

Rapid Response Transcript – Alexis McGill Johnson

“Be relentless – so your team can be fearless”

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BOB SAFIAN: That's Alexis McGill Johnson, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

Planned Parenthood is an institution that often sparks strong feelings, from various constituencies, but there's no denying the perilous situation it finds itself in now.

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 Alexis because every organization goes through periods where things just don't go their way.

How leaders respond to those moments are incredibly important for the organization's mission, and for its team.

Since Alexis took over at Planned Parenthood, she's faced both internal and external challenges. She's chosen to speak boldly, emphasizing equity and addressing the organization's legacies of racism head on.

The lessons she offers are about not shying away from disappointments and impossible dreams, but continuing to stride toward them. It's a case-study in an entrepreneurial mindset, even if the goal isn't financial or scale in the traditional business sense.

She also offers poignant reminders about the role of companies, even in realms ostensibly in the charge of government. Corporate citizens, she notes, are leaders with obligations that extend beyond the bottom line.

[THEME MUSIC]

BOB SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Alexis McGill Johnson, CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Alexis, thanks for joining us.

JOHNSON: Thank you so much for having me, Bob.

SAFIAN: You have had an intriguing background in academia, working on political action through the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, and Citizen Change, and Vote or Die. And then founding your own startup research firm, which became Perception Institute, a successful, impactful enterprise, working on addressing bias with the likes of Starbucks, as well as school systems, and police departments, and so on. But taking the helm of Planned Parenthood in 2019, and then having Covid-19 hit, that's hard for any leader to be prepared for what we've been going through.

And now you've got another storm breaking as abortion restrictions intensify at the state level. And the Supreme Court seems poised to overturn Roe v. Wade, which has been a bedrock for Planned Parenthood for decades. Our audience here is primarily business leaders. And so I'm curious from a business perspective, in leading and operating your enterprise at this moment, how do you plan, how do you react, when the foundation on which the organization was based, and has been operating on, is poised to potentially evaporate?

JOHNSON: Well, look, the foundation of the organization, indeed, the very foundation of the mission is about fighting for and protecting the fundamental right to control your body as a basis for self determination, as a basis for determining who you will be, your freedom, your right, when and if you want to become a parent.

And I think that because it is literally baked into the core of everything we do, everything we do for our patients, it's daunting, but it's how we've been preparing for over 105 years.

SAFIAN: How is Planned Parenthood's strategy different than it was a year ago? Do you have new contingencies in place? Or were there systems already there anticipating these possibilities?

JOHNSON: I was a board member for 10 years. And I think to understand what is happening right now, we have to go back at least that decade to see how the political landscape shifted so significantly in so many states that created the foundation for the number of bans and restrictions that we have.

Our efforts over the last decade have been really to rely on the courts. The courts have been our backstop. And we have seen the judiciary get remade in the last four years.

For many people it may feel like this moment just happened out of thin air. And we have this court that is now acting in a way completely inconsistent with where the majority of American people are, but they have actually been building for over a decade to this moment. And I think that that is really the lesson here, it is the long game that it takes not just to win a right, but also to defend and maintain rights.

SAFIAN: There was a phase of Planned Parenthood's existence where the federal level was your backstop, your support, and your opposition responded by going to the state level. Now that it may be that the federal level is less supportive, does that put more emphasis for your organization on pressing back at local levels or state levels?

JOHNSON: I'd say that we've always been at the state level. Right? Planned Parenthood as a Federation is a network of, currently, 49 affiliates. We have over 600 health centers across the country. We see more than 2.4 million patients a year, a couple hundred million come to our website every year for information around sexual and reproductive education. We span the globe actually. We do work in a number of countries, in Africa and Latin America as well.

The breadth of the work that we do I think is incredibly important. Your delivery of healthcare is local. And last year alone, there were 600 restrictions introduced in 47 states across the country. We tend to think these things are only happening in the South and the Midwest. It just depends on where you have the power to push back.

SAFIAN: As you talk about this, the last year has been a tough year. Right? The position you guys are in now compared to a year ago, it is more fraught.

JOHNSON: It is more fraught. No, I think even for those of us who have been planning scenarios for the last decade, there is no question that listening to the oral arguments on December 1st, when you hear a clear majority of justices willing to uphold the Mississippi 15-week ban, which in itself is unraveling Roe. But to hear a simple majority of justices willing to take up whether or not Roe should be overturned.

For someone who has been involved in fighting for justice of all kinds for so long, that reality really set in when you just feel like the last levers that you have to defend this critical right, it's on the line. There's no question. It just feels like the shoe has dropped.

SAFIAN: Do you go to the arguments?

JOHNSON: I was in the courtroom in March, 2020 during the oral arguments for a case around admitting privileges in the Supreme Court. I got to see justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in her last year on the bench.

Obviously, the oral arguments are now live streamed. I was able to watch and listen to the arguments with my colleagues in real time, so that we could really parse through

some of the questions in advance of doing media just afterwards. We also use this as an opportunity to rally. I was standing outside of the Supreme Court with my colleagues from the center for reproductive rights who were arguing the case, and many other folks and supporters who had come precisely to let folks understand that they knew what was at stake.

SAFIAN: Along with these external issues, legal and regulatory, Planned Parenthood had a period with some internal issues when you came on as CEO, as president. You'd been on the board before, but there was a difficult period with some staff discord over mission and priorities, and then COVID hit. How did you look at trying to refocus and align the organization?

JOHNSON: Yeah. I came in July, 2019. We had a quite tumultuous leadership transition, and the staff really were demoralized. A lot was happening internally, but as a board member you're supposed to be nose in, fingers out. Right? You don't have a sense of all the things that are going on. And I was really, I would say, surprised and concerned about where the staff were. And I felt like my immediate, I don't know, leadership instinct was to become like a weighted blanket just to calm down the anxiety in the staff, because what we really needed to do was get focused on 2020, get through the election, and then kind of rebuild.

The opportunity to really realign, and reimagine, and rebuild was something that I almost didn't give myself, I would say, permission to do. Two different colleagues in my affiliate community came to me and said "You really need to drive it like you stole it." It's like, "You are the president right now. And don't wait for permission to make the transformations that you need to see." And there was just a moment that it clicked for me.

SAFIAN: So what did you do?

JOHNSON: Certainly resetting the relationship between the national office and our affiliate colleagues. You're in a network of organizations that you don't control, they're all run by their individual boards, which is incredibly important, which means that you have to lead by inference. And there was a lot of work that we had to do just in terms of rebuilding after a succession of transitions.

There was a lot of work that I felt we needed to do to resize ourselves inside of the ecosystem of reproductive rights, health, and justice. Planned Parenthood is obviously a significant provider of sexual and reproductive healthcare, but we're not the only provider. There are independent providers. There are reproductive justice groups that are largely groups that have been led by women of color.

I think finding opportunities to really demonstrate key points of leadership that would signal to those broader constituents and communities that I could create a space for

healing, that I could use our broad platform to grow power, because ultimately, that's what we need to fight back.

SAFIAN: When you use the word resize, are you talking about fewer people?

JOHNSON: I think it's about resizing in strategy conversations and decision making. Because we carry so many resources and because we have obviously such a strong national footprint, we are a really important engine, but it doesn't mean we always have to drive. How do you actually create? How do you actually sit with confidence, with a kind of movement confidence at a table without feeling like you have to direct every single conversation?

SAFIAN: So last April in the midst of all this, you authored an opinion piece in the New York Times about Planned Parenthood's legacy. You acknowledged founder Margaret Sanger's association with white supremacists and calling your own organization a Karen, that privileged whiteness. So what prompted that statement, that effort at that time?

JOHNSON: So there's never been a moment in my time with Planned Parenthood where Margaret Sanger's history has not been in question. I think that we've had to strike a balance of really wanting to honor her badassery, quite frankly. She was relentless about fighting for women's reproduction and freedom to decide when and if to become parents. She is the foundation of so many of the rights that we sit on today.

And yet, we know she grew up in an era that was more than 100 years ago. And people on one side who are like, "She's just outright racist," and other people who didn't want to touch the legacy at all. And just like most things, the truth is somewhere in between. I don't feel that naming her racist would've been completely accurate and also wouldn't have been an easy way for us to distance ourselves from 100 years of her life without actually interrogating how those behaviors have continued to be perpetuated inside the work and the movement.

And so Karen was a nod to the next generation to my staff, to say, like, "I see you, and we are going to actually take this work on internally inside of the movement, but also to signal broadly to the community that we are truly going to lean into equity and the very real work that we need to do there, and really lean into leadership." We need to have a practice that actually helps us decenter whiteness. That helps us actually, in some ways, become more expansive and more inclusive. That was the needle I was trying to thread.

SAFIAN: Was there some part of this effort that was hoped to solidify your internal team also?

JOHNSON: I would say internal to the national office, but really internal to the movement, it was just a kind of throw the gauntlet down and actually create a space for accountability. You have to continue to be intentional. You have to really use equity as a way to prioritize resources and decision making, not just talk about it in beautiful words.

But I also know that there will be a lot of pushback. There will be a lot of stakeholders who won't ... maybe not see themselves in a space when you start to talk about equity and naming that there may be potential Karens lurking in the movement or in the organization. And so I think it was to really demonstrate to the team what kind of leader I aspired to be, that I wanted to speak the truth, that I wanted to model what freedom looks like.

SAFIAN: At businesses, at organizations, leaders talk sometimes about the degree of difficulty for success for something. And I can imagine a certain discussion around abortion is hard enough to build consensus around. Do you really have to take on race too? Which may be ... the only thing that rivals it in divisiveness across the country. Do you really want to rattle both cages at once?

JOHNSON: Well, first of all, abortion isn't as controversial as people think it is. The great majority of Americans believe that abortion should be safe, and legal, and available within their zip code.

But I think you can't have a conversation around freedom and access for all people who can become pregnant unless you understand the particular experiences of all people. And so I think that one of the really important shifts that I've made around centering the patient in our experiences, our north star, is that it allows us to actually take on the conversations that impact the patients. So it's not just that people are coming to us for access to birth control, and abortion, and STD screenings when they leave, they may be stopped because ICE has come to their job. They may be pulled over by police officers on their way to school. They may be criminalized because now they are traveling from Texas to Oklahoma in a Rent-A-Car and may be deemed suspicious.

So it's in our interest to actually speak to the intersection of how gender, gender identity, access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, and yes, race are really foundational to understanding the core of freedom. I think that's really at the intersection of all the movements that I care about.

[AD BREAK]

SAFIAN: Before the break we heard Alexis McGill Johnson, head of Planned Parenthood, talk about navigating a tumultuous leadership transition, addressing the founder's difficult history, and reframing the organization's strategy.

Now she gets into the morale challenges that she and her team face with the impending overturning of Roe v Wade and how she's working to underscore the opportunities that she believes are still ahead.

She also talks about the role of business in social action and what it means to be a corporate citizen.

Her emotion about what's at stake is palpable, as is her resolve.

We all look for silver linings from Covid. In your business, the FDA allowed telehealth prescriptions for medication abortion for the first time, on a provisional basis first, and now it's been formalized. I'm curious how significant that is and how much you look for other silver linings and try to focus on them in this tough period?

JOHNSON: The FDA lifting the restrictions on REMS, I think is a really important game-changer for the provision of care, particularly at a time when, obviously, when we see increasing restrictions and when you see what the court is poised to do.

It wasn't quite a silver lining, but I do have to say that the race reckoning in 2020 really did create an opening.

Obviously it was horrific how we got there, and yet, it's opened up, I think, really important conversations around what does it really mean to center equity in our work. I've made a huge bet on centering and resourcing leadership of color and believing that letting the people who are most impacted lead.

So it wasn't quite a silver lining, but I think where we are on the other side of it is having a language and a praxis that is deeply grounded in kind of a bet on ourselves that I think is really powerful.

SAFIAN: It sounds a little bit like there's sort of implicit acknowledgement that maybe the breadth of Planned Parenthood wasn't quite as rich as it could be.

JOHNSON: Yeah. I mean, and again, it's all a work in progress, right? There have been missteps, but at the same time, like just opening up every day to say, "Okay, what can I be doing differently? Who could I call that's different?"

And even on my own teams, leadership of color and really paying attention to how they're growing and evolving paying attention, not just to retention and attrition, but you're saying, "Okay, how many people is this person managing? What is their budget? Are we actually growing the skill sets? If we want to get to a place where these leaders are actually driving us into the future of the movement?"

SAFIAN: And when you talk about your team, like the conditions you face now can impact morale, in a different way than the internal dissension did before, but I guess it can be hard to sort of keep spirits up when you're losing ground in some legal and regulatory areas. How do you keep your team, that human motivation side positive in the organization? How do you keep your own spirits up and engaged when things aren't going your way?

JOHNSON: My favorite quote by Alice Walker is a poem called “Hope is a woman who has lost her fear,” and I think about that a lot. I've meditated, it's sitting up on my wall right now because I think that's who we have to be right now. We have to be fearless. We have to be unapologetic, and we have to hold.

I think two really important things: We have to hold both the notion that we will be the leadership of Planned Parenthood when Roe is likely overturned or gutted irrevocably. So what does it mean to preside over some version of the end of Roe? How do you kind of address that from a heart space, while you were fighting feverishly to do everything you can to leave it all on the field?

And then how do you create the container for people to process those feelings while also saying, you know what? But on the day after we are also going to be in leadership, when we are rethinking, who do we want to be, when we are no longer defending a law that quite frankly was not sufficient for the majority of our states, that was, as our reproductive justice colleagues say, was the floor, not the ceiling.

Who do we want to be when we are not fighting over the privacy and burden and gestation and admitting privileges, all these things that have chipped away, but we are actually having a fundamental conversation around equality and freedom, and what does it look like? What does it look like in every school? What does it look like in every corporation?

The hope that I'm trying to impart to my team right now, to say, "It is going to be dark. We are literally in the darkness, but on the other side, while we are processing that ... " like Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the hill, in the piece, by Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” we have to imagine him happy, right? And I think that's the moment we are in, and that's the fire that I'm trying to bring into the team.

SAFIAN: Many CEOs talk about the broadening demands on them as leaders, the heightened stakes on speaking out, or not speaking out on societal issues for their business, for their employees. What is the role of business in social action, and what should it be?

JOHNSON: I think businesses have to center their engagement on their staff and the people that they serve, like this is not something you can poll test. And even if you did a poll test, you'd actually find out that the majority of people are with you. You actually have to think about, what is right in this moment and who should be involved in these decisions?

We don't want lawmakers making decisions about what we can do with our bodies, nor do we want corporations to make those decisions. We want to leave them in the privacy of individuals. And I think seeing more courage and strength from corporations to really stay in line with where their teams are, their teams who are going to be affected.

I think about the companies in Texas all the time over the last six months, like what are those people doing? What are their employees doing right now, when they find out two weeks after a missed period that they have an unintended pregnancy, and they've got to leave. Some of them may be fortunate enough to get on a plane and fly to L.A. and back in a day.

But there are a lot of people, a lot of workers, a lot of frontline workers right now, who are getting in cars, and they're driving 18 hours to Colorado or Oklahoma, and they are taking off work, and they may be fired because they don't want to give the reason as to why they need to make this emergency trip, and they may putting their kids in the cars because they don't have caregiving at home.

So like, these are the calculations that their workers are making just to get access to a constitutional right, and to be a corporate citizen, which they now are, and a citizen of the democracy, which they have privileges to being, they need to actually take that citizenship responsibility seriously in ways that help us really drive a different conversation.

SAFIAN: At the Perception Institute, at your firm, you worked with lots of businesses. Are there anything you learned from that, lessons, maybe, about how businesses might approach the challenges that they feel like they face in addressing bias or in doing what some would say are taking sides because they're trying to make everybody happy, right?

JOHNSON: Yeah. I mean, look, I worked not just with Starbucks, but I worked with a number of large multinational corporations and banks, places where there isn't a significant amount of diversity within their kind of corporate and leadership structure, and what my job was, was to always get them to have some of the uncomfortable conversations around race, but in ways where they could separate out, they could really understand that it wasn't about making people bad people. It was about helping them understand how the system impacted their colleagues. And I think that when you help people hear the experiences of their colleagues differently, when you help people understand and play out the scenarios, as I said, we're professional scenario planners, when you help people play out the scenarios of what it actually looks like in real time, it does create a level of empathy that I think can help shift direction in conversation.

But every level of a corporation has to be involved in that. It's not just the executives or the frontline workers. It's the boards. It's the shareholders. It's so important for everyone to be engaged and really have a shared language and understanding of how it impacts society and their role in it.

SAFIAN: Talking with you, I'm reminded of how early in your career, you were very focused on voter turnout efforts and how, if voter turnout had worked a different way, some of these

challenges that you're having to deal with now maybe wouldn't have turned out the way they did. Do you ever regret that you didn't stay in that realm? Would it have made everything easier?

JOHNSON: First of all, the voter engagement work that's happening across the country is incredibly important and valuable, and I think the turnout actually has stayed consistent and strong in the last decade or maybe two decades that I've been involved in some of this work. What we've seen, unfortunately, is also an increase in the number of voting restrictions, the ways in which people's ability to exercise and participate also depends on the state. And I think that it's not a coincidence that the same states where we're seeing these incredible restrictions around access to abortion, we're also seeing increased restrictions around voting rights. And I think that tells you something. It tells you something about how a set of lawmakers state by state have decided to control and weaponize the rules of power in a way that really is undermining democracy.

I know there has been a strong corporate effort around access to democracy by many corporate citizens in the same way there have been a lot of corporate leaders who've fought for access to birth control because they have a self-interest in making sure that their employees and their consumers have access to these basic rights and to make sure that they're able to support their folks through their tenure and their career.

SAFIAN: What's at stake for Planned Parenthood right now?

JOHNSON: I think it's not about what's at stake for Planned Parenthood. It's about what's at stake for the millions of people, almost 36 million people, living in 26 states that are poised to further restrict access to abortion and other sexual and reproductive healthcare. Those are the people that we think about every day, and literally every single person in the organization across the federation, they're here because of mission. We get some of the most passionate, brightest folks who want to deliver the best care without judgment. And I think about going into this next year with the impact that we could see from the Supreme Court with the number of states that are starting their legislative sessions right now with an intent to take away freedom, to take away rights, and the impact that that will have on so many people, on so many families, on so many mothers who are the large group of majority who have abortions, who already understand what's at stake, the impact on their communities. It's unconscionable, and that's really who we have to center in this conversation.

SAFIAN: As you're talking, I hear the emotion in your voice, and it sounds like part sadness and part anger. You're not quite sure how to walk your way through it.

JOHNSON: Yeah, it is. I mean, I'm yeah, I'm furious. I'm furious, and I know a lot of leaders talk about resilience and the need to find a way to reset and regenerate, and self care is such an important component, particularly given the moment that we're in and just the relentlessness going now into the third year of Covid. And I keep thinking about it's always the people who are most marginalized, who are the most affected by these

kinds of policies. And so I am sad. I am definitely angry, and I have to practice every day to find that hope, that hope to be fearless and to model that so that my team feels fearless, my team feels unapologetic, my team feels like they can lay it all on the line without penalty, because we have to be just as relentless and just as strategic as the opposition has been in order to build back for the next 30 years.

SAFIAN: Well, you also sound very determined, and I can say that that's very affecting and reassuring for me. So thank you. Thank you again for having this conversation and going down these roads with us. I really appreciate it.

JOHNSON: Oh, thank you so much for having me. It was great to talk to you.