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CAREER DECISIONS: WHEN TO WALK AWAY AND WHEN TO FIGHT FOR OUR SPACE BY NA'ILAH AMARU



As Black, Indigenous, and Brown women in politics, we exist at the intersections of blazing new trails and surviving racial and gendered assaults. Too often, joy and suffering share the same breath as we navigate the complicated reality of writing our own history.

Whether we are embarking on our careers or seasoned veterans, there is a never-ending battle to claim our space in political systems, organizations, and positions never designed for us. As BIWOC we are still reaching our “firsts.” Be it the first of us to be elected, hired, or serve in executive leadership, we are fighting the same war that leaves us with psychological, emotional, and

spiritual scars.

Yet, we fight the good fight believing our sacrifices will lead to our collective victory, which will, in turn, bring us healing and liberation. For many of us, social justice organizations are our chosen pathway. However, no matter their mission statement, many of these organizations perpetuate the same systems of oppression they claim they work to dismantle.

As Black, Indigenous, and Brown women, no matter our credentials, expertise, or accomplishments, there are organizations that will never SEE us. Although we invest our time, talent, and treasure into our role responsibilities and beyond, our value is not recognized or appreciated. That dichotomy takes its toll and at some point, we must make a decision on how to manage the labor of sharing the best of ourselves versus what's best for us.

How do we know when to walk away from the source of our pain and begin healing, and when to fight for our space in organizations that do not value us? The following questions have guided me through the decision making process in those times of conflict. I hope your own answers provide some clarity and help make a decision that's best for you.

When to Walk Away

How does your day begin?

I once worked for an organization that drained me to the point that it was hard for me to get out of bed in the morning. An overwhelming sense of dread welcomed me every day until the day I resigned. Initially, I tried rationalizing the heaviness that weighed down my chest, heart, and spirit because I so deeply believed in the mission. I ended up staying much longer than I should have even though I had lost my joy and was not in a nurturing work environment for me to try and find it again. If the emotional labor of staying in the organization leaves you exhausted before the day has even begun, it's time to start drafting your exit plan.

What is your loyalty costing you?

I once invested a considerable amount of my own political and social capital to advance an organization's mission, but my loyalty was never returned. Passed over for promotions and never received recognition for your contributions? Been there. If you invest more in your organization than they invest in you, then it may be time to start drafting your exit plan.

Is it the end of the road or is there a ladder of opportunity?

What's the next step for you if you stay? Is there an opportunity to move upward and grow professionally or is your role a dead-end? If there's no or limited opportunity for growth, then the sole beneficiary of your time and talent is the organization and not you. If you know there's no step beyond where you are, it may be time to start drafting your exit plan.

How much is left in you to give?

This answer requires an honest assessment. As BIWOC, we face never-ending pressure to be strong no matter what life throws our way. We're taught to wear superhero capes that hide our wounds. Working in toxic organizations or in roles that we've outgrown is suffocating. There's only so much left in us to keep showing up the way we need to, and WANT to. If you know your reserves are running on exhaust fumes, it may be time to start drafting a timeline for your exit plan.

How does being valued and making an impact show up for you?

In an ideal work environment, our contributions are recognized as we deepen our social impact in service of the organization's mission. However, too often, we must choose between the two: Do you want to be valued, or, do you want to make an impact? Sometimes, we can weather the storms of being overlooked because

the talent and expertise we bring to our roles make a significant difference for the people we're serving. Sometimes, making an impact isn't enough to carry the burden of being invisible and unappreciated - and that's okay. The weight of that burden doesn't mean you're not strong enough - it means it may be time to start drafting your exit plan.

When to Fight

Do you WANT to be a part of the leadership team?

I worked in an organization where once I saw how the leadership team made decisions and (mis)managed the organization, I lost any interest in wanting to become one of them. Other times, I stayed because I saw that while there were issues, they could be worked out and that I wanted to share my time and talent and be a part of that process. It is yet another example of the emotional labor we endure as BIWOC in this work. But when our perspectives and positions have the power to create the change we know is needed in our organizations, then it may be time to stand our ground and fight for our space.

Is the mission or role worth whatever it will cost you?

As BIWOC in social justice spaces, we are drawn to our roles and the organizations we choose because we want to make a difference. However, as BIWOC, our expertise is questioned, skills overlooked, and our contributions dismissed. Too often, the toll of staying where we are comes at a steep price in the form of our mental, spiritual, and physical health as well as our professional growth. However, if you can build an internal/external support team that will lift you up and help replenish you when your head/heart space is in a low place, AND you've determined that you see yourself carving out your own space in the organization for the long haul, it may be time to stand your ground and fight for your space.

Can you show up FULLY in your work?

Whether or not you're valued in your organization, can you show up fully to do the work in the environment that you're in? I once worked at an organization where I was forced to hide the best parts of myself. I couldn't share my external accomplishments or accolades from outside the organization, and I didn't feel safe or wanted. Dimming my light strangled the life out of the joy I had for my work and so I left. Not being able to show up fully as ourselves is too common for many of us as BIWOC in many social justice organizations. However, there is a difference between our jobs and our WORK. If you choose to manage the disappointment, frustration, and anger of organizational culture and work environment that doesn't create space for you to grow, it may be time to stand your ground and fight for your space.

How does being valued and making an impact show up for you?

The answer to this same question in the "Walk Away" section may be different and that's okay! Again, in an ideal work environment, our contributions are recognized as we deepen our social impact. However, too often, we must choose between the two: Do you want to be valued, or do you want to make an impact? Not being valued is all too common for BIWOC and many of us have found ways to manage the hurt and frustration, creating channels to still give the best of ourselves in organizations that do not deserve us. If making an impact is enough for you to drive through the pain of being treated as dispensable, then it may be time to stand your ground and fight for your space.

Ultimately, there is no wrong or right answer to any of these questions, there are only answers that reflect what's best for you.

As BIWOC, we often feel the need to validate why we deserve to be in the roles we're in. Experience has taught me an important question to ask ourselves as we move forward in our professional journeys: Does this organization deserve ME?

Sometimes the answer is a resounding YES or a hard NO. Regardless, as BIWOC, we have the power to decide our path forward. If you choose to walk away from an organization that doesn't value you and move towards healing, know that you are always worth fighting for, even if the people you work with don't see it and especially in the moments that you don't feel it. If you should choose to stand your ground and fight for your space, know that you have an army of countless other BIWOC who share your battleground. Whatever your choice, you are not alone. You are a Queen, and you are seen, loved, and celebrated.

Na'ilah Amaru brings 15+ years' experience with policy, political, and organizing knowledge to build democratic power at the intersections of both government and grassroots movements. An award-winning advocacy and policy strategist, Na'ilah has spearheaded key roles within direct service and advocacy non-profits, city, state, and federal government, as well as electoral and issue campaigns.



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