

Lacey Gaitan, ACCP: By way of an additional introduction, will you please share a little bit about your company's social impact work and how your current role supports those efforts?

Renee Hobbs: The Popeye's Foundation is the nonprofit arm for Popeye's Louisiana chicken, and we're in our fourth year, so by and large, still a little bit new. Definitely new when it comes to staffing because I'm a one-person band right now, but I have a tremendous amount of support from volunteers. I manage the finances, fundraising, and events, influence and meet with our franchisees, and tell the story around our impact.

We have a family fund where we help our crew members or any member of the Popeye's system if they have an emergency need. The most impactful thing I've experienced with our family fund was following Hurricane Ida last fall. It was tremendous - probably 400 applications came in from our crew members, so it is an essential piece of our business.

We are also in the hunger relief space and partner with No Kid Hungry.

LG: Fantastic, and thanks, Renee. Janelle, will you share a bit of the social impact efforts at Benevity and how your role supports that?

Janelle St. Omer: For those of you who don't know, Benevity is a software provider for the corporate social responsibility and ESG space. We work with companies to provide a platform for employee engagement, giving and volunteering, corporate sponsorship, tracking ERGs, and anything engagement-related.

My role is to lead our corporate partnerships across the East Coast. I have a team of seven folks who work with companies to determine their goals and how we can partner to help them achieve those goals. We are a B Corp, so for us, our social mission is baked right into the articles of incorporation in our company.

We also focus on advancing women in tech. Many of our initiatives are very grassroots - employee-led and employee-driven.

We have an incredibly engaged employee base who are passionate about the world and what they can do to affect social issues. We have a 94% participation rate with our Goodness Matters program. I also share leadership of Belongings Champions, our diversity and inclusion network or council, and our black employee network. As a "Not Myself Today" ambassador, the last hat I wear is to address our focus on employee mental health, looking at how we can support our leaders with understanding supporting mental health.

LG: I think we can all relate to this – wearing multiple hats and covering numerous projects, activities, teams, and other things that are under the scope of our work. I know that your career path didn't start in social impact. Can you tell us more about how you got to your role with the

Popeye's Foundation?

RH: It was a complete surprise for me truly. I went to school for advertising and then went into the marketing industry. I've always been in the quick-service restaurant industry, and it's fast-paced, which I enjoy. I started my career with Domino's Pizza, and then about 17 years ago, I moved over to Popeyes in field marketing, and then based on my work with co-workers and my skill set, I was moved over to franchise sales and started selling the business. About four years ago, our parent company that purchased Popeye's, Restaurant Brands International, wanted to have an active foundation because their other brands have very well-run foundations. I was then approached to lead the foundation.

I have found that many people fell into their roles. And I want to give a quick plug to the [ACCP Forum](#). I did everything to be a sponge and learn from others in large organizations. I love this space I am connected to. I work with the DE&I team and the other company foundations on a Global Day of Service. I'm working on projects that interact with the sustainability team, so I'm learning about many different spaces within CSR.

LG: Many of us fell into the role who didn't know this was the career path for us, so you learn and grow as you go. What do you feel is the greatest challenge you've overcome in your role?

RH: I would say "overcoming" is precisely what we're doing right now. Popeye's has been around a long time - this is our 50th anniversary this year. But the Foundation has only been around for four years. So, you have franchisees who didn't go through the system with a foundation. And you also have a new leadership team with the new parent company. Everybody's new to impactful work in the community, so it requires constant communication. The storytelling is really what is effective, but what happens is - and I'm sure this happens in many businesses - there's a lot of pressure in the retail industry. And now add to that supply chain issues, staffing shortages, etc. And that can lead to sales declines. So, when the perfect storm happens, social impact and what we do at the Foundation get pushed aside.

LG: Janelle, you've had a different career path to social impact than Renee. What motivated you to consider a career in social impact, and how did you get to where you are today?

JSO: So, I've always wanted to give back, and I'm always thinking about what I can do to influence the world. I studied Human Resources in college and realized that was not exciting to me. And then, while working at a large financial institution in Canada, I became involved with the fall campaign for United Way of Toronto.

I saw that at the end of the day, I could not just volunteer. I needed to do work that could make a difference. I got to see firsthand the impact of the Dollars from Donors' campaigns and how they truly changed people's lives. I then worked in a

series of nonprofit organizations, but I recognized that the corporate side of CSR might be a little bit more, I don't want to say more impactful, but I quickly realized that these kinds of roles existed within companies, and I could be part of that. Coming from the nonprofit space, I brought a specific lens to the conversations to reflect the recipients of these organizations.

So, that's probably more of a straight path than Renee's, but it has always felt suitable for me since the very beginning, and I still feel like this is the space that I want to continue to play in. When I look back on my career, hopefully not too many years from now, I can be proud of the work I did and the impact that I hopefully have.

LG: I think one thing that you both have shared through your stories is that the relationships and skills you've learned along the way have brought you to where you are today and how important that is.

So, Janelle, just a follow-up: What is one thing about being a woman working in social impact that you know now that you wish you knew at the beginning of your career?

JSO: I think many women get into social impact work because they are so passionate about the space – but that can lead to burnout because you're so heavily invested in every initiative and every program. As Renee said, when things are difficult social impact is one of the first budgets to get cut, which can be so deeply personal.

The other thing that I would say is that I was surprised at how little diversity exists in the space. As you get higher up and in some of the roles, then you see some male leaders, but that was certainly something that surprised me coming from a nonprofit space that was predominantly women and then actually getting into social impact from a corporate side, primarily women as well. It's like, okay, where are all the men in these roles?

RH: Janelle, I want to comment on something you said because I appreciate the honesty about it. As women, we tend to be very passionate, and this job can be very emotional. In my mind, I thought I would get to fundraise and do great things to help the community. And then I'm on the phone talking to team members who are applying for a family fund grant or an emergency grant. It just took the wind out of my sails and knocked the breath out of me. I finally broke down and cried while I was on the phone with a team member who needed funeral costs for a loved one who died from COVID. At the same time, we're fundraising for No Kid Hungry for children during shelter in place who don't have access to food; while I sit in my house incredibly fortunate and blessed with a roof over my head, my children had a computer they were doing virtual school, so it was eye-opening for me to understand that.

It's okay to be authentically emotional and show that, but it's a lot. It's an enormous weight to carry doing this work sometimes, and I did not see that

coming.

I think I heard that from so many practitioners over the last couple of years; it's just been so much, and we've been at the center of it and trying to manage from all different angles and trying to continue to do what's right and what's good and almost feeling like it's like one crisis after the other.

JO: I think that anybody who wants to get into this field, it's gratifying. The flip side, though, is that it can be challenging when you're deeply invested, which I would say, nine out of 10 practitioners are.

RH: Did you ever have a hard time coming to terms with being invested that way emotionally? Because I will tell you very transparently that in the franchising industry, there are a lot of men running the restaurants and working in the various departments. So, I was cautious sometimes about showing that side, but now I don't care. I'm like, "this is me." This is what makes me good at my job, and this is what makes me good at telling my story to others so that we continue to grow the Foundation. But did you have moments where you felt like I shouldn't say that? I want to show that emotion?

JSO: 100%. Early days, going from nonprofit into corporate CSR, I was in a discussion, and I guess I got very passionate in the conversation. And I was told you nonprofits you're not thinking strategically, the way we are in corporations. It was very condescending, and I was taken aback by that. I said, "Okay, so you know when you're looking at these things as making the business case, the ROI, and strategy. But I am passionate about this work, and it is essential. I am in a privileged position, and I will use that to make a difference, even if you think that too much.

LG: So, we've touched on this a little bit, but is there anything else that either of you would share that you wish more people knew about making a career and social impact?

RH: We are part of a business and have to consider financials. We're not a slush fund and don't just hand out grants. We don't just host parties.

JSO: Yes, 100%. I have people calling all that time saying they want to get into community relations. "It seems like so much fun planning events." In addition to the burnout, it can be difficult because even making the decisions about what to fund, not to fund, you know which relationships to continue and which to end. We always have to gradually move away from funding relationships because you don't want to cripple an organization - those are tough decisions, knowing the end recipient and the impact you're having. And with corporate social activism as well, you have to determine the issues we're going to take a stance on. And that's not an easy thing to decide; where and how to put your brand, your dollars, your people on something that might be controversial.

LG: So, what advice would you both offer to women interested in a career in social impact?

RH: I think in my world, our company is incredibly open to people showing interest in other roles that they may not have experience in. And I wholeheartedly believe that if you're in a company like that, stop and ask somebody about the social impact department – structure, roles, is there a way to be involved? Because you could potentially start as a volunteer for your organization as a sounding board, an ERG member, or any other way you can offer your experience and expertise.

JO: Absolutely, I would agree with all of that because you do see colleagues who have a background in comms, HR, PR, legal, or finance – there are so many transferable skills from all those different areas. And I think to Renee's point, getting involved internally helps you understand what your company is doing in that space, so you have connections and insights when roles do open up. External volunteerism - sitting on committees and boards, developing those leadership skills, and starting to understand the industry and how we speak and talk about these things in the strategies.

RH: I also want to add that this work can be very humbling as you're helping communities. I have a different view on things now, and it makes me want to have a different conversation with my children and teach them. I feel like I may be fundraising and doing great things in the community, but this work has had an equally significant impact on me.

JSO: Absolutely. I wanted to see more people get involved, and I think that the difficulty is knowing not everybody can be involved or wants to be involved. But I truly believe deep in my soul and the fabric of my being that every single one of us has something to give. So, whether big or small or medium or whatever, our job is to tap into that. What would that mean if we all decided to tap into that for our world? What would it look like if we all chose to be a part of the solution? It might seem overwhelming and daunting, but at the same time, there is always something you can do.

Audience Q&A:

How are your executives supporting women in the workplace, if at all?

RH: We created the Popeye's Women's Network about a year ago at Popeye's. We conducted engagement surveys, and we realized a fundamental disconnect between what women scored versus men. We felt like there needed to be something that really lifts and celebrates women and brings them together. Through the Network, we have seen a difference. We've done a book club, panels of speakers, even a happy hour one night, but the women are coming together in a different way that I think was incredibly important.

JSO: At Benevity, our founder and current chairperson intentionally wanted to build out a gender-balanced organization. As you all know, women in tech are an evolving trend. So, we currently actually have 50% women female representation in our organization, and I believe our current executive is either 35 or 40% women, which is enormous in the technology space.

We've also done equal pay studies to ensure gender parity across the organization. As much as some of our other initiatives have been very grassroots, this is an area - the support of women - that has been very strategic since the organization's inception.

We've done panels and invested, but even with our International Women's Day panel last week, we had one of our male executives speak as well because, in addition to the support of women, we want to bring allies along the journey and have that representation and speak to why it's so important to reduce barriers for women in tech, and look critically at what that means in terms of balances on teams and know those teams are then thriving. We are also looking at changing some of the verbiage of our job descriptions to encourage women to apply and even some of the highly technical roles.

LG: Do you feel there are any certifications or professional credentials out there that you would recommend or that are needed to get into social impact?

RH: I'm interested in Janelle's feedback on this. I enjoyed the ACCP Forum and want to continue furthering my education in this field. I've looked at Boston College; I hear great things about their certification Program.

JO: I'm Boston College certified myself, so I would recommend their practice certificate. I am currently doing Cornell's practice and diversity, equity, and inclusion certificates on diversity and inclusion. I believe they also have a leadership certificate.

LG: The certification field is growing, too, when you talk about ESG. I would say to your earlier point about how women tend to self-select from applying for social impact positions. You don't have to have a certificate. They're helpful; they help you learn and grow but don't let that be why you don't pursue a career in social impact. As you both mentioned earlier, there are a lot of transferable skills from other departments, a lot of ways to approach this. Whether you're in finance, legal, comms/PR/marketing, there are entry points for those different skills. If you come from a nonprofit background, there are ways to get involved in this work.

So, on ESG, do you see a trend in programs moving from CSR to ESG, with a focus on social?

JO: Yes, 100%, particularly with the last two years; that is the conversation

everybody is having as it's been elevated within the business. Ensuring their employee giving, volunteering, and fundraising efforts ladder up to ESG and look at if it's relevant to the business. Looking at the governance models, I see companies thinking about D and I as part of their governance work. The nice thing about that is it is so top of mind for everybody in the C suite. There's never been a more significant time to be a social impact practitioner.

LG: Another CSR trend that's interesting to look at is changing the titles because I started with a community relations title, and then I was corporate citizenship and then CSR. Both the titles and the roles are changing, and I think that's another interesting thing for people looking to get into this field. What it's called at different companies can vary so much, and it does also depend on whether the donations are from corporate giving or through a foundation. So, is it CSR? Is it social impact? Is it under ESG?

So, another question is about internal employees and what that looks like. For the transferable skills, what advice would you offer to someone who is external and has social impact experience (but maybe not corporate social impact) but has the transferable skills to get into corporate social impact.

RH: I think relationships go a long way in that. If you have relationships with people in this space, you can tap into them, especially if you're external and involved in any of these organizations. Don't ever be nervous to ask or reach out to talk to somebody, to learn more about what they do and their space.

JO: I would agree about building relationships. Use LinkedIn – I hear from folks who want to chat about who I can put them in touch with. I feel that making those connections and putting yourself out there to get to know people in these roles does help because then you get to understand the inner workings of companies. Many companies are expanding their social impact teams, so I recommend checking out ACCP's [Job Board](#).

LG: I have one more for you both: what experience do you feel has made you a stronger person in this work that we do?

RH: It is an excellent question because I'm thinking about it two different ways. One in the work environment I'm in with RBI that's made me stronger and in the space of social impact. It can be incredibly emotional, and I'm sensitive, so sometimes it's harder for me. 2020 was a doozy, but I do have to be better and stronger because I have a job to do at the end of the day. So, for example, I have to stay within our guidelines; I have to say no to people. To stay within the strategy, I have to negotiate certain things around our fundraising and how we're granting back. Inevitably you're going to have people who have a very, very hard story, and there's only so much we can do, so it's difficult to say no, but I have to feel good about what we're able to do.

JO: I would agree about 2020, and the experience of that made me stronger as a social impact leader. So much of what was around us was all-consuming, and it was

a very challenging time. And then, we went into the racial and social justice crises, and I felt so deeply connected to them. I harness that into action with uncomfortable conversations and honest conversations with colleagues and folks in the field. And it made me feel a little less helpless.

LG: So, final question for you both: what other female leaders do you draw inspiration from?

JO: It's going to sound very funny, but Michelle Obama. I think she's a wonderful human being, and I think hearing her stories and reading about her being at the height of her career and then taking a step back to let her husband shine. I find so much of what she talks about and how she talks about her experiences, her viewpoint, raising children, having a career, and doing all of the stuff women are often focused on doing. I think she has a fascinating perspective. I also love how outspoken she was on certain things. Even as she was being ridiculed and criticized in the media for so many things because she was a woman or because she was a black woman and - at least not publicly - we never saw it get to her, she always found a way to still stand up and say what she thought was right and stay true to that. I think that's important.

And on a more personal level, my mom is one of the female leaders. I think she is a beautiful human being; having seen her navigate her career and motherhood and being practical about certain things shaped how I feel and live.

RH: I think mine is more personal, and it's inspiring because it's my new boss. I've had her as a boss for three or four weeks, and it's incredible when somebody can come into my life and make a significant impact in that short of a time. Her leadership skills and bringing her team together and working with me as we work through a strategic plan to grow our foundation and appreciating my vulnerability. It gave me a license to say it's okay to be a strong female, a great role model. I want to see the job descriptions and not discount myself. I want to know my value and my worth, and she is showing that to her entire team, and it's been pretty amazing.

LG: Thank you both for sharing those answers and this whole conversation. It was great to talk with and hear from you both today

