



**Recipe for Nonprofit Career Success = Purpose + Nonnegotiables + Growth  
Mindset**  
Season 3, Episode 10

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Speaker 1:

Which is really understanding your authentic voice in two ways, defining your purpose and understanding your non-negotiables.

Speaker 2:

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

Speaker 3:

Hi, I'm Katie Zer, a career fundraiser dedicated to making not-for-profit sector better. Our guest today is Ellen Gifford. I'm thrilled to have her with us because she has vast knowledge of human resource management and has been quite successful in several different types of organizations, including healthcare organizations, non-profit organizations for-profit organizations. And her experience in these organizations has led her to launching two ventures. The first is called Four Doors Coaching and Consulting, which works with folks one-on-one to master their own career. The second is a nonprofit called Southern Plains Productions, which is a unique organization that brings immersive community oriented theater experiences to the Southern Plains region, namely Oklahoma. I'm excited for you to hear from Ellen's experience because I know wherever you are, she has something for you.

Speaker 4:

Welcome, Ellen. Thank you.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for having me.

Speaker 4:

I can't wait to dig in. We've got so much to talk about from your HR experience to your experience starting a nonprofit. Let's start though with the bulk of your career, and that's been in human resources of healthcare systems. So as many of our listeners probably know, healthcare systems come in all shapes and sizes, including their not-for-profit or for-profit status. And you've had experience in both. So why don't you tell us a little bit about the characteristics of each?

Speaker 1:

Yeah, thank you. I, I have spent quite a lot of time in healthcare and I, I frequently say to people I grew up in healthcare 'cause I started my career at a not not-for-profit organization that was a home for

unwed mothers. They were 110 years old. They were a very much a community-based hospital. Then they were purchased by a company that was basically a holding company. And that was a little bit different because it became for-profit but a lot more hands-off. And then there was a third iteration where that company was purchased and they were more of an operating company where they were very hands-on. I think the major difference between not-for-profit and for-profit is really about shareholders. When you are for-profit and you're publicly traded a lot of the time the focus is very much on the money. I think all of us will resonate, even us in the not-for-profit sector that money is important. The, the, the nuns used to always say no margin, no money are no yeah, no margin, no money, no margin mission. Yeah.

Speaker 4:

Right? Yeah.

Speaker 1:

And so, so they very much understood that, you know, money kinda makes or breaks you as well. But the big difference is really how we think about money before the story. So, and not-for-profit, we really think about the story first, the mission first, and then we figure out how we're gonna go find the dollars to support that. Whereas in for-profit, a lot of times it's, you know, we're catering to the dollars and we're looking at that as part of the mission.

Speaker 4:

I really like the way that you're framing this, and I think we'll get to discuss this concept later, but the idea that you were in a role and all of a sudden the organization around you is changing from not for-profit to for-profit. And all along the way you're having to decide, you know, am I still gonna be a part of this?

Speaker 1:

Right.

Speaker 4:

Leading with story as the mission and then figuring out how you're gonna fund things. It's easy in the not-for-profit sector just to assume everybody understands why the work you're doing is important. Right. You know, and you really have to be able to articulate, you know, why this matters for our community. So I like those two ideas that you brought up.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 4:

Since your work in the healthcare world, you've launched two ventures that have given you insight. Our listeners will appreciate you have become a leadership coach and are the founder of a five-year-old performing arts nonprofit. So let's talk about these life changes. And I have to bring up this quote, it's from Lao Sue, and it says, if you don't change your direction, you may end up where you're headed. And I just thought of that being so appropriate for the decisions you have made to arrest your work in the healthcare world, to go into coaching, to go into creating a not-for-profit. You had a personal realization

that you wanted to make these directional changes and start on a new path, and you're actually helping your clients in the same capacity. So can you talk about your goal to help clients create their own inspired healthy life using their authentic voice first?

Speaker 1:

Yeah. So I love the quote that you gave because I think that it's important as you start to think about your career is to really be purposeful and intentional about what, where you're going and what you're doing. And I think so my, so many times we let life just happen to us, and you find yourself kind of in that hamster wheel, running that hamster wheel. And, and maybe you're enjoying the perks of that. But sometimes you wake up and realize this isn't exactly what I thought that was going to be. Or you wake up and have that thought, is this all there is? Right.

Speaker 4:

Yeah. <Laugh>, yeah.

Speaker 1:

I always say that I reserve the right to get smarter. And I think that that's a great way of thinking about really being purposeful and intentional around yourself and where you're headed. And so really you know, after having a, a full career and human resources moving from an entry-level position as a recruiter all the way up into the C-suite so I saw it all, did it all, and enjoyed it all along the way. I really wanted to branch out and have my own consulting business where I'm a little bit of a kind of a career whisperer, a thought partner really meeting people where they are. Some of the clients that I have are around you know, early career and they're looking to move up in, into the C-suite eventually. And so they're looking at how to do that. And then there are others who are, you know, they're already in the C-suite and they either need thought partnership or they want to kind of navigate out and figure out what's next for them. So many of us don't want to retire. We love what we do, so we wanna stay vital and, and relevant. And that's kind of what I've done. And I think I love helping others do that. And

Speaker 4:

When you help them, you're helping them find, as you put it, their authentic voice. And so can you talk to me about, you know, what is your authentic voice?

Speaker 1:

I think when I first started on this path of working with others, I had to take a step back and say, really, who am I? What do I want? What are the things that really jazz me up? Get me going? What are the things that I think and feel? I think so many times as we do adulting, we realize that we need to share the thoughts of others, champion the idea of our company. And while all of those things are good and needed at times, sometimes we lose our own authentic voice and self in that. And so I went on a journey to do this and, and I help others do the same, which is really understanding your authentic voice in two ways. Defining your purpose and understanding your non-negotiables. If you can do those two things, you can define your why.

Speaker 1:

Why do I do this? What, you know, jazzes me up again, what wakes me up in the morning? And I can make the statement, I can't believe I get to do this every day, as opposed to, I can't believe I have to do this every day. Right. It's a get to, not a have to. And it's around this idea of understanding your why and

then creating those non-negotiables. What are those things that are important to you no matter what? And really writing them down and living by them. And if you have a fork in the road, go back to those things, go back to your why, go back to your non-negotiables and say, does this align? And those things can change over time. So it's really a check-in with yourself to say, does this still resonate with me?

Speaker 4:

Because you have a long career in organizations. Do you suggest our listeners talk to their human resources team and share these elements or parts of these elements? And what would that sound like?

Speaker 1:

Oh, you know what? I love that Katie, because I think so many times we don't recognize that there are resources in, in the human space. You know, so often we're caught up in the doing of the work and yes, I agree reach out if your leader is that person, fantastic. But there also should be people who are there to champion you from your growth and development. And a lot of times those are the human resource folks. They are trained in this and they can help kind of walk and guide you through. But honestly, if your company doesn't have that, be that leader yourself. Champion that for yourself. Initiate those conversations. And you asked, how will I do that? I think it's around this idea of walking in, knowing your why, knowing your non-negotiables and knowing where you're headed, you know, to your quote, right? Like, where do I want to go? How do I want to get there? And then looking at the people who are already there and asking questions, getting curious, help, helping to understand how they did this, what was their pathway.

Speaker 4:

Yeah, I love that. And in my own personal experience, I have had times where I knew that the organization I was in didn't necessarily have space for me to grow. Well, I was able to speak candidly with my supervisor and do the most I could within the constraints of the organization. So I was, had this partner in preparing me for my next role. And as a manager, I've been able to do that for other people. Like, I know that you're not always, always going to want to be a coordinator or whatever role you're in now let's communicate and let's figure out where you wanna go so that I can give you these opportunities to learn. Even if I don't have the the place on the organizational chart for you to go next, at least I can help you get ready for the next, next thing.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. And it's so brave of you to, to both be the person to ask for that help, because sometimes I think we feel like we can't step out there, but I think a lot of times you'll be surprised at the response. People do wanna help others grow and develop. Sometimes they just don't think about that because they're caught in their own, you know, hamster wheel or their own work every day. And so they don't often think about like, let's take a step back. So you know, I applaud you for that. I also applaud you for taking that in as a leader and then returning the favor, right? Like paying it forward <laugh>.

Speaker 4:

Absolutely. Well, I don't know that I would've thought about it on my own. It was certainly, you know it was shown to me, right. It was an example that I was following.

Speaker 1:

Yes, yes.

Speaker 4:

So you've worked with clients on creating their authentic voice, understanding their why, defining their non-negotiables, and that's been a, a big career change for you as far as being able to work one-on-one with people as opposed to managing the human resources of an organization. Another big change for you has been starting a nonprofit, and your nonprofit is five years old. And if I had sound effects, I would add an applause here, <laugh>. Because so many nonprofits don't make it past one year or two years, five years is a, is a great accomplishment. So congratulations. And we'd love to hear from you about what you've learned along the way as you created and have kept growing this non nonprofit. I know when people are thinking about entering the not-for-profit space, one idea will come up and say, you know, should I just make my career starting a nonprofit? So should they, no. Do you don't have to answer that directly, but tell us more, more about, you know, what it's been like to start and keep this thing going.

Speaker 1:

Oh, yes. And you said, learning so many learnings. We joked that we should have a Netflix show and we should have had someone like following us and like listening in to our hair-brained ideas that we're so unrealistic. But, you know, one of the core tenets I think of us getting to the five year mark and we'll have our fifth season in 2025 is this idea that shoot for the stars, you might hit a lamppost. And it really, I think you do just have to be all in and stupid to do it. Like I think, and I mean that in the best light, right? Like

Speaker 4:

It yeah. Is totally risk averse. Totally risk averse, right? Yes. I I don't care if I break my nose and fall on my face, I'm just gonna go for it

Speaker 1:

A hundred percent. And that's, that's the beauty of this. And I wouldn't change a single thing of it. Like I wouldn't go back and like you know, make it different. Because the learnings, the failings, that's what's gotten us to where we are. And I think it's the, around this idea of resilience and believing in the mission and what I talked about early in, in the program around this idea that it's, it's the mission first, right? Like we are super serious about bringing this innovative artistic experiences. We're super serious about sparking conversation within our community and bringing that community together. And so we go back to that core tenant that why every single time we have a a moment to say, should we be doing this? And there are plenty of those, right? Like I think if you think there won't be you know, you, you'll be misled, but it's in those times that you can just reinvent, get smarter, right? Reserve the right to get smarter, move the, move the business forward based off the mission and based off what you know now

Speaker 4:

I'm hearing echoes of another nonprofit founder that said, we are our mission. All these programs that we've been doing for 12 years, we like them, but they are not why we're here. And it's very easy in the not-for-profit space to just perpetuate the programs and, and make them fit into the mission. So I I love that you guys are constantly returning to the mission and scrutinizing what you're doing and saying, yeah, what's is this reaching our mission?

Speaker 1:

Yeah. I love that you said that, and that is a wise person who, who shared that with you. Because now that we're in this space of, of getting, like you said, the luxury of going into our fifth season, we've had the realization that we're now ready to be a full company. I think when you start a nonprofit, it is about like, okay, what are we gonna put out there to the world in order to, for them to understand the mission? And so it, it was about the shows and you know, for us it's theater, so it's, you know, it's like what shows are we gonna pick? And everything was around the shows. We've had this kind of realization that that's not a company, right? The shows are not the company. And it is really about this innovation. It really is about sparking conversation. And so how do you do that? And there are other ways that we can do that to add to the programming that we're doing, and in order to have that impact of bringing our community together.

Speaker 4:

Wonderful. Tell me some, some nitty gritty answers here to fundraising. I've been a fundraising professional for so long that I can't remember what it's like to learn the first parts. So you've been learning the first part, so share it with us, because I'm probably too warned to remember <laugh> what to share.

Speaker 1:

Well, I don't know that you're worn. I think you're amazing and you, you know, you have a huge reputation of being fantastic at this. And so anyone out there who needs coaching around fundraising, Katie's your lady. Ooh, that rhymes. Katie's your

Speaker 4:

Lady. Yeah. Wow. <Laugh>, we've come onto something. Thank you so much,

Speaker 1:

<Laugh>. But yes since we're newbies in this space, we we've all the scrapes and scratches and bumps that go along with deciding what your mission is and then using so story and then using the money to support that. And so couple of things is one, I think it's important even as a nonprofit and a not-for-profit to understand how you make money, right? How does this organization money? Where are the funding sources? That's one, two extremely important to be well diversified, right? So for us, like ticket sales grants, corporate sponsorships, individual donations other types of programming that can bring in dollars merchandise, like those are different components board, board giving that we didn't really consider at the beginning, right? Like, we were just like, oh, yay, we're gonna do this and it's gonna be so great and everyone's gonna come and the tickets are gonna pay for everything. And again, naivety is fantastic because otherwise you would just stop yourself and be like, no, ticket sales are not gonna pay for it, right? For us, that's only 25% of everything we're laying out. So I think understanding that really like taking a business approach and putting that down on paper. Second is really understanding that it is super important for you to get your 5 0 1 or whatever, you know, IRS is it

Speaker 4:

Your IRS designation, whatever legal status you need to be, get it sooner than later, right?

Speaker 1:

Exactly. Like go do that right away, apply for that, because it becomes hugely important. A lot of organizations will not give to you until you have that for three years. That is one of their core kind of

markers, minimum qualification to get in the door. And so we actually did that unknowingly. Like we didn't know that that was true. But we just, we knew that we wanted to make sure that we had that legal designation, so we went ahead and did that upfront. But that was kind of a happenstance. I think a lot of people make the mistake of not doing that upfront. And then I think finally it's about relationships. Get to know the people in your community and nationwide, like those resources. The, the, the people who are over the grants, they are not the decision makers necessarily, but they are the voice for you in the room.

Speaker 1:

So most places have a committee, which is perfect exactly how it should be. But if they don't know who you are, and they, and, and the person who is helping to explain who's applied for the grants or who's applied for their corporate sponsorship, they don't know you, you're probably getting passed over because they just have so much need out there. And so understandably, if they can't speak to why you would want that money you aren't going to get it. And they are so gracious and helpful. I think that's the other thing you feel like, oh, I don't wanna bother them. No, this is what they do. They want to help you. They wanna know about your organization, and they wanna be able to champion you in the room. They're, they want to give away money. That's the whole point.

Speaker 4:

<Laugh>. Yeah. Yeah. And that's, that's part of their own personal why, you know, somewhere along the way they've determined that what they wanna be is a catalyst for funding for important nonprofits. Yeah. So they do want to, to take your baton and, and take it to the decision makers.

Speaker 1:

Yes. Yes. I think the last thing that I'll share, Katie about kind of the nitty gritty, the basics, the fundamentals is you have to have some money to get the grants. That was a miss for us. We were so excited to get this grant <laugh>, we applied for this grant, we said we were gonna do all these things, and then we had this realization, we went back to our budget and we were like, oh, we didn't budget for this. Because a lot of times they'll give you matching, right? Like they want you to have skin in the game. So they'll say, oh, you wanna spend 10,000, \$10,000, we'll give you \$5,000 and you'd do the other five. And we were like, oh, whoops. Like, we didn't

Speaker 4:

<Crosstalk> Yeah, hang on a second.

Speaker 1:

We didn't want you to give the whole 10. And so know that going in, like you kind of have to have, you need, don't make things. It's not that we made it up, but it don't make things up in order to get the grants. Like don't make up programming just to get the grant, because you've gotta spend the money on those things and they need to match your why they need to match your mission. And then also just knowing that you need to budget. So for us, fortunately, we had a board that says, we'll, we'll raise the other five, right? And put it with it. And so then that grant meant everything to us, helped us have some equipment, but just kind of knowing that you do need to budget for grants in, in the spending category as well as the receiving category.

Speaker 4:

Oh, that's a great, a great lesson. And one thing that we've talked about before is how when a funder says, no, that's not, no forever, don't, you know, block them in your cell phone. It's not, it's the beginning of a conversation. No means No, not right now. In so many instances. And so in major giving, a lot of times we say, if a donor says no, what you're gonna ask ne what you ask next is, is it the timing, the amount or the project? You know, so you're starting to understand what do they value, what matters to them? And grant makers you can do the same thing with. So what's your experience with you know, being told no in a letter, and then what do you do after that?

Speaker 1:

Yeah, I love this because you're exactly right, the tendency is to be like, oh, they don't like us. They don't want you know, and so we we actually made a relationship with an organization that was granting. We, we talked with the executive director, we talked with the, the grants manager. We were like locked in. We were like, oh, we know exactly what they want. Build up the grant application. And, and then, you know, a couple months later they were like, no. And so you're like, whoa, I felt like I <crosstalk>. Yeah.

Speaker 4:

What happened here? <Laugh>, we were on a date.

Speaker 1:

Yes. Why did we not get married? And so, you're right, the tendency would just be like, oh, I guess they don't like us. I guess that what we do doesn't resonate. That was so far from the truth. And so pick up the phone, we called and we said, Hey. And they met with us, they walked us through our whole application and they explained why we didn't receive the grant. And it was, we were like, oh, that makes complete sense. There was, they asked if we were able to sustain what we were asking for, if they didn't help provide the money. And we said, no, we, we would not be able to do it if they didn't provide this grant to us. And they said, we didn't fund anything that wasn't already sustainable, fought by an organization because we don't wanna give you money. And then if we don't give you money next year, it has to go away. You need to be again. So it's like thinking about your budget and where you're putting your dollars. If you're asking for grants, you probably need to also have other dollars diversifying the what your sources of income. And they explained that to us, and that was extremely helpful for the next time we go to ask them for dollars, which they do like every 90 days.

Speaker 4:

Yeah. Thanks for sharing that story. And I wanna make sure that what people are hearing is that it's important to talk to each funder and not that the way this funder sees funding and the way they give is the way everyone does it. So everyone has their own style, every organization, every foundation, every person. So it's really, like you said before, it's about relationships and just making sure that you are communicating with potential funders.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, I love that you clarified that, Katie, because she even said this particular committee decided that's how it was, but that didn't mean that next year it'll be the same.

Speaker 4:

Oh, good point. Yeah.



Speaker 1:

<Laugh>. So it, so it is, it is really important and, and it's just important to be true to yourself. The reality was we weren't gonna be able to say in it. So that was a true answer. And it, and we needed to say it, what the true answer was.

Speaker 4:

I wanna move us on to another area of your expertise. And I really appreciate you sharing your, your school of hard knocks relative to starting a not-for-profit, and I hope it inspires others. Another thing that I hope listeners are picking up is how to evaluate an organization as you are considering maybe joining a not-for-profit that's just starting up. So Ellen's ideas of making sure there's a diversified revenue model, seeing that the organization has strong relationships and a strong board seeing that they have that they have a real connection to their mission and not a commitment solely to specific programs. You know, that they really know why the programs they're doing align with their mission. So as you're interviewing and assessing organizations to apply to think about those elements also. Now I'd like to move on to another area of your expertise that I think is really useful to people, whether they're starting their career or in mid-career, we see are personal growth and people go from subject matter experts and they can go from there to managing teams, to being mid-level managers onto C-Suite. They can be a subject matter expert and then go learn about something else. So talk to me about how you prepare people who have been subject matter experts and they've hit that moment where you said before, is this all there is? And where do you go from there?

Speaker 1:

Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. Yeah. Yeah. You know, it's interesting because I think all of us start as the subject matter expert, right? Like, we have something we're talented at or good at a skill. And so in those early career days you are an expert at something and that you start to do those things and you get really good at it and, and people come to you and a lot of people get make a whole career that way. And I think that's amazing. And I think that if, I think then two things can happen to those who are subject matter experts. One they might say, Hey, I'm recognizing that technology or, or this has run its course and I, you know, I'm just not getting what I got out of it before. Or there's some sort of landscape change around laws or whatever and, and your job, you know, so many of us, our jobs might be becoming obsolete because it's just like I said, technology or, or landscape.

Speaker 1:

And I think when you find yourself in that role, it's really about having that growth mindset, having that ability to say yes to the things that don't look or feel like what you're doing currently, and stretching and stepping into something new. And I think so many times we kind of put our own selves in a box because we say, no, this is what I'm good at and this is what I do, and I only do this. And we then give off the vibes or, or even verbally say no to opportunity where our leaders are saying, Hey, do you wanna be a part of this committee or understand this project or do this with other people? So a big piece I think of moving around in your career, whether that's lateral to do some new skill or whether that's up to move into a higher level job, is about saying yes, it's about learning and having that growth mindset that you're gonna stretch and, and maybe, maybe be in a little bit more of a scary place as opposed to that comfort zone that you're in now.

Speaker 4:

That's great. And I think that this is a good time then for me to ask my, the last question I wanted to ask. And it's okay if you, if you, if you don't wanna answer, but it's a two part question, and it's this, would you do it again? Would you switch from HR at an organizational level to career coaching? And would you start a nonprofit again?

Speaker 1:

A hundred percent yes. <Laugh>,

Speaker 4:

Yes. Awesome.

Speaker 1:

I even though

Speaker 4:

It

Speaker 1:

Word it, I'm sorry.

Speaker 4:

Oh, I was just saying, even though it's scary, even though there are things you don't know that are gonna pop up on the path.

Speaker 1:

Yes. I

Speaker 4:

Think it's still worth it.

Speaker 1:

It's the beauty of life, right? Like step out there. And that's why I say saying yes, I think we, we walk around, you know, trying to say no to things because so much is coming at us when we think about your own career, like saying yes to a networking event, this podcast meeting a new friend, it's scary, right? All of us feel that way. Taking on a new challenge is hard. You know, I think about when my son was young and he was learning to sing and his voice coach would give him these songs that were terrible for his voice. Like he sounded terrible singing them. But the reason why was because he was, he was in fourth grade, he was in fifth grade, right? Like, this was the ability to stretch him, to, to stretch his vocal chords, to elongate them and make him sing better later. And that worked. And the kids that leaned into that and leaned into sounding bad at the recital because this wasn't the right song for them at the time benefited from that. And I think we can all take that lesson to heart, have a growth mindset, step out there, do something a little scary

Speaker 4:

Sing out of your range. That's awesome. That's really great, <laugh>. Well, thank you so much, Ellen. Before we sign off, I wanna give you a chance to share any resources you might have with our listeners and we'll put any links into the show notes.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. connect with me on LinkedIn. I'd love to hear from you if you are interested in coaching or you just wanna say hi, or you just wanna scoop, scoop out my page and love to share resources or network with you. So check out my LinkedIn. Definitely listen to asking for good podcasts. I also love a couple of other podcasts that help me stretch and grow and hear about other people who are doing the same. I think if you're around that, that gives you the confidence to do it yourself. So one way you can do that virtually is Molly Fletcher, that's a, it's a great podcast and it's called Game Changers. And then the Modern Leader David McLaughlin. I was actually on his podcast so I'm not plugging it for that. But I, he has a, a lot of amazing people on there. And then I, I to get news, I love morning Brew. It's a, it's a little newsletter that kind of encapsulates what's happening on coast to coast in New York and California and everywhere in between. And it does it in a fun way for you to make sure that you're staying current with events. I think that's super important.

Speaker 4:

Wonderful. Thank you. People can find you on LinkedIn with four Doors, coaching and consulting, and at Southern Plains Productions.