

## Listening, Learning and Taking Action: *Our Journey to Advance Racial Equity*

By DANIELLE PULLIAM

THE PINKERTON FOUNDATION is on a journey to advance racial equity in the communities we care about through work done by the organizations we support. We know we are not alone. We see many colleagues in philanthropy struggling to develop effective strategies to deal with racial injustice and we at Pinkerton struggle along with them. We ultimately settled on a three-part Racial Equity Initiative that we'll talk about later, but this is not a story about how we "got it right." Rather, it's a report on an ongoing process that may help others as they develop responses of their own. By sharing our experience, we hope to encourage others to add their weight to a seismic shift that will help improve outcomes for all young people of color.

In the spring of 2020, the simultaneous calamities of the Covid-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, other glaring incidents of racial injustice, and the resulting political strife reignited a national campaign for racial equity. For The Pinkerton Foundation board and staff, the moment was palpable. We knew we needed to do something. We made a commitment to take action, to be timely but not hasty, to root our response in the enduring values of the foundation and to act in a way that had the greatest possible impact on the young people we are dedicated to serve. It was long past time for pretty words in a press release. We agreed to commit substantial resources. The question was: how and where?

Typical for an organization that takes pride in listening closely to our grantees, our first step was to reach out to leaders on the direct-service frontlines to learn what they were experiencing, and to hear their thoughts about how we could help. At the same time, we met with our philanthropic partners to learn what they were doing and to determine if there were ways that we could amplify their efforts. There was internal work to be done as well. As we continued our intelligence gathering, we met as a team to refine our thoughts and to discuss our own attitudes about race and racial equity. The conversations were difficult and felt courageous at times because we didn't always agree. Ultimately, these conversations were necessary to clarify the nature of racial challenges faced by our grantees and to understand the capacity of the foundation to address them.

As a Black woman, I recognized the importance of naming the discomfort that is a critical part of discussing racial equity. Especially (but not solely) for my non-BIPOC colleagues, a conversation about racial injustice produces awkward silences. People are so fearful of saying or doing the wrong things that they are guarded or do not say or do anything at all—in the hope that the problem will just go away. Fortunately, our small collegial team agreed that silence—both institutionally and with each other—was not an option. We knew that we had to respond in a way that was “in community” or “in solidarity.” We tried to lean into our discomfort, recognizing the gaps in our knowledge and that having a desire to act doesn't equate to having all the answers.

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Our conversations confirmed what we intuitively knew from our site visits. Historically marginalized communities of color were under unprecedented stress and in crisis. What's more, nonprofit organizations led by people of color faced special challenges. We know these programs well. Roughly one-third of Pinkerton's 300 grantees in any given year are headed by leaders of color. More

often than their white counterparts, these executives lack robust personal and professional networks to sustain them in times of crisis. They often work with boards made up of people who don't look like them or share the same understanding of the communities they serve. Without question, these organizations needed increased funding, but they also needed deeper investments and support to bolster their feelings of being heard and trusted. One of our key goals: to help fill that void.

Our lengthy discussions led to what we called our Racial Equity Initiative. Funding for the Initiative totaled \$1M

over two years. The financial commitment was in addition to the foundation's 5 percent minimum distribution requirement and has since been extended for a third year. As an early first step, we decided to recognize five programs in our portfolio that through teaching, learning or civic engagement were doing exceptional work on issues of race and civil rights. They each received small unrestricted grants. The second element established a pool of grant dollars to support organizations led by people of color disproportionately affected by the pandemic or facing challenges typical for executives from underrepresented groups. These general operating grants (\$25,000 to \$75,000) are designated by our program officers over and above their

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regular grant recommendations. The third, and in many ways, the most ambitious element was to enlist leaders of color in the youth development field to develop a program that would help accelerate their personal and professional growth. The foundation committed funding for at least two years to develop the project.

The result was the Pinkerton Advanced Leadership Network (PALN).

One of the themes that emerged from the program team's interviews was that executive directors often feel “distant” or “isolated” not only from white-led boards and funders, but from each other. Responding to that, we engaged Erica Hamilton, an experienced leader and advisor on diversity and inclusion and the founder of *The Memo I Never Got*, as a trusted expert partner. Her task was to design a safe-space community that was co-designed by leaders to offer resources, networks and support. Drawing on her experience at Goldman Sachs and leading programs at City Year, Prep for Prep and other nonprofits, Hamilton worked with us to offer responsive programming which included regular convenings, executive coaching and access to executives and experts in the field. Fifteen leaders were chosen to form the initial PALN core group, but our plan was to offer public programs open to other leaders of color in the youth development field.

As always, we emphasized listening. While I am available as a thought partner, we challenged the first cohort—chosen through a rigorous application process—to co-create the program. We encouraged the leaders themselves to identify the areas where they felt they could benefit from executive coaching (finance, fundraising, human resources, board relations, etc.) and to nominate speakers for the private and public forums. We noted that the PALN name was only a placeholder and encouraged them to come up with a better one. (So far, the name has stuck.) Our commitment was, and is, to offer resources, not mandates. The help being given is the help that is being asked for, not what we think is needed.

Pinkerton is in for the long haul. Reshaping the traditional power dynamic between funders and grantees is a slow, iterative process. It requires thought and reflection on both sides. Particularly at a moment when leaders of community-based organizations are stretched to the breaking point, we are committed to focusing on the whole individual. To make sure that the PALN lives up to our original intent and is truly responsive to the group, each session concludes with real-time feedback. The responses are shared immediately to ensure transparency, prompt further discussion, and introduce course corrections or new topics for later meetings.

Since March of last year, we've hosted a series of monthly half-day sessions, except for a summer hiatus, where leaders have come together to learn from one another and to build community over their triumphs, struggles and insights. The topics discussed in the small-group gatherings are private, as are the specific areas identified for executive coaching. But suffice it to say, the discussions have been frank and thoughtful. The two public sessions so far—attended by more than fifty youth-development leaders—reflect the group's general interests: “How to Develop Allies in the Funder Community” and “How BIPOC Leaders Can Leverage Mentors, Advisors, and Sponsors to Build Successful, Joyful & Sustainable Careers.”

We are encouraged by what we have seen so far, and we look forward to continue sharing updates as the leadership network evolves. We recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy in the cause of advancing racial equity. But we hope that our experience prompts further discussion. Above all, we hope to hear your thoughts about how we can all work together to further accelerate progress toward equity in the communities we are committed to serve.



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