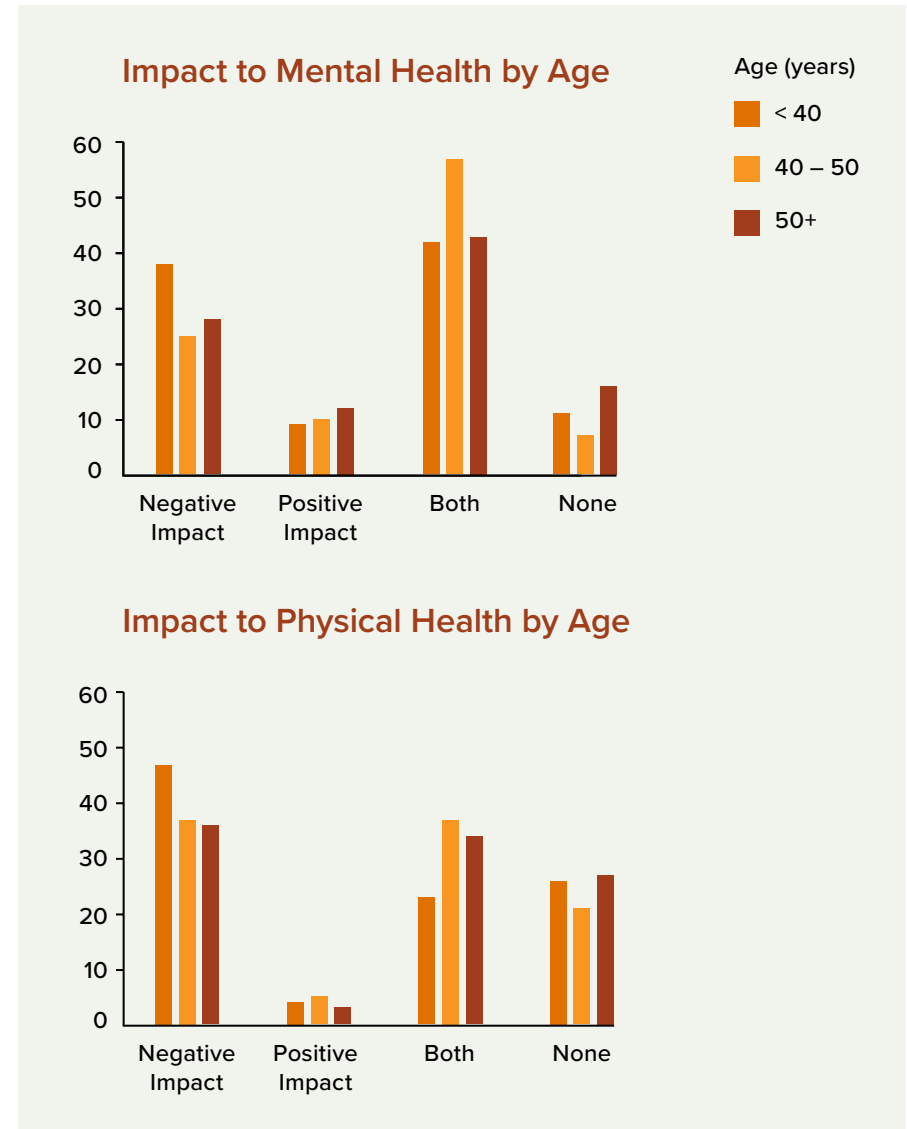
Job Impact on Mental and Physical Health (continued)

Tenure

Senior leaders who were earlier in their tenures (1 – 5 years) were the most likely to report their roles having an exclusively negative impact on their physical health (50%), which was the highest rate recorded compared to leaders with longer tenures (over 5 years). In addition, senior leaders reported feeling their mental health was being exclusively negatively impacted at similar rates (between 27% – 33%) across all tenures. This indicates that, in this sector, not only do newer leaders need support with the learning curve of their responsibilities, but also leaders with longer tenures are not automatically freed from the mental toll of their day-to-day work.

Impact to Mental Health by Tenure

Years in Senior Leadership
- ■ 1 – 5
- ■ 5 – 10
- ■ 11 – 15
- ■ 15+

Impact to Physical Health by Tenure

Job Impact on Mental and Physical Health (continued)

This data offers us some unique insight into the struggles of senior leaders in the mission-driven and nonprofit sectors. For many, while their work is inherently fulfilling—a quality that most evidently inspires them to keep going—it is also taxing to the point of significant personal decline.

Addressing this imbalance between senior leaders' responsibilities to themselves and to their organizations is of the utmost importance. A well-cared for leadership team provides a solid foundation for driving even deeper impact, decreasing turn-over rates, and maximizing ROIs for outcome—key ingredients in a thriving organization.

Collectively, we are in the business of impact on communal and individual levels; supporting healthy and committed senior leadership is as relevant to that goal as the very missions that define our work. Looking to these leaders for cues about next steps leads to some very important insights.

Solutions and Support: Compensation and Benefits

When asked to expand on how benefits could offer support for mental, physical, and financial health, senior leaders shared what new benefits they desire, as well as places where their existing benefits could be improved.

Overall, leaders in the survey most appreciated benefits that offer them more flexibility, control over their day-to-day schedules, and time off of work.
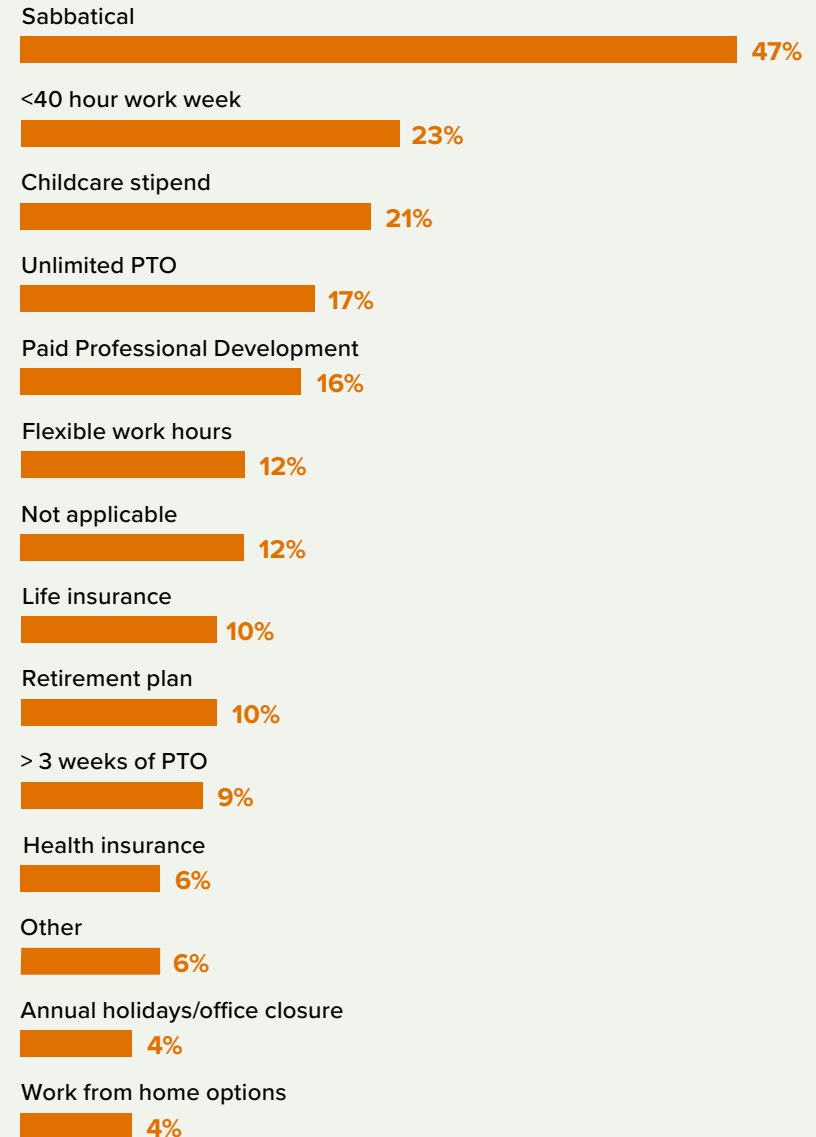
(As On-Ramps has written about previously[8] and seen in our own recruiting work, offering employees flexibility in general—and work-from-home options in particular—has become a standard and expected part of worklife post-pandemic.[9])

Respondents most frequently cited sabbatical (47%), shorter work weeks (23%), and childcare stipends (21%) as benefits that would improve their mental and physical health if offered or improved. Other, common but less frequently cited, responses include paid professional development opportunities (16%) and life insurance (10%).

8. On-Ramps. "On-Ramps | Pandemic Workplace Trends That Are Here to Stay," n.d. https://www.on-ramps.com/blog/pandemic-workplace-trends-that-are-here-to-stay.

9. Smite, Darja, Nils Brede Moe, Jarle Hildrum, Javier Gonzalez-Huerta, and Daniel Mendez. "Work-from-Home Is Here to Stay: Call for Flexibility in Post-Pandemic Work Policies." *Journal of Systems and Software* 195 (January 1, 2023): 111552. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jss.2022.111552.

What benefits could your organization offer to support your mental and/or physical health?

Sabbatical
47%

<40 hour work week
23%

Childcare stipend
21%

Unlimited PTO
17%

Paid Professional Development
16%

Flexible work hours
12%

Not applicable
12%

Life insurance
10%

Retirement plan
10%

> 3 weeks of PTO
9%

Health insurance
6%

Other
6%

Annual holidays/office closure
4%

Work from home options
4%

Solutions and Support: Compensation and Benefits (continued)

TIME OFF

For many, it felt impossible to take time away from work. This was a result of senior leaders having both overwhelming workloads and lack of confidence in the infrastructure to support their time away.

Interestingly, though twice as popular as the next most-requested benefit, only 14% of those actually offered a sabbatical found it to be one of the most helpful benefits for their physical and mental health. This seeming contradiction offers important insight into the organizational responsibility to make benefits "usable."

Senior leaders felt as if there was not only too much to be done, but also no certainty that the processes they oversaw would continue functioning effectively in their absence.

> ***Offering benefits is about more than simply writing a policy claiming they are available.***

This transformed an expected benefit into an ever-dangling carrot that many senior leaders felt too worried to even reach for. It's important for organizations to make note of this, because offering benefits is about more than simply offering them on paper. Organizations need to support senior leaders in feeling safe and comfortable to take full advantage of their benefits and, in an instance like this one, that means shifting the culture and ensuring effective practices and structures are in place to decrease the sense of risk and guilt senior leaders may feel.

> *"When I was the Executive Director, it was very hard to take advantage of the benefits that we worked hard to provide to staff."*

SALARY

Senior leaders also expressed major concern that their salaries felt inadequate to support their daily responsibilities and expectations outside of their jobs. Thirty-nine percent (39%) said they don't feel competitively compensated for their work and level of expertise compared to others in similar roles.

While only 25% of senior leaders in the survey named inadequate salary as one of their top three major challenges, that proportion jumps to 41% for respondents who have been senior leaders for 1 – 5 years. By age, leaders under 40 were most likely to express concern (33%) followed by leaders aged 60 and older (28%). This evidence gives us key insight into the relevance of salary for senior leaders both early in their careers and as they approach retirement.

Solutions and Support: Compensation and Benefits (continued)

41% of women didn't feel competitively compensated, while only 23% of men felt the same.

As is well documented in pre-existing research,[10] the gender pay gap continues to prevail. Compared to 41% of women, men in the survey were almost half as likely (23%) to report they don't feel competitively compensated.

It's especially important to consider the relevance of this issue for BIPOC women, 31% of whom said adequate salary was one of their top three concerns. This is compared to 22% of White women and 14% of men overall.

For many leaders, dedication to the mission means neglecting their own needs. It's imperative to assess how culture and policy supports and affirms leaders prioritizing their own well-being in addition to that of their organization. Meaningful change will come when the responsibility for well-being is not relegated to leaders or even organizations, but rather, funders and boards drive a sector-wide reprioritization.

And it's especially important to remember that senior leaders understand the impacts their needs have on the organization. In the words of one leader in the survey, **"it's really easy to say 'More money please' but that puts more pressure on fundraising."** So, if anyone understands things not being as simple as making a request, it's senior leaders. Working to meet them in the middle makes all the difference.

Still, benefits are just one piece of the puzzle. We hypothesized that running the day-to-day operations and fulfilling the actual duties of the job may also affect leaders' physical and mental health. The next section is designed to see whether that hypothesis bears out.

10. Kochhar, Rakesh. "The Enduring Grip of the Gender Pay Gap." *Pew Research Center* (blog), March 1, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/03/01/the-enduring-grip-of-the-gender-pay-gap/.

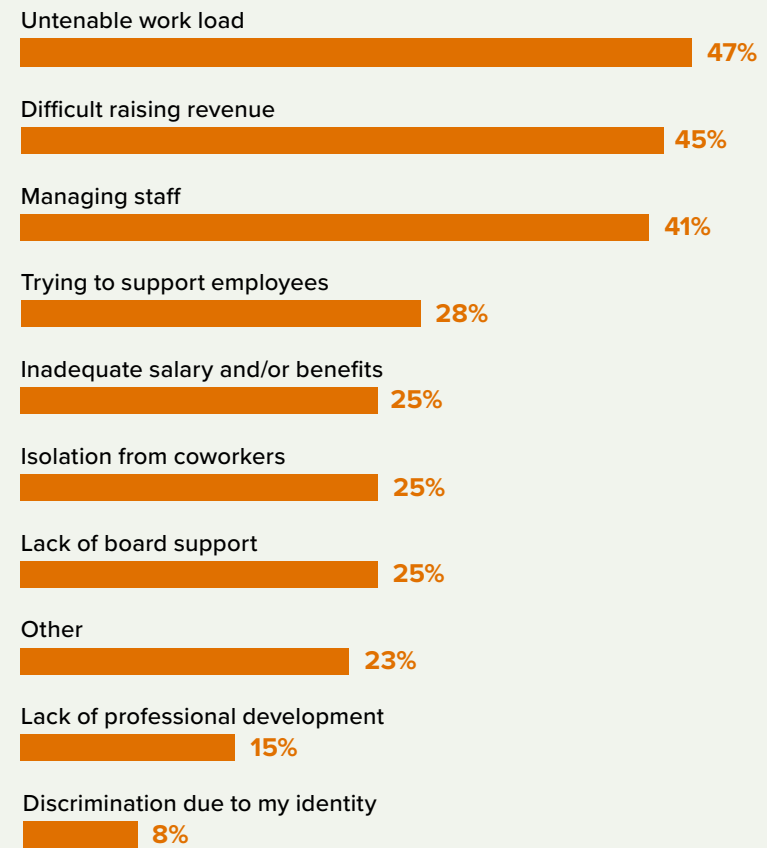# Solutions and Support: Organizational Infrastructure

When we asked senior leaders to name the greatest challenges they've faced in their roles in the past three years, the three most commonly cited were:

- Untenable workload (47%)
- Difficulty raising revenue (45%)
- Managing staff (44%)

> *Although benefits were certainly an important piece of the puzzle, this data suggests that support with day-to-day operations like fundraising and staff management are even more important.*

Fundraising support is especially significant, as that is a place that leaders, across varying identities, directly identified as needing additional support. In addition, greater financial flexibility would enable a broad range of beneficial investments (e.g., staffing, professional development, etc).

What are some of the greatest challenges you've faced as a leader at your organization in the past three years?

Untenable work load
47%

Difficult raising revenue
45%

Managing staff
41%

Trying to support employees
28%

Inadequate salary and/or benefits
25%

Isolation from coworkers
25%

Lack of board support
25%

Other
23%

Lack of professional development
15%

Discrimination due to my identity
8%

Solutions and Support: Organizational Infrastructure (continued)

To understand what support leaders need in order to face these structural challenges, we break them down further by looking at how responsibility for organizational culture and interfacing with donors in a turbulent political climate affects their work.

NAVIGATING THE POLITICAL CLIMATE

When asked how the current political climate has shaped their efforts to build a positive organizational culture, many senior leaders pointed to the challenges of navigating politics while supporting staff and fulfilling their mission.

Of the 38% of senior leaders who noted that the current political climate makes it more difficult to meet the requirements of their position, 19% specifically mentioned negative impacts on their capacity to fundraise. This is especially important considering 45% of senior leaders cited fundraising as a great challenge of the past three years.

How has the political climate shaped your effort to build a positive organizational culture?

Felt it was significantly more difficult to meet the requirements of their position
38%

Mentioned increased need to address the impact of the political climate in day-to-day work
36%

Developed new processes around internal communications
16%

Increased efforts to develop DEIB tools and infrastructure
16%

Championed nuanced adjustments to norms and organizational culture
15%

Solutions and Support: Organizational Infrastructure (continued)

Further, of the 32% of Executive Directors who noted lack of board support as one of their greatest challenges, almost half (48%) said they particularly want more help with raising revenue.

Senior leaders must perform a delicate balancing act in order to navigate the expectations and perspectives of outside stakeholders—who often hold financial influence over the organization—and the expectations of employees and, potentially, their own political commitments as well.

This is especially true in an era where the ideas of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging have become increasingly politicized.[11] In addition to holding appropriate space for the impact of the current political climate, senior leaders must also navigate fear that donors, board members, or other outside external stakeholders may take offense at public statements about social issues or internal efforts to advance DEIB.

Across racial and gender identities, senior leaders in the survey expressed concerns about the unique challenges they experienced in promoting DEIB while navigating the political climate. Many senior leaders shared thoughtful and nuanced details about how their identities influenced their experience.

"There have been demands, particularly from some staff members, for our organization...to respond to the structural/systemic oppression in the world in ways that add stress and pressure, and that, to my understanding, have added complex challenges and caused harm to our other Co-Executive Director who is Black....Further, I have experienced what seems like a conflation of anger/push-back against oppression and authority...with some aspects of required organizational management."

"The current political climate threatens the nature of our work and the mental and emotional health of our team daily. It is a daily worry. To keep up with the news and balance the impact of these events along with the day-to-day struggles of employees is one of the largest challenges to our culture and our process of building community."

"Despite our public image as a race equity organization, our internal culture has been underfunded for years, making it difficult to meet staff expectations with limited resources. Additionally, the crisis in the Middle East has complicated our efforts to engage external facilitators for internal discussions. These challenges highlight the systemic underinvestment in our staff's well-being and the need to realign our funding priorities to truly support our mission."

11. PBS News. "Why Diversity Initiatives at Colleges and Companies Are Facing Political Backlash," February 15, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-diversity-initiatives-at-colleges-and-companies-are-facing-political-backlash.

"I have a board who recognizes the challenges in our field of business, who listens when we explain the climate, a board president and chair who both support changes that I seek to make, who encourage me and who say kind and emotionally caring things about my work and also about self-care. This makes a dramatic difference in my feelings around self-care and overall feeling of safety and joy."

For one leader, their racial identity became a source of conflict regarding their organizations core values and DEIB statement, where previously there was none.

"It's been fascinating to observe how my identity in this seat creates a filter for our staff/ external stakeholders view [of] our core values, DEI statement, etc. Concretely, I've received feedback from funders that our DEI statement is "too political," "charged," "extreme," and sat in

conversations a few years ago when our founder was celebrated for the EXACT same statement."*

For other leaders, their identities created a barrier to connection between them and other staff, as they collectively tried to navigate dismantling supremacy and protection from implicit bias.

"I have worked on, and continue to work on recognizing and addressing any biases that I have. And I think as a White woman in power, I symbolize more than who I am, I represent a lifetime of White teachers, former bosses, etc. I feel like I am seen as having a snake on my shoulder that could strike at any time"

"It's been incredibly challenging as a white, cis-het leader to be at the helm of an organization whose mission predominantly impacts youth of color. I have learned a lot, but it has been deeply emotionally draining and often more painful than

it likely needs to be. I have spent many hours and a fair amount of financial resources on DEI work for our organization. And, our mission focuses on SEL and CRE, which has been stifled nationally by the current political climate."*

These internal tensions senior leaders are facing in the current political climate may relate to the 41% of respondents who found managing staff to be a major challenge in the past three years. Although many respondents said that their staff were generally on the same page about political and social issues, senior leaders' personal relationships to their identities and politics play a significant role.

Though navigating a tumultuous political climate can be a cause of stress, some senior leaders found the current political climate to be a source of inspiration to improve their culture and advance DEIB. Fifty-one percent (51%) shared that the political climate had either strengthened their commitment to the organization's mission, sparked necessary changes in organizational culture, led to improved DEIB programs, or a combination of all three.

"There are some Board members who have been very vocal in their support, but also through their actions. I appreciate when they ask questions,… show up to events, make connections and make actions to show that they are active members in supporting the impact of our mission."

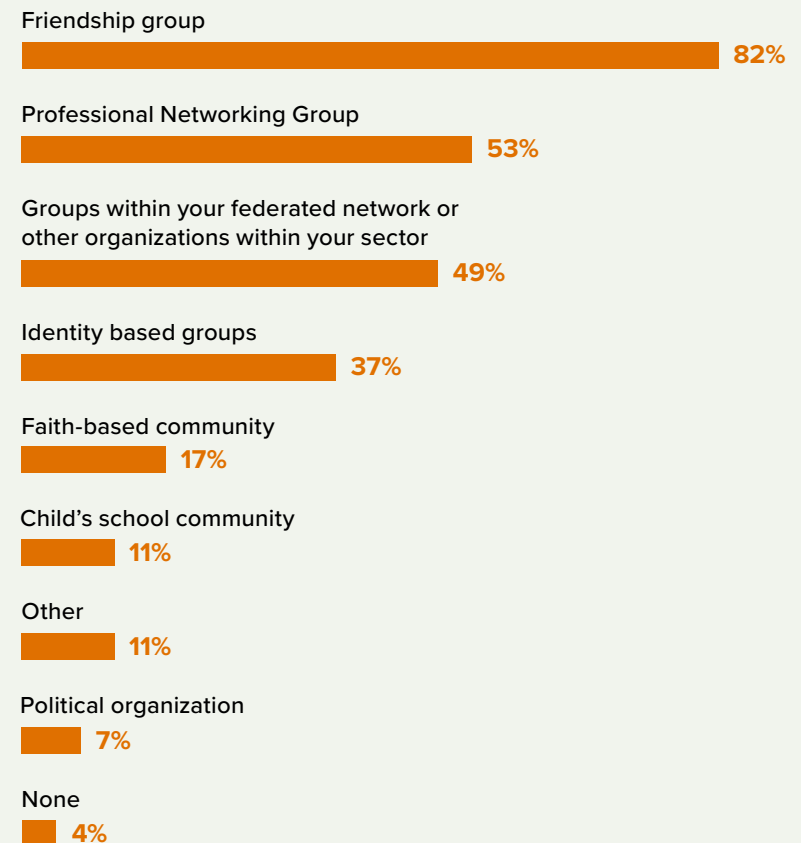# *Solutions and Support: Organizational Infrastructure* *(continued)*

SENSE OF BELONGING

We wanted to know more about the sense of community that helps ground senior leaders through these complicated considerations. We found that within their organizations, leaders in the survey most frequently found a sense of belonging with coworkers (49%), other senior leaders (51%), and direct reports (52%).

Outside of their organizations, leaders said they found belonging most deeply in friendship groups (82%), professional networking groups (53%), and groups within their federated network or sector (49%). While BIPOC leaders and White leaders reported similarly to this question, it's of note that for BIPOC leaders identity-based groups replaced network or sector groups as the third most responded (46%).

> *Professional networking groups have a unique opportunity to play a big role in helping senior leaders strike a better balance.*

Outside of your organization, in what groups do you feel a sense of belonging?

Friendship group
82%

Professional Networking Group
53%

Groups within your federated network or other organizations within your sector
49%

Identity based groups
37%

Faith-based community
17%

Child's school community
11%

Other
11%

Political organization
7%

None
4%

Solutions and Support: Organizational Infrastructure (continued)

Across all segments, leaders agreed about the most helpful support they received from professional networking groups, and the overall order in which they ranked the offerings. The vast majority said the opportunity to build relationships with peers outside their own organization was most helpful, followed by professional development opportunities, then programming (e.g., speakers, courses, etc.).

This means that professional networking groups have a unique opportunity to play a big role in helping senior leaders strike a better balance. The ability to connect outside of their own organizations allows senior leaders to engage fresh new perspectives and relate about their experiences across different contexts. This might not only introduce a new avenue to combat the overwhelm of their responsibilities, but also a path through which to really learn leaders' experiences and the way they share them with one another.

Which type of support from professional networking groups is most helpful?

Relationships with peers outside my own organizations

84%

Professional development opportunities

52%

Programming

29%

Other

10%

Areas Needing More Exploration

This report raised a number of questions and offered thoughtful ideas of responsive solutions from senior leaders that we hope to explore in the future.

- Several identities of leaders (i.e. transgender and non-binary {including demigender, genderqueer, and two-spirit}, BIPOC men, and White men) had too few respondents to draw substantive conclusions about them. Although we saw some interesting data points that could be indicative of larger patterns, we have refrained from developing hypotheses or inferences about these groups.

- The intensity in negative impacts felt by BIPOC women sparks deeper curiosity in further analysis to better understand the nuances of experiences and ideas for solutioning between each racial identity included in this broader group.

- Further study is warranted across the board, as this report reflects the tip of the iceberg in the work to not simply collect and analyze data but also engage senior leaders and other stakeholders in deeper discussions to design, fund, and pilot responsive solutions.

- In order to minimize the length of the survey we focused on exploring a broad list of topics rather than focusing intensively on one or a small number of topics. Future research should focus on probing a smaller list of topics more deeply to produce greater understanding of the experiences and needs of specific identity groups.

About the Authors

Nakia James-Jenkins (she/her)
Partner, On-Ramps

Nakia has spent her career in leadership positions at organizations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, driving the development of their people and cultures. At On-Ramps, she works with social sector organizations focused on changing the world, leading searches and advising leaders on best practices in recruitment and hiring. In addition, Nakia supports On-Ramps' internal talent/HR and operations work, as well as its work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Erica Hamilton (she/her)
CEO & Founder, The Memo I Never Got

Erica is a tri-sector executive with more than two decades of experience serving as an Executive Director, Executive & Leadership Coach, DEIB Strategist, Grantmaker, and Strategic Advisor in the non-profit, private, and academic sectors. Through MING, Erica supports leaders in deepening self-awareness, aligning their personal and professional purpose, and creating sustainable practices for driving meaningful change.

Michelle Kedem (she/her)
Founding Partner, On-Ramps

Michelle currently leads On-Ramps' Communications and Community (aka: CommSquared) working group, supports the firm's strategy development, and manages financial forecasting. She also leads client engagements, working with organizations across a range of issue areas, with an emphasis on impact investing, democracy, advocacy, and social services.

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On-Ramps is a full-service search and consulting firm serving organizations in the social sector. Our passion for social change fuels our determination to put the right people in the right positions. And our track record of successful placements reflects our hard work and high standards.

The Memo I Never Got (MING) is a strategic advisory firm providing executive coaching and consulting services to support senior leaders committed to heightening performance and driving deeper impact at mission driven enterprises.