



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

S1E9: CONFLICTED CANDIDATES: CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN RUNNING WITH MICHAL ROSENOER

Michal Rosenoer: If we want candidates to grow and learn and be more responsive to public opinion, we actually have to give them space to grow and develop on the issues and say, I didn't know that at the time, and I apologize for harm that I caused, and now I wanna do better. I need your help. But if we're only ever gonna say, well, now you're a flip flopper, there's no incentive or space for candidates or elected officials to grow on the issues.

Sam Fuqua: That's Michal Rosenoer, and this is, Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. In this episode, we'll talk about the conflicts, both internal and external, facing women who run for elected office. Michal Rosenoer is the executive director of Emerge Colorado, a nonprofit that recruits and trains democratic women to run for political office. She's also an elected official serving on the city council in Edgewater, Colorado. Since 2013, Emerge Colorado has trained over 450 women.

I'm Sam Fuqua, with co-host Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

Jes Rau: Hey Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're really pleased to be joined by Michal Rosenoer. Michal, thank you for joining us.

Michal Rosenoer: Thank you for having me.

Jes Rau: Michal, we often think about, when we're thinking about political campaigns and conflict, those things tend to go hand in hand, and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the different types of conflict that the folks that you work with face as candidates going into their political races.

Michal Rosenoer: Yeah, that's a great question. I think there's a few layers of conflict that our graduates, who are primarily women, but also primarily either women of color or also LGBTQ, experience walking into their campaigns. First, I think is a big tension between whether or not they should even run. I think societal standards, white supremacy, sexism, um, means that women don't necessarily wake up every day, put on a tie, look in the mirror and say, I look like the president. Maybe I should just run. I think we're told things our whole lives about how we're not necessarily that kind of leader, and our work is better spent at home or in support of others, or even as activists doing the work from outside political office. So, making the choice to run can feel really conflicting because I think you're being asked to put yourself ahead of others in terms of power and privilege, by running. I also think it can feel like a conflict to put, um, your leadership in front of maybe priorities like your family or your job, and that can feel really difficult.

Um, And I also think people from non-dominant backgrounds, and by that I mean folks who are not white, cisgendered, straight men, um, also really struggle to get some of the support they need early in a campaign to be taken seriously. So there can be conflict because friends, donors or allies, folks who might support a candidate just like you or who supports your positions, may not actually show up with the money and time to make you successful. And so there's a lot of interpersonal conflicts that come up early when new candidates who are expecting help don't necessarily get the help from their community that they wanted. And you know, I think both in primaries and in general elections, there's just natural, the conflict between living our values as people who wanna represent our communities and create maybe a better, kinder form of politics while also having to say difficult things about people to clarify the differences

between us and our opponents. And I think there's a fine line between going negative on a campaign and telling the truth about hard things, and that's always a more difficult needle to thread for non-dominant candidates, especially women. Because telling the truth about difficult things can also often be perceived as being negative in and of itself, if that makes sense.

Jes Rau: Yeah, that definitely makes sense. And so often it feels like, um, those are the types of things that are valued and rewarded, like those more negative or what's perceived as more negative, uh, campaigning. And so how do candidates balance that when, when it seems like that's the kind of, what we want as voters, um, is the more negative campaigning?

Michal Rosenoer: Yeah, and that's a really great question. And I do think it's changed a lot in the, so the world of social media, because the more negative, the more dramatic headlines tend to be more clickable. And if something is more clickable, that's also how you raise more money or raise more awareness about a campaign. So, we are drawn as candidates towards a strategy that will help us raise more money or get more votes, but that's not always the strategy that will help us create the kind of world we wanna run or live in. Um, so I think when I'm talking to candidates, it's about strategy and values and trying to really walk that line. You know, maybe if you're gonna have to say something about a, an opponent that is a difficult part of their record, thinking about the ways in which you can say it or the people you can have say it for you so that doesn't have to come outta your mouth or it doesn't sound like an attack. And that's a difficult thing to do in and of itself because we're asking people who have real grievances about those in power or those seeking power to really soften their language and be less straightforward about the threats of their opponents. And um, that's one of the real difficult things about running for office as a non-traditional candidate is that we're trying to negotiate power structures that were meant to keep us from winning. And when you're working within a system that is sexist, that is racist, you have to sometimes give a little bit and move towards a space that isn't in line with your values for the greater good of winning, and potentially protecting your community. But that space feels really murky. So in the end, I tell candidates to run as they are. In the end, you need to live your values and what you do needs to feel right to you, and that should be your guiding light. And if you lose because you lived your values, maybe that's better than winning than not really recognizing yourself at the end of the day.

Sam Fuqua: In addition to delivering that message, what, what else do you do in terms of coaching or even just, uh, talking through some of those internalized conflicts that prospective candidates have? I, I can't do this, I shouldn't do this. How do you work through that?

Michal Rosenoer: Part of the way that Emerge does that is through our cohort structure. So our primary program is a six month training for democratic women, um, and non-binary people. And one of the big strengths of that kind of program is that people go through it in classes of 25 at a time. So if you practice saying, "Hi, my name is Michal. I'm running for Edgewater City Council," a hundred times over six months, and every time you do, a room of women or folks claps for you, congratulates you, supports you, I think that can really feel like a motivating factor. Like you have people on your team. And part of what Emerge does is it builds into this training program, a mentorship program, um, and coaching from candidates who have already run, candidates who have won office before. And hearing those people's personal stories, their struggles with that, and the way they overcame that can really just knock down that internal barrier of fear and, um, the fear of being vulnerable, and putting yourself out there and potentially losing. Um, you know, we really believe that candidates can win with a lot of different issues in their background. We've had, I've trained candidates who were arrested before, who've struggled with mental health issues, bankruptcy, and honestly, the thing we also tell our candidates is that voters are attracted to candidates who look and sound like them. And to be honest, most people do struggle either with finances, with mental



health, with family issues. So the more honest we can be about the struggles we've had with voters, the more likely they are to see themselves in our stories and respond to that. But we have to put ourselves out there first to be able to create that connection.

Sam Fuqua: So we wanna see candidates who we can relate to, but uh, I think as Jes was alluding to earlier, we, this is the big societal we, uh, of voters, we, we tend to respond to negative campaigning. Why is that?

Michal Rosenoer: Um, I think we're, our brains are just hardwired for drama. You know, what is the most interesting thing you can hear right now? And I think especially in this political climate where folks are exhausted by the policy, exhausted by the emotional weight of the problems, um, drama and negative campaigning can feel like brain candy. It's something else to focus on. It's more personal, interpersonal than it is about numbers and stats. And I think because it can be drama between two people, it feels a little more relatable, to be honest, than trying to talk about big policy issues and platforms.

Jes Rau: When you're working with candidates, are there specific conflict resolution skills or conflict mediation or different conflict skills that you work with them on or that you would suggest that candidates go in with, um, or work to have as they're running in their, uh, campaigns?

Michal Rosenoer: I think there's two kinds of conflict management skills we, well, scenarios that we work on in the training. One is how to actually manage yourself and manage your staff appropriately. Campaigns can feel really personal. The ideology is that they're geared towards burnout, right? And that can lead to some really painful conflicts with, with the candidate and their staff. And so we work specifically on setting them up for success by training them to self-reflect and think about who they are as a person and who they're gonna be as a candidate, and how they can plan to fill or meet their own weaknesses with a campaign team that's equipped for that. So for instance, when I am stressed out, I can get really aggressive. I can get really blamey. I can get really defensive, and just spiral. You know, if one thing goes wrong, I'm convinced all the things are gonna go wrong. So I needed a campaign manager who (a) knew that about me, and we could have some really open and honest conversations about that. But also was the kind of person who's a little more even-keeled. If I had chosen a campaign manager who was also going to explode every time they got upset, my campaign would've maybe literally burned to the ground. So part of it is understanding your own abilities and where your strengths and weaknesses are, and having really open conversations about expectations and problem solvings around 'what ifs' before those issues become reality.

And I think the other piece is dealing with conflict, uh, from your opponent. And a lot of that conversation is creating resources for them in advance that they know they can turn to for support. Whether that's calling me, calling their Emerge mentor, calling another candidate and asking for advice. I think we try to steer them away from reactionary work early. And part of that is also just having a good campaign plan. I think it's really hard to not respond to somebody who's being really mean to you on the Internet. But if, but the thing I tell our candidates all the time is they can waste their time blasting you on the Internet all day long. Just go talk to five voters every time it happens, and remember that that's what you're here to do.

Jes Rau: Effective conflict resolution strategies usually require both folks involved in that conflict to be really vulnerable, to get to some sort of positive place. And in campaigning, you're, you're against an opponent and it would be really, I would imagine, pretty damaging or could be damaging to get to that level of vulnerability. Um, in order, like you're not, your goal isn't to resolve conflict with your, your running, who you're running against, right? Your goal is to, um, get the office or get the seat or win. Um, do you think that it would ever be kind of possible, or how might it be possible for candidates to model a more



positive or more effective way to resolve or talk through conflict? Or do you think that that's just maybe not possible given the nature of politics and campaigning?

Michal Rosenoer: Yeah, that's a good question. I think it's easier to do in a primary than a general election, especially if you're a woman, a woman, a person of color, an LGBTQ candidate, and you're running in a general against somebody who maybe doesn't even believe that you should exist or have equal rights. It is really hard to sit down and be the vulnerable spokesperson because that person is like denying your existence or humanity. So, I don't necessarily recommend trying to resolve conflicts in that way. With a general or primary opponent, who is that, uh, juxtaposed to your values, 'cause in the end, being vulnerable is a risk. And if we know that risk isn't likely to pan out for you, it can be too much for a candidate to have to handle that. Um, however, in a primary where ideally you're more ideologically and values aligned with your opponent, we do encourage folks to sit down in advance of public campaigning and try to have some real conversations. And that can look like, you know, if it's two women running against each other that have come out of Emerge, I, I ask them to sit down with me and talk through whether or not a primary is even the best option for them. Um, you know, is this a situation where we can prevent a primary by talking through each other's strengths and weaknesses, having a conversation about representation, and working together. And if not, can we have a conversation about running a really clean and respectful race? And that we have done. Um, I'm actually really proud of that at Emerge. Um, we hold our candidates to a really high standard in terms of ethical leadership. It's something we train specifically on, and I think we've seen women run against each other in races that have been really respectful, and where the person who was one who's hi, has hired their primary opponent afterwards to help inform their platforms or run their office. Um, and so keeping in mind the larger vision and finding shared space and shared goals there, I think can prevent a lot of that damaging and negative campaigning.

Sam Fuqua: If I'm hearing you correctly, that is, uh, more likely to happen in a, in a primary or race where, you know, the candidates are sort of on the same team if we're talking about our two-party system.

Michal Rosenoer: Yeah, and I think it's probably to happen if they're both coming from a place of underrepresentation, right? If they can both see that the power structure is broken, I think they're more likely to work together towards not continuing to break it by running.

Sam Fuqua: Coming back to, to the voters, uh, and the fact that we, we respond to negative campaigns, you said earlier, well, it's, it's simpler in some ways to look at it as a kind of a fight between two people rather than to wade into, uh, detailed policy positions. But, we still don't like that, right? Polls consistently show that even though we respond to negative campaigning, we'd rather it didn't happen. So how do we get, how do we get there? What power do we have as voters to change that?

Michal Rosenoer: I think that as voters we also need to lead by example and be less reactionary when we do see negative campaigning or something that could be perceived as negative if we don't ask more questions. I think as voters we should move forward with a sense of curiosity first and judgment second. Uh, for example, I think we've seen candidates run for office here in Colorado who have had DUIs or arrest records. And instead of just saying, oh, that person is obviously irresponsible, creating space for nuance and asking questions about context, what was happening in their lives, why did that happen, and giving candidates a chance to be humans. Imperfect humans who are trying. And sometimes those people are really responsible and they need to be held accountable. But I also think we're never gonna get the leadership or culture of campaigning that we deserve if we constantly make snap judgments about people who are just putting themselves out there and trying to do something different.



Sam Fuqua: Just coming back to your, your earlier point about having the courage to put yourself out there because you see how other candidates get, uh, their personal lives get picked apart. I empathize so much with people who, who do it. Um, I've done it, you've done it. And it's just, uh, that fear we have of putting ourselves out there, including potentially every detail of our lives is, um, is really powerful.

Michal Rosenoer: Yeah, and I think that's especially true for folks who come from, with, outside the normal power structure. You could be putting your job on the line, your children's safety and privacy. You know, I think we see candidates every year who, their kids get called names, they get called names at the door, but more than that, you know, everything they've ever put on the Internet is now public game. And like, that takes a lot of strength and resolve to be willing to take that personal risk, let alone the professional impacts that come with running and losing for some of these folks. Like women don't have the same opportunities as men to run and lose and be seen as people who tried. They get seen as losers. And so even just the risk alone to your potential political career from running and losing is really high. So yeah, I agree, it's terrifying.

Sam Fuqua: Could you say a little bit more about that double standard that women who try and fail for elective office get labeled as losers, whereas, uh, a man could, uh, bounce back from that in some way? Is there research into that or? Uh, I'd just like to unpack that a bit.

Michal Rosenoer: Yeah, there is some research though I don't have it at the tip of my fingers. But we know that when women and men run, women actually are more successful. When women run, they win. However, in the spaces in which they lose, men can be seen as, um, you know, putting themselves out there. They're brave, they're courageous, they're trying. When women lose, it can tend to reaffirm some of the problematic beliefs people have about women in politics, and that can be really damaging, not just to her, but to other women who are running too. So, it's kind of this self-fulfilling prophecy where a donor may not donate to Michal the candidate because they think, um, I, I should be home with my kids. And then because they don't donate to me, I lose. And then their idea that women aren't fit for office is confirmed even though it's their fault in some ways, right? Um, and so I think that cyclical com, like confirmation bias of why women lose, makes it more likely that they're going to lose. I don't know if that's clear.

Sam Fuqua: Unfortunately, it does make sense. It's a, can be a self-perpetuating cycle.

Michal Rosenoer: Yeah.

Jes Rau: Voters don't usually get to see the behind the scenes. They don't know often what it's like to run for office or, um, what goes on or the strategizing or the ways that you have to be very careful about the things that you say and don't say. Um, and, and that is challenging. Um, are there things that you would want voters to know about, um, how conflict manifests or how they might see conflicts in politics that would help them be more informed and not make those snap judgments? Like things about the, the insides of campaigns that might help them just take a second before making that quick judgment about a candidate.

Michal Rosenoer: Well, my first thought process goes back to some of the concerns about Hillary Clinton when she was running, and lots of folks said that she was very robotic. But I wish more folks could understand that, especially when you're coming from outside the traditional power structures, people can be so mean that it is hard to continue being vulnerable as a candidate and everybody is telling you to look at the polling, write really smart messaging and coaching the genius or the authenticity out of candidates,



especially women. And, people are mean, so you wanna say less and less about yourself. So sometimes when a candidate is coming off a little bit robotic, a little bit inauthentic, I want candidates to think about, hmm, what is happening on this campaign where this woman no longer feels comfortable, like speaking her truth in a room full of voters? Is it that she's robotic and lacking a sense of connection and warmth or is it that people have been so mean to her that she no longer feels safe doing that? Um, so, like I said, it's almost an impossible needle to thread between being a strong personality but not intimidating, you know, a hardworking community leader without being considered uppity. And I think, I wish voters could think more about, um, what they're seeing in the context in which it has been produced, um, rather than just making snap judgements on a few sentences, you know, one piece of mail, things that are written with a strategy in mind and less with the human in mind.

Sam Fuqua: What do candidates need in terms of conflict resolution skills, both on the campaign trail and, and I think then, uh, if they're successful in, are holding elected office, that are kind of shared skills that we all can use to handle conflict better in our lives?

Michal Rosenoer: I think part, one thing I think of for candidates is they need more space to be imperfect. And, uh, when we are thinking about holding elected officials accountable for their votes and actions, we also, as voters, need to give them more space to be imperfect and improve. I think right now, especially, we're seeing a lot of purity tests being lobbied at candidates. You know, if you don't vote exactly this way or if you've made a mistake in the past, that's just your record now. But if we want candidates to grow and learn and be more responsive to public opinion, we actually have to give them space to grow and develop on the issues and say, I didn't know that at the time, and I apologize for harm that I caused and now I wanna do better. I need your help. But if we're only ever gonna say, well, now you're a flip flopper, there's no incentive or space for candidates or elected officials to grow on the issues. So I think voters need to have more space for nuance and grace for people who are learning and growing, and candidates and electeds need to be more comfortable saying and being real about where they have been falling short in the past, and more authentic in their ability to say, I don't know exactly what I'm doing on this issue, but I really wanna try and will you help me get there.

Sam Fuqua: Michal Rosenoer, thank you so much for speaking with us.

Michal Rosenoer: Yeah, thank you so much for having me and, and, uh, thanks for your work on this. It's such an important topic and I'm glad you both are discussing conflict resolution this way.

Sam Fuqua: Michal Rosenoer is the executive director of Emerge Colorado.

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