“Define people by their aspirations”: Trabian Shorters of BMe Community on narrative change, redefining systems, and community-led advocacy.

Lissa Harris
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Lissa Harris: Could you introduce yourself and the problems that you work on, and share a little bit about your approach?

Trabian Shorters: My name's Trabian Shorters. I'm the founding CEO of BMe Community. BMe was started when I was vice president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. It originally stood for Black Male Engagement. The opening premise behind BMe Community was: How do we get Black men to be more positively engaged in their communities? What we immediately discovered in our ground research is that Black men are very engaged in their communities. It's super common. In fact, we interviewed 2,082 men of all ages and all experiences in Philadelphia and Detroit. 100% of them told us what they were doing to give back to the community, voluntarily and in different ways. Thus, the idea that Black men were disengaged was disproven. Because 2,000 is a good sample, especially since they're pretty much random.

I bring that up because it was from that work that we realized the issue was not in the condition. The issue was in the narrative. The various challenges that Black men had were real, and we acknowledged that, and we talked about that. But the ways that they are assets to their communities, the ways that they build and seek, provide, and protect—none of those things were part of the foundation's narrative. The people on the ground had a 180-degree different opinion than we were convinced of. We had data that backed up our assertions, but we realized narrative matters more than the data. We always find data that confirms our narratives. That's just the way we work.

If you try to create change, but you haven't changed your narrative, you've shot a hole in the bottom of your boat. That's where Asset-Framing came from. BMe now teaches Asset-Framing because when we engaged Black men around Asset-Framing, we saw J-curve results as compared to when we were deficit framing. Now, we teach that, and we continue to build leadership communities based on that as a principal. That's the BMe community now.

Lissa Harris: Can you talk a little bit about your audience or your audiences? Who are the main avenues of people that you're speaking to, and how do you reach them?

Trabian Shorters: Our primary audience is Black leaders of all different stripes. The thing that's different about BMe compared to a lot of networks is we don't bring people into the network based on their jobs or their fields. You can be someone who runs a nonprofit in Philly or someone who owns a bank in California. We have foundation people, journalists, and everybody in between. What we build around is a certain psychographic. We look for certain temperaments—and this is research-based. There is a personality type for whom, what they do to benefit their tribes, and how they define their tribes, is key to their sense of self-worth. They literally can't feel good about themselves if they're not doing something to benefit their tribes, and they think that's normal because it's normal for them.

However, there are people in the world who feel perfectly fine not taking care of anybody but themselves and maybe their household. What we recognize is that, if you're trying to build community, this particular psychographic is predisposed to public good, and they're predisposed to self-sacrifice. It just depends on how they define their tribes. Because of those characteristics, they tend to be trusted wherever they are because they will go the extra mile for you, even though they don't really know you. They care about what's happening in your household even though it's not their household. BMe seeks to find people who are wired that way, wherever they are—in the foundation, in the media, wherever—and give them a community of people like them.

They tend to connect with each other and support each other because psychologically, they're predisposed to caring for their tribes, and we make a tribe of them. That's how you build what we call leadership communities. I gave you a long-winded answer on who my audience is because it's not linear. We work with foundations, we work with community leaders, we work with communities, and we work with corporations.

Lissa Harris: It's not a given that somebody in a leadership position has those qualities. Maybe they're a leader because they were ruthless. How do you find the right people, who want to be part of this?

Trabian Shorters: We did layers of research, we did focus groups, we did community centered design, we did polling, we had conversations over the years, and then we've continually iterated on this. We can boil it down to a few things. The top-line characteristics that define those whom we call "folks builders," are that authenticity matters to them, being highly competent matters to them, being builder-oriented, positive, and affirming matters to them, and being motivated from a place of love matters to them. Regarding the love piece, everyone thinks that's about being cuddly. No, there are plenty of angry people. When you love someone or something and they're being hurt, you get angry. Loving doesn't mean you aren't fiery and you aren't mad. It means that, at the end of the day, you're motivated from a place that's about wholeness and healing rather than vengeance and destruction.

Those four characteristics end up being defining. In terms of how we find those people, even from the beginning of BMe, we discovered that you don't find them by asking them to identify themselves. When we put that call out and the same name pops up multiple times, then we drill down and learn more about that person. That's how it began. Now that we've been doing it for a while, there are 700 organizations and 700 leaders who have received our BMe Vanguard Award, and they're all part of an ongoing leadership community. Now, we ask them to recommend people, and we also train our sponsors to identify folks who they think fit the description, and from there we do our own vetting. It sounds like an involved process because it is.

Lissa Harris: What do you think makes your organization and your approach different from others who are working in a similar space? Why do you approach it the way you do?

Trabian Shorters: I think we're genetically different. The DNA of BMe is different. For instance, as I mentioned, we started with a psychographic. We started with Black folks, so there's the demography. But when we started doing the work, we went from birth characteristics to choice characteristics almost immediately. What I mean by that is, obviously, we started with Black

men, now it's Black folks as our core group, but we actually work with folks from all races and all cultures. Our primary audience is Black leaders, but then there are layers. What they all have in common is not the work that they do; it's the spirit with which they do it. That choice characteristic shows up immediately.

For instance, when we did the research with the Black men who originally composed BMe, one of the things we asked was: If a foundation was willing to fund you, and money was not the issue, what issues would you work on? These few thousand guys gave us a long list of things they'd work on. They grouped stuff in five big categories and then had a long trail of things. The big categories were, in order of frequency: youth development, education, economic mobility, public safety, and the environment. Those were the top five. When we looked at the list, we asked, "Which one of these is the Black issue?" Is it only Black people who care about youth development or education? It turns out that these men were doing work that everybody in the society valued, but nobody was acknowledging. They were willing to lead even if no one acknowledged them. That's what I mean by we went from the birth characteristics of being Black and male to the choice characteristics of people who care about these things.

When you identify and define people by their aspirations and their contributions, they bridge differences fast. The first time we got the brothers together, we were just going round-robin in the opening circle, and the guys were saying who they were and what they believed. We discovered that of these 60 or so men that we had gathered from the initial few cohorts, a dozen of them were Evangelical Christians. Religion is not one of our screening criteria, so we discovered it on-site. Then we discovered that another dozen were equally devout in their practice of Islam. Then another dozen or so were out, gay, bi-activists in these circles. Because these brothers had all been chosen from the community, and they were community leaders who held these communities together, they were not the “go along to get along” type of guys. They were not the guys who needed you to like or approve their thing. As we're going around and we're hearing this stuff, we're thinking, "We’ve got to spend the whole weekend with these guys, and it's not going to be good."

But something unexpected happened. By the time we got to the closing circle, which was just two and a half days later, these men were sharing deeply held things. They were telling each other that they loved each other, which brothers don't say in public to another man, or even to sisters that they actually love. It doesn't come out very easily. But they were openly declaring their love for each other as brothers, and they were shedding tears over things that mattered to them. I remember when the closing circle wrapped up, one of the guys who was a deacon told

me that this had been transformational. He said that there are some things that he's not preaching anymore. He's cut all that gay-bashing out of his sermons. He's just done.

I bring that story to illustrate what I mean by our choice characteristics. We're born however we're born, but when you can recognize that someone cares about the same things that you care about, they're wired the same way that you're wired, and you're holding up the world together in the same corner of the universe, then the idea that we are more alike than different is not a hard sell. We've certainly seen that in race, but we've seen that cross race because this work is grounded in cognitive, social, and cultural psychology. That's what makes us different from the ground up. Because we've been applying this psychology for the past 12 years, 85% of the folks who come through our program say that we're incredibly effective at building trust. The other 15% say we're only very effective.

100% of the folks who come through our programs collaborate with other folks that they've met in the program, even if they're different parties, different races, different genders, different political commitments. We get all these different people working together because even though they've arrived at different conclusions about how to do what, at their essence, they see each other.

Lissa Harris: Is there an example that illustrates the impact of the work you do? The one about this retreat was very powerful, but is there another one that you would like to point to?

Trabian Shorters: I can give numbers. For instance, we did a summit a couple of weeks ago where we brought together folks who've been trained in Asset-Framing, and obviously many of them are part of the community BMe. One of the things we found is that, if you define everything as a problem and an issue, then the type of results you get are good. It turns out that when you define folks by their aspirations and contributions, the type of results you get are 10 times more than that good.

To give a few quick examples, we work with the Rockefeller Foundation, which is a foundation committed to ending poverty when we started the engagement. They've since changed their mission to creating an Arkansas where everyone can prosper. What this illustrates is that, when you're focused on the problem of poverty, then you want to end poverty, which is good. When you're focused on the aspiration of making a place where everyone can prosper, then of course you'll address poverty on the way to bigger things. Just ending poverty is a base. To be prosperous you need other things, too. What the foundation realized was their 50-some-odd-year-old narrative of ending poverty had gotten a lot of good things done. But

when you say you want to end poverty and it's still there 50 years later, then your ability to engage people around this dream decreases over time. Conversely, when you say you're trying to make an Arkansas where everyone can prosper, this “us” working to achieve this aspiration is something people can commit to, even into its imperfection.

A shorter example is that one of our members in Minnesota just recently helped to raise $1 billion for racial equity and carbon neutrality. She runs a foundation now. And their foundation got $1 billion in commitments last year, in 2023, when racial equity was not the popular issue. When you're using this tool, the Asset-Framing tool, the types of commitments people are willing to make are tremendous. It's not raising $100 million when everybody loves the cause; it's raising $1 billion when people are attacking the cause.

One of our members here in Florida got the Florida Constitution changed so that people who had been incarcerated could vote again. This is something that had been fought for for 150 years. By the way, he didn't change a law; he had a constitutional amendment passed. Democrats, Republicans, and Independents voted to change the Constitution. People have been trying it another way for 15 decades.

We've had several guys who have gotten the BMe Vanguard Award who have done hard time and real time for crimes that they committed. Now they're on the other side and they're trying to build their lives, yet most programs still define and refer to them as ex-felons or returning citizens. BMe instead defines all those brothers the way they define themselves. I'm an artist, I'm an entrepreneur, or I'm an educator. They’ll invariably add who served 19 years or 11 years. They don't hide the incarceration, but they lead with their actual aspiration, which is Asset-Framing.

Lissa Harris: This work might not be directly related to child sexual violence, but I feel like there are a lot of echoes here in terms of a movement that is trying to draw heavily on survivors and the work of survivors. At the same time, it is dominated by narratives of brokenness: broken people, broken lives. How do you square that circle? How do you do Asset-Framing around stuff that destroys people psychologically?

Trabian Shorters: I'll stay with the story around these guys who have been locked up and draw a parallel. I spoke about defining people by their aspirations rather than things that they can never change. I’m not saying they don’t deal with whatever happened in the past. We don’t ignore it, but we don't define people by it, either. They still have aspirations, they still make contributions, and they're still real human beings with real value. Even the teaching around trauma-informed

language says that you don't just define people by their trauma, but you also don't ignore it, and you don't act as if it's not a real part of people's lives.

The beauty of Asset-Framing is that the definition is, literally, to define people by their aspirations and contributions before noting their challenges. By definition, you have to do both. If you leave off the challenge, then you're lying. But if you only talk about the challenge, you're also lying because you're forgetting that this is a whole human being. Asset-Framing says, start with the parts that people define themselves. Listen to what people aspire to do and aspire to be. Establish that's who they are. Then, talk about the bullshit that's stopping them from being who they want to be. When you do it that way, you get the aspiration and contribution, but you also get the challenges that people face. When we do it the way that people tend to, all conversations start off with, "What's your issue? What's your problem? What's your trauma? What's your need?" Then there's nothing else. We never go into that other stuff.

That's not an honest narrative. And because of how cognition works, whatever you make primary is what all the associations will be made to; in other words, whatever comes first sets all the associations. So in regards to any of these guys that we talk about, I can say so-and-so is an ex-felon who committed murder and used to be a drug dealer. Now he's reformed his life and he does all these great things. That's a very different story from, so-and-so is an author and educator, who once served 19 years in prison for these things. All the facts are the same, but that order matters.

When you look at folks who've dealt with childhood sexual trauma, there's no denying how much it affects people. That's real. Just as folks who have been incarcerated, particularly for long periods of time, are affected by that experience, especially when you look at the rates of assault and sexual assault in lockup. In both cases, folks have had things that have had an impact on their lives, but that should not be allowed to define them. They should not be forced to ignore them either. So how do you do that? The way you do that is you acknowledge the aspiring spirit that is in front of you, the person that is in front of you; acknowledge them, and then talk about everything else. A lot of everything else is things that are beyond their control, like systems.

The example with Arkansas is, they're trying to end poverty. You have 45 million Americans in poverty and you're deficit framing them first and then trying to come up with ways to help them better educate themselves, with this idea that we've got to better equip them to deal with their inadequacies. But if you step back and use Asset-Framing, you'll see a group that earns, yearns, seeks, builds, strives, contributes, and yet they are still in poverty. When you define them that way, you realize: There must be something wrong with the game.

The idea that we need to fix the system makes more sense. But if you define people by their challenge, then you have to fix the people because they're the ones who can't. All the rest of us are doing fine, so it must be them. All that is to say, I do think there's a transferable lesson here, which is that it's important to define people by their aspirations, and to speak to their aspirations and contributions without ignoring any of their challenges. That is a truer story of who you're talking about then if you just slap some label on that has no value, that doesn't speak to their contribution, doesn't speak to their aspirations. Even if you tell the whole story, but you start off with the most salacious, ugliest parts of someone's experience, it misses the true story.

Lissa Harris: We learn as much from things that don't work as things that do. Is there something that you tried that did not work out, but that you learned something important from?

Trabian Shorters: We use emergent strategy, so our whole approach is, we think this will work, so we put it out there, and then it doesn't or it does, but the purpose of the first iteration of anything is to discover what doesn't work. It's hard for me to say what hasn't because everything we've achieved, we've achieved by understanding what doesn't work and then tweaking it. So I have hundreds of things that didn't work.

We were only brothers for a long time, then we brought in sisters, then in the last few years we've been testing how to go multiracial because as I've said, what makes it work is not a birth characteristic. This is the first time we're going into the cultural psychology part. We've been doing this for many years.

Outside of the retreat, there is a commitment to what we call mutual care, which is before we leave the session, we each make a promise to ourselves that we are going to do something to take care of ourselves because remember, the builder needs peer pressure. So while we are still there, we make a commitment to do something for self-care, and your partner's job is to check in on you. It's always a goal that you can absolutely meet, nothing strenuous. What we found was when we did that, and it was all Black, the bank president made time to call the neighborhood guy, even though he has no rank or relationship. Yet when we went multiracial, that didn't happen. Peers kept commitments more consistently than folks who might be considered from different strata.

Relationality matters so much in the Black community that for one of them to not honor their commitment, and then come back to the group, is not socially acceptable. "We're all equal" is the way the culture tells us to behave. Here's a little thing that I point out sometimes to folks who might not work with Black folks a lot. Whether you are in the United States, Brazil, the Czech

Republic, Ghana, wherever Black people are, they refer to people as brother and sister no matter what the cultural context; it's normative. In fact, it's so normative that we don't notice that it's not normal for everyone.

Lissa Harris: A theme that's been emerging in my conversations with people working on the front lines on various sorts of problems is that you have to understand the cultural context and you have to let the people who are embedded in the cultural context lead the conversation or it doesn't work.

Trabian Shorters: I agree, but I have a caveat to that. The social impact sector is driven by problem narratives. If you apply for a grant, they ask you what the problem statement is. You can't even start the conversation without that. The assumption is always the problem; that's the way the market is oriented. But one of the consequences of that, when you're one of the central characters in that narrative, when you're the Black person or the poor person, or you name it, you gain your agency by defining yourself by problems. When you're talking to friends, you say, "I'm this, that, and the other." But when you're talking to folks in the sector, you talk about how you came from this environment or that environment. The code-switching is subconscious.

The point I'm trying to make is, yes, people who are affected need to lead the change, but they need to be conscious before they become leaders. Otherwise, they're just acting out of the narratives that we're taught. These narratives give people agency; groups literally aren't seen unless they can tell the story of how they're connected to this narrative of poverty.

I mentioned a guy who changed the constitution in Florida, Desmond Meade. If you go to The Southern Poverty Law Center's bio, or just search his name on the internet, all of it will lead with the fact that he's a former drug addict, a former felon, and was suicidal at one point. This is a man who has won many awards and who's a successful lawyer. Stacey Abrams pointed out that his work getting 1.4 million people put back into the voter rolls is the largest advancement in voting rights in half a century. He's a major civil rights leader. Yet they lead with those details.

I was talking to Desmond, just to drive this point, because again, if you search the web, everybody leads with this story. It's his agency story, instead of his agency being from the fact that he's one of the greatest civil rights leaders since MLK. What I pointed out to Desmond was that MLK was homeless, MLK was suicidal at one point, and MLK had multiple jail stays, yet nobody describes him the way that Desmond gets described. They have that history in common, but they also have in common the expansion of people's civil rights. But he's MLK and Desmond is the former homeless drug dealer with a law degree.

The narrative around deficit framing is so strong, even those in the communities will come at their own story that way because that's how they're used to people seeing them. We've heard from people that if they don't say it that way, when they apply to foundations, they get rejected because they weren't leading with a whole bunch of drama. It's denigration for dollars. That's the structure. You have to put people down to pick them up, and BMe is working to change that.

You cannot achieve an equitable society from a deficit frame. It's impossible. The way our brains work, when you're trying to solve a problem, that is different from investing in something. Problems are remedial money, that's to get to break even. The wild thing is, when you take a population that has been deemed as somehow lesser than, and you do the work to get them to break even to where they're acceptable, whatever you've solved, then the next step in that logical progression is for them to then become integrated members of society.

Lissa Harris: This all resonates. When you're a survivor, it's always in the conversation, and you're often worrying: Do I lead with it? Do I even mention it? In some situations, it's a form of expertise.

Trabian Shorters: Yes, literal expertise, the experience expertise. The wild thing we learned from the data is that more folks have experienced childhood sexual trauma than people think, but we don't talk about it because it's stigmatized. I think the real connection between BMe and the topic is that anything that we're trying to do around rights and people's sense of humanity has to start from an asset frame or you can't get there. There is no bridge from denigrating and stigmatizing people to seeing them as whole human beings because when that starts to happen, you get this social dynamic where you see people as not equal to you. But they are. They really are. If we start out with that point, if we make the connections clear from the beginning, then the sense of differentiation doesn't kick in.

Lissa Harris: Setting aside funding, because everybody struggles with that, what are the main challenges or barriers to your work that you still need to overcome in order to bring it to the next level?

Trabian Shorters: The main barrier is that the entire system is based on problematizing, and you can't get to equity from problematizing. You can get to remedy, or to a remedial place. But as soon as you start to get to even ground, there'll be backlash no matter what the subject. We cannot win in this setup. That, to me, is the main problem. You do everything you're supposed to do, and then a sociological phenomenon kicks in.

Lissa Harris: Can you talk a little bit about partnerships and coalition building? Who are your main partners and what strategies do you use? How do you cultivate partnerships?

Trabian Shorters: We're BMe Community, and we're big on building communities. We start from the psychographic, then instead of building transactionally beneficial networks, we build intrinsically beneficial communities. That's what we do. We have a ton of partners, but they're also members of the community, and we help each other. Remember, 100% of our folks collaborate with each other, so we have a ton of partnerships.

How do we go about it? We look for the psychographic. We help people on a transactional level regardless. But even in those engagements, we look to see: Is this person a builder? How can they help someone else? Should we bring them into one of our programs? Should they become a BMe Vanguard? Should they be recognized for that? Should they participate in our Smart Optimist retreats? Should they be a member of SOAR? Should they be part of the next narrative network? We try to find communities for them to be in, even if it doesn't directly benefit us. We look out for people personally and help them get into a community of folks who share their interest and values.

Lissa Harris: What are the teachable lessons here? What are the broad insights from your work that people can use whatever field they're working in?

Trabian Shorters: You can't lift anybody up by putting them down. If it starts from that place, you've failed. Not in the short term, but you made the long term impossible. The alternative to that is to state their best before the rest. State what's meaningful and true about someone before you get to all the other stuff. That's required. The other thing is cultural differences are real. Cultural awareness is knowing that differences exist. Cultural competence is knowing what those differences are, and how to engage them.

Then, there's cultural evolution. Anytime you try to make a big change, it requires you to change your narrative about yourself. A lot of us don't appreciate that to make whatever we're trying to do actually happen—if we're trying to make it understood that folks who've experienced child sexual trauma need to be respected, valued, and engaged as the full beings that they are—it requires culture change. Anytime you're trying to create culture change, you've got to factor in that you're requiring people to actually change their own identity. That's where the push [back] comes from. If you don't factor in that you're asking people to change their own narrative, then you get this pushback that doesn't even make sense when you think about it.

As we try to do the bigger change, we need to apply behavioral psychology. We think everybody's going to be rational when the patterns are clear. Even though people are not rational, they're predictable, so we can still make logical plans. You just have to factor in that you're literally asking people to change their narrative about themselves. Give them a narrative that they can still embrace and respect and enjoy that also includes you. Then, big surprise, people who would normally be opponents often say, "I'm okay with that."

Lissa Harris: When you're talking about things like childhood sexual violence or racial and gender equity, how do you get a government or an institution to feel responsible for that and to own it?

Trabian Shorters: We actually work at the institutional level, and the molecule of the institution is those who lead it. When you get the leaders on board, they will wag their institutions. People value them personally, so they are willing to lean in because they know what kind of character this person has, not just because it's advantageous. We've found that when you get a builder on board and they're in a position of influence, and they know other builders who are in positions of influence, then they might get together and create a foundation.

Spirit is a real thing. It gets conceptualized in a lot of different ways, but the way that I think about spirit is the words aspire, conspire, and respire are all talking about the same thing. It's the breath that allows you to move, and then what you move for. When you respire, you're breathing in. When you conspire, you're breathing with. When you aspire, you're breathing towards something. In BMe, we talk about aspiration. What are you breathing toward? There's a spirit in you, there's something moving. And when you get people's spirits aligned, their minds have changed a certain way. Their hearts feel a certain way, and they feel belonging and community.

Lissa Harris: Thank you so much for your time. This has been fantastic.

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***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*