

# Johnson Institute

## for Responsible Leadership

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### ***Leah Lizarondo and 412 Food Rescue: A Case Study on Leadership and Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic***

#### ***Executive Summary***

The United States discards more food than any other country in the world. 80 billion pounds of food—30–40% of our food supply—is wasted every year.<sup>1</sup> Yet, more than 38 million individuals in the US experience food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> At the intersection of food waste, food insecurity, and technology is the Pittsburgh-based 412 Food Rescue, an organization founded in March 2015 by Leah Lizarondo and Gisele Barreto Fetterman. Through the use of the application Food Rescue Hero, 412 Food Rescue mobilizes volunteers to intervene before good food is thrown away. Instead, food is redirected to those who are experiencing food insecurity. This case study focuses on the leadership skills of 412 Food Rescue's CEO Leah Lizarondo, who also developed the Food Rescue Hero application. The study examines how these skills have allowed Lizarondo and her team to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic confidently and successfully.

Through Lizarondo's use of a horizontal 'flat' management style and the cultivation of a strong team ethos, the highly adaptable 412 Food Rescue team was uniquely prepared to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, creating and implementing four projects to meet the needs of various populations in the Greater Pittsburgh region. Despite working in a field where people with the same or similar identities might be discounted, Lizarondo leverages her racial, gender, and familial identities to both lead and grow 412 Food Rescue. She is an innovative and forward-thinker, having created an application to help mobilize volunteers to redistribute food and strategizing to expand the Food Rescue Hero application to 100 cities by 2030. Finally, Lizarondo stresses the importance of mindfulness in leadership. Balance is the key to ensuring that she can assume her different roles (as a mother and CEO and co-founder of 412 Food Rescue).



Photo by Laura Petrilla

**Leah Lizarondo, CEO  
412 Food Rescue**

<sup>1</sup> "Food Waste in America in 2022: Statistics & Facts: RTS." Recycle Track Systems. Accessed February 15, 2022. <https://www.rts.com/resources/guides/food-waste-america/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Hunger in America." Feeding America. Accessed February 15, 2022. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america>.



## Background

Born and raised in Manila, Philippines, Leah Lizarondo's childhood and upbringing were influential in shaping the leader she is today. She says that from a young age, her father demonstrated the importance of hard work and instilled that ethic in each of his children. Surrounded by her siblings and numerous extended family members, Lizarondo recalls being a leader amongst them as the eldest, and she credits this experience as having made her comfortable assuming leadership positions throughout her life. After attending college at Ateneo de Manilla University in the Philippines, she began her career in the private sector at Zero to Five as a marketing and brand communication analyst.

After coming to the United States to complete her master's degree at Carnegie Mellon University, Lizarondo decided to shift her focus to work in the nonprofit sector, a space outside her comfort zone that she was eager to explore. Lizarondo had imagined that the United States was full of luxury and was shocked to see the hidden poverty that lay beneath this illusion. She began to understand that food waste and food insecurity

were not easy to address, nor were these areas that many were actively working to combat. After reading the National Resource Defense Council's report in 2012 that stated 40% of America's food resources are wasted, she decided to take actionable steps to address this challenge.

Lizarondo points to her experience with food insecurity and food waste in Manila when asked what inspired her to develop Food Rescue Hero and co-found 412 Food Rescue. During Lizarondo's childhood, over one-third of the population of the Philippines lived below the poverty line. In an interview with Carnegie Mellon University, she recalled the walls which were erected to hide shantytowns from foreign dignitaries' view.<sup>3</sup> Although she was fortunate to grow up in a prosperous family, she knew that behind the walls lay poverty and hunger. The Philippines has made tremendous strides towards poverty reduction since then, but 64% of Filipinos (54.9 million individuals) are still chronically food insecure.<sup>4</sup> While the Philippines faces its own challenges with food waste (17% of food is wasted), nose-to-tail cooking and eating has been common in the Philippines

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Shestak, "Feeding the Hungry," Carnegie Mellon Today, July 26, 2016, [https://www.cmu.edu/cmtoday/publicpolicy\\_innovation/feeding-the-hungry/index.html](https://www.cmu.edu/cmtoday/publicpolicy_innovation/feeding-the-hungry/index.html).

<sup>4</sup> "Philippines: Chronic Food Insecurity Situation 2015-2020," Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, January 1, 2015, <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1044577?iso3=PHL>.



for generations.<sup>5</sup> Lizarondo recalls “Every part of the animal was eaten, down to the bones.”<sup>6</sup> This manner of cooking and eating easily explains the shock that Lizarondo felt when she saw the amount of good food being wasted in the United States.

## 412 Food Rescue & Food Rescue Hero

Lizarondo’s unique approach to confronting food insecurity took shape after she met Giselle Barreto Fetterman while working as a food columnist for *Pittsburgh Magazine*.<sup>7</sup> Fetterman was the founder of the Free Store in Braddock, which receives surplus donated goods and then redistributes them to the community. Costco offered to donate food to the Free Store, as long as Fetterman or other volunteers would pick it up.

Confident that the Free Store model could be applied to combating food waste and food insecurity while being environmentally sustainable, Lizarondo

and Fetterman co-founded 412 Food Rescue in March 2015. Its goal is to divert healthy food from the waste stream to families and nonprofits that serve people experiencing food insecurity. 412 Food Rescue addresses hunger and food waste by mobilizing volunteers to deliver surplus food from retail locations to nonprofits serving people in need. It builds on the success of gig economy jobs that have taken off in the last decade, such as Uber Eats and other food delivery service models. Lizarondo’s vision, and her ability to mobilize supporters to help achieve it, ensured that the organization saw almost immediate success. Jennifer England, Senior Director for Partner Success states:

*“Year one is a good demonstration of her knack for assembling and mobilizing the right people to get things done. We were all volunteers, even the “staff” but we were dedicated to making it work. And it did! We rescued about 80,000 pounds that first year. I think a lot of leaders would have been satisfied with our growth trajectory, but Leah always drives for more. She saw the potential but understood in order to really harness that potential we needed an assist from technology.”*



In 2016, Lizarondo launched the Food Rescue Hero technology platform to address the logistical challenges of retail food recovery. Through the application, volunteer drivers are alerted when excess food is available for pickup nearby. A volunteer driver accepts the pickup in the app – much as a driver for Door Dash or other app-based delivery services would do – and then delivers it to its intended destination, which is usually a food pantry or similar nonprofit organization but sometimes directly to a family in need. Jennifer England offers further insight into the reasoning behind the creation of Food Rescue Hero:

5 Maan D'Asis Pamaran and Pauline Miranda, “How Filipino Chefs Are Leading the Nose-to-Tail Movement,” *F&B Report Magazine*, August 18, 2021, <https://fibreport.ph/2908/nose-to-tail-cooking/>.

6 Amy Costello and Frederica Boswell, “Food Rescue Hero: Salvaging Food to End Hunger,” *Non Profit News | Nonprofit Quarterly*, November 4, 2021, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/food-rescue-hero-salvaging-food-waste-to-end-hunger/>.

7 Kenny Gould, “Meet Pittsburgh’s Food Rescuers,” *Civil Eats*, July 10, 2017, <https://civileats.com/2016/09/30/meet-pittsburghs-food-rescuers/>.

*“Leah knew we could increase operations exponentially if we could automate as much of the process as possible. That sounds easy and certainly others have created apps that do things like post available food for nonprofits to claim and pick up. But, and here’s where Leah’s values meet her mind, that doesn’t actually increase equity or food justice at all, and potentially doesn’t solve the food waste half of the equation. What is really brilliant about the Food Rescue Hero model is that we only automate parts of the process that don’t impact the potential for food [in]justice ... For example, a bulletin board for nonprofits is great because then you don’t have to make a bunch of calls to place food. Saves time, increases your staff capacity right? But what about the organizations that don’t have the bandwidth to monitor the bulletin board? Or get the food? Or don’t even have a computer? That system favors the better resourced nonprofits and only reinforces a disparity in access. So, we intentionally designed the app to leave that part out. Instead, we crowd source the volunteers. That reduces staff time on the transport of the food and allows us time to work to make sure all of our nonprofits have the same access to available food.”*

While food rescue is a core element of 412 Food Rescue’s work, the organization goes beyond that to do many ancillary things to address regional food waste and hunger, such as making meals from bulk surplus food through its Good Food Project kitchen, equipping people with better cooking skills, using food waste to create innovative products, and distributing “unsaleable” products in the Community Supported Agriculture program, which allows consumers to support farms at the start of growing seasons.

By redirecting surplus food about to go to waste, 412 Food Rescue responds to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 12.3 – to halve per capita food waste by 2030, as well as redirecting good food to organizations that serve those who are food insecure, responding to SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). Food waste is one of the major sources of carbon emissions and wastes significant natural resources. By redirecting food from going to landfill, the organization also helps mitigate climate change, responding to SDG 13 (Climate Action).

## **Leadership Skills**

Leah Lizarondo sat down with four University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA) students and Professor Julia Santucci, Director of the Johnson Institute for Responsible Leadership at GSPIA, to discuss how Lizarondo leads 412 Food Rescue and how her organization has navigated the challenges faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This section will highlight four critical skills (identified through that conversation and through additional research) which have allowed Lizarondo to be a trailblazer





in combatting food waste and food insecurity in the Greater Pittsburgh region and in the United States.

## Adaptability

Through the use of horizontal management and the creation of a strong team dynamic, Lizarondo has positioned her organization to be adaptable in times of crisis. Smaller organizations such as 412 Food Rescue (which has twenty-seven staff members) are more likely to use a horizontal ‘flatter’ organizational structure, in which there are only a few layers of management as opposed to a strict hierarchy.<sup>8</sup> Research shows that this structure provides three key advantages: (1) fewer layers which leads to better communication; (2) more autonomy and responsibility for employees; and (3) employees may feel more motivated and therefore be more productive.<sup>9 10</sup>

Researchers Kaul, Shah, and El-Serag discuss the advantage of a flat organizational structure during times of crisis.<sup>11</sup> Senior leadership managing a team with a vertical organizational structure is more likely to assert control over the employees and reduce the employees’ responsibilities. This results in employees becoming “operators and executors” as opposed to “leaders and decision makers.” 412 Food Rescue’s flat organizational structure has enabled the staff to be leaders and decision makers, therefore making the organization as adaptive as possible while experiencing the rapid and unpredictable changes of the pandemic. The team adjusted more smoothly than most to the remote working world and remained as efficient as ever. This seamless transition and the fact that 412 Food Rescue experienced significant growth can be attributed to Lizarondo’s horizontal management style. Lizarondo was never one to micromanage or keep a tight control over her staff. Instead, she had

always encouraged them to be as independent as possible, instilling confidence that they were each capable leaders and decision-makers. Lizarondo’s pride in her team was constantly reflected in her conversation with the Johnson Institute. She consistently used phrases such as “the team” and “we,” always emphasizing the collaborative nature of 412 Food Rescue over her individual contributions. She expressed admiration for her staff, stating “The whole team made it happen.”

In addition to the implementation of the horizontal management style, Jennifer England attributes the adaptability of 412 Food Rescue to the fact that Lizarondo is a “relentless learner.”

*“She never shies away from changing her direction or tact based on new information. The design of the app and our operations are based on what we learned from doing food rescue. They are battle tested methodologies. While her core values stayed laser focused, the way of serving those values is based on real world experience. This flexibility means that 412 Food Rescue and Food Rescue Hero are agile and adaptable. We are always open to doing things differently if that will help us achieve zero waste, food access, nutrition security, food justice and community empowerment.”*

## The COVID-19 Response

By laying the groundwork for a highly adaptable organization, the quick-thinking Lizarondo and her team were well-equipped to continue rescuing food and combating food insecurity in the Greater Pittsburgh region when the COVID-19 pandemic began. The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank reported that the region experienced a 42% increase in food insecurity.<sup>12</sup>

8 “Organizational Structures,” BBC News (BBC), accessed December 20, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zb2vvk7/revision/2>.

9 Ibid

10 Karmen Verle, Mirko Markič, Borut Kodrič, and Annmarie Gorenc Zoran. “Managerial competencies and organizational structures.” *Industrial management & Data systems* (2014).

11 Vivek Kaul, Vijay H. Shah, and Hashem El-Serag. “Leadership during crisis: lessons and applications from the COVID-19 pandemic.” *Gastroenterology* 159, no. 3 (2020): 809.

12 “One Year of COVID-19: State of Hunger in SWPA,” Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, March 18, 2021, <https://pittsburghfoodbank.org/2021/03/18/one-year-covid-19-state-hunger-swpa/>.

In an interview with Carnegie Mellon University, she stated, “we built our model for emergencies, so we were prepared to evolve rapidly when the need arose.”<sup>13</sup> A sharp increase in downloads of the Food Rescue Hero application and an increase in volunteers allowed 412 Food Rescue to quickly mobilize and rescue more than 16 million pounds of food.<sup>14</sup> What is unique about 412 Food Rescue is that, unlike some nonprofits, its volunteer process does not require congregation—meaning that volunteers are at a reduced risk for COVID-19 exposure. At the peak of the pandemic, Lizarondo put no-contact protocols in place, and volunteers worked in a solitary manner. This ensured that she kept her team and the organization’s volunteers safe while combating food insecurity.

Referring to COVID-19 as a “great test,” Lizarondo and her team conducted a rapid assessment, creating and implementing four new projects to meet the needs of various populations in the Greater Pittsburgh region. 412 Food Rescue began Home Delivery “to respond to the most vulnerable and isolated,” especially the elderly and immunocompromised. With the support of 15 nonprofit partners, 412 Food Rescue served 2,149 households 205,514 meals through November 30, 2020. School closures adversely impacted students who depend on school meals. 412 Food Rescue immediately stepped in, distributing 15,870 meals to 30 school bus stops in the City of Pittsburgh, the Sto-Rox School District, the McKeesport School District, and the Clairton School District.<sup>15</sup>

412 Food Rescue created a network to distribute food (provided by United States Department of Agriculture through its Farmers to Families Program) to nonprofit partners, including churches, housing

authorities, daycares, and more, who also work to support food insecure individuals. The network helped to serve 12,634 households at drive-up and walk-up distribution hubs, distributing a total of 4.5 million pounds of fresh produce, dairy, and groceries.<sup>16</sup> In December 2020, 412 Food Rescue partnered with Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership to create Community Takeout, which leveraged a grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation to pay restaurants to prepare about 1,225 meals each week, which were then distributed to families in need.<sup>17</sup>

The incredible number of people that 412 Food Rescue was able to reach within the first year of the pandemic was facilitated by the inherently adaptive nature of the organization and by Lizarondo’s ability to rapidly respond to meet the needs of the community. During times of crisis, it is common for an organization’s leadership to tighten control to reduce risk and increase efficiency. Lizarondo empowered her staff to share innovative ideas and implement unique programs. Jennifer England affirms this by stating:

*“Leah has faith in her people. She chooses a team that can do the impossible and she lets them do it. She pushes us to be better, but she always surrounds herself with people she sees something in. [...] That’s leadership right there, seeing something in your team they may not even see themselves and then putting them in a position to go full throttle towards fulfillment.”*

## Innovative and Forward-Thinker

Lizarondo developed an innovative, “technology-powered, community-driven solution to food waste and hunger”: the Food Rescue Hero application.<sup>18</sup>

13 Deborah Taylor, “Leading the Fight Against Food Waste and Food Insecurity,” CMU Alumni (Carnegie Mellon University), accessed December 20, 2021, <https://community.cmu.edu/s/news/a4A2S000000YvSyUAK/leading-the-fight-against-food-waste-and-food-insecurity>.

14 Megan DiTrollo, “What I Wear to Work: Leah Lizarondo, Founder of Food Rescue Hero,” Marie Claire Magazine (Marie Claire (US), February 21, 2021), <https://www.marieclaire.com/fashion/a35550469/leah-lizarondo-food-rescue-hero-workplace-style/>.

15 “2020 Interim Impact Report.” 412 Food Rescue Hero. Accessed December 20, 2021.

<https://3g64ch1kkvxp7gd6o3h0a7gr-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/412-Interim-Impact-Report-2020-Digital-Web-Quality.pdf>

16 Ibid

17 “2020 Interim Impact Report.” 412 Food Rescue Hero. Accessed December 20, 2021.

This platform leverages modern technology to complete simple yet meaningful tasks: redistributing food for the purpose of ending hunger in the region and reducing food waste. 412 Food Rescue firmly believes that the application has the “potential to be one of the most disruptive innovations to reduce food waste and hunger.”<sup>19</sup>

From 2015–2020, 412 Food Rescue rescued over 44 million pounds of food (which equates to nearly \$111 million in retail value and more than 40 million meals), partnered with 2,986 nonprofit distribution partners, and recruited 20,196 registered volunteers on the Food Rescue Hero platform.<sup>20</sup> From 2019 to 2020, 4 new cities began using the platform, and there are now 12 cities in the United States and Canada who have joined the network.<sup>21</sup>

As Food Rescue Hero has gained strength and popularity in the Pittsburgh region, Lizarondo and her organization have goals of expanding to 100 new cities in the coming years. Additionally, Lizarondo and 412 Food Rescue intend to focus on spreading technology globally. Lizarondo states that:

*“The tech is crucial and pivotal to the success to any new intervention for our most challenging problems, strategic uses, specific on how you’re going to use tech. While we need many interventions we have currently, to create massive change, have to think outside the interventions we are used to, it’s the definition of disruption, how to work outside the status quo.”*



Marissa Fogel, Managing Director, discusses how Lizarondo is able to relentlessly pursue innovation:

*“When it comes to innovation Leah never waivers. Solutions that may seem daunting or unrealistic to some don’t scare her away. Instead, she will take a seed of an idea and walk it all the way down the path to reality. If there are barriers to actualizing her ideas she quickly pivots to come at the solution from another perspective. Leah’s tenacity is only made stronger by her business acumen. Using structured best practices to conduct research, evaluate impact, and success her team has clear goals and a path to achievement.”*

As she watched this idea blossom into something big, she reminded us that it is important to continue to push yourself to do the work that matters. Her leadership style centers on remembering that it is not just about the pounds of food that they are recovering, but the number of lives that they

<sup>18</sup> “A technology powered, community-driven solution to food waste & hunger.” 412 Food Rescue. <https://www.foodrescuehero.org/>

<sup>19</sup> “A technology powered, community-driven solution to food waste & hunger.” 412 Food Rescue. <https://www.foodrescuehero.org/>

<sup>20</sup> “2019 – 2020 Impact Report.” 412 Food Rescue Hero. Accessed May 12, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> “2020 Interim Impact Report.” 412 Food Rescue Hero. Accessed December 20, 2021.



are improving. In her words, the organization is continuously “measuring what matters.” With the growth of her endeavors, Lizarondo has shifted her perspectives as a woman in business and technology from that of a shareholder, to that of a stakeholder. Even having the power to make decisions about the direction of her company, Lizarondo’s work ethic and the importance of having a strong and supportive team was reflected when the Johnson Institute sat down with her to talk about the future she sees for Food Rescue Hero and 412 Food Rescue.

## Leveraging Her Whole Self

As a Filipina woman with a background in for-profit organizations, Lizarondo is aware of the challenges and barriers that she faces. However, instead of trying to hide who she is, she embraces her whole self in everything she does. Lizarondo shared with the Johnson Institute that when she walks into a room, she recognizes that people will often see her race and gender before they see her as a unique individual. With this knowledge, Lizarondo makes the intentional decision to take pride in and highlight her identity in all that she does.

## Racial and Gender Identity

As an Asian-American woman leading a nonprofit organization, Lizarondo is operating in a sector in which women of color face systemic barriers and limitations. Of the 1.5 million nonprofits operating in the United States as of 2014, only about 7% of nonprofit chief executives and 18% of nonprofit employees identified as people of color.<sup>22</sup> Women are over-represented in administrative roles as opposed to operations, profit and loss, or research and development compared to men.<sup>23</sup> In a 2019 survey of more than 4,000 nonprofit employees, 49% of respondents who identified as women of color expressed interest in assuming top leadership roles in their careers, but many of them reported that their racial and gender identity had a negative impact on their career advancement.<sup>24</sup>

While Lizarondo acknowledges the challenges she and other women of color face in the sector, she also notes that she strives to ensure that her identity is not a “self-imposed discount.” She does not want her racial or gender identity to be something that hinders her from seeking opportunities that could greatly benefit 412 Food Rescue. Lizarondo ensures that she does not let her



<sup>22</sup> Dubose, Derwin. “The Nonprofit Sector Has a Ferguson Problem.” *Nonprofit Quarterly*. December 5, 2014.

<https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-nonprofit-sector-has-a-ferguson-problem/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Building Movement Project. *Race to Lead Revisited: Obstacles and Opportunities in Addressing the Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap*, 2019,

[https://buildingmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RTL\\_Revisited\\_National-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://buildingmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RTL_Revisited_National-Report_Final.pdf)



identity be something that stops her from leading to the fullest of her capabilities, whether that be celebrating her identity, applying for grants geared towards minority leaders in the non-profit world, or highlighting her successes instead of failures.

One of the key areas where Lizarondo has worked hard to overcome the systemic challenges women and women of color face is fundraising. Within the venture capital world, women-led startups receive only about 2.3% of funding.<sup>25</sup> There is a significant lack of investment into women-owned and women-run businesses, which is only marginally better in the nonprofit sector. A 2019 study found that of survey respondents, 35% of those that identified as people of color reported a lack of relationships with funding sources.<sup>26</sup> This creates a situation where they are unable to receive funding as easily as white counterparts, not for lack of trying, but simply because they do not have the connections to start. Only 22% of organizations led by people of color reported having a budget of more than \$5 million, compared to 40% of white-run groups.<sup>27</sup> Knowing this, Lizarondo found it crucial to build her network early on in her nonprofit career. She reported leveraging friends to help her learn the world of fundraising, asking them to broker introductions and assist her in making connections with those who could potentially be a funding source. Lizarondo noted that with these barriers in the nonprofit world comes a ceiling to how much a woman-led organization will likely be able to raise. One of the things that she has come to recognize over the past year is that 412 Food Rescue has now reached that ceiling. She is actively working to smash through it, to ensure the organization continues to grow.

### *Familial Identity*

Her family also influences how and why Lizarondo leads 412 Food Rescue. During her interview with the Johnson Institute, it was clear how important Lizarondo's family is to her. Growing up, Lizarondo was not only the eldest sibling, but also one of the eldest cousins. She fondly recalled her childhood surrounded by relatives, both young and old. She acted frequently as a role model for family members, as well as a leader to her siblings and cousins. This has benefited Lizarondo as she runs 412 Food Rescue – she knows the importance of leading by example, as well as the importance of collaborating on bigger group efforts. She runs the non-profit not just on her own, but by truly collaborating with her employees and seeking their input and vision for the future. Lizarondo's family also acts as a driving force and continued motivator behind the organization. In countless interviews, including the one with the Johnson Institute, she cites her children being her “compass.” When thinking about their future and potential, Lizarondo wants to ensure that the work she does leaves the world a better place for them to live.

### **Mindfulness in Leadership: Balance**

Mindfulness is a state of focusing on the present moment, sensing yourself, sensing those around you, and sensing the sensitivity of your reactions in the face of stressful situations. Mindfulness is proven to help leaders manage their stress, which reduces employee stress, creates a better workplace, and improves the bottom line.<sup>28</sup>

At the core of mindfulness, in Lizarondo's opinion, is balance. First is the balance of roles for Lizarondo between work and family. She is not only the leader of 412 Food Rescue, but also a mother. COVID-19

25 Bittner, Ashley and Lau, Brigitte. Women-Led Startups Received Just 2.3% of VC Funding in 2020. Harvard Business Review. February 25, 2021. <https://hbr.org/2021/02/women-led-startups-received-just-2-3-of-vc-funding-in-2020>

26 Building Movement Project. Race to Lead Revisited: Obstacles and Opportunities in Addressing the Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap, 2019, [https://buildingmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RTL\\_Revisited\\_National-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://buildingmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RTL_Revisited_National-Report_Final.pdf)

27 Building Movement Project. Race to Lead Revisited: Obstacles and Opportunities in Addressing the Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap, 2019, [https://buildingmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RTL\\_Revisited\\_National-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://buildingmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RTL_Revisited_National-Report_Final.pdf)

28 Megan Reitz, Michael Chaskalson, How to Bring Mindfulness to your company's leadership, December 01, 2016, Harvard Business Review.

ushered in changes in everyone's lives, and Lizarondo was no exception. She transitioned to working-from-home and had to care for her children, who were also at home due to school closures. While Lizarondo eventually adapted to this transition, she admitted that it was very difficult. However, the one area she didn't have to worry about was her team's ability to continue to work well virtually. This is due to the strong independence of 412 Food Rescue's organization which is tied to Lizarondo's model of collective participation in the organization.

It is essential for Lizarondo to balance different goals among various stakeholders, which she does with the help of her unique management strategy. Lizarondo says that she has never been a controlling leader. The cornerstone of giving trust to the team and giving freedom to employees is the balance between organizational goals and individual demands of employees. This balance requires effective communication, and Lizarondo has a unique mode of communication called "our voice". Employees from every part of the organization, including volunteers, are integrated into the scope of "us," considering what "our" goal is, how "we" are going to proceed next, etc. This mode quickly gives stakeholders a sense of comfort and belonging, so that employees and volunteers can truly feel their value and their voices can be heard. This is a continuous, high-quality mode of communication.

The most difficult part of mindfulness is pursuing inner balance because it involves reducing one's anxiety, a challenging task for leaders, especially in times of crisis.<sup>29</sup> Lizarondo most often uses sleep and meditation to cope with stress, and she emphasizes the positive effects of meditation, not only to calm her down, but also as a positive cycle of self-management. Lizarondo uses a "to-do" management approach to deal with anxiety caused by uncertainty. This means planning for the day in the morning, with a list of must-

do tasks and priorities in order of importance. This is not only a strength in self-management, but also in organizational management.

## Conclusion

Looking towards the future, Lizarondo has no plans of stopping or slowing down. 412 Food Rescue has ambitious, but attainable, goals to meet by 2030.<sup>30</sup> These include:

- The Food Rescue Hero application will be expanded to more than 100 cities.
- 2.5+ billion pounds of food will be distributed which is equivalent to 2.1+ billion meals.
- 375,000+ food rescue heroes.
- 65,000+ donor partners.
- 64, 000+ nonprofit partners
- 1.3B+ pounds of CO2e emissions mitigated

Lizarondo works relentlessly and passionately with her team at 412 Food Rescue at the intersection of food waste, food insecurity, and technology. She is adaptable, innovative, and forward-thinking, and leverages every part of her identity to advance 412 Food Rescue's mission, all while ensuring that her career is balanced with her personal life. Her holistic approach to leadership is exactly why she is a trailblazer in a challenging field. Through the use of innovative technology and her "strong and genuine relations in the [Pittsburgh] community", she has found a way to combat food waste and serve food insecure individuals in Pittsburgh.

Lizarondo leaves the reader with a simple yet impactful piece of advice: surround yourself with leaders "who have the courage to push the status quo." She discusses the importance of having role models to look up in learning how to be a leader:

<sup>29</sup> Jacqueline Brassey and Michiel Kruijt, "How to Demonstrate Calm and Optimism in a Crisis," McKinsey & Company (McKinsey & Company, March 31, 2021), <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/how-to-demonstrate-calm-and-optimism-in-a-crisis>.

<sup>30</sup> "2019 – 2020 Impact Report." 412 Food Rescue Hero. Accessed May 12, 2022.



*“We envision our goals. And a part of that is really having role models from the beginning. It’s important to have many different role models that you can take little bits from for yourself to help you understand what kind of leader you yourself want to be. You will never be exactly like your role model. But, we can take from many of them, along with our own intrinsic characteristics to form a unique version of ourselves.”*

### Discussion Questions

- Aside from the leadership qualities and skills discussed in this case, what other leadership lessons come to mind?
- Assume you are the chair of the governing board for 412 Food Rescue. Do you have any concerns about its future? How would you advise the CEO regarding next steps in the organization’s growth trajectory?
- What new leadership skills do you believe Lizarondo acquired along the way – as the organization transitioned from an ambitious start-up to a thriving mature organization?



*Photo by Laura Petrilla*

**Leah Lizarondo, CEO of 412 Food Rescue**

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