

Getting Free Together Ep. 7

The Importance of Saying No with Niloufar Khonsari

Leander + Stas (00:00)

This is Leander, and you're listening to Getting Free Together. We're here today with Niloufar Khonsari, who is an amazing author and advocate for workplace democracy. And the founder of Pangea Legal Services and Bala Rising, and is a facilitator and organizational consultant.

Leander + Stas (00:21)

In this conversation, we talk about the wisdom of endings and what are some of the cultural barriers to embracing that and being able to say no as and within organizations. And we also talk about what it means to bring transformative justice values and practices into a collaborative workplace.

Leander + Stas (00:56)

we're really excited to talk about building a culture of workplace care and also to dig into their book, *The Future is Collective*, which I would highly recommend for anyone who's interested in these topics.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (01:08)

Thank you so much for having me.

Leander + Stas (01:09)

let's start by just talking about how did we meet? And this was actually rather recent.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (01:14)

Yeah. Leander, you and I were at the Nonprofit Democracy Network consultation sessions that they host. Nicole Wires started it and facilitates the space of having consultants, coaches, leaders like us support organizations and offer sort of

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (01:33)

Thought partnership and guidance, share experiences, and a lot of times we learn from each other. And I I remember when I saw you, Leander, I was like, and you introduced yourself, I was like, like a fellow queer, and they're so kind and have this calm energy. I love this. It was a it was a sweet connection, kind of right away.

Leander + Stas (01:54)

yeah, that's actually an open drop-in space as well. So we can include the link to that SolidariTea resource that the Sustainable Economy Law Center puts on. And you can come and have chats with with people like us and with Nilu. so that's a a really cool resource that SELC is putting on now. And yeah, I know I I think that's such a great way to meet people with similar

interests and then looking into your

Leander + Stas (02:20)

Book, which I always I always click the links when people are like, I just did this project. and I was like, wow, this is so similar to the themes in our book, Getting Free Together, which it also came out recently. And we have to talk more with this person. so yeah, thank you so much for joining us today. And I'm excited to to dig in. Yeah, and I'll say this is my first time officially meeting you, although when Lea sent the link to our whole co-op, we were all like,

Leander + Stas (02:45)

This is amazing. This is so exciting. What a cool person. I can't wait to connect with them. And I really enjoyed reading your book on flights and trains kind of between travel and a little bit more kind of refreshing this morning and being like, we are making some really shared references. So I'm so excited to dig in and have more conversation. And I look forward to a longer journey of collaboration and learning from you and sharing resources beyond our conversation today as well.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (03:11)

Ditto, thank you so much for inviting me on and sharing this opportunity to learn and and grow and share.

Leander + Stas (03:18)

Great. So I'd love to yeah, just kind of get to know you a little bit more by hearing about what are some everyday practices of liberation that support you as a person and if it feels, you know, like there are some connections there, which movements are inspiring you this year?

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (03:36)

Yeah. I mean everyday practices, I think I just think of community and people, people who nourish me and who I have become more intentional about prioritizing and yeah and and kind of making space for less less

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (03:54)

clutter, less like volume of people, but more like quality and you know, just deeper, deeper connections, and one on ones and like small dinners. there's a there's a tradition I've had in community with friends and loved ones over the last 15, 16 years since I moved to San Francisco, since I moved to the Bay Area. And

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (04:16)

It's a poetry gathering that we have. everybody brings poems to share. Some of us are not me, some of us some of our participants are poets and bring original pieces. And it's kind of a an ongoing practice. We rotate spaces sometimes at a park, some sometimes at folks's homes. I have one coming up soon. And it's something that it's it's poetry art is a way of

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (04:41)
deep liberation and beauty and connection for me.

Leander + Stas (04:44)
I love that.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (04:45)
Okay.

Leander + Stas (04:45)
I I feel like the connection of like actually choosing to engage with people around art and creativity feels so important. and feels connected to this sense that we create our world and that everyday life is even poetic. And I think that invitation to see the way that our relationships are a like embodiment of poetry on multiple levels feels really powerful. I think about that a lot in the

Leander + Stas (05:09)
kind of creative meetups that we also host regularly. And I have a friend who's been talking recently about, you know, what does it look like for us to really balance tending to the one-on-one interpersonal relationships alongside the group? and that so often it feels like there's a choice between those, of like

Leander + Stas (05:26)
Also around how we're managing our time, you know? where like especially if you have limited time, it's like, well, why don't I see all the people I love at the same time? And then how do you actually prioritize spending time one-on-one? I think I tend to come across as someone who shares a lot and who's like very open.

Leander + Stas (05:45)
But that almost obscures how private I actually am. There's just a lot of topics that I feel comfortable talking about, but that those are often not what I'm like actively processing and dealing with. They're things that I feel

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (05:56)
Yeah.

Leander + Stas (05:56)
like, yeah, let's talk about the world, let's talk about creativity. I have all these experiences in my life and in my work that I feel really comfortable talking to people about. I think I'm just like relatively comfortable talking, and that gives the illusion of intimacy.

Leander + Stas (06:11)
and I think something that I've chosen to be more direct with some of my friends about recently is like, you know, if we're not finding one-on-one time, there's a lot going on with me that you're

actually not hearing about. because it I'm just not gonna bring it up in a group setting. we're having fundamentally different conversations and a fundamentally different type of connection if we don't if we do prioritize one on one time with each other. And I think

Leander + Stas (06:36)

That's been a helpful thing to be more explicit with some of the people in my life about because they don't always perceive that in the way that I show up in group settings. so I I really resonate with what you were sharing.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (06:47)

Hmm. Thank you. Yeah, there's something special about poetry too that allows for that a little bit of one on one or intimacy. It's because the setting is like, you know, we sit in a circle where everyone is focused on one topic, as opposed to like a party where everybody just comes together and there's, you know, little groups talking. it's yeah, maybe small talk, maybe deeper, but the

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (07:09)

This this poetry setting is is very intimate in a group setting where everyone's attention is on one poem. Everyone is reflecting and analyzing and like sharing what what came up around one poem. And everyone shares different poems and and different things come up and it's yeah, it is it's kind of special and then there's also a place and time for the like deeper one-on-one going in.

Leander + Stas (07:33)

I'll say for me, I've been doing a lot of traveling lately and really drawing on my Qigong practice in terms of just thinking of like, wow, I am in what I would describe as a hellacious airport situation right now, and the energy around me is

Leander + Stas (07:50)

Pretty bad. Horrible. and how can I center myself and really like draw my boundaries and think about like what energy am I holding for myself? And what energy am I open to letting in? And what energy am I letting just pass me by? and so that was yeah, especially being in transit for so many hours in the last month.

Leander + Stas (08:17)

I think that that's really was helpful for me to be like attuned to like what is around me and what of that am I really like welcoming in and immersing myself in and what of that is is not for me in this moment.

Leander + Stas (08:29)

I'm curious about that other part of the question of which movements are inspiring you recently.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (08:34)

There's so many, there's so many movements that inspire me, but I think the main thing, like all the movements that are moving towards some kind of abolition, inspire me. Prison abolition, immigrant detention and deportation, abolition, controls of any kinds of freedoms, like gender, sexuality, reproductive rights, all the the whole, the whole range. and

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (08:56)

Yeah, the the movements last year around in in Iran that the last years really like the uprisings, woman life freedom, to bring about more of a democracy and free freeness in in my homeland.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (09:13)

All of those have been really inspiring. And I have many organizational clients that I love that inspire me every day on a, you know, on a very local grounded level. And one of them, you know, we were speaking about poetry. I there's one that centers art and poetry, an arts organization in Contra Costa County. And what I love about their work is that they

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (09:36)

You know, they are kind of built with this abolitionist lens, they don't speak it so directly, but they are creating programs for at-risk youth and incarcerated youth to receive arts training, skills development, like professional development and like really holistic supports. And they their goal is to like to reduce recidivism and incarceration and create kind of alternatives to that. And

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (09:59)

The most inspiring organizations or the most inspiring movements that I see are the ones that also build in the alternative, not just the abolition piece, but the

Leander + Stas (10:09)

Mm-hmm.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (10:10)

like how to, the what is the thing piece, which yeah, there are there are many organizations. Another like one specific great organization,

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (10:17)

as the Anti-Police Terror Project in Oakland. And

Leander + Stas (10:20)

Mm-hmm.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (10:21)

they are creating these really amazing alternative systems, alternative a crisis hotline of who to call instead of the police, you know, wellness programs, free acupuncture, free massages for wellness for the community, and so many more things. And so like abolitionist centered work that that lifts up the

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (10:40)

The alternative is the most inspiring to me. And it's also it's also kind of what was the my intention and my what drove me in writing the book, *The Future is Collective*. there was so much of like, here's what not to do, here are the problems. Everybody dwells on that so much. And especially in our movements, you know, we're like abolish this, you know, down with this, down with the system, smash it.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (11:04)

But then what's there? Like what do we have left if we just smash everything? What's there and what are we building? And yeah, I'm really, really inspired by what we are building. And there's so many groups and spaces that are really living into the alternative and trying things on, stumbling and thriving

Leander + Stas (11:20)

I love that. And I think that you know, a lot of people have abolitionist politic, but it's also unique to have an explicitly abolitionist collective or cooperative. And I think that's one of the things that feels so powerful is to connect with other networks that are choosing to be explicit about what it means for them to be abolitionists and that idea of the absence and the presence and that like we're building the thing that needs to exist in order for us to still respond to violence and harm.

Leander + Stas (11:47)

While centering healing and accountability.

Leander + Stas (12:19)

we just completed our summer transformative justice cohort program as well. And part of what we've been kind of at the core of this cohort this summer was over time, there's been more and more excitement and building of awareness of the language of abolition and transformative justice.

Leander + Stas (12:37)

But that's

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (12:37)

Mm.

Leander + Stas (12:38)

not always connected to the embodied practices of what it actually looks like to show up for one another through the lens of abolition. And I think that that feels connected to the way that abolitionist frameworks can sometimes be perceived as only about destruction or getting rid of things. And in my experience of being an abolitionist and being so deeply connected to abolitionist organizers, is there's such a commitment to showing up.

Leander + Stas (13:03)

And to like actually doing the work to address violence that feels different from the way that those words are sometimes used in more academic settings or online. And a lot of what we've been focusing on this summer is like, what does it look like to be in lineage and accountability to practice with the words that we're using? What does it look like to actually be in relationship and asking each other, how is the way that I'm behaving and showing up in line with the language and theories that I'm drawing?

Leander + Stas (13:31)

How do you see me in my everyday practice showing up in alignment with what we're talking about here? And that's, you know, part of what you were talking about in your book of like actually choosing to have the hard conversations consistently and proactively. and that's what's so interesting about working with organizations is that even organizations that claim to be really about social change or even abolition sometimes aren't actually embodying the day-to-day practices that would require

Leander + Stas (13:58)

that would be required in order for us to show up for one another in a way that would prevent us from relying on punishment in carceral systems. We still see the kind of punishment showing up in our working relationships with one another and the way that we think about feedback and the way that we think about conflict and avoid conflict within our working dynamics with one another. So I think it's like so interesting to think about how do we

Leander + Stas (14:22)

see these big beautiful ideas in action through large scale campaigns and incredible books and really cool concepts. And what does that look like on the micro level, on the day-to-day in our lives and relationships and in the way that we choose to work with one another? And I think that's what's so cool about the approach that you took in the book.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (14:42)

Yeah, thank you. I was it was very intentional to make it like really grounded and practical. And you know, to really like give living examples. my own and like my own stumbles and and learnings and many others who have really beautiful concrete practices. and I love how you Stas, how you just described the really s in like a

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (15:04)

concise summary, like the absence and the presence, like the combination of the two that we need both. We we're good at like saying, you know, we need this to be absent. And the, you know, but what do we need to be present? And the concreteness, the micro level, like you said, is is what a lot of people are hungry for and and want more of.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (15:23)

And I'm I'm one of them. I'm really curious what you've seen, what you've seen.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (15:27)

work in you know in this framework of lineage and practice what you shared a moment ago. Are there is there is there an example, like something specific that's coming to mind?

Leander + Stas (15:36)

Ooh, there's so many examples.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (15:38)

Yeah.

Leander + Stas (15:39)

and I think that absence and presence is a framing from Beth Ritchie around what does abolition mean and look like that I think and and Mariam Kaba also talks about that absence and presence

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (15:49)

Mm-hmm.

Leander + Stas (15:50)

framework that I think is so helpful. there's kind of two different things that feel connected to what we're talking about. One is the lineage piece of like what does it mean to be in relationships.

Leander + Stas (16:01)

Around these practices. And, part of what we we talk about, and there's a an organizer, a friend of mine, I was in a cohort with Southerners on New Ground now quite a few years ago. That was it's the Lorde's Work Cohort, Lorde being Audre Lorde, And in that I gave a presentation on transformative justice. I think this was in 2018 maybe.

Leander + Stas (16:19)

And another person in the group is was a doula and was talking about how all communities have had the skills and the ability to bring babies into this world historically. Of course, that's how our lineages have continued. and through the professionalization and medicalization of birth work, our communities have lost those skills, a lot of them have lost the sense that everyone in the community or someone in every community.

Leander + Stas (16:44)

Has the ability to bring babies into the world. And then when it becomes medicalized and professionalized, that's when there's all these structural biases that end up shaping the kind of inequity in birth and in the kind of health impacts that happen, particularly for Black women, for trans folks, right? And that that is also true for conflict work, that all communities have had.

Leander + Stas (17:05)

internal practices and norms about around how to show up for one another when conflict and violence and harm happens. and as that has become this professional thing that we call an external line to be able to answer, there's been this loss of wisdom and skill. And when we talk about the in the cohort thinking about connecting to lineage, there's often this sense of like the right people to quote, the right references to make about about transformative justice of

Leander + Stas (17:32)

There's these specific organizers and these specific folks who have kind of coined this language and that we all turn to. And I think, you know, it feels important that I feel like I have personal relationships with a lot of those people, which is why I'm quoting those people. But I'm also really intentional to quote people that are from my own life, from other lineages, because the reality is that all of us have lineages that we can draw on if we look.

Leander + Stas (17:56)

closely, if we're not looking for the words, but instead we're looking for the practices. If we go further back, we actually choose to tune into our own people and actually choose to tune into the stories that we often dismiss from our neighborhoods, from our families, from our ancestors, from our chosen ancestors, that there are all of these examples of people showing up for one another and responding through mutual aid and de escalation and

Leander + Stas (18:23)

conflict support in our own communities that we can turn to as models and examples that we can draw on and we can be in relationship with them more around what have we learned from them. And we don't have to look just for who's using the right words. We can instead look to who in our lives has modeled how to show up for one another, whether it's kitchen table mediation in the way that a a nonna or an auntie

Leander + Stas (18:48)

has, you know, held space for family members and kids when they're arguing, or if it's, you know, communal practices with land and the way that we see stewarding the land and turning to herbs as a healing medicine. Maybe in our communities it is called something else, but ultimately it's the way that we also tend to relationships. And so it's an invitation to look to where in your lineage can you find further inspiration for the practice.

Leander + Stas (19:16)

Of showing up for one another non-punitively, centering healing and accountability without depending on external intervention. And all of us have the ability to find that in our lineages because we live in an environment, particularly in the United States, of the highest reliance on carcerality and policing in any time in history, which means that there's an infinite number of options of other ways to do things beyond the way that we've been socialized to do them. So I think that like,

Leander + Stas (19:43)

That lineage piece, there's a very clear example of stories I can tell from my life, from my family, from my friendships, from even just how I was as a kid with other kids who were dealing with a ton of drama and didn't want to turn to parents. There's all these examples of things that to me are clearly transformative justice, but we weren't necessarily using that language to describe it. And then I think, you know, without getting into the weeds, because I think that's what each of these books is about, there's all these other examples of.

Leander + Stas (20:09)

Tangible things we can do in our workplaces to bring those skills in and to kind of use the wisdom from our communities, from our lineages to think about the way that we show up in conversation with one another and the way that we offer feedback as a gift and through an investment in one another with care, in the ways that we're receptive to feedback and the willingness to transform. I think about Mary Hook saying that our mandate in this time is to be willing to transform in service of the work.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (20:35)

that's so beautiful. yeah, and I yeah, I just want to underscore the part you just shared about that all of us have lineage and examples in our roots that are that are non-carceral, that are collective, that are community centered and and have so much wisdom. And it's in every single culture on every continent where there have been people.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (21:00)

that's so beautiful and connective that the way that you just shared that. Thank you.

Leander + Stas (21:31)

and I'll say that I was really excited when I got to the chapter about conflict in your book and saw that so many of the references that you're making are to transformative practices and things drawing on transformative justice. I think that that's a connection that feels very strong for us because, you know, of course we didn't start out saying, like, I wanna

Leander + Stas (21:53)

Change the world by being an organizational consultant. I think that's something that you obviously arrive at after a lot of other projects.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (22:00)

Well,

Leander + Stas (22:00)

but you know, we got into this work through addressing gender-based violence, through community-based approaches that were more culturally responsive to needs in LGBTQ+ communities, and to other marginalized people who don't feel

Leander + Stas (22:20)

Served by turning to formal reporting processes around sexual and gender based harm, which led us to restorative practices, restorative justice, transformative justice. and I think that as more and more people have become aware of the need for abolition and the need for community accountability and

Leander + Stas (22:42)

The way that not being able to address conflict and work across difference and make decisions makes it impossible for us to build power as communities and organize effectively. many, many people have come to us with this question of like, I want to live into these values in my life. That feels hard enough. And then when I take it to my workplace, that feels impossible. And I face all these barriers of.

Leander + Stas (23:07)

HR and liability and siloing and just boundaries around like don't talk about that at work, the way that hierarchy stifles feedback culture. and so I think that that's a connection that feels very clear in my life and experience and one that I see a lot of other people looking for. And yet it's not a connection I've really seen made that explicitly in other

Leander + Stas (23:32)

works. And so I really appreciated that. and that to differentiate, we've coined and work with the term of organizational accountability to situate like what does it mean for an organization which is a you know formal entity of some sort to attempt to live into some of these community-based, what are really like personal transformative practices.

Leander + Stas (23:56)

and to kind of bridge like how can we as organizations and collectives of people live into our values, build cultures of care, address conflict and harm in ways that are not just about liability and stifling, and then having transformative, kind of self-healing, feedback based cultures. So yeah, I was just so excited to see this and that's

Leander + Stas (24:22)

I'm definitely gonna be recommending this this book to a lot of people. But yeah, I'm curious like how did that connection with like realizing how much building a liberatory or liberatory organization connected to transformative practices and abolition? how did that connection emerge for you?

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (24:40)

I think that

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (24:41)

like many of like many of my peers and like some of the folks stas that you mentioned earlier, who say, you know, we wanna like live into these like certain values, but then we join an

organization and then it's the organization says they're, you know, they're aligned with these values or says they intend they want to do this, but then their actual practices every day are not aligned. and I would just

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (25:05)

Say to that, me too. I said a lot of things, you know, starting out the organization, my former organization, Pangea. you know, and I was so inspired by worker cooperatives internationally, globally, and you know, had these intentions of being collectively led and cooperative and have these like, you know, non-hierarchical practices and and the in reality.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (25:28)

I was acting out and like behaving in a way that was very hierarchical and top-down in with respect to my colleagues at certain times. And I learned through through making mistakes and hurting folks you know, with that inconsistency that I was bringing. And I'm still learning.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (25:47)

and I you know, coming back to one of your earlier questions of what are some of your liberatory practices, gentleness and kindness for not just others and you know the organizations I work with, but also for myself, you know, we're we're learning, we're unlearning, I'm unpacking a lot of what has been ingrained and conditioned for me. And and I did a lot of that in my 10 years at Pangea.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (26:10)

with the help of my colleagues. I had gracious colleagues. I had not so gracious colleagues. And I'm grateful for both for the gift of the feedback they gave me and the grace that I had the opportunity of like moving through. So the transformative justice like principles and values and like the feedback practices that I talk about,

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (26:30)

They came kind of after we didn't have it and I didn't practice those. and yeah, and you know our our coach and consultant years later, Sheena Wadawan said to us in a feedback training, you know, mistakes,

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (26:45)

are the greatest gift of learning. It's like the the space in which we transform and like an opportunity to really build and grow and develop. and I really, really feel that and experience that firsthand over and over again.

Leander + Stas (27:00)

I appreciate that so much because, you know, us too, of course, right? Like that's the journey of of building these skills. And I think part of why at least I move into the consulting role is so that hopefully other people can make different mistakes or maybe, maybe not less, but just different ones. So that we're not repeating the same cycles, but we're evolving together as a movement,

right? And I think something that I wonder that feels like a

Leander + Stas (27:24)

Core tension in transformative justice work and in organizational development is this question of how many chances people get, or like how much should someone be willing to transform in order to fit what the organization needs? Or how much should the organization be willing to transform in order to meet someone where they are? And at what point do you define limits and say, actually, this isn't

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (27:48)

Yeah.

Leander + Stas (27:49)

the right fit? And, you know.

Leander + Stas (27:51)

we need to be doing things separately or we need to kind of in order to say yes to how we need to operate, we need to say no to the requests of this person or to the way that this person is working. That sense of like endings and boundaries feels like a really tricky zone to know how to navigate, which is a similar thing we discuss around boundaries in community accountability work and transformative justice is if someone's, you know, committing harm.

Leander + Stas (28:18)

in the community and we're committed to not punishing them but working through, you know, repair and transformation. At what point do people need boundaries or do we say we this is enough? We've gone through this process enough. You know, like that question of how do we define endings and boundaries feels like it can often be the the kind of tension point that people bring up when we talk about being inspired by transformative justice in the workplace is

Leander + Stas (28:46)

that it enables this kind of constant cycle of moving through tension and conflict instead of saying enough, we need to move on, that ends up burning people out and and leading to issues amongst the organization, you know? Or if you do say this actually isn't a good fit, we need to be able to move forward. And people say, how can you claim to be inspired by transformative justice and non-punishment while, you know, firing someone or ending a program?

Leander + Stas (29:13)

or something like that. And I think there's a really interesting chapter on endings in your book. And I'm I'm curious how your thinking around this question has evolved because it feels like such a juicy topic and something that's so relevant to this question of how we're inspired by these values within workplaces.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (29:32)

Yeah, God, this is this is the juiciest and hardest topic, I think, for every organization I have worked with personally. And it's the

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (29:43)

It's the most charged emotionally. There's so many feelings and personal experiences and history stacked on top of it. This idea of transition and letting people go. And it can be related to conflict. It can be related to, you know, harm, but it can also be, you know, performance based. though, you know, needs are not being met in accordance to the mission. It can also be values misalignment.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (30:07)

and I I I wonder before I go on a little bit deeper into this, I'm curious if there are other broad categories that that you might want to add or if those feel like the main ones like performance, values, harm.

Leander + Stas (30:21)

would add the self-awareness of the worker about their

Leander + Stas (30:27)

drives in life and access needs also comes up a lot because we enter workplaces or organizing environments and they teach us a lot about ourselves, including workplaces that are doing really transformative work. And so that's been a theme with a number of the endings that we've had in our organization is people realizing that they feel called to doing

Leander + Stas (30:51)

slower place based work offline. and that working primarily digitally, even though that meets access needs for a lot of people, myself included, doesn't actually feel good

Leander + Stas (31:02)

But but that that's not something that was already necessarily known.

Leander + Stas (31:06)

Yeah for like conflicting structural needs from the organization itself. and like the organization not needing to be everything for everyone, but actually doing a very specific thing with a specific structure means that we may have the same vision, even we may even have the same values, but the way that we go about doing the work may not be complementary to one another.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (31:26)

Hmm. Yeah, I appreciate that. it kind of reminds me of what relationship expert Esther Perel says about partners and how we can't expect one partner to meet every single need in our relationship. And our this is in romantic relationships, this is in personal relationships that that she talks about, you know, and

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (31:45)

historically we had, you know, the church for spiritual needs. We had you know, the spouse for reproductive needs. We had the, you know, we had different spaces. We had family and friends, we had different spaces to meet different needs. And now we expect one person to meet every single need. And in some ways that's translating to the workplace.

Leander + Stas (32:05)

Mm-hmm.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (32:06)

where, you know, especially in social justice spaces where we're so values aligned and we go in

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (32:10)

We expect the workplace to be our political home, our therapy home, our like social justice, like value driven space, and then, you know, meet every single access need. And it's a lot to put in one one bucket

Leander + Stas (32:23)

Mm-hmm.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (32:24)

to to try to meet needs. And there's there's some boundaries that it seems like

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (32:28)

Yeah, are worth with worth unpacking.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (32:30)

coming back to the question of, letting folks go or transitions in organizations, and what really stood out in your question was

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (32:38)

You know, how could you how could you call yourself a transformative justice organization and you know and fire this person, you know, or go about it in this way? And what from my experience, what's really underneath that question is a series of other questions that might be connected to like fear, anger, hurt, other other things like, you know, am I next? Like

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (33:01)

Am am I safe? As my colleagues say, you know, vitality and health insurance and like everything that the system has has constructed and connected to the employment, are they gonna be held? There's no safety net, you know, we're responsible. And

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (33:17)

For organizations, one of the things I would I recommend for many organizations, especially

when I meet them at a time when their relationships are strong and trust is high, is to in from that place to build in education and shared language around letting folks go. not not when it's, you know, time to let somebody go, or when there's some conflict or some under,

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (33:39)

Performance or organizational needs not being met. So from a place of strength and a place of solid footing, from there to really start unpacking the collective values and collective needs, organizational needs, around when a separation might be possible and what the process is for that in each organization.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (33:59)

And to have shared language and to have clear understanding of what processes and what limits and boundaries we might have. And my personal value and belief is that we have to have a policy and process for letting folks go. unless our mission or this purpose of the organization is to employ people. Like our purpose is to keep everyone employed.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (34:19)

That's our whole, you know, organizational structure and purpose. Like everyone who comes, like we want them to be employed here. If it's not, if that's not your purpose or your mission, then you are gonna meet people that you're gonna have to separate from. Just as they are free to separate from you, you have to organizationally protect as a collective. and as in collectives especially, we're especially vulnerable to

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (34:43)

organizational harm. Because there's so much care and deference and trust in each individual that comes that if somebody comes without that same alignment and reciprocity, it really hurts people. It really, really hurts a extended numbers of people. So two things that are important to get clear on.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (35:01)

one, job descriptions. I think, you know, every organization, many of us don't have them or have like old ones from ages ago. One of the things I do with a lot of groups is just like encourage and make space and time for like developing some clear, detailed job descriptions with categories of work with prioritization. You know, I've seen organizations, I've seen individuals who were evaluated and their performance evaluation came out great.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (35:26)

Because they didn't the person didn't have a clear job description and the the jobs they had been doing were not jobs that they were hired to do. And they were not meeting the needs of the organization in a way that they were originally intended and hired to do the work. and another another issue I've seen is there is often no space to address the values, the organizational values or collective values.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (35:50)

and this is where having written points of unity like my former organization used to used to call it, or or values that are also a part of the evaluation or a part of a person's review, can be a safeguard from potential harm by an individual.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (36:06)

The other

Leander + Stas (36:06)

Mm-hmm.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (36:07)

like very, very concrete thing that I mention in in the book in the future is collective is having a process for letting people go early. Early is easier, like in any relationship, whether it's personal, friendship.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (36:21)

romantic professional, you kind of you kind of already have a feel for where the relationship is going in the first months, often. sometimes you don't. But often you kind of have a sense like, you know, I've seen certain patterns before, or I don't I can see this is not gonna, you know, this is not gonna be the person I'm gonna grow old with or I'm gonna see, you know, retire at our organization. and

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (36:44)

Having a very heavier investment and heavier input in onboarding, in training and support in the beginning, and and a collective practice around whether or not this person will stay or not, is a really wonderful best practice that I've seen in a lot of cooperatives, worker cooperatives have

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (37:03)

you know, often have like a one year onboarding process before the person is fully hired and becomes a member of the co-op. And yeah, I'm curious what if you all have this or you can relate to that. and it's it's a wonderful safeguard for any collectively led organization and movement space that's that's looking to really yeah be intentional about their process of onboarding as much as about offboarding.

Leander + Stas (37:28)

Yeah, I was going to bring that up because that is more of a norm in the co-op space, which is, you know, of course, the space in which workers are like the space is about the empowerment and ownership of

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (37:40)

Mm-hmm.

Leander + Stas (37:41)

the worker. And so it's interesting that that is a best practice in that space because it is something that also protects the well being of the people that already work there.

Leander + Stas (37:52)

as well. And that is what we did in our hiring process. we typically hire in cohorts, so we'll hire people in small groups and then have them go through a you know up to two year onboarding process. but what you described in your book is actually not something I've heard of nonprofits adopting very much. is having like

Leander + Stas (38:14)

small pods that then have planned checkpoints. And that we did actually the same cadence of three, six, nine, twelve months. and it's a checkpoint. So you need a yes consent in both directions to move forward. And there's something in there too that feels kind of like maybe this is a little half baked, but it does feel connected to

Leander + Stas (38:39)

like straight monogamy culture to presume like now we've started this beautiful full-time employment relationship that will just continue forever. And you know, of course our assessment or our initial of impression of each other is the thing that we should rely on for the next thirty years. It's giving married at first sight. It's giving married at first sight. It's giving arranged marriage, yeah. Instead of especially because your closest colleagues often don't participate in a hierarchical hiring process.

Leander + Stas (39:06)

so it's just this sort of like assigned new supervisor that you have that you're like, well, I guess I'm stuck with this person. Forever. Forever. or until I leave, honestly. Right. whereas it's very empowering to first recognize the power and consent of the person being hired. And I think that sort of checkpoint also gives them a lot of autonomy and power to say, actually, this is not, you know.

Leander + Stas (39:28)

What you said in the job description. That's not what you said, right? that happens a lot of people being hired into a workplace and then in the first three months kind of going, like, okay, wow, I guess I'm in this now and I'll need to adjust my expectations. those feedback conversation, those checkpoints can provide multidirectional feedback of the the work new worker also saying, like, here's what I need, I'm gonna need this to change in the next three months, or I'm not gonna want to continue working here.

Leander + Stas (39:54)

and then also for everyone to not assume that every relationship will work out, which of course is a reality, but I think structurally recognizing that causes us to surface feedback multidirectionally and to recognize that no is a perfectly acceptable answer in pretty much every

situation.

Leander + Stas (40:16)

and honestly, in our workplace more hires have told us no at those checkpoints than we have told no by far.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (40:24)

That is so fascinating and wonderful to hear that this like power of like say no is on both ends. on the in the nonprofit world that from from the bits that I've seen is the no is actually is still is very hard. It's very, very hard.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (40:42)

actually there's often consensus around the committee that's working closest with the person. And this I learned this from like interviews with organizations that I that I had for the book. and in my personal experience, there's a consensus in the group that's working closest to the person that was hired. saying yes or no. it's usually pretty unanimous. But

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (41:00)

It's still so hard for the rest of the group, especially when the no is coming from the organization, from the committee that's working closest. It's hard for the rest of the group that is not closest to receive and move forward with it. a lot of times there's like charisma, or a person that's you know, well loved, even in a short amount of time. And and the you know, the pieces that

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (41:23)

We're not working, that led to the no, you know, are still maintained confidentially. There's still agreements, we still follow, you know, we're still within the system and HR and confidentiality rules. and it I that's like the area that that gap between the the group working closes and the the people that are the the remaining group.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (41:42)

I think there is a gap and a need for continuous education and just language and agreement around values. Like we do believe in separating and letting folks go. We believe in this, like we this is we do this, we agree, and here's why. And so many folks come into collectives or cooperatives with this beautiful alignment and transformative justice work, and

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (42:04)

and feel very uncomfortable with this the power taking and using this power to transition and let go or say no. and it's the biggest area to unpack and unlearn and grow. And the to on the note of,

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (42:20)

it's interesting that this, you know, nonprofits are doing this. We've learned from cooperatives. Our one of our consultants was a co-op founder and member in kiran nigam who who brought

this concept to to me, to Pangea, And we we adopted it thanks to them and to the the co-op world. Yeah.

Leander + Stas (42:38)

Hmm. Yeah.

Leander + Stas (42:40)

so, disclaimer, I am a Scorpio moon. You can look that up if you don't know what it means.

Leander + Stas (42:45)

but I think I I have a tendency to see like, what is the harm in trying to make this work too? Like, what is the harm in not being able to say, Let's move on? Is other people who would be wonderful fits don't have the opportunity to join. Capacity is being sucked

Leander + Stas (43:02)

On like cyclical conflicts that are not able to be resolved. I know in a mediation, one of the things we're really like screening for is in terms of goals, like what is the goal of this mediation? Do you need or want to continue collaborating closely? The the goals are radically different. If it's like no, we just want to understand each other and find boundaries in separating,

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (43:23)

Yeah.

Leander + Stas (43:23)

versus like no, we're gonna continue to try to make this work.

Leander + Stas (43:26)

In many situations, that is you know, great to strive for. And also, yeah, what is not possible if you're not able to say no. And I think that there's so much more to say. I I really appreciated the connections you made to biomimicry and organizations sort of having the capacity to be learning and self-healing and

Leander + Stas (43:48)

I think that what you model in the book is this very intentionally imperfect journey of like I had this, personal calling. I wanted to do this work. I wanted to bring together people. That doesn't mean I already knew all those things that I know twenty years later. And I see a lot of perfectionism also in people in social change work of wanting to already be, you know, like I I studied this or I read this book or whatever.

Leander + Stas (44:14)

but I think that realistically, organizations that do not have the ability to acknowledge problems and talk to each other and say no and like actually move through generative conflict will not learn and grow and transform in the way that we need to to be able to live into these values.

whereas an organization can start from a and you know, we see this all the time in organizations that go through conflict harm.

Leander + Stas (44:38)

repair processes that on the other side of acknowledging the underlying problems, you can actually radically change your culture. And I think being able to acknowledge, like, we actually don't know what we're doing. We need to ask for help. Maybe we need some outside perspectives or to look at some case studies or to come to something like the solidarity time. And like it's okay to ask for help. And acknowledging what the problem is and being able to be honest allows the organization and the people in it.

Leander + Stas (45:04)

To transform and self-heal and grow. Something we've talked about when we've had more challenging moments of needing to let people go, where we're really disagreeing with one another, which I love this point because it's actually completely what I've seen as well. So the people who are working more closely with the person feel like it's a clear no. And then other people who are not as involved are like, but

Leander + Stas (45:25)

How could we do this? And then you're in an argument about the like abstract ideals rather than the actual tangible sense of what it's been like to work with this person. So it's a really helpful distinction. But in in these spaces where we've had more challenging cycles of needing to let someone go and not necessarily being on the same page about how many times to keep trying before moving before moving toward the no, something we've needed to talk about is when we're saying no, what are we saying yes to?

Leander + Stas (45:53)

like what is the yes that's behind or next to the no is saying, like, we are actually about this. And, you know, one of our one of our more recent experiences of letting someone go, which was a really, really challenging experience. Part of what we talked about is like, I genuinely think this person could thrive so much more in a different environment and like be seen as the star of the environment as opposed to the person who is consistently having all the challenges.

Leander + Stas (46:22)

And we've seen that then happen with that person since they've left.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (46:25)

Yeah.

Leander + Stas (46:25)

and it's like, why keep someone in a position where they're constantly getting critical feedback and they're constantly being told that at least it feels like they're being told that they're not good enough. When in fact you're saying it's not the right fit. That is a different thing than saying that

they're not good enough, right? But it gets experienced or or interpreted as I'm not good enough to be in this club, for example. when instead

Leander + Stas (46:47)

If someone finds the right fit, they're able to thrive and don't necessarily have these cycles of feedback around what is ultimately misalignment. and I think that that was such a powerful thing to see happen in this situation. And to also trust that we would be able to repair and tend to our personal relationships outside of the workplace. And I think that's also part of this of like the workplace needing to be everything, is that like you don't have to work together.

Leander + Stas (47:12)

in order to be friends. It is possible to maintain those relationships outside of the work dynamic. And you don't have to maintain those relationships if you don't want to. Like just because we work together doesn't mean we have to be best friends forever. So it's kind of a both and thing.

Leander + Stas (48:21)

There's also a lot of wisdom in the spokes model that you use that is similar to the sociocratic model that we use, which is the decision should be made by the people that are mo closest to the work. And part of living into shared governance is recognizing like your opinion doesn't matter on everything, and that there's some humility and like trust of your colleagues of saying, like, actually, you know

Leander + Stas (48:49)

You can ask me what I think. You don't have to because that's not my decision to make. and so that's another like friction point. I think in just like personal growth of being like, I wasn't asked, but I trust you because you are the ones implementing the work.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (49:03)

Yes. thank you for underscoring that. The that is such an important that is just such an important thing to just to put out for ever for all our organizations. and it's hard because as consultants, you know, we come in often when there's low trust. and so, you know, asking folks to just defer you know at that point is is challenging.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (49:24)

But yeah, the your opinion doesn't matter on everything. we cannot be experts at everything. is a wonderful starting point. And I Leander, one thing that you said earlier that really resonated was, you know, the you know, the flip side of what you had shared was that what a lot of people say and think is in in terms of

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (49:47)

letting folks go and what's the the the cost of that the or the possibilities of that you know what people often ask is you know is this person so bad that we should let them go? Like are they

really that bad? Like they have so many great qualities.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (50:03)

And we can relate to that at every level, right? And relationships and friendships. You know, are they so bad that we shouldn't hang out with them or that we should just dump them? and the flip side of what you're asking is so powerful and beautiful. It resonates so much. what you said is what is not possible? What do we miss out on if we're not able to say that no? I just love that. And

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (50:24)

really want to kind of put that out on in bold letters for folks. You know, what is not possible? What are we missing out on if we can't say no when something isn't working?

Leander + Stas (50:34)

Well, I know that we could talk about this for five more hours, and I look forward to in the future digging deeper and continuing to to build this relationship. And yeah, so excited to meet someone who's interested in so many of the same topics. let's close by briefly just sharing what's some media that that could be game, book, movie, whatever.

Leander + Stas (50:59)

that has been relating to conflict and collective liberation for you.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (51:04)

Love this question. one book that I just finished. I read it on my vacation. was this beautiful, beautiful book called The Island of the Missing Trees by Elif Shafak, Turkish British author. And I love historical fiction novels. and this one is like just such a beautiful historical fiction novel. It describes

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (51:25)

The island of Cyprus, it takes place there and in Britain, mainly in Cyprus, and it just brings together conflict, you know, war, you know, people just of all nations, Turkish, the the Greeks, the Brits, everybody coming in and wanting a peace, wanting to take control and dominate this land. And what

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (51:45)

This the author does so beautifully in this book is it just they she describes the the human beings, the the way that the people, the Greeks and the Turks and the byproduct of love, what what war and conflict does to humans. But not only that, the the every other chapter is written from the perspective of a fig tree, of a female fig tree.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (52:08)

And she per personifies the tree and the tree talks. And at first I was like, this is strange and interesting. I was curious, like a little cautiously curious. And then by the end of the book, I'm

just I'm so in love with this tree and with all with the living beings, the way that this tree describes then like you know, both the humans and the the bees and the bats and the birds and the you know the other beings that it interacts with and lives with and

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (52:34)

the way that yeah, just like imperialism, war, power like destroys the most like tender, like sweet, sweet beings. And it just it just I love how she just uplifts you know, humans and and and all other life in this this gorgeous book. And it it really was like taking me home to

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (52:57)

you know, conflict in Iran and the US Israel war, and the way that, you know, my my motherland and the, you know, the most some of the most beautiful parts in the south and various parts of the country have been bombed and destroyed recently. And I was kind of searching for some like closeness and and this author, Alif Shafak, she really she really s takes me home and

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (53:22)

Yeah, like is able to like lift up both the reality of harm and destruction, but also beauty and love underneath it all.

Leander + Stas (53:30)

I love that. I would love to read that book. I'll

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (53:32)

Yeah, what's the shape?

Leander + Stas (53:33)

say that the books that I've been reading are by TJ Clun, The House on the Cerulean Sea. and then the second book is somewhere beyond the sea. and it's about like queer people who are taking care of magical children who are protected by the state but are actually oppressed by the state.

Leander + Stas (53:51)

and it's a really, really like sweet, wholesome, beautiful, playful book about these children who become villainized. There's literally one of the children is Lucifer, is the child of the of the devil, but who's actually this very playful, sweet child. And what does it mean that the society has like turned him into this like villain who can't repair or grow through his his childhood as sweetly called Lucy.

Leander + Stas (54:17)

and there's these other types of children creatures as well and non-human beings who at the end of the day are children, are playful children, but who are seen as these like really scary beings by society. And it's a it's a really beautiful book series. Exciting.

Leander + Stas (54:32)

Some good, good book recommendations, and we'll link both of those in the in the show notes.
Well, I just want

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (54:39)

Cool. Thank you.

Leander + Stas (54:40)

to thank you so much for your time. What a privilege to dig deeper into your book.

Leander + Stas (54:45)

And yeah, definitely so much more there. really excited to to deepen this relationship moving forward.

Niloufar Khonsari (she, they) (54:51)

Me too. Thank you. This was so nurturing and beautiful and yeah I'm so glad you reached out, Leander, and connected in this way. I look forward to being in touch too.