

How to Build a Solid Foundation for Doing Good: Jean Speaks with Angela Blanchard

[Jean's opening comments 0:07](#)

Hello, everybody, you're about to meet Angela Blanchard. She is currently a Senior Fellow at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. She is also President Emerita at Neighborhood Centers, now BakerRipley.

As you will hear, BakerRipley experienced phenomenal growth under her leadership. Angela wrote a wonderful book about the foundations of that growth entitled *Appreciative Community Building, a Practical Story of Transformative Community Change*. It was published by BakerRipley Community Developers.

Angela has been my friend for many moons. I wanted you to hear her because she embodies value-based leadership. Everything she does – all of her efforts, both personal and professional – stem from a deep-rooted set of values. Those values work throughout her work at Baker Ripley.

I believe those values underpin why BakerRipley took off and gained an international reputation under her leadership.

Two of her values stand out. I hope you will listen for them.

First, she has a deep and abiding respect for the capacity of people to grow and flourish with the right kind of support. That respect comes from a deep place within her.

Second, she understands systems and that everything is interconnected. What you do here impacts what happens over there. She doesn't just plan for that part of a system that she's working on. If she's working on one part, she consciously and deliberately considers the impact on the other part. Because of this, she deliberately builds systems processes and infrastructures to support her work. She doesn't just want to do good. She builds platforms to make possible to do good.

So, here's Angela.

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Angela 4:06

Thank you. My memory of meeting you is a little bit more along the lines of, I had great ambition for Neighborhood Centers – now known as BakerRipley – and I had a sense of what was going to be necessary to grow the organization. But I was also, I felt a bit alone, because many of my views about what could be done weren't shared by colleagues. And they weren't even shared by my boss at the time, who I think said, basically, why would I want a bunch of social workers in my organization telling me how to run things?

Jean 4:57

Yeah. I remember you saying that.

Angela 4:59

I would think of many reasons why we would want Jean and a bunch of social workers in our organization, I had a long list. But I agreed, I agreed, what a great sacrifice, to be the point person. And that was a beginning of a great friendship. But I really want to say thank you for believing in me through thick and thin for decades. I mean, you've been a great personal friend and a wonderful professional support and colleague, and you always believed in my ideas.

Jean 5:38

Well, let's tell how those ideas evolved, okay? I want to go back to your childhood because you have a fascinating story of how you learned leadership.

Angela 5:53

Yeah, well, I'm the oldest of eight kids in a Cajun family. And my parents had eight children before they were 30. So, my parents were married in June of 1953. In June of 1954, I was born. Slightly less than a year later, my sister was born. And there you have it. I always say; good Catholics, no rhythm. But what it meant to be in Cajun culture, the oldest daughter becomes always like this third parent. And so, my parents would always just say, "Angela, and the kids." They never had this notion that I was one of the group.

And, I was also responsible, I was told I was responsible for what happened to everybody, anybody smaller than me, and of course, everyone was. So literally, actually, all the way through high school, I was the tallest person in my family. So,

when people say, when did you learn about leadership? Well at 13, my parents had to go, they worked and they left the house and they said, "Oh, you're in charge." And obviously, I had all the responsibility and no power. So, it's a great lesson, I mean, you have to get people to do things and you can't make them.

Jean 7:25

That's delightful.

Angela 7:26

My parents, my brothers and sisters had absolutely no regard for that role. It was just like, it will all be her fault. We can do whatever we want and it will be her fault. It just kind of happened. So, bottom line, I just kind of ended up with an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, which has really served me well. And I learned to consider every action's impact on everyone around me. I learned, it was just ingrained in me to think, how do we get here and back with everyone?

Jean 8:05

Yeah. To the store. You had to take them to the store.

Angela 8:10

If we all went to the store to spend our nickels and pennies, and whatever, we had to get there and back and it included the two-year-old and the 12-year-old that didn't want to listen to me, and everybody in between. And people will want to say, "Oh, my gosh, how tragic is that? She never had a real childhood." That's all malarkey. Because actually, it was such a great training ground for the responsibilities of leadership and being a real adult in the world. Because really, everything we do does have an impact on others.

Jean 8:55

So that whole philosophy of everything we do has an impact on everybody else that seems to be the thing that's following you.

Angela 9:03

Yeah.

Jean 9:04

Okay, so I want to ask you now, you mentioned that you're Cajun, and you have talked to me at length about the Cajuns, the difference between Cajuns and Creole, which a lot of people don't understand. And how Cajun came to New Orleans, I mean to Louisiana through oppression. So, your exposure to that, tell just not the whole thing, but just tell us.

Angela 9:37

Yeah that's a big historical story. But so growing up sort of like as a Cajun person. First of all, most people think Cajun means you were born and lived in Louisiana, and Louisiana is what it means to be Cajun. But in the truest sense, it means you're a descendant from the Acadians, who were French people who had left France because of religious oppression. And then in the 1700s, were unceremoniously deported from Acadia by the English because, as the Cajun story goes, instead of swearing allegiance to the English monarchy, they merely swore at the monarchy.

So, they were loaded on ships and at the time in the mid-1700s, mid to late 1700s, the 13 colonies were struggling and they weren't really keen on having a bunch of destitute deported people. And so, many of those ships sailed until they were dumped in South Louisiana. And school children grow up reading the poem *Evangeline* by Longfellow, which is the separation of two lovers in "Le Grand Dérangement," which is the big deportation. And so, what Cajuns have as a legacy from all of that is this language and culture and food and celebration and traditions. But also, this massively inculcated, like mistrust and lack of reverence for everything official. Officialdom we find highly entertaining. And we view all manner of officialdom with some degree of skepticism.

Jean 11:45

Hah. Okay, so, here's the picture; the oldest, responsible, kids who don't want to listen to you, and growing up in a culture with a healthy sense of irreverence.

Angela 11:59

Absolutely. Celebration and irreverence.

Jean 12:02

Celebration, oh yeah, celebration and irreverence.

Angela 12:07

And a whole sense of I laughingly say and it's still true, it's like it's true, even in the next generation in our family. You tell us that something cannot be done or you tell us that we mustn't do it, or you tell us that this is a rule and the entire family, everyone sits back, you can see everybody thinking, "Well, that could be true." I mean, we don't, we're not seducible by any of that in any grand thing, we're kind of like, "It could be true or not." Because we came from people where a lot of what was written and dictated was not for them, did not celebrate them, did not lift them up. So, we look at all of them and say, "Well, that might be, might be great but might not."

Jean 13:10

Okay. So that's part of what you and I have in common. My father, for my father especially whom I assume gathered from his father, was there's always a way and all you need is a better strategy. You can get it, you can get whatever you want. All you need is the right strategy. So that's the same thing as; it could be true or it could not be true.

Angela 13:34

Yes. Maybe, maybe not. It's like when my mother said to my brothers and sisters, you're going to all stay in the backyard. I don't want to see one person going through that gate. And so, of course, my sister and my brothers climb the fig tree, got on the roof, walked across the roof, and climbed down the other side. No one went through that gate. So, pretty much we had when we had a goal or an agenda – and it's still true – it's hard to stop us.

Jean 14:05

Okay, so did childhood. We're not going to do college, we'll skip on all of that. You're now at Neighborhood Centers.

Angela 14:17

Yeah. So, what really attracted me to Neighborhood Centers, now BakerRipley, was this kind of identification with people who were in some form of economic social struggle. So, in our family, we just scraped together everything we could to make our way out of multiple generations of poverty, ignorance, alcoholism, isolation this was our, this was what we sought to overcome and in a conscious way. And I mean, I'm

really still everyday drawn to people who are trying to build and craft a life different than the one they we're born to. And so for me, the first introduction I had to BakerRipley was meeting Felix Fraga in one of the back hallways of the old Ripley House.

Jean 15:22

Wait a minute Angela, because I'm afraid people won't get that name. Felix, F-E-L-I-X. Fraga, F-R-A-G-A. And, I do well remember Felix.

Angela 15:32

How could anyone not remember Felix? I mean, Felix embodied everything about community engagement, everything about community development. He was the embodiment of service to community. His belief, his intense belief that you cultivate all these healthy things in neighborhoods that people thought were troubled. So there was this great energy there. But there was also just, as you observed when you came, it was a financially fragile organization. Yeah.

Jean 16:08

Yeah. I want people to picture it and the services that you provided at the time. You said, I remember you said, you all provide services from womb to tomb. So, describe what Neighborhood Centers is, what it does, what it was doing. And ethnically, who is the population, you're serving. All of that.

Angela 16:32

You mentioned, Jean, having an affinity and awareness of the role of community centers and settlement houses. So, a great deal of social work actually bloomed and blossomed out of the Settlement House Movement.

Jean 16:51

Yes.

Angela 16:52

And it was that essence of settlement houses, the core story about settlement houses that really attracted me to BakerRipley. What I saw there – through Felix, through Ripley House, through the other centers – was people in neighborhoods creating welcoming places for those who were there and those who were coming. And I feel like there's never going to be a time, particularly never in the foreseeable future, when

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that's not going to be really important that we have these places welcome these landing places and on ramps for people. And so, the challenge was, how do we make it financially viable? How do we create a strong backbone for an organization that could continue to evolve and grow with Houston?

Jean 18:00

Okay. So, hang on, you've said three things that need to be unpacked. First is understanding the neighborhood.

Angela 18:11

Yeah.

Jean 18:12

And I had asked you, describe the ethnicity, average income level, talk about the neighborhood itself?

Angela 18:20

Well, there were so many neighborhoods, because we were in multiple neighborhoods. And I knew from previous work that the way to understand a neighborhood was to talk to the people who lived in it, because I had lived in many neighborhoods that had been characterized by others as troublesome and problematic, and the lacks, gaps, needs, wants, poor etcetera. I mean, I heard it all. And yeah, my experience of those neighborhoods had been different.

And so, I was very keenly tuned in to the notion that in every neighborhood you're going to find these signs of connection and life and generosity and celebration and history and all the things we associate with being a good neighbor. It's been popular for people to say, "Oh, there's no there, there." There's always a there. If there are people, there's a there, there, whether or not you can see it depends on your lenses. But so, I was seeing an organization working in multiple neighborhoods, and each of the neighborhoods having its own idea about what it meant to be to be in Acres Home or to be in East End or to be in Fifth Ward. What does that identity mean? And, what is the history that's important to you? And, what's the connection today that matters?

Jean 20:00

I'm going to say what you said differently, because I want to make sure people get that because I think what you just said is really so important. A lot of people think of low-income neighborhoods as dysfunctional, and they put dysfunctional words on them. They put words like "crime" and they put words like "lazy" and all of that. And my experience of neighborhoods – low income, low-moderate-income neighborhoods – is just what you're saying, they are neighbors.

Angela 20:37

Yeah. Well, I mean, I think there's, so we have to dial all the way back in order to talk about this with and say, how we view any group of people; whether it's a neighborhood or a population, or a race, or an ethnic group, or a gender or whatever, has to do with the filters we put on. So, we have this whole notion in this country that if you need help it signals that you're broken or flawed in some way. And our paradigm for working with neighborhoods that we deem low income or poor is from a lack, gaps, needs, wants. And this is, of course, with probably people associated most with me was this notion that everything was broken in that neighborhood. We were compelled, it was demanded of us as a human services social sector organization that we generate reports that really detailed all the problems in places where we were working.

Jean 21:58

Because we were funded by the federal government and by foundations.

Angela 22:04

Oh, wait, yeah, let's just be clear, it's not just the federal government that does this, everyone does it. It suits the Western philosophy and American narrative to just characterize any struggling group of people as having some individual or collective failure not as some kind of byproduct of a failure of policy or our lack of perfection in the allocation of resources, right? So high school dropout, non-English speaking, uninsured, low birth rate, then we could [...] everybody knew all the problems when we went into [...] and you know, highest juvenile crimes zip code in the country. So having both lived in neighborhoods that had been characterized that way and actually just my sort of gut level the regard with which I was taught that the inherent respect for people that I was taught from childhood on, made me think: isn't there another way to talk about why we invest that is not based on find the problem diagnose the problem, bandaid the problem?

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I was so sick and tired of it. And I saw that it felt like a form of violence to the spirit to persist in describing these places that were actually, as you said, full of life and generosity and community, and people behaving as real neighbors. And yet, we were supposed to talk about them as these broken places. So, that just had to end for me, in order to stay congruent with my beliefs and how I really saw people.

Jean 24:07

Yes.

Angela 24:08

That was hard.

Jean 24:11

That's why I wanted Neighborhood Centers, because I saw that you saw that. I was totally impressed that you saw that. Because of my experience in neighborhoods in New York City, in Richmond and other places. So, you saw that, and it was tremendous.

Angela 24:30

You knew it. Of course, you knew it.

Jean 24:35

Yeah. Yeah, I'm a social worker community organizer and so I understood that completely. I want you to talk about then how you took being sick of that, being sick of the pathology diagnosis, turned it on its head and developed this tremendous model to grow Neighborhood Centers, with, not for, but with the community.

Angela 25:07

I only do this because I love you. All right. You know, not just me, it was a lot of us. There were a lot of people, hungry as I was. And I say a lot of people in this state, in this country that really, at some gut level knew that what was being done was not quite the truth. That knew that every program based on a problem somehow that always ended up in the cul-de-sac of misery. So, yes, I knew it but I my job became to find others that knew it too. And, challenge number one is, can you find funders that embrace this community as places worthy of investment? So, because we of course, behave very differently toward people we believe in, in places we believe in, versus those who think are problematic. So, the first thing was, could we tell a story to reach

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congruence? So, the story I tell about you, and the story I tell with you and the story you tell about yourself – one story?

Jean 26:35

Oh, that's magnificent. Can you go on?

Angela 26:40

That was the integrity, Jean. That was the integrity that we found our way to, that the only thing we could say in a campaign was something that somebody in the community had said or something we could say in front of the community, and they would recognize it as true. So what funders would hear and what we would say in the community was the same story. And that it was moving those things together, to not use language, and I think I've shared with you before, part of what really pushed me toward this was the memory of college of reading a social work textbook and there were case studies in it. And I remember reading this sort of dispassionate account of a family: poor, alcoholism, and too many children. And it was my family.

Jean 27:45

Oh, my goodness!

Angela 27:47

And I had this sort of sick horror and I remember putting my hand really quickly over the page and the thought I had is, I would never want my parents to read that someone had written like this about us. And obviously it wasn't us, but it was close enough. And I feel horrified. And I still, even if I think about it now I feel horrified. Because I saw my parents struggle and overcome almost unbelievable odds to accomplish what they did with us. And I saw that in every neighborhood in Houston. And to think that we took all that hunger and all that striving, and the only story we could tell about it was how it didn't I just, I can't bear it. It's like I can't. So so it was Tim Skaggs at an ALF thing when I was saying one time, "I can't take this anymore. There's got to be a way. I mean, some proven way some validated way of studying people and communities that is not based on problems in pathology, but it is instead..." And he said, "Oh, yes, it's called appreciative inquiry."

Jean 29:15

Oh, you heard about that? I know Tim. Let's point to Tim Skaggs. Yes, I know Tim.

Angela 29:20

So, I was like, "Hallelujah!" And I looked it up that night. The next day, I gathered six of my best team members that could like to entertain a new idea. And I said, "This is how. We're going to have to try this right now. Like today. We have to start now." And we stumbled, and we were inept, we struggled we had to learn, and we had to learn how to be in community that way and inside the agency that way. But for us, it kind of opened the door to be in integrity, to be able to talk about the people that we work with the way we really saw them in a way that honored them and the work we were doing. It was great. And I'm pretty stubbornly dogmatic on all of that still.

Jean 30:44

What I want people to understand is that you used and infused, and I mean, a plural you – you plus your staff – you used appreciative inquiry throughout all parts of the organization. You hired people in an appreciative manner. I remember one of my former students applied for a job with Neighborhood Centers, came back to me and said, "I can't believe this job interview, it was unlike anything I've ever had. They asked me about what I was going to bring to the table." He said it was and he couldn't describe it, because the questions had lost, you know had blown away. But I've heard from different people throughout the Houston community that you all were using it. So, should I show the model now? Do you want me to screen share or do you want to talk about it some more? How do you want to proceed?

Angela 31:45

You brought up several things. One thing is, as we crafted new questions and new ways of discerning and gathering insights through appreciative inquiry about communities, it soon became obvious to us that we had to take the approach we were taking with communities and move it into the organization. And one of my dear colleagues, Anne Helbig, says: If we had tried to undergo a change project and bring that in for us, we would have never been motivated enough to do it for ourselves the way we were motivated to do it for our communities. But in doing it for our communities, a necessity of doing it internally and using it as we recruited our board members and our staff members and our consultants and whomever we work with, it was working then from the standpoint of strengths. You know, appreciative inquiry is all about understanding what makes us as individuals and communities, what makes us

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energized and whole and healthy and strong. And in crafting questions it gets to the heart of what matters most to us. So yes, very much interviewed very differently, once we were seeking those answers from people as they came in.

Jean 33:39

What you're saying is you applied appreciative inquiry in the community first, you then said, "Oh, oh, we have to do it ourselves so that it is part of who we are." And so, you brought it internal, as well. And by bringing it internal means you will strengthen and bring it back out into the community?

Angela 34:02

I think so. But it was also challenging, and there would be still people that connected with us, that would some say sarcastically, like, "Oh, I'm not drinking that Kool Aid," you know, so I mean, because, of course, we think when we wrap ourselves in cynicism, there's a sort of superiority to that. We assume that a person more cynical, less positive, has a greater handle on reality. And I was always very entertained by that I would just allow people to go on, saying whatever they wanted, and then a lot of people confused it also with positive thinking. So, no, it's radically not that.

Jean 34:55

So, let's talk about this. Okay, sentences like that. I'm getting excited. Okay, positive thinking. So first, let's talk about the difference between what you're talking about appreciative inquiry and positive thinking.

Angela 35:25

I share this, I talk about this a lot with my students because students are really being educated in a system that is in the academic world, which is largely kind of used to criticism as a way to understand things. And there's a great deal to criticize about both our political system and our economic system and our social systems. And so, a lot of students are like seeing what's flawed about the systems we've built, and they want to talk about it.

And appreciative inquiry doesn't shut down discussion about what is flawed and problematic and painful and cruel and devastating, far from it. Appreciative inquiry is the quest for understanding what is there to work with? What do we have to work with

in the way of strengths, resources, power, etc., that can be activated and arranged in a way that allows us to free ourselves from the things that are not working?

And so, I often say, I still believe in some ways, maybe the most appreciative inquiry type question ever asked was Nelson Mandela as he emerges from prison 27 years, of really his personal imprisonment and oppression. And then his lifetime of witnessing the cruelties of apartheid South Africa. And his question is, how shall we come together and move forward as one country? Not, let's forget about everything that ever happened. And what came out of that was not a collective amnesia of whitewashing, but that reconciliation heals.

Jean 37:20

Right. Reconciliation.

Angela 37:25

And we have a desperate need as a species, our quest now really should be for how do we have a reckoning with the cruelties and problems of the past that allows us to come together and move forward? Not a whitewashing, not burying it, not erasing. But it's like the old gnostic gospel thing: that which we bring forth shall save us, that which we do not bring forth shall destroy us. So, I think appreciative inquiry in real practitioners, it's the art in bringing forth that which can save us. Well, let me pause there because I really want to respect what you and your audience would most want to know.

Jean 38:25

Okay. So, what you're saying, I'm trying to, I'm going back and forth with this model, and whether we want to do that or not. Okay. What you're saying is that appreciative inquiry uses questions to seek out what is it in this community, in this organization, in this nation, in whatever, what resources do they have to build on, so that whatever's in the way of progress, those resources can be harnessed to move forward?

Angela 39:01

Yeah. So, we can work toward wholeness and healing and what is there to work with. Yeah.

Jean 39:09

so, we can work towards wholeness. Okay, so that was one thing, the contrast between that and positive thinking. The second question, and I really got downright excited when you started talking about it, is the spirit of cynicism. I know so many people who think they are so smart if they can find some fatal flaw in whatever idea somebody hits. You personally – we know – encountered a lot of cynicism.

Angela 39:43

Oh, yeah.

Jean 39:46

How did you as a leader, deal with that? How could you use or bring an appreciative inquiry approach to your organization, to building it to community in the face of people who think they're smarter than you if they can point out what's wrong?

Angela 40:04

So back when my hair was still red, I was referred to as “the redheaded flake,” and a lot of other unkind things. You know there's a kind of... if all you do is espouse a philosophy, then yes, I mean, I think there's a kind of questioning of, great, this sounds wonderful, but what does it look like on the ground? And so, one thing that's always a source of humility for me, is that it is extremely difficult to craft, to actually draw upon what is available to craft it so that it works. I mean, that's the art of running an organization, that's the art of building an institution, is you create this capacity to actually make something work on a set of principles. Right?

Jean 40:13

Right.

Angela 40:14

That just will keep you really humble because on any given day, you just hope you're at 51% of its working, because it's also...what did you used to say? What you don't work on works loose?

Jean 41:32

There you go. That's it.

Angela 41:33

Every day, this is gardening, this isn't like you build it and you walk away. If you view organizations as we do, as living things, then it's an ongoing cultivation process, and one in which you are constantly aligning yourself and inviting others. And it's a tending process. So, we also had to create within the organization something I know that you long respected was an organizational development model because we had to build an organization that worked and could be funded and could last.

Jean 42:18

Okay, so I'm going to screen share that model. Okay, and I want you to talk it through, talk us through this. I will say that I thought when you showed this to me, I thought this is brilliant.

Angela 42:42

I have always appreciated that you were both interested in and positive about my ideas because I think people just would want to have an opinion about the outcome of things without really wanting to know why I did a thing the way I did. I had this theory kind of base, it sort of stemmed from systems thinking, which is the macro and the micro are the same. So, we kind of fundamentally grasp the common sense of Maslow's hierarchy, right? I mean, it's been justifiably criticized. And in many indigenous communities, we wouldn't necessarily see a pyramid the way Maslow did it.

But setting that aside for a minute, we did really understand in the social sector that basic needs had to be met if we were to actually work with individuals on anything beyond survival. And so there was a logic to this hierarchy of needs. And I thought, if it applied to individuals, why would not it apply to collections of individuals? So, I wanted to see if we could make an argument and treat our organization as if it were a person, a family, a community. And respect the need for the foundational and basic needs of the organization to be met. What really hurt me, Jean, and you and I saw this a lot, especially 70s and 80s, it was is just rampant, is nonprofits, really, sort of people working there in some sort of sacrificial mode, almost...

Jean 44:42

Let me snap screen share for this, because this is really important one.

Angela 44:45

Yeah. So, people working in some sort of sacrificial mode, not being paid well, not having the tools they needed, the roof leaking over their heads. Here, we were just sort of really mission driven, but not substantiated or supported by an organization that could reliably carry out the delivery of services in line with those principles. And when you came to be with us, I mean, you were looking for where is the organization that has some sort of healthy way of interacting with one another – the people they served and the people that fund them – that we could see some sort of healthy progress. So, we were swimming upstream at that time in our organization, when I was making arguments for automation, arguments for facility improvement, arguments for tools that people needed to do their jobs. And it was like, remember all the fights about, M&G [management and general expenses], they spent all that money on M&G instead of services? And it was very difficult.

Jean 46:08

Yeah. So, let me make sure people are with what you're saying, because this is so critical for nonprofits.

Angela 46:17

Yeah.

Jean 46:18

Nonprofits expect to be broke by many funders. Funders often give money for services, they want to feed the hungry child. They don't want to support the staff who are feeding the hungry child, and they don't want to support the organization that has the building in which the hungry child comes to get the food. They don't want to support any of the staff that makes it work. They just want to see the hungry child and feed the hungry child, and the staff expect to be suffering martyrs.

Angela 46:57

Yeah. That's an incredibly offensive, just utterly offensive approach, because those same funders will demand, demand, almost ridiculous amounts of documentation and support. So, what I observed is a lot of nonprofits being funded into bankruptcy. Because here's your money. Now, you're expected to provide all of it supposed to go towards services, but oh, by the way, you still better provide an endless number of reports and give us your data and track your services and your demographics. And

you'll have to do it with pencil and paper because of course a computer would be a misuse of funds.

So, this is unconscionable. We would never expect, we would absolutely know that any business organized that way would fail, it would almost fail instantly. So, what happens in the nonprofit sector is any labor in violation any Aramony and United Way scandal makes headlines forever. And then we're all supposed to be suffering because somebody spent too much money on office furniture and misuse, really created completely inappropriate perks for themselves. But this is nonsense because we don't expect every business to do without infrastructure and buildings and computers and systems and good data methods and process design and everything else because somebody did it wrong.

[Jean 48:55](#)

To be clear, so this bottom part, you determine that if you are going to really deliver great services with the community, you had to have this strong infrastructure.

[Angela 49:09](#)

Yes. To have a platform. Yes, Jean.

[Jean 49:12](#)

As the basis. Okay.

[Angela 49:14](#)

You built a platform because, well, for one thing, part of the joy of working with the Obama Administration was they recognized that we were all trying to take these disparate silo sources of funding and weave them into something coherent that made sense for communities. But you can't count on anybody funding you the way that you need to deliver. So you have to have a platform, you have to perform the alchemy of drawing on all these disparate sources of support and funding and tracking them and reporting on them the way you're required to, and building the platform for compliance and control over resources and support so that you can satisfy those really, in our case, would have been dozens and dozens, hundreds, really, that was necessary, that's the stage we operate, that we built the stage so that we could perform a play on it in a reliable way. It was challenging.

Jean 50:30

Okay, so then the next phase of the model was the efficiency and effectiveness, then you sought to improve that.

Angela 50:38

So, when you look at the model, the foundation is, comply, because the failure to do so is a game over. You know, you don't get the funding, you can't account for it, you fail your audit, you misallocate either by lack of skill or ability a federal grant, game over. So, we didn't want any of that game over stuff. So, we built the foundation, then we move beyond compliance and control, and we start looking at: is what we're spending here, on this process, on this product, on this service really rational?

I remember looking, for example, at what we were spending on an early childhood per unit cost for one particular program, and how it compared to the most awarded early childhood program in the region, the one that people with money could pay for. And I'm thinking if these are the same, the quality should be too. So, you start looking at efficiency and effectiveness, not just are we delivering but is it rational the resources used? Are the dollars being spent, the dollars we're spending to help someone navigate their immigration status, are those rational? Is that a rational use of dollars per person per service per unit? This is just good discipline to check yourself and to check what you're doing against what the people you're serving with value most in that circumstance.

Jean 52:27

Okay. So, coming up to the creativity in leadership.

Angela 52:33

I find our American narrative about innovation and creativity just utterly entertaining because we have this like story, two guys go in a garage and they tinker and come out with this brilliant idea all by themselves as if none of the work that led up to that existed and they are the heroes. So, this is in no way how innovation really happens. But nonprofits have such a difficult time. I was talking with someone this week about, there's hardly anything it could be considered, venture capital in the nonprofit sector, a lot of funders will mouth those words or will talk about, "Oh, we're looking for innovation and new ideas." And yet, what they then require of you is 100 pages that promise that it will definitely work just the way you say it will, no matter what.

So, nonprofits who strive for creativity and innovation, which really a lot comes from the integration of what they're doing with other services, really have to do that on a foundation of solid infrastructure, good product, and service delivery. And then on top of that, you can actually then not just risk but push for innovation and creativity, saying, "Look, we deliver and here's how on this foundation of delivery, we could do something with far more impact." It is a joy to me when we reach the point where we could strive for something creative that could be done on the existing platform. So now, when you're thinking like an accountant, which I still occasionally do, where all we had to consider were the marginal costs of that innovation, not the entire structure that had to be built underneath it or that would support it, which had already been created.

Jean 54:43

Okay, so what you're saying is, instead of planning for the cost of the innovation, you had to think about the added cost the innovation brings, since you already have the platform and the processes in place.

Angela 55:00

So, you're just looking at marginal increases in an investment you're making for an experiment that resides on, lives on the stage already built and that form of innovation. And then for us, also, it was embracing the challenge of integrating what we were doing with what others were doing. And that, to make a system work better. A lot of the actions that I contemplated, I actually contemplated them in the context of, for example, the entire system that was serving seniors, what does that system look like from the seniors like us, Jean, that are healthy and active to the 101-year-old person that probably needs a little bit of assistance? So that whole spectrum of services, you start to think about, where should we act, so that that whole system and spectrum works? So, on that third tier, you have different questions, and you have a different set of considerations. It might also be you look at the entire geography of the region, and say, 13 neighborhoods have asked us for a community center, where shall we act that actually makes the region work better? Does that make sense?

Jean 56:30

Yes. So, I want to translate this because for racial and social justice, a lot of people who are listening are people who in their organizations are trying to implement and bring the organization towards greater internal equity, greater equity and services delivery, that's what they want to do. They want to be where you were, you had the

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constraints of the funders – some of them do, some of them don't – but they still have the constraints of having managers or peers who can't see their vision of what's possible in their organization. Can you speak to how this model could help them?

Angela 57:22

I think there is one healthy, recent shift, I would point to. So many decades have gone by during which the funders only focused on high performing nonprofits. Which really did not resource a nonprofit that was organized around racial justice or equity, and had at its core a set of principles and values that needed uplifting that everyone really would benefit from seeing this thing blossom and grow. But because it was small, because it was fragile as an organization, it's like we can't send our money there.

So that they did one of two things: they did nothing, they just perpetuated the inequity by doing nothing, or they selected an intermediary. And the intermediary, of course, always has an investment in keeping this organization fragile because they're an intermediary. And if you're great, they won't need to stand between you and the funder anymore and you'll stand on your own two feet, everything. So, I'm really encouraged because there's some sign that funders are willing to undertake the challenge of identifying amongst smaller organizations, grassroots led by people of color with a clear understanding of what equity would mean, for their communities, for their people. They reach into those communities to serve and find those organizations and trust them believe what they tell you about what's needed. I find that hopeful. There's not enough of it as much as we might like, but it's moving in that direction.

Now, for those organizations, here's where it gets challenging, because they need to do a bit of institution building. And that doesn't sound very good to a person who says I'm a part of a movement. So like, "Oh, my God, I'm going to be spending it again, or I buy computers instead of powering the movement. And buying computers does power the movement." I think we've come a long way in understanding that if we do not like the way institutions are responding to, caring for people that are dear to us, we must create new institutions that really can and will do it.

So, institution building around a core set of principles and practices that value people previously not valued, we need those. And that means that people who lead them have to get beyond the movement into the institution building. And I find amongst a

lot of my much beloved millennial leaders, and I do love them, they don't like all of that institution building money, talking infrastructures, stuff, because they fear it, they associate it with the institutions that shut them out, and that were not flexible and didn't evolve. So, it's a real challenge now, isn't it? To see funds go to those institutions, but then see the leaders in them embrace the responsibility of growing something that can last.

Jean 1:01:33

So, you talked about this in terms of nonprofits. In my corporate work, I find the same dynamic, people who are trying to lead and promote racial justice in their organization. Literally, I was just talking with a client who was saying that he was having trouble retaining volunteers to work on this internal program that he had started. And I said, we talked about, where do you keep the shared documents? Do you have the procedures written down? Do people know what to do when they show up? Is it written down? Do they have to reinvent the wheel all the time?

Angela 1:02:13

Yeah, that's it's too easy for people to treat equity and justice all as some sort of cotton candy type thing. It's sort of a feel-good thing, is sweet. It's nice. We spin it and we move on. And yes, I do respect people who are embracing this but it's much like our shift to appreciative inquiry. You do not get to do it in one department. It's not departmental, it's not an initiative, it's a full blown, really scrubbing of the organization to reconstitute the way it operates. So, fairness is built into every single practice and process and who wants to undergo that? I mean, people but I'm seeing more people saying, "Oh, my God."

Well, one organization I work with, said they had really held back from issuing the big statement when we were coming to terms with the murder of George Floyd. They held back and they said, this time, instead of a big statement, we need to look at ourselves first. And I felt like, I did feel a certain "hallelujah!" feeling like yes, because we don't need you. If you're a healthcare system, or you're a bank, or an educational institution, we don't need you to become a social justice expert. We need you to bank fairly with people of color. We need you to bank in a way that undoes the built-in inequities that you inherited, that you adopt, whether it's credit scores, or other things that you implement over and over again that reinforce oppression. We need you to scrub that,

be fair bankers. So, it was again, it's part of my nature to look for where are people getting it right. And I thought that moment when somebody says: instead of issuing a statement, we need to look at ourselves. Yes. Yes. Please. This is not a diversity campaign where you just prop up a message and put someone with a beautiful face out there to say something nice, this is you.

Jean 1:04:59

Part of my nature, I repeat what you just said, part of my nature is to look for where people get it right.

Angela 1:05:05

Yeah. Yes. And again, this is not, I am not some Pollyanna person that says, "Oh, but look at us improving." I just know that if we're to learn to do better, that we learn by watching others do better. And then when I serve an example of how people make a transition from dysfunction to a fairer, more functional way of working, that others will learn from that. So, we end up with the responsibility of servicing people getting it right, telling the story. And I've heard you do this, so many times, Jean, tell the story of how people got from here to there. You know, it's like, it's the awakening. Yeah. And then the changed behavior.

Jean 1:06:07

We need to close this out. But I do want you to tell people what you're doing now, because it is fascinating.

Angela 1:06:15

Really, I'm focused now on working with studying, working with researching, teaching, about strategies that we are using to help people who have to rebuild their lives. These are the people that in some way, have been shipwrecked by war or whether loss of health or wealth and find themselves washed up on an unfamiliar shore trying to rebuild their lives. And I've always been really riveted by the capacity that people have to recreate lives out of their imagination, this sort of amazing human capacity. And so, focusing on that in an era of upheaval which is what I call this time we're in now – where one thing after another threatens our sense of security and our notion about what is reliable and what can be taken for granted – I think is a good time for us to understand people who've found their way through the unthinkable, and to understand better the wisdom they have about what it means to rebuild your life.

So, I've been to so many different places now in the world, and I've been with people under what we all would think the direst circumstances, right? And so, I'm always looking for what is universal, one of an anthropological approach. And what is universal is the universal hungers which I just sort of sum up as earn, learn, belong. The desire we all have to offer something to the world, the world values to have an exchange that's based on work that we think will matter in the world or will be invaluable by others.

The desire to learn, none of us wants to be treated as a finished product. You know, we all want to see ourselves as evolving people with capacity to grow and acquire new skills. And then, fundamentally wanting to belong, wanting to be able to walk on the ground, to feel welcomed on the ground that we stand upon, to believe that we can have a shared experience with the people around us.

So, earn, learn, belong, became my shorthand for describing these human aspirations and also the challenges that we try to resolve and solve after catastrophic events. I mean, I think now BakerRipley has trademarked that but earn, learn, belong for me are universal hungers. They're there in Za'atari, the camp for Syrian refugees in the desert in Jordan. They were in the shelters Germany created for displaced Syrians, they're in Lebanon, the oldest refugee camp in the world. They were in the neighborhoods of New Orleans as I stood there with neighborhood leaders after Katrina. We want as human beings to contribute to learn, to be connected, this is universal and the human spirit is not extinguishable. Not by fires, or floods, or pandemics, or inequities, or brutal systems. The spark does not go out. So, there we are with a job to attend to mind it.

[Jean's closing comments 1:10:42](#)

Hello again. Hearing Angela talk about her work never fails to inspire me. When I introduced her, I referred to two of her values that I thought were particularly key to Baker Ripley's phenomenal growth. I want to emphasize them again here.

The first was her deep and abiding respect for the capacity of people to grow and flourish. She talked about how in the early days of BakerRipley, they were required by funders to detail what was broken in the communities they served.

At that time, the focus was on diagnose the problem, fix the problem. That's how you get funds and support. After getting sick and tired of focusing on what was wrong, she and her staff decided to adopt appreciative inquiry as the philosophy for Baker Ripley's community work.

She pointed out this does not mean they shut down discussion about what was broken and flawed. Instead, using appreciative inquiry. They focused on – and I'm quoting her here – “What do we have to work with in the way of strengths and resources, power, etc. that can be activated and arranged in a way that allows us to free ourselves from the things that are not working?”

I just love that.

The second value that she holds is understanding how everything is connected. She gets systems! Operationally, this means that she and the staff worked hard to build an infrastructure at BakerRipley that would support the services they wanted to provide to the community. She showed us her model that put infrastructure as the platform on which services were built.

She didn't say it here, but her monitor throughout the years when we would talk is that the business of delivering services and the service themselves are intertwined.

This is important for those who are committed to leadership in the racial associate social justice arena. It is not just about the good we do. It's about having the platform and organization on which to do the good.

Thank you for listening.

Please check out [Pathfinders](#), our membership program. Also, we would love it if you would [subscribe](#) to our blog.