



Episode Transcript

Season 2 Episode 2: Values-Based Organizing

Intro Hi everyone and welcome to The Big View: Ending Poverty in Your Community. At (Yvette Trujillo) Circles, our mission is building community to end poverty through intentional friendships, personal transformation, and systemic change led by the people closest to the challenge. And our vision for the future is all individuals live in equitable and thriving communities where poverty no longer exists.

Kris Alexander Hey y'all. This is Kris Alexander, and I am the Chief Learning Officer at Circles USA and as usual, I am joined with my co-host, Executive Director Kamatara Johnson. Hello, Kamatara, welcome.

Kamatara Johnson Hello everyone. Thanks for joining us today.

KA Yes. And I am super excited about today. So this is Episode 2 of Season 2. And you may recall from last episode that we are moving through the mindset, the Circles mindset that we bring to Big View. And Big View is the work that we do on systems change to end poverty in our communities. In our community, like nationally, but also in our local communities.

And so today in season two, we're starting a three part conversation on centering people and purpose. And we have three different mindsets that we're going to approach over the next three episodes on how to do that effectively, how to ensure that we keep our purpose at the forefront of what we're doing, and also the people, the community, the people that are closest to the challenge at the center of what we're doing.

And today we are beginning this conversation with values-based organizing. And this is something that I discovered in my research, as I created the big new training that Circles USA now has. And when I found it, I was so excited because I was like, this is it! This is what CUSA does. And so I'm going to just really quickly share very quickly what values-based organizing is and kind of what traditional organizing is that we kind of typically see.

So traditional organizing is that you look out into the world or you look around in your community, you see there is a problem, you focus on finding a solution to that problem, and then the strategy is you implement it. So in this example here, the problem is that not all children—we're looking at a school—not all children have breakfast at home.

Not all children have time to eat breakfast at home before they come to school. So the solution is that the school provides breakfast for children, and the strategy is the cafeteria makes breakfast and the children can purchase it. So it solves the problem, but it also leaves a lot of kids out, like maybe kids that don't have the money to eat breakfast, or maybe they get to school,

you know, right as the bell rings and they don't have time or whatever it may be. So in values-based organizing, instead of looking at what the problem is and then finding a solution of it, or for it, instead we look at, what is the value that we all hold? What is going against that value? What do we want?

And then what can we do to get there? So in this same example, the value is that all children deserve equal educational opportunities regardless of their socioeconomic status, regardless of disability or ability, ethnicity, gender, genetic informational or national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, the whole gamut. All children deserve equal opportunity to education, and the violation is that children who don't eat breakfast, or who don't have access to breakfast, aren't able to learn at the same pace of their peers because they're hungry.

And we know that hunger is a barrier to learning. And so the aspiration is that we prioritize the education of every student and therefore ensure that they all get to eat breakfast. And the campaign is free breakfast for all. And we know that this free breakfast for all is something that, that is implemented all across our country,

right? And that way, every child has access to food, period. And it doesn't matter what the barriers are that may come up. They're just given food, right? Because the value is that every child deserves education. So that's essentially what values-based organizing is. Instead of looking at the problem like one singular problem and finding a solution and doing that over and over and over again, we start from the big picture value of what do we want our community to look like?

Like what are the values that we hold in our community? What's keeping us from getting there? And then what do we do about it? So thank you for humoring me, Kamatara, as I just kind of ran through that whole little thing. And my question—first of all, I want to hear if you have just anything to say on that, because I'm sure you do.

But I also want to hear from you just values. Why are values so important? So kind of going to that bigger picture and just anything else you want to say, of course.

KJ I really appreciate you, you know, reminding us, doing the refresher course on values-based organizing. And for those of you who may be listening to the podcast, not seeing the video, if you want to go check this podcast out online on the website, then you can see there were just a couple of slides that have some really nice visuals that help you to picture what Kris was describing.

So I love the visuals, but also that is a really good example. We all can relate to that example, especially myself as a former school teacher in a Title I school, it was incredibly important, whether it was a school year or even in the summer when breakfast and lunch were being handed out in the parks. That was a solution, a strategy that they came up with. Like, okay, now we don't have school.

How do we still get food to our precious children who may be suffering from malnutrition, you know, because the parents are depending on the schools to help feed their children and be healthy and happy and all wonderful things. So that was, yeah, that was a great example. And values, values are so incredibly important because when we know what we value, it really directs our actions in a meaningful way.

And Circles USA is all about being assets-driven, life-affirming community solutions, like how do we all come together to help each other out to live better lives? Those are part of our values. And then that gives us our yardstick, our measurement, our go no go like, should we do this? Should we not do this? Or to be able to ask some of those bigger questions that might be hard, like for whom does this solve the problem?

If we're doing the problem solving approach, there's a lot of folks that get excluded not only from the solution, but from the process of creating the solution. It's a very top down approach, isn't prescriptive. It only meets like a really targeted niche group where only these few people get their needs met. And then it also it may make—let's say the families who don't have the capacity to feed their children—makes them a problem, as opposed to: our community has resources.

We have this beautiful school where the children are all going. We could figure this out. How do we make it so all the children get to have breakfast, because we value the education and the health and well-being of all of our children. There is our value. And we also don't want only some people to get breakfast. You know, how would you figure it out?

Well, these kids get breakfast, but not those. So having, you know, like a values-based organizing just seems so much more inclusive, community driven, asset-based, life-affirming. You know, how do we work on this together to get the best ideas possible? And then you get the community building, you get the buy-in, you get all the partnerships that might come out of it.

That wouldn't happen otherwise if it was prescriptive, top down, siloed, and some of the things that we're trying to get away from. It's not so transactional. How do you get to the transformational? And that's why having values at the heart of what we're doing, like that's where the transformation happens. When you get to live your values. It's so fulfilling.

KA Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. Thank you so much for that. You touched on so many things that I want to go back to. And I think the first thing, just kind of going back to that, what you were talking about, like the importance of values and how we can come together under those sort of shared values. And I think the other thing that always comes to my mind when I think about values is that we're all living from our values.

We might just not be aware of what those values are. That's right. And so, I really appreciate values, work on all levels. I do my own individual values work so that when I'm looking at decisions in my life, I can look at how those decisions are going to, align or not with the values that I know are important to me.

And I have to, like, actually read through and look at—I think often we have these sort of aspirational values of “we want this to be a value” and that's great. It's absolutely wonderful to have aspirational values, but it's also really important to know the values that we actually have. Right? So, you know, an example would be looking at this job—career, really—opportunity for myself, shifting from being like a contract worker to being brought on as the Chief Learning Officer. I got to look at, that opportunity through the lens of my values and see if it was the alignment, and look at the look at Circles and say, “Is Circles

in alignment? Am I in alignment with them?” Right? And do all this work and then ultimately I'm like, yes, absolutely. Right? And so we get to do that on an organizational level as well. We get to recognize, what are our values as Circles, or as whatever organization you're a part of. Like what is important to us? And then when we're making these decisions, we run those through the lens of our values.

KJ And what I love about that, too, is... Inside the realm of each value we hold, there are infinite, you know, actions we could take or ways we could roll. So it almost feels more generative or more creative. And we may have different people that differ in their opinions or differ in how they think we should get there.

But if we agree on the value and use that as our North Star, then whatever we whatever solution we can come up with, it's it's going to be fine. Like, I'm much more open to negotiating or coming to ideas that maybe I didn't even have, if I can understand the value that's underneath or behind it. Like, oh, that still maintains a person's dignity and their capacity to work.

But how about they only work one job, not three? Oh, actually, you know, that would maintain the person's, you know, dignity and health and well-being and contributing to society like it pulls it all together. So focusing on values, it's like we can find that common ground that comes up with the solutions and strategies that that really could work, that could bring people together.

KA Well. And I think that that's another... That's kind of the next thing I wanted to pull out of what you said a minute ago, is just the communal nature of being values-oriented.

And we can see also communities have a set of values, whether they're spoken or unspoken. Countries have a set of unspoken, sometimes spoken, often unspoken, values, or not in alignment with each other.

I think we're seeing that in the United States right now, where we're all trying to figure out what values we're holding, that we can all hold together as a country, right? And so, yeah, you know, it becomes this communal exercise. And I love your example and kind of want to like dive into it a little more, of like, a value we hold is people's dignity and ability to thrive.

Right? Like I, I would say that most everybody, close to everybody, most people can get behind the idea that everybody, should have opportunities to thrive. Right? And so dignity is the value. The other thing you can do is you don't have to have one solution or like one strategy. We can have this overarching value.

There's going to be a lot of places maybe that are violations to that, or that's a barrier. And lots of different people, who have lots of different ideas about how to get there, all get to work together and implement all or some or more than one of the "hows" to work toward this shared value. And it's not, it's not like one group helping another group.

It's a community coming together to make community the best that it can be.

KJ And that's that common cause. So regardless of maybe a personal difference or a difference in our backgrounds or education or socioeconomic status, or like we're in different parts of this neighborhood or we have totally different lived experiences. But, you know, let's say that we really value human relationships. Okay. Then we can come together and say, how can we make these relationships better?

Or we really value thriving communities. Okay, so I have a more open heart, a more open mind, like I'm more willing to do the work. And then there's more people who can do the work together because we're being inclusive and and yeah, finding that common purpose, a common ground like how do we really center people. And I think we're inherently values-driven.

It just seems, to me that seems like human nature. Like what is meaningful to us is motivational. It's what gives us hope. So if we can keep people connected with their motivation, their hope, their purpose, like, why are we doing this? And it does matter how you get there. So it's like, could we could we be values driven the whole way?

Not just the ends justify the means, but not like as we're walking this path together, sharing the journey, could we be values-driven the whole way and bringing people together and like weaving community assets and wonderful things along, even though we might disagree on some things, but we could really come together around a common purpose.

KA Yeah, I love that. I love that so much. And I think, you know, the the the ends never justify the means if it means you have to live outside of values, right?

KJ: Yes.

KA: So I love that like reminder of, this isn't something we do at the end of the process. Like, oh, is this in alignment with our values now that we've done all this work?

No, it's the first thing. The first thing we do is we get really clear on what our values are, and then we look at what is standing in the way of those values, and then come together on the how. And and I was just sitting here thinking, as you're talking, of course, like the big value that Circles USA and probably people who are listening to this have is ending poverty in our communities,

right? And there are so many organizations, so many people doing that in so many different ways. And one of the things that I love about Circles and about working with you specifically, Kamatara, is the partnerships. Like we are always looking to partner with other people to learn what we don't know we don't know, right? Like we're in this poverty arena, but we don't have the corner market on the best way to solve poverty.

We have a because none of us have the answer. There is no "the answer" to solve poverty, right? But we all together are working to end poverty, and we're all doing it in our different ways. And we may or may not necessarily agree on every "how". But at the end of the day, we can all say, yeah, you know what?

We all agree that nobody should have to live in poverty, like that poverty needs to end.

KJ You know, we agree on the "why" and then we don't... Sometimes people get so trapped in the "how" that no action happens. Everything just gets paralyzed or locked up. And we're trying to actually build communities to get past that gridlock or get past the silos that are doing things that don't communicate with each other.

Whereas we can say to churches, schools, government agencies, not local nonprofits, like all across all sectors, hey, would you like to have thriving families and thriving communities? Yes! Oh my gosh.

KA: Of course!

KJ: And you know, and people who can be working to be working and people who can be contributing to the community contributing and healthy, happy children, like we're all going to say yes.

So it's like if we can focus on our values and then we each can discern. Okay, we're working on this value, but this piece is what's mine to do. What's mine to do inside of

this value? And then you can do these things and I'll do this, and those folks will do that, and then we can all come together more.

It's that, you know, cross-sector collaboration or collective impact approach or even just to say like across the community approach. It's very holistic, not just for the person. Yes, we're considering the whole person and the whole family. We're also considering the whole community.

KA And it's all, it's all of it, because, you know, you talked about all these sectors. And I just also want to throw out there like even businesses you know, for-profit organizations can get behind thriving families, thriving community because that is...

KJ Thriving employees!

KA Right, like it's so communal. It's so holistic in its approach. And, and also I, I just want to also point out what you said about like the squabble, like getting stuck in the "how" and squabbling and never taking action. I think that something that has happened in the past, and I hear a lot of people when I'm talking to them, get really frustrated at the, like, inaction of just not being able to, like, identify a problem and a solution together.

And so this circumvents that whole issue, right? Right. We don't yeah. We don't have to agree on what the problem or the solution is because we all agree on what the value is. We all agree that the thriving is the goal, right? I love that. So what are some other examples that you have or where you've seen this sort of values-based organizing really like shift or really move a community or group forward in an impactful way?

KJ Well, I think it, it does out picture at the chapter level when folks are doing their, their Big View campaigns, like listening to Circle Leaders (who are participants in the Circles program, the people with the lived experience of poverty). Okay, what are you experiencing? So listening is a core value and valuing all people's experiences, that's a core value.

Like from the word go, we're we're valuing what people are seeing. And then as folks share, you know, for for example, in Greenville, South Carolina, like folks were struggling to get to work. There were transportation issues. So like, okay, how do we come together and solve that? Like, okay, let's think of this outside of the box.

Like we're going to go through, what's the violation? Okay. We don't have a transportation system that meets all people's needs. This bus system is not getting us where we need to go. Waiting for the bus, it passes me.... there's no bus....it takes three hours, or I've got to drop the kids off at childcare and then get to work.

It's not real for a lived experience. It doesn't work. But because we have the value of, you know, the dignity of all people and to have health and well being that you can

work, but in a balanced life with good supports and that you're not just getting, you know, raked across the coals to work no matter what, all of that is so hard.

So, you know, they came up with the van pool idea like, let's get people clustered together and how do we get them to, you know, carpool and get to work and like solve that transportation issue? That's so, like it's such a pressure cooker if you don't have transportation. And so again, it gets back to the the value of each person.

And just with that touch of community support, then people could, could really plug into work, and the dignity that that provides and, and the, you know, obviously the finances and economy that that provides, like all the benefits that come with... "Okay, now I can take care of my children and I can work and I can have work-life balance because I'm not freaking out about this transportation issue."

So there's there's just so many times where our chapters have listened to people with the lived experience and come together as a community like, we we value thriving, thriving families and individuals, so how do we get there? Like what are the barriers that are in the way? And then what are all different solutions? Great. Now let's work with some partners in the community to to solve that.

KA Well, and that, "What is mine to do?" question, whether you're asking that individually, as an organization, as a community that like "I don't have to do it all. I can do something. So what is mine to do?" And trusting that like my piece of the solution, or maybe not solution, but my piece of the the campaign and the the aspiration, I do my piece toward this value and this organization or person does their piece and this person or organization does their piece.

And we're all uplifted together. Right. And it just keeps circling back around to that. It's not you have a problem and I don't. And I'm going to solve your problem for you. But we as a community are building a community that we all want to live in and be a part of. And how are we doing that together?

KJ It really puts the heart back in the community to, like, well, you've got a problem. That's your problem. As opposed to know, we are all connected. Like, we are very interdependent. So if if you have a problem and it it impacts me to in ways I may not even realize. But if we love our community and we love our neighbors and we value, like we've been saying, you know, digging into your wellness or work life balance or a deep sense of meaning and belonging.

Okay, then we need to work on this together. So it it like it, it not only builds it, we get the space to practice those values and then it builds up our muscles. And then we're weaving it into our communities, so now our community is stronger and richer all the way around because we're living our values, not just saying them.

KA Well and going back just to your van pool example, which is a fabulous example, shout out to the Greenville Circles, or the Upstate South Carolina Circles chapter... Circles of

Upstate South Carolina. My goodness. Yeah. But it's like, yeah, we could look at it as like, oh, you don't have a way to get to work and drop your kids off.

That's a you problem. This is a, you know, I don't have that problem.

KJ "Take the bus."

KA Yeah. "Take the bus."

KJ Or "Get an Uber."

KA Yeah, or "work it out" But it's like when you're looking at it from that holistic, interdependent part, like it is important to business owners that people have transportation because they're missing out on incredible workers. Yes. Just because the workers can't get to work and people are missing out on, you know, having like, childcare centers don't get to have the children, and the children don't get to have that experience of community with other kids.

KA And, you know, it just ripples out. There's not, that's a you problem versus me problem. That's, we know we want a community that thrives. And so we're all going to come together to make that happen for one another.

KJ When people get a little too into the "how", I think that's where people can become so entrenched. And we start, you know, getting upset about the color of the cocktail napkins instead of how much we love our community members. And so it's like, are we getting I understand there has to be an action plan and there has to be steps, and we do have to agree on those.

But once once we get our values set, then everything falls into place. Like if I'm so steeped in conditions that I'm like losing my mind and I don't know what to do and I'm kind of asking, I might be asking the wrong questions. Yeah, like, what do we do next? It's like, wait, why are we doing this?

KA It gets us all like in the same book, like in the same chapter of the same book, instead of we're all focused on the cocktail napkins and we don't look up long enough to realize that we're not even in the same book or, like, planning for the same party. If we're going to go with the cocktail napkin analogy.

Right. And this really circles us around very nicely to how does this value-centered organizing, like, why is this one of our mindsets in centering people and purpose? And I think we've said it all kinds of different ways, but I just want us to like, highlight it, right? Like to say it out loud of, the importance of ensuring, once again, that it's the whole community. We're centering people and purpose because we're centering the community, and that is the people and purpose.

Like at the heart of it, the purpose is thriving communities, right? The purpose is, ask for it. I'm not going to say it as eloquently, actually. I'm just going to let you say it. What is the, what is the purpose? Why are we doing all of this, Kamatara?

KJ Well it gets us back to our tagline, which is Building Community to End Poverty. We really do believe in the goodness of people and the goodness of communities, and how our neighbors can take care of each other, and that we can do wonderful things when we work together. So the wonderful thing is when we remember who and what we are and what we value, then, some of the, you know, some of the other the more traditional things that we've experienced in the past that really aren't working, we've got this, you know, crazy system that doesn't work, and we've got some really divisive politics going on and we've got some really...

Like it is that gridlock, that just something that would, could, should be working but isn't because we can't even get to the conversation we need to have. So when we focus on values, we can open up people's hearts, open up people's minds, open up people's hands. And that brings us together to really move things forward. We all want the same things when it comes, you know, truly we do. You know, some really basic common core ideals that we all want.

KJ So when we focus on that, it moves us forward.

KA Yeah. I just my mind just immediately went back to like a, a farmer's market, like the tailgate market that my spouse and I go to every weekend. Right. Like when we get in there, we're not focused on like, what are your politics? Or, you know...

KJ What church do you go to?

KA What church do you go to?

KJ What neighborhood are you in?

KA Yeah, yeah. Where do you live or what do you think about, you know, poverty in our community. Like, we're not focused on any of that. We're focused on coming together around our community and giving and receiving together like a communal experience.

KJ And supporting local businesses and supporting each other as a community. And then also, what I love about local farmers markets is also getting to know your neighbors and having beautiful conversations and moving at the speed of relationships, like really listening to people, really seeing each other. And again, that's it's so values-driven as opposed to I'm going to go to the cheapest grocery store and I'm going to get, you know, the most for the least.

And I and I understand like sometimes that that could be really important, economically. Like it's a privilege to be able to shop at the farmers market. And I understand that. But when, when I can and then I have the relationships and there's the business of it, and then there's the beautiful product of it. And yeah, like, it's so mutually reinforcing and it's so values driven.

KA Well and what I love you know. Yes, absolutely. And there are times that I'm like cheapest fastest grocery store, you know like both of those things simultaneously. And

what I love, you know, is that people, like a value is that everybody should be able to have access to that, if that is what they choose. And so, like, I know a lot of communities, like I knew when I lived in Napa, California, the farmers market had a, you got double food stamps.

KJ Yes, yes. Las Cruces has that too, in New Mexico with the tokens. It's wonderful.

KA Yeah, with the tokens.

You know, here's what's really cool is like the value of community is been like, okay, so we have this strategy of tailgate market. Oh we're doing that. Oh no. People are still being left out. So what's this new barrier. How can we fix this new barrier. Right. It's just this ever building, expanding process.

KJ It holds on to the value that everyone deserves nutritional fresh foods or, you know, we value knowing our neighbors and and getting to know each other's names and each other's stories. And yeah, that that's wonderful.

KA And it's the it's the both/ands. You know, it's the both/and of it all. There's not one right way of being. We're not saying, like if you don't shop at the tailgate market or the farmer's market, xyz... It's just it's just another way for us to be together in community. And we each get to find our own way to be in community together and to to value that.

So, any final words?

KJ Yeah, I was just thinking I want to challenge all the listeners and viewers to maybe take some time to think about what you value. What are your core values? Like, could you come up with your top five gotta-have-it's, and then look at your schedule. Does your schedule for the week reflect those values, or are you doing something else?

Because if your... let's say your top five values is actually reflected in your schedule that you already have. There's a really high probability you will feel very fulfilled in your life. If they don't match, like I've got these values, but, my schedule is doing these other things, there's a pretty good chance you're not going to be feeling satisfied with your life.

Or you may feel like you are not thriving. So that's just a little values challenge for the folks listening today to to check that out. And it might be very telling. Or like where you're working, do your values align with that workplace? Because again, when you're in alignment, then you know, it's very fulfilling and you have a deep sense of meaning and belonging and purpose. When it doesn't match, that's when life gets really, really hard.

KA Yeah. And recognizing, you know, the the privilege of being able to change jobs and things like that. So if you're working somewhere and you're like, you know what, it's not in alignment with my values. And it's not, it's not in my possibilities right now to move jobs or to alter that in some way. Then maybe try like, here are my values.

Where are some spots and how could I just like, you know, infuse my values into what I'm already doing? So it's no matter what there's, how can you get more of your values into what you're doing. Noticing, taking stock and then not judging yourself for it and just finding little quick ways that you can infuse those values?

KJ Yes, you can bring it. You can leave from wherever you are.

KA Yeah, exactly. I mean, we can't get to anywhere without starting where we are. Like one of my little things you can't get to, you can't get from A to B by starting at C because you're not there.

KJ Yeah. But I, you know that that brings us right back to, to values. You got to start at your home base.

KA Yeah. Yeah absolutely. Thank you so much, Kamatara. It's always such a rich conversation. And, we're going to be continuing this conversation in our next episode, which will come out next month. And it's going to be the second part of Centering People and Purpose. And I hope you'll join us for that. Bye, y'all.

KJ Thanks so much, Kris.

