



Workforce Leadership Profile: Advancing Equity Through Workforce Development with Clair Minson

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Description

[Clair Minson](#) is founder and principal consultant at [Sandra Grace LLC](#), as well as being co-director of Workforce Matters. In this recording, [Dee Wallace](#) asks her questions about systems change and equity in the workforce, about her work at the intersection of workforce development and racial equity, and about what true leadership in workforce development looks like and what it will take to advance.

Speakers

Clair Minson, (Sandra Grace LLC)

Dee Wallace, (The Aspen Institute)

Transcript

Dee Wallace (00:02)

Hello, I'm Dee Wallace, senior fellow with the Aspen Institute's Economic Opportunities Program. As part of the Aspen Institute's commitment to leadership, the Economic Opportunities Program has been supporting workforce development leaders across the country in academies of fellows that come together locally or in national cohorts to learn together about workforce development, learn together about applying systems change and racial equity lenses to the work that they do in local workforce ecosystems.

In this past year, we've had the opportunity to work in eight local communities, launching academies with partners around the country, and we have been learning so much from their work about talent development in the workforce field itself. Today, we would like to have the chance to hear from someone that we've long admired in the workforce development field about their journey around leadership development and leadership in the field. We wanted to take some time today to lift up a story from someone whose work we admire and who inspires us in our work as we aim to do this job. And so please welcome Clair Minson of Sandra Grace. Thank you so much, Clair, for taking the time to join us. I know how busy you are.

Clair Minson (01:51)

Thank you for the invite. I'll do anything for you all, Dee.

Dee Wallace (01:53)

Oh gosh. So first, before we get to some questions, tell us about Sandra Grace.

Clair Minson (02:00)

Sure. Sandra Grace is a change management consulting firm. We started in 2020 actually with a vision to really see an equitable and anti-racist workforce development or talent development ecosystem. And so all of our work, we work with folks, predominantly nonprofit organizations and nonprofit leaders in workforce development, really helping them to deepen their analysis and understanding of racial equity and anti-racism. And particularly to pay attention to the manifestations of racism in talent in workforce development, and then equip them with tools and skills and practices that will help them disrupt and uproot inequitable practices and inequitable narratives and inequitable policies.

Dee Wallace (02:52)

Great. Thank you, thank you. Now it's 2024 now they tell me. I first met you, I remember the day May 27th, 2015. It was the first day of the opening retreat of the Baltimore Weinberg Sector Skills Academy out on the water in Maryland. Our team at the Economic Opportunities Program had been working feverishly in the month before that getting ready to launch this academy. And we were really working hard to welcome that cohort in Baltimore. And another date stands out to me from that time, April 19th, 2015. What was the impact of that date on you as a workforce practitioner and as a Baltimore resident, as a black woman?

Clair Minson (03:51)

Yeah. So that would be the day Freddie Gray was murdered, if I'm not mistaken. And it was really a mirror moment. I think it was an opportunity to really examine on some level my safety as a black woman in Baltimore. On another level, my work. What is the work that I'm doing? What is the work that I should be doing? What are the things that need to be said and how do we really have honest conversations starting with myself? How do I have an honest conversation about the role of race and racism in our work in workforce development? And the ways in which we've been predominantly colorblind or race neutral in our work and in our approach. And in some ways actually problematic in terms of how we were framing the challenges that people of color and specifically black people in Baltimore who were job seekers, in the way that we framed the challenges that they were navigating.

So it was a mirror moment. It was an opportunity, unfortunately, one out of violence to really ask myself and my organization at the time the hard questions or what is the work that we ought to be doing? What is the responsibility we need to take for harm or perpetuation of harmful narratives and unjust systems? And then how do we do that authentically and in community? So it was hard. It was a defining moment for my work and the way that it shaped my work today. I knew that there... But I didn't have all the language that I have now. I knew that there were systems that were keeping people of color and specifically black people in Baltimore stuck and excluded or limited in their access to economic mobility. I didn't have all of the language and wasn't even really comfortable or confident in, or felt like the permission existed to even have the conversation about the role of race and the system of racism and its impact on the people we were working with every day as a direct service organization.

Dee Wallace (06:12)

Speaking of systems change, I'm looking at the background of this maritime area in Baltimore. When you were in that academy, you were working in programs, in the program services. You were working in direct service at an organization, a training organization in Baltimore. When did that aha moment or that shift happen for you to start focusing on systems change?

Clair Minson (06:43)

Yeah, it was in the academy. It was towards the latter half of the academy. We had an activity where we had to, I forget what the activity was. It probably was called a systems change activity, but it really required us to think intentionally and explicitly about the systems change efforts that we were trying to do through our work. So it was a sector skills academy, so everybody there was leading some kind of sector based training and working with employers in a particular sector. Mine was the maritime transportation distribution and logistics industry. And I had to confront what is the system change that we're trying to do? And it was in that activity that I really was able to name like, oh, we are trying to actually create a talent pipeline that increases the number of black people and people of color, or non-black people of color in Baltimore who are entering this industry.

It was the first time that I really named that out loud. It was always the elephant in the room. Especially being a black woman and an immigrant in particular, walking into a very white and male dominant industry, having to build relationships and then also create a space for the work that we were doing that was really important. But it was in the academy, and when you all asked that question, what are the systems change efforts that you're leading? That had really made me acknowledge and then name explicitly the work that we were already trying to do.

Dee Wallace (08:16)

I don't remember what that activity was myself. I wonder if it was the iceberg analysis where you look at, you go below the tip of the iceberg and stop looking just at events and start looking at what are the patterns below there and what are the mindsets that need to shift, et cetera in order to make the change that you want.

Clair Minson (08:38)

Yeah, I just remember a chart and I think that specific question was asked, what are the systems change efforts? So who knows? But it was a good one.

Dee Wallace (08:53)

And it was really interesting to me. I still remember you talking about the maritime industry and the work that you were doing was pretty significant in that field. I really appreciated that. So let me ask you about another date. May 25th, 2020. What's the significance of that date to you?

Clair Minson (09:17)

Yeah, other than it being the day after my daughter, my youngest daughter was born, that day was the day, unbeknownst to many of us, that George Floyd would be murdered. So we've been knee-deep, we were navigating the pandemic for a few months in trying to figure out this "new normal". I was working in New Orleans at the time, but beginning to feel really frustrated about the conversations that folks were having, folks in the workforce development world in particular, and the lack of recognition of the opportunity related to really reexamine our work and systems because of COVID. And I think it's important to name that in the middle of all things COVID, starting in March, there were also these murders that were happening to black bodied people. So Brianna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, and then in May, George Floyd. And it was another mirror moment, it was another moment to really re-examine. Like, what is the work that I feel called to do? What are the conversations that we need to have? Are we having honest and transparent and vulnerable conversations about the role of race and racism, again, in workforce development? And in the way that we as workforce practitioners in many ways have been complicit in maintaining a system of oppression and a system of economic inequity.

And so George Floyd's murder really, again, gave me an opportunity, unfortunately, on the heels of violence, to examine my complicity and then to make a different choice about the work that I was doing and what I felt really compelled to do related to that work. So when Freddie Gray was murdered, it was really an opportunity to, again, self examine and to learn, and learning continues throughout. In May, 2020, George Floyd's murder was this, opportunity feels like a terrible word to use, and it's the only one that's coming to me, so I hopefully am not causing any reactions for anybody by using that. But it was a moment, again, to really lean harder, maybe, into focusing on this intersection of racial equity and workforce development explicitly and intentionally, and with courage.

Dee Wallace (12:04)

You published a piece coincidentally.

Clair Minson (12:09)

That morning.

Dee Wallace (12:09)

That morning.

Clair Minson (12:10)

At seven o'clock that morning. There was a lot of backstory into it, and that date was specifically given to me as the day to release it. Unbeknownst to me, I wrote again because I was really frustrated with the nature of conversations that were happening. And at the time, I was working with the city, a P3 partnership in New Orleans, and so had access to conversations at the city level around how we are going to support workers as they navigate the pandemic. And I was feeling really frustrated with folks wanting to go back to business as usual, rather than seeing that there was an opportunity to really transform our systems. And so I put pen to paper because that was the only way I felt like I could get my message out to a broader audience. And I had no idea that it would do what it did, but it was really asking us to reflect on us as workforce practitioners on the role that we have played in maintaining systemic racism in workforce development and in our labor economy.

Dee Wallace (13:17)

That was a pretty significant piece. And in fact, it's required reading now as part of the academy, along with another piece of work that you commissioned when you were in Baltimore. Right? Could you say a little bit about that work that you commissioned in Baltimore?

Clair Minson (13:37)

Yeah. So I think that you're referencing the Changing the Future.

Dee Wallace (13:43)

Yes.

Clair Minson (13:43)

Baltimore ecosystem. So when I was in Baltimore, really - after my experience at the academy and after Freddie Gray's murder, there was an opportunity for me to really step into a role where I got to bring these two passions and expertise together, this workforce development experience and this kind of growing knowledge of racial equity and anti-racism. And so in Baltimore, had the opportunity to bring these two worlds together and facilitate conversations with practitioners around this intersection of workforce development and racial equity.

And as part of that, we worked in partnership with a professor at Loyola University to really commission a qualitative study around trying to get a baseline understanding of how workforce practitioners are thinking about and applying racial equity principles in their workforce development practices in work and in their organizations. And so it really gave us an opportunity to examine where we were and where there was opportunity for us to really deepen our knowledge and understanding and practices so that we could truly, hopefully realize racial equity as an outcome in our community. And recognizing that we, in workforce development in particular, had a unique role that we can play to move our system towards equity.

Dee Wallace (15:15)

And one of the things that's so significant to me about that work, which is also required reading, is that it was framed around what we can all do in different roles across the ecosystem under practitioners.

Clair Minson (15:30)

So we called it Changing the Future, and it was really this kind of landscape analysis, if you will, looking... So we had conversations with workforce practitioners, and so there's a practitioner role. We had conversations with workforce funders, and there was a funder role, and we had conversations with our public service partners, so the public workforce system and other adjacent partners and kind of public partners, and thinking about what's the role and responsibility that they have to offer. Those three primary prongs or groups and very specific recommendations related to their role within the ecosystem, and then the changes that they can make. The things that were in their control or sphere of influence.

Dee Wallace (16:11)

Appreciate that. We were talking recently, and I was introducing you to some folks, and I referred to you, what I call you, the conscience of a field. And you seem to be a little taken aback, but that's how I acknowledge the impact that you're having. How do you acknowledge the impact that you're having? When have you said, "Okay, this is what I'm meant to do."?

Clair Minson (16:37)

I don't always acknowledge it. I was very taken aback when you said that. I think that's a huge compliment, and there's, I think, a weight, there's a responsibility with that. And I take that really seriously. This very much feels like a calling or a vocation, and so I think you just spoke to that in that framing. I'm pretty hard on myself, so I don't always take a moment to see the work and the impact. But last year in particular, I created a lot, and there were two frameworks that had the opportunity to create that made me feel really proud, and I am making the difference that I hope for. And this work is having an impact and has the potential to really seed and lead transformative change. And so that would be in partnership with Chicago Jobs Council, the anti-racist Workforce Development framework, and a set of visionary definitions for anti-racist program design and delivery, anti-racist policy design and implementation, anti-racist partnerships, and anti-racist client engagement.

So that made me really proud and like, "Okay, yes, this is the work." And then in partnership with Jobs for the Future at JFF, the Fruit and Root Framework are really developing this analysis and way of analyzing both the roots of inequity, the system of racism, and then paying attention to the fruits, the manifestations of whether it's racism or equity. So this framework, I think, really provides practitioners with a way to self-examine themselves, their organizations, but also examine their ecosystem to really see how they are uprooting root causes and leading to fruits of equity. So those two last year in particular, make me really proud and like, okay, I am making a difference, and this work is really doing what I feel called to do. Yeah.

Dee Wallace (18:42)

I encourage you to take a few moments and acknowledge yourself a little bit more because you are doing some important work and you deserve to congratulate yourself every once in a while.

Clair Minson (18:52)

Noted.

Dee Wallace (18:55)

I mentioned that I got the chance to meet you in Baltimore, also got the chance to work with you when you were in New Orleans. Tell us a little bit about some of the other places, some of the places you've worked, the roles that you've held, and what were some of the transitions and motivations for those transitions?

Clair Minson (19:15)

Yeah, that's a really good question. So yep, started this work in Baltimore and then transitioned to New Orleans where I worked, again, in an intermediary capacity in helping direct service professionals think about system change, think about racial equity and build capacity for them, and then moved to Colorado. So I currently work in Boulder, Colorado, reside in Westminster, Colorado, and have done some work with some local practitioners here, although much of my work is around the country. So folks in California, different parts of California, folks in Boston, folks in Washington DC, folks in Cleveland, do a lot of work with the folks in Cleveland. Some influencing work with some folks in Detroit.

And every place is different and unique, and a lot of work with the folks in Chicago as well. And every place also has amazing people who are so committed to advancing racial equity and specifically in workforce development. And every place has its challenges that are so unique. And so I really enjoy getting the opportunity to learn about what's happening around the country related to workforce development specifically and racial equity in those places, and really work with people who want to do the work for real.

What's been the motivation behind those transitions is all faith-based and spiritual. For me, it's really going where I feel called to go at a particular point in time. And so my faith is an anchor in driving not only the work that I do, but where I go to do that work, if I'm honest. So that has been a huge motivator. And unlike every other place I've moved, Colorado's journey was not necessarily for workforce development or racial equity, it was much more related to ministry. Although I'm having the opportunity to actually, what opened the door for this was related to workforce development. So it's been an interesting journey for sure. But I love being able to connect with people in different places, and through that, learn about the history of racism in those respective places and how that's manifesting in workforce development. So that's exciting.

Dee Wallace (21:49)

It sounds like faith is part of what sustains you in this. This is difficult, painful to look at work sometimes, right?

Clair Minson (21:57)

Yeah.

Dee Wallace (22:00)

Now, in your work around the country, across the country, what do you observe about leadership in the field? Particularly for men and women of color.

Clair Minson (22:14)

I am inspired by the leaders, especially as I've interacted with the leaders who are participating in some academy, some academy of yours. I'm really inspired by not only their commitment to racial equity and passion for it, but also to their deep, deep knowledge of place and the people and relationships in the places that they're in, and their understanding of what needs to change and who they can work with to move things forward.

I think it's challenging everywhere for men and women of color to lead the work related to racial equity. And so folks are, I notice people making an intentional choice about how they want to step into that work and engage in that work, and as they should. And in some places it is being put upon black and brown leaders of color, and so that's something that needs to be examined, I think. But I do not feel discouraged when I think about the leaders and workforce, the leaders now, and the leaders to come. I'm probably more inspired by the leaders to come, but I think folks who are in positions of leadership now are also really, really serious about addressing inequity and root causes of inequity and championing that work.

Dee Wallace (23:52)

And speaking of leaders to come, what do you think, thinking broadly about the workforce development field and understanding what an interdisciplinary ecosystem that we build locally and around the country, what does the field need to be paying attention to in order to develop leadership? What's the field doing well, or what are some challenges for the development of leaders in this field?

Clair Minson (24:21)

This is a good question. Let's see.

I think the field has a long history of trying to engage with other players in the ecosystem who can help make sure that there are clear pathways and pipelines for folks who've been historically excluded and marginalized, whether conscious or not. I mean, that is a part of the work that the field has done. I think there are some decisions that need to be made, or maybe there's just more alignment and honesty and transparency about the continuum of change and where people enter that continuum. So for example, there are folks in our field, leaders and organizations who are really comfortable with a DEI framing, and there are folks who are really comfortable with anti-racism, and there are folks in between. And everybody has a role that they can play, so there doesn't have to be competition. There can really be collaboration and partnerships. So really getting clear on who is doing what work, who's in what lane, how do we partner and align all with a common goal of making sure that workers, and particularly workers who've been historically excluded and marginalized, have the best opportunity for economic mobility. And however they define that, right, the opportunity to thrive.

And so I think there is lots more deconstructing that needs to happen. How has racism morphed and evolved in our field, and what's the role that we have played individually and as organizations in

perpetuating racism? I think there's still a lot of grappling we need to do there, and that's ongoing learning and work. And really reconstructing or re-imagining what it could mean to use the language of the folks at PolicyLink, a multiracial democracy, and one where people are honored and valued in their humanity just because they're human beings.

So I think there's some openness and transparency about who's doing what work and what work folks won't touch, so that then there can be more alignment so that we can actually realize the equitable outcomes we want to see. And then at the individual leadership level, there's just a lot more kind of personal responsibility that folks need to take around the ways in which we've been complicit and the shifts, like how we can deconstruct our understanding of root causes, and then reimagine our role in particular as workforce leaders and practitioners so that we can realize those equitable outcomes and a more just society. Hopefully that answered your question.

Dee Wallace (27:47)

Thank you for that. It gives us a glimpse into what you see, what you might hope the future looks like for equitable workforce development. And I'd like to ask you, Clair, because we look at your work, and I think that we can learn from you as an individual leader as well in doing this work. And I'd just like to ask you, what would you say to others who are hoping to get closer to their calling, advance in the field, lead this kind of work? What are some tips that you would have for leaders as they're continuing to grow?

Clair Minson (28:42)

I think it's important to... I have multiple thoughts at the same time, so, I can slow down. I think people need to be clear about the work they feel called to do, be confident in doing that authentically. There's a way that I show up in the work that's really authentic to me, and that's a part of what makes me impactful. And so I think we can only influence and impact, one, to the level of our understanding. So there's a requirement for ongoing learning and commitment for personal professional development, deconstructing, reconstructing, and making sure that, give yourself space to do that learning and learning in community with other like-minded folks. Iron sharpens iron, right? People who can work together and really fine tune their analysis, support one another because the work is long and the work is hard. And particularly for leaders of color, it can be really emotionally and mentally exhausting.

It requires a lot. So make sure that there's a community of folks who can hold space for you to grow and learn, and as well as to lead authentically with a voice that is true to them. And so I've made decisions in my leadership journey to step out of leadership roles because I could not do the work. I could not use my voice in the way that I felt really compelled to use it. And so being clear about the voice that people have and the vantage point that they can bring to the conversation and being authentic in that, and to center joy and rest as much as possible. We are links in a chain.

The arc of the moral universe is long, and it is a very long journey. And so I think being able to remember that we are links in a chain at a point in time, and to really lean into, what's the change I can do now so that when the time comes from either pass the baton, I can do that with integrity and with pride about the work that I've been able to do, and the path that I've been able to lay forward in the season and time that I've been a leader. So that's what I would say to others, to other leaders or to aspiring leaders.

Everybody's a leader, some people just have the stamp of approval, if you will, and some people are leading laterally. But I guess, so a part of that would be to see the ways in which you're already leading, to celebrate along the way, to center joy and rest for ongoing learning, and to surround yourself with people who can really support, authentically support the journey in the way that you, Dee in particular, and Sheila have for years for me.

Dee Wallace (31:50)

Wow. Thank you for that. And we certainly celebrate you, and we want to thank you for making the time out of your busy schedule as a leader in this field, and for being an incredible mom to spend time with us and give to us from your authentic self. So thank you so much for everything that you do.

Clair Minson (32:17)

Yeah, thank you for the opportunity to share.