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Maven Leadership Collective

CODA

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2024 Impact Report

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Perpetual Sabbatical

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Corey Davis (00:00):

I am Corey Davis, the creative director and founder of Maven Leadership Collective. Centering respite and fortification and holding space for it in our social practice isn't easy. It is a fundamental restructuring of how we build power together, and for that, it will require a consistent daily practice of saying no, of pursuing an evidence-based approach, of really making space for rest, for getting aligned and not just these time-bound artificial pressures of action and doing and looking like we have it together. Instead of posing the question, do we have the capacity for this? How long can we take to figure this out in order to get it right? And if not, why are we doing it?

(01:32):

The existing way of operating is not working. The things that the nonprofit sector incentivizes are at direct odds with my body, with my health, with my relationships, with how I want to take up space in the world, and so it's just not sustainable. Reimagining really, to me is the only option, but it's so hard. It's like turning a cruise ship in a different direction in the middle of a storm, but it has to be done. I'm not completely sure what a perpetual sabbatical could and should look like, but I want to claim space for discovery and to think about it and to figure it out.

(02:16):

A friend of mine told me some years back that we should not have a life that we need vacation from. At the time, I really didn't know what he was talking about. Of course we need vacation. Of course we need a break. But what he was saying was something I really didn't understand until very recently that why can't we build a life that we don't have to escape from? So if that is true, then how do we build a career that we don't have to escape from? How is it that we always find time for nourishing ourselves, for learning, for deep rest, reflection, exploration, experimentation, all of the things that people look forward to in this sabbatical, but you have to wait years or sometimes never. Sometimes people don't get them. So how do we build a career and a life and a practice that perpetually nourishes us and that we don't have to save up and grind ourselves down to eventually hopefully get some kind of deep reflective piece.

(03:30):

In 2025, I'd really like for Maven to play and experiment with foundational elements of building a perpetual sabbatical as the core practice of how we achieve impact with leaders. I think it's time to have a radical departure from what we currently know, and that might be scary, it might be liberating, but I think a little crazy is what's needed in experimentation. In terms of health, I had heart failure in 2018. The doctors still are not exactly sure why, but I do know that what contributed to me ending up in Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, in the ICU with my heart functioning at 10% what it should be around the Christmas holidays, was that I just thought I was tired. I just thought that the work was so important as an emerging nonprofit leader and founder that if I just worked harder, that's what was required and I could rest later.

(04:35):

And I kept saying that for months. And in fact my heart had started failing several months earlier in September. The shortness of breath that I was feeling, the inability to sleep, the choking feeling eventually was all because I kept saying, I will rest later. Similar to this idea of either vacation or sabbatical or taking the professional development that we need, the nonprofit sector says, "But first, wear yourself down before you do any of that other stuff. Let us require your health as entrance for staying and being elevated in this sector." And that's largely for black and brown folks that have to pay that price to sit at that table. And then you get there and you realize you've just bought entrance into a burning building.

(05:35):

One of our mavens, Linda Chung, who is an artist and a deep thinker, said to me one time, "Corey, one of the satisfying things about being an artist is that people expect you to be a little bit different, a little bit

off, to think in a more radical way." And as an ideas lab, I think people have come to expect that from us as well. It has been a difficult journey as an organization being seen as doing things differently, that we will look to fix it even if something's not broken. That's just our orientation. So when we propose some kind of idea like a perpetual sabbatical, we expect that will immediately be understood or embraced. But our job is to innovate, to interrogate and to dismantle the things that are not working for us and find more creative solutions to failing systems. We are in a perpetual state of attack, of threat, of violence, and the more we do this constrict and release and constrict and release, that's not a healthy way of achieving any kind of peace.

(06:46):

In Maven's mission, we talk about providing greater ease for those we serve. And the concept of a perpetual sabbatical that we're experimenting with is its natural evolution. An extension of that. To be less encumbered in our social impact practice is not to be without responsibility. In fact, expanding the aperture of what respite is and what it requires, rigor, integrity, and consistent practice, actually allows us to double down on our responsibility, on our commitment on what some might say is a calling with even greater clarity. And so if we adopt strategies that realize we always have to be in a state of respite and fortification that paces the oppressive structures, the better off we'll be.

(07:50):

In 2025, we will start to say goodbye to some of the things that we have come to know and cherish so much. Part of the reason why this report is called CODA is because we want to look at how to take a departure from the familiar refrain and introduce something new and unexpected before we come to the conclusion. In 2025, we will see the last edition of the Maven Leadership Cohort for a while. We have built a very strong community of learners in multiple states, in multiple disciplines, and there's not a need, one, for an impact lab that specializes in ideas to keep doing the same thing over and over again. It will be our 10th one in eight years, I think we've demonstrated proof of concept. I think we have shown how to create belonging and to invest in leaders who are usually left out of the equation.

(08:52):

After 2025, we will turn more inward and spark creativity and collaboration among the existing learning community, use our capacity to better support the existing mavens. The second way is that we will do less so that we can move deeper and we will move to a model in which all of our learning will be around intense topics for short bursts of time. We will travel to be with experts in their field and we will bring our resources and our community of learners to that place, and we will learn together.

(09:29):

There'll be four retreat style formats that will anchor our programming year. They will include wellness and well-being, catalytic funding, and they'll include space to learn in a more advanced way. So we never wanted to be leadership 101, but because there are not a sufficient number of organizations like ours, we've had to expand to be multiple things to multiple people. Black-led organizations don't get the luxury of being single-minded in their pursuit of the mission, that's reserved for white-led organizations because they are sufficiently resourced, because philanthropy still trusts white leadership more than it does Black leadership. So we had to expand our reach in order to sustain and in order to be truly supportive of our community.

(10:23):

But now we built a new community. What about them? They have scaled. They have invested. They have grown. Over eight years, we've seen a number of our mavens go on to achieve things that they never thought that they could. We need to revisit them and make good on our promise for a lifelong support. So that's what our focus will be moving beyond 2025. And I'm excited to experiment and play and learn from our mavens, learn from other people who are doing this work, other organizations who are committed to centering queer and trans social impact leaders of color about what that form and texture should take.

(11:04):

One time earlier in the summer of 2024, we were at Maven Camp in Costa Rica and we were thinking about one of these big ideas about how do we reimagine our social practice. The clouds had gone away and the sun, even though it was the end of the day, was peeking out in the most radiant fashion. And we ran down the street to the beach and all of us got our feet wet in the waves and just were embracing and laughing and giggling because there was a certain delight in this unexpected tree at the end of a very intense day. And one of our mavens turned to me and said, "I never knew that running a nonprofit could feel like this." At once I was feeling great that we could hold space for her in this way, but simultaneously, I felt a deep sense of sadness that he was a tremendously bright, generous person who hadn't even contemplated that we should be nourished, that we can work hard, but also have a place of being nourished and supported. Why isn't that just the default?

(12:47):

So many nonprofit leaders, our charge is to provide expressions of care to entire communities. Where is it written that we should not then receive the same level of care that we provide to others? Why do we kick that down the road? Why do we hold that out for other people, not ourselves, not for each other even? I really don't believe you can get to delight without facing the icky stuff. So people think I'm weird because I say, "How do we find delight in failure?" How is it that now I am thinking more about where do we have a place to talk about the profound disappointment that we carry with us at work? Where's the repository for that? We say show up and bring your whole shelf, but we don't really have a place to express disappointment in the integrity of our institutions or the values of our bosses.

(13:46):

There's no place for that and keep your job, but there has to be a healthy digestion of those things that we really don't want to deal with, like disappointment, like failure to be able to inhabit and embrace that full deep belly laughter that comes with delight. I think that we get to delight by planning for it intentionally or at least allowing for it to have space. And if we're moving too fast, we're doing too many things, we have too many commitments, there's no way that delight can sneak up on you, and delight does have to sneak up on us, but we can be intentional about moving in a way that it can sneak up on us. You have to expect it, and you have to make room for it. But if we're running at a million miles an hour, if we are doing things that we know we shouldn't be, being around people that we shouldn't be, there's no way for delight to come and tap us on the shoulder.