



Learning to Stand Up for Yourself

Chandi is a fundraising professional advancing her career in the nonprofit world. She's the face of her organization and interacts with donors, but behind the scenes she often feels dismissed and overlooked. Stevon helps us develop a sense of belonging and get comfortable taking up space in rooms that don't feel affirming.

Stevon Lewis:

What's up, everybody? Welcome to *How to Talk to High Achievers about Anything*. I'm Stevon Lewis, a licensed psychotherapist. Today, we welcome Chandi. Chandi is a fundraising professional who manages donor relationships for a nonprofit environmental organization. She's passionate about her work and the cause that she helps to support. But in her day to day, she often finds herself in situations where she feels isolated, excluded, or overlooked. Let's get into it.

Chandi:

I'm Chandi Guntupalli and I'm a nonprofit fundraiser. I'm based in New Jersey, but originally from Michigan, and currently, I am a donor relations manager at a nonprofit organization that works with farmers in 10 different countries across the world. But I started off my career as an advocate for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. So, I was a programs person that fell into nonprofit fundraising by chance. And I was a grant writer for many years and now I have moved on to the individual donor relations side. I was born in India and I am an Indian Canadian who's about to become an American. I've lived in four different countries. I grew up in India, Kuwait, Canada, and the US. It's been an interesting journey being a person of color, specifically a South Asian woman in the nonprofit industry in the US.

So, most people in nonprofit fundraising, and especially in senior positions, are white. When you do see people of color, they are usually mid-level employees or even lower-level employees. Which is really shocking because the beneficiaries of the nonprofit services for the most part are people of color. The most striking example of when I realized that I was different or I was a minority, besides obviously not seeing many people in the industry who look like me, I was at a networking event in New York City and it was a room full of women. It was specifically a women in nonprofit fundraising networking event. I was probably the

youngest or one of the few youngest women. And one of the two South Asian women, the other one was a board member of a nonprofit. And then you have me.

Chandi: I remember it felt like they didn't really want to know about me or they didn't want to know my perspectives. I was sitting at the table and I had some paper or I had a book and I left because I needed to use the restroom. Clearly, I was sitting there. So, when I came back, this older lady was sitting in the chair and my book was off to the side. You know how they say that it's important to be at the table making the decisions? I was at the table then I was pushed off. I didn't talk to my boss about it because I really thought I would be coming across as dramatic. But I think if my boss was a person of color, I would've been more comfortable telling her about this experience, and I didn't.

I had an imposter syndrome before, but it just got so much more heightened. Nonprofit fundraising is stressful in that it develops this kind of turnover for people. So, with this front-facing role that I have interacting with donors, I am in a way the face of the organization and it makes a difference in terms of my confidence. And so, thinking about this incident and figuring out what I want to do with my life, I did want to leave the industry at some point, but I was able to find a great organization called Women of Color in Development and I felt like I found a place where yes, I can be myself. And I think it's just great that when you do find your niche or you find your people, it makes a difference.

And also, my current organization that I work at full-time is amazing and I have never really felt as valued as I have. So, I think it's really important for people of color to be in nonprofit fundraising positions because we are able to provide a different perspective. I mean, I'm not lumping people of color into one, but it is important to understand and realize where we're coming from in this industry. If funders are interested in racial equality, there's a lot of foundations that have made statements about it, that's great and that's important, but that should also carry on to the nonprofits fundraising team. The beneficiaries of the organization need to be a people of color as well.

Lewis: Chandi, thanks for coming on the show and sharing everything that's been happening with you. So, as I was listening to Chandi talk about her story, she is very, very well-traveled, lots of experiences having grown up in multiple environments and countries. I think part of that is the idea of trying to also learn to fit in when we go to those different places. And I can't help to think that she's taken or bought along with her part of that story when she discussed being a Southeast Asian woman and working in an environment where there aren't a ton of people that look like her in the room. What came up for me is this feeling of not being seen or maybe being dismissed. And she corroborated that with some of her story and her experience.

Lewis: For high achievers, there's this thing of wanting to fit in and feel like, "I belong in the room." And I think that there's a disconnect between our experience, especially when we're talking about being a person of color and being in a space that is majority white, that we take on the feeling of not belonging and it's not ours. And what I mean when I say not taking ownership over, not feeling like you belong in the room, I'm saying you have to be critically aware of whether or not people are used to someone like you being in the room versus you telling yourself you don't belong in the room. And to me, those are two different things.

So, the way I think about it is if I'm, let's take a sport like hockey, there aren't many Black people that play hockey, that doesn't mean that I'm not supposed to play if I have the talent, abilities, and skills, we're just not used to seeing many Black people play it. And so, don't take ownership over the fact that there are few in number as a determinant that you shouldn't be doing that thing you're doing. So, the way I think about it if I were to try to get Chandi to think about her deservingness in being in a space, and recognizing that me as a man has a different level of privilege to be able to maybe speak up for myself, even though that might be limited by me being a Black man, thinking about the safety for being able to speak up and what that will mean, I try to get people to think about the idea that if you're in a room, then you're supposed to be in that room.

Lewis: And so you can't think of it like it's a privilege for you to be there. So, instead of saying like, "Thank you for letting me be here," it's more of a, "You're welcome that I am in this space." And I think if you have that energy, it changes how you navigate. And so, if you're in a room that you belong in, that is yours, that is for you, like if you were at your aunt's house, or your uncle's house, or your grandparents' house, you feel comfortable, you feel at home. So, you wouldn't let a stranger come in and tell you how to behave in your own house. That doesn't mean that we have to be rude or we have to be offensive, but it's saying that, "Hey, I'm comfortable here too, just as comfortable as you are, and so I'm going to act and behave in that same way."

So, if the person who moved her books and her belongings was comfortable enough to do so because they felt like, "Hey, this is my place and my position," I can politely tap them on the shoulder and say, "Yes, my stuff was here. You need to recognize that and respect that so I would politely ask that you would find another place to sit because I was sitting here and we can deal with that discomfort together." Because our tendency is to shrink, right? We don't want to be the troublemaker or the cause for bad vibes or anything like that. Here's how Chandi put it.

Chandi: I was at the table then I was pushed off. I didn't talk to my boss about it because I really thought I would be coming across as dramatic.

Lewis: I think that's, again, unfairly taking ownership over something that's not mine. I didn't do anything. I didn't move anybody else's stuff, my stuff was moved. Something was done to me and it's okay for me to acknowledge that that happened. If we don't act like we belong and we continue to shrink or we take ownership over someone else's behavior because we don't want to make them feel bad, the message they'll get is that their behavior is okay. I think it's really important for high achievers to understand that it feels good and empowering to see other people that look like them or that are operating at the same level that look like them when they enter into different spaces and environments. The thing I caution against is making that a requirement. I know it feels lonely. I know it feels like you're on an island.

Also, don't discredit yourself, or diminish your abilities, or how you're able to show up in what you can accomplish because you aren't seeing a model for that in front of you or ahead of you. And oftentimes, what I hear in my work with high achievers is that the self doubt starts to come in because they're saying, "There isn't anyone doing what I'm doing," or, "I don't have a model to follow." And that might be true for some people that they need someone to go before them for them to be successful. Some people are really good at not having a model to follow and still finding a way to reach success. And so, I don't want high achievers to kind of discount that ability in themselves.

Lewis: And I do recognize that it feels better when I walk into a room and I look around and the first thing I do is scan to see, are there any other Black people in the room? And then once I notice that, it's like, are there any other Black men in the room? Because I want to see how safe I feel in being able to show up as me. Also, if there isn't anyone in the room that looks like me, so they don't check those two boxes, that doesn't mean I'm leaving, it just means that like, "Okay, well this space isn't designed for Stevon Lewis, a Black man, but I'm going to stay in here and this space is going to learn to be ready, and prepared, and accepting of me. And I'm going to find a way to make that happen."

And so, for Chandi in the work that she does, it seems like she's going to frequently be one-off in a room and not one of many, but one of one or one of two, a very low number. You have the right to show up as yourself just as the other people are showing up as themselves. We hope you also have that same privilege and that same right to be able to do that unapologetically. I also think that it's important for you to know your worth. That if you've made it into that room, it's because you've done a lot of things right. Not one thing, not two things, but several, a multitude that to get to a level where you are an executive or very high up in an organization, you had to work your way through things and accepting that and knowing that you bring value to the spaces that you inhabit.

Also, kind of being really clear about when those spaces don't feel affirming and when those spaces don't allow a lot of people like you or that look like us in, then it's not a matter of something being wrong with you as an individual, there's something wrong with that space, that that space has been designed in a way that it hasn't allowed for more individuals that bring what you bring to the table to be in. And that's a loss on the environment, not a loss on you. High achievers, high achievers of color have to kind of grapple with and learn to accept that the environments or the people who are in those environments that don't allow for a lot of us in the room or in that space, it's not our problem, it's theirs. And they need to kind of figure that out, but I'm going to sit comfortably like I'm at my grandma's house.

Lewis: And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to *How to Talk to High Achievers about Anything*. We have really big plans for our show, and we want you to be a part of it. We want to hear about your successes and challenges, your sacrifices, the ways you've celebrated, and what's ahead as you grow. Send our producer Virginia an email, and we'll get your story on the show. She's at virginia@lwcstudios.com.

How to Talk to High Achievers about Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Our show is produced by Virginia Lora. Editing and production support from Jordan Kauwling. Mixed by Tren Lightburn. Juleyka Lantigua is the creator and Executive Producer. I'm Stevon Lewis. On Twitter and Instagram we're @TalkToAchievers. Bye everybody.

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