

Transcript – Episode 70 – [A Culture on Purpose with McKenzie Wren](#)

Dolph Goldenburg: Welcome to the Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast. I'm your host Dolph Goldenburg with another great conversation that will help your nonprofit thrive in a competitive environment. We live in polarized times, whether we're talking politics, religion, community, or the workplace. Lately, it just feels like people take a position and build a fortress around it, and then there's this mentality of everything you do is bad because [I] don't like you. A few months ago, I had coffee with someone who felt like an antidote to these polarized times. McKenzie Wren was introduced to me through a client, and the conversation that followed just felt like a big, huge sigh of relief. Imagine a world where we can still talk through our problems and emerge with mutual respect. Well, Mackenzie facilitates a world that makes this very magical thing happen. McKenzie is a consultant that helps manage change, plan and build teams. She does this through a number of different modalities, which we will discuss shortly. Before entering the consulting world, McKenzie ran a prominent refugee resettlement organization here in Atlanta and holds a graduate degree in public health from Emory University. So, let's settle in for a common conversation about building a culture on purpose,

Hey. Welcome to the podcast McKenzie.

McKenzie Wren: Hi, good morning. So great to be here with you today.

Dolph Goldenburg: I am thrilled to be with you in part because I can use a little bit about an anecdote right now. I make the mistake of watching a CBS this morning, every morning at 7:00 AM and watch their eye-opener. And, of course, I saw that the Tweeter in Chief is now threatening someone. And I'm like, really? So, I need a break and calmness right now. So, I'm thrilled for us to be talking.

McKenzie Wren: Wonderful. And let's just take a deep breath cause that's always a good place to start. And 7:00 AM triggers like that. Woo! It's hard to get back on track sometimes.

Dolph Goldenburg: Yeah. Well, you know the funny thing, I stopped listening to NPR several years ago for that very reason. And somehow, now I've replaced it with CBS this morning. And honestly, I probably should stop doing that, but we're not here to talk about my neuroses. We are here to talk about culture on purpose. So, talk to me, what culture on purpose?

McKenzie Wren: Culture on purpose is the recognition that culture at work matters and that wherever people come together, whether it's work or whether it's your neighborhood or your faith institution or even a social league, that that is community happening. The culture happens kind of despite people's best intents. And so, if you can recognize that anytime that community is happening, culture is happening. Thus, you can create the culture that you truly want, that that represents your values, that works for all people included. And so, culture on purpose, right? It's on purpose with what your mission and you are creating it purposefully.

Dolph Goldenburg: Well, I know when I've looked at your website, and when you and I spoke, you talked a lot about “authentic inclusion.”

McKenzie Wren: Diversity, which used to just be called diversity work, right? Then inclusion was added, so D and I work diversity and inclusion work. And the idea of authentic inclusion is that there's not one group that is welcoming another group, right? Because even that sets up an artificial barrier. Who are we to welcome somebody else? But authentic inclusion means that the culture is set up for all people to participate in from their true self and with authentic purpose, if you will. So, people know why they're there; they know how to be present, and they know that it is a space that works for them so that they can truly bring their true self to wherever it is that they are. I really got turned on to this because first of all, I tried to work in the corporate environment for a few minutes. It really didn't work because I felt like that it was all about putting on a mask at the beginning of the day and wearing that mask throughout the day and then draw and then trying to figure out who I was after work. It feels like that the corporate space, in particular, was not a place where humanity was really welcomed.

Then, I shifted over to the nonprofit realm. I love nonprofits, and I've worked most of my career in nonprofits. It's a different kind of environment and more often messier and authentic, more authentic and in some ways has some of the same problems of the corporate realm. But that idea of how you don't have to put on a mask, but you can actually not have to cover parts of your personality. You can show up as your full self and with all of your multiple different identities. So, that authentic inclusion is an attempt to create an environment where you are just yourself, knowing why you're there and living authentically with your own personal purpose as well as meeting the purpose of, in this case, the organization of the agency.

Dolph Goldenburg: I want to jump back for a quick second to talk about diversity and inclusion. Early on in the podcast, you are episode 60 something. I don't know whether it's 66 or 67 or 68, but I think our second or third episode we had Clarence Patton on who talked about diversity and inclusion. Now, we have many times, many, many times more listeners now than we did an episode three, so I don't want to make the assumption that our listeners automatically understand the difference between diversity and inclusion. Can you give a quick primer?

McKenzie Wren: Yeah, absolutely. So, diversity is an array of differences in the room. Diversity includes everything. So, that's gender, sexual orientation, religion, certainly race and ethnicity, and it's welcoming. And then there's all the diversity of backgrounds, economic status, country of origin – all these different places that create a diverse environment. So, diversity is simply who is showing up. Now, given that our country's history and the way that segregation and integration has worked and the way that racism has worked in our country, diversity really first began taking off after the civil rights movement and people recognizing that there needs to be more than just white men in the corporate structure. And so, to intentionally make up for some of this, diversity work emerged. With that came equal rights act and the affirmative action and a Title Nine and different opportunities for people who had had been historically marginalized to participate. It's hard to turn a big ship around, so the ways that the white male, normative corporate culture was working still needed a lot of pushing to bring in additional varieties of

perspectives and opinions. So, original diversity work, if you will, often felt like checking a box. Oh Great. We have a black person. Great. We have a woman, oh, we have a black woman. Yay Bonus. Right? You may remember the Twofer from Third Rock from the Sun. If any listeners followed Third Rock from the Sun.

Dolph Goldenburg: And the criticism about that was always, oh, that's just tokenism. Yeah, you just want an African-American or you just want a woman just to have an African-American or just to have a woman.

McKenzie Wren: Exactly. Not Third Rock from the Sun. It was Tina Fey's show. Anyway, so then inclusion began to say we don't want tokenism. It's actually really valuable. Just as we know in biology, diversity is important to strengthen ecosystems. It is the same thing with humans. We are actually strengthened by our differences. And so, inclusion added onto diversity, so diversity and inclusion. Inclusion is really that understanding that it's not about tokenism and that you can't just bring in somebody different, so to speak, and expect it to work for them. And so, inclusion is when you look at it and [ask], well what works for people who bring in different perspectives, different backgrounds to actually have a culture that works? So, that's really the big difference from diversity to the diversity and inclusion.

Dolph Goldenburg: Thank you for explaining that, McKenzie. I certainly know that might feel like we're going a little bit off the actual topic, but I did not want us to use those two terms and have any listener's not understand what each of those mean because in the nonprofit sector when they talk to funders, especially funders that are really on the cutting edge of equity work. They are going to be using those two terms and then going to be expecting that their grantees understand what they mean.

McKenzie Wren: I appreciate that you took the time to spell that out. So thank you for that.

Dolph Goldenburg: Let's go back for a little bit about culture on purpose. I know that that authentic inclusion is a part of that, but why is culture on purpose important for teams?

McKenzie Wren: Culture develops kind of organically, and if you're not paying attention, it can be set up based on power, personality or politics. And so, that can set up really poor lines of communication. It can set up poor lines of assumptions and expectations. Whose way of working are we just expected to conform to? Right? And so, we see that in dynamic individuals start up, new nonprofits, new entrepreneur, new entrepreneurial activities. They've got this great vision, and they're super charismatic. Then they have to start sharing that vision and bringing people in. And they oftentimes don't know how to share that vision. And so, the culture becomes based upon the founder and whether you're a legacy organization or whether you're a new nonprofit, oftentimes culture has been primed or has been marching along based on just everyday life.

So, culture on purpose says, let's look at our culture and make sure that it is an environment where people can thrive. Now, nonprofits in particular are notorious for overworking and underpaying people and chewing them up and spitting them out, and there's high turnover in

the nonprofit world. A lot of that is about the nonprofit culture where people feel wrung dry, and that culture is not one that honors and support the incredible service that nonprofit workers are bringing. So many nonprofits who do this incredible work in the world are not doing the incredible work in their internal world, and that's why so much turnover and much burnout. People leave the nonprofit realm because they're exhausted. So if we can bring this idea of culture on purpose to the nonprofit realms and help people thrive so that they can be in it for the long haul so that we can truly make changes in, in society.

That's what culture on purposes about. And I will say, Dolph, that for me, I got turned onto this because I had ran not a prominent refugee resettlement agency, but I actually ran the multicultural community center in the most diverse square mile of the United States in Clarkston, Georgia and the stone as a multicultural community center that serve many new Americans or folks who came in as refugees as well as long-term southerners. It was imperative that I figured out a way to keep my employees happy cause since I couldn't pay them very well and the one thing I could do was make the culture of work for them so that they wanted to be there. And that's really how I got started in this.

Dolph Goldenburg: Let me back up. I apologize for getting that wrong, bad on me. But now let me move forward and ask, what did you do to really create a culture where your staff would be happy?

McKenzie Wren: So, I talked. I talked. I talked. We talked, I knew who my employees, where we started with the one and a half employees, and six years later when I left, we had 12. As each time we brought in a position, we would talk about the position, what we were able to pay. Then when I hired the person, in terms of integrating them into the culture, we all would look at who needs to talk to each other? What are their roles? What do they need to feel successful and support it? So, we had some folks who were parents, so we had flexible schedules so that it could work with childcare. We allowed parents to bring their children to work if that was necessary. It was a nonprofit community center, so it was a little bit easier than some places. Kids could hang out in the kind of the library area. We made it so that people could do project-based work as opposed to hourly based work. So, as long as they were getting done what needed to be done, then they could do it how they needed to do it. So, it was those kinds of things of making the work environment of great human and human-centered and family-centered environment was probably the most critical thing.

Dolph Goldenburg: And so, let me ask, I guess you helped to create really positions there were more project-based and hourly-based. So, so this is going to sound so rule like, but did you take any steps to ensure that you remain compliant with Department of Labor requirements?

McKenzie Wren: We had to look at who was exempt and who's nonexempt and all those different things and make sure that we were. Fortunately, there are the good people at pro bono partnerships who will always hold your hand through these processes, and they probably saved me from being kicked into the can several times. So, they really were a fantastic resource for working with us.

Dolph Goldenburg: Let me just jump in. Shameless promotion. We have another podcast episode on finding pro bono legal counsel. We do have listeners all over the country, so if you are not an Atlanta and are looking for a way to find pro bono legal counsel on matters like that, make sure you download that episode with Rachel Spears. I will make sure we link it in the show notes as well because it is possible to create culture on purpose while also making the lawyers happy and keeping the regulators happy. Sorry, I had to give that quick promo McKenzie.

McKenzie Wren: Absolutely. It's so important, and those are the folks who keep us on track. For sure. I love Rachel.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, you talked to, as they were coming in. You helped integrate people into your team. You created flexible work environments and schedules for your team members. What are some of the other things you did to build culture on purpose of the community center?

McKenzie Wren: We had frequent staff meetings, and we were small, of course. But we did hope folks who are sort of in leadership, and then we had folks who were, um, more project or like custodial based or whatever, things that you might traditionally put into a hierarchy. What was really important for me is that all voices were at the table. We solicited ideas and feedback and opinions about the running of the center from everybody. So, you know, all of us felt like we all felt ownership of the place and people who have great loyalty, there are people who are still there, you know, 10 years later. And that feels amazing to me.

That ability to respect and honor everybody's perspective and to help them know that their voices matter by creating a space for them... One of my greatest things that makes me feel good when I go to sleep at night is this one gentleman who had had some issues in his life. He was a local guy, and we basically gave him, maybe it was a fourth or fifth chance, I don't know for him when he came to us, and he turned his life around there. He's an amazing, amazing person who really turned his life around. And I know that part of it is because he felt for the first time that he got the respect, not just for me but from the whole community of his human dignity and honored his life path and what he was bringing to the table.

That's one of the things that was probably the thing that I felt best in all of my work there is that recognition that everybody has gifts, talents and skills. That idea of asset-based community building, that motivates me every single day of recognizing that everybody has gifts, talents, and assets to share. That gets us back to staying calm in the days of this Tweeter in Chief administration of, how do we actually honor the gifts, talents, and skills of somebody who may be so entirely different from us that we want to pull our hair out and fling them out the window, right?

Dolph Goldenburg: And I think one of the things that you said, and I just think it's so critical to reiterate, is you had the staff person who had some issues, but I have certainly done this a couple times successfully and probably a couple times not so successfully, but you know what, where I've gone to a staff person, I've had to challenge or write up and I've said, you know, you

made a mistake. It's okay to make a mistake. What we need you to do is own that mistake and know that it's not okay to keep making the same mistake

McKenzie Wren: And find out if there's additional support that that person needs around their mistakes, so that's where professional development comes in, right? And sometimes professional development is simply somebody to talk to. And sometimes professional development is a more specific training. So, that's a piece of it too, what do the employees need in order to be successful?

Dolph Goldenburg: Absolutely. Definitely. McKenzie, we're going to take a quick break, and when we come back, we're going to talk about some of your tools for inclusion and community building.

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Hey. Welcome back, McKenzie. So, what are some of these tools of inclusion and community building that you feel are most effective?

McKenzie Wren: To me, collaboration is one of the most important tools. And what I learned, again, through my work at the nonprofit is a lot of people think they know what collaboration is, but they don't know how to do it. So, I was trained in the collaborative operating system, which is one of several different methods for collaborative tools because in order to collaborate successfully, you actually have to know things like who owns what piece, who's responsible and how do we get what's called ownership and alignment around different topics. So, to build a truly collaborative team, you need to have strong processes. So, I'm a big process person. I am flexible and intuitive and all those things. And I really like knowing what the boundaries and the processes by which we can be super flexible. So, it's funny. I talk about you can have a lot more freedom if you kind of know what the parameters are.

And so, these kinds of tools are ways to have very successful meetings, to make them be functional, to walk away with people feeling like they know what to do and that they've also had a chance to be human within that. For example, a simple thing is whenever you start a meeting, you always do a check-in. It's worth the five or 10 minutes even to have a check in so that people can bring their whatever they're bringing today. And there are different ways of doing check-ins, some formal and some informal like something called Connections, which just opens up a space about five minutes, and whoever wants to say anything within that five minutes, they're

welcome to do so. Or you can do more formal check ins where everybody goes around and you have 30 seconds to say whatever's on your mind, whatever.

Creating a space where people are arriving together. Quakers do it by using silence, right? All those things are really valuable tools.

Another really important thing is an agenda beforehand, ideally so that people actually know why they're at the meeting, what they're bringing, what's going to be discussed and approximately how long is being allocated for that discussion. So, these very formal tools allow for really effective meetings and really effective information sharing so that work can get done, and people know what work they need to help other folks out with or what work they need help with. The collaborative operating system are some of my favorite tools, and there are different processes for just about every layer of work.

Dolph Goldenburg: Let me ask you about the check-in because I am a huge fan of check-ins at the beginning of meetings. But I normally see one of two things happen. Either people genuinely participate, or they kind of turn into robotic participants. So, in those check-ins where I'm facilitating the meeting, and it turns into a robotic check-in, help me out here. What am I doing wrong?

McKenzie Wren: Well that's a good question. I will turn it back to you and say, what do you think is happening when you see that? What are people being asked to do that might turn them into a robot?

Dolph Goldenburg: That is an excellent question. And now, of course, I'm blanking on a time when it's actually happened. So, this is why I'm not in therapy because I can't answer your question!

McKenzie Wren: So oftentimes, it's looking at the tools that are being used. And asking people, so I see that this isn't really working for folks. What do you all need to do this morning? Let's recalibrate. And that's where building ownership and alignment, right? If people are not in alignment with the check-in process is not going to work for them.

Dolph Goldenburg: Thank you. That's exactly what I needed to hear. Admittedly, I never thought about just stopping the check-in after the second or third or fourth person and say, hey, this is clearly not working for everybody this morning. What else should we be doing?

McKenzie Wren: So, my catchphrase is: The wisdom is in the room. Tap into it. So that's exactly when you would do that. Like, hey you all. Something's happening. What's going on? What do we need to do differently? Tapping into the wisdom of the room, your people, you know, the people in the room know what they need.

Dolph Goldenburg: I love that. So again, I apologize for taking us off on that tangent, but you know, I figured, hey, I can get some free consulting here for what I'm doing wrong,

McKenzie Wren: I'll put the bill in the mail.

Dolph Goldenburg: Hey, there you go.

McKenzie Wren: So, the other tools that I use really center around listening and respect. So, what I see and why I think that my work is so much more important than ever today is this ability to listen. People are popping off at each other and going right into defensive mode, and there is not a lot of active listening. There's not even hearing going on. People are just saying something, and then somebody else's screaming back at them; then somebody yells, screams back; it's just about throwing out opinions at each other and not truly about engaging in conversation. So, my other favorite tools and concepts come from something called the Presencing Institute. And the Presencing Institute comes out of MIT, and a gentleman named Otto Scharmer outlined what he saw as ways of listening. It's called **Theory U**, and it's literally the letter U and its processes of recognizing how change happens.

And this also comes back to authenticity. So, the “U” have listening starts out with just what I just described as, as throwing opinions at each other. Nobody is listening to anybody else. And then there are three other steps of listening. Part of it is becoming aware of how you are listening or how you are being listened to and offering tools so that people can have this shared language and shared understanding of how to listen. There's also the role of agreements or norms which also says how we talk to each other. I have been part of board meetings and even some staff meetings where people are horrible to each other; they are yelling at somebody; they are being nasty; they're being critical where it just shuts down all possibility of growth and engagement. And having both been on the receiving end of that and witnessing it, we have to set up ways that we can actually talk to each other. So agreements around how we listen and also around how we talk are key for setting up a culture that works.

Dolph Goldenburg: I say this all the time, but boards and teams need to have rules of engagement that everybody is in alignment on, and there is absolutely no place for a bomb thrower on a team. I say it all the time. If that is your pattern, if you just want to lob a bomb in, laugh and walk away, you probably need to be a solo or independent person.

McKenzie Wren: Yeah. that's just a power play. It really is. And it doesn't accomplish anything except for an ego stroke for that person. And it's unacceptable. And it's part of it like, you know, helping people recognize, did you know that you have a pattern of throwing bombs? How is that working for you? And that's where coaching is great. I have some friends, a lot of friends who are coaches actually. I love coaches, and there's certainly, as you well know, there's a consulting and coaching go hand in hand. But that personal coaching for people to become aware of their own patterns because some people don't even realize that they're doing this. They're kind of checked out as to their own way of operating. So, I want to say another tool which – I don't personally do this, but I think it's a really important part of the toolkit - is having do some kind of, whether it's Myers Briggs or strengths finders or [Disc] or some way of, of knowing. So “know thy self” essentially, so people understand their own strengths and also can understand how the team works together and what ways pack. You know, what people need to feel successful. Some

people are very, very linear, and some people are very circular. You put a circular in a linear person in a room and expect them to get things done, you're going to have to facilitate some of that. So, part of those tools is setting up systems that work for multiple different ways of learning and expressing yourself.

Dolph Goldenburg: My personal favorite is [DISK]. Do you have a personal favorite?

McKenzie Wren: I've found value in most of them. I'm one of those who just knows enough to be dangerous. I do love "strengths finders." And I also feel that part of the cool thing about [DISK] is that it offers you the opportunity for growth as well. So, I like them. I think they all play different roles. And I don't want to throw down with just one favorite.

Dolph Goldenburg: I love it. I love it. This is part of what I love is it's one of the ways like you, and I are different, and we're showing that on the podcast. I tend to be really very linear. And I was like, "Okay, A,B,C,D. How do I get to F? Oh, I go through A B C D." It's two different approaches, but I love that. Thank you for bringing that.

McKenzie Wren: Yeah, absolutely. Well, so when we talk about inclusion, we can get into the messy, the messy stuff about, cultural assumptions. I mentioned at the beginning of the podcast that the corporate structure – and I include the nonprofit structure in here as well – was really set up to work for White Christian men. So, there are certain assumptions that go along with that. And in order to kind of challenge that and create new ways of being, we also have to know kind of some of those dynamics about power and voices and whose voices are in the room. Just asking somebody who may be different from yourself to just show up and start speaking into that space is really difficult, which is why looking at the systems and providing different tools so that you can hear different voices, people's cultural backgrounds bring different ways of showing up.

And if you come from a culture where you never challenge authority, then somebody saying, "Well, just tell me whatever I'm doing wrong," is really not going to work for them. There are going to have to be different ways of providing feedback. And so that's where those cultural analysis or systems, you know, looking at some of the underlying cultural constructs are really fun to me. Somebody actually asked me if I was an anthropologist the other day, and I was like, "Wow, how did you know that?" But I have a background in anthropology, so I love this culture stuff. I love it. Looking at the ways that people come together and, and then I love trying to impact it.

Dolph Goldenburg: McKenzie, thank you for joining us. Before you leave us, I always have to ask an Off-the-Map question and if this is the listeners first time tuning in the Off-the-Map question is something that is tangentially or sometimes not at all related to what we're talking about today, but allows listeners to get to know a little bit more about you as a guest. So McKenzie might Off-the-Map question for you. And again, I guess I'm looking for some free coaching here. What are your tips for remaining calm and centered during what is truly the daily media circus of the Trump presidency?

McKenzie Wren: Breathing. Compassion. I have been studying and working on compassion for a couple of years as part of my spiritual practice. That ability to not take it all so personally has been huge for me. And so, whether it's meditation... I personally, I chant, I do Hebrew chanting and the calming rituals that keep our inner psyches. So, meditation, chant, walking, Yoga, all these different ways of calming ourselves down, but first and foremost is the act of breathing. If we can breathe deeply and exhale deeply, it's the simplest and most powerful tool that we have. It's true in every situation. And everybody who's done any kind of leadership talks about the importance of counting to 10 before you speak or counting to four. Take that time to breathe and let the trigger release for just a second so that you can figure out how you truly want to respond. That for me has been huge, and it took a minute. I mean, we're in our second year, right? God, it was a long year. Those first three months of last year, you know, I was working on it as hard as everybody else and just triggering all over the place and had to actively engage my spiritual tools in order to be able to get through. And it's taking support, talking about it.

Dolph Goldenburg: Well thank you. And that is definitely a good reminder to me to breathe. I actually used to meditate. This is probably a good time for me to start doing it again because like you, I'm like, "Oh, we're just about to start the second year and I don't imagine the second year is going to be any better than the first."

McKenzie Wren: So, I take a deep breath with you on that one. And again, it doesn't have to be formal meditation. That's the thing. For some people, it does not work to just sit cross-legged in a lotus position and breathe. There are so many different ways to incorporate mindfulness, right? And so, it's really about developing mindfulness techniques.

Dolph Goldenburg: Well, you know, and I attended Quaker meeting for about 10 years, so I got used to chasing the monkey, and you know, I never sat cross-legged while doing it.

McKenzie, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast. You provide a very unique service. A lot of people are good at building systems but fall short on the human side of the equation. You bring both in a creative and effective way. So, for folks who want to learn more about your services, they can visit you at www.wrenconsulting.net, and at your site. They can also sign up for seven steps to build community today. We will that in our show notes, and we will also link your Facebook page and so if folks want to reach out to you on Facebook, they can visit you at www.facebook.com/culture-on-purpose. Hey, McKenzie, thank you so much for joining us.

McKenzie Wren: Thank you, Dolph. If it's been an absolute pleasure and I'm grateful to have had this time in conversation with you. Thank you for the work that you do to help nonprofits be successful. It's really important.

Dolph Goldenburg: Once again, be certain to visit www.successfulnonprofits.com to get all of McKenzie's contact information from our show notes. Now, let's just take a second to acknowledge those who made today show possible. Thank you, McKenzie Wren, for joining us and, of course, Brianna Ohonba for producing this episode. And if I'm thanking folks, I also need to thank you our listeners for downloading and being a part of our journey together. That's our

show for this week. I hope you have gained some insight that will help your nonprofit thrive in a competitive environment.

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