



CLIENT CASE STUDY SERIES, No. 1

Center for Civic Innovation

Over a two year engagement together, Blaze and CCI founder Rohit Malhotra developed a strategic infrastructure to build one of Atlanta's foremost organizations committed to changing the civic, social, and entrepreneurial lifeforce in the Capital of the South.

Client Snapshot

LENGTH OF ENGAGEMENT:
27 months, from September
2017-December 2019

LOCATION: Atlanta, GA

SERVICE AREA: City of Atlanta

FOUNDED: 2014

FOCUS: Civic engagement and
entrepreneurship

MISSION: To elevate more
effective solutions that improve
equality and build trust in the
public sector.

SIZE: 10 staff, with a budget of
approximately \$1M

Blaze provided the following services:

- Founder & Leadership-Level Executive Coaching
- Leadership Coaching for Startups
- Strategic Plan Development
- Organizational Process Development
- Organizational Culture Development

Highlights:

- Worked with the Executive Director to devise organizational structure and to create new senior level positions to support CCI's growth
- Support CCI in developing and integrating new administrative and strategic processes as the team evolved and grew
- Conducted strategic discovery with more than three dozen key stakeholders determined CCI's standing in and value to the community it serves
- Developed evaluation systems for numerous facets of the organization
- Advised on key staff transitions and strategic cultural development decision
- Logged more than 500 hours coaching civic entrepreneurs in Atlanta, helping them shape their work and build their leadership skills

The Center for Civic Innovation was just an idea in the mind of Rohit Malhotra when Val and Elyse first met him. In a few short months, Elyse would join Rohit to turn that idea into an organization, and Val would be the first board member. When Elyse and Val joined forces almost two years later, CCI became Blaze's first client.

It started with a coffee shop meetup with a few Atlanta locals interested in making the city more equal. Elyse Klova enthusiastically joined the group, and after her first meeting, sent an email to the meetup's organizer detailing ten suggestions for improving its efficiency and effectiveness. "She didn't just give critiques," Rohit Malhotra recalls. "She genuinely wanted to help, and that was the beginning of everything." In short order, Elyse introduced Rohit to Val Porter Cook, then an active leader in Atlanta's non-profit community.

"Val's reputation preceded her," he remembers. "When we started talking, I realized that we were so similar in philosophy and ambition. At that time, I was preparing for a meeting with a leader in Atlanta's philanthropy space, and when everyone else told me to over prepare, Val was the only person to offer me calm assurance." A young Malhotra invited Val to accompany him to that meeting, to which she agreed, eventually leading to the official founding of The Center for Civic Innovation.

Not only did Val offer leadership and coaching to the new organization, but she also became a direct coach to the first class of Fellows, selected from an impressive pool of applicants and accepted for a year-long intensive residency program. Elyse came on board to officially help build the bones for the emerging organization, including organizational structure and process inte-

gration, managing strategic discovery work with new key stakeholders and partners, developing a system for evaluations, and organizing key data on the Fellows through the program's progression.

With personalized professional coaching in one hand, and intensive process development in the other, the foundation of Blaze Leadership Development was born.

"When I... learned that I'd get to work with Val as a benefit of the program, I remember thinking, Geez, I need her on my side. I went in with the thought that by the end of the program, I wanted her to be a board member for my organization. But what I got was even better."

-Sam Aleinikoff, Founder and Executive Director, College AIM

Coaching for Founders

As CCI grew and began to support new fellows in the development of their organizations, Val and Elyse became coaches and consultants for these budding organizations, too.

"I never set out to run a nonprofit organization or run an organization of any type," reflects Sam Aleinikoff, Founder and ED of College AIM.

"As a high school teacher through Teach for America, I saw systemic problems that needed to be fixed in order for my students to have access to basic opportunities. But I had zero formal training to make that happen. When I applied

to become a Fellow and learned that I'd get to work with Val as a benefit of the program, I remember thinking, Geez, I need her on my side. I went in with the thought that by the end of the program, I wanted her to be a board member for my organization. But what I got was even better.

"Val became integral to helping us with staff transitions, and the cultural questions that followed. She facilitated those early, critical culture conversations, as well as the strategic work of navigating a young organization to the place we envisioned for ourselves."

-Sagdrina Jalal, Senior Director of Programs and Partnerships at CCI

I was really struggling through a critical process for building the business, and she gave me an exercise to do that made that mountain into an anthill.

I was developing my job description, and Val told me to write down everything that I do, highlight all the things that I wanted to be doing, and cross off all the things that I didn't. 'You need to hire someone to do the things that you're crossing off,' she said. In the next meeting, she helped build what had crossed off into a position with a job description. To this day, that's still what I do when we're trying to hire. That exercise became one of our foundational processes, and has efficiently guided us now through three rounds of hires. Beyond hiring, it makes the organization sustainable, and really impacts the way that I lead.

She also empowered me to discover and include in my job description what I would need to maintain a sense of purpose in my work. For me, I knew that I needed student engagement in my day to day life; if I didn't have the students, running this organization was going to feel like I was just working in any other corporate position in which I have no interest. Val provided me with this process, which seems simple, but is very profound. She helped ensure that those moments of motivation and of purpose were still embedded in my work."

Support for Growth

Building a plane while flying it is a common saying within organizations in the midst of growth and transformation, and that was no exception here. Sagdrina Jalal, Senior Director of Programs and Partnerships confesses, "Back then, we were creating and refining the process at the same time that we were implementing the work.

"Val became integral to helping us with staff transitions, and the cultural questions that followed. She facilitated those early, critical culture conversations, as well as the strategic work of navigating a young organization to the place we envisioned for ourselves. Blaze had a lot to do with helping us rethink the organizational and the leadership structure. I personally benefited from Val being able to keep my perspective broad enough that I didn't get stuck in the weeds of what I was experiencing week to week. She also helped me to think through specific challenges so that we could solve them in real time."

While supporting the larger ship's navigation, Blaze still actively coached Fellows through the internal development of their operations.

Aleinikoff adds "Val's guidance during that time helped me to form and navigate

critical conversations that our very young organization depended on to survive. We literally grew our work tenfold as a result of her work, and she's helped us to position what we do for exponential growth in the years ahead."

One Year Later

Almost a year since Blaze's engagement with the organization came to a close, Malhotra reflects on his experiences from over two years of fumbling and flying:

"From a value proposition standpoint, investors and funders need to be convinced of where to put capital. And what we now know is this—coaching is a longitudinal game. We now know that the value of leadership coaching really propels an organization or a leader forward in a way that you can see. The quality of the work from our team and our fellows would have never happened if they hadn't received coaching through some very tough challenges.

In a word, strong coaching is preventative care for organizations. If this work isn't done as preventative care, then it becomes immediately emergent—triage or preventative, these are the only options.

Blaze is largely responsible for helping us to rethink our entire organizational and leadership structure, and outfitting

the team with new leaders, as needed, to carry out the highest form of the mission. I am more clear now than ever that strategic clarity was the blessing that allowed me to become a better leader."

"Strong coaching is preventative care for organizations."

-Rohit Malhotra, Founder and Executive Director, CCI

Although Aleinikoff began his leadership development with the common non-profit solution to challenges—funding—he walked away with so much more in reflection:

"Beyond knowing that I needed support and I needed to know how to grow an organization, I really thought that my organization just needed money. Over time, that did happen; I was plugged into funding opportunities. But that was by no means the central piece of the work. Because of Blaze, I essentially received a graduate certificate in organizational leadership and nonprofit management, and that was worth way more than just funding."



Strategic challenges? Ready for a clear vision of what's next? Let Blaze help.

With almost 40 years' combined experience in the social sector, Blaze offers wraparound services to provide mission-driven organizations with the love and support they need at critical inflection points in their development. We work with board, staff, and community to help organizations find or get clear on their North Star. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you think we can be of service.

You can email Val and Elyse anytime at hello@blazeleadership.co.