Conversation with Rosalinda Natividad
Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Please introduce yourself, tell me a little bit about yourself and what brought you to the work that you do today.

Rosalinda Natividad: I'm Rosalinda, you can call me Rosie Natividad. I'm the Founder and CEO of Incite Network. We are a social enterprise community-owned company. We bring bold community-owned solutions to life through reimagined strategy, flipping strategic planning processes on its head and challenging it. We secure funding to change the game in how those who are doing the work and are closest to the problem have the resources to make solutions happen.

We do equitable grants management so our communities can stay focused on the vision and the intent, and we're supporting them overall with their grants acquisition work. Incite Network started in 2015 and we are border-based, and very proud to be of the US-Mexico community.

We are in El Paso, Texas, but we call our community the Borderplex, the borderland, Bustle del Norte area comprising El Paso, Texas, Ciudad Juárez, and Las Cruces, New Mexico. We have a unique perspective: we understand that innovation doesn't stop at its state lines, nor do problems. I was born and raised in this wonderful, beautiful place that has nurtured my innovative thinking.

Ashley Hopkinson: There are a lot of organizations that do community-driven work but not always that full wraparound, what would you say is distinctive about Incite Network?

Rosalinda: We start first with strategy, and when you get into that space, ultimately you're going to get into the good, the bad, and the not-so-good with politics and culture. Peter Drucker's famous quote is, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." No matter how wonderful you put together your strategy, if you're putting it in an unhealthy dysfunctional culture for operationalizing it, it won't survive.

Until that strategy is deeply rooted in what community voice and choice is, we can't ethically move forward with securing funding and making that vision happen. That may separate us from other grants writing and management firms. We are a multicultural bilingual, fully diverse community.

When the pandemic happened, I grew concerned about how it pushed diverse communities back to where they were before the previous recession. We opened our doors and moved across southern states working in Louisiana, Florida, and Georgia. We have a network of 40 to 50 different partnering firms we work with on big initiatives.

We started to take on national causes. For example, the significant isolation and degradation of the mental and medical wellbeing of our older adults during this national crisis. We built in the same model, as we have here in the borderland: community-owned solutions brought forth through those reimagined strategies, secure the funding, and then make it happen.

We act as a guide, support, and safety net for community members and bold progressive thinkers to keep doing what they're doing. We'll take care of everything in the background. As a result, we ran a $50 million vaccine initiative to vaccinate hundreds of thousands of older adults across communities nationally. We worked with wonderful partners like WE in the World who believe in addressing the generational dysfunctional cycle of inequity and changing that.

We worked with them in the state of Illinois to build health equity principles. We worked with hundreds of community organizations across the nation in understanding and surveying wellbeing. Are they surviving, struggling, thriving, and what kind of community-owned solutions can we build to support them? We took a tour of the nation from 2019 to 2023 and fell in love with all the states we worked with. We are more national now, but we'll never forget our roots of the border.

Ashley Hopkinson: There is a diverse population in the Deep South that I think sometimes gets forgotten. I'm based in New Orleans, Louisiana. It's wonderful that you were able to expand the work to help communities there.

Rosalinda Natividad: Specific to New Orleans, the culture bearers there and how they have stood up and maintained and preserved the history of New Orleans, Louisiana (NOLA) is beautiful. There is so much opportunity, inequity, and systemic oppression in New Orleans. Whether it's how legacy systems of the interstate cut across communities, or the inadvertent racist policies within local government that communities are still paying the price for.

Incite will recruit from the area and we had a great partnership with Kimberly Thomas, an excellent consultant, strategic planner, and a strong leader in the space. New Orleans has a deep, warm place in my heart.

Ashley Hopkinson: What role do partnerships play in your work and what are your strategies to maintain partnerships?

Rosalinda Natividad: We realize at Incite that we don't know all the answers. As WE in the World has taught us, each of us is holding a piece of the puzzle. Once we come together, we can accelerate our work, we can bring more innovation and more expertise.

Whether it was WE in the World on national vaccine uptake initiatives or addressing intergenerational cycles of inequity. The other piece that we saw, for example, is in Doña Ana County, New Mexico, which is a place where we have been deeply rooted in strategic thinking systems change and we've brought others in for support.

For example, a partnership with Goodman Corporation, which has engineers, designers, planners, when we all came to the table, when we talked about the huge growth at the port of entry in the industrial park at the border. We were able to secure over $30 million in grant funding so we could expand that area in economic wellbeing. We have to think about the wellbeing economy, of the whole county and ensure that economic development is not at the expense of someone else.

Bringing in the community to have conversations about what the future looks like has been our latest and most important mission. I've worked mostly in government, city, county, and state entities, and in my experience, strategic planning tends to be a long, sometimes academic approach. It can be intimidating for community residents.

Especially those who don’t speak English or who are on the fray, out of school youth, or returning citizens from the prison community. Then, we have those who are undocumented but still have a voice. How does our strategic planning experience allow for the diversity of voice?

It tends to be a long process that we spend a lot of money on. We'll have town halls, we may have surveys, and the community is often left with the question of what happened to the data I gave you. Sometimes that data will make it in and sometimes it won't. To me, that's a disservice, a detriment. We are responsible for the community, for sharing the influence and the power of a strategic plan.

We decided to shrink the timeline to create a strategic plan from typically a year to four to six months.

We build a minimum viable product, take all of the county plans and surveys, and put together an actual plan. Then the community jumps in and implements, changes, and iterates with us. We never stop holding their hand throughout the whole process.

Ripple Foundation works to advance equity and provides us with the philosophies of the vital conditions. We have a lot of challenges here on the ground: unreliable transportation for half of our population living in unincorporated areas, and 800 miles of road could be subject to flooding, some unpaved, and bad air quality.

We do not have the septic or utility lines that we need. In case of flooding, some communities may be subject to emergencies for evacuation. We need to change this to ensure a well-being economy where all thrive, with no exceptions. We baked the vital conditions into the strategic plan, and it was the first time for New Mexico to take on this framework. As a result, overnight, we now have a national network of other communities doing vital conditions work, and peers to speak to.

That's very exciting for us. We are building vital condition teams: individuals who focus on reliable transportation can pull in another vital condition team from basic needs for health and safety and come up with cross-cutting solutions for many problems.

Our vital conditions teams have county staff and community residents. We're having a co-presentation where residents come in and help us design these actual solutions. The goal is to move from engagement of the community to ownership so that the community can own the strategy. Culturally, what happens in strategic planning is it dies after elected official turnover and then you bring in newly elected officials. If it stays with the community, it will have a chance to make a generational change. Then they're teaching elected officials what is expected of them when they're building policy and thinking of statutes.

Ashley Hopkinson: We are a society that likes our silos — the health people stick with the health stuff, and the climate people are over here. What do you think it takes to demonstrate the value of this interconnected approach that the vital conditions have helped you to implement?

Rosalinda Natividad: The interconnectedness comes from my background and thinking — an individual needs to be both unique and feel belonging. When you're thinking about drawing in a different group, there are a few frameworks that we have to have in place. One is ensuring that their agenda is well discussed and well-spoken about at our various meetings. No one will come to a meeting if it's for them to just hear others report out, and they never have an actual way of being engaged.

We have to offer them Aspirin, not vitamins for what they're working on. The other piece is we have to address the cultural nature of siloing. When that happens, especially in a very toxic environment, you get this sense of I'm right to the extent of polarization where if I'm right, you must be a bad person. This happens in government, unfortunately, all we have to do is see how national elections have been rolling out.

We have to address and break down those cultural deficiencies and dysfunctions brought on by polarization. At the end of the day, some of the things that are best brought forward are the stories we hear from our residents, and not being afraid of healthy conflict and having those discussions.

We talk about disagreeing agreeably and finding a way forward, you would think that everyone needs some type of mediation or we have to end conversations because it's becoming so heated. When you work through the conversations with respect and certain values, you often are surprised how people will come together for another meeting and another, and another.

Early wins are very helpful. In Doña Ana County, we wanted to include the creative economy. Are we even bringing the creative economy into our conversations when we're thinking about larger economic development initiatives? The short answer is no. We have to own that.

It was a $100,000 grant to start to showcase all of the different culture bearers and creatives in the area and to asset map all they have to offer. Then we get the ball rolling. Collaboration and coordination are invaluable.

Ashley Hopkinson: What has been a takeaway or an insight from having done work in a networked way in the past few years?

Rosalinda Natividad: One is understanding the difference in the private sector business mentality. We loved the agility to make change overnight and move quickly with the current innovation. Having a private sector company with the DNA of a public or nonprofit where we're inclusive and thoughtful of our work was important to me.

Your table is always ever-expanding. Don't indicate that because there's competition or these American values of being the best or growing your company for the sake of growing it and scaling it. It matters what you're doing and you should look for partnership everywhere. We call them competitive peers on our end. Our end goal is not to secure a contract. Our end goal is to solve a community problem. We can't do that alone. Having the mentality of a community CEO is what I've always called myself.

The other two is that you must be thoughtful of your workforce, whether in the government or private sector. No community agenda solution strategy can run well without a happy workforce. I adamantly study happiness. I think about my staff being happy. I think about the executives I meet with and their happiness, not just their wellbeing. I read different books, listen to podcasts, and ideate on that. One of the sole things about happiness is having a purpose otherwise you'll get lost.

That has to be grounded, whether it's you writing a mission statement for yourself personally or for your team, you must find that purpose first.

Those two things are a maturation of self-awareness and emotional intelligence. When you sit down, you're listening to others and what they have to say rather than what you want to respond about. You are 110% present in every conversation that you have.

Ashley Hopkinson: What you said about the purpose is what keeps you from getting lost. That's your center and that is a source of happiness.

Rosalinda Natividad: Absolutely. The work is hard work. It's tough work. Another piece that I've had to learn over time is to remove any particular ego, as humans we all have ego. The ego shows up in different ways. Work is seen as a reflection of yourself or your value, and you get distracted and lose sight of the movement. I've had to learn the difference between quitting and losing.

There are times when there is a loss. We can't make that wheel on generational change move faster than we'd hoped to. That does not mean that we gave up on the effort. It just means there's an opportunity for us to innovate differently. That goes back to morale and happiness in the workforce and understanding what binds us together. It's not just to get points on the board. We're looking for a systemic change and it's a long haul. That's why the network is so important to us.

That goes back again to the ego. Why would it just be us? There are so many, as The Rippel Foundation talks about stewards, that we could work with that have impressed me. There's so much more out there besides the Incite Network.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is the evidence that you're moving toward the goals you've set for the network and the organization's mission? How do you measure progress for the network?

Rosalinda Natividad: For ourselves at Incite, you caught us in an exciting and vulnerable shift in our company's evolution. Our measurements previously had been awards secured. The grant writing was the first line of service that we offer. We were excited about the over $250 million secured across

communities nationally. Another one was over $75 million managed for communities and ensuring that the money goes to diverse voices and led organizations.

As I met with organizations like WE in the World, Ripple Foundation, and others who talk about inequity within the community, I felt that those weren't enough. The measures didn't feel as deep as I wanted them to be, so we're rethinking them.

One thought that we're having, especially on systems change and implementing a strategic plan, is to not only measure whether or not individuals are thriving as a result of the outcomes of a strategic plan in government but also if they feel like they belong. If we have a baseline and see annually how we're shifting that, and if we see even some incremental changes.

Even how the government does business and how that impacts someone's value when they show up to a government office, I think are the things that I'm interested in measuring. The value of the creative industries grants that we have. Rather than the $100,000, I want to measure those who participated, "Do you have a sense of belonging? Are you seeing more equity now in whatever inequity you had in the past for inclusion?" Those are the measures I'm excited about for the next 10 years of our work.

We have often been on the front end of the movement. We catalyze the change, we secure the funds. I hear from the community that they want us to stay and continue the work with us. That requires the Incite Network to help and make sure that we're set up for success, and for community champions to own it and be supported and feel valued.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the limitations that you face in the work you do and how do you see yourself actively working to solve some of the challenges that come to the surface?

Rosalinda Natividad: Sometimes I'm not the right person to show up and knock on the door because of where I'm from, the color of my skin, and the preconceptions people have about Mexican-American women in leadership. Although that is the minority over time, it's a limitation for my ability to do good work. I experienced that when I went to different communities in different states. I grew up in a community where 83% of us are of Mexican descent. The leadership here demonstrates that.

I did not grow up in a world or in a household where race or my gender was a factor or created limiting beliefs about who I was. I had wonderful mentors and parents who said, "You can be what you want to be. There's nothing that can stop you." As I went into the world, I was told otherwise.

I thought about how to address that from a perspective of who I am as a community leader and my values. A government official told me in a professional setting at a conference after I asked about

resources for exporting and importing goods to build out a biomedical industrial park, "Hey, wait, we're talking about legal things, right? I've seen Queen of the South."

This person didn't know me, but in that public exchange, they compared me to a Netflix series that was rather popular about a female drug lord who was running her chain throughout the Southern states and up into New York. From public to private, behind boardrooms and conferences, I had to work on that and it is a significant limiting issue for me.

Ashley Hopkinson: Has being in a network helped you with that challenge at all, or do you feel it's part of being at a high level with grant work?

Rosalinda Natividad: It's helped immensely to be in collaboration with others, their ideas, their thoughts. The diversity that comes so quickly for solution building would normally take us months to think about as being done and executed in days. The ability to show the power of diversity in thought, color, background, and beliefs, and the unifying effort addressing the community problem. It is a very powerful and influential way to support and get work done.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision-makers can do to help accelerate this conversation around wellbeing and disenfranchised communities?

Rosalinda Natividad: There are efforts in tolerance and patience. The example of an initial response to the characterization of me in a Netflix series comes from an educational rather than combative lens.

Showing all of the dimensions of who I am as a person and of who my community is, and what they are capable of. We should create a sense of tolerance and patience to work with one another, especially at an executive or a government level, and then build trust.

Trust is the first piece and it takes so long to build, which is why you have to have patience. Once that trust is in place, the work can be done. Sometimes there are leaders we can't work with because they don't want to adhere to universal values that transcend color, gender, etc. We've worked on our ability to truly actively listen, motivational interviewing, and help individuals realize, "Oh, well, times are shifting and turning, and these are some of the reasons why."

Ashley Hopkinson: I like that phrase, motivational interviewing.

Rosalinda Natividad: That's an evidence-based practice. My background is in behavioral health and therapy. I thought I was going to become a licensed marital and family therapist. I had most of my undergrad in that space, so some of these techniques I like to use when I'm working with different

individuals. When I got into the public setting or working with families, I realized it was public systems that were keeping them down, not more so than what I could do in a therapy setting.

That's when I changed and started to look at systems change in government. Then, I got frustrated with how long it takes to change policy. Then, I went more to the private sector, where I saw the speed of innovation and was so impressed by that. Yes, I appreciate motivational interviewing. It's a wonderful asset and tool.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, what would you like to see grow, expand, or be replicated within communities?

Rosalinda Natividad: I'd like to see the work of the vital conditions expanded. It is one of the most thoughtful and intentional organizing frameworks that also respects frameworks deeply grounded in culture and the richness and history of an area.

The other thing I'd love to see expanded is having the government open up its doors with trauma-informed and culturally responsive ways of working with communities. Letting go of old hat, even how we hold work sessions and council sessions, and truly change it. How can we shift how we involve community voices at every level? Even how you express your organization charts, your websites, and how you speak within our community.

I'd love to see government innovation in the next 10 years change so that the community actually owns and is not just asked about what strategy should be employed. Or how the county or city government should spend taxpayer money. It's not a radical idea, it's something that many organizations are thinking about. I'd love to see it done before I retire and to see it done well.

Ashley Hopkinson: How would you define collective wellbeing?

Rosalinda Natividad: It's so funny because we keep speaking about The Ripple Foundation but they have the ripple effect and if there is one impact that positively happens on a community, it ripples throughout so that we benefit as a whole in some way, shape, or form. It may be outsized in some other areas, and it might be minor in others. Collective wellbeing is the result of a positive encounter, whatever that might be.

In a negative encounter, we mobilize and respond to the community that is hurt, rather than siloing or one part of the community taking and absorbing the negative impact. We can mount up efforts and create longer lasting impact and protection of whatever adverse experiences that are impacting us together. Rather than having people stand alone and in isolation, collective wellbeing is the

interconnection and the communication and awareness of when one part of our community is either suffering or struggling, and how we are collectively making sure that doesn't happen again.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*