

Masters of Scale: Rapid Response Transcript – Sonal Shah

“Scaling a mission”

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The purpose of the foundation and the mission is to create a sense of belonging and prosperity for the Asian-American Pacific Islander communities, free from violence, discrimination and slander.

TAAF is, in all senses of the word, a startup. You have to keep trying different things until you figure out what exactly is the scalable piece of this.

We have to be a nimble startup and, at the same time, be a good steward of the money that's been given to us and make sure we spend it well and do well by the community.

BOB SAFIAN: That's Sonal Shah, president of The Asian American Foundation, a nonprofit launched by business leaders in May, dedicated to addressing discrimination against Asian Americans.

In just its first few weeks, TAAF raised \$1 billion for the effort.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of the Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk to Sonal because businesses have often overlooked the challenges faced by the Asian American community.

Since the pandemic, hate crimes against Asian-Americans have been on the rise, punctuated by the shootings in Atlanta in March that left eight people dead.

Sonal, who launched the White House Office of Social Innovation in the Obama Administration, is applying the philosophy of business startups to the new effort, building networks between government, businesses, and other nonprofits to amplify and speed impact.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian. I'm here with Sonal Shah, the president of The Asian American Foundation. Sonal is coming to us from her apartment in Washington, D.C. Sonal, thanks for joining us.

SHAH: Bob, it is so great to be here and so looking forward to our conversation.

SAFIAN: You showed me the view from your window. I'm curious, were you there on January 6? Did you see anything that was going on during the insurrection?

SHAH: I was not here. But I had a lot of friends who were in D.C. Some of whom were a lot of the folks that were part of the insurrection were staying, right across from their apartments or in and around their neighborhoods near Capitol Hill.

SAFIAN: That was a crazy day as part of a crazy year. Wasn't it?

SHAH: It was sad that this is what happens in the United States, actually. It was not something I would have expected.

SAFIAN: The Asian American Foundation was only established recently, this year, post-January 6, in 2021. It's in essence a very early stage startup in that way. For our listeners, what's the foundation's purpose, its role, and how did you get connected to it?

SHAH: The purpose of the foundation and the mission is to create a sense of belonging and prosperity for the Asian-American Pacific Islander communities, free from violence, discrimination, and slander – creating an opportunity for Asian-Americans to be seen as American in the United States and to be a part of writing the American story, which we have been.

We got started last year, right after the spike in hate incidents in March of 2020. The board sort of came together and really was focused on how do we address this hate? What do we need to do? Jonathan Greenblatt from the ADL reached out to many of our board members, and our board sort of joined in and said like, "This is something we have to do." I joined in October of last year and then accelerate to March when the killings in Atlanta happened and what you have is just really an acceleration to the founding of the foundation.

SAFIAN: You led Georgetown University's Center for Social Impact. You were a director of social innovation in the White House during the Obama administration, but the task here is a little different. What are the metrics for success, or are there metrics? Is that the way you think about it?

SHAH: Well, I started off with, I think, what's the mission that we want to achieve, which is a sense of belonging for the Asian-American community free from violence. And then we work backwards as to what are our metrics of success? What does belonging mean? How do we make sure narratives about the Asian-American community are not the usual tropes? How do we ensure education includes education about Asian-American communities as part of the American story and American history?

Then how do we make sure that the data that's being seen accurately reflects who the community is and how we have been actively engaged in the United States?

SAFIAN: The instigator you say was sort of starting in March of 2020 with the pandemic that this violence seemed to be sparked by Wuhan, China being the source of the COVID-19 virus, that that term like China Virus, that Donald Trump evoked, that that was kind of the instigator.

SHAH: Yeah, it sort of gives you a sense of what the power of the presidency is when a president says that. It sort of got a lot of people in the community blamed for the virus. The virus itself, we don't really know the origins of the virus. We know that there was a big outbreak in China first. But Americans were being blamed for the virus even though we were also victims of the virus ourselves.

I think the anti-hate incidents started at that time. We saw significant spikes in New York. There was an 833% increase in violence against Asian-Americans. In San Francisco and LA, there was over 150% increase. In March of this year, we saw them on TV, but these incidents were pretty high in March of 2020, we just didn't talk about it.

SAFIAN: The March events this year, the shooting in Atlanta that claimed the lives of eight people, including six Asian-American women, that was not necessarily directly tied to the virus, but sort of grew out of this time, this, what, allowing or normalizing of anti-Asian hate?

SHAH: I think it's a normalizing of the other. We're never seen as Americans. We're seen as the other. We're those people that are not American. We are perpetual foreigners. When something goes wrong, you want to blame the Asian-American community. This is historical. It happened with the Chinese Exclusion Act in the 1800s. It happened with the Japanese incarceration in the 1940s. You had it with Vincent Chin in 1982. It's this constant that it must be that we are the other. Over a year, it's normalized that Asian-Americans are the other and they're not part of America. That sort of led to increasing violence as well as shooting.

SAFIAN: I mean, I saw *The New York Times* published an article a few weeks ago about Asian women on the LPGA tour who expressed fear about anti-Asian bias in the U.S. for themselves and their families and their companions. They're Asian, they're not Asian American, but I'm wondering how much of the expression of fear and the outbreaks of hate are sort of changed risks versus an increased willingness to either act on or speak about the fears that have been around.

SHAH: Yeah, I think one of the things about launching the foundation that's been so interesting is how many people wanted to speak out about what was happening to them, whether it was in their communities, whether it was in their places of work, whether it was in schools and bullying. We've heard a lot more stories. The outbreak has sort of allowed people to feel. I think the launch of the foundation has allowed people to feel that they can express that anti-Asian hate is real. It isn't just something that happened to me and I don't want to talk about, but it's something that is happening to a lot of us and that we do want to talk about it.

I still think we under-report. I think there's a lot more that's going on than we talk about. I know there was one study by AAPI Data that said one in four Asian Americans has felt an Asian hate incident.

SAFIAN: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the shootings in Atlanta in March?

SHAH: We had just finished a board meeting talking about our strategy, and then we were all getting texts on our phones telling us that there was this shooting that happened in Atlanta. The next day we sort of took what was a strategy and said, "We have to just start executing and getting to launch because we have to be out there speaking up."

SAFIAN: The founders of the organization came out of the business world, out of the business community. I remember seeing newspaper ads right after the Atlanta shootings that said, sort of, "Stand with Asians," and a website. Some of your board members signed it and maybe helped pay for it. Was this a related effort to the Asian-American Foundation? Was it something completely separate?

SHAH: Yeah, it was sort of the community feeling like they needed to galvanize when they saw it happen. Our board members were actively engaged because it was run through the Asian Pacific Fund, which one of our board members was on the board of. They wanted to participate in it.

A lot of the folks that signed that ad that were part of the ad, but also many other incidents like Daniel Dae Kim, who spoke up, and is on our advisory council, all started to come together and say, "We need to do something together." That sort of really pushed the foundation to launch quickly.

SAFIAN: Yeah, when we talked earlier, you noted to me that less than 1% or half a percent of charitable giving goes to the Asian American Pacific Islander community. Why is that? Is that funder discrimination, is that misunderstanding, are there not enough of the right organizations or cultural obstacles to seeing and asking for help? What does that come from?

SHAH: I think part of it is that people have never thought about the Asian-American community as a minority community. People have never thought about racism against Asian-American communities. I'm not wholly convinced it's evil as much as I think it is that we're overlooked. So for many companies, for example, 18% to 20% of their population in the workforce is Asian American. And nobody has thought about them as an entity, as a group that might be facing discrimination, might be facing racism.

And this is the other trope that's been super important about our community is, people think we're successful so therefore we don't need help and that there is no discrimination. And that is not true, we're not wholly successful. Yes, the top 10% has been successful, but I think there's a lot in that community that just doesn't get talked about.

So, I think what happens is Asian-Americans we're not heard as the discrimination that is happening to us and the hate incidents and things. When we have spoken up, people haven't heard it. And when we haven't spoken up, we're afraid to talk about it because we're afraid that it's going to affect us.

SAFIAN: You alluded to that sort of "model minority myth" that Asian Americans are doing well. And that persists? Those implications still run through?

SHAH: Continues to persist. So the model minority myth, just as a background to everybody, is that the Asian-American minority is the "model minority," they're the ones that have made it in this country. They come here, they get the education, they get the good jobs, and all of that. That myth has been around and it continues to persist.

I've heard this many times where people are like, "Well, you guys don't need help. Why is this a problem?" We don't see the poor in our communities. We don't see communities that need help.

For example, the Asian American communities were the highest affected communities during COVID, especially the Pacific Islander communities. Our nurses in California, a large percentage of them, are Filipina-American.

Then we also get pitted against other communities. "Well, this community is a model minority, why aren't you like them?" And there is no conversation that's taking place in the breadth of who our community is, which is over 40 ethnicities and 20 Pacific Islander communities.

SAFIAN: Yeah. Asian-American covers a really broad description, a lot of discrete communities and experiences. How do you link all those experiences? And I guess, why wouldn't you have more targeted efforts for each culture and each community because they are very different, often?

SHAH: Yep. So I think the role of the foundation is to be able to show that the communities are diverse, and understanding the data and research that we want to invest in is really about how do we show the diversity of the community and show where the needs in the community are?

So if we can tell you that X community, the Vietnamese community, has these needs or the Chinese American community has these needs, we can then break out where the needs are. We can be similar, but we can also be very different and recognize that our needs are different, health issues, education issues, they're slightly different in each of these communities. So that's something that the foundation itself wants to invest in and wants to make sure that that data is available.

And, recognizing we want to celebrate the diversity of our communities, but also show that as an identity, Asian American, Pacific Islander communities, we can be stronger together. It's also about the strength of the community, 23 million of us together can do something.

SAFIAN: You began this startup with \$120 million, which is a well-funded startup certainly for a lot of startups. And you've identified another billion dollars in resources already as part of your giving challenge. Can you explain how that worked?

SHAH: Sure. The beauty for me was that our board stepped up and offered 125 million first. So they said we have to make a commitment to ourselves, and the board really stepped in and said, "We're going to commit \$125 million over five years as a start."

Then we started to reach out to other friends of the board, other friends of Asian-Americans asking if they would want to join in to match some of the funding that the board was putting in. And then we reached out to corporations and asked if they could join in.

To be honest, we would have been happy with another \$100 million in matches, and we were surprised at how many people wanted to join in with us. And the next thing you know is, we started on May 3rd, all of a sudden people are like, "We want in, we want to be a part of this." By May 20th, we had raised \$1 billion.

And that money, all of it does not come to TAAF, 90% of it goes to the communities themselves, through foundations, through corporations, through community foundations. And 10% of it comes through TAAF.

SAFIAN: So that money that's being donated, you guys are dictating where it goes? Am I understanding that right or not exactly?

SHAH: We are not dictating the money where it goes. What we will say is, "We're making these investments, do you want to join in with us? Co-invest with us?" Every

donor has slightly different interests so people may do different things. But some of them may co-invest with us, some of it may be that they do their own, but we can highlight for them where the needs of the community are.

SAFIAN: A lot of our listeners are business people, are in the business community. Is the experience of Asian-Americans in the business community different? Does the model minority myth persist there?

SHAH: Yeah. The model minority myth definitely also exists within the business community. A lot of businesses, and we heard from a lot of our partners to say that, "We need to do more for our Asian American populations in our companies and what more should we be doing?"

We do these donations through corporate platforms. Who are the Asian American organizations on those corporate platforms that can be donated to for matching donations that companies and others do? How do they invest in Asian American suppliers and small businesses? Are they part of the supply chain that businesses are looking at?

So it's sort of forced a conversation of, "Are we doing enough for Asian American communities in our cities and our towns and the communities that we're working in, not just our employee base, but also just in the business community around us. Are we investing in that?"

SAFIAN: There's a lot of competition for resources and for attention in social causes. And it tends to kind of peak and then wane based on the news, right? How do you think about and approach the various constituencies working on and targeted by hate?

SHAH: Hate is not a one community issue. The Black community faces it, the Latino community faces it, LGBTQ communities face it. I think that the way we've been approaching it with corporations and foundations is, "How do we do those together? How do we address hate that affects all of these communities equally?" Hate is hate, angry, the way we bully people, the way we treat people. It's a common conversation, and what we have talked about with all of our partners is let's do this together. Don't split us up as one group versus the other group. Don't split up the money as a competition amongst the Black community versus the Asian community. What this needs to be is a more intersectional conversation that we need to talk about hate across communities.

In order to build a multiracial democracy, we need to talk to each other about what that looks like together.

SAFIAN: Is there a differentiation of responsibilities or impact that you might look to government versus business versus other community organizations? What's the role of each one in advancing this anti-hate issue?

SHAH: Yeah, Bob, this is the beauty of where we sit as TAAF is we want to work with all of those communities. We don't think it's one versus the other. It's not just the business community's responsibility. It's not just the nonprofit community's responsibility, or just the government, it's that we're going to all have to work together to address anti-hate and also, belonging together. So the role of the nonprofit community as they are the closest to the communities on a daily basis, they're the ones talking to the communities. The role of the business community is how do we make sure those nonprofits and other communities are seeing and hearing these communities and what is that going to take? And the role of the philanthropy and others is where are the gaps and what should it be funded and how do we fund it?

And then finally, how do we also unlock government resources? It means working with mayors. It means working with local communities. So, we have to bring all of those people together and all of those different groups together, and that is what TAAF's role is.

SAFIAN: When we talked, you said that TAAF is like a startup, but because it's well-funded, it also reminds you a little bit of government. Can you explain what you mean by that?

SHAH: Yeah. So TAAF is, I mean, in all senses of the word, you know, from all the work that you've done is startups you're building, you're figuring out what works, then you pivot and then you change, and you have to keep trying different things. The challenge when you have a lot of money is that people expect you to have it all figured out at the beginning, right? So in government, it's like you get it, and you have to spend it all immediately, and you have to do the work immediately at scale, even though you're still a startup sometimes in government.

When I started the Office of Social Innovation at the White House, we were very much a startup. This was a new idea. This is a new way of thinking, but we had \$50 million, and then we got another \$250 million, and we got \$750 million. And we had to operate at scale with the nimbleness of being a startup to make sure that you're still learning and adapting fast enough. So what TAAF reminds me of is we have to do both equally well. We have to be a nimble startup and at the same time, be a good steward of the money that's been given to us and make sure we spend it well and do well by the community.

SAFIAN: Yeah, I hadn't really thought about it before that in government, it's almost like they're two separate activities, right? One is approving the money with only a general idea about how that money is actually going to be spent. And then, other folks who were tasked with spending or allocating to programs, some of which may be effective, some of which may not be effective, but you need to just act immediately, right?

SHAH: And what's so challenging, Bob, on this is that the government money in some cases has to be spent in that year. So if it gets approved in September of 2021, it has to be spent by September 2022, right? And a year is not a long time.

SAFIAN: How are you, what's the right word, resisting the impulse to spend through the money that you have on tap already, as you're trying to figure out what's going to have the most impact over a longer period of time?

SHAH: So I think what we're doing is in short term pieces. We're going to start with more work on anti hate and making sure we're addressing, how do we prepare communities? How do we make sure the next time there is an Atlanta that the community is ready, and the mayor's ready, and the local organizations are ready? So we're getting some grants out the door. At the same time, we're building a long term strategy of how we have the greatest impact and where are the places that we can have the greatest impact.

SAFIAN: So what's at stake in this moment, early moment for TAAF?

SHAH: The biggest thing we have is we launched creating a lot of sense of community for many Asian-American organizations and Asian-American communities. What we need to show is that we're here for the long term, we're not big splash, big event and then we moved on, but that we are here. We want to build relationships in the communities, we want to build relationships with the government. We want to build relationships with corporations, and we want to make sure that Asian Americans are visible.

So our goal now is to make sure that we build the long-term infrastructure in the communities as well as ourselves to make sure we're here for multi-generation.

SAFIAN: Are there any local organizations or community organizations that you've had the occasion to engage with as part of this role that you opened your eyes, said, "Wow, they're doing something special?"

SHAH: There are so many of them, but I want to talk about the four that we've invested in immediately. The first organization is Asian Americans Advancing Justice, AAJC. They are both a national organization and a regional organization. They work across the country to make sure we both have a federal approach as well as a city approach, as well as a national approach.

And they were the lead organization post-Atlanta, really liaising with the federal government. Then there's another group called Stop AAPI Hate. They have been the most well known group out there because they're collecting the most data on anti-hate incidents. And they've been an incredible partner. They're working with us on making sure we can track across the country more effectively. A third organization that we've been working with is NAPAWF. They are the national Asian-American organization

working with women, Asian-American women, as you can guess post Atlanta. That is also very important.

Too often in our communities, we don't think about how hate and other things work against women, and NAPAWF has been one of the leading organizations in the country working on this. And then finally, we gave money to the Asian American Education Project. They took this documentary that PBS had done on Asian-American history and they're turning it into curriculum. So those are our four key partners, as well as the Urban Institute and The Anti-Defamation League. Anti-Defamation League is helping us build out our structures to address anti-hate. And the Urban Institute is doing a landscape study for us on Asian-American organizations across the U.S. So that's a start, but there's so many organizations in our country that are working in communities across the country, and we are just starting to tap into many of them.

SAFIAN: It's been a stressful year with the pandemic, with the hate issues, with the economic issues. Has it been stressful for you? How do you handle your own stress in these environments?

SHAH: Well, there's been a lot of stress on a lot of families. I mean, I've been lucky that I had a job throughout the pandemic, that I was able to work from home. I was able to spend time with my parents and make sure that they were okay. There has been a lot of stress. And I think our communities have been working through a lot of that stress.

I know many of my family members were essential workers, so they were going into work all the time. Some of them were doctors. Some of them worked in grocery stores. The way I've learned to deal with stress is I do two things. One, I run, it allows me to just decompress. And then the second thing I do is I meditate in the mornings. I do about 30 minutes every day. And it's a way to center myself in the mornings.

SAFIAN: Yeah. As I'm listening to you and I'm thinking about the other parts of TAAF being a startup, there are a lot of organizations that are struggling anew with what they do remotely and what they do in the office. As you're conceiving and building out TAAF, are you conceiving it as a remote organization? Is there a home office? Since you're starting from scratch, you have some leeway in those areas?

SHAH: Well, so Bob, you're asking the tough questions now. It's funny, we started this organization all virtually, I'd never met most of my team members. I had recruited them and asked them to come, but I hadn't actually worked with them before or met them. So it's been a learning experience on how to do that effectively. And it's been great. I'm impressed at just how we've been able to do it, and give a lot of credit to a generation that just knows how to use technology better than I do.

We are looking at building an office because I do think that it's important that we also get to work together and understand each other. There is a sense of understanding and

learning. So we're looking at both, we're actually assessing whether we are in New York, D.C., and San Francisco. We do think there's a need for a West Coast presence because 15% of the Asian-American population is in California. Seattle also has a very large Asian-American population. In New York City, it's 13% of the population. So we need to make sure we're in the places where our communities are. And D.C., largely because policy is such an important part of the conversation for us.

SAFIAN: Well, this has been great. Are there any things that I haven't asked you that we haven't talked about that I should have? What have we missed?

SHAH: So Bob, great conversation, and thank you for having me. I just want to say before we leave that while we've spent a lot of time talking about anti-hate and the issues around anti-hate, I think one of the most powerful things we do is actually about belonging and ensuring that Asian-American communities, but frankly all communities feel like we are part of the contribution of the United States, and part of building of the United States. And it's an important part of who we all are. And we want to be seen as part of that. So the belonging piece is just as important as the anti-hate piece.

SAFIAN: Well, Sonal, thank you for being here and for sharing and being part of our community in trying to spread this word. I appreciate it.

SHAH: Thank you so much.