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SPEAKERS

Outro, Meena Das, Intro, Tony Kopetchny

I **Intro** 00:02

Welcome to Engaging Ideas, the bi weekly podcast from Parsons TKO, bringing you conversations with mission driven leaders and luminaries to shift your perspective and challenge your assumptions on the art of the possible.

Tony Kopetchny 00:15

Hello, everybody. Welcome to another episode of engaging ideas. The Parsons TKO podcast where we like to explore all kinds of interesting and new ideas for the nonprofit sector. PARSONS TKO, we are a digital transformation consulting firm, where we focus on data analysis, data strategy, data enablement, technology and strategy enablement technology roadmapping. And I'm so delighted today to be joined by my friend Meena Das, welcome, you Meena

M **Meena Das** 01:17

thank you, Tony. I'm so glad to be here. Thank you for having me.

Tony Kopetchny 02:11

Wonderful so Meena is the founder and nonprofit analyst and she started a Namaste Data.

M **Meena Das** 03:36

And at that point, at some point, I can guess in one year into the school, I realized, okay, I don't have enough funds, I need more. I didn't know how fundraising works. I didn't even know it, fundraising, the word itself. And so I thought, I need to get more education. And so I decided,

okay, I'll move to somewhere where I can earn more, learn more and bring it back, hopefully, someday. So I still have that vision. And the the other thing that was going into my school was my experience of moving every other city, even growing up. So India is a huge country. And I used to move a lot even growing up with city to city to city. So I had met a lot of people that that that that was coming into my school. And so I moved to North America about five, six years ago, got more education around analytics, information science, data science, still was me. Graduated, still was working in the tech in early 2017, about four years ago, and had just started my job and mednax and lost my teeth in the country and took three years, three months of freight and couldn't speak. And at that point, I realized that I can speak some decent English I would say fluid and decent to survive. And then there are other first generation immigrants who have a hard time even to be able to speak this time. In an English and so I started to observe that it's hard being a new person in a country where you don't have your family. And it's hard to figure out the legal system if you have gone through something a traumatizing experience, or to find out health care. And so I started to volunteer a lot about immigrant advocacy and Refugee Rights, and from there moved to a nonprofit consulting job became a analyst for the nonprofits, and several years into that nonprofit consulting job. I got a chance and exposure to see what data exists for the nonprofits who exist in this database. And what do we actually do with that data. And at some point, maybe call it the pandemic awakening, or I don't know, remix, or whatever it was, I started to see the gap. And the data I was being handed again and again, from my jobs was never put, I see anyone who looked like me or talk like me in any afterwards did in any of those data points. So that started to bother me. And that's where I realized that I want to continuously use equity. And inclusion works like that with Candida several times. And I wanted that autonomy and and so I moved and started this consulting practice to be able to do that. And I absolutely believed the purpose of research is definitely those two things to make it inclusive. So as long as you're in this nonprofit industry, I don't want the definition of philanthropy to be narrow. By the limited ways we do the research or analytics, so it is broader than that, and how we actually use the data. And so that's one purpose. And definitely the other is to spark some curiosity and ask questions, but not just, they wouldn't say meaningless questions, but not just collect more data and ask another question and do it in the same way, things need to change, but at several different points. And I think that was that's where I want to bring this di lens into every single point with the data. So that's, that's mine, my vision with my work. What I'm doing this

Tony Kopetchny   07:08

wonderful, thank you so much. And we are all lucky that you're taking this work on and that you're pushing it forward, I think you're going to have a big impact for the sector. I think the sector does need some awakening, as you said, like, you know, coming through the pandemic I think everybody's looking for

Meena Das   07:27

now, thank you so much for saying that. You know how, when I started it, I thought, okay, how would I know if I'm doing a good job? Because then I'm trying to build this consulting practice in a different way? How would I know? Would it be about revenue? Would it be about the number of clients I have? Or are the work that I do, and I think these days, my definition of how the success would be is if I have a hard time getting clients in my work, I want it to be because of my bad sales practice or my pad sales background, not because it's a new thing to put data

Equity and Inclusion together. So my success lies in the fact when people when I talk to them and say, Hey, data, equitable inclusion, they don't look at me with steering heights, they, they know and understand what I need, and then they become compliant or not, that's probably because of my sales techniques, which I can never you can really feel. But if that's as long as that's happening, I think I'll be on the right track.

Tony Kopetchny 08:27

I can definitely on the right track, and I can empathize a Stephen and I always talk about it. Are we possibly the worst salespeople out there? Maybe there's but there's something in when you have that conversation, right? I mean, you're, you can solve something for someone or you can't. And if you can't, it's good to be honest and find and help connect them to the people who probably can help them. So. But talking about Stephen, so he is my business partner, and he's the one who met you through LinkedIn, he was utterly enamored with what he found from your LinkedIn profile and what you've been working on. And so I know from him, you use LinkedIn as a strategy to start building up your consulting practice. So I wonder if you could tell us sort of a little bit about what you did there, and also what data and metrics you were looking at from using LinkedIn to see how you're performing or progressing?

Meena Das 09:17

Absolutely, and I would say, Steven was a fantastic person. I met him a few months ago, honestly, a few weeks, months, I don't know to pandemic at the time. But he's fantastic. And so it's really glad to have I'm really glad to have people like him in my network. I think that's that's the work of mine. lindens platform means profile features to have people like him. So what I did was about two years ago, early 2020 I wasn't as invested in LinkedIn. As such, I had a full time job, a demanding job. I didn't have time to have any social presence. I don't even use I have an Instagram but I think that was a phase in my life that I always do. have a ton of selfies, I don't know, pictures of dogs who have no idea. But two years back, I realized as we got into this, you know, pandemic and you can't see anybody, you can talk to anybody, like be in your home, it's only through zoom, you get to see people, I needed more human connection. And I needed it more in a more authentic way. So even if I were that means even if I was tired, I wanted to see people with my messy hair with my tired face with my baggy eyes, I wanted still wanted to see people. And I want to share that pain and joy, if I would feel anything in one of those days. So I started to show up more and more on LinkedIn. I started as writing posts every now and then I started writing articles adding people to my LinkedIn account. And at some point in the middle of 2020, I started to have every Friday to do three coffees with virtual coffees with people who would be willing to have to spend their time with me. So it was sort of a discipline sort of a habit that throughout that year, every Friday, I would have one and a half hour of two to three coffees like 30 minutes each to meet people, just asking them how their day was. And I would be honest, some of those conversations in the beginning were hard because it's hard to, you know, jump on a 30 minute call with a stranger and then say, okay, then what next? What, what are we doing today? But it became easier over time, it became easier to just simply ask, how was your last hour? How was your half day? How was your Friday so far? How's your Friday so far? Questions like that became easier. And at some point, LinkedIn just became like a, like a busy coffee shop or a busy workplace where I only needed to show up in any form, whether it was Sunday or all other days it was sending a chat to someone and asking, Would you be willing to meet or writing a post were something I'm very passionate about, but whether or not

so someone would like it or not. So LinkedIn became for me a place to show up more, gradually more for myself than for others. And to your question, what data on metrics did I see? I saw none. And I would be honest, I saw absolutely none. I write a newsletter every Thursday. I started it in February. It's been three, four months now. It's a weekly newsletter data I'm collected. And I track no stats around, like how many people read it? How many people like that? I would love if people would like it. And that's not an issue. But definitely I don't track those because I started to realize that instead it was more for me to be able to write something to be able to learn something, research something and so staying true to the purpose. I am not tracking any metrics. And that's how it has been so far with LinkedIn.

Tony Kopetchny   13:08

Wow, thank you for all that. That's wonderful that for the show notes, will we be able to get a link to the newsletter if anybody does want to sign up?

Meena Das   13:17

Yes, I will send you the link.

Tony Kopetchny   13:20

So three coffees every Friday to just sleep Friday night? switch to decaf.

Meena Das   13:26

I did switch to decaf. I realized I'm having way more coffees. I mean, Amazon started to give me offers on coffees of new, I thought okay, this is the time I should actually switch to decaf.

Tony Kopetchny   13:39

It's good to hear you on that LinkedIn too. I mean, I'm working on a piece that I'm going to put out soon as whether we have a social media problem in the nonprofit sector because of you know, there are some pretty negative effects of groups like Facebook, Instagram, I too have found through LinkedIn, actual human connection that is turned into zoom conversations. And then a person I've been talking to for three years, we just met in person for the first time. Last week, it was wonderful. met her through LinkedIn was the only way we'd ever talked and first time we met and we've become friends. It's great.

Meena Das   14:13

Oh, that's fantastic. You know that? That's fantastic. I would I would add though. So yesterday, I wrote my last piece on data and collected was about breaking algorithmic behavior. So you know, when we are so connected with algorithms, whether or not it's fundraising related or not, the predictive models are not even the day to day the algorithms and social media or

entertainment. How do we break away from the behavior? So first of all, we need to acknowledge that there are some behaviors so when I say that I have been showing up in on LinkedIn. There are definitely times where I could have been influenced or may have been influenced for from some of the expectations that LinkedIn sets out like yeah, to show up every day, why not? I'm not going to probably show up your Margot here and there. So there's this pressure that you have to show up, then there's this pressure on social media, okay? Do you need to succinct your message in like, three bullet points two points with, so and so emojis with so and so hashtags, and only then your message would be received? Well, I think that creates a lot of pressure for someone who's creating and sharing that content, because there might be history, context and narrative to something which cannot fit into a 10 Second Reel, or, or video and send it out. So I have tried to stay away from those. Every time I've seen that I'm, you know, getting into that kind of behavior, or I'm taking the pressure to create something that would be mass appeal, liking, like kind of a content, I have tried to take a step back and see if given my whole message. And so you will notice if you ever see any of my message integrity, you will home and I and I do like to add every context that I can, because it's I think the original purpose of get showing up on LinkedIn was also to show up for myself. So there are definitely behaviors that LinkedIn or any algorithm, create some, there are ways that we can break it. Yeah, during the newsletter.

Tony Kopetchny 16:20

We are we are kindred spirits, right? This is a long form podcast, I don't think I've ever when our blog comes out, it tells people how long the Read is, I don't think I've written anything that's under a seven minute radiant. You got to say what you guys say sometimes. So you have a workshop coming up in June, advancing equitable data. Your LinkedIn post has a list of eight questions about the workshops gonna cover and I'm hoping we could dive into a few of those, if that's okay. So the first one I had was, it says, one of the things we're going to cover is what do the words equity and data mean together? So could you tell us a little bit about that?

Meena Das 17:02

Absolutely. So that question, I like and grow that question, because? Because there was no perfect one line answer for it. Bad question has an answer different as a different answer coming from which team is answering that question. So whether it is the membership team, whether it is a theater organization, philanthropy team or publishing team depends on who's answering that question. But the fact remains through your data. Are you bringing your center in your community in your work or not? Whether it's the data collection, whether it's identifying the problem, whether it's analyzing it or creating a context to share that analysis back to the community? Who and how are you doing it? I really asked him that question repeatedly, several times. And as we struggle, and you know, go through these questions, we would get a definition for our own self, what is the connection between data and equity, because there is, and it's not a good to have thing, it's a must have been, we want to be data driven in our day to day basis. And we we each of us have a relationship with data, whether or not we are the collectors or analyzers, we each of us have a relationship with data. I call this like, having a relationship in the kitchen. Everybody in the family has someone goes and reads the fridge, someone goes and cook, someone gets groceries, someone does it all. But we all have relationships. Same with the data, we all have a relationship with him. So this this question hopefully can bring some clarity about it.

Tony Kopetchny 18:41

I was writing down and you're talking, I used to say, when I get into when I worked in house, and some larger nonprofits, and we'd all come to the table and everybody had subjective opinions, I was like, look, let's data be the fair arbiter here, at least come in and give us some objective opinions to work against. But in the context of data lacking equity, or the way that people are perceiving it, you know, is data actually still a fair arbiter depending on how we're using?

Meena Das 19:10

Absolutely, it is, I was given an example in the during the pandemic, a lot of my clients wanted to collect social identity data. We just you know, I would get requests and I asked this question that you know, can you give me five question checklists that I can add to my so and so survey or can you do a survey for my alumni base or my donor base this but it lacked always a why why do you want to ask 15 questions that has questions like What language do you speak what language do you write in? What language do you like? Are you going to do actually going to do with something with him? Is there going is there a why you are collecting it? Is there a why you are sharing the pure population with our audience with your community? While you are collecting, in the lack of all of it, what you are going to get back with those five questions is, I would say, pretty biased data that you would store in your database, and then probably, maybe, maybe use it to create some strategies. But but that's not helpful at all. Like, for example, the Asian category is pretty long derivative, it's a big category. So so as a South Asian woman, I would rather have my own category. Now, does that mean in every context? Do we need to have South Asian separate? And then Chinese, Korean Japanese that also buckets different in a form format? Maybe not. But that depends on your context. And so you need to think about your context before downloading a list or a set of questions that everybody is using, because there are no set standards. These questions are about people, this data is about people. So we need to be mindful of what we are asking why we are asking, who is collecting it, and what we are going to do with it. So there is a lot of power this these data points can offer. And awesome, believe it or not, we don't usually use that power, and we put the power in the wrong places. Or we can we can shift that through conversations like this.

Tony Kopetchny 21:22

Thank you. That was wonderful. Thank you so much. Yeah, just just make me think gotta stop relying on some standard format that people use 10 years ago just to get everything because because then you have to think about even if you do start collecting more sensitive data, how are you securing it? There's few nonprofits that I've run into that really do have full, like, data compliance, security strategy of how they're going to keep PII information or any sort of identification information, very safe. So the second question I have from, again, this back to the workshop will be coming soon. But the question was, how can data lead to impact and accountability?

Meena Das 22:02

I'll take an example from a recent workshop that I did for a theater organization says theater

I'll take an example from a recent workshop that I did for a theater organization says theater services organization. And if for context of the audience listening to this podcast, I would say the theaters in the US have recently gone through a going through a movement, something called ICU wide American theater. If you Google it, you will see there are these bipoc artists who have listed some of these very specific things they need to be meaningfully contributing in the arts and culture field, especially in the broad base. And this movement, this is how my engagement began. So probably I'm using some of more specific stuff, my engagement to answer this question. And this this moment, I see you white American theater started out in calm right after George Floyd said in 2020, and different events and things like that. And I wouldn't say a trend, but something like observation a lot of theaters have right now is that as people are taking off their masks, as the organizations are saying, Okay, you are safe now, we are quickly turning back to where things were are hoping to get we are, we are hoping to go back to where things were. But in that process, we are probably eliminating some of the learning we had about inequity and in justices. And the way my training unfolded and came to me was that we don't want to let go of this. I see you wide American theater, that feeling that going away this this fire that's burning this is for a reason. And we don't want it to go away. And I started to think, Okay, if you don't want this, this moment to really go away, what is the role of beta in it. And so data does play a part in the way you collect it, how you collect it, and how you share the stories with who you share the stories, it does lead to creating an impact and then in turn create an accountability on the people who should be held accountable for so data has a role to play more than setting it out to funders with okay, I you know, I these are my population I need funds for but it has a more role to play to say, Okay, this can leave your fire on in a good way. So how do we do that?

Tony Kopetchny 24:31

I'd like to thank you for your quotes or that data has more of a role than just to send some reports back to your funders. I hope the audience will just sit with that for a second. Let that sink in. It's something that needs to be active and part of what you're looking at. It's not just for your funders. Yeah, that's,

M Meena Das 24:50

that's you. I hope so to

Tony Kopetchny 24:55

the next question they're going to is what is the role of data in perpetuating biases

M Meena Das 25:03

I'll probably refer back to my new set or addition yesterday of breaking the algorithm withdrawal and behaviors to answer this question, because I think this was the original one of the parts of question because of which I started as part of design this workshop. So a lot of our data data that we have, it often goes unchecked, into who collected the data, and how was that data collected, we have these categories, we have, let's say, back to social identity data again, now we have this big, let's say, Hispanic category. And we would have these mix, there are so

many subcultures that are into that category that we don't know how to pull that apart, or we would have a big category called Bible, and then we would have everybody in that big lump together in that category, or LGBTQ, that big category. But the thing is, who collected that data? How was that data collected? What is the background story, the meta data behind that data, which is missing, often causes biases in it? What it shows that the number itself doesn't give you the full picture, you need one context around that number. Where is that 25% LGBTQ? Let's say something came up. So and so are two out of three first generation immigrants, where is that really coming from? When was it collected? Who did you ask the questions to if you ask questions to 500, white people with three immigrant immigrant people, and you say two out of three, say that doesn't really give you the full picture, there are only three in the original data set. So you, it doesn't give you full picture pitcher, and that causes biases. Now, if we need that, and never talked about, or don't deliberately pause to think where who collected that data? Where is it coming from? Yeah, actually perpetuating advisors through the strategies that we will be forming through that data. So we need to pause. And the other thing I would refer back for my newsletter yesterday is an example I have mentioned there is, you know, let's let's take our predictive analytics model for major gifts that a lot of organizations use, a lot of organizations want to use it some to build a model for themselves, or use a product. And we have the algorithm would probably use their points a b, c, from your database, to set up the algorithm and give you 15. donors. Let's take an example that they are going to be your best major gift prospects now go talk to them, ask for major gifts, what is it that will go I'm going to give you not only those 15 things, which is great, yay, we bought it. But it's causing a behavior that the fundraisers thing, we need to collect good data, good quality data for data points A, B and C only because the algorithm works on it. So we need to collect data on that they would miss out on collecting better data on data point B, say volunteering, because, well, the algorithm didn't pick it. So we might not leave it out. And we would still be collecting A, B and C. That's the behavior we need to address that, whether or not we need to collect that data point D for our purposes. So that's how biases exists. And we if we don't have conversations like these, we perpetrate them.

Tony Kopetchny 28:35

Yeah, one of the it's thank you for all that that. One of the it's interesting, I think it's I'm in my time blurred too. I, for some time now, we have been hearing and we had a panel discussion about it to this request of or this need of I want to diversify our audiences. And just from what you were saying, they're thinking about the way algorithms pick a certain set of data to look at. And so you just grab it and go with it. Because it's fast. It's easy, it's there, it seems to work, but it's almost like, Okay, you want to diversify your audience that start way, way, way, way, way back? Why are you looking at what you were looking at in the first place? And what's in front of you that you could have added in? You also mentioned in the beginning their metadata. So I'm wondering just for the audience, if you could break that down a little bit, like where? How should an organization be thinking about metadata? Because I feel like people might be listening or like, well, I've got the data. Now I got the metadata. It's like when I think it was trigonometry, when I learned about the was it the the non real numbers or whatever? They said, Oh, my God, there's real numbers. Why are they were they're not real numbers.

Meena Das 29:43

I remember that. Ah, no, that's a good question. I it's it wouldn't be that hard. So you know, I wouldn't make it too technical. Even though I'm from this technical background. I would say the

easiest way is you can add two more columns to your dataset in your database. If you don't have the structure, the structural integrity of your current data set doesn't offer that there are options that you can pick and probably excuse me, for using a little going a little bit more technical, you could probably pick one primary key of your current data set and connect it to create a new data set where you hold, okay, this data was collected from this person, well, for this intention for this purpose, like you don't have these three or four fields, it doesn't take too much. So even though that person probably leaves the organization, or transitions out of the organization, you still have the way to go back and see, okay, this data point was collected three years ago, for this and this reason, what happens, what I hear back often from nonprofits is, oh, it was before my time, and that person who was in this role has moved on to a different organization. So we really don't know where is it coming from? We it always existed, these kinds of dialogues, they don't really help anybody with the data you have. And you still can't really know how sure you can be about it.

Tony Kopetchny 31:09
Yeah, the other point there too, in the turnover is just like knowledge management is such an underrated activity process in almost every organization I've ever been around over the last 20 years. And we know turnover happens, right?

Meena Das 31:25
Oh, for sure. I mean, it's and I would say it's not even in the nonprofits, even when I was in the tech background in the tech industry, like knowledge management is something it's important. And often it goes in the last list and the to do list it goes off and make okay, we need to do this for the meeting, do this for the next delivery, do this for the stakeholders. And at the end comes Okay, knowledge management, do I need to create a folder? I put some documents, but it's more than that, and putting some documents in a folder?

Tony Kopetchny 31:54
Yes. Okay, I have one more question that kind of be part of your workshop that. So what are some common challenges of collecting equitable data that you found?

Meena Das 32:06
Well, certainly, we missed it include the context, like we just talked about, about this, you know, this data that we are collecting, we miss. And it's not even, you know, you know, so I'm reading this book called Design justice. And it's a great book. And one of the things that the author continuously mentions is that none of the designers of any product or any solution is, you know, deliberately trying to eradicate some lived experience of deliberately trying to throw away people who's, who should be included in the solutions, it's just by, it just so happens that if you close your eyes and you're designing a solution, you're probably automatically going to think about them, the majority of the population how it looks like, so everybody says, white, probably, if you're in the North America, that kind of maximum, coming from a stable home having a physical address having a phone number, but it's not for everybody, there can be

people who are coming from domestic violence background, if you're, if you're serving that kind of a community, have it in your hands, and your process is not probably going to work for someone, if physical address keeps changing in a few days, just because of the nature of the experiences they have, and it's not going to work out. So it's not really malicious nature, but we still miss out on those points. So the challenge always is not coming out of what happened consciously. But what is happening without knowing unintentionally, and how do we acknowledge it, address it, and then change what needs to be changed?

Tony Kopetchny 33:51

Thank you. That was incredible. Yeah, I can see where the internal imagination of most people but steer something in a way that yes, it's an almost even biases to your own lived experience, rather than the experience of everyone's lives that aren't yours that you're trying to connect with. Thank you. So, you know, another question here, how do you think about data collection within CRMs as part of a larger set of data, in terms of how to connect the activities and profiles and outcomes for an organization? You know, because I, there's perform the way we like any of this performance data, but then what do we do on the people side of the data? And we've talked about that a little bit here, but yeah, how how often are you running into CRMs as part of your work and

Meena Das 34:36

I'm not in the consulting practice but definitely my past jobs I have done and that was done this that there was always a missing piece in with the CRM data. And while it is that, you know, we are so ready me looking to certain their points so often, that we miss on some of the other data points. So there are some, I would say garbage data that we have collected over and over the years, we don't really need it, we don't even use it. We don't think about it. But it's being collected again and again and again. And there are structures in place that are being better collecting it. And then there are data points that we feel like, Oh, this is going to be helpful. So just collect some of those donation things that are always, you know, the best and the best quality and we still collected. What's missing is those data points don't really speak to each other. First of all, they don't have the why they don't have the purpose that why they're collecting or not collecting, and then they don't really speak to each other. So what I did, and I come from this analyst analytics background, so my job in the previous jobs have been with teams who are responsible with data, or working in liaison with the IT team who's responsible with the data. And so what I have tried to do is carve out intentional spaces, and build relationships as my team who's a resource responsible and analytics responsibility with the philanthropy teams. So let's make time not in like, donor strategy meeting last 10 minutes, give to the research team, not in a bad way, I want full one hour to talk with my team to drive this conversation, what exists in the database, let's pull a data set and then see where what is in it, is it going to be meaningful? Is it helpful? Can we add it to any of the criteria for how we define our prospects and fluidity in between? You know, these folks should be in solicitation versus contribution? Can we use some of those features that exists in the database? So the question that you asked during the answer doesn't lie in the fact that okay, as an IT person, or as an analyst person, go make a connection between feature a and feature B, the answer lies in having conversations, having the understanding, having a relationship and clarity with the one data points exists. And that cannot happen just for the researchers, they can have all the knowledge they want. But unless everybody's on board with this idea, it will always be a siloed

knowledge. So we want those conversations to happen, where we can ask each other okay, do we really want about this? Meetup group information? For alumni, there are five meetup groups that are happening along with volunteering? Should we include that because it is gaining traction in the last three years? Should we include that information in the database as well? Those are the kinds of questions and that was an example. That can help us to understand our CRM data better and make those connections faster.

Tony Kopetchny   37:35

Right, yeah. And I think also, there's part of me where Mike ties back into your metadata point earlier, right? Like, what's the taxonomy across the organization that's kind of be able to put all these pieces together? And then, yeah, I'm definitely getting some trends that are right down here just for the audience to have in the why of the collection, why do we even have this piece about these people and where we transparent with them, and when we collected it and

Meena Das   37:59

know and like you said, it goes back to the same metadata point, like, oh, this data was collected way before I joined this nonprofit. So I don't really know. So we can answer some of those questions. If we have good metadata, it's not even about just about knowing what's in your CRM, but it's also enabling your next set of colleagues who are going to join the organization and make that transition much easier.

Tony Kopetchny   38:24

And then that last point you made to about just spending some actual time, it doesn't have to be weeks, but like, an hour, because it's, you know, in the nonprofit space, especially so much push on the program work, and it's the thrust and it's a year and everything's there, and then they bring everybody who's going to support it, and at the end, and if you really do get 20 minutes, and you're like, a little more,

Meena Das   38:46

those 1010 1015 minutes, I'm not really enough ever so like, they have always been like, okay, Mina, I need your team to do XYZ, can you get it done by the sisters? I want those conversations to change from the researchers and the research teams perspective. I want them to be with the philanthropy teams on the table driving, what do we want to do not give me this and then I'll give you back this output or outcome on a on a paper that's, that's not a meaningful use of research techniques, or the people we have in the staff members who are learning these new things, amazing things about research and analytics.

Tony Kopetchny   39:26

I think to just to get to that fair, equitable, inclusive point, it starts so far upstream, there's little you can do once everything's already collected, you're just looking at what was there rather than how do we create the pathway to make this far more inclusive and equitable from the

than how do we create the pathway to make this far more inclusive and equitable from the start and then see how well we did afterwards? It's that a conversation has to go way upstream before anyone goes on to talk to anyone who sends anything out the door.

Meena Das 39:50

No, I you know if I can offer an example from my own personal life, so when I started this consulting practice about 10 months ago, and I had I had I have a decade and a half experience of different organizations and nonprofits. So this was certainly not the first time I was working. But I was going to work for myself for the first time. So within and I was trying to have more intentional outlook on why I am doing this, why do I need to become a solopreneur, or social entrepreneur in this at this point in my life. And so after I left my jobs, I started, okay, let me start with the resources I have, I do have good intentions. But I have collected a lot of things over the years through my knowledge through things I have in my folders and my laptop, let me start with the cleanup. And so I actually started when I took a month, I remember about just cleaning up everything, my my knowledge through reflection, and then of course, my laptop and Google Drives and all those drives, okay, organizing everything, what needs to be what needs to be thrown out what can be stored in there. And after about a month, I was in a place where I felt like, Okay, now the intention that I have, it now can be laid on a good foundation, where I can start actually seeing some results, if I would have just thought about, okay, I have intention. Now next day, boom, let me start and put some action directly, I don't think it would have led to a longer term impact that I'm feeling, even now 10 months later, unless I have a good foundation to make it on. So it's the same thing, even though you have collected a lot of data for the nonprofits, they still can, you know, make space for that kind of reflection cleanup, then make a foundation and then make their intention and purpose on top of it to make better action or take better actions.

Tony Kopetchny 41:40

Right. Thank you. Yeah, I mean, I think it's important for everyone listening to this, start from where you're at, you can make this transition, you're not starting from scratch, but get a little more focused on what you're doing, get a little more into the why and then and then rebuild up so you can get into a far more equitable place with your your data moving forward. That's a that's true, thank you. So I'm gonna I'm going to take a sort of future looking. But we hear a lot about AI, machine learning, predictive analytics out there in the world, everybody seems excited about it it reminds me a lot of a couple years ago, everyone's doing the term around big data. But no, everybody said it. I don't know if anyone really knew it. And then what role do you see for applications like AI, ml, predictive analytics and the mission driven sector?

Meena Das 42:25

I think they none of them are going anywhere away, they're gonna stay AI and machine learning, they would be only used more. Whether it's in our personal life, whether it's in the let's take an example, Netflix offers recommendation systems. Now you go on Expedia website, and you look forward to two vacations and you would see, oh, there are three more destinations that you should look at. And three more kinds of flights you should look at. Those are the kinds of examples that we're going to see more and more outside of the nonprofit industry, in the nonprofit industry as well. We are going to see more AI and machine learning

with our, you know, the way we do our predictive things. And we want to automate this. But being said all that the reason I started my work and what I am doing these days is not to push AI and machine learning. Do you when I say to you, I mean like nonprofits, but just making sure at this point, like, let's start with the data. Let's start with the fundamental, let's start with what you are collecting. Why are you collecting, and once you feel comfortable enough to come at a place where you think, Okay, now let's get an AI product from an external vendor and you know, get that product and start leveraging, you will be at a much better place in using that output and outcome in your work for creating strategies versus if you see, okay, every other organization is getting AI. Now, let me also get a subscription. And let's start using it now. Oh, and eventually I'll figure it out how AI works, is probably going to take way longer for you to be able to really use the maximum output of it. So I would rather be I would rather have us become snow now and have an intention, build a purpose, build a why. And then take a faster route, then somehow just keep running and then exhaust all your energy at some point and and feel like okay, why are we doing what we are doing? And if we have invested way too much into this product already, we can do this. I don't want that. So I would rather have people be slower now and have a better intention.

Tony Kopetchny 44:36

Thank you. I know you've been pre conversation you and I were talking and since we've been having this dialogue, I mean, it's dawned on me too, you know, originally, I just there's so many nonprofits that just don't have the basics down to be able to get to a level where getting to an AI or machine learning algorithm or even in predictive analytics would be useful in the current state. It's great to have the future vision but then in this talk with you today, it's I also don't think they, we probably need to build more of the critical eye into what those algorithms can be doing to make sure what's happening remains the keeps us in an equitable space, as we think about the data, too, because if you just trust the algorithm, someone else created that algorithm. Why is that? And so I feel like there's this twofold path that hopefully everyone's listening to you want to get there. It's a great future state. But what are you doing today with your data? Why are you collecting it? How do you have it? And then before you, as you set up your meta systems to potentially get the data lake and all the other pieces you need technically to get to the, to that mountain, maybe have that critical eye towards it as well, you know, really thinking about why you have it? And is it equitable? And are you cutting out a population that you didn't mean to, which you're looking at? That's

Meena Das 45:48

No, I would, I would stop at 20. I would add that, you know, I tried to think when I talk about these things are right about these things, I try to think from a perspective of a person who has done some amazing job, but not necessarily anything to do with machine learning or AI. So far in life, they have no amazing fundraising experience, they have talked to people, they have the human connection with the people they work with. But they really haven't had a chance to dig into machine learning concepts or AI or anything to do more with Excel. But as that kind of a person who has that experience, I don't want to feel pressured. Because everybody says the word AI, everybody says, machine learning is going to stay, I want to build a journey of my own, for my organization for my community and serving, even though that means for the next six months, I'm going to play more with Excel, and I'm going to learn better itself. And from there, in the next year, I would get into learning AR or maybe Python or get an external help in

making those building those models. But that has to be my journey from where I am coming from into this organization or into this nonprofit to bring more analytics, it cannot be based on someone else's vision, expectations, knowledge, or some other organizations work with this building relationship with AI and machine learning.

Tony Kopetchny 47:13

I've been listening to podcasts on this book, but a lot about our loss of attention. As a as humans and society just in some of the studies were just there's just what happens is everything is so fast, and the data is and the information is coming so fast. And the amount of information sources are so abundant that you make this assumption you can consume a lot of it, but you can't it feels the same as you're getting your data house ready, like don't feel the pressure of the speed because you heard about it. And Citibank has figured out how to make an algorithm like you're not you're not Citibank, you don't have the wherewithal, you don't have their money. Take your time, be patient, use what you got build over time and get there and you're still going to be okay.

Meena Das 47:59

Yeah, and this is what I feel like the tangible translation of that statement would be because they often get, okay, what does that mean on a day to day basis? Like, what when you talk about these things, and kind of one of the ways they feel like that's that should could translate is, you know, you build these strategic plans in your nonprofits, and they don't have to have something like, Okay, the third thing would be we would have advanced systems, advanced tech advanced this. Why don't we have a shorter duration, a strategic plan, or a mini strategic plan out of the bigger strategic plan, which says, We want to invest in getting the organization up to speed for being able to use AI and machine learning stuff like that. That means for some teams, it will translate into having more conversation for it, it would mean getting the data quality in order for the research team means professional development in being able to use those things and talk about those things, like translating that into more concrete steps, but it's possible it's not something that's impossible.

Tony Kopetchny 49:04

Yeah, I think that's important for women to hear this is possible. You gotta you got to have some patience, set a plan. These things don't happen overnight. I've been contemplating on a quote from the other day recently, well, what's the quick win? What's my quick win? And I was like, I just don't think there is some times not not the way you might perceive it. There is no quick technology when you're going to implement and everything starts happening. But I think if you have a heuristic and a plan of what the desired future status, you could put that out to your team, or to your audiences and say, we're here today, this is where we're gonna get to, it's going to look like this to get there. It's not going to happen tomorrow. That mean that that feels like the quick win is at least letting everybody know where you're going. I mean, I this has been a great conversation. I feel like we might need a part two because I can't believe how fast the time went by here. Which is certainly an indicator of a wonderful conversation. So thank you so much. I do have one final question for you that we ask all of our guests And for anyone

who's become a regular listener at this point, you know, we have built a Spotify channel for you to grab the wonderful tunes that all of our guests have been given us. So me know what is your go to song, when you need a boost? And why?

M   Meena Das 50:17
I know I remember you mentioned this and I said, Can I sing?

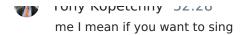Tony Kopetchny 50:21
You could say, please. So this

M   Meena Das 50:24
is actually an Indian song. I grew up, I grew up with this, this, this, this is coming out of the movie, I saw this when I was growing up. And I really liked the song because I'll give I'll share the link with you so you can share with our audience when they're listening. So the purpose of this song is that there's this person who is a first generation immigrant, he moves out, he is in the US, he goes to visit his country at some point, India and he sees some some challenges and gaps, because now there are two worlds inside him one where he grew up, and one where he is learning every day and he's earning and so there are two worlds and there is a huge gap. In the two worlds. It's not just the same the opportunities, the people, the kinds of connections, not the same. So he when he comes back and returns back to the US, he sort of misses home and he tries to see a purpose in what he's doing in the country he wants to be in or he wants to have a better why he wants to have better intentions. And so the countries so the song is sort of a conversation between him and the country and his why. And I like to go back to that song more and more because every time I'm scared, you know, I am nervous and anxious person every time I'm scared of something. I like to hear that song and remind myself where I'm coming from. It's not about just where I'm going to where I'm coming I want to remember every single pain every single day, which led to my why and some of those the conversation came from conversations on buses with strangers now by way back when I was in college, some of those came with people I met when my dad used to drag me around every two years moving to a different city. And so I will be happy to share that thing with you after our conversation and put saying but I don't know if I should say

Tony Kopetchny 52:19
what's the name of the song

M   Meena Das 52:22
I can type it out for you here

Tony Kopetchny 52:28

Tony Kopetchny 52:28

me I mean if you want to sing

Meena Das 52:30

I can I can I can how much you

Tony Kopetchny 52:33

yo so I'm gonna say this right yeah, Joe desh Yeah,

Meena Das 52:38

yeah, that's right. So this is my country. Okay. That's the meaning of the statement so I can come up to you I'm sure the God say hey, somebody say hey, Mara, T hair bukata never been Kenny Henshaw copy go to my he sup man, PK. Hijo questionable. Luck again. I hula cha. Cha Ching. Aleikum. Name. de vida? Me. My golly. Yeah, that's how the communists

Tony Kopetchny 53:46

Oh, thank you. That was wonderful. This is the best clothes we'll ever have, I think on the show. So thank you. Amazing. I really appreciate the thing. It was beautiful. And the conversation was wonderful. So thank you, again, for being with us

Meena Das 54:01

today for having me, I don't think I have the opportunity to sing every on every podcast or conference. So this for me is definitely going to be only one probably where I can. And I will send you a link and I will definitely add it there. There are good translations of the song too. So for anybody who is listening to it, they can really see what this all means. And it helps me to keep remember my why and where I'm coming from. And I hope everybody has a song like that which makes them cherish remember where they're coming from. It really matters to remember our roots and foundations.

Tony Kopetchny 54:36

Wonderful. Thank you so much. Thank you again, and I'll see you next time.

Outro 54:42

Thank you for listening. Join us again for more engaging ideas with your host Parsons TKO CEO Tony Kopetchny. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a comment and share with your friends. Send us your feedback at create change at Parsons tko.com.