Funding Black Leaders to Prevent Burnout

WITH

Dany Sigwalt
Power Shift Network

INTRO [00:00:03] You're listening to the Fund The People Podcast, I'm your host Rusty Stahl. On this show we serve up a healthy nutritious alternative to the nonprofit starvation cycle. If you work as a funder, a non-profit, or intermediary, we'll help you invest in America's nonprofit workforce to drive equity, effectiveness and endurance in our nonprofit and social justice community. So let's get going.

PILOT AD: Folks, Fund The People is cooking up a very exciting new program: The Funding that Works Academy, which will offer online courses that teach our new Talent Investing Framework right from our website. Our initial courses will focus on the fundamentals of talent investing, and there will be versions available for foundation professionals, foundation board members, nonprofit professionals, nonprofit board members and folks working in intermediary organizations, like consultants, educators and membership associations. We want to give our podcast listeners early access to this great new program, so if you fit into any of those broad categories that I just mentioned and you're interested in helping us to pilot the course, please send an email to info@fundthepeople.org and write Pilot in the subject line, you will get special early access to our cutting-edge content and help us make improvements to the course before rolling it out widely. So remember just email me info@fundthepeople.org and write Pilot in the subject line, and we'll get back to you with details. Thanks!

RUSTY [00:02:007]: Hey everybody! Welcome to the Fund The People podcast, this is your host, Rusty Stahl and I am grateful as always for your time and attention. I know you've got a

wide choice of coffee shops, so thank you for caffeinating with us today or decaffeinating, whichever way you have, whatever time of day it is, thank you for sipping some lemon iced tea with us today.

This is season 3 episode 7. ==Today we're exploring Talent Investing Principle 4: Talent Justice is essential. This principle tells us that racism, sexism, classism and other inequities are baked into the deficit of investment in the nonprofit workforce. And so our solutions must advance intersectional racial equity.== To learn about all eight principles of talent investing, go back and listen to season 3, episode 1.

==In this episode, you'll gain a blunt perspective on burnout from a Black woman who is an outgoing non-profit Executive Director, and you'll get some tangible ideas for how to address the burnout that is spreading like a virus in our sector. Dany Sigwalt ,who served as Executive Director of== [Power Shift Network](), a coalition of young people climate change orgs, recently wrote what I would call ==a pretty bold, vulnerable article in YES magazine about her own experience of burnout. The challenges she has faced trying to address it and a concrete set of recommendations for funders about how to help Black leaders address burnout.== We talk about all of this and more in our expansive conversation today.

Before we get started, be sure to subscribe to the show wherever you listen, and remember, to go to our website fundthepeople.org and sign up for our mailing list. Because we'll make sure you get every episode plus other great resources in your inbox. On the website fundthepeople.org, you can find all the podcast episodes and the show notes with links and also access our free original content on the Fund The People Tool Kit, including our talent justice work on investing in intersectional racial equity in the nonprofit workforce.

And now here's my conversation with Dany Sigwalt.

All right, well, I'm happy to be here with our special guest Danny Sigwalt, who is in the process of transitioning out of the role of Executive Director at the Power Shift Network. Welcome to the show.

DANY: [00:05:03]
Thank you, thank you for having me.

RUSTY: [00:05:05]
So give us a little bit of a snapshot, or overview of your career motivation and trajectory.

DANY: [00:05:12]
Yeah, I love this question and I've been trying to think about how I can create the snapshot that only exists in this career area because it just doesn't exist, right? Like, I do not exist in a workspace separate from my Humanity. I think the big things that folks should know about me is that both of my parents are professors, they teach African History. I grew up a couple blocks away from Howard University which folks in DC and across the country called Mecca. It's the

first Historically Black College University that was founded in the states and I also grew up one block away from buildings that were burnt out from the '68 riots well into the late 90s. So I grew up around a lot of Black excellence, but also around a lot of poverty. Bearing witness to access and privilege on the other side of the city, on the other side of the park in DC.

So, from a very young age, I've been really passionate about racial justice, which is something that has been an anchor in the way that I show up in working spaces. I majored in American studies which my college, McAllister was focused on setting Americanist through a lens of disenfranchisement, which means that I got to study a lot of ethnic studies, disability studies, women/gender/sexuality studies and that's kind of shaped the way that I see the world. After college, I graduated in 2008, which is the worst time other than now in US history to graduate and be on the job market, and I did a couple of years of Americorps and then found myself really heavily into anti-war work.

When I was a young person, I did a fair amount of anti-war organizing in high school after 9/11, and so it felt really natural for me to come into that place. And I settled into an organization that really sought to connect the wars abroad with social justice issues here in DC, but also across the country, right? So, like, underfunding of schools, terrible energy infrastructure, all of these issues that we are looking at home, underfunded medical care, are related to our inflated military budget. Really thinking about the ways that foreign military interests are impacting domestic social services, played a big role in me understanding the world, geopolitics, empire, all of these things. And I left there after a really actually horrible kind of like failure of the white anti-racist establishment and being able to hold me, pushing them to do better and create more space for Black folks in this movement work.

I left really abruptly after a lot of trauma and started doing more DC-focused work. I worked on housing campaigns, I worked on local political campaigns and in an attempt to find more stable work eventually knew that I wanted to work in either reproductive justice or climate, because hat's where there was money at the time, right? Like I could see myself settling into a relatively stable career while pushing racial justice frameworks. I found myself at Power Shift Network which is actually then still called Energy Action Coalition. Started in 2016 as the Operations Director and then fast-forward six-and-a-half, almost seven, years I've been Executive Director for a couple of years now, really pushing forward, moving the needle on racial justice within the climate movement which has just historically been an incredibly white privileged space, unable to hold more marginalized folks, and I've been really focused on changing the culture of the climate space, to be able to hold young folks of color, specifically, because I think that that's a really important key to building power.

RUSTY: [00:08:57]
So you published this article in *YES Magazine* in February 2022 entitled: How to Prevent Burnout Among Black Movement Leaders. What brought about the publication of this article, what was going on for you and what were you thinking about?

DANY: [00:09:14]

So I mean, I think that a lot was going on for me. I moved actually to Knoxville, Tennessee in November, so just a couple of months before I wrote that piece and was really burnt out. I moved because my husband got a job and I was really tired and feeling a lot of urgency and crisis within our organization, Power Shift Network. Our mission is to catalyze the collective power of young people for climate justice, to take power for climate justice and that means that we work with young people who have a lot less insight, for whom every problem or every new issue becomes a crisis, which means that because of the structure of our organization, everything takes a lot more emotional labor in a lot of ways than it would with an organization that was staffed by more seasoned folks.

And we had hit another fundraising kind of crisis, we were looking at a shortfall and I was tired of it. It has happened countless times since I've been on staff and I had just started a fellowship with the Atlantic Fellows for Racial Equity. So I reached out to my coach, Nigel Richard, who I adore, a couple of times to think about what are the resources that the fellowship program could have to offer, was it coaching, was it this? He'd connected me with a couple of resources that existed and it became really clear to me in those conversations that what I was dealing with wasn't an individual issue, right? Like we have so many more layers that are impacting our collective mental health in movement spaces around Covid, around the economy, around the political structure as it exists, after we burn ourselves out to get the people elected who then just fall through on their promises over and over again… it was really clear to me that burnout is a part of this problem that we're facing, like a part of why we're not winning is because we're not holding space for people to be able to talk about what's hard and how we're moving through it and how we're creating structures that allow people to be whole people.

And one of the things that I've realized is that it's hard for me to be vulnerable. Like, it's a really hard thing for me to be a vulnerable human being, to ask for help, to say that things aren't working and to acknowledge that things aren't working and it's not my fault. It's not because I'm not working hard enough, it's not because I'm not smart enough, it's not because I don't have the right connections to people. It's because the systems are broken.

So I wrote this piece trying to map out to some degree what was happening to me, to be able to tell this story and make it make sense in my brain. But also to make it really clear that it's a systemic issue and that burnout is a racial justice issue in terms of how resources are allocated to support leaders, especially in this moment, like two years past the big racial reckoning that supposedly changed everything, which really just meant that Black leaders were being brought into organizations with an expectation that they do all of the things that their white predecessors were to do and also fix racism. That's where I was at and writing things is part of my emotional processing. So that's the origin story of that piece.

RUSTY: [00:12:31]
Well thanks. Yeah, as I was saying to you before the show, I think the powerful vulnerability you showed in publishing the piece was really, I think, meaningful. So thank you for that. And in terms of your own, what's happened since then, you are kind of in the middle of this executive transition now, so tell us where you are in this process and then we'll get back to the article.

DANY: [00:12:45]

I think that part of the article just to bring it back, had to do with me not feeling like I can leave, right? Like, I feel like the way that my job is set up right now expects somebody to be superhuman, it's to a large degree because of the structure of our organization. I'm, like, peak middle Millennial, the folks who come in are going to be younger, and are likely going to be younger than me, stepping into this role. And I just don't want to leave this mess for other people, right? Like, I feel an immense sense of guilt just leaving, stepping away and handing something that I know is unsustainable over to a new generation of people, like reproducing these harms that exist. So, that's another piece of it, right? Like it's a realization that I need to do something within our organization, but also within the larger movement, to shift this dynamic so that it's not something that I feel guilty handing the keys over to.

That's really a big, big piece of where that was coming from. And I think since the article was written, I made public that I'm planning on leaving my role fully, completely at the end of this year and we've laid out this larger transition plan, which I'm happy to talk about in a second. But a big part of that has been really figuring out what the staffing structure for our ideal organization is going to look like and how we get the money to make that happen, right? So you know, it's partially because we're planning on growing our organization but also because this job is just too much for one human, the way that it's laid out. We're planning on bringing in three co-directors, right? So they're replacing me with three people, which is hilarious, but it's also an acknowledgement of the amount that I have overworked but also there's no restitution which is a really interesting conversation, which is part of what in the piece that I wrote, ==one of the recommendations was that we figure out a way to fund sabbaticals for folks after they're leaving, because for me to be able to try to do this work, hold the organization down, build the infrastructure for success, and figure out my own next steps it's too much to expect==.

I've heard lots of stories about executive directors just jumping into new roles without a lot of intentionality and I think that that's really detrimental to our ability to win to make these critical wins that we need to ensure that humans can continue to live on the planet and also with dignity and all of the resources that we need to be able to thrive. ==There's a lot of space for care and rest and creativity that we just do not have in this current political moment in the nonprofit sector because everything is just so focused on scarcity that we really need to figure out how to implement some space for that kind of intentionality and world building rather than reactivity because we're never going to win if we're just focusing on the bad and not building and imagining the good.==

RUSTY: [00:15:52]

Yeah, completely. There's a quote I have on my wall that I'm looking at it now, by this leader Maria De La Cruz at Headwaters Foundation For Justice. She wrote that, I think this is from her, "rest makes leadership possible". I feel like that's kind of what you're getting at, like we can't really lead forward if we don't take that time in between things and during the work as well to just recuperate and dream big and not just be reactionary.

DANY: [00:16:26]
Yeah, and I think that she would agree, you know, Covid has defined so many pieces of our lives and what our lives look like. But having a three-year-old and trying to navigate all of the horrifying pieces of Covid with a small child who is not yet vaccinated, although that's going to change soon (knock on wood) it's a lot. And there's not a lot of spaces for parents, especially mothers, to be able to just complain and problem solve in community. There's this expectation that we show up to work as a full person for whom work is our only priority and then show up to parenting as a full person whose only priority is parenting. And it's exhausting and means that we don't have downtime structured into the ways that we are living in this moment and it's a recipe for burnout over and over and over again and our culture. And our societies are really broken and it's wonderful to think about how we can rebuild them. But that's something that we need to have like energy and capacity to be able to do, which just is not the way that things are set up right now.

RUSTY: [00:17:34]
So speaking of creating space, you are on some kind of a sabbatical life process. Tell us how long is your sabbatical do you think is going to be and what are you doing with it? And then are you going back afterwards or are you done, like what's the… if you can share a little bit of that.

DANY: [00:17:52]
Totally. So my sabbatical is slowly starting. It is also fully paid, which I think is important to articulate because I'm not a person who can afford just not to work for months at a time. And just like going back really quickly, that's actually a really fascinating thing. I think that there's a question that we're going to hit on here, but what I was talking about burnout a lot of people after this article came out, told me that they just took months off from work. I was like, "Cool, that's nice. I'm the primary wage earner in my family, that is not a possibility because I want to pay my mortgage." But yeah.

So for my sabbatical I'm basically being paid to rest and my own plans which are from me, and not at all being put on me by my organization, is to do a little bit of writing. I have some dreams and projects that I haven't really had the brain capacity to focus on. And if I do have that capacity, I'm really excited to spend some energy on it and thinking about what I want to do next.

After I leave Power Shift there's some intention for me to stay on and kind of an ED emeritus role so that there's some more baked in support for future leadership with a lot of intentionality about what that looks like, right? Like there's going to be like a very clear parameter about how I'm supporting with a very contained project. And I will be probably on like some kind of consulting retainer, so that I'm still being compensated for the labor that I put in, but just like really trying to be intentional about not just handing over the keys and expecting people to be able to thrive, which is something that I wrote about in the piece, that new leaders, specially new executive directors, need structured support and that a lot of the time, they don't actually know what they're going to need. So we need to be able to be ready to be responsive and still lean into their leadership.

Yeah, I'm excited to see how it plays out, because there's not a lot out there about what transition looks like. I think that when we're being really intentional about building in new leadership, but also building opportunities for leadership from folks with like marginalized backgrounds, we need to double and triple the level of investment that we put in to make sure that they're set up for success because, you know, glass cliff is a very real reality, in terms of like folks seeing a project that's not doing well largely because of racism or classism or all of these dynamics that show up in nonprofit organizations handing over the keys and expecting somebody from a marginalized identity to just come in and fix it. When you know, the problem is too entrenched. So we're really, really committed to making sure that folks are set up for success and are creating organizations where the leadership can thrive and also the staff and the people in our organizing bases are set up well.

RUSTY: [00:20:52]
That's great. We'll put some stuff in the show notes about the glass cliff, because I think that that's an important point, and I know that Building Movement Project published a piece about that and there's some other research out there. So I think that is good to be on people's radar screens. I'm glad you're doing the sabbatical. I'm glad you're also structuring in this overlap with the new folks, that's terrific.

So, I want to bring it back to the article because you're starting to talk about the article anyway, so we might as well do that. The article talks about how there has been, and you've already mentioned, kind of this wave of new Black organizational leaders– I would say in the climate movement and well beyond as well--you know, often taking the helm of previously white-led and created organizations at a personal cost to themselves. So can you say a little more about what you see happening in the field in this regard?

DANY: [00:21:54]
I think that it's really that simple, right? And like we can talk more in depth about it, but a lot of the nonprofit sector has been really, when we think about charity frameworks, and who's most likely to have the freedom to be able to come into these spaces where folks are generally underpaid compared to what they could be, it's very, very easy for these nonprofits to become really toxic in non inclusive spaces. In 2020, there was this massive moment where people were really interested in thinking about what justice for Black folks specifically looked like, but really a moment of racial reckoning around people being able to see the impacts of centuries of white supremacist violence and terror across this continent, but also across the world and the climate movement specifically, I can talk about this for days and actually write about a bit about it in my book which we're going to touch on later, but was founded on on racism, right?

Like, a lot of the ways that the environmental movement has showed up in this country from, like, 1492 in some respects, all the way up to the day, has really been founded in the exclusion of Black and other folks of color from various spaces and that just, like, trickled down and people don't have the deep systems level understanding of how that's shown up. But it just, like, there has been exclusion on so many levels, ideologically, in the nonprofit sector, in the

environmental and climate sector specifically, more people understand foundations are like looking, donors are looking for diversity and understand that organizations need to be led by folks of color who are experiencing the impacts of that racism that exists throughout the sector to be able to address it.

And also philanthropists support a scarcity mindset. They want to get the most amount of impact with the fewest amount of dollars. And, you know we understand why, right? Like I understand why that is folks' instinct, but it's a losing strategy at the end of the day, right? So like ==now there are all of these organizations that have Black leadership but instead of maintaining the status quo, they are now expected to promote all of their campaigns and make all of the wins but also fix all of racism on this similar salary and without the necessary staff and institutional and structural support to be able to do that.== People's jobs are doubled and tripled on top of the fact that you need to build trust and ==building trust as a Black woman and as a Black person when folks are used to having white male authority figures, takes even more work, right? Like every step of this requires more labor, in terms of like product, but also more labor in terms of emotional labor.==

I mentioned this at the Geo Conference but, you know, movement leaders die young, like women of color, Urvashi Vaid who we love so much, like our bodies can't handle this amount of stress. There's so much documentation about the impacts of racism on our bodies. And I really think that the philanthropic sector is putting this on us, because, of course we want to solve racism, ==of course we want to solve racism, but the fact of the matter is the capacity to do that without the added resources is next to impossible==.

In the piece I was writing specifically about burnout and the way that it manifests, and it's… everything's individualistic, right? Like I was talking about these people who said that they took months off of work and acknowledged, right? They acknowledged that it's class privilege, they're not opaque to it, but at the same time there's no resources that exist, our organizations aren't built with the infrastructure necessary to avoid burnout, but also acknowledge the damage that burnout causes, right? Like I should be able to have access to a massive cadre of movement elders who have been doing this work for ever and some of them just aren't here anymore, which is heartbreaking because they should be. But also a lot of them are burnt out and like really deep into a scarcity mindset where they're not able to show up and support younger leaders.

And so it's just like a really broken structural system and I can't afford to just go off on a wild vacation and rest in the way that, you know, I might need to because there are people who count on me, there's like the organization, there's all these things. I need to be able to earn money and there's not, burnout isn't a quick Band-Aid, right? Like, I think that that's another important piece that we need to talk about. A psychiatrist, psychologist say that it takes three to five years to recover from burnout. And so, we need to be actively working towards figuring out what it means to be building movement in organizational cultures that really prevent burnout, but also that we need to not let people get into this stage, this final stage of chronic chronic burnout because our bodies can't take it.

We are earthlings, we are animals with bodies that we need to care for and that needs to be more clear in our spaces, which is honestly a big part of why I'm in love with all of the disability justice activists out here who are reminding us and it is a big lesson for me, right? Because a big part of disability justice frameworks in movement spaces is that overworking is bad for us, but it's also ableist, right? Because folks with disabilities that prevent them from being able to work at this pace will never be able to reach success in the way that, you know, I might be able to because of their disabilities, right? So I'm preventing folks from being able to come into leadership roles because the standard of work that I'm bringing in is more than a lot of folks could be able to offer and with that, the brilliance of lived experiences of being disabled or chronically ill aren't at the foundation of our organizational cultures.

I think there's a lot to that, that I just offered and I can talk about these things for days, but I think, you know, the beginning, middle and end is that we need to figure out how to bake in rest into our organizational cultures so that we can bring in the creativity and world building that we need that we don't have space for an isn't prioritized because the email needs to go out or the meeting needs to happen or so many things.

RUSTY: [00:28:37]
Well, you could talk about this for days and I could listen and learn for days. So, I'm getting a lot from what you're saying and I'm sure our listeners are too. So, one of the things that I feel like came up for me in reading your piece and listening to you just now is that I feel like Black people and people of color who are being recruited into these positional leadership roles in organizations, and the white folks who are maybe on the board and executive director roles and other roles in those organizations are both kind of caught in a set of contradictions or something or just challenges of how to do this well.

So, like the white people are like, okay, we need to create space, take a backseat or leave and like, as you said, hand over, turn over the keys to the castle and step away. And the people of color are like, okay this is a chance to get these opportunities that have been closed off and so we need to step up but also not over extend ourselves in this way that we're not being compensated for, that is just not viable or sustainable. And you write in the piece, I thought it was really interesting that, you know, when white people think that they can just hand over the keys and step away, they're denying resources to the leader who they're replacing themselves with or whatever and that they're reinforcing–in your words–reinforcing the racial wealth gap. So, I feel like we need to explore what is the both effective and ethical and appropriate way for white people to create that space while not abandoning the new people to the whims of the, you know, and like taking resources along and relationships along with them as they leave. And similarly, with the people of color, how to step into these roles without undermining their own well-being?

DANY: [00:30:42]
Yeah, I think that's a really important question and I think that a lot of it has to do with resource sharing. I think that there's a lot of work that folks have to do to really be able to see the values

that they bring to the table and what the resources are that we have, right? Like, I think that something that is a lesson that people have to actively learn is that ==relationships are resources and a lot of folks are gate kept from those relationships==, right? Like, it can be much harder to find the connection to the person to facilitate the introduction and it's astonishing to me the number of people in movement spaces who won't even answer an email from me that's like, "hey, I see that you're funded by this group, could you talk to me about that? Would you be interested or willing to facilitate an introduction?" Like groups that love our organization who are really deeply in relationship with us but are really, really, like, bought into a competition model of fundraising, which is ridiculous and horrific.

It's also particularly upsetting to me when I see these organizations really like putting out the faces of young folks of color, but not bringing them into leadership roles, right? Just the massive amount of gatekeeping that happens is incredibly upsetting. I also think that, I'm just like going through these pillars of white supremacy culture, and perfectionism is one of them, right? Like people, especially if you've been a part of an organization that has had massive fumbles that have been very public and very upsetting and embarrassing, folks don't want to be imperfect again, right? So, it's like I'm going to wash my hands of this thing, prevent myself from being embarrassed for making a mistake, I don't even want to try because I don't want to make that mistake, is a form of violence, right?

Because we don't know, like ==nobody knows how we dismantled the white supremacist power structure. Nobody has all of those answers. We are all working on it, and white folks need to play a really critical role and so the idea that white folks leaving an organization can help that organization better embody anti-racism is just like a form of violence in and of itself, because you're taking so much away, so many opportunities away, so many resources away from the new leaders of color== and like, a lot of that is really, you know, magnified in conversations about fundraising but it really relates to so many things, right? Like legal expertise, policy expertise, connections with folks in office. Like the list can go on and on and on and on but just like structurally, white folks generally have more access to power and by walking away you're denying all of those opportunities from the new leaders that you're so excited about hiring and bringing in it, just like fewer and fewer resources that folks are able to access.

RUSTY: [00:33:37]
It's like, it makes that glass cliff even steeper or something.

DANY: [00:33:43]
Yeah. And I think that there's also something really important about who's doing that labor. You might be stepping off of a board and think that it's obvious that this new leader is going to reach out. But because of the ways that racism and impostor syndrome and all of these things show up, and this is a big part of why I'm really working on leading with vulnerability is because nobody's perfect. I know that nobody's perfect. If everybody was perfect or anybody was perfect things would be really boring, but we need help. Like nobody can do all of these things by ourselves and it's really easy to assume that if somebody needs help, they will ask. But if you do not make that offer, people often feel like they're not not doing their job well if they need to ask

for help, that's part of the way that this whole system is structured. Asking for help makes people seem weak and unable to do their jobs, especially when you're working in a framework where it's like white supremacy assumes that folks are ill-equipped or that our leadership isn't as legitimate.

Thinking about the implicit kind of affirmative action. Like this person wouldn't be able to have gotten this job if they weren't a person of color, it's really deep. And folks need to do the low labor of showing up in support and not assume that people will feel comfortable asking people for help, because ==asking for help is something that triggers imposter syndrome, really deeply.== And I think that ==folks really need to be proactive about showing up and making those offers and being clear about what they are.==

RUSTY: [00:35:23]
I feel like I mean for me, like I left a board once, when a Black woman was hired as ED. I don't know, but I'd been on the board through like three executive transitions. It was insane. And finally, the board members who were a lot more experience in the organization and in the field than me, I think everyone got so tired of the tumult and the transitions and they ended up hiring one of the board members without a full search process and I yeah, this is not like a good, I think that's kind of dangerous when boards do that without a process of looking at other people and doing a search. So I was like, "I can't be part of that," so I left, but I was like, well, this is just going to look like, you know, and feel like I'm walking away from this new ED, you know, on her board like just as she's being brought in and and that was a long time before the last couple years of craziness and strain and stress within organizations because of the pandemic and the racial politics in organizations. So I think so many board members through executive transitions get so burned out themselves as volunteers that when the new person is hired, they are like, "I'm done," but as a result it's like that person is left without those board members to call upon.

DANY: [00:37:03]
Yeah. And I mean, I think the thing is, like, it's been my experience that if I do proactively ask people for help, they'll generally help, right? But there's something about opening the door and making it clear that that's the norm, especially for folks who are new fundraisers, right? Like new development, it's a cultural shift that people have to feel comfortable with and feel access to. And yeah, I mean we can talk for days about the structure of nonprofit organizational model and the nonprofit industrial complex and all of these things, I recently had a young staff member on an organization that I sit on the board of just be astonished to learn that board members aren't paid. It's difficult for sure.

But also, there's this level of gatekeeping, where it doesn't actually have to be a lot of labor and people can be upfront about what they're able to offer and like maybe that's three months after you leave, right? It doesn't have to be immediate. Any former board members, you hear this, I will be happy to get an email from you even if you've been gone for five or six years. It's never going to be something that's upsetting to people. But I do think that there's a duty of care, really, to make sure that folks in organizations that we care about are well supported and able to human thoroughly, you know?

RUSTY: [00:38:27]

All right. So, one of the things you wrote about in the article and by the way, we did interview Dr. Christina Maslach in season 1 of the show, who's been studying burnout in the caring profession since before I was born. And her research which she talks about in the episode, I think backs up or echoes what you were saying, that burnout is a structural issue about workplaces and organizational culture, and all of those things. It's not an individual problem. And so the solution is about building a better workplace, and a more supportive, caring, meaningful workplace, not about getting coaching, or going and taking a nap, you know. And so the whole field needs to, I think, really understand. We talk about burnout ad nauseam, but a lot of people don't bother to define it upfront and there are decades of research about it that we should be drawing upon which when I found Dr. Christina Maslach, I was like, okay there's research, there's actually a way to measure burnout that she created. Like let's start there instead of just like talking about it as if it's something we made up. But so I just wanted to share that with our listeners in hopes that folks will go back and listen to that episode,

In the article though, you talk about the solutions for burnout, these things like retreats and things being kind of white-centric, as well as individualistic. So, can you talk about what you found when you were looking for support for your burnout and your analysis of that dynamic?

DANY: [00:40:14]

I think that this question about, like, white-centric and individualistic is really like an important one to speak to because I think that there's an incredible amount of overlap, right? Like I can talk about colonialism and US Empire, but this idea of rugged individualism as the route to success in our culture and not having a culture of communal care and support is a really big one, right?

Like there are lots of conversations that are happening in psychology right now, specifically psychology Tik Tok is my point of access to this. To be clear and transparent about, you know, wellness comes from taking ownership over, like taking care of your body and moving, like moving your body and eating good food and making sure that these foundations exist. Those foundations are very hard for people for every individual person to be solely focused on, right? Like, ==we need to be able to figure out what it looks like to have more shared responsibility around collective wellness, and the nonprofit sector very much has made clear that we are focused on caring for others and not for ourselves by and large==.

And so, you know, as an executive director of an organization I have been working with folks on staff to figure out what wellness looks like, right? And part of it is that we have to come to that conversation with an acknowledgement that it looks different for everyone. And we hold that and we can recognize that different people have different needs and different things are stressful for different people. One very easy example that we have on our staff is that when I started on staff we, everybody rotated taking notes at our shared staff meetings but that can be very difficult and very stressful if you are a person with, I don't know, dyslexia, or with ADHD, but then there are other people for whom taking notes helps you focus on what's happening, right? So being really

real about where folks' brains are at, what works. Our staff has a lot of neurodivergent folks. I have ADHD, at least one person on staff has autism and one of the really defining characteristics of autism is autistic burnout, which means that it is like, it comes on much more quickly and is much more acute. And obviously we do not want this person going through that, but it's a good gut check on what is our organizational culture that exists and how do we talk about this as a shared community to meet folks needs?

Some of the really obvious things for us have been like the note-taking thing. I'm having shared expectations about how much video time is expected, like when it's expected for people to be on video or like actively wanted or desired, or when folks can hop off. We have four-day work weeks, that's a really important piece of the puzzle even if it means that fewer things are getting done during the week, which it usually doesn't honestly. It also means that people aren't having to juggle work and life, you could have a doctor's appointment on a Friday or if something comes up on a Tuesday, you can make up the day and still have time to do the things that you need to do to care for yourself.

And then another thing that I'm really interested in thinking about is shutting down the office for everybody at the same time so that it's not a mad rush when people come back from vacation, because there's just this expectation that it's on you as an individual to make sure that your needs are met in the workplace, the way that things are set up. And that also presumes that you know how to do that. And that you have been conditioned to take care of yourself as an individual and not part of a larger collective. And that is really toxic. It's really toxic. It's not the way that humans have been conditioned to function is like a product of white supremacy culture. So this idea that "I need to know preemptively that I'm hitting a line and that it's my responsibility to step back and carve out space when I'm working in an organizational culture that does not plan for that, does not have the infrastructure in place for anybody being able to step out for a week or two at a time to care for their life or their mental health, or whatever." We are conditioned to be working as hard as possible on as few dollars as possible, which also means that it's a lot harder for folks to get access to wages that allow people to just go on vacation without having to do a ton of planning, and care for themselves. It really, really requires a strong organizational culture of care that's genuine and also understands that collective liberation and winning depends on people caring for one another and having each other's backs in deep and honest ways.

Another thing that we think a lot about at PSN is the way that we're building in redundancy, right? So, like, we have enough bandwidth organizationally for one or two people to be off staff, off the clock any given moment, so that everybody has the opportunity and ability to step away. That no one person on staff has so many things on their plate that it's just not an option for them to step away. And I think that a lot of it, you know, in these conversations that I've been having with folks in philanthropy, is about making sure that the executive director is cared for in really deep ways, and it seems counterintuitive to a lot of degrees but, you know, as a mother of a human and a mother of this organization, in a lot of ways, I know that our society just expects for people to like bear more and more, and more, and more of the weight. And so if I'm able to model stepping away, that means that our staff is also going to feel empowered to do that. And if

I do not feel equipped to step away, we are like the stress and anxiety and burnout is trickling down. And I can do my best to build an organizational culture that is healthy and abundant and joyful and reflecting the world that we are trying to build, but if too much labor is expected of me, there's only so much that I can do in that respect.

RUSTY: [00:46:31]
Yeah. The culture of care term that you used as like a structural response to the burnout culture and expectations kind of that we all live with, that term culture of care we actually had an episode about that. Not to harp on our episodes, but I want to make sure these conversations do connect for people. So, I don't know if you've ever met Michelle Booth Cole in DC, who's the executive director of a group called Safe Shores. They support children who have been abused or otherwise experienced violence in DC and she wrote an article in Stanford Social Innovation Review called "A Culture of Care without Compromise". And it was about how she's trying to build a culture of care for the staff at Safe Shores. And so she came on in Season 2, episode 10 to talk about what it's meant for her and her organization to build a culture of care for the staff. Because, like you said, we're expected to care for the people who our organizations serve, but expected not to care for ourselves or each other. I bet you Michelle would be an interesting conversation for you as well.

So it's hard to keep moving because there's so much to talk about, but as we continue to go through kind of the outline that you offered in your article, you ended the article with a section talking about how foundations and funders can focus more resources on supporting Black leaders, and you've already kind of reference that earlier in the show, but talk about what you recommended there for that type of talent investing.

DANY: [00:48:17]
I think that a lot of it starts with building relationships, right? Like, I think that there's something to be said about opening the door as a resource and mapping out what those kinds of resources can look like, because there's a lot of things to learn when you step into organizational leadership. Folks at foundations have, you know, a really unique perspective in terms of what that looks like and I think that they don't realize it, but they can give people answers before they know that they need them if they're forthright and are invested in leaders, right? I mean, obviously, if you're talking about spending staff time that does cost money, but like really investing time and energy into making sure that folks are well positioned to succeed in their roles and aren't feeling like there's just an opaque culture of philanthropy, of organizing, and doing the labor to make that available.

I've definitely had really incredible program officers who have helped me kind of break down some of those walls that I will forever feel grateful for. And on top of that, I think that there's just, like, really important conversations to be had about what it means to rest. Like how we're really thinking about leadership within movement spaces, what kind of trajectories exist, how are we setting people up to make really good choices for how we're moving our energy. A lot of us EDs aren't just trying to sit on our butts all day and do nothing, like, maybe for a few months for sure because like our brains need to do things and rest, but I think that there's like a really intense

need for, I've said it a couple of times but, creativity and thinking about what the world that we're trying to build is, and creating space to make some offerings and some leaps about what we want to see rather than what we're fighting. We need the time and energy to be able to do the visioning of what the good is and build some space for building alignment on what the long-term vision is and then working together to figure out how we get there.

I think ==the culture of scarcity that we're living in right now means that we have too few people doing that big world visioning work==. That can look so many different ways, but there's like a poverty in terms of like imagination in these spaces, because everything that we're doing is just reacting to all of the badness that exists and that there's a lot of radical possibility in terms of creating space for folks who have just been in the trenches for a really long time to dream. And I think that that's a really important investment that we need.

I also think that we need more opportunities to be really intentional about transition planning. It's really funny this transition word just like, as a Black person I'm like, I'm not dying, I'm really not dying, I'm really trying hard to do everything that I can to take care of myself.

RUSTY: [00:51:15]
Maybe we should call it moving over, not transitioning.

DANY: [00:51:18]
Sure, yeah. So, like, really ==creating some models that don't feel like they are coming out of, like, crisis or scarcity but an abundance, to make sure that folks have access to the wisdom, to the programs, to the people that they need to be able to step into leadership but also really step into their own power confidently and shift organizations abundantly and powerfully.==

RUSTY: [00:51:47]
So one suggestion you made in the article that I loved was creating a movement-wide norm to fund year-long sabbaticals after leadership transitions, that would include cash compensation but also benefits. I think you said coaching and like wellness supports. There's some foundations, very few, who have made a practice out of funding sabbaticals, but certainly not year-long, certainly not that structured in terms of compensation, and certainly it's not a movement-wide norm, nor is it a philanthropy-wide norm in the funding community. So I think this is a great thing to harp on a little bit. So, can you talk about both how would that help the person who has left but also, how could that kind of norm, or something that could complement it, help the person who's just come in, because I feel like we're talking about both ends of this experience of coming in and then leaving well.

DANY: [00:52:52]
I mean, I think that I've been talking around it, right, in terms of this like visioning and dreaming and creating some space for world building. But it's very quick, people will leave a job and then cut ties. I think a lot of the time when people leave, it's incredibly stressful and really hard, even if it's happening in a way that is planned to some extent. T==he way that scarcity shows up in our organizations just means that it often feels like there's never enough time to do all the things==

that need to be done and so we're in this triage situation as we're running out the door. I think that building in some spaciousness and intentionality around what those transitions look like and creating space for the folks who are moving out of their roles to have, like, a runway to figure out what they want to do, how they want to show up in the work that we're doing, it also creates a bunch of opportunity for, like, seeds of brilliance to be dropped.

People can spend time working, like, you know, maybe they're on a board that they wish that they could invest more energy into, or maybe they have, like, a million things that they wanted to put on paper but never had the opportunity to do, maybe there's like deep reflection work and offerings that people could be making if they have the time. I think that there's real wisdom in creating space for people to follow their passions and creating that opportunity for folks to really think about what they want to do, create that runway that could look like starting an organization or starting a program or just like writing the thing that changes the world.

RUSTY:
Right. Yeah, completely.

DANY:
We need to be able to really set up systems and structures that hold people– in addition to organizations–because organizations are made of people, and if people are able to make the decisions that they want without scarcity and with a sense of abundance, we're going to be much more equipped to build the organizational and, like, movement culture that we need to, not just win the fights that we know that we need, but build the better future that we're all dreaming of.

RUSTY: [00:55:01]
Yeah. And sustain those wins, you know? The work doesn't end when we've won a big, gotten a bill passed or, right? Just look at the last 10 years, you could see things go in cycles. It's not like it ends, right? Like so we've got to be in it, not just for the wins, but like for the long haul.

Well, thank you for that. I think we should keep pushing for year-long sabbaticals and as well as that support for new directors and support for the people who are moving over, and support for people at all levels, all stages in the process of leading.

So well, you have a book out which you referenced earlier, and I want to make sure people know about the book, so tell people the name of the book and where they can find it, and what it's about and why they should buy it.

DANY: [00:55:52]
Yeah. So it's called This Book Will Save the Planet. It is a climate justice primer for young folks. The target age is 12 to 17, but I think everybody should read it. It, like, connects colonialism with the climate crisis and points to destructive capitalism as the root cause of the climate crisis and makes important connections about white supremacy and racism as kind of like a shared impact

of colonialism and capitalism alongside the climate crisis and calls for us to reinvent the world so that we can have a stable climate and social justice.

I very much encourage you not to buy it from Bezos, but you can buy anywhere else books are sold. So there's this great website called bookshop.org, which helps your local bookstores, really it's one of those situations where you can pick it up anywhere books are sold. So Barnes & Noble, your local bookstore, all of these fun places should be carrying it and if they're not you should call them and ask them to. You can pre-order it also on my website, which is danysigwalt.com.

RUSTY: [00:57:11]
Terrific and we'll put those links up to on the show notes so folks can find that and the article along with the book. The article is How to Prevent Burnout Among Black Movement Leaders, it's in YES Magazine, it's not behind a paywall or anything so people can find that.
So, thank you Dany for your time today. Thanks for your thought leadership and for all your work and labor.

DANY: [00:57:37]
Thanks a bunch Rusty. I'm glad to get to share with you.

RUSTY:
Me too.

OUTRO:
Thanks for listening to the Fund The People podcast where we help you cook up nutritious and delicious alternatives to the nonprofit starvation cycle by investing in the nonprofit workforce. On behalf of myself, Rusty Stahl, our gracious guests and everyone who makes the show possible we hope you enjoyed the episode. You can find links to the resources that were mentioned, guest bios, show notes, and the audio for this episode by visiting fundthepeople.org and clicking on Podcast. Thank you for driving change in our communities, our country and the world. Remember to keep your tank full, take care of yourself and take care of one another.