

The In for 13 Pledge Shows Why Black Leadership Levels at Agencies Are Stagnant

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By [Jameson Fleming](#)

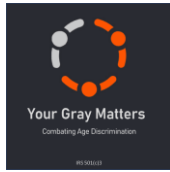
- [@JamesonFleming](#)
- jameson.fleming@adweek.com

Jameson Fleming is Adweek's managing editor of marketing and agencies.

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The In for 13 Pledge Shows Why Black Leadership Levels at Agencies Are Stagnant

Here's what ad shops can do about it



Top row: Co-founder Reonna Johnson; Creative Director Tahirah Edwards Byfield; Director and co-founder Justin Polk. Middle Row: Chief Creative Officer Marcus Wesson; Associate Creative Director Melissa Matos; Senior Art Director Lauryn Alvarez Bottom Row: Senior Brand Strategist Olivia Campbell; Brand & Creative Strategy Director Charlie Jim-George; Executive Music Producer Carol Dunn

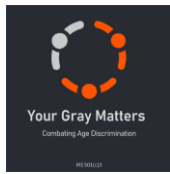
In 2020, a group of 71 agencies made a three-year pledge to increase Black leadership levels to fall in line with the Black population in the United States—13%. After one year of discussions and work, 22 agencies remained part of the pledge, which Three's a Crowd, the advocacy group behind the pledge, said is meant to be additive to an agency's DEI efforts, not to replace it. The pledge requires a buy-in from more than just the head of DEI, but key stakeholders like the CEO.

With the three-year pledge now complete, TAC revealed that after a big jump in Black leadership levels from 2020 to 2021, the group of 22 agencies' progress collectively stagnated at about 6.5% of leaders identifying as Black. A number of factors led to the stalling out of Black leadership growth, including the economy and not enough investment in building a bigger talent pool in the

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industry. But TAC co-founder Reonna Johnson is confident that agencies that prioritize DEI programs will see leadership levels grow in time as new, junior talent may take five to seven years to reach leadership ranks if an agency does the work to retain them. Johnson, who was recently elevated to svp of partnership at Deutsch LA, spoke with Adweek about what agencies can learn from the results of the three-year pledge and how they can better back Black talent.

“I call the representation numbers the desert. It’s what you get after you’ve completed the main course. And the main course is changing all that internal stuff that’s going to require people to stay that will eventually be moved into VP roles,” Johnson explained as to why agencies are increasing their overall representation numbers, but not at leadership levels.

The report comes on the [heels of a 4A’s study](#) that found that 90% of agency CEOs are white, and there’s a significant drop-off in retention of Black employees after the first two years.



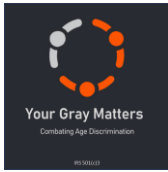
The great stagnation

The final report on the three-year pledge surveyed almost two dozen agencies, spanning large holding company-owned shops like AKQA, Huge and 72andSunny, as well as indie agencies like RPA, Horizon Media and Preacher. In 2020, when these agencies first took the pledge, they self-reported that about 3% of their leaders identified as Black. That number has remained between 6%

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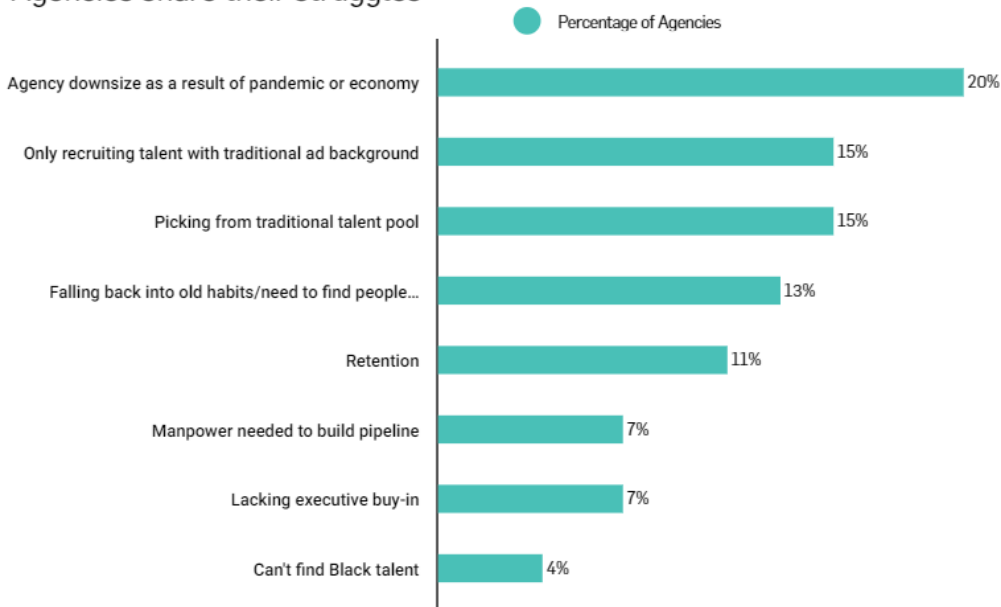


and 7% since 2021, with the top reason agencies haven't increased Black leaders in the past year being a lack of preexisting open roles and new opportunities.

While the chart below says “agency downsize as a result of the pandemic/economy” as the top reason, Johnson explained there's more nuance around that. It's not that these agencies laid off leaders; it's more there's been a lack of open roles and opportunities to elevate anyone, not just Black talent. Johnson said it's a combination of clients aren't spending as much, and thus agencies aren't growing their ranks, with retention rates, which have soared over the past year, meaning fewer roles opened up. With the lack of roles plaguing the whole industry, last year's top reason agencies gave for not increasing Black leadership levels—retention—dropped from 22% to 11%.

Why the percentage of Black leaders is flat

Agencies share their struggles



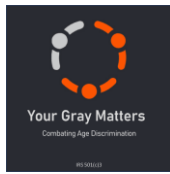
Source: In for 13

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Investing in your talent

For junior talent to last long enough at an agency to make it to leadership levels, Johnson pointed out a few ways that agencies can take long, hard looks at themselves to ensure they are eliminating any biases. One of In for 13's guest speakers, Joan Williams of Bias Interrupters, taught the group several exercises they should do to evaluate all kinds of representation. Johnson said the first is to make a list of the 10 most visible projects in your agency. If you have the same people doing them, then you have a bias.

"How do you farm out some of those where people have more visibility into things that are large and really be strategic about how you get people a part that?" Johnson said.

The second thing agencies should do is to evaluate their review process for promotions.

"Review who has not been promoted within the last two to three years and look at whether you are tight-ropeing them," Johnson said, explaining, "tight-ropeing basically means that they have to keep showing receipts for a role they haven't done yet."

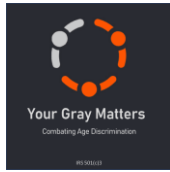
Johnson stressed that employees should not have to show that they're capable of a role versus just allowing them the space to do it. "It's like you have to do the job before you've done the job," she said. "And then you would promote them."

Over the past year, the study showed that agencies are increasingly investing in Black managers and associate directors in order to increase Black leadership at their agencies and spend less time and resources on various pipelines that take longer to pay dividends.

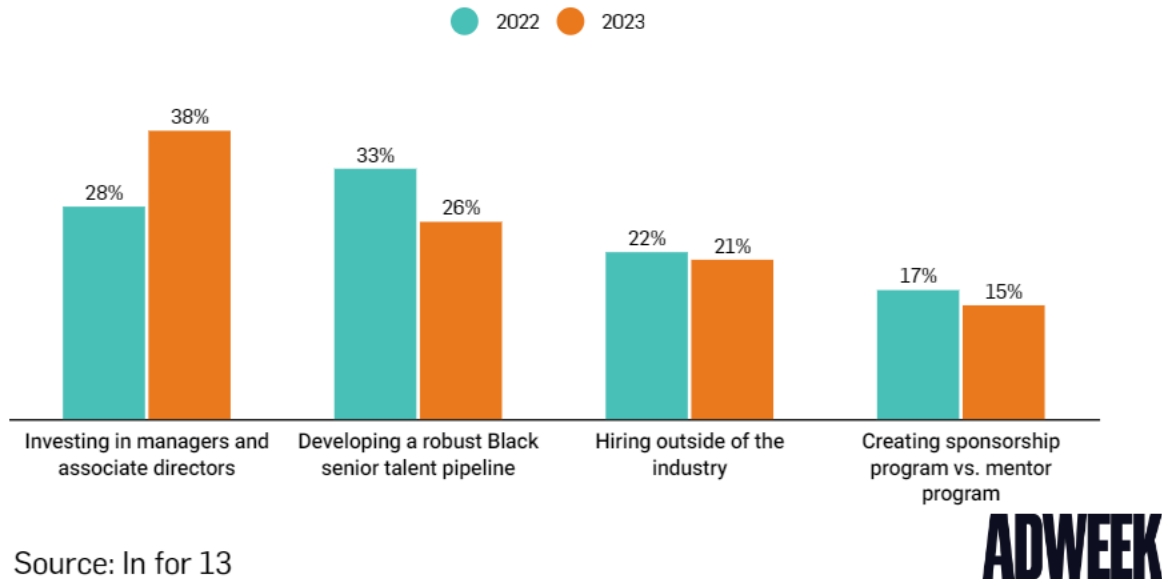
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How agencies are investing in Black leaders

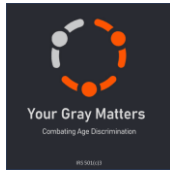


Advice for employees

When evaluating potential opportunities with a new agency, Johnson stressed one key red flag. Agencies should be evaluating how you would be additive to the organization and discovering how you “sparkle,” as Johnson described it. If the agency is trying to understand you from a very narrow meaning, then you run the risk of the agency looking to “check a box.”

She points to her experience joining Deutsch LA as an example. “They were trying to understand what are you really good at, and what do you want because we can pivot and make a role based on what you’re good at. That felt more authentic to me than someone just asking me like, ‘What big pitches have I won for the agency?’”

Black talent should also be seeking out mentors, but Johnson said the first step in doing so is to understand what phase of life they’re in, like wanting a stable opportunity versus pursuing exciting accounts and a big agency or about to become a parent versus seeking to travel the world. “Don’t reach out to anybody until you know where you want to go because you need to find a role that



supports your life phase.” Once you know that, find a mentor that can help you pursue that specific path.

Hybrid work environments are also important for Black talent and employers to implement, Johnson said. Black talent is often marginalized by office politics in many agencies, but being in person can present new opportunities for growth and build chemistry. With hybrid settings, Black talent may be in a better place to excel.

“I can belong without necessarily feeling like I belong to the office politics,” she said.

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