



Job Search using a Nonprofit Startup Mindset: Insights from Ellisa Brown
Season 2, Episode 4

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Transcript

Speaker 1:

Welcome to Asking for Good a podcast for people who want to make a difference. Hear stories from seasoned nonprofit professionals and volunteers on how to begin or further a career in making the world a better place.

Speaker 2:

Welcome to season two of Asking for Good. This is Katie Puer, a career fundraiser dedicated to making the nonprofit sector better.

Speaker 3:

And I'm Tania Winston. New to the nonprofit sector. I'm here to learn along with you

Speaker 4:

By definition, when you're beginning your nonprofit job search, you are in an in-between time. You're looking to change your life from point A to point B, and in the middle it can be discouraging. It can be a time where you actually lose some confidence because you're not seeing the results you want as quickly as you'd like. So for all of those listening who are putting in tons of effort into launching your nonprofit career, I wanna remind you that not all growth is linear. We have setbacks, and that's natural, and that's part of the process. So stay in there, learn from the setbacks. I also wanna encourage you to be open to possibilities that you hadn't considered initially. For example, last year I spoke with a mid-career professional who was on a strong career track in an uninspiring industry. He was, however, really fulfilled by his volunteering.

Speaker 4:

So what started out as a job search for a nonprofit job to replace his full-time job, it morphed into perhaps freelancing part-time and working non-profit part-time. This is your reminder that there are many ways to achieve your dreams. The meat of our episode today is an interview you with a non-profit founder. It will inspire you, no doubt. This is the next edition of our stakeholder series. Today we're talking to a founder, and whether you're considering starting your own nonprofit or not, this is a great episode for you to really tune into and listen to how a nonprofit is born, how it's sustained, and the personal characteristics of successful nonprofit leaders. They're entrepreneurial, innovative, and mission-driven. It's my pleasure to introduce you to Alyssa Brown. She's a Texas native and the founder of Civic Essentials Education. Alyssa is committed to innovating traditional civic education by building a practical, engaging, and experience-based civics education curriculum with her bachelor's degree from John Hopkins University and Political Science and her master's degree from on day two to day two, to

politic <inaudible> in politics and public policy. It should be no surprise that Alyssa occasionally dabbles in the political scene. Let's dive into the interview with Alyssa.

Speaker 5:

You've started a nonprofit and we'd love to hear just kind of a little bit about your background. What made you decide to start a nonprofit instead of join another one? Or if you have another total perspective, or maybe you regret it, I don't know. So we'd just love to hear from you, like what do you need to know or do if you wanna start your own nonprofit?

Speaker 6:

Definitely. So I have so much advice. I would start with, first of all, I'm Alyssa Brown. I started Civic Essentials Education Fund. It is a, basically a youth political literacy organization. And it came out of, I think, all of the passion that was happening during the 2020 election. I think there was a lot, and also confusion, right? I happened to be a political science major, so I have my bachelor's in political science, and then I also did my master's in Paris, France in public policy. And so I was the person you asked in the family if you weren't sure about something. And all of the sudden in 2020, my phone was ringing off the hook. And I felt like there were so many things that I was being asked by people in their thirties, forties, fifties, that a good citizen of a democracy should already know, right?

Speaker 6:

Because that in a lot of ways is our first and primary job as a citizen of the us. And so it was kind of discouraging, honestly. And so I was like, well, if I can spend an hour explaining this to, you know, one of my family members, it just makes more sense for me to make a course or a curriculum or a workshop or a webinar about it, because at least then I'm, I'm touching more people. And so out of that, I've just never been a person to do something small. And so I was like, well, I'll just start an organization. And I think that's where a lot of people start, right? They start with a problem that seems super personal to them and then they're like, oh, well this feels like something that a nonprofit should do. And then they just start a nonprofit.

Speaker 6:

Do not recommend that. Not in the sense of like, don't start a nonprofit, but in the sense of you need to do a lot more research first, right? I didn't know my sector. I didn't know what other nonprofits in the civic education space were doing when I started, I had started civics before I knew that like icis existed or that close close up DC existed, or all of these other organizations that are wonderful reflect us. True enough, we don't do the same thing they do, right? But I may have chosen a different path if I had known that, right? So I think that's one of the big things. I would say first, do your research, make sure nobody else is doing what you're doing. True enough. I think I would've found that nobody else is doing exactly what I'm doing, right? And I think then I would say your next step is to develop a niche.

Speaker 6:

So I would say civics is niche, for example, is that we don't care about things that a lot of nonprofits care about. We don't care about like who the 35th president of the United States is, or a lot of those random historical civic education facts you get in like an AP government. That's not our interest. Our interest is to give you the stuff that will make you move and then make your moves matter. So in the sense of how do you talk to your city council, right? Like what website do you go onto? What issues do you bring to them? Who do you need to contact if you're just not sure what to do or what department handles in

particular government issue? How do you think through our federal government where you may not know whether your city or council or county or school board is responsible for it?

Speaker 6:

Those are the things that I think matter, because those are the things that make a difference. And that's also how you hold government accountable. And our youth don't know any of that <laugh>, right? Our youth are taught things like who the 35th president in the United States is, and that doesn't help them do anything. And I think it's a big reason why people don't go out and vote, right? And so we found a niche, we found a very specific thing that set us apart from everyone else, but that takes work Civics wasn't that when I first started? So civics has been in operations in November, it was two years. And so when I first started, it started with a lot of just like calling up people that I, of people I didn't know or who I knew were somewhat adjacent to the nonprofit space. Or I had interned at a nonprofit before.

Speaker 6:

So I, I called them up and I was like, Hey, what does this thing do? So that would be the third. That would be the second thing, right? First, do your research. Second find your niche. Third, it'd be take a crash course in nonprofit govern governance, right? Because if you are a founder, I promise you you'll have to do absolutely every part of your organization at some point. I publish our social media. I, you know, do our PR at some point. I do fundraising. I contact potential donors. I try and think through strategy as far as like how we can interact with corporations, right? You'll do all of it. So you need to have some idea of what a development role is, what a fundraising role is, what a communications director like. You need to know all of that. So I'd say three is take a, take a crash course.

Speaker 6:

And then four, last but not least is find you at least two good people. You cannot do it by yourself. <Laugh>, you will think you can but you can't. And those two people have to be as passionate about it as you are. I think a lot of emphasis is put on like find a good board, like find a board that's got a network. And I think that was a lot of the advice I got. But what you'll find is a board with a network is also not a board that's got time and not a board that is going to help you work those long nights when you're like, well, I don't need somebody who's gonna run to a Fortune 500 company. I need somebody who's gonna post some stuff on social, or who's going to help me figure out how to run this webinar or help me reach out to potential speakers for our event or find us workshops to do in our community.

Speaker 6:

That's not what a board member with a great network is gonna do. You have to have somebody who's got just as much ownership of that cause as you do. And that's if you wanna get the work done. So that's what I would say. Those are kind of like my, if I had, if I'd known four things when I started, I would've known one, I need to research, two need to find that niche, develop it, know it backwards and forwards. Three crash course in nonprofit governance, and four, you need at least two other good people that are gonna be in the trenches with you.

Speaker 7:

I have a couple of follow up questions. I'm sure I could keep you here all day, but I know we don't have all day. But something you named it just the beginning with your background being in poli sci. There's a lot of folks that go into the nonprofit sector that don't have formal nonprofit degrees. So can you speak

to kind of what might be some triggers for someone that the nonprofit space might be the right direction for them to head in, even if that's not their background?

Speaker 6:

Yeah, definitely. I would say if you have a cause and are passionate about something and are willing to put in the work, right? I think that is the biggest thing. That should be your huge green flag that the nonprofit space is for you. Now, that means your purpose or your cause has to be your North star, because there will be a lot of things that try and push you off of that. So one of the ways that I, like I will in most of my LinkedIn posts and all of that wonderful stuff with purpose driven, right? That means I can't be determined to get the big grant, right? That's not the end goal. Your end goal should be whatever that grant is supposed to fund. Because that means if that grant falls off, you still got that thing to fund, you're still looking for that end goal, which is to, is it impact 5,000 students or whatever.

Speaker 6:

Whatever you put in that grant application has to be your North star, not the money itself. And I think it's really easy to fall off the bandwagon and get distracted by what are really tools in your toolkit, not the destination. So if you're a person who can stay grounded and anchored to that kind of destination, the nonprofit is for you. If you are easily distracted or really don't care about the end goal, for instance, you just want a particular title or whatever, corporate America's for you definitely go like they love that stuff there. Also, another good way to think through is sometimes your nonprofit doesn't have to be people facing. And I think that's a weird slash unpopular opinion, but there are other ways to support nonprofits that don't have to do with actually impacting individuals, right? There are nonprofits that focus on policy pushes, right? There are nonprofits that focus on work with other nonprofits right there, <laugh>. There are also really good background roles at nonprofits. So maybe you're just a good accountant, but you want your work to have to do something, right? Go be an accountant at a nonprofit, right? That doesn't mean you necessarily need to found one. I think it's just about finding a way for your passions to intersect with what you do. Well,

Speaker 7:

That was really, I think, solid advice. And I imagine that having to be in that role as the founder and having to do it all must be tied to having that north star. What are maybe some other things that keep you going and being able to do the work?

Speaker 6:

Actually, I'd say two things. One in work is loving the little wins or what other people would perceive as the little wins, right? Like, I got to go on this podcast. Like, that's a little win. That's a thing to keep you pushing. I think anytime you find somebody who cares about your mission, even just a little bit, right? Knowing that they give you that extra, oh yeah, that is a problem. Somebody should fix it. That is always the best thing in my day, right? When I can tell somebody, oh, I'm working on this thing. And they're like, oh yeah, that is an issue. I think it validates your work, right? It helps to validate you. So in work, I would say those are the little things outside of work. It's definitely family, right? It's my family was the reason I started this, right? They were the reason answering those questions for them were the reason why I decided to go down this journey.

Speaker 6:

And so when I can look back at them and be like, Hey, I created this resource based on what you asked me. Is it helpful? Does that, and they're like, oh yeah, this answers all my questions. I'm gonna go share this with like all of the people I know, or whatever. Right? That feels really, really good because in the, it's really easy, especially as a founder to get disconnected from the good you meant to do, right? And I was really lucky that my family was my my impetus right to joining this, this whole industry. And as a result, they're able to fill my tank when it starts to run a little empty. They, they can put back in that same joy. And understanding that I love to see on their face. I can see it over and over and over again as much as I want.

Speaker 6:

And they also remind me that I just love talking about this stuff. I didn't start to, I wasn't, the reason I went into poly sci was because I really do love politics. I love civics. I love talking about government and the different types of government and the different ways government can change and shift. That's one of the reasons I went abroad. 'cause I wanted to see outside of American democracy, there has to be other ways for this whole government thing to work. And when I get to have those kinds of conversations with people who know nothing about the nonprofit space, they have very little background on civics and they don't really care about how successful that's going, right? They just like the information, they like the conversation. That's what keeps me going every time.

Speaker 5:

That's great. Can I jump in with a couple of kind of more tactical questions?

Speaker 6:

Definitely. <laugh>.

Speaker 5:

So civic essentials is two years old. Yeah. And I'm wondering, have you had the chance to hire anyone on staff? And if so, what type of person did you hire or what types of people are you looking for when you are hiring?

Speaker 6:

We are doing a lot of contract labor now because we're two years old. And one of the things that if you are a founder, and you don't know this, most of the time, you can't apply for grants until you're two years old. And then grants take a ridiculous amount of time to come through, right? So don't think you're gonna hit that two year mark and have people lining up at the door. No, it's probably gonna be at least six months or so before you start seeing any grant money after you turn two years. And most grants won't give you a dime if you, unless you've been in existence for two years. So there's that. So we do a lot of contract labor and we hold in a curriculum spec development specialist. So a big part of our work is that we outside of workshops, we're creating this experience, experience-based practical simulation type curriculum.

Speaker 6:

And I wanted a full curriculum. So I needed somebody who was a teacher who was teaching certified, who had their master's. Like I had this whole list of our perfect person. And we went out, I did advertisements on LinkedIn I pulled in different networks. I had my mother as a member of a sorority. I had her posted in their sorority group. I screamed it from the rooftops of our organization. And I did

interview after interview after interview. Because the one thing when you're a small org and a young org, even though you may be willing to pay good money for it, you're gonna wanna be very picky with who you bring in because you need to know that they have the vision in mind. Because I had everything that I envisioned for civics as curriculum lived in my head.

Speaker 6:

So a lot of it was her really sitting down with me and picking my brain because I was not a teacher. So what I had was not always compatible <laugh> with like actually teaching high school students. So she had to be a person that I was willing to let check me, but also knew the vision and the goal, and was excited about it so that I knew when she checked me, it wasn't because she didn't want the same goal I wanted. So I went through a lot of interviews. But I think also for people who are looking to be hired by small nonprofits, be very sure you understand whoever's interviewing you's, vision, what they want what product they're looking for, what kind of work they want you to do, ask a ridiculous amount of questions because they're honestly, a lot of the time the stuff has not been done yet. It doesn't exist, and that's why they're looking for you. And that's gonna take a lot of creativity and a lot of flexibility.

Speaker 5:

I think that that advice is true for any size nonprofit too. You know, you can talk to the department head about their vision for the department. If it's a larger nonprofit. I think that's a, a critical piece if you're on the same page with the vision. So that's great. Any last thoughts? Alyssa or Tania?

Speaker 6:

I would say just last thoughts. For anybody who's interested making a difference in joining the space, don't be discouraged. Just find, find your space. Civics was not the first nonprofit I started. I'm super young, I'm 26, but I still, I, when I was, I think 13, I started this nonprofit called Tesh with like four of my friends. We were still in school, which means our parents did a lot of work, but we, it was called Tesh because it stood for teen earth superheroes. It was extremely naive, but I think because I'm okay with my ideas being naive and going into a space and not knowing that they're, whether they're gonna work or true, or maybe they'll fail, but that doesn't matter. Try it, right? Because otherwise, if a, if a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, it didn't fall right? I'm a communications professional.

Speaker 6:

That's what it's, and so at least open your mouth and tell people about your idea. You never know who's gonna bite. Even people that you don't expect to bite. So we're a non-partisan org and some people that I thought would, I'm in and I'm in Texas, right? And I never thought some of the most conservative people are still like, oh yeah, that's a really big thing. We should be looking into that. I have follow up questions, of course, what are you teaching? Or why, whatever. But I think the biggest thing is just, just say why you're passionate about it. Most people will meet that passion with passion.

Speaker 5:

Wonderful. I do wanna say thank you so much for being with us today.

Speaker 6:

Of course, of course. It's been great.

Speaker 2:

To recap, Alyssa started a nonprofit to solve a problem that was impacting her personally. She suggests these four must do steps if you wanna start your own nonprofit. Number one, research. Research the issue which other organizations, whether they be nonprofits, businesses, or governments, are also trying to solve this problem. Number two, find your niche. How are you uniquely skilled and positioned to solve this problem? Number three, take a crash course in nonprofit governance. As part of her research, Alyssa called up nonprofits to understand what they do. Founders will do all the jobs at some point. So knowing fundraising or marketing and even how to file taxes will be important. Number four, find two good people to be in the trenches with you. Make sure they are as passionate as you are about the issue. You can't do it alone even if you want to. She also spoke to board development and how necessary it is to fill the board by what the organization needs, not just selecting higher profile people or simply passionate people.

Speaker 2:

Board members bring specific skills to an organization in the quest to keep the organization alive. As Alyssa puts it, it's really easy as a founder to get disconnected from the good you meant to do. Staying mission focused. She provided the example of trying to secure a large grant. Your end goal isn't the big grant. Your end goal is the purpose of whatever the grant would fund. Let me share an example from another founder who I admire. I'm on the board of a 14 year old nonprofit and the founder is on the board and he puts it like this. Programs come and go, but our mission remains. Grants and programs are tools in the toolkit to achieve the mission. They're not really your destination. Thank you for listening. Will you rate and review us wherever you're listening? Our mission is to help people like you successfully launch their nonprofit careers. And we need your help to help us reach more people through your ratings and reviews. Up next, we continue our stakeholder series with donors and beneficiaries, and finally, the ancillary players that are imperative to nonprofit work. Until then, take care. I.