

# What Is Needed Now

*by Linda Nguyen*

**I**n today's tumultuous climate—global political turmoil; emboldened White supremacists; mass gun violence; environmental degradation; pandemics; lack of access to quality, affordable healthcare; and counting—we need leadership that can grapple with the challenges. Nonprofits play a critical role in organizing communities and advocating for better policies to face these crises, and we must now assess what we are looking for in our colleagues and ourselves. If we are to move the needle on changing systems, structures, and policies to benefit all people and the planet, we need the right people in the right organizations building mass movements for change.

But at Movement Talent, a nonprofit recruitment organization that works with a majority of BIPOC and other individuals from underrepresented communities, we are seeing that, post-COVID, position-vacancy rates continue to be an issue for the organizations we represent. Organizations, like society at large, are facing fundamental paradigm shifts. In the wake of the multiple external crises, some are trying hard to come to grips with changing expectations in the workplace—as evidenced,

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for example, by the proliferation of nonprofit staff unions. Efforts have been made to address DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) practices, improve compensation and benefits, incorporate wellness, and make more space for all staff to share their opinions on organizational matters—but in a number of cases, such efforts have been shallow, and many organizations have become fraught with (more-often-than-not hidden) internal conflicts. In such a climate, job seekers are, understandably, hesitant to make a move.

Movement work is not simply intersectional—it's chockablock. External crises are stacked on top of internal crises, and for many in the movement space, the work feels unrelenting and lacking in the psychic rewards that may have kept some motivated prior to the last few years of tumult. The issues we are collectively combating aren't just present in our organizing and advocacy work 9 to 5—we are often experiencing them acutely and personally at home, within our families and communities. Over the past three years, more than one million Americans *each month* have called in sick.<sup>1</sup> On top of that, there is the increased isolation of many people, with once in-person organizations now going remote-first. It's caused a tidal wave of new problems in the workplace around coordination, solidarity, and effective teamwork—and not many guide maps exist around how to deal with it all.

## **TRENDS AND OBSERVATIONS**

At Movement Talent, we have supported more than fifty organizations (from grassroots organizing groups and unions to PACs, philanthropic institutions, and more) with key hires—mostly mid- and senior-level roles. What we have observed over the past three years is that the climate has fundamentally changed people's interactions and motivations within the workplace as well as the types of individuals looking for roles. We are seeing many more applicants than usual wanting to switch sectors and transition to doing social justice work, and we are seeing many more applicants than usual looking first and foremost for the roles that provide the most flexibility. Some key observations:

*People are dealing with—and attending to—multiple forms of trauma, depression, and anxiety.* There is more acceptance now for people to share the challenges they are facing—

whether personal, mental, physical, or emotional—and that sharing often crosses over into the workplace. So, whether the levels and types of trauma (for example, workplace trauma) have always been there yet have never been spoken about freely or whether trauma is on the rise in real numbers is something we are examining. What is clear, via self-disclosure, is that we are interacting with many individuals who have experienced high levels of trauma.

It is an honor for us to work with so many people from so many different backgrounds, and we are here to support individuals in their professional journeys. We present this observation as a way to prepare and encourage organizations, too, to develop ways to accept, embrace, and support people on their healing journeys. These healing journeys don't need to be organization-provided experiences; however, it must be acknowledged that some individuals will need to undertake healing processes while working at your organization.<sup>2</sup> Organizations must also be mindful not to create additional trauma, which can happen when our workplaces lack clear communication about roles, responsibilities, expectations, and boundaries.

*People are more and more looking for remote work.* There is a tug-of-war going on between remote work and every other kind of work.<sup>3</sup> In particular, there is resistance from staff and prospective applicants about in-field or in-office requirements for roles that do not in fact *need* a staff member to be in the field or in the office. Some organizations are losing out on applicants due to their having requirements for staff to be in the office at least some of the time (hybrid, limited-remote) or 100 percent of the time. On average, when we are asked to recruit for two similar roles (similar experience, qualifications, salary)—but one remote, the other not—we get double the number of applicants for the remote position, no matter how much or little in-person time is required (limited/hybrid basis, and so on).

If given the choice between more or less flexibility for roughly the same type of job, most applicants will choose the option with more flexibility. Some very talented folks, seemingly great fits for the in-person roles, are looking elsewhere. This disadvantages direct-organizing and region-specific roles

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while being advantageous for remote national roles and remote operational and administrative roles.<sup>4</sup> And for some unions, there is a solidarity principle at play: “If our members are expected to show up at their jobs, why should we have different expectations for ourselves?”

At Movement Talent, we see this kind of principle across the board as a unique recruitment opportunity (not just for unions but also, for example, for a rooted community-based organization that feels that its physical presence in the community is essential to its mission, and sees that as being in solidarity with the members it represents). And we believe that clarity is key—it allows the organization to attract individuals with that same kind of orientation and helps those who differ to look elsewhere.

The unique recruitment opportunity lies in the ability of the organization to articulate those values aloud, even up front in a job announcement. Listing a position as “In-office M–F required” reads differently from “In solidarity with the members we represent—the majority of whom are retail, service, and airport workers going to work every day to provide essential services—our staff work out of our three offices located in the largest counties in the state.” That said, solidarity comes in all shapes and forms, and for people who, for example, are immunocompromised, solidarity may mean keeping as many people at home as possible!

*People are pushing back against working beyond their salaried hours.* Workers, regardless of generation, have increasingly drawn boundaries that more clearly and cleanly separate work and their personal and family lives. We’ve noticed this trend at all age levels as workers collectively argue, “Good boundaries do not mean I lack a work ethic—I work my ass off.” They are looking realistically at the cost of living, noting when a posted salary range is just not going to cut it, and declaring that they are not going to work day and night or weekends without additional compensation. What we hear from employers in response to the pushback is, “The issues we work on are not 9 to 5. We need people to understand that reality.” So, we encourage organizations to outline this carefully in their job descriptions (with real and accurate

estimates) so as to make clear from the outset what is expected of staff. The nonprofit sector has spent a lot of time and energy over the years talking about burnout and ways to avoid burnout among staff—and both the older and the younger generations are trying to take this advice!

*People still want to maintain culture and camaraderie.* For many organizations, the move to remote-first or online versus in-person engagement has put a strain on culture building. The ability of people to gather in person, create bonds, and develop friendships has been dramatically impacted due to the pandemic and its ensuing restrictions. What we are left with is trying to figure out ways to build culture over Zoom. Some groups have made tremendous strides in this arena, but overall it has left some people feeling isolated, not “part of something larger than myself,” and needing real-time connection. And for organizations seeking to build movement—whether for policy/systems change or to grow a great idea—the lack of in-person connection can be very challenging.

## **BRIGHT SPOTS**

As we take stock of what the moment is bringing us and the inherent challenges the realities present, we reflect too on who is meeting the moment in ways that can provide some inspiration for many of us still trying to gain a footing in this new world.

Just as we heard about folks coming out of the pandemic thriving in new and unexpected ways—newly attending to their health, developing more meaningful relationships with family members, learning a new craft—we are seeing a crop of leaders who started new roles within the last three years and seem to be thriving, notwithstanding the challenges. From our observation, backed by one-on-one interviews with individuals, we’ve gleaned some key characteristics that successful leaders in this moment all seem to possess:

- 1. A high sense of self-awareness.** Self-awareness is a concept often brought up in interview settings (whether directly, in the interview, or as an evaluative point after an interview: “How self-aware do you think

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this person is?"). Why is self-awareness important in a job? We see this as a trait that almost all employers look for, because they seek colleagues who can regulate how they work with others, who can determine when collaboration would be beneficial or not, and who are able to be realistic—about possibilities, volume of work, and assessing talent, to name a few standouts. The individuals we see doing well in this time are self-aware and understand what role they play in an ecosystem. (A great tool for those interested in learning more about this is Deepa Iyer's "social change ecosystem framework," which helps to "clarify values, [and] identify roles."<sup>5</sup>)

- 2. The ability to hold infinite complexities.** Last year, we read Maurice Mitchell's seminal piece on building resilient organizations, which includes terrific guidance for progressive organizations and the people who work with and for them.<sup>6</sup> The tendencies Mitchell points out that hold us back, and the orientations we require in order to get back on the path together, are all examples of the need to hold infinite complexities. We see this ability in the leaders who are navigating this moment well—they are challenged by multiple truths, by the human tendencies of contradiction and hypocrisy—and they hold all those truths and contradictions when making decisions or taking actions. One leader I've observed doing this extremely well, recently described a situation in which a colleague was not performing at the expected level. The leader explained the ways in which this was impacting the leader's own work and the direct consequences it was having, or would have, on the community they served, while at the same time straightforwardly and with genuine empathy discussed the challenges the colleague was facing. It is a tricky and often fraught dynamic, this holding of empathy while also demanding that our efforts produce change.
- 3. Internal fountains of motivation.** The personal stories of these successful leaders share some common themes, including events that, and people who, have made huge positive impacts on their lives and provide them with great sources of motivation. A number of these individuals recounted powerful stories involving family members and mentors who influenced them with their hard work and words of wisdom and guidance. This kind of motivation strikes me as different from that of a new staff member in a new position hoping for internal recognition and/or power; instead, the motivation is rooted in stories that themselves are rooted in hope, compassion, strength, difficulty, struggle, and real change.
- 4. A lack of concern vis-à-vis external validators or detractors.** Another major prevailing characteristic includes minimal concern about what others might be saying about them—whether positive or negative—and more focus on their work responsibilities. This is, admittedly, difficult in today's world, where feedback and input are placed on a pedestal and public scrutiny is high (and Twitter fingers are loose). Being in senior-level, high-profile roles, such individuals will likely be used to a plethora of both critiques and accolades. The ability to be unbothered by the noise speaks to focus—and it also speaks to a balanced ego.
- 5. Ease in situations of conflict.** This finding was harder to tease out, as there was not a definitive connecting point in approaches to conflict or even perspectives around healthy versus unhealthy conflict. What we would point to are the diverse work experiences and backgrounds of these individuals, many of whom, in addition to work in the movement space, had had the opportunity to work in different fields/sectors—including early-in-life jobs that involved manual labor, work in service industries, work in corporations, work in government, and work with people of varying

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educational attainment and incomes. This kind of diverse experience has proven useful in dealing with situations of conflict today. When asked to talk about working through a conflict, all interviewees brought up examples from different fields they had worked in and described a tendency to take an inquisitive approach to conflict and an intention of understanding. There was recognition of the vastness of perspectives as well as demonstration of their own ability to bring parts of what they learned from other sectors into the movement space.

## OFFERINGS FOR US ALL

As we continue to find our bearings in these trying times, we find hope and inspiration in the fact that there are people both holding it down *and* advancing the work—tremendously—on behalf of and with our communities. And we meet more of these folks every day.

For individuals seeking new roles and wondering whether what they bring to the table matches what is needed in many organizations in this moment, we close out with some questions that can help to spark self-examination.

**If you are someone looking for a new role**, what do you want to convey to organizations about yourself to help them see how your background will support their mission? *Questions to ask yourself that will help you get to your answer:*

- Have you done full and expansive work in thinking about what role you want to play?
- Does your vision align with the role you are suited to play?
- Have you done exhaustive self-interrogation about your motivations for pursuing this work—and are those motivations enough to sustain you over the long-term?
- Have you explored what practices you need to integrate into your work, whether spiritual/religious, wellness-centered, healing-centered, or community-building-centered?

## Possible Interview Questions to Consider



1. Are there experiences from the first half of your life that have shaped your motivation that you would be willing to share?
2. Is feedback something that is important to you? How do you take in feedback, and what do you do with the feedback that is provided to you (whether you asked for it or not)?
3. Please describe a time you were involved in or brought into a conflict situation. What were some actions you took to ameliorate the situation or support those involved in moving past the conflict?
4. Have you been asked to uphold a policy/standard that you had strong feelings against? If yes, what did you do in that situation?
5. What kind of team role do you most naturally play? Is there another/a different role you would prefer to play?

If you are building a staff team, have you thought about how important EQ (emotional quotient) is to the role? *Questions to ask yourself that will help you get to your answer:*

- How might you weigh EQ with the core responsibilities of the position?
- Are the questions you are asking in the vetting process allowing you to make a good assessment of the attributes you care about most?
- Which aspects of lived experience are ones you want to home in on specifically, and are there ways you can be respectfully inquisitive about lived experience with potential future staff?


We appreciate everyone's efforts on behalf of justice, equity, and peace, and continue to look to you for good models and examples of leadership.

## NOTES

1. Melody Schreiber, "Absence from work at record high as Americans feel strain from Covid," *The Guardian*, January 29, 2023, [theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/29/covid-absence-workforce-health-long-covid](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/29/covid-absence-workforce-health-long-covid).
2. See Prentis Hemphill, "Transforming Our Systems, Transforming Ourselves: The Pivotal Role of Healing in Social Change Work," *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2022): 114–19.
3. The following report—not nonprofit-specific—notes that there are about 120 percent more applicants for remote roles. This tracks with our own experience at Movement Talent: Datapeople, *Hiring in a Distributed World* (New York: Datapeople, 2022).
4. Direct organizing roles, which might necessitate staff to interact with community members in person—in meeting halls, at places of faith, before the city council, on the streets—are disadvantaged. In our work, region-specific/local-level roles are more likely to be in-person as well—and not just for organizers. The national groups that once had headquarters and fewer people directly in the field on a regular basis make up the overwhelming majority of organizations going remote-first.
5. Deepa Iyer, "Frequently Asked Questions," The Social Change Map, accessed February 22, 2023, [socialchangemap.com/framework](https://socialchangemap.com/framework).
6. Maurice Mitchell, "Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis," *NPQ, The Forge, and Convergence*, November 29, 2022, [nonprofitquarterly.org/building-resilient-organizations-toward-joy-and-durable-power-in-a-time-of-crisis/](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/building-resilient-organizations-toward-joy-and-durable-power-in-a-time-of-crisis/).

**LINDA NGUYEN** is the executive director of Movement Talent, a nonprofit recruitment and talent organization she founded in 2020. Nguyen previously served as the first talent director for Community Change. Before that, she worked closely with frontline human services groups across the United States to build their civic engagement capacities. In her work, Nguyen most enjoys helping people find their *ikigai* (reason for being).

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