

# Elan Hope on Shaping the Research and Evaluation Area

## Conversations on Leadership

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### Overview

*Conversations on Leadership* is a series highlighting the leaders within Policy Research. In this series, guests share their thoughts on Policy Research's work and culture and highlight how they are using the firm's strategic plan to guide their work and advance the field.

In this episode, Elan Hope, PhD, reflects on her experiences as a Vice President, Policy Research's strategic plan and its impact on her area, new and emerging research from her area, and her approach to leadership.

### Elan Hope:

I want my team to always remember and value the humanity of every person who we have the privilege of working with their data, and to also uplift their own humanity, to take time away from complicated issues and data to refresh, to renew, and to keep it as light as possible. We want to enjoy the data work.

### Elianne Paley:

That was Dr. Elan Hope, Vice President of research and evaluation at Policy Research. As Vice President, Dr. Hope develops and oversees research projects that inform and strengthen PRA's technical assistance efforts. With a PhD in education and psychology from the University of Michigan and a postdoctoral fellowship in comparative human development at the University of Chicago, she examines factors related to behavioral health and well-being, including racial identity, critical consciousness, socialization, and activism. Welcome to *Conversations on Leadership* by Policy Research. This series highlights the firm's leaders, our strategic goals, and our approach to the work. I'm Elianne Paley, a communications specialist at Policy Research. In this episode, Elan will reflect on her experiences as a program area director, Policy Research's strategic plan, and its impact on her area, new and emerging research from her area, and her approach to leadership. Elan, it's great to have you here today.

### Elan Hope:

Hi. Thanks for having me.

### Elianne Paley:

So to set the stage, I'd love to start with a more open-ended question. Do you have a personal mantra or philosophy in leading your team that you can share?

## Elan Hope:

Yes. My philosophy when leading my team is to do good work and keep people first. Keeping the people who trust us with their data first is so important to me, and keeping ourselves as whole human beings first is also important. Often in our research and evaluation work, we listen to people's stories and we collect data about challenging times in people's lives, whether it be time in the criminal legal system, complicated experiences with the mental healthcare system, or experiences of oppression, like racism or sexism or classism. And this work can be heavy. We can hold onto a lot of realities of unjust, complicated, and traumatic experiences as we try to make sense of data from people who have trusted us to understand and explore their lives.

So this really guides my leadership approach in research and evaluation. The work is important, the data is important, the analyses are important, but we can't make intentional change in our communities without truly rooting ourselves in the humanity of people's everyday lives. And to do that work well, I want my team to always remember and value the humanity of every person who we have the privilege of working with their data, and to also uplift their own humanity, to take time away from complicated issues and data to refresh, to renew, and to keep it as light as possible. We want to enjoy the data work. And so that's what guides my approach.

## Elianne Paley:

Thanks for sharing that, Elan. I love your answer and I think it is really well-reflected in your leadership style. I think it'll be very useful to keep in mind while we jump into our substantive questions, so I can get us started with those. The 2023 PRA strategic plan has designated research and evaluation as the priority work area for this year. That's a really big responsibility. Can you delve into the significance of this decision and what prompted it?

## Elan Hope:

Yes. Having research and evaluation as a renewed focus here at PRA is very exciting and like you said, quite a responsibility. Policy Research has engaged in research and evaluation throughout its history, and so the decision to create an area focused on research and evaluation is somewhat a return to our roots. Both Sarah and I have backgrounds in academia where we ran research labs. So when determining the strategic goals for 2023, we understood that it takes a significant amount of support to sustain a research and evaluation area.

One strategy to build that stability is long-term funding and long-term partnerships. Research with community partners can take time. We need to collect new data sometimes. We have to work with existing data that a partner might have, clean it up, make sure it's in great shape to analyze. And this type of in-depth work takes a significant amount of time so we can ensure that our findings are accurate, so our partners can confidently make decisions based on our work. And we also do a lot of mixed methods research. So mixed methods research is when you combine quantitative data like surveys or administrative intake data from a jail with qualitative data like interviews, focus groups,

observations. And this type of data collection can also take a lot of time. So it's really helpful when we have funded, long-term supported partnerships so we can work with communities over time, we can support their growth and change, and we can use a variety of methods to answer the questions that are most meaningful to them.

### **Elianne Paley:**

Thanks, Elan. What was your strategy to accomplish that goal and what were the outcomes?

### **Elan Hope:**

So our primary strategy was shifting a focus from shorter year-long projects to projects that expand the three to five-year range. So we really wanted to make sure that we had time to work with partners, that we have the time for the data collection, that we have time to get to know communities that we maybe aren't as familiar with, or to relearn communities that maybe we haven't worked with in a longer time. So that is the first and foremost, is really seeking those long-term projects and partnerships. And the second is truly making sure they're well-funded. So what's the scope of our work that we're doing within that time period, and doing a better job and consistent job at making sure that the work that we say we're going to do, we can truly do with the resources provided.

### **Elianne Paley:**

I find it so interesting to hear about the strategies that go on behind the scenes and about the outcomes as well. Can you share some insights on how being the priority work area has transformed the way that your team approaches the long-term projects?

### **Elan Hope:**

Yeah. So we really get an opportunity to engage various methods. So when we have time to work with a community partner, we can sit down and say, okay, what do you already have? What data do you have and what are your goals? What are you hoping to learn here? And that allows us to say, okay, we have time to dig into your administrative data. What have you already collected? We have time to, say, recruit people to do interviews. Let's hear from on the ground folks, maybe practitioners, maybe people with lived experience, and hear how it's going from their perspective.

We have time to triangulate that data, so to take a couple of data sources and say how what they're saying aligns and maybe how what those data sources are saying doesn't align. And we have time for iteration and collaboration, so we can take work in progress back to our partners, which can take a little bit of time, right? You want people to have time to digest what they're hearing, to ask questions, time for us to go back into the data and answer some of those little Q, small questions that are all leading up to the major questions that started us on our research journey to begin with.

**Elianne Paley:**

So in a similar vein then, beyond the obvious impact on the nature of the work, how has the strategic focus influenced staffing, hiring, and team development in your area?

**Elan Hope:**

This is exciting. Because we have more sustained long-term partnerships, we're able to bring on some more junior staff in our area. We have some bright young folks, early career folks, who are experts and budding experts in data visualization, data analysis, data management, and so we're able to really have more cutting edge and new exciting ways of housing and managing all of our data. We get to do small visualizations in progress as we go through our projects and share with our partners. Early career folks keep us grounded and keep us at the exciting new ways of thinking about data science, statistics, and integrating qualitative and quantitative research. So we've been able to grow our team. It's been great.

**Elianne Paley:**

And that's so exciting. It's clear that your project area has had such a broad impact on many different areas. Have there been new collaborations or partnerships created as a result of the strategic priority?

**Elan Hope:**

Yes. So PRA has partnered to conduct a large-scale statewide evaluation of a system of care. This project is new and we're excited to talk about our findings and partnership more in the coming months, so stay tuned. And we're also working with medical professionals, pediatricians, to develop and evaluate a youth-focused intervention to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression in adolescents. Mental health concerns are growing among adolescents and young adults, and we're excited to work on promising strategies to help youth navigate that transition from adolescence to adulthood with a focus on their mental health and well-being. So look out for more on that work too in the coming months and years.

**Elianne Paley:**

I'm excited. Well, on the topic of collaboration, I would love to discuss cross-departmental work. How is your team collaborating with other areas of PRA?

**Elan Hope:**

Yeah, we have been very fortunate to collaborate across the areas at PRA. One exciting collaboration that we were able to do earlier in this year was with our project funded by the MacArthur Foundation, with people with frequent jail contact. So we were able to work with the Safety Justice Challenge site in our criminal legal system area. And so we did some data analysis with several of the sites, and as a result of our findings, we were able to do a webinar that reached over 70 people throughout the Safety Justice Challenge sites. And we're really excited that we had that direct impact of our research

project going directly to folks working with people day-to-day in practice. And we also have a wonderful podcast in our Data Points series that shares a little bit more about that work. So if you want to hear about our people with frequent jail contact research, you can head on over wherever you're listening to this podcast now, you can probably scroll down a few episodes and Dr. Sam Zottola and Dr. Lisa Callahan discuss that project.

### **Elianne Paley:**

Thanks for that plug, Elan. So if folks want to hear more information there, they can. But here, can you talk about the origins of these projects a little bit and the needs they're addressing in the community?

### **Elan Hope:**

One thing that we know from our research is that most people are only going to have about one contact with our criminal legal system within a year or so given period of time. But there's a smaller segment of our population that has frequent contacts with jails and other related kind of behavioral health systems, emergency rooms and the like. And so with this project, we really wanted to dig in and understand more about that population. What is going on? Who are the people who are having these repeated contacts with our criminal legal system, particularly jails, and what are their characteristics? What are their needs?

And so that was the true impetus for that work. And we found in particular that there was a lot of overlapping needs, a lot of behavioral health needs, substance use needs, and also housing and other resource needs. So as people are working and transitioning to better their mental health and to also receive treatment and different services for behavioral health concerns, they also need related help and services with regard to things like housing. And so with this project, we were able to work with three districts and jurisdictions to really dig in and understand who are the people who have frequent jail contact, and a little bit more about exactly what their needs are and how communities were trying to meet those needs and where communities might need additional support.

### **Elianne Paley:**

Thanks, Elan. That's super helpful. I believe you mentioned the court navigator project as well. Can you elaborate a little bit more on that too?

### **Elan Hope:**

Yes. Our court navigators project is another project that we're happy to be collaborating with the criminal legal system area here at Policy Research. In the court navigator project, Dr. Sam Zottola is leading that work and she and our team are understanding particular types of supports within and connected to courts. And so court navigators are generally folks who help people through their court processes and proceedings, particularly in relation to behavioral health and other needs adjacent to their criminal legal system needs.

And so in that project, we did a scan of the United States. We looked to see what courts or communities have these kind of navigator services folks on staff, how are they funded, what are their roles, what does their day-to-day job look like, and to get a really true sense of exactly what these positions look like and who they're helping. And from there, we actually have a team on the ground doing site visits. So they're visiting these navigator programs to get a better sense of exactly how they help people to navigate their legal processes and also receive supports for their behavioral health needs.

### **Elianne Paley:**

So these two projects both sound like massive undertakings. What are the short-term and long-term objectives for your department's work with these projects?

### **Elan Hope:**

Our short-term goals are often to collect the initial data and to analyze our initial data, so what are our top research questions and then let's get some preliminary answers to those. And the long-term goals are truly seeing practice and policy shifts that reflect the needs within our populations that we're understanding and serving. And so we would love from the court navigators project to see more programs supported, right? To see the benefits of court navigators and to see existing court navigator programs continue to flourish and to also see jurisdictions who've been thinking about these programs, now we can provide them with data and resources on what programs look like, what is related to success for these programs, and new jurisdictions can create them in their own spaces to serve the people of their communities.

### **Elianne Paley:**

Thanks so much for sharing that, Elan. It's wonderful and exciting to hear about the collaborations going on in your area. So what else exciting is going on with your program area? Is there anything you'd like to share about what you're focusing on outside of the strategic plan?

### **Elan Hope:**

Sure. We are excited for two things, I would say. One thing that we're really excited about in research and evaluation is our work with youth. So we've been growing and developing our youth portfolio within our research projects and really excited to continue to analyze data, particularly around how do youth understand systems of oppression, how do youth understand the current climate of the world we're living in, and what does that mean for their mental health and well-being?

So those projects are very exciting. I hope to have some findings to share with you all in the upcoming year in particular related to youth well-being and youth mental health. The second thing we're very excited about is some of our internal work. So we're excited to help Policy Research think about how we ask questions. For a lot of our training and technical assistance across our areas we collect a lot of data, even demographic data. And so my team has been thinking about how do we want to consistently think about those types of questions and data that we collect, and so we're excited to roll out and think through some more strategic and consistent ways of looking at data, even internally, at Policy Research.

## **Elianne Paley:**

Your team is certainly very busy. You just mentioned your team, and so I'm wondering, to transition a little bit into your leadership style as a program area director and how you focus on life work integration, I'm wondering, as a team lead, how do you ensure that the members of your team prioritize life/work integration, especially when you are working on so many projects?

## **Elan Hope:**

It is a task, and I think Policy Research sets us up to do this well. At Policy Research, one of our focuses is life/work integration, and I take that very seriously. So when my team has reports due or several projects going at the same time with data collection, I deeply encourage time off. We have our leave that Policy Research provides, and I want my team to use it strategically and meaningfully for how their life flow works. I also take very seriously project management, and so consistently looking across projects and checking in with folks to see what are the different balances of our projects within a given time, how can we spread that out more consistently or efficiently, how can we bring people onto different projects strategically to help manage the workload? Research can sometimes be a little hurry-up and wait, and so it's a consistent checking in that I do with my team and with the workload to make sure that folks aren't overburdened at any given time, and are really truly able to take advantage of our flex time, take advantage of our leave, and be human first.

## **Elianne Paley:**

I love that approach to ensuring a healthy balance. Have you received any feedback from your team about the remote-first workplace and their thoughts on it?

## **Elan Hope:**

With the research and evaluation area being relatively newer to Policy Research, we have a lot of remote staff in particular who can't necessarily go into our office and enjoy. And so far the feedback that I've received from my team has been great. Folks love being able to work from home or a coffee shop or wherever and be flexible in their workspace. That also does have some challenges, because we are all across the United States. And so with that, we do our weekly huddles where every week we all make sure we connect across projects, and make sure to check in regularly with all of my staff and team members. And when possible, folks who are closer geographically do try to get together every once in a while to see each other and make those kind of connections. And we love, love, love the company gatherings, so being mostly remote, when we all are able to come together in Troy, it truly is a reunion and an opportunity to really get to know each other, to get some face time, and even sometimes to get to work on projects collaboratively in person.

## **Elianne Paley:**

I always look forward to those too. So I really appreciate the dynamic and thoughtful approach that you bring to leadership with your team and leadership at PRA. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share or any final thoughts you'd like to leave our listeners with?

## Elan Hope:

I just would like to say I am grateful for Policy Research's approach to research and evaluation and the integration of research and practice. I'm proud to work for an organization that values evidence and using what we know from everyday real experiences of people to inform our decision-making. I think it's critical and key to making changes in behavioral health across a variety of systems.

## Elianne Paley:

Awesome. Thank you so much, Elan. It's been so enlightening to hear your insights on research and evaluations work and balancing team wellness. Seeing the research and evaluation area expand has led to so many benefits for the whole firm, and your collaborative approach is so instrumental to that success.

## Elan Hope:

Thank you, Elianne. It's been a pleasure to be here today. I've enjoyed chatting with you and getting a chance to share a little of the behind the scenes of research and evaluation.

## Elianne Paley:

I'm Elianne Paley, and you've been listening to *Conversations on Leadership*. *Conversations on Leadership* is available via Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and SoundCloud. This episode was produced, hosted, and edited by Elianne Paley, and engineered by Nicole Vincent-Roller. If you have questions about this episode, email us at [communications@prainc.com](mailto:communications@prainc.com). Learn more about us and the *Conversations on Leadership* series at [prainc.com](http://prainc.com).

## About

Policy Research Associates, Inc. (PRA) is a women-owned small business founded in 1987. In partnership with our sister non-profit, Policy Research, Inc. (PRI), we offer four core services: research, technical assistance, training, and policy evaluation. Through our work, we enhance systems that assist individuals with behavioral health needs on their journey to recovery.

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