

## Ep. 125 Building Organizations that Matter

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:00:03] What does it take as a woman to build a business from the ground up? Are there special challenges that women face? Are there lessons that can be learned from women who have, as they say, been there and done that when it comes to building organizations that matter? My guest today is Maya Ajmera, and she started her first organization, the Global Fund for Children, shortly after she graduated from Duke University with a master of public policy degree. To date, that organization has invested nearly 50 million dollars in over 725 grassroots organizations, reaching 11 million children and youth worldwide. She's now the president and CEO of the Society for Science and publisher of its award winning magazine, Science News. The Society for Science is best known for its world class science competitions and its suite of outreach and equity programs. She's the recipient of leadership awards and fellowships, including the National Science Board Public Service Award. She also serves on numerous boards, including Echoing Green, Kids in Need of Defense and the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics Foundation. Welcome back to Policy 360 Maya.

**Maya Ajmera** [00:01:17] Thanks so much for having me.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:01:23] Your story is so wonderful, I mean, you were just 22 years old and traveling in India where you saw children gathered at a train station learning to read and write at a so-called train platform school, and you call this your moment of obligation? What is a moment of obligation?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:01:44] Well, let me start a bit from the beginning here of that I had received a fellowship after college that allowed me to travel to South and Southeast Asia and had wonderful professors who said, you really want to understand people and understand their aspirations, start traveling for a year, get a backpack and just listen and learn from local communities. And so I did that. I traveled from Thailand to Pakistan for a year after college, and it was in Bhubaneshwar, India, on a train platform that I say I had my moment of obligation. It was on this train platform that I saw 50 kids sitting in a circle learning how to read and write. And there was a teacher in the middle teaching them with flashcards. And I asked what's going on here? And she said, these children live on and around the train platform. They work, they play, they beg, they sleep, but they don't go to school. And I asked well, what is it cost to run one of these schools? And at that time, the 1998 cost \$500 to teach 50 kids with two teachers for one year with a hot meal every day. And it was there that I say I had the moment of obligation. It was one, how do I help? And two, how come I don't see more train platform schools all over India? And that moment of obligation is this sense of you can't sit idly by and not do anything, you have to act. And that moment on the train platform was that moment that I needed to act. So I took that moment of obligation and I decided to put off an M.D., Ph.D. and decided to get my master's in public policy from Duke University.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:03:31] It's interesting that you say that because, you know, I had a similar experience that I won't recount here where where also I was I was traveling overseas and it's it's so -- that exposure to the world and seeing and being shocked in some ways by what you saw into action resonates a lot with me. But how did you, at such a young age, recognize that this was what you needed to do? So many people would have just passed on.

**Maya Ajmera** [00:04:00] You know, I, I, I had this idea of when I started, when I found the train platform schools, then I started really looking at what was going on in people's local

communities. And you started seeing homegrown innovations taking place. And the question becomes is, is that they were capital starved. They didn't have enough capital into these local groups led by local leadership, proximate leadership, and that became a very strong focal point for me when I came to Duke, because I my my background had been neuroscience. I was a science kid my whole life. But I needed to learn about education and policy and statistics and economics and international development. I needed grounding and and the Sanford School of Public Policy gave me that to really build and think about the Global Fund for Children from- from scratch.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:04:59] So while you were going to school, did you in any way sort of engage further with the people you had met or did you sort of put it on the back burner and then you went about going to school?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:05:11] I put it on the back burner and took my courses. And then my second year graduate school at Sanford, I told my graduate school advisor, Dr. William Asher, at that time, who was the founder of the Center for International Development and I said, this is what I want to do after I'm finished. I want to found the Global Fund for Children. And he took out his yellow notebook, says, well, why don't you tell me what that's about? And so I said, what I want to do is put small amounts of capital into really innovative grassroots organizations serving the most vulnerable children and youth in the world and help them become scalable and sustainable. And he he wrote down, you know, lots of notes, asked me a lot of questions, and he said, OK, the center will support you. We'll give you a desk, a chair and a telephone. But you need to go out and raise some money to help support yourself. And that's how the Global Fund for Children was literally founded in an office, a bare office space at the at the Sanford School,

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:06:16] And that-- I actually didn't know that. I think that's really fascinating. Bill Asher surely has inspired a lot of a lot of people, but you took it much further than many other students who had an opportunity to do the same things. How did you then go about just did you know about fundraising? How did you how did you did you write a business plan? What did you do?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:06:38] I wrote a proposal. I wrote a four page proposal. I had Professor Asher look at it. I had a couple of other professors look at it. And there was a lot of elation and extraordinary excitement about it. And then there was one professor who basically said, "Maya, this is going to fail. It's never going to work." And, you know, you get that right in all, in all situations. But I ended up applying to something, a group called Echoing Green, and Echoing Green was founded by General Atlantic, which uses private sector principles to solve social problems. Echoing Green backed Wendy Kopp of Teach for America and Alan Khazei and Michael Brown of City Year. They backed many Duke graduates with their ideas for starting social enterprises and NGOs. And I went in and was interviewed for my for my for my organization. And they gave me 25,000 dollars a year for three years, for four years. And then I had to go out and raise more capital. And I learned an interesting thing about being an alum of an institution like Duke or even my undergraduate at Bryn Mawr, was that there are many that your alumni network plays a really big role in helping to support your dreams, frankly, and didn't really got that from several alumni from Duke who I had the opportunity to meet that learned about my vision of the Global Fund for Children and really backed me for several years to get to get the organization up and running.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:08:32] Did you did you ever just feel like quitting like this was just not going to...?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:08:37] Oh, sure.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:08:38] Yeah. And what did you do in those moments?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:08:42] I had really great mentors like Professor Asher and other folks who said, "OK, you've come towards a rough patch." I remember one time in particular where the founding piece of the Global Fund for Children was a social enterprise called Global Fund for Children's Books. It was children's books. And my first children's book was being turned down by every publisher in New York. It's called "Children from Australia to Zimbabwe". And we ended up self publishing the book, but I had to go out and raise capital to self publish it. The book did so well in North Carolina because we donated three copies to every public school. But I remember that we had literally like two thousand dollars in the bank account. I wasn't sure how we were going to make it. But I also had outstanding proposals to the Kellogg Foundation and a couple of individual donors and they said, stick with it, just stick with it. Let's see what happens. I was thinking about getting another job to support the Global Fund, but I got those grants. And as they say, the rest is history.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:09:45] I'm sure the rest is history, but I'm sure there was a lot more there. Right, because raising the money was one thing, but you, I'm sure, also had to build relationships in the field. And I wonder how how did you build those relationships and and do you think did it at all matter that you were in the field of children, that you you were a woman? Did that matter at all or did it not matter?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:10:10] I don't know if I ever thought that it mattered being a woman in the field at that time. But what I do know is that I knew that the first grant we wanted to make was to the train platform schools. That was going to be sort of the model. And so the first royalty checks we got from the sale of "Children from Australia to Zimbabwe", we put those royalties back into the field immediately. I ended up meeting through my travels quite a few social entrepreneurs on the ground, grassroots leaders that were doing really great work. And it was through networking and actually through letter writing at that time, you know, the Internet would just come to explode. Right. And so I was traveling a lot looking for projects. But once I got our first major grant, I ended up you really you hire really smart people to surround you. And I hired a program officer who's just brilliant, who actually became, as they call a person who went into the field and sourced projects, left to right. And we ended up building on that model of individuals that came from those areas of the world. Understood - understanding proximate leadership and understanding grassroots innovation and figuring out how to support those those organizations.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:11:39] So two thousand dollars, you know, even back then was not a lot. You must have been very persuasive or, you know, you had people who believed in you. What was your strategy? What was your tactic? What was your secret?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:11:56] Well, I mean, my first seed grant was 25000 thousand dollars. And so that supported me through Echoing Green. That's not a lot of money in this day and age, I guess, but. It's really about setting the vision and where do you see the organization going and what did you want to do for children? And for me, it was very clear that there was a large population of children that were invisible to government and and the only way to reach child laborers and street children and girls and minority populations and children with disabilities and street children was really through grassroots organizations, right, and local leaders. And I think that really took people's imaginations, right, and

saying, wow, small amount of money targeted well and locally can do very big things in the developing world and even in the United States. So, you know, I I really started built, you know, I built the organization for 17 years and then decided, like any leader founder, that it was time to let the baby go off to college and for me to do something else. I could have been with the Global Fund for Children for the rest of my life, but felt that it was important for new leadership to come in to take it to the next level.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:13:27] You know, it's very interesting because it's it's your approach was so innovative because in some ways, you know, we had the movement of micro lending going on and you were sort of micro granting.

**Maya Ajmera** [00:13:37] That's right.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:13:38] And and to organizations rather than necessarily individuals.

**Maya Ajmera** [00:13:42] Individuals.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:13:43] Yeah, I think it's fascinating. So I'm wondering, you know, as you were leading this organization, you're starting to build the staff. There's a bunch of skills that nobody really teaches you. But clearly, you were incredibly passionate about what you were doing. Was that passion enough to make you feel like you could do this or were you, say, putting one foot in front of the other, although you had self doubts or did you know where to go?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:14:16] So, yes, I had a lot of self-doubt. I you know, I was young. I, you don't know what you don't know. I learned building a board. I learned about H.R., I learned about, you know, things like benefits. And and you read a lot you ask a lot of other nonprofit leaders how they did it. And I really was about paying it forward when I spent time with the nonprofit leaders giving me advice. They said just pay it forward to somebody else who's in the same position someday, which I've done on many, many, many occasions. And you trip up and you have self-doubt - almost, you know, as women, go through imposter syndrome. When we got, we got more and more well known, I almost sort of had this out of body experiences, some time of looking at myself going is this me? Is this really me? You know, should I really be doing this? But I think the work speaks for itself and the investments that that the organization has made and the fact that the organization stands without me today is a testament to the fact that the organization was not built on a personality, but it was built on an extraordinary model.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:15:40] An idea. An idea. A powerful idea, right. I mean, I think, you know, that is really the core of of of your stories that you had. And, you know, even when you were articulating it in the beginning, the idea was so clear about what you wanted to do. And the sustainability piece at being being able to articulate that vision is so important.

**Maya Ajmera** [00:16:03] I yeah, and, you know, now leading a 100 year old organization like the Society for Science and going back to my science roots, you still use the same tools that I used when founding the Global Fund for Children, even though it's 100 year old organization. It's about passion, it's about vision, and it's about getting individuals excited and seeing something very clearly that's highly important in people's lives.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:16:37] Mm hmm. Did you have a lot of mentors along the way? Did you have any formal coaches even? I mean, that's become so fashionable. Some some of my fellow Deans were like, oh, we have coaches. I'm like, should I be having one? How did you how did you navigate all that? Did you have folks you could lean on outside the organization as well?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:17:00] Well, my board, they were a great source. At the beginning, professor Asher was a great source of support and several philanthropists were great sources of support, not just financially, but just providing me insight and advice. Individuals like Adele Richardson Ray, the Hewlett family, Esther Hewlett and Juliette Gimon, and the late Richard B. Fisher, Morgan Stanley and Robert - Mr Robert K. Steel, who's a Duke grad, was an enormous support and mentor to me during the early days. And you search out people, you really search out folks who can who can really lend a ear, but also provide strategic advice. One big piece of advice I learned was to stay away from people who sucked the passion out of you. And I found some of those. They were just naysayers the whole time. And I basically learned very quickly to stay away from them or you just won't be able to do your work.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:18:08] Was that an advice, was that a piece of advice anybody gave you or was that were you sort of learned along the way?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:18:13] I think somebody gave me that advice, but I can't remember.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:18:19] I think it's very true. You know, you lead an organization, you know, they're always going to be naysayers. That's part of what you just have to accept that you can't make them go away. But how do you not make them suck the life out of you, right?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:18:33] Right.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:18:33] I think that's really, really key. So what? So what? So how did you not let them do that when they knocked on your door and they were naysayers? How did you emotionally not let them take your passion and your energy?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:18:48] I just you know, you just walk away. I know a few instances where I thought they were going to, you know, take it out of me. But you just call really good friends and they're like, "stop, just don't listen to them, move on." And and you just get stronger and stronger and you still have naysayers, but you just still have to keep pushing forward and believing in what you're doing. And it's not that you don't want to get challenging responses from individuals because you do. You want people to challenge you. You want people to deconstruct your argument. What you don't want is people to say, "You can't do this. This is ridiculous. This is dumb. You're out of your mind." or "You're you're too young to be doing this." God, I had so many people who said, "how old are you? You're too young." or or sort of indications about my gender, right? Like, you know, is this something you really should be doing? So but, you know, now I lead a major scientific institution and you still come up around things like that. Right? A woman leading a science scientific institution. And not only that, a woman of color leading a scientific institution. I've been in places where someone will walk right by me and shake the hands because they thought that person was the CEO of the organization. And that blows my mind constantly, like, wow.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:20:25] Has your leadership style changed much over the years or not just over the years, but also as you move from one organization to the other?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:20:33] I would say that one piece that stayed the same is hiring really smart people to surround you who know a heck of a lot more than you do, but that you have the critic but the CEO having critical thinking skills to ask the right questions. So I'm going to hire the best CFO ever. I'm going to hire the best program officer ever. I'm going to hire the best communications officer ever. Right. And they're the experts in their fields, but also knowing the right questions to ask. Right. That's one piece. One piece also is I love a team that just takes initiative and are entrepreneurial and come to me with new ideas. I just love it.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:21:18] It doesn't have all to come from you.

**Maya Ajmera** [00:21:19] Right. And I'd love loved seeing that at Global Fund for Children. And I love seeing it at the Society for Science and the newsroom I lead at Science News. It is so much fun and gratifying to see someone say, Maya, I have this idea, da da da da. What do you think? I said, OK, go for it. You know, first is how much it's going to cost, I think. And then we say, OK, it's a great idea. Let's figure out how we're going to raise the money for it or let me see if we can pull money from other places for to to test something. Right. I'm a big believer in empowering people to to be entrepreneurial. Right. I think it's fun.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:22:05] What you're saying resonates so much with me. Not needing to be seen like the only source of ideas and allowing those around you to shine and giving them the credit.

**Maya Ajmera** [00:22:17] If you have a really extraordinary team, it's so much fun to support their initiatives and to back them and to see them thrive and to see their teams thrive. I'll give a great example. In my current work, the Society for Science founded the International Science and Engineering Fair in 1950, and we've built local science fairs throughout the world from the grassroots. We now have a 400 affiliated fair science fairs in 80 countries, regions and territories. We have been in person every year since last year before Covid hit. We had to pivot very quickly of how we were going to do an international science fair. Right? Everything closed down in March 2020. Last year we did we celebrated the the finalists, the projects, the science projects from around the world. This year we're going to have a competition. We are going to have the largest fair ever, we're going to have over fifteen hundred projects from over 2000 students from 65 countries, regions and territories. Each project will get four video interviews with two judges. And we've had to build these digital platforms, right, to be able to do all this. We're going to be awarding five million dollars in awards virtually to these students. And they are the most powerful STEM visionaries in the world. And half of them are young women and a quarter of them are coming in with patents or patent ready. These are high school students. They are the next Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg and and others of the world. And diversity, equity and inclusion is really important because we see kids from rural North Carolina and rural Alabama and Indonesia and Zimbabwe coming in and and putting forth their scientific innovations and engineering innovations. So that's what leadership's about. It's about how well do you pivot in a crisis? And we were able to do that. And we've now become sort of a role model for others of how we're doing this work, frankly.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:24:32] That is so, so exciting. And, you know, I think about in the military, when they do training, you know, they teach cadets or whatever to do certain

routines and then then afterwards they say, OK, now do the same one, but with a giant backpack on, right? And in the pandemic, it's a little bit like that. And and that hones your skills in a way that just operating under normal circumstances doesn't. I love the innovation you brought into it.

**Maya Ajmera** [00:24:59] Well, you have to, right? You know, if we had not pivoted to becoming -- we're now a digital organization. If we had not pivoted, I don't know what would have happened to us as an institution, frankly. Of course, Science News that I'm publisher of is an all women led newsroom of science, PhD science journalists. But we're all digital as well as the paper magazine. But all of this had to be pivoted very quickly. Women are good at pivoting. I will say that I think women are really good at crisis leadership too.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:25:40] Do you think that's because we just have to multitask more in general?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:25:44] I do, I do, I mean, here I am, a CEO, publisher, I serve on a multiple number of boards that are going through their own crises, right, of everything going on. And the mother of an eight year old, a wife, you know, I have elderly parents and I'm just doing multiple, multiple juggling. Right. And and just having lists and lists and lists. Right. But then I also look at the global sphere of how well women leaders of countries have done with Covid. I think a great example is New Zealand, right? Or even Angela Merkel of Germany to a certain degree. And of course, Kamala Harris now being our vice president. I just think we need to be looking and learning from women leaders more. What makes them different and how do they lead in different ways? And I know a lot's been written about it, but especially during this time of crisis. I think it's quite interesting.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:26:49] Maya, what's one piece of advice you would give other aspiring female leaders?

**Maya Ajmera** [00:26:56] Stay away from people who suck the passion out of you.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:27:00] I love it. I love it. So I think that I've learned a lot just from this short conversation. I wish we didn't have to end it now. But thank you so much for joining us.

**Maya Ajmera** [00:27:13] Thank you so much for having me.

**Dean Judith Kelley** [00:27:16] It's so wonderful to see our alumni out in the world making a difference. Maya Ajmera is the president and CEO of the Society for Science and the publisher of Science News. She founded the Global Fund for Children and is a published author of more than 20 award winning children's books. We'll have a link to her website at ours -- [policy360.org](http://policy360.org). We'll be back soon with another conversation. I'm Judith Kelly.