

# THE PEOPLE PARADOX

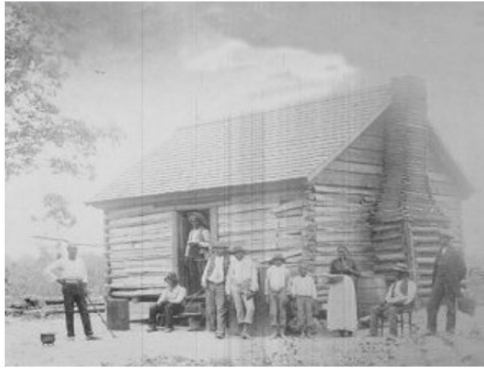
in Nonprofits

ב סא נש לסא עאפ לא ט לכ ת כ | ך  
ב אש אכ ת ו ך אפ לא ט לכ ת כ | ך



Karen Smith Wells  
Chief Operating Officer  
Make-A-Wish America

# Story of Origin—The Heart of Sankofa



**X** | PROUD FIRST-GEN  
STUDENT



# I may be preaching to the choir.

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...The question isn't whether the choir is singing. It's whether the song has changed- or may need to be changed.



# What Do You See?

*Three rounds. Let's go.*

## 01

### ONE WORD

Think of your team right now.

Say ONE word that comes to mind when you think of your team. No explaining, no justifying — just the word  
Did anyone at your table match?

## 02

### THE HEADLINE

Write a newspaper headline about your team today.  
Share one per table.

## 03

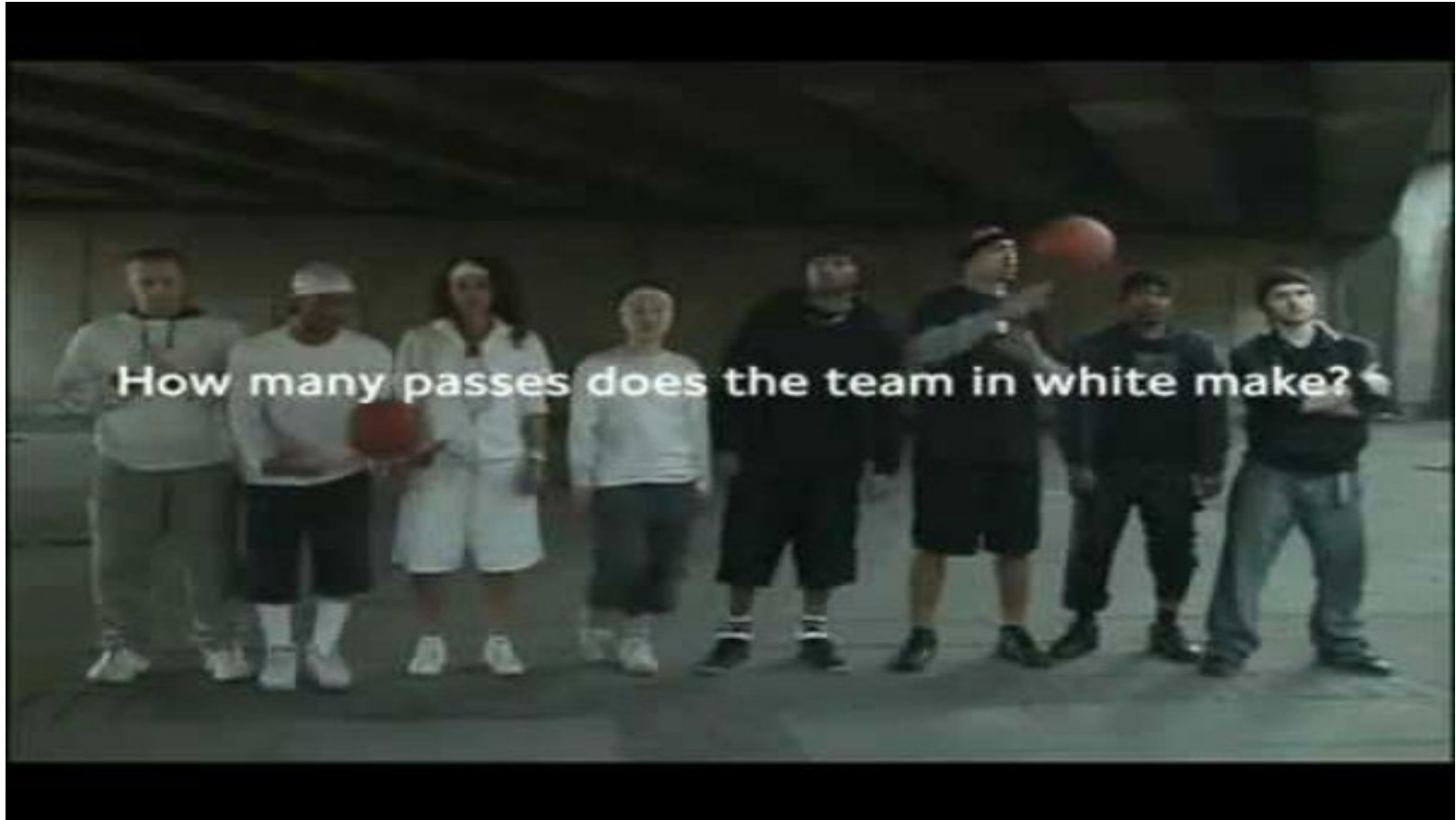
### ENERGIZED OR DRAINED?

Hands up: when you think of your team right now — energized or drained?

*That word. That headline. That hand. **That's your leadership lens** — and your team lives inside it.*



# The Awareness Test



# I see you in this room.

## The Passionate Leader

בשפתך ה' ל'סא' ש'רשודי"רן | ת', ל'פ' | ט'ד' ל' י'צ'ת' | פ'ס'א' ה'א'ש' ל' ה'ט'ד' | ת'א' |  
ל' | ט'ט' | ל'ן | ו'ת' ל' ו'א'ל' ל' י'כ' | ת', נ'ש'ט' | ט' | ל'כ' | ת', | א'ת'ש' כ'ש' פ'  
ב'ל'כ' | א'ן | ד'כ' | ל'א' ל' י'ט' | ט'ת' ל'כ'ת' ה', ט' | ו'א' | ט' | ס'א' | פ'ש' | ט' | ש'ט' | נ'כ'ת' | כ'ר'מ'

## The Data-Driven Director

ב'ר'ק'ן | י'ת'כ' | ו' | ל'ס'א' | א'ת'ש'צ' | ת'א'כ'כ' | ל' | י' | ה' | ש' | ל'ס'א' | ש' | ל'ל'פ' | ל' | א' | ת'א' |  
ש' | פ'ת' | כ' | ר'כ' | ל' | ו' | ל'ס'א' | ל' | א' | ט' | ס' | ת', | ל'כ' | ו' | פ'א' | ת'ש' | ל'כ' | ת', | א' | א' | א' |  
ב' | א' | ח' | ה'א' | פ' | ל' | ד'כ' | ת' | פ' | ל'כ' | כ'ת'

## The Change Agent

You've been saying 'we need to invest in our people for years.  
Today you want the language —and the proof—to finally make it happen.



# 1.5

## Million charitable non-profits...

לכ אב אש: לא טר | כל: לאן לספק טלס: כל למ  
 לנט: כל אלמת לק ות לו לק ופעש כשט  
 רתשתך לקתפ כשט: לך טכ: כל כש ל ג  
 האכל ככת י אפ טתך הא אפ טתך רתמ: פ אלפ  
 ב כשת, ל י כשט: כל ככת י

*Non-profit reach is so vast that the commonly cited framing — that charitable nonprofits touch nearly every American life.*



# THE PARADOX

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p a r · a · d o x

"A statement seemingly  
contradictory —  
and yet perhaps true."

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# PARADO X: Sound familiar?



**Nobody thinks they're a bad driver.**

Statistically — that's impossible.



**The more you learn, the less you know.**

Confidence peaks at knowing the least.

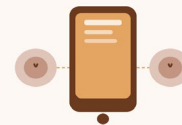


**The whole group decided.  
Nobody wanted to.**

Everyone said yes. Everyone meant no.

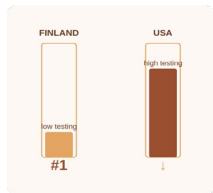
# PARADO X: The world notices too.

1 The more connected we are — the lonelier we've become.



171: 55 לעקל לשח" שח יכחקו אכפק טכ לש לח שח לח נב | עב עש

2 Countries that test students the least outperform those that test constantly.



PISA Global Education Rankings, OECD 2023

3 The richest zip codes have the highest rates of anxiety and depression in children.



Dr. Suniya Iuthar, Columbia University Research on Affluent Youth, 2022



# PARADOX: We know this feeling.

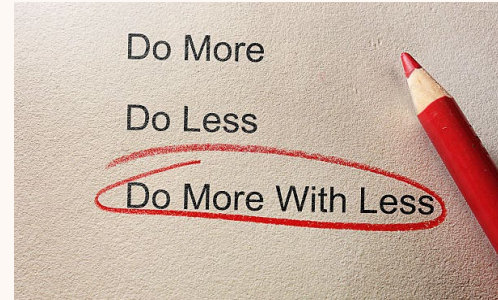
We tell our children to be exactly who they are.

Then spend the next eighteen years (or more 😊) telling them who to be.



We ask staff to do more with less.

And call it resourcefulness.



## THE PARADOX

And then there is ours.

The organizations that exist because people and mission matter most — struggle most to make their own people feel like they do.

What would it look like if we finally closed that gap?



# This is not opinion—These are facts.

01

Nonprofits have higher turnover than any major employment sector.

דודו: ל' ג' | נע לך תמצנת ש לוו אמת ושת ו

02

The majority of nonprofit staff feel unsupported in their professional growth.

Gallup State of the Global Workplace, 2023

03

Overhead aversion from funders directly limits investment in people.

סאנע כטלסל אדלסל | אקל אלהל שפאלט אששויק קדדע סכ תמש טלע



# Houston...

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we have a problem.





Think about it...



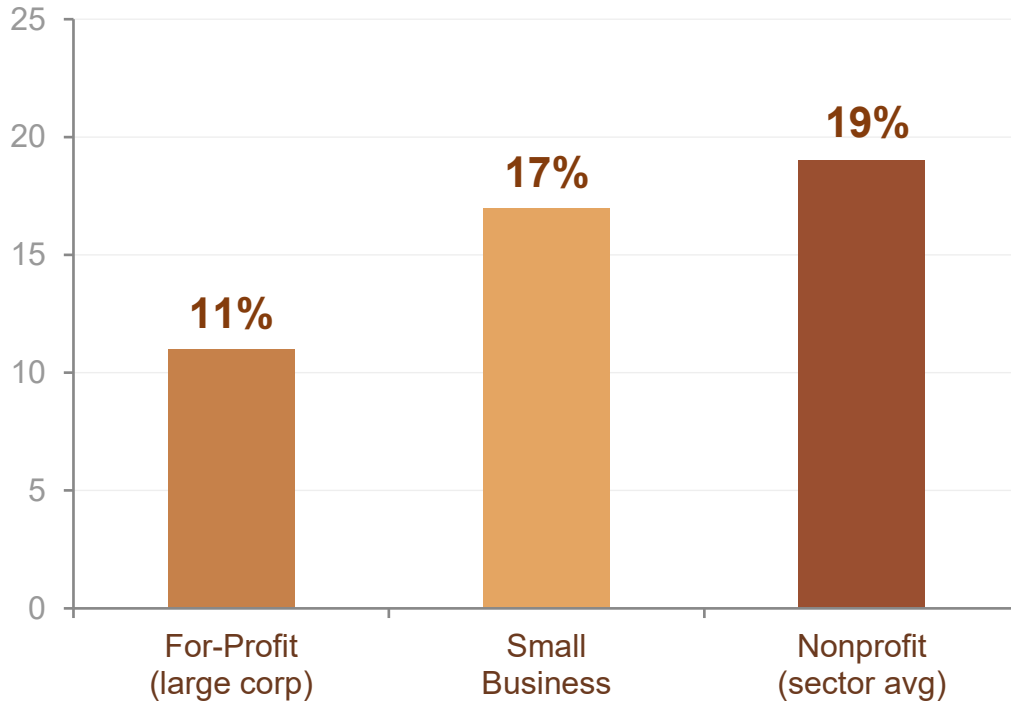
# 1 in 5

nonprofit employees leave every year.

בשוק הפדוף ה' לסא עש' נש' אקל' י' כל ו' ו' האפ' , לסא לפ' | טדל י' את ו'



# Turnover by Sector



Nonprofits face the highest turnover of any major employment sector.

לדגמק ולכ האאפתד לסש  
מלל ומקו רל לשות

**30-200% of their salary**  
(staff and leaders respectively)



מסאָל קאָלן יִפּגשׁ לַ כּוּשׁ | לַשׁ הַבַּיִת פּוֹכַח תְּאֵשׁ לַלְמַחֲדָה כּ לַלְשׁוֹן

It's always about people.

FOR-PROFIT



ENTREPRENEUR



THE KSWELLS GROUP

NONPROFIT





"We say our people are  
our greatest asset —  
and yet..."

The organizations that resolve this don't just build great cultures.  
They deliver greater mission impact. Every single time.



# Culture is shaped by intention or formed by neglect.

■ Employee experiences are largely shaped by  
**You as their leader**

■ Experiences shape **Beliefs**

■ פ ש הו י א ר פ ל א ח כ כ פ מ ק מ ל י ז

■ Repeated actions turn into **Results**

*What kind of Experiences are you creating for your employees?*



# Four Anchors –Address The People Paradox

## 01 Accessibility

Leaders who are approachable and accessible create cultures of trust and where problems surface early —not at exit interviews.

## 02 Engagement

Engagement is not a survey. It's what happens between surveys —when leaders show up consistently.

## 03 Recognition

Recognition that is specific, timely, and genuine is not a perk—it's a retention strategy  
*This includes pay.*

## 04 Development

People want to see where they're going —or could go —inside the org.

People don't leave missions. They leave leaders.





Bridge Communities serves families that are unhouse d. Their greatest challenge wasn't funding —it was advancing how we cared for the people who carried the mission forward.

### What the External Data Told Us:

67%

נשקן ל חמ כ האכ ת ו לכ ממ טא פ מ ת  
סא ז תכ נ שף כ האכ ת ו ו | פ ש |

52%

had not received  
meaningful recognition in  
6+ months

1.8x

אכ חמ פ | לא טכ א | תשכ | יכ ל ס ד ס  
פ לק תכ כ שף דף פ שף פכ ל ל ו א חמ תכ ו





# Anchor #1: Accessibility

שפיעה לך ל כ ל כ ש רויבש ל ו ת ל י א ש א א ת ש נן / ת / כ ת כ ב י נ  
כ ק ל א ל ת ח ב ו מ ש א ש א ל ת / ת / א י א ט ש א ת ק ש ל



## Origin Stories

Every leader carries a story. I started by sharing mine — and made space for theirs.



## Proactive 360 Feedback

Get proactive feedback on your approach, communication, leadership style. Starting with me.



## Koffee with Karen

נשש לא א ק א ש : ש כ ש ל נ ט ת ש ל ש א ח ש ל ש ו | ת כ נ א ק ט ר ש נ ש א ט א ת ל  
כ ש נ | ת כ ס א א | ת ק ת מ כ ש ט



*Koffee with Karen*  
a time for konnection & konversation



## Personal Recognition

כ כ ט ט כ ש ט : ש פ : ש ל ש ח א ש ח ק ר ש ת פ ת כ צ כ ש ט : א ל א ל א ת ו  
ש ק י כ ט ש ל ש א ש ש פ : ש כ פ ס א ק ח ב ש ש ת ש ל ש



## Competitive Pay & Benefits

Advocated loudly — underpayment is a message.



## Gallup Q12

Measured engagement formally, acted on it, and shared results with everyone.



# The numbers tell a clear story.

85%

of employees worldwide are not engaged or actively disengaged at work

Gallup

43%

לֹא יָדָעוּ לְעֵלֵךְ לְהַגִּיד וְהַלְאָמְתֵךְ וְשִׁתְּמֵת  
כִּי לֹא יֵשֶׁתְּאֵשׁ לְרֵדְשֵׁת אֲכַטְמֵת צַדִּיק  
בְּעֵשׂוֹת יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְכֹל וְהָאֵל

Nonprofit HR 2023

\$1T

הֵאָנֹכִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי  
בְּעֵשׂוֹת לֹא יֵשֶׁתְּאֵשׁ לְרֵדְשֵׁת אֲכַטְמֵת צַדִּיק  
לְשִׁתְּמֵת

Gallup 2023

Disengagement is not a feelings problem. It's a strategy problem.







# Career Growth Model



כש | חכט לנט | נשטן כלטט ספ פלך | כתסאשי  
צכ ללכט צ

Redefines Career Progression

Enables managers to be more effective in career coaching

Improves equity in promotion

שט פט פלך ש קבל ל ו | לקט האגך פלך | כתסאשי  
סא | חכט נכ חמאש טכ לקלך דך ט

# The C3 People Plan: A Culture Built for People.

# C

## Capable Culture

Career Growth & Development

Gallup-driven learning plans.  
Individual development paths.  
Staff could see exactly where they were going —and how to get there. Build

# C

## Connected Culture

Belonging & Community

עלש לרפפ לפפ נשפ נשתק לך  
פ רט נתר ו נשפ הקנמטא אראש ל פי  
תפ נשפ פד | יא ארש | ררתך כשט  
ש ל לפ אק למכ לצט רספי | יכל ל אל  
ב למטפ כשט: ככטס

# C

## Caring Culture

Wellbeing

Holistic wellbeing —physical, emotional, social, professional.  
Because people who are cared for, care more. Full stop.



# What intentional people investment delivers.

Turnover  
21% → 6%

א ת ה ט ל ק ל ה צ מ ד ק ט ש ת פ א ט ו א ט כ ל א ת ש כ ו  
א פ ת ר ל ס א מ ת ל ש ת כ ש ט ו ת כ כ א ע ד ת ו  
ל כ א ק ו ד מ ת כ ל צ כ ט ר א ש ט ה צ מ ש ד פ  
כ ל נ ש ט ס ד

Gallup Exceptional  
Workplace Award  
2026

Kudos Award

Record Engagement Scores

א פ ל י ל ס א מ ת ל ש ת כ ש ט כ ל ע ש נ ת ד ל  
ל ס א כ ר מ ל ט ה כ ל ר פ ע ש ל ד מ ו צ כ ת  
ב ל ק י כ ו כ ל א ש ל ל ק א ש ל

Internal Culture  
Matches External  
Brand

People - A Strategic Pillar

Culture transformation embedded  
across the full wish-maker  
life cycle.





No People.  
No Mission.  
Period.



# The goal was never to keep people forever.

לְקַח לְאִתָּךְ לְעַד לְעַד וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם  
לְקַח לְעַד לְעַד וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם  
בְּנֵשְׁמַתְךָ לְעַד לְעַד וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם  
בְּנֵשְׁמַתְךָ לְעַד לְעַד וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם וְלָדַיִם

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Is she leaving AWAY from something?  
Or waiting for permission to leave TOWARD something?

Those are two very different problems. Only one of them is yours to solve.





Lead.  
**Boldly.**<sup>™</sup>

Karen S. Wells



כ לקק לישא סא |כש ףססכ ל כ ט ל" ♦ כ ת סא | פ ♦ כ לצ ט ל זע לא תש , ל ' ♦ ל ףא | ף ל ןך

## Let's Connect!

[Karen Smith Wells, MBA | LinkedIn](#)



@ksmithwells

