

# BUILD LEADERSHIP AT THE GRASSTOPS AND THE GRASSROOTS

**M**any interviewees noted that leadership, from the grassroots and the grasstops, is crucial to strengthening the field of black male achievement. “What’s needed is bold, courageous leadership,” asserts Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, “because it’s going to require a degree of willingness to speak the hard truth, which makes some people uncomfortable.”

“What’s needed is bold, courageous leadership.”

Darren Walker, president, Ford Foundation

## GRASSTOPS

The Executives’ Alliance to Expand Opportunities for Boys and Men of Color represents a highly visible and prominent collection of philanthropic leaders. One of the most valuable roles this group can play is to use the presidents’ personal as well as organizational brands to bring attention to this issue. While this includes using their influence to get the attention of media and of public officials, it also includes making the case to board members and trustees and those that ultimately control the purse strings. Shawn Dove states pointedly, “The conversation around race and gender that is not happening on the trustee level is somewhat embarrassing. We hope the Alliance can shift that conversation.”

Similarly, the importance of high-ranking public officials directly engaging in this work cannot be overstated. Certainly, the support of the President of the United States has brought the

issue before new audiences and has drawn additional supporters. Municipal officials can also make a significant impact. The leadership of Tony Smith, former superintendent of Oakland Unified School District, played a significant role in the school board’s unanimous vote to create the district’s Office for African American Male Achievement. Former mayor Michael Bloomberg launched the Young Men’s Initiative, a \$127 million public-private partnership dedicated to improving the life outcomes of New York City’s young black and Latino men. And Mayors Michael Nutter and Mitch Landrieu have played a large role in elevating Cities United to a national scale. “Bloomberg, Nutter, and Landrieu really championing this cause and framing it not only around public safety but also around opportunity, I think, is important,” says EPIP’s Rahsaan Harris.

Notes Greg Hodge, it is also critical for the unusual suspects to speak up. Hodge observes, “Frankly, I think it’s been helpful for white men in leadership to hear somebody like George Soros say that this is a key issue. If a white person says it then it’s going to have much more credibility than if a black or brown man, or a woman says it, still. We act like that’s not true, but it’s still true.” Asked how to draw key partners to this work, Alan Jenkins replies simply, “If George Soros invites them, they’ll come.”

## GRASSROOTS

At the same time that those in power must use their position to advocate and garner support for solutions, the field needs to build a more robust leadership pipeline and cultivate a new cohort of leaders at the local level. David Banks of the Eagle Academy Foundation, among

others, sees a place for engaging successful black men. “Successful black men should be champions for this work. Right now we’re relying on George Soros and Mike Bloomberg to come to the aid of black boys.” Hodge notes that these new leaders might not be nonprofit executives. They could be artists, union shop stewards, or leaders that come from other unconventional backgrounds.

“ It’s vital that black people understand that the cavalry is not coming to save the day. We can’t wait, we must stop waiting, for iconic leaders to come in and save the day. We are them. ”

Shawn Dove, campaign manager,  
Open Society Foundations

Organizations like the California Endowment, Black Families Development, Inc., Advancement Project, and the League of Young Voters Education Fund incorporate a community and youth organizing approach. They have a deliberate focus on developing the leadership skills of community members, especially youth of color, to ensure they have a voice in their communities. Biko Baker, executive director of the League of Young Voters Education Fund, describes the potential of youth: “There are some kids out here who are extremely talented, who could innovate and change the game if a foundation or two supported their growth as executives.”

As Shawn Dove summarizes, “It’s vital that black people understand that the cavalry is not coming to save the day. We can’t wait, we must stop waiting, for iconic leaders to come in and save the day. We are them. That’s why efforts like BMe that recognize and galvanize hometown heroes and local leaders are truly important. That work on the ground, block by block, person by person, is important to complement the broader systems change work that’s needed.”

## RESOURCES



### 30 Leaders in the Fight for Black Men

*Newsweek/The Daily Beast*

List profiles activists, politicians, and writers, among others, working to change the future for African-American men.



### Dream Defenders

Organization is directed by black and brown youth who confront systemic inequality by building their collective power.



### Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy

Network of foundation professionals and social entrepreneurs develops emerging leaders committed to building an equitable society.



### League of Young Voters Education Fund

National organization utilizes grassroots organizing to empower youth from low-income communities and communities of color to participate in the democratic process.

For additional resources, visit: [bmafunders.org/beloved-community](https://bmafunders.org/beloved-community)

