



Podcast: Leading During Times of Transition

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Guest speaker: Nao Kabashima, Executive Director, KOSD

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Introduction

Selina Máté: Today I will be talking with Nao Kabashima. She is the executive director of the Karen Organization of San Diego (KOSD). Nao is the co-founder and has led the organization since 2009. KOSD aims to meet the needs of newcomers from Burma in San Diego. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Nao Kabashima: Thank you so much for having me.

SM: Yes. I'm so excited. We're here today in Silver Spring, Maryland with the Switchboard team. I was happy to be able to meet in person with you and record the podcast. Thank you for joining. Let's start off with some questions.

KOSD is partnering with Switchboard to provide technical and training assistance to ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs). Can you give a brief overview of what an ECBO is?

NK: Yes. ECBOs are organizations funded, founded, and then led by refugees or former refugees for the advancement of refugees and newcomers in this country. And like, led by refugees, meaning they're the organization's governing board, at least 60% of the governing board members are.

SM: That's awesome.

How does an ECBO meet the needs of the community in different ways?

NK: Yeah, I think ECBOs and refugee settlement agencies is very different. ECBOs are founded and led by refugees themselves. So, I think it's very natural for them to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services. Most of the community workers at the ECBOs are refugees themselves. And they are from a very similar background and speak the languages of the preparation that they serve. That's one of the traditions of the refugee community. The organizations are led by themselves, like a refugee themselves, which makes community members even feel comfortable to go with, uh—to trust their message. I feel that capacity building—so these are capacity building for the community, because most of the board members and then the staff members are refugees from the community. But that's another difference.

SM: That's very interesting. So ECBOs can see a different level of trust because that cultural competency already exists, because it's built in with the staff and volunteers.

NK: And then also, like, if a mainstream organization is struggling to teach the community, or government agencies, you know, struggle to teach that community because of language needs and backgrounds—it's very natural to do, you know, where the community members are, and they trust us. Yeah.

Have you been able to partner with agencies that are looking to you for that cultural competency guidance?

NK: Yeah. Like when we started this organization in the beginning, we were struggling with funding opportunities coming to us to support our work. But the first, uh, grant we ever got was from the Office of Refugee Resettlement. So then we got work in our local community. We worked with the county, the city of San Diego, the school district. Those agencies definitely have, um, difficulty reaching our community compared to our organization. Yeah. Easy. That's awesome.

Have you been able to partner with agencies that are looking to you for that cultural competency guidance? In 2009 you co-founded KOSD. What were some of the pressing needs that you saw in the community then?

NK: Yeah. At the beginning I was one of the volunteers in the community. By the way, I'm not from Burma. We have 15 staff members and I'm the only person from Japan. But I was doing, like, home visit. I was making sure that everybody had food, everybody's getting board, like housing health. And then those days we would see huge gaps between the needs of our newcomers and then also what the San Diego community was able to offer. Like, even the teachers at the local school, like, where the refugee students from Burma are going, those teachers really didn't know how to communicate with our parents. And then the students, local hospital clinics, or even just the neighbors—they didn't really know food. These people are, and also like—our community members came here, they tried their best to learn English and, you know, ESL class, and then did whatever they needed to do, but it was really hard for them to find jobs.

And then students started to have issues at school, but the parents were not able to communicate. I think with those gaps in the community, we started to have a series of community conversations, community meetings at the local church. And those conversations, we tried to find our own solutions, like our community's own solutions to this issue. And I think that process, it took about maybe six months or so, but I think that was a really important process. Because some leaders like myself had the idea of having, like, a nonprofit organization or community-based organization.

SM: I love what you said at the end, how it's listening to the needs of the community. When I did work in resettlement, that was one thing that I learned as well. I worked with youth and I could plan all of the things that sounded fun, but if the kids did not want it, it would not work, it was in vain. And I learned that very quickly.

NK: Each community has a different way to solve and that was important for us. And yeah, it's amazing that we still have this space for the community.

How have those needs evolved over the last 15 years?

NK: I think the needs, uh, evolve. Yes and no. Like, yes. Um, new needs. For example, many of our community members started taking U.S. citizenship. They now have a different need as a U.S. citizen. Like, to truly understand elections, like that they bought on or—yeah, many, many issues. Even like a benefit that our senior corporations were able to get at the beginning—unless they become citizens, then they're going to do that benefit or yeah, that kind of needs stuff. And yeah. And then behavioral housing, you can see maybe at the beginning that we are really focusing on urgent needs—meaning eat, right, eat and then live today and tomorrow and then like you have a house. And then, then more and more we started to see house.

That's going to be huge this year. Our community members, we were from Burma and as we see on the TV, like, what's happening in Burma like for two years—but this type of thing's been happening more than years. And then, like generational trauma and effective struggle, definitely brought those issues to the community. And so that need never changes. Even basic needs, lot of new things or even the government benefits, application process change, or, because of COVID many moved to a digital application, online application. Now we have to help our community members a different way. So yeah, both. Yes.

SM: There have been many periods of transition and change that the resettlement field has seen over the last few years. We've had the Afghan crisis, COVID, we've had shifting political situations for funding.

What are some ways that you have seen the transition as a leader?

NK: Yeah. I think I see a lot. But for example, like COVID, right? Our community members from Burma, most of them never, like, especially the parents' or grandparents' age, they never touched a computer. And every single thing that we did before COVID was in person. We'd never done the virtual anything because that's the way our community members feel comfortable to communicate. And then, so we intentionally chose like in-person communication, but because of COVID, by March 20, we needed to close our office completely. And then I was, we were very afraid that our community members felt so at loss, so isolated. And then, so what we did right away was to set up that virtual online phone system. So, we started to get Google Voice numbers, like six voice numbers that people can call in many different languages. So yes, our office is closed now, like in person, but we're able to provide a lot of, actually, like, change and time for them to reach us, chat. But I think the most important thing we did was not only setting those up, but also making phone calls to them very often. So, every week, once a week we'd call those families: we're still here for you. If you need any help, please call this number for senior members who are by themselves. Then we'd call them even more often because they're easier to get lost and then get isolated.

SM: It's so impressive to hear at the beginning that you started with \$400. Yeah. Despite everything that we've been through as a, as a country as you know, as a community in the last 15 years, but especially the last, what, four or five years to grow to where you are today. And how many people do you have on staff at this point?

NK: 15.

Have you seen your leadership style change over the years? And in what ways do you think you have grown as a leader and had to adapt?

NK: Yeah, as I said already, I'm Japanese and I'm not from this culture. So, at the beginning, from the beginning I always knew that my position, executive director of this ECBO, would be someone else. So I've been always kind of preparing for the shift, and then the funding issues. And then I've been kind of pointing my hope. And then at the same time, like my leadership style, maybe at the beginning and then maybe sometimes still now, it's—I love to help, I love to do things and then, for example, like our staff members have a lot of things and want to help anytime. And then I don't want them to feel overwhelmed, because it's really important for them to stay in this organization. So, I usually, like in my leadership, I've been a little—I say I do too much, maybe. And I was not really good at delegating—because I just love to do this work, right?

But then I think about our organizational, like, sustainability, and then this community—the sustainability of this community. And then it's really important for me to delegate so that our staff and senior staff to get to run this little, the programs, but also the kind of management part. So, I started to be that type of leader. Little by little. I still need to train. I still need to push myself sometimes. But yeah, I started to feel this is way as—and then yeah, our hope is one day to have other leaders to come together.

SM: I think that is such a mark of a true leader as well. One thing that I believe is that, you know, the mark of a true leader is empowering your team to take over and replace you in a better way than you could have ever done it. You know? So, it sounds like you lead from a place of humility and service and that's very admirable. Yeah. And I, I don't think you're alone in the delegation. I think there are many executive directors that might be listening to this who probably understand. Yes. I think it's, it's difficult, especially when something is, you know, you have ownership over it and you're like, yeah, love it. Not necessarily ownership, but love and passion for it, right? And you don't want to delegate that sometimes. But it's, it's good to do that.

What are some of the ways that you envision KOSD partnering to provide technical and training assistance alongside Switchboard?

NK: Yes. We are really excited this opportunity. And as a small ECBO, I never thought that we would be able to partner with Switchboard. But I, I think yeah, we can be a good partner because of the struggle that we have as organizations—and then also the best practices that we found out through these struggles. So, through this kind of technical assistance for ECBO leaders, but also—I'm really excited about the community of practice. It's more like a space for leaders, or people working for the community, coming together to talk about some common issues in a community, common struggles. Or maybe just to share something that makes you happy, makes you want to keep this organization. And there's no judgment, like, there's nothing you should or should not say but I—we needed that kind of thing. Yeah. There's a lot of things that we are able to talk to the ECBOs about. So, I'm really excited about this.

SM: And we're excited to have you and our other partners. This year is going to be wonderful. So, if you are listening and you are an ECBO, be on the lookout for these materials Thank you so much for joining me today.

NK: Yes. Thank you for having me!

SM: Anytime.

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