

S2 Ep09: How to Handle Transition in Organizational Leadership with Shereen Essof and Lisa VeneKlasen



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Mallika Dutt

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Are you thinking about a significant work transition? Are you a founder exploring to leave your beloved organization? What does it take to succeed a charismatic leader? Join Lisa VeneKlasen and Shereen Essof from JASS to learn how to make big leadership changes with breath, love and grace.

Welcome to Leadership Moves, a podcast for visionary changemakers ready to shake up and re-envision the world. I'm your host, Mallika Dutt. Join me and my extraordinary guests as we discuss how to generate social change through leadership and the entrepreneurial, non-profit and philanthropic fields.

Mallika: Hello Shereen and hello Lisa. This is an important conversation that we're about to have about transitions at JASS. And I'm so delighted to have you join me in this episode of Leadership Moves. We're going to be exploring how to handle transition in organizational leadership. What happens when the founder of an organization decides to leave? How do you leave? And how do you ensure that the journey along that way can bring forth leadership within the organization to continue to do the important work of social justice that JASS does around the world?

And you and Shereen, Lisa, were able to curate and craft this journey of transition and succession with a great deal of deliberation and thoughtfulness. Sometimes it's very difficult to do that when you are in the midst of such major change. And, Lisa, you also did this right at the time that a global pandemic took over the world. And you left in early 2020. So, the challenges of transition got layered with a whole bunch of other challenges.

Tell me a little bit about your decision to step down from JASS, what that was like for you and what were some of the things that you really wanted to put in place to continue the work of the organization that you had founded that you love so deeply?

Lisa: Thanks, Mallika, for inviting us to have this conversation. I think Shereen and I have been wanting to share the story and reflect together on

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the story from different perspectives for some time. So, it's really nice to talk to you. The people often think of leadership transitions, particularly in international organizations or non-profits as a really short process. It was a six month process or it was a year long process.

And actually, my decision and then the careful process of really collectivizing that decision and planning to move forward with our transition probably started in 2015 for me. And so, then you imagine almost five years later. And the date of March 2020 was chosen and planned before we knew of the pandemic. In fact, the plan to step down and my steps to step down happened and then the pandemic happened. So, it really is a testament to the JASS team and to Shereen's leadership that they have managed that incredible disruption.

My decision had different routes and took different shapes over time. I think JASS is an organization built upon relationships and work over decades that it's built on a relationship that were shaped and crystallized in very intense political experiences. And the real focus and the real core root experiences is directly in liberation struggles and particularly in Central America. And so, the core relationships that still holds JASS were of people that I worked alongside as popular educators in the early years of the Sandinista revolution which of course lost its way.

But also, part of a global solidarity movement that had liberation at its core. And from that work I was given an opportunity to actually work in the post-liberation struggle and process in a more regional way in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa which is where Shereen and I met way back when, when we were quite different generations. And she would come in and out of my life through my close relationship with Hope Chigudu, and hers which was different.

So, in 2015 it was really clear that – it started to become clear that the representation and identity of JASS as a Global South organization is a critical principle to our movement building. That those people who are

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driving the work and the geographies and voices driving the work need to be represented in the leadership. And clearly despite my own history that isn't my identity or my positionality right now.

And so that, it wasn't a conflict within JASS but it was a conflict increasingly that I could see was going to undermine the power of JASS and the future of JASS in projecting who she really is. I think what really started to trigger my desire to step down though was a health crisis that was the product of really intense years of building JASS while being immersed in a context like Mesoamerica including the murder of Berta Cáceres which impacted many of us very much.

And so, I had a health crisis that forced me to step out of the organization and it created a bit of a crisis in a way that also offered an opportunity for JASS leaders to step in to ways that they hadn't before. I could see coming out of that that the next phase of JASS's growth and strength really would need fresh leadership. And that I needed to invest in the financial and organizational capacity of JASS to move in that direction.

And so actually Shereen was the first person that I shared that inclination with. And there wasn't a date set but I said out loud to her, we decided we would go on a little trip together when we were in Zimbabwe. And as we looked at animals from the back of a truck we discussed who we are and where we are in life.

And that is when I shared with her that it's time for me to navigate a stepping out process and to think about that. But that we really needed to consolidate the shared leadership systems and structures of JASS and really ensure JASS was financially strong to do that. And so, we began to gently map out a process to really strengthen our joint leadership team, create something that we called the OMG! exclamation point, which was the organizational management group when we discussed it with our donors.

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But amongst us it was a troubleshooting kind of structure, a small troubleshooting kind of structure that Shereen was a part of, that was essential so that I didn't carry the burden as the founding leader of troubleshooting all of the crises. We are deep JASS, at that time was deep in 10 countries all of which were in various forms of crisis. And then the organization itself is very decentralized, so it's quite complex to manage and kind of get ahead of challenges.

And so, we set up these structures and Shereen assumed the leadership of the joint leadership team which was a really critical step in moving Shereen's leadership, something she had put forward to JASS and that we agreed to. Moving her leadership from the leadership of Southern Africa, which is where Shereen joined JASS, into a cross regional and more globalized leadership role.

Mallika: Lisa, I'm just going to interject for a moment. So, I just want to go back to a couple of things that you said about your own health crisis around working on issues of human rights where one is confronting so much violence and death on a regular basis. And the kind of crises that so many parts of the world are in, which lead to the killing of people that are on the frontlines and people who are very dear to us, people who are very important in our lives, like Berta was in your life.

And so, I just want to take a pause over there and ask you to talk a little bit about what was happening with your emotional landscape as you were putting in place all of these structures, and OMG! exclamation mark and talking to Shereen, and all of the structural pieces were being put in place. What was happening in your inner landscape? And what were you drawing on to support you emotionally during this time?

Lisa: During this quite turbulent time I think I really became quite numb. The scale of the loss, and the anxiety, and the need to, as the Director of JASS, as a leader, the need to hold people calmly, it was so intense that emotionally I really disconnected. And I think that was a real source of my

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health breakdown. It was, I physically was so stressed that my jaw was locked, my back was hurting but it was all about denying that.

Here's an organization where we're on WhatsApp with each other, we're on Wire, we're on all these forms of communication. And you're hearing from one corner, staff in Cambodia and our partners there, the police have come from another, Honduras, the car has been pushed off the road. You're constantly in solving mode while projecting to your team that everything's going to be okay. And it's what we do but it creates such a toll on our bodies.

And it's interesting how one of the reasons and one of the core projects that I've had since stepping down is a reintegration of my heart, mind, body and spirit as a way of recovering from that incredible stress. Everyone in your team is stressed by so many different things. So, you don't want to add to their stress. On top of it at this time, JASS had a serious funding gap. The funding world had shifted and resources that were meant to come through from new sources didn't come through in time. And we'd hired a couple of new people.

So, it created an even greater source of stress. I think too for me one of the things, when you become part of building such an extraordinary organization from a background, and movement building, and popular education, you're not signing up for HR systems and institutional structures, and finance and auditing. That's not what you're signing on to. You do that work because you want to break the mold and adapt your systems.

But to me the institutional dimensions and the institutionalization of JASS had become increasingly demanding in a way that that too is a little bit soul sucking. So that was a factor in needing to hold the institution, march the institution forward, we're suddenly 40 staff. We've got a lot of consultants. We've got all these partners. We've got all these crises. I am exhausted and it all comes together in a break, in a realization that my transition is the

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key to the next phase of JASS's resilience and that is something to do with others.

Mallika: I'm going to have you pause right there. And I'm going to go over to Shereen. So, Shereen, I'm listening to this journey that Lisa has been on and all of the challenges that social justice, activists face. And how the work is hard, it's difficult, it challenges your health, it fragments you, it creates all kinds of challenges and pressures at the psychic level, at the emotional level, at the physical level. And that it's a situation where then one is also dealing with all of the structural hierarchies in the world that are causing this violence and discrimination in the first place.

What is it about you, what is it that motivates you to want to do this work, that animates you to be a social justice leader, to then step into the leadership of JASS and say, okay, I'm ready to take this on and I'm ready to do this? So, I'm curious to hear about your relationship to activism and leadership and then how that connects to JASS?

Shereen: Thanks, Mallika, and also just to echo Lisa, the opportunity to have this conversation in this way which is a gift, I think. We don't often find time to reflect in this kind of way. I think that the beginnings of my activism really start with my grandmother. My grandmother was an activist of note in her own way, a big community leader with her long [inaudible] or scarf that she would wear.

Mallika: Where was this, Shereen, which part of the world?

Shereen: In Zimbabwe, it was in Zimbabwe. So, she had this huge veranda and people would come and they would have tea. And she would bake many things every day and by the end of the day they would be finished because she had so many people that she held court with. And I remember as a very, very young child my grandmother telling me the story. She was married when she was 13. So, she didn't really finish primary school but she ran a number of big businesses as a businesswoman in her own right.

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And she would tell me the story that when she got married, if my grandfather would point to something that was black and say, this was white. She would have to agree and say, "Yes, it's white." And that story always puzzles me because in my seven year old mind I knew that this was black so why would somebody say that it was white when it was actually black? And I guess I didn't have the language to be able to talk about gendered oppression, about oppressive systems.

But I think as my life unfolded, I came from a family that was very, very involved in the liberation struggle in then Rhodesia in a range of different ways. And my consciousness in terms of issues of injustice, in terms of issues of inequity got sharpened as I continued my journey, including as part of the student movement in South Africa where I was part of the first Student Representative Council that was in at that time non-racial.

So it was at the time that Mandela was released and people were really kind of pushing the boundaries in terms of the meaning of integration, and race, and class, and gender in a completely different way. I think it was only really when I finished my first degree and started working for an organization in Zimbabwe called the Zimbabwe Women's Rights Center, Resource Center Network that I began to develop a real political language from my experience.

And that I think gave me another tool in my toolbox for committing to this work, particularly in terms of the liberation of women dating back to the story that my grandmother told me. Because I now had the consciousness and the language to really more deeply understand what that story meant in terms of her positioning as a woman in a heterosexual relationship with my grandfather that I learnt much later was a violent relationship.

So, there's something about that story that moved me along and that saw me really rolling up my sleeves and becoming much more politically active on a range of different issues both in Zimbabwe and later in South Africa. And that in a similar way to the way Lisa describes, saw me becoming a

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little bit worn out, vulnerable because of risk that began accruing in terms of the political work that I was doing in Zimbabwe around the 2000s.

Which was really the time in Zimbabwe where the emergence of a new political party and new possibilities for the country was very, very palpable. Of course, it didn't play out that way. But there was a lot of energy, activist energy at that time for social justice. That saw me land myself in a university for a number of years, almost 10 because I felt it was important to write, to write my experience and to write women back into history, at a time when I was seeing, particularly in the Zimbabwean context, women doing so much work and yet being written out.

But I think my activist organizing always centered around poor and working class women in communities who were really organizing for basic needs essentially. And that continued throughout my life whether it be as a volunteer or whether it be as part of different collectives. That was always the constant in my life.

And so, I tell you that long story, Mallika, because it was at that point that I think my path intersected with JASS, which was in 2009, I think. Is connected to the story that Lisa began about how we would meet, see each other at convenings that JASS was holding in Southern Africa and say, hi, hi, and then we would continue our lives.

But it was really in 2009/10, where I think JASS was looking for somebody to really step into the leadership of the work that JASS had been doing in Southern Africa that I have realized that JASS was a space that would allow for all of those different parts of me to come together. And so that was really the beginning of my journey with JASS and Lisa has told a story of a progression to a point in time where I was honored to take over the baton in a particular kind of way and a particular moment as you have referenced around the pandemic.

Mallika: What's that been like for you? Taking over from founders is often a challenging moment and then there's all of the additional challenging

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moments that we're all facing right now. So, I'm curious to know, what's it been like for you for these last two years? How has it felt to be in this leadership space, to be the first leader after the founder in the middle of this pandemic? What are some key emotional moments that you're able and willing to share with us?

Shereen: Sure. I mean I think the first thing that I need to say which also builds on what it is that Lisa has laid out. The transition, the leadership transition was very, very well planned, spoke through and held in this organization, initially by Lisa. But it opened out into being held by a staff committee as well as the board. So, there was organization wide investment in designing a process that it actually began whether it was said or not many years before.

And so, I think Lisa and I worked together for many years prior to the moment when the words, leadership transition were uttered in the organization. And I think that is a gift and from where I'm sitting that readied me for what it is that I thought I was stepping into. Of course, I think the celebration because we had a ritual moment in Mexico in February which I think for a JASS and for the meaning of a leadership transition in an organization is pretty important because yes, we work here but we also work for this right, and the energy of such a moment.

And so, I think to really invest in a space where the broader JASS community in a configuration could come together to both honor Lisa as the founding executive director and the moment in life that she was in as well as hold and welcome the stepping in of somebody new. I think was a very, very important moment in JASS for what it was but specifically because two weeks later we were hit by a pandemic.

And so, to answer your question more directly, Mallika, I have to go five years back. Because five years prior to February of 2020 when I stepped in I was diagnosed with a chronic lung condition that came out of nowhere. And it became more and more serious over that period of time. And I

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couldn't breathe. And so, in some way the journey that I traveled at the level of my heart and my body was also a journey of preparation in retrospect I think.

For the meaning of stepping into a leadership moment, at a time when the world was struggling to breathe collectively. It's not an easy moment to hold and step into. And in fact, it isn't even a singular moment, it's a period. But I think there were things at that level in terms of my own practice, and my own consciousness, and my own ability to manage my health that also allowed me, and it's still the work that I'm doing to build the body to step into leadership, that holds and also invites something a little bit different.

Which I think is the thread that connects to what Lisa has shared about where JASS was and what may be needed in a JASS in terms of a collective holding in a way that distributes the load. And it's perfectly imperfect. But I think that's the invitation which is a global invitation in this moment too.

Mallika: Really coming to terms with being perfectly imperfect and imperfectly perfect is such an important reminder for all of us as we navigate such deep shift and change through this pandemic. I just want to ask if there are a couple of key insights or pieces of wisdom, Lisa, that you have that you'd like to share around leadership transitions? So, if there's something that you've really learned about this process that you want to make sure you pass on, what might that be?

Lisa: So, I think, Mallika, you can hear from this story this is a story where crises emerge in an organization and shifts occur when we, for the ways that we work and the context in which we work don't allow ourselves to be whole people and we break. And so, I think one of the things that we really planned for is to design a transition that acknowledged the wholeness of our relationships and the wholeness of who we are. And how we were connected through, not because of, solely because of coordinated work and deliverables.

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We were coordinated, our families are intertwined. My partner, my son were very involved in JASS throughout the whole time. There was a whole generation of kids and partners who played a crucial role. We were bound by relationships and JASS works that way, bound by a set of relationships that were great and deep. And that's what JASS's strength is. And so, to center all of our relationships with each other and honor those relationships, and the relationships and connections that extend beyond us that hold the organization and its work.

I think that was a really critical part of this. How to design a process that allowed for a change in relationships and a new alignment and to design it in that way. It's very feminist. And I think it really turned what is often a very disruptive time in an organization into a moment of really deeply rooting resilience in the organization in a way that it hadn't yet landed. So, I think that's really key.

I think, you know, I remember talking to a lot of friends who had stepped down and really scanning the literature in preparation for really defining some steps that were more public. And it really, I saw these non-profits that had entirely board led processes, that were perceived to make it more objective. It's objective, this is transforming people's lives. It's taking a mission to a new level. And so, we really made the case to our board that this had to really be partly staff driven at a certain point and then eventually jointly staff and board led.

So that's, you know, break the mold is really, really important relationships and break the mold. And I think when you center relationships it really is a moment to share memories and hold those memories into the DNA of an organization. That helps ground its mission and allow the next generation of leaders to take that into a new modality with that rooting, in the codes set that are about values and about stories. And allow for a new culture to take root in a new time, in a new group of people. And so, I think those are two really critical pieces.

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I think for me, the thing about transitions is you, as the founding ED I really cared about everybody else, and the process, and really gave it so much attention. It turns out to be incredibly demanding. I can remember saying to Shereen and others at a certain point, it's like we had taken on a whole new region. Because so much of it rests initially on the shoulders of the ED who is stepping out.

Mallika: Thanks, Lisa. I'm going to move over to Shereen now to ask, as the new leader having to navigate breath, to building a new relationship with breath. In the midst of this pandemic, I'm curious to hear how that has shaped your leadership at JASS, what has that brought to the way in which you do your work and to the work itself?

Shereen: I mean maybe there's three things that I'll say in response to your question, Mallika. I think the first thing is you have to be able to breathe for yourself in order to be able to support others in that task. So, I remember one of the first things that I and we did in JASS when the pandemic became real was we actually closed. And people laugh at this because it's one of the first big decisions was to close the organization.

But we closed the organization for a couple of days because it was a question of we can't pretend that everything is okay or that things are normal like March 2020. Because everything is not okay actually. And we've got to make sure that we have our oxygen masks on first before we can prepare to step into the movement support work that is JASS, and that is needed in this moment of the unknown.

And so, there's something about that and that metaphor for me that holds true even today. You've got to be grounded and centered in as much as you are able to be able to hold the complexity and the multidimensional nature of an organization and her people. And the context to be able to do this with some level of the compass pointing in the direction that you need to move towards. So that's the first thing.

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I think the second thing, to stick with the metaphor of breath. There are times when you have to hold your breath and you've got to live with the questions that come with that. And there are times when you are more definitive in terms of pace and that's great. And there's times when you are needing to actually catch your breath. And I think all of those breathing modalities exist in the rhythm of an organization in very, very specific ways.

And each modality requires something different in terms of leadership. It is what I'm learning. And so, there's something about that, that's the second thing for me that is critically important.

I think the third thing for me is in a time when we are all invited to think about not being able to breathe, that takes me certainly to the heart of the social justice invitation in this moment because the systems are strangling us. And I'm not going to go into it but in a whole range of different ways. And so, what does it mean to think about breath in that sense in terms of the commitment, the recommitment to the invitation in this moment for movement support organizations, social justice actors to show up in a way that allows us all to breathe freely and more integrity in this moment?

But I think the last thing that I would want to say which I guess is going back to the relationship question which is a complex question, it's not a straightforward question. Is that we are interlinked and I think the pandemic is showing us that in a different way. But we are interlinked and the survival of us all depends on us all. And so, what does that mean in terms of how we sync our breathing, how we pace ourselves? What is the relay that we are needing to do as we continue to forge relationships and breathe together?

I was reading, I've been very fascinated by something which I have experimented with in JASS in this period which is about alignment. Because there's a theory that goes – well, it's not a theory, I think it's been proved that if you are together and moving together for a period of time, or breathing together as in practice for a period of time you actually

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synchronize including your heartbeat. And what does that mean in terms of the kind of body, individual and collective that we are needing to both in this moment to really do the work?

Because it's embodied work, leadership and social justice work is embodied work. What does it mean to build the body for that work individually and collectively? Which is I think is something we don't always think about. But I think in this moment is important because of the forces that are coming at us.

Mallika: And I'm just imagining us all synchronizing our hearts, and our heartbeat, and our breath, and coming together in this way. And I'm taking that invitation one step further and thinking, imagine if we could synchronize our heartbeats with the heartbeat of the Earth. And what that could create in terms of the world that we all so desire and long for. I want to thank you both for this incredibly powerful and beautiful conversation. Thank you, Shereen. Thank you, Lisa. This has just been inspirational, and reflective, and embodied.

And as somebody who's gone through a major transition myself in terms of the organization that I founded, and ran, and then left, so much wisdom, so many insights, even for me at this time. So, thank you so much.

Shereen: Thank you, Mallika. Thanks, Lisa.

Lisa: Thank you so much, Mallika, and thank you so much, Shereen, I just love listening and so excited about like always, feminists, the more we tell the truth about all the imperfection of who we are as humans, and all the ways that we are building new ways of being, the better off those are in the organizational space and the stronger organizations are. And I think the invitation of the moment that Shereen has stepped into in building an organization that truly is aligned, that embodied is really inspiring.

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