



Black Leadership Matters

Breaking the cycle of underachievement in BAME leadership



Introduction

The subject of this provocation paper is 'Black Leadership', an extremely 'hot' topic in terms of the sensitivities involved and one about which very little research exists. The paper aims to break that silence by making more public the issues that underpin BAME (Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic) under-representation/underachievement. We hope to encourage more-open conversations about the issues, and through such conversations find new ways to break this cycle of underachievement, which impacts BAME leaders, the organisations we work for, the sector and, ultimately, wider society.

We have approached this paper in a different way to our first provocation paper. Rather than taking a more academic/research-based approach, we decided that perhaps it would be more revealing to offer a personal perspective by giving at least equal weight to my lived experience as to the research that I have done as part of an MSc and Clore Leadership Programme. Although the statistics of BAME under-representation/underachievement are well known and, in my view, not contested, the root causes lie hidden from view. My thoughts on the issues have been unpicked through a question-and-answer format.

As with our first paper we are keen to hear voices that question, support or help us to deepen our thinking and, most importantly, move the sector towards real change in improving diversity.

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The conversation (through email correspondence) is between James Doerer, a freelance researcher who works at the intersections of evidence, advocacy and policymaking, and me. I gave James a list of contentions/questions, which he then probed and prodded in order to get my thoughts and then create this piece. Here are examples of my contentions:

- 1 **The grants-funding trap (see paper 1 here) has led to the failure or underachievement of BAME organisations and programmes. The corollary of this is that BAME leaders of these organisations/programmes have also failed or underachieved.**
- 2 **Investment over 20 years in BAME leadership has resulted in fewer visible BAME leaders.**
- 3 **There is a culture of shame and silence around BAME leadership failure.**
- 4 **This culture in part contributes to why BAME underachievement persists.**
- 5 **Many of the major publicly funded BAME organisations (referred to in paper 1) started with BAME leaders but now have white Chief Executives. Does this matter? Do BAME organisations need to be BAME-led?**
- 6 **The fact that many of the major BAME-funded projects over the last 20 years are now closed or have white leaders says something both about the skills/aptitude/mindset of the BAME leaders AND about the unconscious bias built into the system.**
- 7 **It's important that we see visible role models in more traditional forms of leadership as well as newer views/representations of what leadership is: e.g., freelance consultancy or a behind-the-scenes operations' role.**



The conversation

Here's the conversation between James and me ...

Let's get straight to the question that has brought us together for this correspondence: I'd love to know why you think there are so few BAME leaders in the cultural sector today?

It's several reasons, which when combined create a 'cocktail' that prevents BAME leaders from achieving their potential, and so results in so few BAME leaders. Let me explain:

1_As outlined in the first paper, the most prominent organisations led by BAME leaders were

- policy- rather than demand-driven
- grant-funded.

Lack of public demand for these organisations and the inherent risks of grant-funding means it can be argued that the organisations were 'set up to fail' and therefore their leaders were too.

2_There is the skill/mindset gap of the BAME leaders themselves. This manifests itself in different ways:

- An inability to either recognise systemic issues (e.g., grant-funding, diversity policy, etc) or to navigate their way through these (e.g., by adopting a more entrepreneurial mindset)
- A lack of confidence in their own ability to lead the organisations they are/were running. In the past, BAME leaders were often over-promoted in a bid to improve representation, but had been given insufficient development to enable them to lead successfully.

3_Lack of institutional support –the programmes that have been set up did not directly/sufficiently address the issues faced by some BAME leaders (e.g., around their race and identity, isolation, etc.).

4_Insufficient research into the challenges of BAME leadership – the sector still has very little research or understanding as to the issues outlined above.

5_BAME leaders are themselves divided on the issues around BAME leadership under-representation and how best to deal with these. Some advocate different visions of what needs to be achieved, usually one or a mix of increased diversity, prosperity, redistribution or self-determination, as you set out in your Arts Professional' article (<http://www.artspromotional.co.uk/magazine/article/move-towards-self-determination>).

My take on these divided opinions is that competition for resources means BAME leaders pull in different directions over which should come first. Insufficient funding won't allow a plurality of approaches, nor will it fund the research required to understand which of these approaches gives the best results and why. In the past, diversity and redistribution approaches have had the most investment and it's widely accepted that the results from these could be better. This is why I would now argue for self-determination and the pursuit of prosperity as another way forward.

Take any of the points above individually, or in any combination or permutation, and you get a sense of the complexity of the issues that have got us to where we are regarding the lack of BAME leaders in the sector. Though there are common threads, no two leaders share the same story, and so a process of development is required that can respond in a practical and efficient way to this plurality of stories and challenges.



This policy-/grant-funded versus commercial aspect is something we discussed in the first paper, and something that you have a particular perspective on, given what MeWe360 is up to ... In what ways, do you think that these BAME leaders you have in mind (the ones schooled and over-promoted in grant-funded organisations) would have fared differently in commercial and demand-driven organisations?

I don't think BAME leaders would have fared better in commercial organisations. The work Lenny Henry does in film/TV, plus any stats for BAME representation in the commercial sector (whatever industry), would bear this out. The issues are the same:

- no peer support to deal with issues relating to race
- skills gaps on the part of BAME leaders
- ways of working that suit/maintain the status quo of white, middle-class, privately educated leaders who hire, network and promote others like themselves
- no understanding of the issues due to lack of research, so development programmes that are put in place by commercial companies (many TV companies have these) are not being effective
- neither BAME leaders nor the organisations they work for are talking openly about the issues.

I focus on the arts/creative industries because it's where I have most experience and because it has, more than any other sector, invested cash and time in dealing with diversity.

The arts are inherently altruistic, at least in aspiration. Arts and culture lift the human spirit, connect us to who we are, and to each other, or at the very least exist to serve a higher purpose than profit. I assume arts' funding aims to do this not just through the art and culture it funds but through the processes and mechanisms by which it funds this, and so arguably has a greater responsibility than the private sector to support diversity. Or, perhaps in taking on such a responsibility arts' funding has the power not only to change the way we are as a society through the creative output itself, but also through its processes and behaviours. The Arts Sector creates learning around diversity, which can be shared across all sectors and industries. The arts sector has the potential to lead on diversity.

“Arts and culture lift the human spirit, connect us to who we are, and to each other, or at the very least exist to serve a higher purpose than profit.”



Is there an element of a self-selection at work here? Meaning that some types of people (whether BAME or not) are predisposed to take the policy-driven/grant-funded route over the more commercial route?

If I've understood the question, then yes; and all should be given an equal chance at success. That is, BAME leaders with this predisposition should be able to fare equally as well as white leaders. The question I'm interested in is, why aren't they?

Let's come back to the lack of peer support ... What do you think those issues are? How do they manifest? And what sort of peer support might help overcome them?

The main issue is isolation. Often the higher you climb as a leader, the fewer BAME faces you see. Often BAME leaders are the only non-white people in the room – and for some this can create a feeling of 'being the only one', which can often be felt subconsciously if not consciously.

It can manifest itself in the ways that the main group socialises – and their cultural influences. I've had conversations with many BAME leaders who don't network as often as they should (or as would be helpful to their careers) because the means of networking by the group – going to bars for a drink, playing golf, taking drugs or something as basic as music/film preferences – doesn't fit with who they are. The same can be true of women in leadership positions, where a predominant male culture in some ways excludes and isolates them in a way that wouldn't happen if there were more women in the group.

Speaking out about these dynamics when you are 'the only one', be it BAME or female, is hard because you have the decision to make about 'is it just me?': my insecurity, lack of confidence; or is there something happening which actually does exclude me? Often there is nothing you

can really do about these dynamics anyway, but having someone to talk to about these experiences who is in the same position is very helpful in reducing the dissonance that can be felt, thereby reducing this extra dimension of stress/pressure from being in a leadership role.

There is a school of thought that says to make it to the top as someone with a disability, or as a woman or BAME, that you have to be that much better than your white male with no disability, and this isolation I think makes this true. There is something more you have to overcome, both overt and/or hidden, that makes the journey that bit more challenging. Peer support through this is an important part of surviving the journey 'intact'. It helps to acknowledge your lived experience (and in the most serious situations – for example, racial or sexual discrimination/abuse), gives you practical support from people who may have had the same experiences in the past and may know how to best deal with it.

I don't want you to think that I believe the solution is to pass the problem back onto individuals, but what qualities or attributes or skills do you think BAME leaders need to be equipped with in order to better navigate that gauntlet you so brilliantly describe?

They need to be:

- resilient to deal with the discrimination, which they will almost inevitably face in their career, and be discerning about when to ignore it or challenge this.
- mature with regard to their racial identity. Some people deny or ignore their blackness in order just to fit in and get along. On the surface this may seem to be a good strategy but it is ultimately 'splitting' as the person has to 'play white', ignoring/suppressing the black part of their identity in order to get along. The same happens with women who have to be more 'macho' in an all-male environment or gay people who don't come out, or someone with a



hidden disability or mental illness who keeps this hidden rather than shares it, in order to just fit in. Often this takes its toll, whether people realise or not. This is not to say that people don't survive using this strategy but it's always at some cost, either in terms of stress/dissonance/'splitting' or at the expense of losing at least part of who you are, which no one should have to do in order to thrive at work.

- able to build and use a strong support network and connect with others who have 'maturity' around issues of race. It's worth saying here that 'racial identity maturity' is something that black people and white people can have and develop, and there are some white people who have more awareness of racial dynamics at play than the BAME person they work with. (As there can be men who are more aware than some women of the gender dynamics at play.) In this way, some environments with only one BAME person can be an environment in which that BAME person thrives.
- reflexive and to have an understanding of the power dynamics at play so they can better understand, in relation to their race and leadership progression (or lack of), what's down to them, what's down to their peers (work colleague/s) and what's down to the system, the organisation, the wider culture they work in.

My next question is the really important one for those of us in pursuit of solutions ... What structures need to be in place to act as support networks to BAME leaders who are in the positions you describe? (Maybe the structures do exist but are faulty or under-resourced? I'd imagine you see MeWe360 as part of that necessary infrastructure.)

Generally, I think more training on racial identity is needed, but there are few trainers that do this well. In any case, most organisations won't invest in this kind of training because it's quite a long process of unravelling inner

prejudices, biases, preferences and it's 'dangerous' or risky work because the process inevitably throws up challenges to BAME and white participants alike, which in the short term can destabilise the work environment.

Essentially, you need an environment in which BAME leaders can access development of any of the skills/attributes listed above, which will ultimately help them to thrive not just as leaders, but as BAME leaders. It needs to be a place that recognises not all BAME leaders think in the same way about racial identity and how it impacts them, but allows input to be given at point of need – that is, when they face a challenge that relates to race.

That's what MeWe aims to do: help people see what's me, what's we and what's the system (360) – and make skilful decisions accordingly, so they thrive first as individuals and, as a result, as 'professionals'.

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Okay, let's get really practical and pragmatic ... Imagine we are 10 years from now, and MeWe360 has spawned a cohort of BAME leaders who are taking up senior positions in the arts, media, gaming, etc. They have all the attributes you describe in your last answer, and they are pushing through the sector ... Where are their allies? (Are they to be found outside the arts and creative industries? Do they come from outside the UK? Are they sympathetic insiders of established organisations or radical new voices from the periphery?) I ask as I'm not confident ours is a sector that can heal itself unaided!

In addition to the attributes I described earlier, the leaders you describe would be thought of as:

- **Credible** – able to do their leadership role well and lead an organisation that is thriving.
- **Visible** – have a profile amongst their BAME peers and in the sector, and be willing to work in their own way to support and promote increased BAME leadership.
- **Stable** – in a secure and well-paid role for long enough to be able to make a difference.

As someone journeying towards this, I guess my allies have come from all the places you state above. But there are points in the journey where you need to be willing to walk alone and be 'the visible one' and where you have to draw on your own resources including the attributes I outlined above.

Thinking about these provocation papers we are developing, just as an example, there is risk in putting my name to them, and I notice that my allies have at times also appeared to be aware of the risks and thought about how much they attach themselves to the papers. I try to do this too, but it's clear

that if everyone else decided to distance themselves from the papers at any point I would be left holding the baby. This is not necessarily a problem, but just an example of the natural boundaries of allies, and the loneliness of leadership at times.

I'm of course conscious that if, through these papers, I upset the wrong people, or the argument is misconstrued or misunderstood, or is thought to antagonise funders, this could negatively impact my own career in the creative sector. I believe I'm a credible commentator, given my long and varied experience dealing with diversity and leadership matters, and I'm ready to be visible with all the associated risks. But this can be very scary at times because MeWe is still at the development stage and not yet fully financially stable. The business model is still vulnerable. My gamble is that by being more visible and vocal I increase the chances of achieving scale and stability, but this engagement has to be navigated with some skill and (to the extent that they can) with strong support from allies.

As we explained in the previous paper – and earlier in our discussion – the funding system has not allowed those who stay invisible to sustain themselves as the funding system itself is flawed. However, it's more flawed for the invisible and less powerful/influential.

How, for example, does one justify two Opera Houses a few hundred metres from each other if not through the visibility and power of their leaders and allies? BAME projects (including MeWe) are vulnerable because we are less visible. It's not a question of comparing the value added by projects on an equal basis (not that this is even possible), but of comparing the relative influence that each can exert to secure funding within a wider system that values certain art forms over others, and certain priorities over others.

We do need radical insiders ('tempered radicals') as allies more than radical voices from the periphery, who are likely to be ignored in my experience because they are invisible to the main power-brokers. However, even



with tempered radicals on the inside as allies, the biggest challenge (something that slows progress significantly if the sector is to heal itself) is the centralised, committee, decision-making process. In order to innovate and do so quickly you need to liberate leadership and delegate power to individuals and this can't happen with the current institutions that shape the sector.

I want to explore in the next paper the difference between public and commercial sectors, including their respective decision-making processes, and the pros and cons of each, and therefore as a result whether or not (because of these differences) our sector can really heal itself.

The language we've used thus far indicates a sense of battling through, of competition and of limited room at the top. Is that real? Does it just feel that way? What does that mean in the pursuit of solutions?

Yes, there is limited room at the top. There are only a relatively small (and fixed) number of major arts organisations to lead the sector, and the people in post don't change very often. This leaves BAME leaders leading smaller organisations, often ones which they have set up themselves. They then have to fight along with everyone else for the limited grants available within their art form, and as a representative of the BAME community (and therefore as an organisation that meets the diversity priority of funders). Funders have a finite budget for diversity and so yes, this puts BAME organisations and their leaders in competition with each other. This in turn exacerbates the issue of BAME isolation, because although we all share the same problem we are also competing for the same limited pots of money to survive. It's another systemic jam, which is important to look at through the lens of power and unintended consequences.

Do you think the sense that people are fighting over a bigger slice of the pie (rather than a larger pie) makes the battle for equity, support and change especially risky [another recurring concept in our correspondence] for those engaged in it?

In a word: yes. We are competing, and so there are power dynamics at play for those of us trying to influence the system in our own way so that we stay in the game. I am doing that with these papers, perhaps. I guess the question for me and others is: Am I trying to exercise power and influence in a productive and constructive way, or not?

Let's get practical again ... How might we change that?

On a purely equitable basis, the funding for diversity, that which goes to BAME-led organisations, should be far higher than it currently is. However, being practical, I don't necessarily think the pie needs to be significantly bigger. I think most (if not everyone) can get what they need if grants are managed differently, and if we as leaders work with a more entrepreneurial mindset. If you don't spend £15m on a new building (for example) then you have that money to fund a significant number of BAME-led projects over many years. And if you fund such projects, and they operate in a more entrepreneurial way, in a few years time each of them can be making its own money through trading activity, which reduces reliance on grants, and frees up money at the end of the funding cycle to support new BAME-led projects. By investing in this way, you grow the pot. It need not be a zero-sum game any more.

Maybe I'm being too simplistic, but to me there wouldn't be a significant lack of cash, if what is there were managed differently. This would represent a drastic change in approach/culture to the current funding system, but without this there will, justifiably, be calls for a more equitable



distribution of funding to BAME-led organisations and/or projects. I want to deal with this potential change to the funding system in our next paper by exploring the differences between commercial/entrepreneurial versus public/central management culture, and ways of managing money and people, the pros and cons of both, and why the hybrid/mixed model is perhaps the way forward.

One thing that interests me, but that I approach (I hope understandably) with some trepidation, is whether all this is dependent on the assumption that BAME leaders need to lead BAME-focused projects/ organisations, or indeed vice versa?

The fact that all major BAME-focused organisations like the Bernie Grant Arts Centre, Rich Mix, Hackney Empire are now white-led after initially being BAME-led is interesting to say the least. At the same time there is an attempt by some institutions to 'policy-make' their way out of the BAME leadership issue by

- changing what counts as 'BAME-led'. For example, by counting organisations like the ones listed above as BAME-led.
- counting BAME-focused projects – projects which deliver outcomes for BAME audiences/participants, even if led by a predominantly white institution like the National Gallery – as a diversity project.
- Including as 'leadership', roles like consultancy or behind-the-scenes operations' roles.

I have no problem with any of this in principle but it would need to be done in a totally transparent way, which does not further obscure and potentially silence the debate on what I call 'visible black leadership' or mask any reduction this might have on the funding to the grassroots' BAME projects working in communities across the country.

The question all of this raises for me is, does BAME leadership, in its most traditional and visible form (as day-to-day executive leadership), actually matter?

'No' and 'Yes'

'No', in that if we don't, for whatever reason, have BAME leaders (I don't know the answer to this, it's an open question) then, assuming these organisations are worth keeping because they deliver BAME audiences and improve the lives of BAME participants, we need the best leaders to keep these organisations working. At the same time, I would like to know: Where are all the BAME leaders and why has 20 years of effort by our sector not left us in a position where such organisations can be BAME-led?

'Yes', because without a critical mass of BAME leaders who are credible, visible and stable, who act as role models of success and as a possible support system for each other, we are unlikely to see the change we all want to see.

So, my questions are: If the BAME leaders are out there, then why aren't they leading these organisations? Or, if it's true that the BAME talent doesn't currently exist and white leaders of these organisations are needed until we have the BAME leaders who are ready and able to successfully take over, how best do we get there?

These last few questions that I pose are at the heart of the conversation I'd like to start. My invitation to anyone who might read this is: You've now read my view and heard my questions, I'd love to hear yours? Let's talk ...



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