



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

SESSION 163

MOVING OUT OF THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

WITH SARAH DAVIS

BETH: Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky, and welcome to Driving Participation. Today I am on with Sarah Davis. Sarah is the director of development for our University City District here in Philadelphia, and she's been doing some really interesting things with her work, and we've been having some really great conversations about the nature of nonprofit thinking. So I thought this would be a perfect time to bring her on today. I have this opportunity because she is a local Philadelphian to be out here in person in our wonderful Center City to talk about the strides that you've made in your organization and where you're going next. Thanks for joining me today.

SARAH: Thank you so much for having me. It's totally a pleasure.

BETH: Sarah, why don't you first tell people about what University City District is and what the goals are of having an organization like that.

SARAH: Sure, absolutely. So University City District was founded 20 years ago, actually 20 years ago this year. So it's our 20th anniversary, as a community development organization devoted to improving the community vitality at the University City area. So it's about a two and a half square mile area of a West Philadelphia neighborhood. Twenty years ago the neighborhood was really experiencing something of a crisis. There was significant dis-investment from a physical standpoint, dilapidated properties, crime rates were relatively high and there was a fair amount of concern among stake holders, including universities, the health systems, community associations, neighbors about how to ensure that this area of the West Philadelphia community and footprint would become stronger and more vital and more vibrant. So University City District was created to layer in a series of services closer to the ground than any of those institutions





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or associations could provide individually.

BETH: It's been an incredible success. I'm a local Philadelphian so I remember when University City was a place you didn't go.

SARAH: Right, and you know it's interesting because I feel like I've been in Philly for 10 years and I hear that a lot about various different neighborhoods in Philly.

BETH: Right, and I went to college in Brooklyn and still said that. So that's saying something.

SARAH: Right. And so the city has changed dramatically even in just the 10 years I've been here, and one of the things that our work is about is when you think about change, change for whom and to what end, and I think that when we talk about economic vitality we wanted to have overarching goals at this point in the University City District portfolio is increasing inclusion and opportunity for everybody in the neighborhood. So six years ago, we created the West Philadelphia Skills Initiative, which connects unemployed West Philadelphians to an opportunity with institutions who are hiring in the community who are looking for local residents to fill meaningful jobs with career ladder opportunities.

BETH: Right. One of the things I think is so interesting about you that I hear from a lot of organizations, a lot of people say, "We have so many different audiences," but you guys really do a couple of different vertical things that are connected with each other, but if you look at one end of the spectrum of what you do and the other end of the spectrum of what you do, there's some really vast differences. So you really do have some distinct channels that you need to communicate with. When it comes to this work and balancing all of that, I always love to talk about it from the perspective of participation. You've got to juggle these different things that you're doing and figure out how you get people involved. So it's an interesting question to ask you with that uniqueness, and I'm sure many of the people that are listening have that same issue, that they do





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multiple services that have some relationship to each other, but really often serve different audiences. In this complex work that you do, what do you guys look at when it comes to participation? How do you look at the things that are really gonna help you thrive and know what moves your needle?

SARAH: That's a huge question, and I think you're absolutely right. We do have so many different stakeholders from executive level leaders at institutions, health systems and universities to members of the community associations to individual residents and funders and donors and everything in between. Really I think that we are a different thing to every single different person who engages with us. For some people, our work is purely about our Clean and Safe program. We're the folks in yellow polo shirts who provide safety ambassador coverage and remove trash when somebody has dumped a couch on your block and it begins and ends there. For some people, we are the place that built The Porch at 30th Street Station, which is a gorgeous and vibrant plaza. For others, we are the provider of the train that helps them connect to lifelong employment and exit from poverty in some cases. So we have and for us, overarchingly that theme of economic connection and increasing vibrancy as where all those distinct verticals kind of connect and how we think of them not as silos, but in terms of communicating with those audiences, we have a unique challenge because we have to make sure we understand how they see us, and I think that has been one of the things that communications team and I have been thinking together a lot about and more broadly across our program staff. We consistently have these conversations about who are we to our audiences and how do we know, and I think that ...

BETH: That's a really good question. So have you solved that? I love that. How do we know? That's a great way to put it because I know near the end of this year we're gonna actually be talking specifically about measurement. What are you guys looking at? How are you answering that question?

SARAH: So one of the things as the director of development, I have a unique lens because I'm interacting with donors all the time. So I get to ask consistently or





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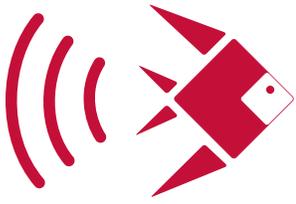
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I've taken the opportunity when somebody makes a gift to, and that can be \$5 or it can be \$2,000 what brings you to our work? What compels you to our work? What compels you to make this gift? So I have the opportunity to have those conversations one on one with a body of donors, which isn't massive because we serve such a place and environment. It's not a massive cross-section of the population, but what I hear from people is that they care about the place that they live. They care about the place where they work and where they do business and they want to see it grow. They want to see it thrive, and I think that is the united sort of thread where all of the stakeholders that we have is that they care about this place, and they have all those different versions of what "better" means. I think that in terms of how we seek those opinions, I think we're working very hard on including that kind of engagement mechanism, both in more formal and kind of more casual ways, as well.

BETH: I think that's so smart and probably why you've been so effective is because a couple of things that you said. You're consciously asking the question of your donors and I'm assuming that you mean between donors for each of the verticals. Like somebody might care about the Clean and Safe program and somebody might care about something else, but what you've been listening for is what's the thread that's beneath all of that that ties it all together and that's really the key because I think organizations that struggle and feel they do so many different things are so complex. If they really listened to what people said about what they value separate from the tactics or the actions of what you do, there would be that. I feel like there's always something. Every organization has something unique and special about it no matter what the actual outputs are of the work that you do.

SARAH: We also have to be open to what we mean to a particular person or particular stakeholder might not be the thing at the beginning of every day that we set out to achieve. I think that that fluidity of received intent is very interesting. How people perceive our work, how people perceive what we are trying to do, versus what we say we're trying to do, isn't always the same thing.





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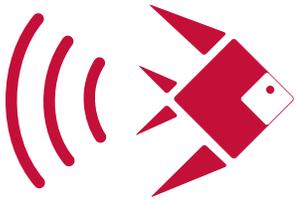
Sometimes, much of the time, I would say it's very positive, but sometimes it's not. So I think being really intentional about hearing from people what they believe us to be motivated to do.

BETH: How are you cultivating that internally? Because one of the things that we see a lot is there can sometimes be this disconnect between the board or the internal staff saying, "We know, we understand what we do," or often like you said, being really invested in one thing that you do that you love so much that it's easy when you're inside to think this is who we are because this is what I care so much about because I put my time, my energy, my work into creating this thing. How are you making sure that your board and your team is culturally prepared to hear that and absorb it and be willing to become that?

SARAH: I think it's an active process. I think one thing that happens is that so much of our staff have been here for I would say less than half of our full organizational history, and much of our programming and kind of current deployment of our mission is relatively new in the scope of our kind of 20-year history. So our intention to creative place making and to making public spaces that are green, where people can engage and have creative social spaces that are kind of in between the gray concrete spaces. That's quite new, as is the skills initiative, in the scheme of our history, and I think in some ways with newness comes a kind of openness. I think we are fundamentally curious as an organization, I think at a leadership level, I think at the program staff level, throughout the organization there is a genuine devotion to wanting to do better and wanting to serve well. I think there's a naturally occurring culture around that that's emergent, and I think that in terms of how we formalize that, that's one of the interesting questions. So it's one thing to have that culture but how do you deploy that on the ground seeking that engagement.

BETH: Exactly, and that leads us to the topic that you and I were bantering around over the last few weeks and it seems to be that you're the perfect person to talk about this because you're an organization that was formed out of the





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neighborhood that was literally struggling with poverty and how to bring light and energy on top of just services, a change in perspective about this community. When we got to talking, we'd started talking about this whole idea of the overall poverty mentality, which applies to people in their space, applies in so many things, but applies so much to nonprofits. Looking at every choice through the lens of "that's too expensive," or "we can't afford that." So I wanted to have an opportunity to have a conversation about this to hopefully spark even a bigger conversation among other people that are in this space, but why are we like that, and where's the separation between not having the money, and the attitude around not having the money? So let's talk a little bit about how you've seen that, how you've seen this culture of poverty show up in places that you've worked.

SARAH: So I think that one of the things of course is scarcity is a very real concern in nonprofit space. We use the phrase "keeping the lights on" as shorthand a lot of the time in the nonprofit space, raising money to keep the lights on. Literally how I'm making payroll, how I'm making the electric bill, whatever the sort of day-to-day immediate needs are, and that's a very real, very pressing concern for so much of the nonprofit sector. I think that has kind of woven its way into our day-to-day practices, that we are constantly concerned with. We're not gonna spend money on other things when we can't meet the basic needs. That's essentially true for so many organizations. So there's that piece of it. I also think that there's signs in the nonprofit space, which is warranted in many ways, that modesty and simplicity are facts because we are not a for-profit model, because we are not selling a product necessarily. We are more about service, than we are about hyperbole or about selling, and so that modesty becomes part of the culture as well. So we wouldn't, and if your people joke all the time about how many times they've recycled the file folder or you know ...

BETH: Yeah, but it's interesting. It's like where's the line between that becoming a badge of honor so big that you're unwilling to invest in vital areas, and where that culture of all of the reporting that talks about 82 percent of our money that





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we bring in goes directly to delivering services, that this whole story that's told about the only way you're doing a good job as a nonprofit is if you live like a pauper in the office and make sure that every cent goes straight through. There's a continuum along that. What are your thoughts on it?

SARAH: Well, I mean, I think that's really dangerous, and I think what happens is when people internalize it as professionals inside of these organizations, we as nonprofit professionals come to expect less. We expect less from our organizations and we expect less from ourselves. So I think being able to say, I insist on delivering something to my community that is rooted and not material abundance, but perhaps it's even a spiritual abundance, but you're saying to your community, "We are surrounding your needs with resources," but you have to arm yourself with those resources and sometimes I think that in a nonprofit space, OK, so maybe you're not gonna get new furniture all the time and maybe you're not gonna have the most expensive office or maybe you're not gonna get to go to, maybe you'll have to share a hotel room ...

BETH: Go every other year to a conference.

SARAH: Yeah, go every other year, but what are the things that you can do internally to say to your staff, to say to your peers, "We embrace you, and we support you, and we want you to thrive." Here, our president at UCD , Matt Bergheiser, has done quite a bit in terms of his focus on making sure that there are resources for professional development. We really value family time, we really value people taking the space that they need to help run their lives and I think even just that notion of flexibility helps loosen that rigidity that some people experience in nonprofit space.

BETH: Absolutely, and I think those are really good ideas because I think this is an important conversation because cultivating this spirit of abundance, this culture of abundance in your organization doesn't necessarily immediately change how much money there is available to do that, but if you don't, if you constantly look





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at the world from a place of “We can’t,” what do you think the risks are? Like if you embed that philosophy in your head, if you look at how that plays out this year, next year, five years from now when you’re looking at the goals and dreams that people have for their organizations, what do you think that owning that philosophy of “We’re small,” or “We can’t spend that kind of money,” how does that build up over time and create limitations and risks for an organization?

SARAH: I think one thing it does is it can engender a sense of anxiety and risk aversion. I think that from a professional standpoint, it can feel like I’m not well-resourced, I’m not valued as an employee, as a professional. I also think that there can be a sense of limiting your belief in your own potential as an organization at times. There is a sense of “We can’t, we can’t, we can’t,” and it starts to become that you really can’t, that you don’t have the will. I know that’s sort of an abstract idea, but what happens is there’s always all these conferences and all these Facebook groups for nonprofit professionals and there’s so many recurring jokes about these themes are the things people are often most concerned about, and I think that collectively we need to as professionals say to ourselves, “I have the resources I need, either inter-personally within myself or within my colleagues to deliver something amazing to my community.” We have to feel empowered and it’s really hard to do if you don’t have enough money, if you don’t have what you need to deliver your program, if the grant doesn’t cover x percent of your actual costs to deliver a specific outcome. All of that I think builds and we absorb it because that’s what we do as humans. We absorb our collective experience, our past experience, and we tell ourselves stories about what we’ve experienced in the past and how we’ve lived those to be true every day and we turn it into our future. Then I think as it translates to our communities and communities we serve, if we continue to feel as though we cannot deliver beyond a certain bandwidth, we can’t deliver a certain set of services or we can’t change the outcome of the community because the resources aren’t there, I think we start to limit our own imagination and we start to limit our organizational potential because we’re not allowing ourselves to imagine a different outcome. I think that, I know this





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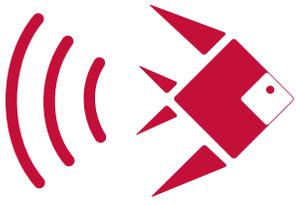
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is psychological, but I think this is an important thing to let yourself imagine different outcomes.

BETH: I think that it's so true, and it's funny. I've been recording these stories with people for a little over three years now and I started out wanting to ask really traditional marketing execution questions like, "What are you guys doing? Is it social media? Is it your website? What are you doing to make it work?" I'm at about 160 interviews now, it's amazing how it's really starting to cross over into deeper stuff about leadership and what's emerging lately is mindset. Participation is at its heart a psychological thing, getting people comfortable of wanting to get involved isn't just about sending out enough emails that they finally say yes. It's this deeper stuff that's really becoming interesting to talk about and as an entrepreneur and so I follow the kind of things like the self-helpish things that entrepreneurs listen to in order to get up every day when you don't have a boss making you. They talk about things like if you think you can or if you think you can't, you're right. Another one that I really love that people talk about a lot is this idea of that you're only as good as the five people that you spend the most time with. I think when we talk about things like culture inside of an organization and leadership and being the champion for an idea, I think those are important things to think about, that if we want people to collaborate with us, if we want people to join us on our journey, how do we cultivate the mindset? Does that mean you bring in people that have this positive outlook or have made things achievable? How do you model that for your team so that you do what you were talking about, this belief and cultivate that imagination that anything in the future is possible?

SARAH: Yeah, I mean, I think it is really important, and I can't say that I can name a lot of organizations off the top of my head where I'd say, "That's absolutely the culture they embrace." It's a very internal and sometimes intangible sense, but I think if you even just look at the space around development professionals, you look at the turnover rate, it's enormous.





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BETH: Enormous, right!

SARAH: And when I've gone to fundraising conferences for example, just even in a room with other people who raise resources for a living, it often turns to borderline therapy sessions because we are trying to decompress and process in the context of the stakes feel very high. You're raising money to make sure that this organization can really deliver the things that it set out to find and to deliver and that it promises to do. I think for so many people, even if you're not in the fundraising capacity, those stakes are very high and it's likely you have chosen a path in nonprofit space because that issue that the organization is devoted to resonates with you. You want to live a life that feels like it's making a difference somehow. You want your work to feel aligned with your values. So feeling as though your week is very personal, I think by definition it's more likely to internalize an experience our work as personal, which means that we're also more likely to feel those losses and feel defeat or frustration.

BETH: I always wondered too if there's also that feeling of "I'm lucky enough that I get to do something that I love and not only do I love the actual work that I do, I get to do it for people who I feel really benefit from and get meaning from it," and I always wonder do we feel as a culture that well in exchange for that, of course I'm gonna make less money. Of course her organization is gonna be smaller because we do something that's special and meaningful. As an entrepreneur, I have to make sure I'm getting over like not thinking that same way. Why do we feel that because we do something that's good and valuable, that in exchange for that, we should be grateful, so grateful that we're willing to accept less?

SARAH: The folks I know who work in for-profit spaces work for companies, especially commerce-based companies, they're often there because they also believe in the work that given company is doing. They believe in the product or they believe in the service. They also for the most part don't question if they deserve the paycheck they're bringing home or the benefits they have or





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the work/life balance Not everybody can say that they have a great work/life balance, but I know many people who feel fortunate to work for companies that provide that. So I think we are seeing more and more companies that are talking about triple bottom line, how to be both for profit and socially minded and have B corporations that are getting certifications in that space. So I think there's a lot of movement in the for-profit and corporate world to think more holistically about their employee's experiences and their community's experiences and their consumers' experiences. I think that there is a little bit in the nonprofit sector. We hesitate to take cues from the for-profit world. We often talk about if we're not selling anything, we're not delivering a product. We're doing something a little bit more intangible or more deep or whatever it is, but I do think there is a lot of richness in looking at how various different organizations function and not thinking about it so much as the difference between a for profit or a nonprofit model, but saying how does it give an organization structure itself to benefit everybody who they consider a stakeholder.

BETH: Absolutely! It's so interesting that you mention that because I feel like in a lot of the conversations I've been having with both my clients and also with people that I'm recording with, I'm seeing more and more them bringing in that. We're gonna be having podcasts with Cynthia Round who directed the branding at the Met and before that was with the United Way, but before that was with Proctor & Gamble. I'm gonna be speaking with Canadian Hear & Stroke who brought people in from all sorts of different corporate organizations. I actually on Monday am going out to Colorado to do some workshopping with Compassionate International, a global organization. The team I'm working with there has come from Starbucks and Talbots and Apple. So these are large organizations that are successful, and I want to say you don't solve big problems by thinking small and by only wanting to look inside and to start that, you've got to start shifting your thinking and thinking differently even if the reality around you doesn't look like that. That's a hard thing.

SARAH: It is. It is really hard, and I think that there can be a sense of, it's hard





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to know where to start. It's hard to know how to change tomorrow. When you look backwards, whether it felt like you felt there were many days, months, years, and so how do you say, "You know what? Starting tomorrow, I'm going to build a culture of abundance."

BETH: There you go! Push the button!

SARAH: It's so layered because I think we talked about Margaret Wheatley who is an organizational psychologist who talks about thinking about organisms, thinking about organizations rather as living organisms. Thinking about the people that live and work in these spaces as human beings who are fluid and changeable and thinking less about who we are as I am Director of Development or you are Director of Communications or thinking less about those rules and more about I am somebody who is deeply devoted to communication. I'm someone who is deeply devoted to ensuring that the people around me feel like they understand one another and feel a collective sense of belief in the work. So in some ways I think that engendering a sense of participation is really about turning towards our assets as actual human beings and within the organizations we work and giving ourselves more space to be more fallible and we have bad days and we get bummed out and it's very real.

BETH: On the flip side of that, when it comes to the perception, the external because I know people have a lot of fears and a lot of times we have a tendency to make decisions out of the fear of loss as opposed to the belief that we're going to win. It's sort of human nature. I talk all the time about recently we did a workshop, and we got six people that said unsubscribe, unsubscribe, when I started sending out things to say sign up for this free workshop. We tend to react to the small amount of negative at a disproportionate rate and it brings out these fears, these fears of what are people gonna think about me? Oh, they think I'm bad because I'm asking them to do something. They think we're not doing a good job. Maybe, who knows what people come up with. When it comes to nonprofits, as somebody who works at one, this fear of the perception, fear of whatever, you





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spent too much money on your website or I can't believe they had their event at that hotel. What are the fears that come up that you think get in the way of cultivating this idea of abundance?

SARAH: I think one thing that I've seen is fear is an incredible power. It's an incredibly powerful emotion. I know I have let it govern my behavior way too much in my life ...

BETH: Me, too!

SARAH: ... and my decisions. I try not to do that in my professional life, but I do think that organizations have tendencies to sometimes act of a place of what will they think and getting back to my notion of engagement and participation, one way to find out what they'll think is to ask them. I think that we need to do that more as organizations to say to our stakeholders and to say to our audiences again what is it that you're looking for from us? How do you perceive us? That annual event that we have and it can be anything, it can be a dinner or a golf tournament and everybody has some sort of fundraising event or some sort of gathering. How do you value that event? What does it mean to you? I think it's OK to ask questions of the people that we're serving and interacting with, again rather than making assumptions about how it might be perceived.

BETH: Absolutely! I think that that's a great idea to give people and the more we can do that, the more we can ask in any form. I often want to always remind people that a survey is not the only way to ask people things. Even if you know what your one question is, and Amanda Kaiser who I've had on this show a couple of times is a phenomenal researcher and one of her favorite questions is to ask people, "What's the moment, what's the moment where you discovered what you value about us? Did something happen? Did somebody do something for you? Did you have an experience? Tell me where the light clicked on for you." That's one of her favorite interview questions that she has when she sits down and has conversations with people and is doing her membership interviews. I love that





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question because it is something that can be done in a survey, but it's something that a board member could do at the after party of a golf event. It's something that you can do with your board members at your next retreat. It's such a wonderful question, to not just say, "Generally, what do you like about us, but tell us about that moment where the light clicked on and you said I need to be here."

SARAH: It's a really good point and I think I'm willing to ask that of people at all different kinds of levels. One of the things we're doing and this is because it's our 20th anniversary, we're trying to highlight that for all kinds of different stakeholders. So with our board, with our donors, with our funders and just folks who go to our events. We have really robust events throughout the spring and summer. So we're trying to engage people where they are and one thing as we show our appreciation of them and so we're having a very simple thing at The Porch at 30th Street Station and employee appreciation days and it's simple. Come down to The Porch. We have food trucks. You can have a chance to win a free lunch or a discounted lunch or something like that. It's just an opportunity to literally just open the door to conversation with people ...

BETH: And who are you inviting to this?

SARAH: So for us, because again we're place-based in University City, it's folks who work in University City.

BETH: So employee appreciation, meaning the employees throughout University City.

SARAH: There's 77,000 jobs roughly in University City.

BETH: And The Porch is at the train station, which is very much the hub of this side of our city, and I don't know about any of you that are listening that are in other cities, but Philadelphians will pretty much do anything for a food truck.

SARAH: We have a big food truck! We work with a bunch of great food trucks and





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so just saying to people, “Hello, did you know that we made this space? Did you know that we produce these events year round? Did you know that we don’t just do those things? We do a myriad of other things in devotion to this community.” I’m using the opportunity again not to say, “What do you value most about us even necessarily, but what do you know about us? How can we deepen our relationship with you and do you want that?” I think that that’s really valuable.

BETH: I love the way that you’re choosing to get participation to get people to join in this with you is to choose to do something that you know they like. People like to socialize. They are already circling around the 30th Street Station. They love food trucks. You chose to go into their space and into things that they enjoy and in ways that they already like to participate with you to find out what they would like to do more of as opposed to saying, “Look over here. Come to this educational session to be informed about this thing or go to this webinar.” You’re surfing with the tide as opposed to fighting against it.

SARAH: I think that’s true, and in our case, a lot of what I found in our narrative and our brand is about promoting the community itself. So we don’t necessarily center ourselves. We don’t talk about University City District does x, y and z all the time. In some cases we certainly do, but in other cases, it’s much more about saying, “Did you know that within two and a half square miles you can have ethnic food from 20 different countries?” or whatever it is.

BETH: That makes a lot of sense. We talk a lot about the fact that where organizations really start to have success with this is when they become comfortable with being the facilitator of the conversation as opposed to the center of the conversation.

SARAH: Right. So I think we oscillate between telling our own story and telling the story of the community that we serve, and because there are so many rich stories and so many kind of converging and diverging realities in this community, I think for us one of the interesting challenges and opportunities is to figure





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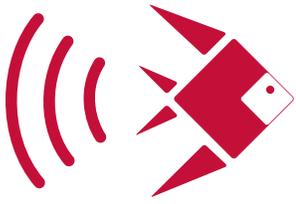
out when it's the right time to tell our story and when it's the right time to tell someone else's story. I think we've gotten pretty good at it, and as we celebrate our 20th anniversary, we actually deployed a series called "20 Years, 20 Stories" where we are telling stories about people and faces throughout our service area that really do represent that richness of experience.

BETH: Wonderful! If someone that's listening said, "This all sounds great, but we are so far from this mindset in our organization," what suggestion can you leave people with to say, "You know what? Start here."

SARAH: For me, so much of the work that I have found and enjoyed most over my career has come from just spending time with my colleagues and understanding where they're coming from. I think that just sitting together and saying, "Where is your head right now? What do you need? What is hard for you?" Just truly listening to one other and creating spaces where we can be honest about things we feel like we're doing well and things we feel depleted by, the things we feel like we need to more resources for. Sometimes the problem solving happens in very informal ways and I think that that openness is something I really value, is something I treasure in colleagues here and in other places I've worked. So I think turning towards one another and saying, "These are the things that are concerning to me and exciting to me. How about you? Where are you at?" I think that can start to build something very interesting.

BETH: I think that's a terrific suggestion for people. Thank you so much. I could sit and talk about this all day. For everyone that's listening, I would love to get your feedback on this episode. This is a different direction for us. We're not talking so much about necessarily the tactics, but as we move into learning things about leadership and mindset, I would love to hear from you to find out is this valuable? Is this an important direction that we should be exploring more of for you. As I plan our guests, this is important things for me to know. Please email me at Beth@IrisCreative.com to let me know what is it that's working for you? What do you want to hear more of? Sarah, thank you so much for sharing your insight with





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both me and everyone that's listening and our whole nonprofit community. I so appreciate your time and value your contribution.

SARAH: Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me. It's been really delightful.

BETH: Wonderful! For everyone that's listening, thank you so much and we'll catch you next time.

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