How Philanthropy Can Build Anti-Racist Cohort Experiences to Elevate the Genius of Black, Indigenous and Leaders of Color in Nonprofit Organizations
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Lifting up the genius and lived experience of Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) leaders is necessary to advancing racial equity and uncovering the solutions to large, systemic problems like disparities in housing, education, healthcare and the wealth gap. BIPOC communities continue to be excluded from, and wholly oppressed by, these systems and continue to experience the highest barriers when engaging with them. Even across the nonprofit landscape, leaders who reflect their communities typically receive only a fraction of funding for their nonprofit organizations, despite better outcomes and superior social capital in the communities they serve. Philanthropic organizations have an opportunity to repair historical inequities that persist today. One way they can do this is by supporting BIPOC leaders by funding and designing high quality, anti-racist cohort collaborative experiences that bring together and engage leaders in authentic and trusting ways. Cohort models, in addition to robust, multi-year general operating funding, can work to address systemic inequities. The intention behind an anti-racist cohort experience is to value and support collective action by understanding the complexity of work, creating space for collaboration, fairly compensating time and ideas, and elevating grantee work to other nonprofit and funding partners.

In 2019, the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) awarded the Greater Twin Cities United Way (GTCUW) the Equity Accelerator grant to create a cohort program of grantees that support workforce development initiatives in diverse Twin Cities communities and share a deep commitment to eliminating racial disparities in the field. Now, as the cohort comes to an end, the seven participating grantees and the GTCUW Community Impact team (GTCUW team) reflect on the experience and share eight promising practices for how funders committed to justice and racial equity, can better work alongside culturally specific organizations and design anti-racist cohort experiences with BIPOC nonprofit leaders at the center.
The United States is a nation built on slavery and colonialism. When the ‘founding fathers’ signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the practice of buying and selling enslaved people was legal in all 13 colonies. From the booming cotton empire to the expansion of the railroad, slavery provided the means to fuel America’s economic growth, and the foundation on which predominantly white businessmen, plantation owners and railroad tycoons built their wealth. Even now, more than 150 years after the adoption of the 13th Amendment, the legacy of America’s history with slavery still lives on in the philanthropic community through the types of projects funded, problematic power dynamics that breed competition and mistrust, and processes and practices that reflect philanthropy’s roots in white supremacy.

“Many foundations are built by organizations or white men who got their generational wealth or family wealth by slavery,” says one GTCUW team member. “If we’re trying to make a difference and solve [racial] disparities, we have to be radical and transparent about that. [We have to] be bold and say it.” Without a consciousness or awareness of philanthropy’s history, funders struggle to recognize where they are perpetuating inequities.
So how can the philanthropic community reckon with the living reality that comes from its history?

Funders can disrupt power dynamics by actively centralizing the voices of BIPOC leaders and communities in decision-making and solution development. Funders can also take into account the complexity of how nonprofits actually work, re-examining their rigid application processes and evaluation requirements to be better partners. We can demonstrate trust and share power by funding general operating and technical assistance, instead of program-specific, one-off grants.

Finally, to tackle large, systemic issues - nonprofits can no longer work in silos. Instead, funders can give leaders the freedom to work within interdependent, abundant and risk-free ecosystems that bring them close to former competitors. Philanthropic organizations can host and convene those ecosystems with support ‘beyond the dollars’— intentionally adding additional resources and support structures that both elevate and accelerate the critical work of grantees. GTCUW was able to provide this support through the Equity Accelerator cohort model.
Elevating the genius and lived experience of BIPOC nonprofits leaders is essential because BIPOC communities have been pushed to the margins since the abolition of slavery. A cohort model is one way to elevate the community genius we’ve left behind, uncovering unique solutions to systemic problems.

Many funders provide support ‘beyond the dollars’ for their grantees. A cohort is typically a group of grantees that are working towards a similar goal who come together to learn from each other, from experts and/or track the progress of their grants for a specific duration of time. In a cohort, grantees share best practices, learn together and build collaborative relationships.

The Equity Accelerator grant is unique because the GTCUW Community Impact team designed an anti-racist cohort experience for the seven grantees. The grantees were co-creative participants throughout the cohort experience by providing feedback and ideas. The GTCUW team was successful in creating a unique anti-racist cohort experience because they were deliberate about selecting organizations led by and serving people of color, reflecting the communities being served and deeply connecting with each organization in the cohort.
Designing an Anti-Racist Cohort Experience

Anti-racism means encouraging, supporting, and driving towards racial equity. By designing an anti-racist cohort experience with the Equity Accelerator grant, the GTCUW Community Impact team changed the way it worked with grantees by building authentic relationships, developing trust, creating space for cohort learning and elevating grantee work. To create an anti-racist cohort experience, the funder’s program staff can:

- Reflect the grantees in the cohort in authentic ways, such as sharing racial identities, lived experiences and/or geographic proximity;

- Remove the philanthropic organization from the center and place the grantee experience as the leader;

- Encourage grantees to be the designer of the cohort and to co-create with grantees;

- Actively seek feedback to improve the grantee experience.

The GTCUW team used these guiding principles to design the Equity Accelerator cohort, and the following eight promising practices demonstrate how to build an anti-racist cohort experience.
PROMISING PRACTICES
Storytelling can drive transformative change. Experts at FSG, a global consulting firm, say philanthropic organizations and grantees can create change at three different levels: structural change, relational change and transformative change. According to their theory, The Water of Systems Change, there are six interconnected conditions within these three tiers: policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models. While philanthropic organizations can target and activate each of these levers independently, true systems change takes an approach that accounts for all six conditions, and consequently all three tiers of change. However, transformative change comes from addressing the mental models of a system or the assumptions and beliefs that guide what we think and do.

Support Storytelling so BIPOC Nonprofits Have a Louder Voice
Systems don’t change permanently unless the narratives and mental models they’re built upon change, too. One of the mental models currently working against grantees is the idea that capacity-building funding doesn’t deliver results. “Donors want metrics. They want the numbers. I think it’s difficult for people to understand capacity building. It doesn’t pull at the heartstrings [like direct service],” says one GTCUW team member. “We haven’t figured out how to tell the story of systems change. It’s much easier to say, ‘This many people were employed because of this program.’ But how do you quantify the number of people impacted by systems change? It’s a much harder story to tell, and the impact often takes longer to see.” Funders who invest in storytelling can change the narratives that other funders and people in society share that create barriers for grantees. By elevating the voices of grantees, funders can eliminate barriers and change grantmaking.
One way funders could incorporate storytelling into the structure of a cohort is by inviting storytelling experts to attend cohort meetings and train grantees on the ins and outs of crafting a compelling narrative. Several times throughout the Equity Accelerator cohort, GTCUW invited consultants to share their experiences with the cohort. Afterward, GTCUW followed up on that training with a monetary investment, paying for each grantee to have 10 additional follow-up hours with the consultant.

Through stories, nonprofits have the power to leverage their work and experiences and transform systems. Funders can elevate grantee work and share power by investing in narratives. “We need to develop narratives about what we do so funders understand our work,” says one grantee. “Storytelling is powerful. It creates empathy. It puts people in others’ shoes. These are powerful emotions when we think about shifting and changing funding priorities that decision makers have stuck with for decades.” Storytelling is transformative and can change systems.

Take Action!
For all of the Equity Accelerator grantees, the cohort experience provided an opportunity to come together with people who shared similar values: a commitment to equity in workforce development, a commitment to BIPOC communities, and a willingness to engage and contribute. “I love having the time to get to know people and learn about what they're doing because I always think the magic is in the partnership,” say two grantees. “Nothing happens alone. It all happens through leveraging the strengths of our organizations and our services. An ideal cohort [is one] where we share our knowledge and wisdom together, and not keep it to ourselves, because at the end of the day, we can't build power if we're just doing it for ourselves and not sharing.” More specifically, the cohort can be “a sounding board for BIPOC and allies to explore the dismantling of racism and white power structures” says one grantee.
Creating opportunities for collaboration and partnership within a cohort starts with curating the people in the room. During the review of grant applications for the RFP, GTCUW thought about two guiding principles: “How do we find organizations that strengthen each other, and how do we create a space where organizations can build on each other and leverage each other’s skills?” To make sure GTCUW put those kinds of people together in one room, a team member got to know each applicant on a deeper level. One team member assessed factors like the demographics of their staff, the organization’s board makeup, and the nonprofit’s mission and values. What that team member ended up with was seven organizations that all shared a set of values who were at slightly different points in their organizational journey and could learn from each other.

For funders looking to design a cohort, GTCUW suggests reading up on collective impact models and social impact networks. In collective impact models, a group of people from different sectors commits to working together toward a common agenda that provides a solution to a specific social problem. Social impact networks are similar, but more fluid. They’re self-organizing groups whose structure can change rapidly, and whose decision-making power is distributed throughout the network. “[Social impact network is] the biggest bang for your buck,” says one GTCUW team member. “I look at United Way as an intermediary, serving as the backbone for these organizations to come together and partner. If [funders] move out the way, [grantees] are going to strategize about how to get the work done.”
Creating space for BIPOC leaders to collaborate with each other and share expertise is key to working alongside culturally specific organizations and designing an anti-racist cohort experience. One GTCUW team member describes the design of the Equity Accelerator cohort: “I wanted to make sure that the grantees understood that our job was to provide them with infrastructure support.” It’s money that ensures an organization is growing, learning and changing—all so they have the capacity to stick around for the long haul and create change in the community. A GTCUW team member states, “Our approach [for the cohort] was to reinforce their expertise and provide them with the services and resources needed to take their work/organizations to the next level.”
Funders can create cohort models that are anti-racist by sharing power, participating in sessions and trusting BIPOC leaders in designing sessions. A GTCUW team member states that funders can “acknowledge the power dynamic and work to gain trust, and when appropriate, demonstrate a willingness to share power, give up power and use power to advance the work.” To do this, the GTCUW team participated in all sessions right alongside the grantees. The team also participated in co-creation and provided accountability by asking for grantee feedback on cohort design and making changes throughout the grant cycle.

A GTCUW team member suggests not entering the cohort as an expert and centering and recognizing the grantee’s expertise, knowledge and assets when building the cohort. It is also important for funders to recognize the space that they are taking up in the cohort. A GTCUW team member says “participation of [the] funder in the cohort as a partner (when not a barrier)” is key.
While the Equity Accelerator grantees view cohort meetings as a place to build connections with other BIPOC leaders and learn skills like strategic planning and budgeting, they also view cohort gatherings as a considerable time commitment that takes away from their everyday obligations and workload. Time is a grantee’s most valuable resource. “They give us $50,000 for the grant to do the work, but they’re not giving us anything extra for the half-day convenings, the cost of parking or the loss of time in the office,” says one of the grantees. “Foundations need to recognize the true cost of what we do because the folks that work in foundations get paid handsomely, but they expect to give us $50,000 to change the world.” A GTCUW team member says it is important to ask, “Are there ways that the structure reinforces or reminds grantees that [the] funder holds resources?” While GTCUW does not offer additional funding for convenings and training, it provides multi-year general operating grants that can be used for programmatic and capacity needs as deemed appropriate by the nonprofit.
Requiring grantees to attend cohort meetings in order to receive grant money can feel like another onerous hurdle BIPOC leaders must jump through to get funding. So when it comes to designing these types of experiences, funders can ask themselves: “How can I make this experience an equal exchange—beyond a good lunch and a parking voucher—so that it’s truly mutually beneficial for both funders and grantees?” Ensuring a value add for everyone in the room is important.

At a minimum, funders can restructure grant budgets to compensate organizations for the requirements they ask them to fulfill—whether that’s covering an executive director’s hourly wage to attend a cohort meeting, reimbursing a nonprofit’s part-time accountant to come in and work extra hours to create a financial report, or compensating grantees for the intellectual capital they share with foundations through surveys and cohort meetings. Funders also can design sessions that accelerate existing grantee work and can co-create sessions to guarantee value add for grantees.
When designing an anti-racist cohort experience, it is important to “[make] sure people are seen and have a place to be seen,” says a GTCUW team member. For two grantees, personal relationships are what drive collaboration and progress in work and in a cohort. “So much more is possible at a quicker pace,” says one grantee. “Without trust, you don’t have any kind of a relationship, and very little, if anything, can occur.” For one GTCUW team member, building that trust starts with gathering folks around the dinner table. “People underestimate the power of having a warm meal,” says the GTCUW team member. “If you want authentic, true community engagement, food is a huge part of that community building.” In one GTCUW team member’s experience, breaking bread with others has a way of breaking the tension in a room. It gives people something else to focus on and keeps them focused on what’s going on in the room, rather than thinking about where they’re going to eat after a meeting. When people sit around a table together, they have the opportunity to laugh, to strike up tough conversations and to enjoy one another’s company beyond talking about the work or the grant. “For me to have a relationship with someone, it’s more than just business,” says one grantee. “I’ve got to know a person. I’ve got to know their background. I often say, ‘I like to break bread with them.’ If I haven’t broken bread with somebody, then that’s a different kind of value. That’s why it’s important that there is food when we have these convenings. You get to know a person, and they can share something about themselves that you might not otherwise know.”
First, the group met and GTCUW provided space for grantees to get to know one another over lunch and provided an overview of the grant. Next, the group toured an exhibition on race. Then, each member of the cohort shared a story about the first time they were confronted by racism or the first time they realized they were different from others. “For me, it was a way to let my guard down a bit because I got a chance to open up and understand where people are coming from, and they got to see [my perspective] as well,” says one of the grantees.

That day at the Science Museum was particularly influential in setting the tone for the rest of the cohort experience because GTCUW staff participated in all the activities, too. That involvement started to break down the traditional walls between grantees and funders so they could move toward building trust with one another as well. “It changes how you interact with somebody when you understand their background and where they came from,” says a GTCUW team member. “When you allow time for community building, it changes the game.”

“A hot meal, and a decent meal, goes a long way, as do culturally sensitive food choices that accommodate religious and dietary needs,” says a GTCUW team member. “When grantmakers take the time to ask people about their dietary restrictions ahead of time—and then provide options that meet those needs—it sends a signal to grantees that they are valued and welcomed for who they are.” Funders also can increase the food budget because food is an authentic vehicle to community building.

Beyond planning for meals, funders can ask themselves this: “How do I want people to feel when they’re together, and what do I want folks to experience?” For GTCUW, these two questions guided many of the choices they made for the cohort—from making sure every venue had gender-neutral restrooms to guaranteeing participants always had a quiet spot they could retreat to if they had to take a phone call or answer an urgent email during a gathering. The questions also influenced the types of experiences GTCUW staff planned for cohort members. For example, GTCUW hosted the cohort’s first convening at the Science Museum of Minnesota.

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Funders can create meaningful measures for evaluation and develop a shared understanding of success with grantees. For every grant an organization receives, nonprofit staff must write a list of outcomes and metrics they’ll have to hit to prove their organization spent the funds well. While nonprofit leaders understand the need for grantee accountability, many believe the current structure fails to capture the full picture of their work. This is why GTCUW aimed to be intentional about the information it collected during the Equity Accelerator cohort. A GTCUW team member says, “[GTCUW] tried to be clear about only collecting information that would be used, recognizing the histories of monitoring that communities of color have been subjected to.” Traditional ideas of measurement and evaluation have been laborious and do not accurately illustrate grantee progress. “Funders need to be open to understanding that success isn’t only about one- or two-year metrics, especially if we’re dealing with systemic issues as big as racism,” says one grantee. “Success has to be defined differently,” says another grantee. “Either you’re a success defined by these metrics or you’re a failure. But there’s actually a lot of other stuff in between,” comments another grantee. Success for nonprofits is about progress and forward momentum.
Nonprofits often fear that if they don’t hit their metrics, a funder won’t renew their funding for the future. But it’s different with GTCUW. “They’re not holding that kind of power over us. It really feels like they’re here to help,” say two grantees. “...we can pick up the phone and call our program officer, accountant or any person working on the grant and say, ‘You know what? We’ve thought about it, and we really need to make some changes.’ And we’ve been met and welcomed with, ‘Okay, we understand that.’”

In addition to being in constant conversation with grantees, funders can co-create and set measures of success with grantees so the measures are meaningful to the specific work of each grantee. Funders also can develop achievable measures of success that are transparent to grantees. A GTCUW team member says, “We have to be adaptable once we begin the work and when necessary, change indicators/measures of success. Our job is to be a resource and champion. Oftentimes, too many funders are into heavy compliance and penalize organizations when they lose staff and can’t meet ‘agreed upon’ outcomes.”
Collaboration between nonprofits can be hard to come by in the philanthropic space, where it can feel like nonprofits are competing for the same scarce resources and fighting just to survive. “Grantees are so territorial because everybody is struggling for the same funding,” says one grantee. “It discourages collaboration because everybody wants to have their own share. But then everybody starts duplicating the same effort. I can't tell you how many people are out there doing financial literacy when there's already an organization that has been doing it longer and does it far better. Why not collaborate with them?” Cohorts foster collaboration, which sparks innovation and greater change.
When designing cohorts, funders can incentivize nonprofits to work together and build on each other’s strengths. For one grantee, it’s as easy as funders requiring an applicant to form a partnership with an organization in order to apply for a particular cohort experience or pool of funding. “Let’s take the strength of one [organization] and combine it with the strength of another, and then provide a service,” says the grantee. “Make them report as one entity, almost like a limited partnership. If a funder insists on nonprofits partnering with other organizations, they will start to look at the strength of that.” For the grantee, that shift in perspective will ultimately lead nonprofits to serve their communities better.

“We have to make the client or the community central,” says the grantee. “When that’s not central and everybody is just trying to survive and make payroll, you lose sight of why you came together and why you formed the organization in the first place.”
Through the combined efforts and expertise of BIPOC-led cohorts and funders, greater change can occur. Annually, funders funnel millions of dollars into nonprofits across Minnesota. Most of that money goes toward direct services or programs, such as giving money to a nonprofit so they can help an individual find a job or somewhere to live. However, grantees in the Equity Accelerator cohort want to see funders direct more resources and effort toward advocacy, such as influencing legislative laws, government policies and employer practices. This kind of approach will help the sector shift from a reactive role to a proactive one—where organizations can work toward systems change by addressing the root causes of an issue, rather than just the fallout. “A state organization like DEED has an opportunity to build an advocacy agenda that they move,” says one grantee. “We can all do it together, but they’ve got a huge leg up because they can walk to the governor’s office and say, ‘We need to change this.’”
“I can't say enough about the advocacy work that's needed,” says one grantee. “Dr. King would say, ‘It doesn't make a difference if I'm able to go to a restaurant if I can't afford to buy the burger there.’ There is advocacy work that's needed to talk about the employment barriers and the race barriers, and to help us bring attention to how government policies keep people out and create pathways into failure. In addition to helping us to prepare [the workforce], funders could help us put more pressure on the employment community and the legislative to look at some of their laws. They can be very strong advocates.”
Using a cohort model as a platform for advocacy shifts power to BIPOC leaders and gives them an opportunity to change the system rather than just work within broken structures. Nonprofit leaders are anxious to use cohorts to spark collective action around shared values and interests. “I can imagine a scenario in which a United Way or DEED would say, ‘Here’s your $100,000 to do the work,” says one grantee. “And here’s another $30,000 to add with the other grantees around advocacy efforts that you’re going to collectively create as a result of your work.’”

But advocacy work requires strong leadership from funders to take bold stances by sharing power with BIPOC leaders and identifying priority issues because advocacy takes time and resources. “You really have to be committed to this work,” says a grantee. “It can’t be the flavor of the day.

GTCUW taking [on advocacy around equity and racial justice] is really important because they’re setting the tone and influencing other philanthropic organizations to say, ‘Yes, we want to address this.’” A GTCUW team member says “a commitment to bold thinking and action” is important for designing an anti-racist cohort and driving systems change. Funders can take bold action by supporting BIPOC leaders to lead advocacy work and providing financial resources to advance collective action.

Take Action!
Thank you to the seven DEED Equity Accelerator grantees who shared their insight and ideas for how philanthropic organizations can create more just and equitable choices both in cohort and grant design. Get to know them below:

Asian Economic Development Association
CAPI
Merrick Community Services
Model Cities
Northside Economic Opportunity Network
St. Paul Youth Services
Ujamaa Place
About Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA)

AEDA strives to increase economic opportunities for Asian Americans under a racial and economic equity framework that recognizes the wealth asset and opportunity gaps between many Minnesotan Southeast Asians and the majority of the state. To achieve this mission, AEDA deploys an array of mutually-reinforcing, cross-sector local economic development, small business development, career development, leadership development, physical revitalization, community building and creative placemaking strategies to empower lower-income Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees with the tools and resources needed to address a range of challenges that keep these communities economically marginalized. AEDA’s most recent achievement is developing its construction training more effectively. If AEDA found the right partners or resources, it would love to have its own training facility with multiple disciplines such as HVAC, Piping, Electrical, and Carpentry. It would like to be a resource for employers to send their employees for on-going training and a source of staff recruitment for the industry.
CAPI builds vibrant communities by providing immigrants and refugees the resources needed to navigate services and systems in Minnesota. CAPI’s most recent achievement is receiving its first-ever financial capacity grant from LISC Twin Cities, which helped to build internal infrastructure and allowed CAPI to add financial opportunity services to its work and to move toward offering wraparound workforce services. If CAPI found the right partners or resources, it would build a collaborative of small nonprofits because it’s passionate about creating programmatic collaboration with other grassroots organizations in its ecosystem that play a critical role in moving the community forward.
Merrick Community Services’ mission is to support individuals and families to navigate life transitions, find health and stability, and promote independence. Its most recent achievement is receiving funding from a local funder who had previously denied its requests. If Merrick Community Services found the right partners or resources, it would want to provide Commercial Driver’s License and information technology training opportunities that offer stipends to cover a number of living expenses — such as child care — that could be an impediment to someone taking advantage of training otherwise.
About Model Cities

Model Cities’ mission is to provide social and economic prosperity by providing access to opportunities that stabilize and develop families and communities. One of its most recent wins is the development of its Youth Services Theory of Change as it has helped to organize the thoughts of staff at Model Cities around the services provided to youth. If Model Cities found the right partners or resources, it would pursue the implementation of a trauma-informed approach to its agency’s work with youth and families.
About Northside Economic Opportunity Network (NEON)

NEON’s mission is to build wealth for low-to-moderate income entrepreneurs in North Minneapolis and surrounding communities. One of NEON’s most recent achievements is being selected by Hennepin County as one of the organizations to help businesses that will be affected by the light rail Bottineau Blue Line. If NEON found the right partners or resources, it would like to pursue an idea for an esports arena and gaming that would provide a technology business or career ladder for our young people.
About St. Paul Youth Services (SPYS)

SPYS’ mission is to improve the community’s collective ability to engage and support all youth by pioneering and sharing best practices. SPYS works alongside young people, transforms institutional practices, and amplifies the voices of youth in policy. One of SPYS’ most recent wins is growing its board of directors. If SPYS found the right partners or resources, it would pursue youth social entrepreneurship.
About Ujamaa Place

Ujamaa Place provides programming and services to African American men between the ages of 18-30 who are economically disadvantaged and have experienced repeated cycles of failure. One recent achievement is receiving perpetual funding from a foundation that continues to support the mission since the startup and stabilization phases. If Ujamaa Place found the right partners or resources, it (located in St. Paul) would pursue an opportunity to open up a second "Ujamaa Place" in Minneapolis. Currently, 24 percent of its enrolled men have a Minneapolis address.
WHO IS GREATER TWIN CITIES UNITED WAY?

About Greater Twin Cities United Way: One in four people in the Twin Cities region cannot afford their basic needs and people of color are four times more likely than their white neighbors to experience poverty. That’s why Greater Twin Cities United Way is on a mission to build prosperity and equity for all through equitable access to housing, healthy food, education and the workforce. We do this by bringing together the public, private and nonprofit sectors to solve the community’s most pressing needs as a convener, catalyst for change, multiplier and innovator. Through the United Way 2-1-1 resource hotline; advocacy and coalition work; volunteer engagement; nonprofit leadership support and capacity building; convenings; and fund raising and grant making, we take a holistic, long-term approach to reach our vision of a united community where all people thrive – regardless of income, race or place of residence. That’s because we know when more of us reach our potential, our whole community benefits. For more information, visit www.gtcuw.org

WHO IS IMAGINE DELIVER?

Imagine Deliver is a strategy consulting firm for the new majority. Imagine Deliver defines the ‘new majority’ as people living multicultural lives between - and across - racial, gender and other intersecting identities. The Imagine Deliver team delivers insights and strategy by lifting up the genius of the world’s most overlooked innovators to develop brand new solutions for a rapidly changing world.
Get in touch with us!