

Signal Boost Transcript

Episode: 7 - Knowledge Mobilization as Relationship Building

Guests: Ajeev Bhatia, Manager of Policy and Community Connections

Centre for Connected Communities

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CEO and Cofounder of MONUMENTAL

SARAH

Welcome to SIGNAL BOOST, a podcast brought to you by the Centre for Connected Communities and the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

The Centre for Connected Communities is a community development strategy organization that supports people, organizations and institutions to unlock the potential of connected communities everywhere!

Communities are the building blocks of cities. But communities can't exist without people. In each episode of SIGNAL BOOST, you'll hear from people on the ground about how grassroots solutions are leading local change. On this season, we're highlighting the work of community builders across Toronto that are actively engaging in ways that make their communities more livable.

On this episode, AJEEV BHATIA, Manager of Policy and Community Connections at the Centre for Connected Communities and ZAHRA EBRAHIM, CEO and cofounder of MONUMENTAL, met to talk about how institutions can learn from and with grassroots leaders towards building more equitable and inclusive communities during the COVID-19 recovery

AJEEV

Hi there, I'm your host for today Ajeev Bhatia, I'm the Manager of Policy and Community connections at the Center for Connected Communities, and I'm joined today by Zahra Ebrahim. Zahra is the CEO and cofounder of MONUMENTAL, working with institutions to live their stated values and contribute to an equitable recovery from COVID-19. She has led organizations in the social and private sector that design and deliver participatory and equity centered design approaches to policy, service and infrastructure development. She's an adjunct professor at the University of Toronto's geography and planning department and serves as a key advisor to public interest initiatives across Canada. Welcome Zahra.

ZAHRA

Thanks Ajeev, thanks for having me. The early part of my career was really focused on working with communities to try and more meaningfully integrate and share decision making processes with them by, you know,

revealing sort of the details of processes that might seem inaccessible or elite, and ultimately, sort of, supporting communities to be able to lead their own initiatives, and their own conversations about what they want. The latter half the last you know, five or six years of my career has really been focused on letting institutions know that they can trust community voice and I think that's really really hard. Institutions in the public and private sector will typically trust community voice as they are trying to validate a question that they about a problem they're facing or problem they think needs solving. Right now my work is really focused on helping institutional leaders move principles of equity and fairness and justice into the center of what they do not sort of holed up in a corporate social responsibility or a diversity, equity and inclusion department. And so I'm really working with them to trust, which is a weird, a weird job is to help them trust the folks that they are trying to serve that they can really be meaningfully driving the change and not just involved in one part of the process but all the way through.

AJEEV

I love that. If trust doesn't exist, if deep relationship building, and people who understand that aren't designing for that, then everything else that we're hoping to achieve, it becomes so much more difficult. So when I say that you're a bit of a cheerleader in castles you're, you're really enabling folks who might otherwise, you know, be gatekeepers or are unaware of how to leverage their positions to make space. You know I'm sure you've been having some interesting conversations with the folks in these decision making spaces in these big institutions that we're talking about in the wake of this global about pandemic and, and also in the context of the anti-Black racism movements that we are, that is really percolating the world right now. So what kind of... what are those conversations like with folks at the grassstops, and what have you noticed that's changed about the way that institutions with the big footprints you're talking about are thinking about more creative solutions to COVID and beyond

ZAHRA

For those of us who are systems thinkers sometimes it feels like we're whispering into the wind or screaming into the wind, like, we're all interconnected. You can't solve one without addressing the other or you can't address one addressing the other. And that's always been a really hard conversation to have I find within large private sector institutions or public sector institutions. If you're not talking in a really tangible way and so I think with COVID-19 our interconnectivity is so obvious and visible, the

systems are visible, it's not a philosophy, it's a reality it's something that we can all... we're all looking at now. And I think what's been made very visible is the erosion on some of the connections in the system. The connections, you know connective tissue and some of the links have not been invested in and not been nurtured and so they've started to erode. So I think that's made my work a little bit easier, because we all agree that we need each other and we need to take care of each other. You know, no one's ever asked me the open ended question so what should we do, when I've had an idea or I've had a philosophy around the way that we could build more equitable and fair human centered institutions and this is the first time, where leaders, CEOs and folks right at the at the grasstops and are recognizing that they're part of what what made these conditions of COVID-19 emerge has been their lack of attention right but to some of these systems. Because, in part out of I think goodwill, because I think no one wants to see the pain that we're seeing in the world, and no one wants to see this happen again and again it again we have an opportunity to shift. And so we should. I think that a lot of them are seeing that the reasons their organizations are shifting and not succeeding is because they didn't really deal with conditions of equity, fairness and justice through their work because they were like the will that's the work of the social sector that's not our job.

AJEEV

I think oftentimes grassroots leaders and community builders, community organizers are looked at as a polarizing kind of actor. They're there there's somebody who's pushing for social transformative change. And if I'm in an institution. I don't really see what they're proposing as practical, but we're seeing solutions from the bottom up centering around universal childcare around, you know, universal benefits for folks, just like those kind of underlying conditions that you've talked about that have been eroding over time. Are they accessing other people who they may not have traditionally been engaging?

ZAHRA

Those questions are so new. People are, they're starting to engage with their questions about the world. I'm finding that leaders that I'm working with have heard stories that have rattled them, rattled them to their core, they're listening to stories of people, people within the organization saying, I live in pain every day. I've seen it happen a lot internally within organizations right now where you know some folks who wouldn't otherwise have a seat at the table have a very meaningful seat at the

table for long term change not just for the moment and not just as a token person who's decided to speak up, but has had a rising and they are trusting and reorganizing their institutions in order to be able to listen to different types of people on an ongoing basis. So that's the start.

AJEEV

How do we get started on processes for creating the equitable recovery that everyone is talking about? Turning us from what are you seeing what, you know ,what are you hearing to Okay, what are we going to do? What are tips that you can share for how institutions can start doing some of this meaningful engagement of grassroots groups and surfacing kind of collective solutions and co-creating solutions together?

ZAHRA

That starts with, you know, making sure that the principles that are coming out in anti-racism statements and support of the Black Lives Matter movement, all of those, you know, commitments are central to their strategy so they're looking at what can we do as an organization? Really moving equity fairness and justice to every single part of their organizational strategy with their corporate strategy. That equity lens needs to be applied so they need to commit to doing that if they've committed to anti-racism. I'm a strong believer that whoever leaves the organization, the Executive Director and CEO, needs to own this as their agenda, and they need to allow folks to witness their learning. And it's a really difficult thing, but they just can't say, you know, we are aligned with Black Lives Matter. If folks within the organization have experienced some kind of discrimination, they need to own it as CEO, that is that is for them to steward. If it's an externalized thing, and there's not a process of leadership reflection that is witnessed, we'll get nowhere, and we won't build any trust within the organizations for change. They need to spend money on this. This is as much money as you spend on strategy. As you spend on HR policy, all of it. So this is not a marginal investment. This is a significant investment. This is not an end part of your annual strategy. This is part of the next many years, so this has to be committed to you by your executive leadership team, because this is going to take years. And that's okay, this is about shifting power, long term.

AJEEV

I feel like a lot of the times, you know it's that kind of screaming and banging on the door and it's just, you know, over the course of many, many decades community builders have been championing these solutions and now it seems like there's a little bit of an opening. You know,

right now, there are many calls for what a just and equitable recovery kind of like in a lot of really great bottom up approaches and models that have real evidence based solutions. Can you share some tips on what might benefit grassroots leaders who are strategizing, organizing, mobilizing right now to influence systems to choose equitable solutions in their recovery efforts?

ZAHRA

I think you're allowed to ask for something and not know necessarily how to deliver it. And I think that... I anticipate that there's a lot of grassroots leaders who are like, we want this, and then good humble, wonderful people that, that so many of these leaders that I know are will say when we met might not be the right people to deliver it or we don't know enough. I think in this moment, no one knows how to make the change, specifically how to, how to play with the machine in a way that changes the world. And so I would say trust yourself, you will learn we're all learning together on this journey so if you have space, take it, it is yours. It's a process of iteration, it's a process of sort of collective experimentation. As much as leaders are saying hey what do we do how do we respond, there's space to also say, Hey, what are you doing, like specifically you this, this organization, this leader, and I would like you to be accountable to us. With COVID-19 now that it's clear sort of who's governing different things that matter to us. I think you're allowed to ask, you're allowed to say, I want to be part of the accountability circle that you report back to, that I want to be at the table. There are open seats right now, because there are more seats, I don't think people have surrendered their power but I think they pulled some more chairs into the room. If there's a space that's particularly intriguing don't go through the back channel go straight, ask the question, send the email like and I know that there are power dynamics I know it's terrifying and I know it feels risky, you know. If you're a resident in a community that's what your grassroots leaders are for. They're these fierce, amazing voices that you can trust. If you're a resident, give your grassroots leader that question and if you're a leader don't be scared. All these dusty old institutions don't bother with them, just build your own table and use the money that's there and ask for it. I really think we need new tables, to be honest. What I really want to say if you're a grassroots grassroots leader, you should be asking for is resources and power, we want to be able to run this thing, we want money, we want to do this, and this is how we want it to be governed. You know if grassroots leaders were better resourced, they would run the world. And so, let's get

them some money. I just want to say that you know for some people like me who are not grassroots leaders, we can go mess with institutions, and open up more seats. The goal is not just more seats in those institutions, I think the goal is that those institutions fundamentally change and if they can't, the new world is getting built in parallel. If there's even a line of sight to a way that you can get resources, ask. Ask people, ask people like me to go do that work for you. This is what it means to respond to this moment.

AJEEV

I love the passion and energy you bring. You just get fired up when talking about grassroots leaders. I really love it, but I also love how practical those tips are: if you have space keep it, take it, own it--it's yours. If you don't, and you want it, email somebody, get on the phone and say I want to be a part of your accountability circle. I love that even that language because you know that they've got some mechanism internally that may not be visible, and how else do we know if we don't ask. And for institutions to move money to grassroots groups--non-qualified donees, be flexible and nimble with the way in which you're offering resources. To close I guess I'll offer you any space to say is there anything that you'd like to offer, as we're winding down

ZAHRA

We need everyone, right, like we need everyone to make change happen. My heart hurts a little sometimes when I hear about all the incredible work that grassroots leaders are doing to help institutions understand their value. Their work should be serving the amazing people that they love. Find your group of people like find, find me, find your version of me to do some of the work within institutions so that you can double down on your community because I think it's almost like in this, you know, anti-Black racism movement where a lot of attention is going to supporting white leaders to be better. Really what we need to be doing is supporting communities to heal, to step into their power and recognize that the world is changing and it's their moment.

SARAH

Thanks AJEEV and ZAHRA! Communities are ecosystems, and when different parts of the system, like grassroots leaders and institutions, learn to work together, great things can be accomplished towards justice, inclusivity and equity.

Today's guests were AJEEV BHATIA, Manager of Policy and Community Connections at the Centre for Connected Communities and ZAHRA EBRAHIM, CEO and cofounder of MONUMENTAL. You can learn more about Zahra and get in touch with her on twitter at **@ZAHRAEB**

This has been SIGNAL BOOST, amplifying the voices of community builders on the ground and at the grassroots. SIGNAL BOOST is produced by the Centre for Connected Communities and made possible with the support of the Ontario Trillium Foundation

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