

STAYING THE COURSE

How leaders hold their values when the pressure comes



Dr. Jamal Jimerson

From the doctoral dissertation *Staying the Course: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Persistence Under Pressure, A Qualitative Collective Case Study of Nonprofit DEI Leaders, 2020-2025*, July 2026

WHAT THIS RESEARCH ASKED

The record documents the backlash. This study followed the leaders who carried it.

Between 2020 and 2025, organizations across the country made public commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and then the cost of keeping those commitments rose. Funding came under threat, political exposure grew, and an environment that once rewarded the commitment began to punish it. The record of that backlash is well documented in the research literature. What the record leaves out is the people who carried the work: the leaders inside nonprofit organizations who had to decide, under real pressure, what their organizations would actually do. This study examined nonprofit leaders navigating DEI-related pressure between 2020 and 2025, and it asked one question underneath all the others. How does a leader hold their values when holding them carries a cost?

WHAT THE RESEARCH FOUND

The heaviest pressure came from inside the building.

The pressure came from three directions: financial threat, political exposure, and internal resistance. The finding that surprises people is which one carried the most weight. The heaviest pressure came from inside the organization itself, from boards, executives, and managers who feared the conflict, and it appeared more often than the federal climate that dominates the headlines. The leaders' values varied, anchored in faith, representation, dignity, integrity, and love, yet every leader measured their organization by the same standard: the gap between what it espoused and what it enacted once the commitment carried a cost. One leader in the study described hollow commitment as "a bag of chips filled with air," a package that looked full and held nothing. That gap, between the stated value and the enacted one, turned out to be the ground where leadership actually gets decided.

FINANCIAL THREAT

Funding under threat

POLITICAL EXPOSURE

The climate in the headlines

INTERNAL RESISTANCE

Boards, executives, managers. The heaviest of the three.

"a bag of chips filled with air"

Patricia, describing hollow commitment

— THE FINDING THAT ORGANIZES EVERYTHING

Conviction was constant. Leverage varied. The response followed the leverage.

Every leader in the study held their conviction, and their responses still differed widely. Some protected the work by changing its label while keeping its substance intact, some refused openly and accepted the cost, and some advanced the work through relationships and coalitions where the direct path was blocked. What separated them was rarely the strength of the belief. It was leverage: what each leader could draw on to act, whether the authority of their seat, an independent base beyond the organization's reach, or the trusted relationships around them. Conviction was constant across the study while leverage varied, and the response a leader could mount corresponded to the leverage that leader held. That finding became the Values-Based Leverage Model, and it changes how leaders can prepare, because leverage can be assessed and leverage can be built before the pressure arrives.

THE VALUES-BASED LEVERAGE MODEL

CONVICTION

Held constant across the study



LEVERAGE

The seat, an independent base, trusted relationships



RESPONSE

The move a leader can mount

"I stand so firm and true and solid that I'm okay if it means an exit plan. Life is too short. I'm not gonna be beholden."

Erica, on the leverage of an independent base

— WHY THIS MATTERS FOR YOU

The gap the study mapped is bigger than DEI.

DEI is where this pressure landed in this period, and the model reaches every commitment a leader carries under weight. A school leader holding an instructional vision through board scrutiny, an executive director holding mission through a funding cliff, a ministry leader holding a congregation through conflict, and a public administrator holding integrity through political heat are all standing in the same gap the study mapped. The research also produced a way for a leader to locate themselves inside it: a set of leadership profiles describing how leaders perceive pressure, how their values show up when it lands, and how they tend to respond. Reading your own profile is where this work becomes personal, and that is where the next conversation begins. The findings are the map, and your position on it is the conversation worth having.



If these findings speak to something you are carrying, I would welcome the conversation.

Dr. Jamal Jimerson | drjay@jimersonleadershiplab.com

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