

**NINA MOINI:** On this program, we regularly learn about research that's aimed at understanding social issues to make people's lives better. My next guest says too often, institutions study communities without including them, and their findings never reach the people they're supposed to help.

Brittany Lewis is out with a book today that outlines a different framework. It's called *Building a New Table-- A Community-Centered Handbook for Transformative Social Change*. Brittany Lewis has a PhD in urban studies, and she's founder and CEO of Minnesota-based Research in Action. She joins me now. Thanks so much for your time, Brittany.

**BRITTANY** Hello.

**LEWIS:**

**NINA MOINI:** Hello. With all of the work that you've done, I wonder when you realized that it was time for a book or a handbook like this to be out in the world.

**BRITTANY** I guess I'd be honest I feel like this book was always needed. I feel like I needed it when I was figuring out who and what I wanted to be as a leader. And because it didn't exist, I had to figure out for myself the best way to lead, pulling from so many different toolkits where one really wasn't speaking to the intersections that community really needed.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. I can't tell you how many times I've talked with people over the years from all different communities who say we just want a seat at the table about issues that are pertaining to where I live or my community. And I think that what you've noticed and pointed out is definitely not something new. It's always been around, but I think that there's more openness to people admitting that that gap exists.

I wonder what it looks like when research does not effectively include communities and what it looks like when it does. Could you break that down for us, like in action what it looks like?

**BRITTANY** 100%. I think we are most used to a traditional research approach that is extractive, that dives into communities, extract information, and makes meaning of that information separate from those communities. We're also used to a history of harmful research from whether it's the Tuskegee Institute, or we're talking about boards or commissions who define an agenda, make a reading of a community and then funnel resources in that direction without the community present. I think we are most used to that.

I would argue that the Equity in Action model, which I feature in this book, illustrates what happens when we don't do that. And there's a number of examples of projects that we have led at Research in Action that has moved change. For instance, in 2018, I led the evictions in North Minneapolis project, and that work moved a number of things. We moved folks getting rid of what is a self-pay policy in Hennepin County, which required shelter guests to pay to stay.

It prompted the Pohlad Family Foundation to put up half a million dollars to redesign Hennepin County emergency assistance, because that was the place in which folks would actually cry or show emotions because they had to ask for help and it was a dehumanizing process. We've also been able to work at the legislature with a lot of advocates to question why it was taking up to 30 days to hear back about your emergency assistance application, where you could actually get evicted in housing court in less than two weeks. So our actual timelines didn't match.

**NINA MOINI:** That's a great example. Thank you. I also feel that I hear a lot of people talking about how research is driven by a lot of competition for grants, timelines, and really restrictive ways of measuring success or effectiveness. How do you deal with those pressures when you're talking about deeper community engagement?

**BRITTANY LEWIS:** How do I deal with those pressures. Research in Action takes a model of building in-depth relationships with our partners. We don't take on projects that are not committed to the type of practice and policy change that we are. So we might not be the organization for you because we understand to do deep, intentional, community-based work does take time.

So for the folks that have come to me and said, I got six months to pump out this thing to prove something to a board, we don't work with those folks. So I'll just name that as true because if I'm going to live my values and I'm going to live the ethics of the change that I seek in the world, what I take on has to actually mirror that.

**NINA MOINI:** It's a bold stance and that a lot of people try to conform to what they are already seeing happening in society, and they are trying to maybe fix an institution from within. A few years ago, many institutions were incorporating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, DEI, into more of their research. Obviously, over the last year, we've seen cancellations of grants with even mentions of those terms in many cases.

Do you see an opportunity here to refocus the work that happens so it's maybe less performative and more impactful?

**BRITTANY LEWIS:** 100%. Building a new table is exactly about that. We are not invested in performative engagement, performative research that simply mesmerizes problems. We are unapologetic about supporting whether it's local government, local communities, and organizers moving conversations. And it's not impossible to do.

I think the challenging part of it, if I were going to be honest, is less the technical sides of what I do but the people work. Meaning half of our model is about how we acknowledge historic harm, how we process, how do we rebuild those harmed relationships in the process, and in growing our self-awareness.

Because the reality is to actually create the change we're all seeking, our culture has to change. So whether it's the organizational culture, whether it's the culture of leadership, whether it's the culture of how we even interpreted or understood the policy or practice in and of itself, that's where I think the real work, in my opinion, happens because we can write a great report, but if you have people at a table who aren't willing to move it, it does nothing.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. This is really the truth, right. This is people work and it's long-term work, and it's not something you can just perform because you're not going to see real impactful results. Before we have to move on, Brittany, I want to make sure that we talk about your launch events that are coming up. You have one tonight, I understand, at The Loft Literary Center in Downtown Minneapolis. Is there still space available? How can people engage with your work?

**BRITTANY LEWIS:** Yes. So tonight at Open Book, Downtown Minneapolis, we have our book launch event. Doors open at 6, program at 6:30. You can still register online and/or register in person. We are super, super excited for the launch of this book. We have a great program organized for everyone, and we really want folks to be able to take this as an active tool.

This book features a series of both lessons and concrete examples that we can add to our toolkit, and it also really helps people think about what does it mean to fail well and recover, because we're all going to make mistakes.

**NINA MOINI:** Absolutely. Thank you so much for your time, Brittany. Really appreciate it.

**BRITTANY LEWIS:** Thank you.

**NINA MOINI:** Brittany Lewis is the author of *Building a New Table-- A Community-Centered Handbook for Transformative Social Change*.