

Black Girls Code: Founder Displacement, Board Governance, or Hostile Takeover?

Embryo Template

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Key Themes

1. Nonprofit governance
2. Founder displacement
3. HR investigations
4. Retaliation
5. DEI leadership
6. Organizational power dynamics

Hook:

When a founder builds a mission-driven organization into a nationally recognized nonprofit, who ultimately owns the authority to decide when that founder should step aside?

Case Context

Founder-led nonprofits often face a critical inflection point as they scale: the professionalization of governance structures can introduce tensions between mission, accountability, and founder authority. This embryo case examines the removal of Kimberly Bryant, founder and long-time CEO of Black Girls Code, a nationally recognized nonprofit dedicated to expanding access to technology education for Black girls (Joyner, 2021; Mascarenhas & Dominic-Madori Davis, 2022).

After more than a decade of organizational growth and over \$30 million in philanthropic funding, Bryant was placed on administrative leave by the board of directors following complaints related to leadership style and workplace climate (Joyner, 2021). An external investigation was conducted over an eight-month period, after which Bryant was terminated. Bryant subsequently filed a federal lawsuit alleging wrongful suspension, retaliation, and conflict of interest, characterizing her removal as a hostile takeover.

This case places students at the intersection of nonprofit governance, founder identity, DEI leadership, and organizational power. With competing narratives offered by the board and the founder—and no definitive public resolution—the case invites analysis of how boards evaluate leadership risk, how HR investigations are interpreted, and how race, gender, and mission-driven contexts shape perceptions of “hostile work environments.”

The Organization: Black Girls Code

Founded in 2011, Black Girls Code (BGC) was established to address persistent gaps in access to computer science and technology education for Black girls. Headquartered in Oakland, California, with operations in New York and chapters across the United States, BGC delivers

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programming through workshops, summer camps, hackathons, and community-based initiatives focused on robotics, game design, web development, and emerging technologies.

Under Bryant’s leadership, the organization experienced rapid growth in visibility, funding, and national influence. As BGC expanded, its governance structure evolved to include a formal board of directors tasked with fiduciary oversight, compliance, and organizational sustainability.

Focused Closing Hook

As nonprofit organizations professionalize and scale, the Black Girls Code case raises enduring questions: When does governance become protection—and when does it become displacement?

Learning Outcomes:

After completing this case, students should be able to:

1. **LO1:** Analyze board fiduciary responsibilities in founder-led nonprofit organizations.
2. **LO2:** Evaluate competing narratives regarding leadership behavior and organizational culture.
3. **LO3:** Assess how HR investigations may raise compliance and retaliation concerns.
4. **LO4:** Recommend governance practices that balance founder vision with organizational sustainability.

Outline:

1. **Hook:** Founder removal following allegations of leadership misconduct
2. **Context:** Mission, growth, and evolving governance expectations
3. **Escalation:** HR investigation, retaliation claims, and reputational risk
4. **Return to Hook:** Governance legitimacy and the prevention of founder–board breakdowns

Discussion Questions:

1. **DQ1 (LO1):** What fiduciary obligations did the board have in responding to complaints against the founder?
2. **DQ2 (LO2):** How should leadership style be evaluated in the context of mission-driven organizations?
3. **DQ3 (LO3):** What constitutes a fair and defensible HR investigation in a nonprofit setting?
4. **DQ4 (LO4):** What governance safeguards could help prevent founder–board conflict in the future?

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