



Transcript  
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Episode 9

Work-Life Balance  
Co-Hosts: Brittny Wilson (B) and Nia Wassink (N)

B: I'm Brittny Wilson.

N: And I'm Nia Wassink.

Both: And this is, The Nonprofit Reframe

B: Together, Nia and I have over thirty years of nonprofit experience. We've worked the program side, the business side, and everything in between.

N: We are reframing the nonprofit experience by challenging the status quo because we know that nonprofits and their staff are undervalued, under-resource and unrelenting.

B: Welcome back!

N: Happy President's Day!

B: Happy President's Day, to you, too! Do you have to work today?

N: Well I'm a consultant. So yes?

B: You work every day.

N: Yeah yeah. I mean if I don't work, I don't get paid. So, there's a little extra incentive to not take holidays that represent and celebrate old white men in our communities.

B: Oh, oh. This is such a great segue for today's topic, which is not old white men.

N: Oh great. I'm so thrilled to hear that. What are we talking about today?

B: Today, we are talking about work-life balance.

N: What is that, Brittny?

B: I don't think it exists. It's a myth, first and foremost, but I think there are varying degrees of it. And so today, we're gonna talk about when it is super toxic.

N: First off, have you ever seen it in practice? Have you ever experienced it, even to some small extent?

B: I am actively trying, on a daily basis and I feel like I have... I'm winning. At some things.

N: You're winning?

B: At some things. Not always. And it can shift in a heartbeat. It can shift in a heartbeat. Um, but yeah, sure I think people can find it.

N: Great!

B: To some extent. It all depends on what season of life you're in, too. I mean, when I had my kids, yeah, no way. I mean, it was ridiculous just all of life was crazy. When they were first born, but you know, as they've gotten older and a little bit more dependent(?)... independent! There we go. I have felt more space and room in my life to consider myself and my needs. And so I feel like I have gained some of that back.

N: That's lovely.

B: Yeah, what about you? How's your work-life balance, as you're working on a holiday today?

N: Well, there was that one week back in 2015 where I felt like I had it.

B: It was so close.

N: I know. It is definitely an elusive thing and I think because I don't have kids it is easier to let work engulf your life and be your life.

B: Absolutely.

N: Right? Like I don't have that guilty of not tucking my kids in for bed. I mean, my husband will make me feel guilty if I don't tuck him into bed, but you know. So, I do think it's a bit of a different dynamic, but then also, I think that it was kind of bread into me from an early age. My dad was small business owner, as were my grandparents. And so it was modeled for me from very, very early on how work is your life. But then, because they're all family businesses, it was part of your family, as well.

B: Right.

N: And so it was always this, you know, we went to the shop every Saturday morning and played in the office while my dad worked. And so that was just always part of how I understood work. So, when I got into adulthood and started working a lot, I don't think anybody was surprised, especially my family. And then being a small business owner, there are pieces where you can find so much more balance because you have so much more control of your schedule. And, at the same time you less so, because you're building a business.

B: Right.

N: You're responsible for everything. Like, last week, I'm going through doing client things, and I'm like, oh shit. it's time for 1099s that I have to send out my subcontractors. And I have nobody to do that. Like that's all on me, as a small business owner. So, it's interesting where like, there moments where you feel more balanced. Like one day last week, I went for a walk in the morning and then I made myself breakfast and had a cup of coffee and like didn't open my computer till 10am. And how great was that?! And then there are days like today where I'm at my computer at 7a because it's literally down the hall and it's just always there and omnipresent. And then when you work with nonprofits, either in them or for them, like I do, it's so easy to justify over-working.

B: Right.

N: Because there's always a bigger cause, there's a bigger mission. There are people that need us and I think that sense of being needed allows us to forget that we need to take care of ourselves, too.

B: Well, absolutely. And I think that it looks differently for everybody or the ideal looks different for everybody. I mean, you know, some people you talk about work-life balance and they say, "I would love it if I just had to go to work from 9-5 and that was it. And leave it at work and come home." And then other people are like, "Well, I don't really want to work 9-5. I'd rather work on my own time and be able to put in less hours during the day and then, after the kids go to sleep, put in a couple hours." So I think it's something very personal that everybody has to

decide for themselves. And I agree with you, that our sector lends itself to make it really imbalanced.

N: Yeah, I'll say, when I was in the last stretch of being Executive Director, before I even decided to leave, my health was really suffering. I wasn't sleeping. I had done like sleep studies and all these doctors were basically like, "you're too stressed at work."

B: yeah

N: And it really sucks when that's the diagnosis. But, like, the kind of pressures and stresses of working in a nonprofit have very real physical tolls. And I will say, since leaving the sector, you know, not directly working for a nonprofit, that has really alleviated for me. And I'm not saying folks should just leave the sector. I mean. I think we have a bigger cultural issue that we need to deal with in nonprofits that will allow people to work long-term without their health and lives suffering.

B: I've seen it so many times as well. In fact, the reason that we're doing this episode today... It was not we were supposed to do... What were we supposed to do? Hiring. We'll get to that. But, we chose to change the topic because I've been doing these interviews as part of market research for this podcast and sort of the overwhelming theme that I've heard from each person is this concept of not having balance.

N: Yeah.

B: And not being able... Whether it's not being able to put your phone away at the end of the night when you get home, or working really late hours, or working weekends, not taking vacation time, whatever that might be. It is rampant in our sector. And to go back to what you were saying, I think that's true that because a lot of the work that we're doing is really, truly life changing for people, that we feel that if we don't get it all done, if we don't do the best that we can do, if we don't give a hundred and twenty percent, then we're affecting other people's lives.

N: Exactly

B: So the consequences are that much greater. And so, it motivates us all to go above and beyond. And then that standard becomes the expectation.

N: Right

B: And so now, you've developed a culture where everybody is expected... I remember that this came up that one of the places I worked. We were reviewing our annual performance evaluation tool and one of the questions was, "has this person gone above and beyond?" And what we felt like, what the question was doing was setting that standard. That if you said "no" they're actually just doing their job - really well - but they're just doing their job. That somehow means they're doing less than everybody else.

N: Right, right.

B: And so, we're saying you have to stretch yourself thin, give more than, you know, what should be allowed in order to be considered a good employee.

N: Yeah, well it gets to a point where like "busy" is this badge of honor that we all wear. Like how often do you go into a meeting and everybody's like, "Hey, how you doing?" and everybody is like, "oh my god, I'm so busy." But, like, that's what everybody in the sector says. I'm not saying it's unique to the sector, but I do think that it is really like ad...ap, an ep, I can't even use words right now, I'm so upset. It is so pervasive.

B: That's all I ever hear. In fact, that came up. I was talking to different people at work this week and that was everybody's sentiment. "I am exhausted. I'm working way too much. 60-hour

work weeks. I've got too much to do." And yet everybody kind of felt like they were the only ones doing that.

N: Right.

B: And that can get really toxic within a work culture, as well.

N: Yeah

B: Where somebody feels like they're working harder than anybody else, when the truth is that everybody feels that way.

N: Right, well. And I think like we can sit here and go through, "here are some tips to like reduce burn out," or "tips to find better boundaries," but it really is a bigger issue. It's not just one nonprofit, one employee. It is across the sector and a lot of it is these external pressures we have. Like we are so metrics driven: if we don't serve this many clients, our funding is going to be pulled.

B: Right.

N: If we don't get this appeal out, we're not going to get our donors. If we don't hit our outcomes, what does that mean for the population we serve?

B: Right

N: There all these numbers that can really, I think just kinda amp up these dynamics where folks feel like they always have to work because there's always one more thing to do.

B: Well, there is always one more thing to do because, as we always say in the nonprofit sector, we are wearing ten different hats. And we joke that when you come in and, you know, be careful because if you show an inclination towards anything then all of a sudden you're going to be in charge of that. Right. Now I can't tell you how many times... One place I worked, I was the default IT person.

N: I've been that so many times.

B: But that is not my wheel house. I mean, I did not have the knowledge that is needed for that role. But I had just a little bit more than anybody else. They're like, "you're on it."

N: You're basically like, "have you restarted your computer?" and they're like "IT – Brittny!"

B: I'm like "is it plugged in?" yeah so we have all these different hats we wear and then another thing that I was thinking of is how there's just this cycle of people working so hard because there's so much to do, getting burned out, deciding to leave, which leads to turn over. That position is either not filled, it takes longer than you want it to be filled, or even just like the normal hiring process takes a long time. So meanwhile, everybody else is having to suck up that job along with theirs to fill the gap and fill the hole. So now they're burdened with more work to do, which leads to their burn out, which leads to them wanting to leave, and it just, it's the cycle.

N: Totally yeah, I was running a small nonprofit and we had a woman go on maternity leave. So, of course, you know, that's kind of nice because you got this three-month window where everybody's all hands-on deck, but you've got an end in sight. Like she's gonna come back. We got this three-months and everybody rallied and we did great. And before she left, we actually put into place a policy that allowed her to bring the child into work a few days a week.

B: That's awesome.

N: Yeah. I felt like we were a small nonprofit, we didn't have benefits...there, well, we had very few benefits...and I felt like it was such an important thing for us to be able to do, to support families and to support her coming back and finding that balance and what that should look like. And so we did all of this work, we like created a separate room basically for her and the

baby so she had privacy. We outfitted it with all kinds of things. And then she didn't come back!

B: Well that... I did not see that coming.

N: I do want to say, in case she listen to this, she had a lot of really good reasons for not coming back and I'm not upset. It was just more the hilarity of the situation in trying to do the right thing, so that she could find balance.

B: Well and that's another topic that I want to discuss on a different episode around maternity leave or lack there of.

N: Gosh, yeah.

B: And all that. I have some stories to tell on that end. It was another theme that came up in these interviews that I've been doing around maternity leave, mom guilt, that you know, ties into that work-life balance. But, I think it's a whole separate episode for sure. So, this is what I want to... This podcast is about challenging the status quo. Excuse me while I get some water... And I want to address, I am guilty of it... I've said it a million times and now it just makes my skin crawl every time somebody says it. When they say, "well you know, we're not...we're not in it for the money!"

N: Oy. Yeah, because we don't have bills to pay.

B: Yeah what are your thoughts on it?

N: It drives me crazy and I will say I have sent it to because I do think it's important to distinguish her for some folks. right like, "I didn't go into the for profit world to like chase a paycheck and make copiers," because that's our continual analogy. "I wanted to help people and I'm not in it for the money." And yet that is also a cop out. That...that's how we say...well...we can't afford to pay people well. And that is absolute bullshit.

B: I spoke to someone, and it just broke my heart in one of my interviews, where she said, "I mean, I get paid well for what I do, but I'm having to go look for a second job so I can make ends meet." And my first thought was, "well, how were you qualifying getting 'paid well' if you can't pay your bills."

N: Well, that's so funny because, I keep having that conversation and so often, especially with women, I think they blame it on themselves and their choices. "Well it's my student loan debt, you know. It's my whatever situation."

B: right

N: Like no no no.

B: "I chose to have kids or a family. I have to pay for daycare because of that."

N: You are living in America.

B: Right

N: Right. Like, that that is what everybody is dealing with, because our public education system sucks, because our healthcare system sucks, because we can't have affordable fucking childcare or housing or anything.

B: Get it, Nia!

N: We need to pay our people well enough to live.

B: Yes!

N: I spiked on all of the levels for that. We'll see if any of that that audio is usable.

B: Sorry we just blew out your radio. Yes. It also shouldn't matter where you live. You shouldn't have to say, "well, that's a pretty decent salary if you live in..."

N: rural North Dakota.

B: Exactly, "but because I live in a major metropolitan city, you know, I need to get a second or third job.

N: What about this? So working in boulder county, which both of us have done now for awhile, how often do you look at the staff and 75%+ live out of the county, because they can't afford it?

B: I think it's more than 75%.

N: Oh yeah

N: Yeah. There were periods where myself and my entire staff all lived out of county because none of us could afford to live here.

B: Anybody that I ever knew who actually lived in the City of Boulder, lived in a basement.

N: Yes or they had a partner with a fancy for profit job that allowed them to afford to live there.

B: Absolutely absolutely yes.

N: I love that I just called for profit jobs "fancy."

B: You know those fancy for profit jobs?

N: You know, where they get free lunches on Fridays, donuts on Mondays?

B: And they've yoga.

N: Naw, I'm only in it for the food. It's the only reason I'm going for profit: free food.

B: We actually have no idea what they have because I have never worked for a for profit.

N: The ones I...You know, one of the like the big banks or something brought down all their nonprofit folks for the day. And it was way up in one of the big buildings in Denver. And I made some joke about, "we don't even have buildings this tall in Boulder," which I meant as a joke. but, I mean we do have height restrictions in boulder. And they looked at me like I had just like come in on my wagon from the plains. But then, we get there and they've got this spread of food including boozy cupcakes at noon on a Friday.

B: I love where this conversation has led.

N: More food.

B: Well, this isn't about, well, it's kind about food. You know this place I'm talking about. It's a for profit a company where I love their pens.

N: Shout out! You also know who you are, people listening right now, who work for this company.

B: And every time it Nia has a meeting there, I ask her to snag some for me.

N: And then for Christmas...

B: You give me a bunch of them.

N: I actually asked my friend who works there and I went in and she had left like a little bundle for me at the front desk.

B: Those are some really expensive pens.

N: And they write really nicely.

B: Oh my gosh, they're amazing.

N: They're perfect for thank you notes.

B: The weight to them is ideal. Anyways I digress. Work-life balance.

N: Thank goodness, because at the beginning of this episode, I was... it was feeling a little bit therapy-like.

B: Yeah we don't want to do that.

N: But everybody in the sector should find an actual, qualified therapist probably.

B: That should be part of the work-life balance. That should be a benefit.

N: Well, yeah. EAP programs.

B: So, the other thing that we were chatting about earlier is how, when your work is something that you're so passionate about you're so close to, how easy it is to blend into your personal life.

N: yeah

B: I know a lot of people who say, "well I'm not friends with people I work with. They're co workers, they're not friends. But I feel like, when you're working for a non profit in work that is sometimes traumatizing

N: Yes incredibly,

B: It bonds you together and you become more like a family and then it's harder to distinguish between what is work and what is your personal life.

N: I'm going to take away back to my first nonprofit job. I worked for this small organization back in Michigan and there was another younger person working there. And we became really good friends, mostly because we would...we had the state-wide tournaments that we travel around for and, of course, we'd have to share a hotel room. Because...nonprofit life

B: oh, yeah.

N: But we became such good friends. And then like, over the summer there would be projects and she would call me. And so I drive across the state, stay with her for a week, work for the nonprofit and it was so wonderful. Like for me, that was my first real job and yeah it's like you're building friendships through this work because you work until midnight, getting ready for this big event. And it was such an incredible bonding experience. And then, as somebody else came into the organization who I didn't like as much, I realized how awful those boundaries are, as well.

B: Right, they are. Yeah. Well we could probably do a whole nother episode on interpersonal dynamics within the workplace.

N: Right, right

B: I know I have a lot of stories around that. Some really intimate stuff that goes down at the workplace.

N: I mean, how often do people start hooking up within a nonprofit especially when you get big enough that you've got like more than four people in the office? It's so common. I mean, truthfully it happens with so many of my clients. I've got a friend of mine who does HR consulting and one of the first things I said was, you need to deal with this dynamic: that everybody ends up dating each other within an organization or with a partner organization and it gets so icky.

B: Yes, well in all of these things that we're talking about, I think leads, I'm gonna go back to it, can lead to turn over rate when you have these... this dynamic in the workplace that is so close and so intimate that sometimes...

N: Yeah, Well, I think part of where you're going with this is, sometimes that gets really tricky. Like how often do you get a text from a colleague at night and it's half personal, half work. Like, "Hey just checking in. Did you grab some cough syrup on the way home and also did you do that grant report?"

B: exactly right.

N: Like everything gets blurry, all these lines get blurry and we have no boundaries.

B: Which makes it really hard to have those tough conversations when you need to have them.

N: Exactly.

B: Especially when you're a supervisor and you're managing staff.

N: I think this is one of the keys is when we talk about work-life balance, finding boundaries: it has to come from the top. They need to be the first ones to put that in place. I know and I am not the poster child for work-life balance. Anybody in my life will confirm that, I'm sure you will, as well. But there were moments where I would really try, especially when I had staff. And so

one of the things I would do and actually I still do with my clients: if I work on the weekend, I schedule the email to go out Monday morning. If I work after hours, I do the same thing, because I don't want to set up an expectation that I'm available or for staff. that they should be.

B: Exactly yeah. Well and going back to the staff meeting that I had earlier this week and the theme that resonated throughout all these interviews that I was doing of people burning the candle at both ends, feeling like they have so much work to do and that there wasn't enough time. The question becomes, why can't they set those boundaries for themselves? I liked what you said earlier about how "busy" has become a badge of honor and in fact one of the interviews I had, the woman said that when people say they're busy it's that they're posturing for their own value.

N: Oh wow. It's so true.

B: Right?

N: And it's Monday and I'm gonna say I've been guilty of it twice this week already and I haven't even left my house. But it's so true.

B: It's really true and how we are defining ourselves by our jobs, by our role. We have chosen to go into a profession of service, but if we are not serving ourselves - this is going to be on the brink of therapizing, but it's true though- if you're not serving yourself first, then you cannot help anybody else.

N: Right

B: And so, you know I think when we say one of our takeaways from today's episode that that is one of them, is that you have to build those boundaries for yourself.

N: Yess absolutely.

B: And then, as a nonprofit you have to create a culture within the organization where those boundaries can be respected and not shamed.

N: Yes yes! Well, and I think this is actually a really important distinction to where you end up with dynamics between even people with young children, people with adult children, people with no children and there is sometimes it's kind of an internal issue, you know where you're feeling the shame yourself, but we end up making it so that people feel like they can't go home to their kids. Or they need to bring their kids into meetings. [Or they like it we] We allow them to justify putting their work in front of their families.

B: Right

N: And then it ends up with, kind what you're saying earlier, with this these dynamics of like, kind of side-eyeing these other people, like, "she's not working as hard, She clocked out right at five. Somebody must be less dedicated to the mission than I am."

B: Exactly

N: And that's not the case. Like, we know that. We should all be upholding that like, "Hey, Susan left at 5p. That's amazing! Let's all try to do that tomorrow."

B: As long as she's getting at least three of her five jobs done, I think that's okay.

N: We'll see you at target, when you're cashiering tonight.

B: That's so sad.

N: And true.

B: And true. I mean I know that I have been in a situation before where I had a lot of turnover in one position and I finally got someone. We got through a year. They had climbed and got to the other side of the learning curve and then something happened with their family. And they felt...They came to me and said, "look, this is gonna be a shaky couple of months. I have something going on with my family and I just don't think I can, with good integrity, continue at



the level of performance that I'm at now, while going through this. And so, as much as I would hate to do this, I feel like I should step away and you should re-hire for the position." And so, I had a lot of respect for that. And so, I started the re-hiring process for the fourth time in four years and I thought, "you know what? What's a couple months? What is a couple of months?"  
N: Absolutely

B: I would much rather give the person the time that they need and say, "when you come back, you have a job" than try to re-hire, go through that whole learning curve process, go through a whole nother year of stuff. And so, I just made it very clear that, "okay, this is what I'm willing to offer, but while you're gone, you have to be gone."

N: yeah

B: "You can't be micromanaging from the sideline. We're going to internally take over your responsibilities for these next three months, but when you come back, you're back." And so we did that and it ended up working out really well.

N: That is so lovely and I wish, I wish we would do that more. To me, it kind of comes back to, when you're talking about like the busy-ness thing. So much that comes back to saying, "no."

B: Ewww, I don't, we don't, that's not allowed, we don't...

N: It's spelled "N-O."

B: N-O? I don't know that word. You don't know that word.

N: So, no, I can't do this because I have a family commitment. No, I can't sit on this committee because I don't have capacity. No, Nia, don't take on that other project because you don't have fucking time. But like we have a really hard time, as a sector, saying "no." And I'm not gonna pull in demographics, I have some assumptions about certain types of people, who look like me, doing this more, but that comes back to it. Is we can't say "no" for a lot of really good reasons, but then we end up in these situations that really just harm us.

B: So ,are there any final take-aways that we didn't already mention?

N: Boundaries. Boundaries for the sector.

B: #BoundariesForTheSector

N: I like that one.

B: Isn't that good?

N: Tht's a good one. You haven't had a good hashtag in awhile.

B: I know, I need to get back on my game.

N: But yeah. Like, as nonprofits, let's recognize what it truly means to have boundaries with our staff. And staff, let's recognize what it means to have boundaries with our work, with our colleagues. Let's all go to therapy... separately, to be clear. Not together. I think it'll just it'll create a how healthier sector, as a whole.

B: Absolutely and I think any way that, as nonprofit organizations, we can create that flexibility for people so that they can take the time that they need, when they need it, but then also make that culturally acceptable to do it. Because it's one thing to say, "we have all these...we have flex time, and you can get this, and this, and this." I've heard of this a lot, actually for profit companies do this, where we don't have vacation time

N: Oh yeah, take whatever you want.

B: Take whatever you want, but then nobody takes anything because there's the culture there is that you can't take time off. And although you have unlimited time off, I don't get it. So, creating an environment where that's acceptable as well.

N: Yeah totally agree

B: Alright. Well thank you so much for joining us! We'll see you next week. Have a happy president's day!

N: I don't even know what that looks like, but yeah.

B: And remember, please give and give generously.

N: Thanks everybody!

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