



Selectively apply, Ace your interview with Katherine Cross
Season 1, Episode 6

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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.

Amélie Poojary:

I'm Amélie Poojary. I work with foundations in the us and abroad to make the world a better place. Katherine Cross has worked in the non-profit sector for over 10 years in her current role at Memorial Sloan catering. She enjoys focusing on stewardship and taking on projects that showcase mission impact and promote renew. And in quest giving, she has always been drawn to the donor engagement and relationship building side of things previously holding a variety of fundraising and development walls at the Environmental Defense Fund, Catalyst, and Carnegie Hall.

Welcome Katherine, Asking For Good. You and I met at EDF where you were working on major gifts and you are now a senior stewardship officer at Memorial Sloan catering cancer center. You've worked for nonprofits big and small and have been involved in different aspects of the fundraising cycle. Tell us a bit more about your background and what brought you to your current hold.

Katherine Cross:

Thanks so much Amie for having me on your podcast. And I guess I would say in looking at my career to date, it's hard to believe that I've worked in nonprofits for the past 10 years now. You know, time seems to fly from the start. I knew I wanted to work for a mission driven organization and to feel like I was part of something bigger with a higher purpose. And that became even more apparent after the internships that I had in college. So I started out junior year of college interning at Carnegie hall in the development department. And while I was there, I not only got to see the inner workings of a wellness Vista for in the mission. And I also really love the partnership between the funders and the programs that they supported. So many of the grant reports that I worked on involved music programs for the New York City public school system.

Katherine Cross:

And if they provided students with the chance to learn about different musical genres and learned to play different instruments from all over the world and at the end of the program, they got to perform at

Carnegie hall. So seeing this time was really rewarding. And then once I graduated, my first job out of college was at a three person nonprofit that focused on civic engagement. So I definitely had the chance to do a little bit of everything since it was so small. And I got to work with college students and I built a really strong relationship with my manager, but everyone's roles were pretty set within this organization since there were only three of us. And after three years in the same role, I realized there really wasn't room for growth. So I chose to move on. And my second job was at a larger nonprofit and I was consistently promoted over four and a half years, but my job primarily worked with corporate partners and I really wanted to see what it was like to work with individual donors.

Katherine Cross:

So that's how I made that jump to EDF, where I met you. And I had a great experience working with top donors, but after three and a half years, I, you know, the work didn't really allow for autonomy for me. And the next step in my career path would be to become a major gift officer, which I realized wasn't exactly what I wanted to do going forward. So now I'm at the largest place I've ever worked for at Memorial Sloan Kettering, which has around 23,000 employees. And my current role focuses more on project management, writing and working on different creative projects, whether it be written reports for gratitude videos, which were things that I wanted to do more of long term. And right now I have full ownership over projects, and I'm also part of a newly formed team. So things are constant. Things are constantly evolving and, you know, my team members were open to new ideas and ways of doing things. And this position is also at a higher level. So that kind of scared me at the outset, but I think it's a good thing to feel challenged. Like you're stepping up to something bigger. I felt like my role at EDF, I was getting complacent and a bit static and I didn't wanna feel that way long term.

Amélie Poojary:

Thanks, Katherine. You know, hearing you, I, I realized you really mastered the art of knowing when to move on. And it's really interesting that within the non-profit sector, you actually managed to build on your experience and transition to new areas of work. Here, I'm Asking For Good. We like to focus on the moment of the ask. Your current work is focused on stewardship and ensuring the post ask is successful. Can you tell us a bit more about your role and how that allows donor to fully understand their impact and prepare them for more meaningful future future us,

Katherine Cross:

Right. Yeah. So I think in answering this question, I should talk a bit more about my role at EDF before my current role at MSK. So at EDF, I worked in principal giving with high level donors and prospects. So it was less about assessing their capacity and interest and more about presenting them with a compelling idea that they could really latch onto. I'd say many of the donors in portfolio were well established. So the focus was less on getting, I mean, the focus was more on getting the next gift, not the first gift, which comes with its own set of challenges, because if someone has been giving to us to the same thing for years, what can we do to discover additional interests and get them excited about something new? So in my experience, ship building has been so important and doing a lot of listening early on to fully understand the donor's motivations and interests is really vital to getting to that point of being ready to make an ask.

Katherine Cross:

I think it's also been important, especially in the principal giving level to involve leadership, both the president and program leads in the conversations with donors and to leverage any board relationships.

You'd be surprised how small of a world it is among those donors and how casual conversations among, you know, networks and friends can lead to a new gift as well. So this kind of leads to my point about providing space for unscripted conversations. Sometimes the best ideas can be surprising and seem seemingly come out of nowhere. An example that comes to mind is leading up to cultivation meetings. I would often spend so much time preparing, talking points for leadership and writing down, you know, detailed notes about program areas that I thought they would be interested in, but sometimes the donor would end up steering the meeting in an entirely different direction, not necessarily a bad thing, but just being prepared and flexible for when that time comes is good.

Katherine Cross:

And the particular donor I'm referencing was already a trustee and involved in many facets of our work already. And she was, you know, very engaged. So in looking for that next gift, we wanted to come up with ideas that would inspire her. And she ended up making a \$6 million pledge, which included a \$2 million anchor gift to a pilot program that she along with our program lead came up with. So I think a key takeaway is that while our staff have the experience and the expertise to drive our work forward, it's important to involve the donor in the process and we want to share our goals and our strategies, but we also want to make sure that the donor can see the role that they can play in helping us get there. So currently my role at MSK is all about connecting those dots for the donor on a consistent basis, and ensuring that they're aware of how their support fits, aware of how their support fits into the bigger picture of our mission. And if they have a good experience with their current gift with stewardship, this leads to a greater likelihood that they'll continue to support us in the future.

Amélie Poojary:

That was really good overview of major gifts. Ask in general how you build a relationship and why stewardship is so important and allocating resources and time to visa efforts is definitely a worth right investment for any organization. Your job right now is new to you and new to the organization. Can you share how the job interview process was and what you saw in this organization that connected with your professional goals?

Katherine Cross:

I've been in this role for about five months now, so still relatively new, but starting to get the hang of things. And I was really drawn to the senior stewardship officer role, not only because of Ms K's reputation in history, but also through a personal connection to the mission. I think when someone close to them who has, or had cancer, you know, that personal tie in was really important to me. And during the interview process, two people I interviewed with actually were former patients at MSK. So it was really powerful to see that tangible connection. And in looking at the role itself, I was really drawn to the storytelling piece. Our work often shares patient stories or scientific breakthroughs. And our team is a valuable part of the life cycle of a gift to ensure that the donor feels acknowledged and engaged with our work and on the path to becoming lifelong supporters.

Katherine Cross:

And I'll say it was interesting interviewing for jobs during COVID all of my interviews, including the phone screen at the beginning were via zoom. So I had to be vigilant about how I was presenting myself and coming across at all stages of the process. And it's definitely different doing that over video instead of in person. I think I definitely prefer in person after going through all of that, it's harder to read people's expressions, read the room and for five rounds of interviews, and many of them were panel

interviews. So with four to five people asking questions, a challenge for me, I would say, was trying to engage multiple people at once and coming up with new answers and examples for each round of interviews, because I did encounter repeat questions, but I'd say over time as you practice and you do more interviews, you definitely get more comfortable speaking about yourself, which doesn't come naturally to me also by the fifth round, I saw some familiar faces. So the conversations became a bit more informal, which was helpful.

Amélie Poojary:

It sounds like you went through a lot of interviews and maybe when you were exploring over job opportunities as well, how did you prepare? We often say it's the full-time job to <laugh> look for a job.

Katherine Cross:

I know it was definitely, it was hard sometimes looking for job openings that were very compelling while having to work at my full-time job currently, but it also kind of took the pressure off. So I've also, I was really picking and choosing positions that I really wanted to actually be in. I wasn't just throwing everything, you know, throwing applications out there left and right. I was very selective. And so then I was very invested in each position that I was applying to. And I'll admit those first few interviews early on that I got, it was pretty rough. And you could tell I was rusty and I had to really Polish my answers, especially around that. Tell me about yourself question. It's so broad. And I would just find myself rambling sometimes as I kept interviewing more, it was apparent that certain questions would likely be asked time and time again.

Katherine Cross:

So I was really able to hone my answers. And luckily there are so many resources and tips that I found on YouTube that were really helpful in helping me frame my answers and making sure that they were concise and comprehensive. And then some of the common interview questions that I encountered were, of course, why do you wanna work here? Why do you wanna leave your current place, share what you're most proud of or major proud of or major accomplishment? Tell me about a mistake you made and how you overcame it. Tell me something that's not on your resume. And also a lot of scenario based questions that were relevant to the organization that you were interviewing for. And I'd say it's important to do your homework and know some details, especially about the leadership and the mission. The department that the position is in. I also browsed through annual reports and recent news articles and picked a few examples to reference in my interview. I found just picking and choosing a few things was impressive. And it also didn't take a lot of time to prepare. And I'm also very big on writing down notes ahead of time and having anecdotes and examples in my back pocket to reference that show my value and my accomplishments because people did ask a lot. These were all just helpful and it was definitely a learning process going through it. It took months and months. It wasn't just overnight.

Amélie Poojary:

These are all great recommendations. And you speak about alignment with the mission of the organization and AF all the interviews you did. How did you realize this specific organization was the right place for you?

Katherine Cross:

I would say I took a close look at the job description itself and browse through Glassdoor and the company website prior to even applying, to make sure that everything seemed suited to what I was

looking for. I noticed in most job descriptions, the top bullet points tend to focus on the main responsibilities of your role. So really making sure that I could see myself doing those day to day tasks was important to me. And while M MSK is an older organization, I think it was founded in like 1884. The leadership within the development department is relatively new. And the team that I would be working with is also newly formed actually right before the pandemic they were formed. So throughout the interview process, it became clear that I would have a unique opportunity to contribute my ideas and insights to their work and to think innovatively, I think I think leadership and who you'll be reporting to is also key to look at. If there aren't opportunities for visibility or senior leaders won't know what you do all day. I think that really takes a toll on your morale and feeling valued. So I considered all of these things closely when I was looking to make that transition.

Amélie Poojary:

You know, we can't wait to hear more, but impact your life in this job. Maybe we should think of a follow up podcast with you once your few years into the job.

Katherine Cross:

Yeah, that'd be great.

Amélie Poojary:

<Laugh> before we close our conversation, you know, we'd like to speak about diversity equity and inclusion efforts in nonprofits. And so I would like to hear a bit more from you on, you know, how this is part of your work at MSK.

Katherine Cross:

Just didn't look like looking back. Diversity equity inclusion has always been very top of mind for me as an Asian woman. I felt like an outsider at times, and even in sports, growing up when I played ice hockey and the only girl on the team, and there sometimes wasn't even a locker room for me to change into, I would have to change in the bathroom. So I think at the heart of ed and I is feeling a sense of belonging and respect, and I can definitely recall times in my life where that was not the case. And they stood out to me. I also think my interest in ed and I really grew when I worked at catalyst, which was a nonprofit that focuses on advancing women in the workplace. In my role, I partnered with many large fortune 500 companies on their diversity and inclusion efforts and was kind of a thought partner in their work.

Katherine Cross:

Most of my questions to the contacts there were centered around what can companies do to foster an inclusive culture instead of what steps can an employee take to feel like they belong and are able to move up the ranks. And in my current role, we're also thinking about how to broaden our donor resources and offerings to people with, you know, different needs and preferences. So thinking about materials and videos, simple to people who are hearing or visually impaired, also thinking through materials that can be translated to different languages as Wells, not having a one size fits all approach to everything just overall. We wanna think about steps, not only that individuals can take, but also what an organization can be doing to encourage diversity and inclusion. I think what's nice is I think these values are woven into the goals of many organizations right now.

Katherine Cross:

It's part of so many conversations, especially given what's happening in the world. I just hope that organizations walk the talk. It's so easy to check off a box and hire diverse employees, do a workshop here and there it's a lot harder to foster, a long term culture of inclusion from the top down and much harder to retain a diverse workforce if they aren't feeling like they're seen, heard, or represented. So I think in the things that I do, I really want to showcase these ideas and make sure that it's woven into the fabric of what we offer. And I think I carry these personal values with professional work. So hope to continue doing that going forward.

Amélie Poojary:

Thank you so much for telling us more about the importance of stewardship and de efforts in your work. What brought you to your current job and how you prepared for the interviews? We are really delighted. You were able to join us today.

Katherine Cross:

Of course, thanks so much for having me and hope to keep in touch.

Amélie Poojary:

Thanks, Katherine.

Speaker 5:

Thank you for joining us on Asking For Good. Find us wherever you get your podcasts. And please tell a friend. Take care.