



**Building Movement Project**

*Activating Nonprofits | Fueling Change*

# CO EXECUTIVE DIRECTORSHIP LEARNINGS





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## About Building Movement Project

The Building Movement Project (BMP) provides insightful research, practical resources, and pathways for transformative relationships that support nonprofit organizations, networks, and movements in their work to create a just and equitable world.

With over two decades of experience, BMP understands the short- and long-term effects of social and political change on the nonprofit sector. Our work draws on our expertise to help organizations navigate the challenges of leadership, internal and external changes, build greater momentum, and achieve new victories. We push organizations to ask difficult questions and offer productive tools to guide them through the process of seeking answers.

## Acknowledgements

Michelle Flores (independent writer and researcher) served as the primary author of this resource tool with tremendous support from Romana Lee-Akiyama (BMP's Senior Director of Institutional Advancement). Frances Kunreuther (BMP's founder and former Co-Executive Director) and Sean Thomas-Breitfeld (BMP's former Co-Executive Director) provided invaluable wisdom and lessons learned from their ten years of co-executive directorship during the interview process. BMP also thanks Eseosa Eke and the IconiQ Creative Group for the design and layout of this resource.

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# CO-DIRECTORSHIP AT BUILDING MOVEMENT PROJECT



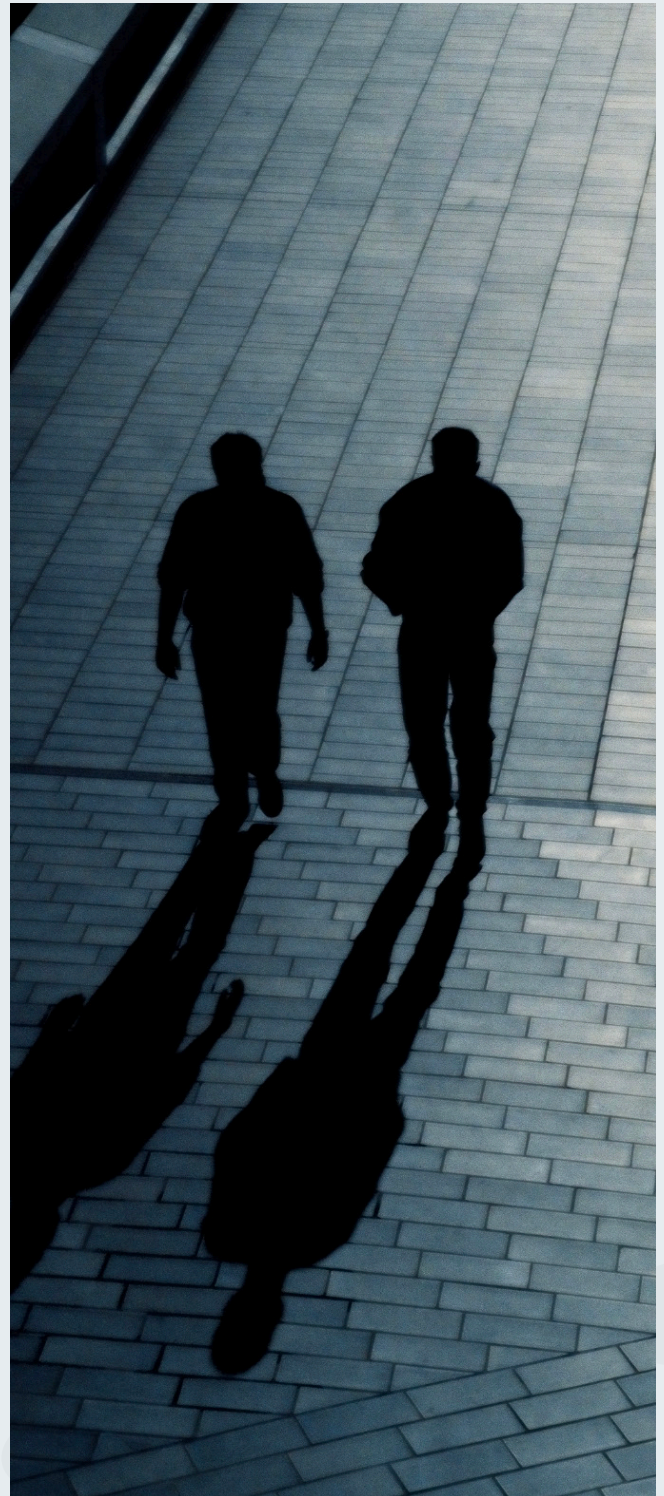
**T**he Building Movement Project (BMP) has long endeavored to practice the principles that it learns from and recommends to the field. As it transitions from a durable co-directorship model back to a sole executive director, it's useful to pause to ask what can be learned from BMP's experience with co-directorship that can be useful for the field.

The Building Movement Project began from a conversation organized by Frances Kunreuther in 1999 and grew as she continued to cultivate a collaborative learning and action space over the next few years. In those early years, it was not clear that what began as a steering committee - a six-person team that Frances brought together to shape what was then called the project on Building Movement into the Nonprofit Sector - would later become an organization. At that time, Frances worked at the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Harvard. BMP and its steering committee were primarily focused on learning together, so Frances raised money to bring the team together and for specific projects, but it remained only part of her work. Over the next couple years, as interest and funding for the project increased, Building Movement Project began paying Frances and a half-time staffer a small salary allowing the project to separate from Harvard in 2003 and move to New York City.

# CO-DIRECTORSHIP AT BUILDING MOVEMENT PROJECT

The steering committee became the Project Team, a cross between content contributors and an advisory board, who co-created BMP's work and served as an accountability mechanism to make sure the work was relevant and accountable to the field. Sean Thomas-Breitfeld joined Building Movement Project's Project Team in March 2009 when he was on staff at the Center for Community Change. In 2013, Sean moved into the co-director role. Together, Frances and Sean led the Building Movement Project for eleven years before leaving the organization in summer 2024.

This article draws on BMP's internal documentation and interviews with Frances and Sean to capture their learnings and reflections on their co-directorship in the context of the organization's leadership transition.



*Photo by willb23 from Getty Images Via Canva*

# AN EVOLVING PRACTICE

Developing a shared leadership model met a particular moment at the Building Movement Project. In 2011, BMP had published a report investigating alternative models of leadership based on three in-depth case studies and a survey of 112 nonprofit leaders. This report, [Structuring Leadership: Alternative Models for Distributing Power and Decision-making](#), made a useful contribution to developing knowledge in the area, particularly in distinguishing between “shared leadership” and “distributed leadership,” the former describing shared leadership among top executives, as in a co-directorship, and the latter a model in which decision making power is consistently distributed to other levels within the organization.

By this time, BMP was over ten years into its organizational life and, while maintaining a small staff of three, was producing a great deal of work vital to movements across the country.



*Photo by Thirdman from Pexels*

With particularly deep networks in Detroit and New Mexico and a strong Project Team to guide and execute the work, BMP had resisted crystallizing into a traditional nonprofit format. Instead, it centered the collective learning space and the contributions of Project Team members in accomplishing discrete projects.

# AN EVOLVING PRACTICE

In 2012, staff changes and increased work led BMP to seek out additional staff capacity. The Project Team worked together to put together a description of the kind of person they wanted to add to staff, prioritizing individual characteristics over a standard job description. Ideally, they sought out a co-director, but were open to a different arrangement for someone who would bring not just a willingness to work on existing projects and to fundraise, but who also brought creativity and a vision to shape the role. Most important for Frances was somebody who would partner in the work to create more movement building activity in the nonprofit sector. The Project Team also had an ongoing open conversation about the importance of race, gender, and class in their work which shaped how they thought about this role. Importantly, the idea for a co-directorship was not based on a principle or commitment to a model, but on the specific needs of the organization at the time.

By listening and learning from the field, BMP had long been an innovator in the movement ecosystem. Part of what drove that innovation was a strategic desire to learn what would work. They had already documented generational dynamics at work in leadership transitions, with boomers reluctant to move on, and younger leaders of color coming in without the support necessary to succeed. So when it came to their own decision to move toward co-directorship, as Frances put it, “if it hadn’t worked, we would have tried something else.” Such was the ethos of an organization with a well-cultivated practice of learning from the field. In bringing together these ideas, they had also sought the support of an organizational coach. As it turned out, their ideal candidate was already in the room with them.

# SHARING THE BURDEN AND LEARNING TOGETHER

Sean came on as co-director in January 2013 to much celebration. By this time, Frances and Sean shared a strong, trusting relationship grounded in the work they had already done together. They knew how to debate with each other and to learn together in the context of the Project Team. Frances had also supported Sean in his work as a staffer at the Center for Community Change. Years earlier, as a graduate student, Sean had developed a keen interest in management theory, an interest that was further deepened through his participation on the Project Team. There he could reflect on his work as a campaigner and learn from peers such as Helen Kim, a member of BMP's Project Team, who brought strong expertise in coalition management and facilitation.

In his new role as co-director, Sean was particularly interested in learning more about the nuts and bolts of organizational management and systems. With coaching from Frances and Caroline McAndrews who was on staff at the time, Sean took on the leadership of organizational budgeting and human resources and continued to hold primary oversight of those systems as the organization grew and changed fiscal sponsors. While the work was still done in consultation with Frances, as Sean puts it, "I primarily thought about that stuff on a day to day basis." For Frances this meant that after years as the primary decision maker, she had a partner to share the burden of responsibility for all aspects of the organization's success. She noted, "The top can be very lonely. There's a lot of hard decisions that you have to make. Co-directorship meant you shared."

# SHARING THE BURDEN AND LEARNING TOGETHER



With two people to take on the hard work of leading the organization, the Building Movement Project could do more.

Their practice was less about taking a full time role and dividing it in two, than it was about creating a collaborative space that opened the possibility for more and higher quality work. As Frances shared, “We didn’t just produce more, we coached each other, we talked - there’s a sharing part and a doing more part.” They both fundraised. Frances thoughtfully supported Sean’s relationship building with BMP’s funders which Sean continued to steward. They supervised staff jointly. Since BMP was a small organization, both Sean and Frances had significant roles in executing the learning processes, facilitation, research, and writing that defined the organization’s programmatic work. Crucially, as an organization that learns from the field, this meant that BMP had two strong leaders listening and learning from BMP’s many partners. When conflicts arose or they had to grapple with a particularly hard decision, they sought the support of their coach - sometimes more frequently, sometimes only a couple times a year.



# LEGACY AND IMPACT



Photo by Life Matters from Pexels

From 2013 to 2024, the Building Movement Project grew significantly, from a staff of three to its current size of twelve full time staff. In this period, BMP [published dozens of reports](#), including groundbreaking contributions in the areas of intergenerational leadership, leadership transitions, and the high impact Race to Lead series. In partnership with organizations across the country, they also developed many toolkits and other resources to support cross-movement solidarity, racial equity in the nonprofit sector, and community engagement. For ten years, BMP supported network building and field growth in New Mexico focused on service and social change. Linda Campbell, a long time member of the BMP Project Team launched and

incubated the [Detroit People's Platform \(DPP\)](#) in 2013, an organizing group focused on keeping Detroit a majority Black city. DPP was part of BMP until becoming its own organization in 2023. Building on the [Race to Lead series](#), BMP began developing a race equity assessment, [Building Blocks for Change](#) which launched in 2023. In 2019, Deepa Iyer brought the [Solidarity Is](#) program to BMP. Solidarity Is grew out of a series of gatherings, called Solidarity Summits, that she had initiated in 2015 with racial justice leaders from across the country to create space for learning and organizing around multiracial solidarity. The impact of BMP's work has reached tens of thousands of workers, activists, and nonprofit leaders working with groups across the country, a powerful legacy of their co-directorship.

# LEARNINGS AND QUESTIONS FOR THE FIELD

With Sean and Frances' co-directorship, BMP has certainly had a significant impact in the field across many areas of movement practice and knowledge production. Still, co-directorships continue to be rare, and those that do emerge do not tend to last. While Sean and Frances did not set up their co-directorship to be a model for the field, their ten years of leadership practice does offer some lessons, and perhaps some inspirational touch points for the field.



## LEADING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

While Sean was an ideal fit for the priorities that the Project Team worked together to determine for the time and the ambitions of BMP in 2013, from the outside some might have questioned the viability of a co-directorship that bridged significant gaps in age, gender, and race; Sean is a gen X Black man while Frances is a white woman and a boomer. Indeed, the Building Movement Project has developed a great deal of knowledge about the challenges faced by younger BIPOC leaders moving into leadership. Several factors seem to have made possible the bridging that this specific relationship required. First, Sean and Frances shared a trusting and supportive working relationship that preceded their co-directorship. Second, while Frances was thoughtful about the power dynamics involved, she wasn't thoughtful alone; she worked consistently with the Project Team to think through the racial, gender, and age dynamics involved with this choice and many choices before it. Considering these power dynamics was part of an ongoing practice in a collective space where candid feedback and accountability were long standing norms. Finally, from Sean's perspective, the Building Movement Project was a unique space where he could express the fullness of his identity, not just in terms of race and gender, but also his sexuality and the full range of his intellectual curiosity and initiative.

# LEARNINGS AND QUESTIONS FOR THE FIELD



## **Shared vs. Distributed Leadership**

The initial insight from BMP's early report on co-directorships - that there is a difference between shared leadership and distributed leadership - remains salient. BMP was launched and sustained in its early years by a distributed leadership model with the Project Team working collectively to guide and carry out the work and Frances coordinating as sole Executive Director. As the organization grew under Frances and Sean's co-directorship, the Project Team shifted into an Advisory Board as additional BMP staff began to do more of the programmatic work. While Sean and Frances continued to work collaboratively, arriving at decisions through some combination of persuasion, concession, consensus, and facilitated conflict resolution, this decision making practice did not extend throughout the growing organization which took on a more hierarchical form, with clearly defined decision-making roles.



## **Fit over Principle**

Co-directorship is not a teleological endpoint. If co-directorship responds not just to organizational purpose but to a moment in organizational trajectory, it could be that a healthy organization sometimes needs different leadership configurations. BMP chose co-directorship when it was a small, fiscally sponsored organization with an active and engaged Project Team that carried significant parts of the work. Today, its work and staff has expanded significantly and the organization has chosen a different leadership configuration. Across the field, further investigation into the contexts in which organizations choose co-directorship might yield some insight into what makes for a stronger or more impactful structure for each organization.

# LEARNINGS AND QUESTIONS FOR THE FIELD



## Co-directorship as a Feminist Approach to Organizational Leadership?

One early piece on co-directors in Nonprofit Quarterly interviewed ten co-directors in the field. Notably, if perhaps as a result of networked relationships, all ten co-directors, including Frances and Sean who were part of those interviewed, identified as queer.<sup>1</sup> While it would be a mistake to generalize from this small number of co-directors, perhaps the coincidence calls for a better understanding of how gender - or explicitly feminist approaches to leadership - might be operating in the decision to adopt a co-director model, the experience of co-directors, and the practice of co-directorship. Further investigation would be needed to understand whether across the board queer people are in fact overrepresented among co-directors, and if so, why. For Sean, moving into leadership at BMP marked a profound change in how he was able to express his identity as a queer Black man through his work. But it was also a vehicle for realizing a feminist vision for organizational leadership and management.

*So the first three years of my work at BMP was suddenly much more inclusive of my sexuality than it had ever been at the prior 13 years of my career. And that mattered. Sharing leadership with someone who was also queer mattered.*

1 Bell, Jeanne, Paola Cubías and Byron Johnson. 2017. Five Insights from Directors Sharing Power. Nonprofit Quarterly.

# LEARNINGS AND QUESTIONS FOR THE FIELD

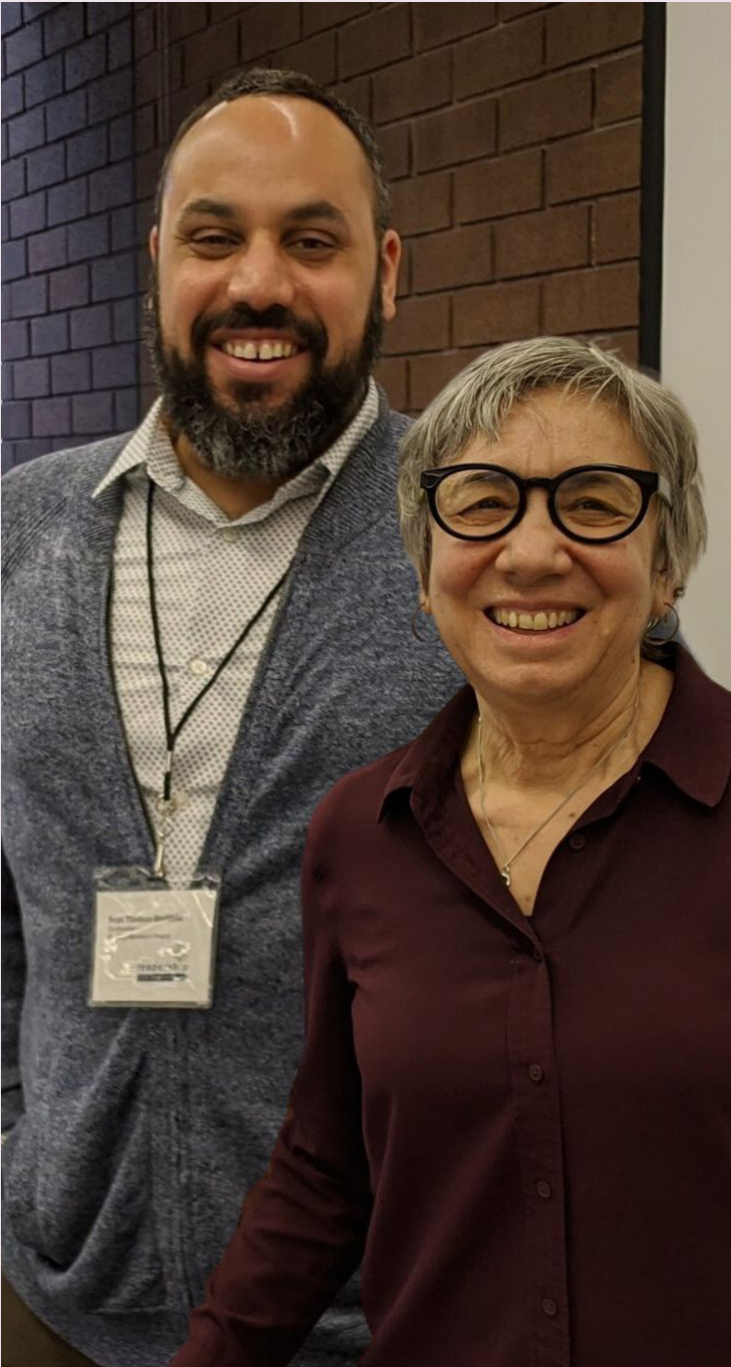


## **The Purpose of Shared Leadership**

With increased pressure on individual leaders to solve a growing number of organizational challenges, more evidence from the field is required to understand whether, how, and when shared leadership helps leaders navigate these challenges.

Co-directorship and other forms of shared leadership are frequently mentioned by those who are seeking new organizational forms to better align with a vision of social justice or liberation. However, most of the work on shared leadership draws primarily on the experience of leaders themselves and does not adequately consider other constituents, particularly staff and membership where relevant. This leaves an incomplete picture of how an organization's community experiences co-directorship and how it impacts organizational success. It also gives a one-sided view of the crucial power dynamics that could impact the success or failure of any leadership model. Digging deeper into the specific policies and practices of a larger group of organizations led by co-directors can perhaps bring us closer to understanding how these organizations see the purpose of shared leadership, and ultimately, to assess whether co-directorship meets that purpose.

# CONCLUSION



*Photo From: [Take The Lead Women](#). (2023, October 10). [Nonprofits so white: New report on lack of inclusion offers strategies](#). [Take The Lead](#).*

Consistent with the principles they've organized around for decades, Frances and Sean's tenure leading the Building Movement Project leaves a legacy of learning that points to new questions for the field. From the earliest days, Frances cultivated in the Project Team a collective space that surfaced and examined the power relationships that animate, and sometimes damage, nonprofits across sectors. Well cognizant of how racial, gendered, and age based difference could lead to conflict, Building Movement Project openly and bravely explored ways to build on the richness of solidarity that difference could also bring. Their shared commitment to listening to the field and to learning with loving rigor expressed itself in a durable co-directorship that has had an immense impact on the field. The questions their leadership raises carry that legacy forward.



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For more information, please visit The Building Movement Project at [www.buildingmovement.org](http://www.buildingmovement.org) or contact us at [info@buildingmovement.org](mailto:info@buildingmovement.org).

