Case Study: Post-Landfill Action Network (PLAN)

Interview Date: Jan 18th, 2024

Interviewee:
- Jensen Quinn (They/Them), Director of Education and Resource Management + Staff Benefits Seat, 5 years with PLAN
- Ramiro Murguia (He/Him), Director of Events + Financial Health Seat, 5 years with PLAN

Organizational Background:
- **Mission**: The Post-Landfill Action Network (PLAN) supports students in reimagining systems beyond the Linear Consumption Economy. We equip students with the resources and tools necessary to holistically understand the Global Waste Crisis and lead solutions on their campuses. Collectively, we can build a world beyond waste.
- **Region**: PLAN is a national organization with offices in New Hampshire and Philadelphia. All of the staff have been remote since the start of the pandemic.
- **Size**:
  - 14 staff and 11 paid student fellows
  - 18 board members
  - Annual budget between $500k and $1 million
- **WSDN Status**:
  - PLAN was founded in 2014 and became a co-directorship in 2016. In the summer of 2022, both of the Co-Executive Directors began to talk about transitioning out of the organization. The team took this opportunity to look internally and decided that instead of hiring a new Co-ED team they wanted to make the shift to a WSDN.
  - Many of the collaborative structures had already been in place for years when this decision was made so it felt like a natural progression.
  - The team spent a year planning for the transition and in June 2023 the Board passed a resolution to become a Worker Self-Directed Nonprofit.

Structure:
- Of the 10 full-time staff on the PLAN team, 9 are Directors of their own areas of work. This includes directing their annual budgets and impact goals. There is a high level of autonomy within projects and many structures in place to ensure collaboration.
- PLAN is governed by 4 circles:
  - General Circle: This circle includes all full-time and part-time staff, and meets weekly to review the organization's current work.
  - Admin Circle: This circle includes the Financial Health Seat, the Staff Benefits Seat, and the Admin Chair. This circle is responsible for administrative oversight of the organization. The members are voted in on three-year terms by the rest of the team and are responsible for managing the Board of Directors.
  - Campus Engagement Circle: This circle includes all team members whose projects work directly with students on campuses.
○ Network Building Circle: This circle includes all team members who are working on projects that build the overall community. Including development, partnerships, events, content, and communications.

- To balance accountability and autonomy, the team maintains a high level of transparency in all of the work each of the Directors and Circles are doing. Additionally, there are committees in place for things like the Budget, that require cross-circle collaboration.

- Decision-making is organized by tiers to allow projects autonomy to make their own decisions but ensure larger decisions are brought to the rest of the group. For larger decisions, PLAN uses proposals and a consensus-based decision-making process.

- **Board of Directors Structure:**
  ○ When PLAN became a WSDN, they also updated the organization's by-laws to implement similar democratic processes for the Board. The board is governed by Co-Chairs and utilizes a consensus-based decision-making process.
  ○ The Board functions as an advisory body, providing expertise in areas that the staff feel they lack.

**What has been integral to making this work for your team?**

- The Circle model has been important in making sure roles and expected points of collaboration are clear.
  ○ The development of the Admin Circle has ensured that all of the administrative responsibilities are covered and nothing falls through the cracks. Additionally, in the transition from the Co-ED model, some of the responsibilities previously held by Co-EDs were developed into new staff roles, such as the Development Director and the Staff Support Specialist.

- The development of the Staff Support Specialist role. This is a part-time role filled by a former board member. This role is dedicated to the ongoing professional development of the team. They are responsible for regular trainings, staff evals, and an annual organizational health report to the full staff and board.

- Expanding and diversifying the Board of Directors to ensure the team has adequate legal support, support from individuals with experience in WSDNs, and direct stakeholders of the work.

- In the process of transitioning to a WSDN, the team developed the following resources:
  ○ Updated Bylaws
  ○ WSDN Handbook outlining everything about the structure: governance, staff structure and expectations, accountability and conflict resolution, & decision-making tools and processes.
  ○ Updated Employee Handbook
  ○ Updated Payscale Guidelines

**What are some of the challenges you have faced since becoming a WSDN?**

- Balancing existing roles with increased Admin responsibility, particularly for Admin Circle members. The basic responsibilities of administration and editing of policies can take a significant amount of time. This cuts into their capacity to do their programmatic work.
Historically, conflict was kept between Co-EDs and those in conflict. Now it involves the whole team. While the Staff Support Specialist plays a facilitation role in the process, it has still been an adjustment to navigate interpersonal conflict this way.

Keeping up with continuous growth and the need for new policies and systems. Having the power to make change can be exhausting and overwhelming. In a traditional organizational structure, the team would just have to live with issues they now have the power to change. But having the capacity to take advantage of these opportunities can be a challenge. There are so many opportunities for continuous growth and the team has had to learn to balance this empowerment more sustainably.

You don't know what you don't know. There will always be things you cannot plan for and you must be able to deal with things on the fly.

What are some highlights you have experienced since becoming a WSDN?

- Projects are much more collaborative. In the previous structure, project Directors would meet with Co-EDs to discuss the development of their work. Now they do this in their Circles, which means that there is cross-project troubleshooting and collaboration. This has broken down organizational silos, increased project ownership, and built peer-to-peer collaboration.

- It is no secret in the nonprofit world that administrative work can be tedious and lead to burnout. In this structure, the responsibility of this work is shared between a team and can be transitioned out without having to leave your job entirely. This creates internal mobility for staff that want to learn new skills and take on new responsibilities and for staff that want to step back and take a break from the admin work.

- Being able to live into values has been very rewarding. This structure aligns with the mission of the organization and the values of the team. Being able to learn and talk about the WSDN structure puts their values into practice.

What advice would you give to an organization considering shifting to a WSDN?

- Be realistic about how the time commitment of administrative responsibility will impact other work and budget additional time for a learning curve. Include opportunities to shadow those who have done the work previously, if possible.

- Explore multiple structure options for your organization and maybe try out some small changes before committing to a big change.

- Prepare yourself to unlearn the old ways of doing things. This takes time and making mistakes to learn from them.

- Don't be afraid of being wrong.