



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

SESSION 152

BUYING INTO YOURSELF AS A LEADER

WITH SANDY REES

BETH: Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky. Welcome to Driving Participation. I am so excited to be recording live from Asheville, North Carolina, and I've been down here all weekend with my friend and former podcast guest, Sandy Rees. We have been down here celebrating her birthday for the weekend, which has been a lot of fun and I always joke that my parents ask me whenever I go away, is it for work or for fun and of course I always say, "What's the difference?" But the beauty of getting together with some of my friends like Sandy is that it's sort of this interesting blend of both. We've had a really great weekend walking around and visiting the Biltmore, but also talking about things we both love and focus on. Sandy, thanks so much for recording with me.

SANDY: My pleasure! Thank you for spending the weekend with me. It's been great. It's been probably one of the best birthdays I've ever had and I really am excited just to spend time with you and talk about the way we're making a big difference in the world.

BETH: So what we've been talking a lot about is for my focus and all the things I talk about about participation, and Sandy's focus on leadership and specifically on founders and the work that she's doing with the leaders of organizations and where those two things connect with each other. So I thought this would be a great opportunity to talk about the blend of where leadership and participation connect with each other and specifically, one of the things that comes up all the time on this podcast is about leadership buy-in, and people use that specific word, buy-in, and I think one of the things Sandy can really share with us is what it takes for a leader to buy into themselves and what happens when people who create and start organization struggle with that. So, Sandy, tell us a little about like what you see from the people because you work with all these different





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founders of organizations and what it takes for them to do what they do.

SANDY: You know I think it's no easy thing for somebody to start a nonprofit. A lot of them do it because they care very much about a problem or a cause. There's something that pulls their heart strong enough that they're willing to go through the process of setting up a nonprofit and they get into it because they want to change. They want to change something. They want to solve a problem, and pretty soon they go, "Oh crap, I've got to raise money for this thing, we've got to make sure that we're well-funded," and all of a sudden they find themselves whether they realize it or not, whether they want to be or not, they're in a leadership role and people are looking to them to set the tone. People are looking to them to set the vision and to lay out the plan and they find themselves sometimes in unfamiliar territory and I have clients that will say to me, "I'm not a leader," and I always laugh. Well, yeah you are.

BETH: Too late now!

SANDY: Whether you want to be or not, congratulations. You are in a leadership role, and I've seen this in other places, too. Sometimes it's not a founder, but it's someone who finds themselves in a leadership role. It could be a staff role, it could be a board role and they don't see themselves as a leader and I think that gets in their way and it's a huge road block. It's a big speed bump because sometimes those people will not fully step into their authority. They won't fully step into their role and it kind of leads other people sort of floundering wondering, "What what are we doing? Which way are we going? What's the plan? What's happening?" Depending on other things that are going on, it can cause confusion. It can cause a lack of clarity. There can be just all kinds of issues that pop up out of that when that person in a leadership role does not embrace that leadership.

BETH: Right, and I talk a ton about what kind of participation people are looking for in their organization to help it thrive and that touches all of those things. As a





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leader, as somebody that's running an organization to make it run, you can't do it by yourself, so you've got to attract people to help you do this.

SANDY: Absolutely, absolutely, and you know you can start with the board. Especially with the founder. That's really important that they surround themselves with people who care about their mission and are willing to offer up their time, talent and treasure to help get that organization off the ground. With older organizations, it's really very much the same thing. You surround yourself with people on the board who can help move the organization forward, who can help advance the mission, engage participation from different audiences and ultimately have a big win for the organization, and when there's a lack of leadership, that organization is gonna struggle. It's kind of a mess and it can be really uncomfortable for the people who are participating, whether they're volunteers, staff or whoever because it just never seems like it's a real clear goal. There's nothing clear that you're working toward. I've had that opportunity in my career and as I worked as a development director, I worked a couple of times for people who were in leadership roles who were not leaders, didn't want to be or refused to embrace that, and it was uncomfortable. It was not fun. It could have been a very different situation if they had said, "You know what, I'm not a leader, but let me learn what I might need to know. Let me get some support, let me get some coaching, let me get some help." It would have been a real different situation, and so what happens is when that person in a leadership role does not embrace that, somebody else will naturally rise up and try to lead the organization.

BETH: Because they care about it and they want to see the thing they care about happening come to life.

SANDY: That I think is sometimes where you get board members who become micro-managers; they become a little pushy. They sense that there's not a strong leader and there's something that they really want to advance, sometimes that's why they pop up and they do that. I've also seen and I've had this experience





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myself, in the absence of a good leader, I saw real clearly what needed to happen at the organization. So as a development director, I had to sort of lead and steer the ship, which was, that was hard to do.

BETH: Right. I mean, how does that make staff feel? What happens to the culture and the actual work experience for staff when they feel like they've got to manage their leader?

SANDY: For me, it was incredibly frustrating. It was heavily frustrating. I saw so clearly what we needed to be doing and my sense was that my executive director didn't take it seriously. I don't think that was the case. I think she did take it seriously, but that's what it felt like to me.

BETH: Right, because when you're an employee, like you can't help but thing that everything relates to you. You know what I mean? Exactly because people go to jobs and they expect you to create a job. People expect me to create a job for them they're going to enjoy and want and if they don't get that, they typically, most human beings blame someone else. You know. So it's hard to not look at the leader of the organization and say you're not creating a space for me to do my best work and do what I want to do.

SANDY: Right. You know what I think is really hard about that is in an ideal situation, you're gonna have somebody in the leadership role, in that head staff role or even in a voluntary role who have leadership skills. The truth is, if you look at most nonprofits, you don't have an ideal situation and you have to deal with what you've got. You know. It would be lovely if you could wave a magic wand and say, "Ta-da! Every leader now has leadership skills." It doesn't work that way and so you have to work with and deal with what you've got.

BETH: So around the focus of, I call it driving participation, but it's really encouraging, creating an atmosphere where participation naturally wants to occur. What skills should a leader be, you know, sort of embracing and working





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towards building in themselves in order to allow participation to happen?

SANDY: I actually have a whole blog post on that. <http://getfullyfunded.com/blog/>

BETH: We'll have to link to it. We'll find it and we'll link to it.

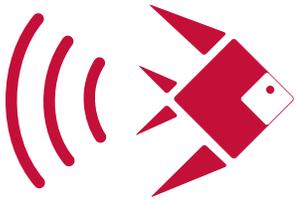
SANDY: Good. There are skills that an executive director, particularly a founder, really needs to master in order to move things forward. One of them is I think that person needs a clear vision of where they're going because it's really tough to engage and get participation from staff and volunteers and even the folks that your organization is serving, you don't know where you're going. That's a real hard one so I think vision is one thing and then the ability to communicate that to people, that's another thing. So it's one thing to know where you're going, but if you can't articulate that, the rest of your team and the people who are trying to participate, that's a whole other problem.

BETH: Right. That's why our tag line is called "focus your vision." It's really hard. So I just want to ask you this specific question around that is when it comes to the team and volunteers that are people are working for, are they looking for somebody that has this like, "I have the charge, I have the manifesto, I have the vision," and can suck everybody else into the vision or are they looking for somebody that can help create a shared vision?

SANDY: I think sometimes you get both or you get one or the other and I think that depends on confidence of the person in that role. I've seen founders who they start the organization and they're very passionate and they want other people to be as well. They actually call this passion myth. They think because they're passionate, everybody else will be, too.

BETH: Entrepreneurs have the same problem!





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SANDY: I love my vision! You'll love it, too. It doesn't work that way. So for them then, it can become very disillusioning when they realize that other people don't care as much. If they're not getting the participation that they're looking for from their board, from their volunteers, from whomever, then they start to think that other people don't care.

BETH: Right.

SANDY: I think as a leader then, you have to realize that not everybody is gonna care about something that you do. Nobody loves our children the way we do.

BETH: That's right! Absolutely!

SANDY: Nobody loves our kids because our kids are the best in the world. Nobody loves them the way we do.

BETH: Right. We can say they're not perfect, but nobody else can.

SANDY: That's right, and so it's the same thing I think for any nonprofit because I think it's the closest thing to a child we have when we're working in organizations.

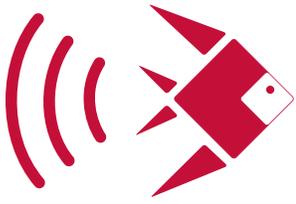
BETH: Like two people have created companies, we know exactly what that feels like.

SANDY: Yeah, and to have other people reject it or not care about it as much as you do, that hurts. It's frustrating and it's real easy to have a reaction one way or another to have a reaction that nobody cares about this. It must be crap. Or nobody cares about this. What's wrong with them?

BETH: Or nobody else cares about this. I have to do everything myself apparently.

SANDY: Yes, because if you're a control freak anyway,





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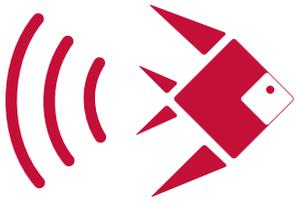
BETH: Which a lot of leaders are.

SANDY: Yeah, they are. That's just fuel to the fire of "See, I was right. I have to do this all by myself," and the truth is, and gosh I've said this to so many founders and so many directors, is, "Yeah, you can do this yourself for awhile, but if you don't get some help, you will never fulfill your vision You just won't." Many hands make light work. That's very, very true, but you've got to get the participation of people around you to help you get that thing launched. Otherwise you're just never gonna totally meet that need that you're trying to meet in the first place.

BETH: So I also like what you said, like part two. So they have this vision that's in their head, that the key to that, part of it is having a vision in the first place, but part two is communicating that vision, which is what I do for a living. Everything that we do is about how do you get that out of your head and into the world in a way that attracts buy-in from other people. So how are you seeing that work in organizations? Like, the processes, where have you seen a leader actually be able to have this vision and translate it externally into something that make it not just their own, make it into something like you are an island trying to suck in all the gravity around you and hold it all together yourself. How have you seen that happen well?

SANDY: You know, immediately what pops to mind is a client that I worked with several years ago. They had just started an organization. They were maybe a year or two in when I was connected with them to give them some support to raise some money and oh my gosh, if I just started listing the qualities of this guy who, he and his wife started this organization helping single moms, the word that I can use to describe him is determined. He was a charming leader and what I mean by that is it was never all about him. It was never about his vision. He would usually go out and meet with people and say, "I don't want to talk to you about money. I want your thoughts. Let me tell you about what we're trying to accomplish here and you tell me what you think." He was very respectful of other people's





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opinions. He would listen. He was totally an engaging listener. He was pretty good at that, and people in town fell in love with him. Most people love to be listened to, right?

BETH: Absolutely.

SANDY: And so he would go out and tell people, “We’re not talking about money, so just don’t even worry about that. I’m want to tell you a PR vision, tell you what we’re trying to do and then you tell me your thoughts.” Just asking people for their opinion, in the fundraising world, we say, “If you want advice, ask for money. If you want money, ask for advice.” He raised money like crazy because he was very authentic about it and so people were really clear that wow, you’re not here to ask me for money and what he was trying to do was amazing. It was not a duplication of services. He was doing something that really mattered. He was trying to do it in a way that made a lot of sense, and people got really excited about that. So as a leader, what I saw from him was he was very much a servant leader. It was not all about him. He was not about his ego. He’s very authentic and very real. He cared about other people. Not only the people his organization was serving, he cared about people who served on his board. He cared about his volunteers and he cared about his staff. He cared about people who he was talking to. When he would sit and talk with people, he was fully present in the moment, incredibly respectful of the people he was talking to. He valued their opinions. He followed up with them with a handwritten note. “Thank you for your time.” To me, those are all qualities of servant leadership. He could probably many, many more. I think that put him in a role that was very magnetic, wanted to be part of that because he was just fun to be with.

BETH: Right. It made him feel good. I mean, it sounds like he was really good at doing one of the most important things, just staying focused on the outcomes, but the outcomes in every way. You and I always talk about you can’t just talk about your organization and how great your organization is, give to the organization because if you give to us, we’ll be better because nobody, like





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organizations don't, people don't give money to organizations. They give money to the outcomes the organizations can create and then it's only the organization's job to facilitate that outcome happening. But outcomes aren't just about the work. The outcome is also about the person that you're connecting with and what are they wanting. What dream are you trying to facilitate for them? Then if you can put your intention on your intention and go into these conversations, go into your communications with the intention of facilitating somebody else's dreams and trying to understand what they dream and what they want to see happen in the world align with something that you can deliver, that's a really different conversation.

SANDY: Yeah it is. Yeah it is. I'm with you. I think fundraising and supporting the mission of a nonprofit is really about changing a life. Sometimes it's about saving lives and if you can't articulate that, you can have a lot of trouble rounding up participation and support for your organization because nobody wants to give just to support your annual fund. They do not care. I hope everybody who is listening writes that down. People do not care about your annual fund.

BETH: Nobody wants to top off your bank account.

SANDY: I know, right.

BETH: How many letters have you seen? How many end-of-year, annual letters say, "Please give, we're short. We're almost there. We just need this much more in order to fill up our bucket for the year." I don't care. I can use some more to fill up my bucket for the year.

SANDY: Right. Help us reach our goal. Know what? Nobody cares. It's not about the organization. It's about the lives they're changing, and I think when a leader can stay really focused on that and keep everybody else focused on that, I think that's another sign of good leadership. So holding that vision, communicating that vision and then supporting people to continue staying focused on that vision





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and working towards it. I mean that's another piece of leadership. Think about it. We've both been talking about our kids all weekend, which is really kind of fun because our kids are all grown up.

BETH: They're all grown. Right, exactly. As I've been saying to my mom lately, a lot of adult kids are really hard and challenging and my mom goes, "Really? Really? Are they?"

SANDY: You know it's one thing when you have a child that you're trying to teach them a new habit, like let's say your kids are old enough to start brushing their teeth. You can't just say to them once, "Here's the toothbrush. Here's how it works. Go brush your teeth," and then expect them to have that nailed down from then on. What do you have to do? Like the next day, you have to do it again. You have to brush your teeth. Then the next day, OK, brush your teeth. Let's go. You have to stay on them basically. It's a training process.

BETH: A training process.

SANDY: That's what it is. It's the same.

BETH: And it's the same when it comes to, you don't feel bad about that unless it's toilet training. I feel bad about that because that was a really long process in my life.

SANDY: I hope your boys don't hear this.

BETH: My kids are so used to my lack of filter. So, hey, I got my son a wife that way. So really, but that's a really good point that we're so used to teaching habits and getting there in other things, but sometimes in our professional lives, we just want to like come on, just do it. I understand it. Why don't you understand it?

SANDY: I've seen people make huge mistakes, particularly with volunteers. I saw a woman who was a founder and director think she could tell her volunteers





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who showed up once a week, “Hey, here’s a new way we’re doing this.” Not train them. Just say we’re gonna do it this way now. Then she expected a full change in behavior out of all those volunteers. Then she would say to me, “Well the volunteers won’t do what I ask them to do,” and when I started with “OK, tell me how you’re encouraging them to participate in the change,” and she told me, and I said, “What makes you think that telling them once without providing training, without context about why we’re changing this, without getting their buy-in, without any of this articulation, what makes you think they’re gonna do it?”

BETH: Which makes you think about how many times with your coworkers, with your boss, with your volunteers, with whoever, you get really frustrated with people that won’t do what you want them to do because in your head, there’s this completely clear path that you know what you want and you know what the outcome should look like in your head, and it’s so easy to miss that you haven’t really given anybody a chance to successfully participate, to successfully join in. Most of the times they’re there. They’re volunteering because they want to support you. They’re not there to try and like get on your last nerve. That’s not, I mean that’s really not the goal of some of these volunteers. Maybe some of them, but their goal is to come in and do the thing. It’s funny, I just asked some of my friends because we have some products that we’re getting ready for volunteer week in April, and we’re getting ready to launch them so I actually asked a bunch of my Facebook friends what’s the best and/or worst way you’ve been recognized as a volunteer. I can’t get over how many people sent me Facebook messages back to say, “My kid was six years old and decided to give up her birthday to do a volunteer thing and she never got a thank you note.” Like, how are you gonna get participation if you can’t, if a six-year-old does something and then tells you about it and you can’t tell that kid that that’s awesome, how are you cultivating positive behaviors?

SANDY: Yeah, yeah. You know, I think with kids and animals, we’re doing a lot of training with our dogs right now, and one common training advice with a dog is to reward the behavior you want to see more of.





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BETH: Right, absolutely.

SANDY: Punishing a dog, that's not helpful. Reward the behavior you want to see more of. It's the same thing with people.

BETH: Which I know is hard for people to hear. I tell people all the time when they're doing their copy, like developing their writing, that in Word, there's this little tool under editing tools or something that you can actually see the grade level you've written for and most of us that are college-educated, if you go and look at that, it's gonna say 13th grade. You know, which is basically college level writing and then also you've got to write really the general norm is sixth grade writing. The instant answer that most people say to me, "No, our people are really smart," "No, no, you don't understand. We're talking to people with like master's degrees." What you don't understand is that they're paying attention to you. They don't want to work that hard to consume your information. This isn't their PhD thesis. Their life doesn't depend on it. So you make it difficult if you don't reinforce things, if you don't make it simple and easy to consume and absorb and embrace. You're just creating an uphill battle for yourself.

SANDY: I think that's exactly right. It's about setting people up for success.

BETH: Right, exactly.

SANDY: That's exactly what it is and I think a good leader thinks about that. They think about how can I help my team or my followers or my fill-in-the-blank. How can I help them win? How can I help them get the result that I'm trying to help them get? Even with staff, if what you're trying to do there is have them do their job, then you've got to back up and think about how can I help them do their job? What do they need? What tools do they need? What support do they need? What training do they need? If you don't have staff, what about volunteers? How do I set them up to win? How do I set them up for success? I think that's another key skill of a good leader. They're not just thinking of themselves, but they realize





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that they have a team of people who are looking to them for guidance. They're looking to them for a tone and they're also looking to them to tell them what to do. I find in the case of volunteers, a lot of people want to come and volunteer. They do. They want to participate in supporting the organization's good work, but they don't want to work real hard to do it. They don't want to show up on a volunteer job and have to figure it out themselves. They want to show up and you tell them, "Hey, here's what you need to do." This is exactly how this works. They want to jump in and do it and they want to leave and feel really good. They don't want to work that hard.

BETH: But they also want to know that it was meaningful. Somebody else on my post said one of the things that frustrates her so much isn't so much about being thanked or not thanked. It's coming, taking time out of your day, planning to do something that you know is like, "Hey I'm doing this thing and I know I'm gonna feel good," and getting there and being told, "We don't really have a job for you," or "We have enough volunteers," or "Hang out over there for a minute while we figure out what's next." So it's amazing all of the little tiny spots that leadership shows up and can break down your organization.

SANDY: Yes, yes, and I think a good leader is setting that tone of "All right, folks, we've got something coming up. Let's be ready. What do we need to put in place so we're ready for people when they show up? We're ready for volunteers, we're ready for whoever." If that leader is lackadaisical and waits until the last minute to do things, guess how everybody else in the organization is gonna behave? They're gonna do the same thing. It's going to be a whole organization of Last Minute Lucies and if the leader is purposeful and organized and really encouraging everybody to be prepared, they're gonna rise up to that. The leader sets the tone. They set the stage and everybody is going to follow along.

BETH: That is so true. Sandy, this was so much fun. It's always good to talk to you. I appreciate this weekend. It's been wonderful. I'm so glad you share your time once again with both me and our whole nonprofit community and again, can you





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tell people if they have questions and they want to ask you more about the work that you do with founders, where can they get in touch with you?

SANDY: We are making all the magic happen at GetFullyFunded.com and you can also find us on Facebook at Facebook.com/GetFullyFunded.

BETH: Terrific! Thank you so much for joining me, and I'll see you all next time!

SANDY: Thank you!

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