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The Mission Is Your North Star - Transcript

[Speaker 1]

Welcome to Charity Therapy, a podcast from Birken Law about building better nonprofits. I'm your host, Jess Birken. Hello and welcome to this episode of Charity Therapy.

Today I am joined by Maria Huntley, Executive Director of Minnesota Academy of Family Physicians. Full disclosure, Maria is my client and she's also a good friend and a badass leader who helped her nonprofit get through this pandemic season we've been going through. Maria, I am so glad to have you here.

[Speaker 2]

Thanks, Jess. I'm thrilled to be here.

[Speaker 1]

Maria, I really wanted you to come on for this one because I, first of all, I've just been so impressed with the way that you have navigated all the uncertainty the pandemic brought, especially for member-based nonprofits. I feel like it's been a little tougher on my member-based nonprofit clients and I saw lots of small organizations sort of flounder or even go under in the past year, but something about your strategy has always worked and it just made me curious, what is your approach to decision-making as a nonprofit executive?

[Speaker 2]

Sure. Well, it's, you know, in some ways it's pretty easy because a responsible leader in a nonprofit will use their mission as their North Star for decision-making and so that's always the first layer when we're trying to decide, as a membership organization, how are we most relevant and best supportive of our members in a certain scenario and being able to tie what you're doing back to the mission statement is always my first layer in decision-making for my organization. That makes a lot of sense.

[Speaker 1]

All right. You ready for our first question? I'm ready.

All right. Here we go. I'm the executive director of a small neighborhood group that gets the majority of our revenue each year from events.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, very little money has been coming in. We have essentially been waiting for things to go back to normal and we threw all of our energy into planning our events this summer, except now summer is almost here and things aren't quite back to normal for events. Even though things are opening up in our city, people seem really hesitant or even uninterested to go to large neighborhood events and I don't think we're going to have a good turnout.

What can we do?

[Speaker 2]

Wow. That's a super valid concern to have. In fact, I just went out to lunch for my first time in a year and I didn't even know how to do that.

[Speaker 1]

Right.

[Speaker 2]

I know. So I can see why people are hesitant or questioning going to large events. I think it's interesting.

My board, as I've been talking to them recently about events, they've talked about how so many organizations have shifted to virtual events and how great that's been in so many cases. The thing that's missing is bringing together small groups of people, whether it's virtual or in person. And so I'd be curious for this organization and others, if they've had an opportunity to pause for a minute and think, is bigger better in this circumstance?

Or are there opportunities to look for bringing smaller groups of people together? Because I think, I know I'd feel more comfortable with that personally. And so that's the first thing that jumps into my mind.

Right.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. Like the white knuckling it, trying to wait for everything to go back to normal and sort of disregarding where people are at. There's like a lack of empathy there.

We just so much want it to go the way we want it to go that we're maybe not adapting as much as we could.

[Speaker 2]

Absolutely. I think the other thing I think about too is, how can you, as we're coming back and having events, how can you think about what steps you as an organization could take to make as many people comfortable as possible? Maybe that means masks are recommended.

Maybe it means masks are required, depending on kind of the culture of your organization, who you're hoping to attract to an event you're having, but really kind of thinking through what are reasonable steps we can take to make people feel comfortable. I work with physicians and we're talking about coming together, a small group, seven of us for the first time, we're all vaccinated, but we're also having the conversation of, as physician leaders, being role models and setting the right example by, sometimes we wear masks because we're protecting other people and setting the right example. So even in our setting where the CDC might not require us to wear masks, we're still looking for those opportunities to make sure everyone's comfortable.

We're setting the right example and doing the right thing to keep attendees who want to come to an event feeling safe and comfortable to be there.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, that's been a big part of conversations I've been having recently, just like, let's say it's a school type environment. Well, what's going to make your teachers comfortable? Because if your independent contractor teachers don't want to show up, your program's not going to do very well, right?

So keeping people's comfort level in mind is super key.

[Speaker 2]

One other thought I was having just related to a neighborhood group, it makes me wonder if it is a neighbor group that's looking to pull together individuals who are in a smaller geographic location, if there are opportunities to explore outdoor or semi-outdoor settings for people to come together. I know that we're planning our first member, larger member gets together in September, and it's going to be a picnic in a mostly outdoor area. And so if there's opportunities to explore, you know, different venues or different settings that way, that might be a good option.

[Speaker 1]

I love that too, because it's really like, think outside the box, right? If you've traditionally, if you represent this big neighborhood area, and you think people aren't going to want to come to a 250 person event, or you're getting low registration, well, reimagine the event. What about 10, 25 person events that are more like a block party?

Because those people are probably kind of in your bubble, theoretically, and maybe you can think outside of the box, and it doesn't have to be like, well, we've always done it this way, so we have to do it that way, or we can't do it at all, right? It's like, get your creative hat on and think like, how can we, to your point, accomplish the mission and still deal with this situation that we have to adapt to right now? I love that.

All right, let's get into question number two. We are a membership association for young PR professionals, and we have a big conference every year for our members. Our 2020 fall conference was canceled due to the pandemic, but we're trying to develop a plan for our fall 2021 event.

We'd like to hold it in person, if at all possible, but it just depends on the vaccine rollout in our area. It's not going very fast right now. We also don't know whether people will come, if their employers will even pay for their staff to travel.

Yeah, exactly. At the moment, we're developing a series of contingency plans that we can revert to depending on the virus numbers and member interest. We have plans for fully in person, partially in person with online components, fully online or canceled.

We just don't know what the state of things will be this fall. How do you even make these plans?

[Speaker 2]

How do you even make these plans? My goodness. So I actually have developed a pretty strong recommendation based on observations over the past year, specifically related to the idea of contingency planning or scenario planning.

And here, Jess, is my oftentimes unpopular opinion. Are you ready?

[Speaker 1]

I'm ready. Drumroll, please.

[Speaker 2]

I, and especially for nonprofits that have potentially more limited resources, if you take an event, your fall conference, and you think about how much time, energy and resource goes into planning a fall conference, and then you try to do two or three or four scenarios, that's like planning potentially two or three or four totally different events. And what I've seen happen is that a lot of organizations will do that, and it maxes out the staff. It creates an environment where people are putting together, can I say half-assed on your podcast?

Oh, yeah. Plans, because nobody's feeling quite great that any of it actually will happen. And then oftentimes when it comes down to it, none of those scenarios is actually what plays out.

It's maybe a hybrid of all the different scenarios. Instead, what organizations could potentially consider is, let's just make the decision. How are we going to hold this event?

And for some organizations, maybe that's a year out for maybe smaller groups or different kinds of groups. Maybe you can wait a little longer to make that call, but that's what I really encourage my organization and my staff to do. It can be difficult sometimes to make that call in advance because things can change, but it really is a more respectful use of time and energy, and then you can just focus in on making that virtual event or that hybrid event or that in-person event the best you possibly can make it.

And the other thing that I've noticed is that people in general have learned to be nimble and flexible so that if you need to make last minute changes, no one's going to be surprised by that.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. What I love about that answer is, you know, the question's very like pandemic related, but I feel like in my history of working in nonprofits and with nonprofits, we've all had this, like this is a thing, right, where you work with a board or whoever, your manager, and they're like, well, run the scenarios, you know, we're not really sure, and like asking staff to do just like a ton of extra work because basically they don't want to make a decision.

[Speaker 2]

Exactly.

[Speaker 1]

And sometimes that's because something's not very popular, and so there's like a political reason where they're trying to like placate somebody and get, well, we'll entertain so-and-so's little whim about doing it this way and make staff go through all the motions, but we all really know we're never going to do that or whatever it is, right? That is something that does come up in management and decision-making that is beyond just like dealing with a pandemic and a canceled event potentially, right? It's like, look at the human resources you're using, and is it a good use of your resources at your organization, or, you know, are we like avoiding having the hard conversation?

Like for this questioner, maybe they need to have a hard conversation with some folks on the board, and maybe they're avoiding it because they don't want to have the conversation and say, I need you to make a decision, this is crazy.

[Speaker 2]

Exactly. You know, this decision-making too makes me think about a tool that one of my mentors shared with me in having these maybe difficult discussions or maybe, you know, entering a conversation to make these difficult decisions is sometimes just by having a series of questions you walk your leadership through, you know, what's the worst thing that's going to happen if we do it this way? What's the best thing that's going to happen?

And just some real non-threatening type questions that you could walk your leaders through in the decision-making. And I think that, you know, pulling in the responsible use of resources and pulling in that fiscal piece is sometimes helpful to people who maybe think a little bit differently about the process. You know, sometimes it's easy to forget that, myself included, that things don't just happen on their own, there's resources involved.

[Speaker 1]

Right, or like having a candid conversation, like, okay, we can plan five different conferences and these other things that are on the to-do list for Q3 are not going to happen because this is literally going to take everybody's time and we're not going to work, you know, 80 hours a

week every week just to get this extra work done. Because, you know, it's so bad for morale with staff to do that to them. And I feel like we treat our staff in the non-profit sector a lot of times like they're, well, because you love the mission, that means you have to be a slave.

And we just do, you know, you have to just work, work, work, work and get it all done no matter how much time it takes from, you know, like, no, that's crazy. Don't treat your staff that way. So, I love your approach because you're so, like, your team must love you.

I mean, I know I love you. So, I'm just saying.

[Speaker 2]

Well, thanks. Thanks. I try to always be respectful and thoughtful and use their talents the best way I can.

And oftentimes it's not by spending their time planning things that likely will never happen.

[Speaker 1]

So, I think that's really the takeaway here is going back to your first statement about how you make decisions is keep the mission in mind, right? Like, what is the mission? Is our mission to plan five different conferences for that last questioner?

No. No. What is the mission?

And when you're making a decision, are you heading towards achieving the mission or are you moving away from it with the different options? And then I also heard you sort of basically

saying, like, think outside the box. You know, we don't always have to do it the same way we've always done it.

And it's possible to think creatively to come up with new solutions that maybe are unexpected, but actually help us move toward the mission more effectively. So, I love that. I think that your answer at the top is really a thread throughout this whole thing.

So, I just can't promote that idea enough, right? Like, we're nonprofits. We're supposed to be all about the mission.

So, actually, I guess.

[Speaker 2]

Right. Well, you know, another thing I was just thinking about is, you know, for a lot of nonprofits and membership organizations, events are such a flagship offering. And they're certainly my favorite part, being the extreme extrovert that I am.

That being said, it's also important to take a pause and ask the question, is that really what our members need right now as an event? Maybe the answer is yes, but maybe the answer is no. What our members need right now is something else.

And I know for us, that's been really interesting because our big annual meeting, which is our flagship offering, has, you know, we kind of turned it on its head since the pandemic. And we're learning a lot. We're learning a lot about what we can do to support our members and to support our mission in different ways.

Which, for someone like me, that's really exciting to kind of navigate that change. But I know it's also, it's hard and it's scary and all those other things, too. Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

Well, it's great that you're out there doing that and being a leader in the space. And I would encourage any folks in, you know, management or leadership positions to connect with you online because I think there is sort of that safety in numbers. And watching someone like you go first and weather those things or being a professional that people can connect with is really awesome.

Maria, where can people connect with you on Twitter?

[Speaker 2]

My Twitter handle is Maria Huntley 1. Maria is spelt like Maria. And I love to engage on Twitter and connect with people and share ideas and learn from others.

So don't ever hesitate to reach out. Right on.

[Speaker 1]

Thank you so much for being here. Thanks for having me, Jess. Anytime.

We're having you back for sure. We got to make you a regular because you're one of my favorite EDs. Don't tell all the other clients.

[Speaker 2]

Your secret's safe with me.

[Speaker 1]

All right. If you enjoyed this episode, do me a huge favor. Share it with a friend, rate, review, subscribe on your podcast app.

It really does help us out. If you have a question or a story to share or something you wish an executive director like Maria would weigh in on, we'd love to hear from you. Send me a note online or leave a voice memo by calling 612-208-9120.

Thanks for listening. All right, folks. That's our show.

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About the Author



Hi, I'm Jess Birken.

I'm the owner of Birken Law Office, I help nonprofits solve problems so they can quit worrying and get back to what matters most – The Mission. I'm not like most attorneys, I actually have an outgoing personality, and – like you – I like to think outside the box. Most of my clients are passionate and have an entrepreneurial spirit. I'm like that too. My goal is to help you crush it. Getting bogged down in the minutia sucks the joy out of the important stuff. My clients want to do the work – not the paperwork.

Let's connect!

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