

LIBERATING LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

**A Case Study in partnership and
purpose between
NPAG and The LeadersTrust**



NPAG



LIBERATING LEADERSHIP TRANSITION: A CASE STUDY IN PARTNERSHIP AND PURPOSE BETWEEN NPAG AND THE LEADERSTRUST

As leaders in the social sector, we find ourselves in a dynamic moment of uncertainty and urgency. Our communities and families are asking for healing, and our institutions, systems, and structures – reckoning with their complicity with oppression – are being reimagined. Amid a huge amount of job transition in most sectors, many organizations are seizing this moment to examine their own ways of working and invite forward new leadership models.

At NPAG and the LeadersTrust, we believe it is time to shift hiring and transition processes and practices that have historically supported inequity. While not always perfect, we are designing new processes that bring the people at the margins of decision-making to the center and practice respect from beginning to end.

In this case study, we reflect on our partnership as a model of what is possible when we engage with people in ways that we wish to be engaged – with great care and forethought.

A values-driven partnership

The LeadersTrust is a new, independent entity focused on the people at the heart of change. The LeadersTrust believes that a deep investment in the leadership and organizational capacity of change makers is critical for their success. By delivering responsive, long-term, high-touch investment in the people at the heart of organizations, we unlock the radical imagination and inherent power of leaders, organizations, and movements to achieve transformative change. Ultimately, the LeadersTrust believes its targeted, long-term investment in leadership is, in turn, creating a social change ecosystem that is rooted in trust, where resources are invested more equitably, power is shared, and agents of change have the capacity, connections, and investment they need to reach their goals and thrive.

While the LeadersTrust had, for many years, operated as a capacity building venture within the structure of a well-established philanthropic institution, the Haas Jr. Fund, it was entering a new moment in its history as an independent entity in search of its inaugural Executive Director.

Any organization or entity navigating major structural transitions, like a move toward independence or a leadership transition, knows how challenging this process can be. The LeadersTrust staff agreed that it needed to have a search partner that was values-aligned and flexible in their approach. After interviewing several firms, the team decided to engage with NPAG – a social sector talent strategy and search firm – as its partner in reimagining a hiring process that would be rooted in, not just the diversity of the candidate pool, but in shared, core values of equity, people, connection, and trust. NPAG’s ultimate goal is to place talent acquisition at the center of movement building. This signaled the right kind of partnership between the two groups.

Collaboratively, The LeadersTrust and NPAG staff approached the recruitment and hiring process in new ways – guided foremost by relationships and intentionality. We were together in understanding that a successful process would mean more than making a ‘great’ hire, but also how genuinely we engaged all the people essential to the success of the search, from staff and board to coaches and community members. Together, we wanted to recognize all the time each candidate was asked to expend as part of the process, ensure they had an empowering and positive experience, and compensate them for this labor.

A human-centered invitation

To live into our shared values, the LeadersTrust and NPAG co-designed a process with several key innovations to traditional hiring processes:

- Each conversation began with the interviewers sharing with vulnerability and candor about themselves and why they are excited about the candidate
- Expertise, lived experience, and time are treated as sacred, and thus, candidates are paid not only for their availability but also the ideas and suggestions they shared for the organization’s future
- Black, Indigenous, and People of Color were centered on both the recruitment and the hiring side—including everyone invited to participate in interviews and de-briefs, extending beyond staff to board and community members as well

The creation of this process with the LeadersTrust team began with discovery, which NPAG has long believed is a critical phase of the process. NPAG works to bring to life the qualities, attributes, and core competencies needed in a new leader. By listening to the voices of those not just in the decision-making seats at the LeadersTrust, but to those team members impacted by the decision of the new leader, NPAG reaffirms their shared purpose and builds alignment among everyone involved.

NPAG also built and shared information during the outreach phase, adding its own networks and best ideas into the mix together with other groups and organizations who we invited to the conversation. Networking in this more collaborative paradigm is not simply a transactional solicitation of candidates, but an opportunity to mobilize, listen, and learn from an ever-expanding group of leaders, community networks, and individuals.

Operationalizing trust

Without greater trust and investment in the leaders most impacted by the problems, our sector risks replicating many of the very same injustices we are trying to shift in the world. Doing search from a human-centered stance inspires candidates to bring their whole selves into the search process. The candidate experience from end to end is about a personal and professional exploration of purpose and possibility.

Another way that operationalized trust showed up in the search process was that the LeadersTrust Advisory Board entrusted the staff to lead the search process for the inaugural Executive Director and together, they developed a framework for shared accountability and decision-making. The final decision about the hire for the Executive Director was made through collaborative conversation and consensus building.

Tethered by shared values, The LeadersTrust and NPAG learned valuable lessons:

Networking as movement building.

A hiring process, and the networking it requires to invite candidates in as partners in upholding trust, connection, and equity, is an opportunity for movement building. As we reached out to our networks to invite leaders' expertise, we learned so much from their voices, their vision for the role, and their critiques. By centering learning and transformation, we were able to invite candidate leaders into authentic dialogue without commoditizing their knowledge. For NPAG, networking was a crucial way to test the vision and message of the LeadersTrust with stakeholders and thought partners. The result was a tremendously engaged universe of over 400 individuals.

"This was a comprehensive and inclusive process that incorporated the voices of the consultant, the Program Directors who have the responsibility for the implementation of the work, and external partners. The applicants came to the interviews being very well prepared which led to an engaging and meaningful dialogue."

- Inca Mohamed

We continue to learn about building and 'knitting' community. The LeadersTrust started a practice of inviting all 11 finalist candidates to a follow-up conversation with us, to explore potential work intersections and synergy. To a person, they have leaned in and there are several with whom we are in active conversation about work we might do together.

Centering candidates in hiring leads to an inspiring and equitable process.

The LeadersTrust realized in the hiring process how important it was to be vulnerable, transparent, organized, and prepared so that each candidate could be comfortable knowing that we were clear on the role itself, what experience and skills we were looking for, and our own values and principles. For the interviews, we realized that the work of creating a good conversation does not solely lie on the candidate but on our own labor as well. Getting clear on the questions and sending them ahead of time, reading the candidate's materials in depth beforehand, and our willingness to answer hard questions truthfully were all aspects of building trust from the beginning.

We also realized that in this time of remote hiring, it was important to create as intimate of an interviewing process as possible, making room for new ways of getting to know candidates while still trying to replicate what might happen in person. At every step, NPAG

and the LeadersTrust sought to create connections with candidates through personalized ways. While prepping candidates multiple times for interviews, NPAG would engage them in length about their personal stories. The LeadersTrust team would share candid aspects of themselves at the beginning of an interview, leave ample room for candidates to ask questions, and at the end one staff member would stay behind in the room and ‘walk’ each candidate to the proverbial ‘elevator’ to say goodbye and close out the virtual session.

Together we learned how important it is for a candidate to know what is happening with the process in real time. It can produce anxiety if updates aren’t coming on a regular basis. We realized how important it is to be transparent with all of the candidates who do not make it to the next round of interviews. This is unusual in traditional search practices, as firms like to keep candidates available and interested should there be a change in thinking. In hindsight, we recognized that some candidates still needed even more transparency from us in the process, and are committed to improving communication in future searches to carefully consider each individual’s experience, regardless of whether they are moving forward in the process.

Upholding inclusivity with community members and stakeholders is invaluable, and learning around leading with values takes time, increased coordination, and patience.

A leadership transition is among the most vulnerable moments that an organization or team will experience. There is a great deal of uncertainty and discomfort. But by acknowledging this when it arises, staff can set it aside and make space for values, learning, and shared power at the helm. This is the approach that NPAG and the LeadersTrust took in inviting authentic community partnership and voice into the interview process which were woven into the final decision entrusted to the team.

Summary

The partnership between NPAG and the LeadersTrust in hiring its first Executive Director was an exercise in upholding shared values of inclusivity, care, kindness, equity, and treating the executive search as an act of liberation. Over time, and trust, our ideas on how to support candidates and bring out their best qualities overlapped, our approaches to turning dialogue into deep conversation emerged, and together, we learned how to level the power dynamics that often threaten to delay, or derail altogether, any hiring process.

Ultimately, the collaboration between NPAG and the LeadersTrust, brought forth the hiring of the LeadersTrust's inaugural Executive Director, Sidney Hargro. Leading with a bold commitment to racial and social justice, a creative yet scientific mind, and a courageous leadership disposition, Sidney has embraced the invitation to dedicate his gifts to a collective and powerful movement to change the systems we rely on to ones that are more loving, sustainable, and just.



“I have been a candidate in several executive searches. Many of the processes were inequitable at best, concluding with the inevitable ghosting phase if I was not the final candidate standing. The LeadersTrust-NPAG process invited me to show up authentically and offered me the space and time to do so. NPAG offered timely responses to my inquiries and useful feedback between interviews. I was both heard and respected from the discovery call to the final interview. This process combined with a patient onboarding plan made this by far the most effective search process I’ve experienced.”

– Sidney Hargro

This experience confirmed for us that by exchanging new ideas, collaboratively learning, adapting and iterating processes, and leaning into our values in everything we do, we can create a social change sector filled with thriving leaders who operate boldly, with creativity and joy, and in deep connection to others.

For organizations contemplating their next leadership transition, we leave you with these key questions your search committee can use as a guide:

- What are the core values the organization must uphold every step of the way?
- What do your organization need to keep or change to center humanity and share power during this search process?
- How is trust operationalized in your organization's daily interactions?
- Whose voices are not at the table that your organization will want to seek and invite?
- Who does your organization need to partner with to complement its strengths as well as uncover any gaps or blind spots?



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