

NNSC Session #3 Preparing Tomorrow's Leaders Today: How Current Organizational Cultures & Work Environments are Influencing Hiring Decisions & Shaping Future Leaders

Speakers:

Marcia Wright-Soika, Executive Director FamilyWorks Food Bank and Resource Center

Bindiya Patel, Executive Director, Leadership Tomorrow and;

Lee Lambert, Executive Director, Cascade Bicycle Club

Moderated by Ed Rogan

Ed: In what ways are your organizations intentionally creating leadership development opportunities and pathways for emerging talent?

Marcia: FamilyWorks is a staff of 22. As a flat organization, she is always thinking of ways to create opportunities for staff to build their leadership skillset. They have been in a capital campaign raising money for renovations, capacity and infrastructure. This is important to an organization in terms of its size; it allows them to provide additional management opportunities that will support the growth of the organization. The campaign also gives them an opportunity to give bonuses to staff who take on additional projects.

Lee: They do it through culture and transparency. They know a job with us is not a "forever" job, so they determine what people want to do.

Bindiya: They do this through leadership programs such as retreats with sessions that focus on different issues in the region. This enables them to bring people together who they wouldn't have met otherwise.

Ed: How are you working to make your organizational culture and work environment attractive to the next generation of potential leaders? What workplace policies, benefits, or philosophies are you emphasizing?

Lee: They have been working in a hybrid workspace which has expanded their hiring reach. They are clear about expectations on when they need to be available in a hybrid space. They also offer a generous leave policy.

Marcia: She was very concerned about the low pay of staff. The average salary was less than \$40K / year. To make the organization more attractive, they had to take this on. This involved diversifying their revenue and conversations with funders. She is very proud that in the 4 years she has been there, all 22 staff have a full-time job, and the average salary is \$55K. They also work with a clinical health specialist and have added an employee assistance program that helps with trauma experienced on the job.

Bindiya: She is radically candid with her staff. She talks about career growth so it's not a once/year performance conversation. The organization offers mentorship, support, and sponsorship so they can overcome things that might hold them back in the future.

Ed: Diversity, equity and inclusion are critical priorities across the sector and in the country. How are you developing a diverse pipeline of leaders?

Bindiya: They have grown immensely and want to involve white allies who can serve as inclusive leaders as well. They ask themselves how they can recruit diverse cohorts who have the availability and practice to talk about equity and can have tough conversations.

Marcia: They have a two-fold approach, looking at diversity and capacity building at the staff level and the board level, making sure it is reflective of the community they serve. Each department looks at goals related to their work. They have made improvements in increasing the number of BIPOC owned and operated vendors (increased to 41%). They are also cognizant of how they talk about their program participants. What does the storytelling look like? They want to build trust when sharing the experiences of their clients, in a way that advances racial equity. On the Board side, when she joined FamilyWorks, most Board members were white, and clients were black indigenous. They took a close look at DEI training for the Board and creating a more diverse recruitment structure.

Lee: The diversity of staff has increased, which is not easy given it's a bicycle club in Seattle. He includes salary in the job description, removed educational requirements, provides interview questions in advance, and models the organization as a safe place to work. This has resulted in a more diverse pool of candidates.

Ed: Working with employees new to the workforce. How do we manage the expectations of a different generation?

Lee: His strategy is to clarify the type of decision being made seeking input, a democratic decision, or "this is what's happening". He lets staff know on the front end what he is looking for.

Marcia: The vast majority of their staff are early career. Expectations from early career staff are very different from staff who have been there a while. They did a staff survey to understand what employees want from the workplace.

Bindiya: She questions how open they are to change what work looks like. In 2025, half of all employees will be working for people younger than them. She asks: What does mutual mentorship look like? How can we think about a multi-generational workplace that looks different? What is this next generation workforce going to bring in?

Ed: What are you looking for in that next generation as you're interviewing? What are the skills and mindsets you are looking for?

Marcia: If a candidate lacks supervisory experience, they ask scenarios about how they make decisions. They build in questions that demonstrate how they show up in decision-making, how they consider the wellness of volunteers and staff, making sure the people joining them have a justice mindset. When asking a question like, "What do you think are the root causes of poverty?" They are making sure the candidate's answer reflects the values of the organization.

Lee: They ask all candidates about their race and equity journey. What are your biases and how do they show up at work? And there's only one wrong answer.

Ed: Please share your experience being interviewed for senior roles. What worked well for you and what did you wish you had going into interviews?

Bindiya: She was told very clearly that she would have 75 minutes and the structure of the interview was explained. There were frequent check-ins with the recruiter. As a finalist, she was given a \$500 stipend to help cover the time and cost of two in-person meetings. This was a nice touch. In another search, she didn't hear from the recruiter. Closing the loop would have been nice.

Marcia: She was recruited to a job across the country and the recruiter stepped out of the process. It would have been good to have a relationship with the recruiter throughout the entire search, particularly since she was unfamiliar with the area. She was hired in March 2020. Meeting the entire staff was a great part of her experience in tapping into their fears and anxieties with leadership change and the world in general. She would have appreciated more documents that provided context around the job.

Lee: He made sure 3-months' severance was part of the offer.

Question from an attendee: How do you feel about having the recruiter in the room for the interview?

Bindiya: She likes having the recruiter in the room. She feels much more supported and appreciates a third-party observer who can offer feedback after the interview.

Lee: The recruiter is always there; it would be strange if they were not present.

Marcia: The recruiter stepped out of the process and wasn't at any interviews until the offer letter was presented. She appreciates a recruiter who can help her prepare for the offer and close the deal. She believes having the recruiter present is better for the client and the candidate.

Question from an attendee: Seattle's economy is so steeped in tech. Has it been challenging raising the profile of your organization?

Bindiya: A lot of times with tech they want to solve a problem for you in a space they don't understand. They have had to think carefully about what volunteerism looks like and set boundaries around that.

Lee: They have been training donors and are very clear about how they engage donors. They have a very clear gift acceptance policy.

Trevor commends Bindiya/Leadership Tomorrow. His firm is very engaged with the local leadership program in their market, which is called LEAD San Diego. Every new hire at Blair Search Partners is put through LEAD's program as part of their onboarding experience. With the organizations his firm serves, it helps to be grounded in the local community. He noted that most major cities across the country have a program like Leadership Tomorrow and encouraged NNSC members to get involved and consider using it as part of their new hire onboarding process as well.

Question about paying it forward: What advice would you give leaders of color to determine if the environment is healthy for them?

Lee: How comfortable are you with whiteness in white spaces. You get a good sense of culture when you walk into a room.

Marcia: She asks values-based questions of an organization and sees if they respond with defensiveness or with strength and vision.

It takes courage to feel that it's a two-way conversation and it's a safe space accountable to development as a leader in the organization. Be brave in asking the questions.

What do you wish you had known as a mid-career professional?

Bindiya: She wishes she had applied for positions along the way (in an organization where she spent 20 years) that could have taken her down a different path. She gave so much effort to her workplace and should have given more attention to networking/throwing her hat in the ring. She suggests reading Rosalyn Chow's book: *Don't Just Mentor Women and People of Color. Sponsor Them.*

Marcia: It's difficult to diagnose when you're in a situation where they don't invest in your development. The skills you may need to get to the next stage of your career may not exist. You may need to reserve 20-30% outside of your organization.

Lee: Know how and when to ask for help.

Question: What advice would you give to other mid-career people?

Marcia: Don't be afraid to take on a job or project at work that may not seem like it will lead to promotion but will make you more well-rounded.

Bindiya; Learn budgets (this will help understand how decisions are made). Attend the happy hours. Friendships she created at work helped her navigate her career. Save some time to socialize.

Lee: Look at the job description of the job you want two jobs ahead and steer toward that. And know when to make the jump if you won't learn the skills you need to get that job.

How can search firms support you better?

Lee: Monthly Table Talks are facilitated conversations with 10 Executive Directors. They meet 8 times/year. It costs \$600-\$700. It's a confidential space he values.

Marcia: BIPOC ED Coalition for problem solving and advocacy. Listening, and trying to learn the culture of the client and their organization and the way that presents to a potential recruit. What have you learned/gleaned that can help support the search process?

Bindiya: Make connections with your local leadership programs to help source your next recruits.

Transition period – having your recruiter stay involved and go back to recruiter when needed.