

Long-Distance Nonprofit Leadership

Asha Curran, the co-founder and CEO of Giving Tuesday, talks about how she approaches leading and managing a global movement and her far-flung Giving Tuesday team, and how her approach to work has built balance into her life.

Giving Tuesday proudly declares an annual day of generosity to counteract feverish days of spending. This year it [raised \\$511 million on December 3](#), far exceeding the \$400 million raised in 2018. Launched in 2012 with a largely US-focus, it has grown to become a global movement. “It was initially predicated on Black Friday, Cyber Monday, and Thanksgiving, which by default made it very US-centric,” says co-founder and current CEO Asha Curran (Curran started the movement with Henry Timms, the executive director of the [92nd Street Y](#)). Today, however, the movement spans more than 60 countries, which Curran says puts “a year-round focus on inspiring more generosity as a value at every level of society and expressed in endlessly creative ways.”

Leading this global movement, and the virtual team that serves it, has inspired Curran to think differently about how she works and about how a leader can help build a culture that is authentic to an organization’s mission. Here she shares her thoughts on leading a virtual movement and team, and creating work-life balance.

How did the Giving Tuesday movement start?

Asha Curran: It started at the [92nd Street Y in 2012](#) and we co-founded it with the United Nations Foundation, who ran communications for the first several years. It was an experiment, long before “hashtag movements” were as prevalent as they are today. During the second year of Giving Tuesday, it took on new meaning. That’s when Baltimore and Bucks County Pennsylvania decided to create Giving Tuesday movements in their local regions. These were our first two community campaigns and they drew together all of the different verticals of those communities: nonprofits, local businesses, houses of worship, families, schools, local government, and they



Asha Curran, Co-founder and CEO, Giving Tuesday

created campaigns that were an outpouring of generosity expressed as civic pride. It was a completely organic offshoot. It was nothing that we had decided to make happen.

Now, there are over 200 of those community campaigns just in the United States and hundreds more around the world. And those are only in an ancillary way about fundraising. Sometimes they are about supporting local nonprofits, but they really are more about bridging divides.

Generosity is a transformative value that we can show in every way from the smallest interactions we have with others every day, from strangers to colleagues and from friends and family to supporting nonprofit organizations. We try to erase the binary idea that there are people who have and there are people who need. Instead, we work with the philosophy that everybody has something to give, and everybody has something that they need.

How are the activities and initiatives led and managed? What role does Giving Tuesday play?

Asha: The leaders of each of these communities and countries form a global peer learning ecosystem. Our job as an organization is largely focused on those leaders, not on individual nonprofits, or the general public. It is focused on this network of whom we call “hand raisers,” because they’re self-appointed leaders, not leaders that we decided had the right qualities to be local Giving Tuesday leaders. They decided to step forward and say, “I want to do something with this in my community.”

A lot of people seem to think that we built some big fancy digital platform to grow this community, and we didn’t. We just brought intentionality to the technology they were already using, like WhatsApp and Slack. One of the really important guiding principles of that community, and I think part of our role is to set this expectation, is that there’s no hierarchy. If you are from a tiny country with very low GDP, you have just as much to offer as if you are the head of a major association in a large Western European country with high GDP. Everyone has something to bring to the table and something that they take from it.

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That is so important because they’re really modeling a new level of collaboration for the sector. If I have a great idea, if I hit on an innovation, if I discover a new best practice, if I do something really amazing and fun in my community, the first thing I’m going to do is rush to this WhatsApp group or Slack and share it. And then I can see that idea replicated in all of these different communities around the world.

Bringing that spirit and philosophy to the community is such a game changer, seeing new 21st century best practices rather than the same old outdated conventional wisdom. The potential of this shift is really fascinating to me.

Giving Tuesday works virtually with a global community of leaders. How big is your team internally?

Asha: When people ask how big my team is, I don't know whether to say 10 or 400. What's the definition of a team? If the definition is people who are working towards the same mission, then that team really is that network of hundreds of community and country leaders to whom we connect all day, every day. If you're talking in a more literal sense, people who are on the Giving Tuesday payroll, that's 10 of us. In both senses, we are globally distributed. Our core team is in New York, Toronto, Baltimore, Hong Kong, Oxford, Chicago, and more. Only two of us live in the same city.

What are the benefits of having a virtual team?

Asha: I have become a huge proponent of this way of working. That doesn't mean that I automatically think it would be the right thing for everyone, every team, or every kind of work. But for us, it is extraordinarily successful. Technology makes it possible to be in constant contact with one another, and that makes things very easy.

Not being located all in one place is actually a benefit. Imagine if just a team of New Yorkers was running a global movement. Our lens of the world would be coming from one place. Even as a tiny team, we have this very global scope, so that means we each bring something very different to the team.

Another benefit is it makes us appreciate each other even more when we are in person together. The in-person part is very important, and we really prioritize it. I just had my senior team of four together for two full days. We have whole-day team retreats often. They're energizing, they're fun, and we get a ton of work done. And then we go back to our respective countries or cities and continue to work in a more virtual environment. When you get used to seeing people every single day, 9 to 5, in the cubicles, there is a sense of taking each other for granted that's much harder when your time together is very precious.

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What do you find challenging about having a virtual team?

Asha: I'm going to sound glib, but I honestly find the most challenging thing about it is time zones. We are genuinely a 24-hour operation at this point, and we love that: we say the Giving Tuesday office is always open. But it's definitely a challenge. Our person who lives in Hong Kong is a really important member of our team. She manages our entire global community, so she's the person who onboards new countries, who stays in weekly

touch with each country, talking them through their campaigns, through any specific challenges they're having, all of that. And she and I are literally almost never awake at the same hour. So when we have calls, she'll have to join at 10:30 p.m. Hong Kong time. That's a fairly minor challenge and so far, it works very, very well.

Does this work arrangement provide better—or worse—work-life balance?

Asha: For me it works brilliantly with balancing my life in a couple of different ways. I think that everybody is part introvert and part extrovert. Sometimes being around other people can be energizing, and sometimes it can be draining. My days are so varied. Sometimes they are highly social, and I'm all around New York meeting with people. Some days I'm working alone from home the entire day on my laptop or phone. That kind of balance feels wonderful to me and very, very healthy.

I also have a daughter who just left for college, and I was able to, while working very hard, be physically present with her for her last few months here, and that was wonderful. I have a son who just started high school, and I can structure some days to be here when he gets home. Anybody who has teenagers knows that they don't always want to talk to you, but your physical presence, just the fact that you're there, is meaningful. This is true especially for parents who have really intense travel schedules, which I do. When you're traveling, you're gone, so when you're there, you really want to be there as much as you can be. So for me, and I believe for others on our team, it has added a tremendous amount of balance to our lives.

It sounds as if this balance is part of the culture you've tried to instill in your life and your team.

Asha: I've worked in many places with terrible cultures. Being in the same physical space as other human beings does not in any sense mean that you have a healthy work culture. I think the elements of setting a good work culture are actually very similar, for me as a leader and manager, as they would be anywhere.

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First is trust. You have to trust that people are going to get their work done, and they're going to be able to get it done without you physically looking over their shoulder. Even when I was at the 92nd Street Y, I never policed peoples' hours. My motto as a manager was deliverables

not hours. You have to trust that people know how to parcel out their own time, not just so they can deliver for you but so they can over deliver for you.

Another important element is humor. We have a lot of fun together. We don't take ourselves too seriously. We know how to joke in a digital environment, so tone is really important when you're communicating on Slack, on text message, on WhatsApp, or on email.

The third most important thing is solidarity. By that I mean knowing that whether you're in the same place or not, your team members have your back and you have theirs. We

will always pick up the slack, no pun intended, for each other. It's never something that I command; it's part of the culture of the team.

I think it also helps, honestly, that we are all true Giving Tuesday believers. We find such joy and inspiration in the work itself; that's key to a really thriving culture whether you have a virtual team or a 9-to-5 office space.

That's part of the reason I hire right from the Giving Tuesday community. The people who come to work for our core team get it. They are already hand raisers. They've already chosen to be part of the movement. Our data insights lead was our Giving Tuesday Canada leader. Our chief strategy officer was our Baltimore community leader. Our global manager was on the development staff of the 92nd Street Y. Our digital lead was our Illinois Giving Tuesday leader. They all came in feeling really lucky to work for this movement and really believing in its transformative potential.

If there's one piece of advice you'd have for a nonprofit leader considering a virtual team, what would it be?

Asha: All of the things I said are important, whether you're forming a virtual team or will have people right there in the office with you. Trust your people. Tell them what you need. Tell them you expect them to play to their strengths. I love being shocked and delighted by what somebody delivers that was not actually in their job description. It's important to give people room to find things that they're great at and feel passionate about and to deliver based on those passions and skills. You have to give people trust and room to play, to discover those new things. If people are too tightly constrained, they lose inspiration.

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