The Upstander Ripple Effect: Leadership with Dr. Gail Fairhurst

**Jackie Congedo** 00:03

These are your superpowers, positive character strengths. You have them, all of them, some more than others,

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 00:11

what we are best suited to do in our lives connects with who we are and our character strengths,

**Jackie Congedo** 00:19

standing up strong, activating your superpowers is how you can change the world,

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 00:25

and you're pioneering the future of humanity.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:27

Let's start right now.

**Kara Driscoll** 00:31

Welcome to the upstander ripple effect. I'm Kara Driscoll, director of marketing and events for the Nancy and David Wolf Holocaust and Humanity Center. In this podcast, we dive into the 24 character strengths and explore how positive psychology can help us live as upstanders. Today, during my senior year at the University of Cincinnati, I took a class with Dr Gail Fairhurst, and the subject matter has resonated with me throughout my career in journalism, and our work here at the Center. Today, we're focusing on the power of framing and communication and the strength of leadership, what it means, how we can develop it, and why it's essential in building a more compassionate and just society. Dr Fairhurst, who has extensively studied leadership and communication, is here to share her experience.Before we kind of dive into the nitty gritty of communication and leadership, for those listening who didn't take your class, can you tell us a little bit about your background and how you began your career and how you really began researching and studying organizational communication and leadership?

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 01:37

Well, that's a that's a really interesting question, because I credit it to working myself through college as a secretary, and so I saw firsthand a lot of organizational dynamics, and just organizational life in general presented a lot of complexity that I thought was really interesting. And I was an English major as an undergraduate, but I really kind of moved increasingly towards communication, which you know, was and still is a relative new discipline, compared to, say, psychology or sociology or political science, but the focus was heavily on how people exchange messages and how they act in relation to one another, and that's what I was observing firsthand as a secretary. So I saw lots of good and bad leadership dynamics as well, and I had the opportunity to gravitate in that direction during my studies.

**Kara Driscoll** 02:47

That's incredible. And you've gone on to have such a remarkable career, and just so many different books and publications and research that you've done and students that you've impacted. And so it's great to to delve into some of these topics, even for you know, 30 minutes with you.

**Kara Driscoll** 03:07

So we talk about leadership as a character strength at the Holocaust and Humanity Center, meaning it's something that we all have the capacity for, and we can develop those skills if we're intentional with it. So in your book The Power of Framing, you delve into how leaders can effectively use language to shape meaning and influence. So can you kind of explain the basics of framing and what that really means and how people can use it in everyday situations, whether they're in, you know, a formal leadership position or maybe it's just something they're striving to

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 03:44

right? Well, I would say first of all that we all have the capacity to speak, right? So the problem that folks sometimes get confused with, and managers fall into this category, is that they equate talking with communicating, and those are not the same thing. Just because we are able to speak, and maybe we're a relatively articulate person, you know, who has a very big repertoire, that doesn't mean that we have... we are aware of the context shaping features of our language use. And so what framing is about is understanding that what we do when we communicate is not just transmit a message, which is what we probably learned in public speaking classes, but that we are essentially creating meaning with another person to essentially paint a picture of that context, right? So, you know, it's you. We can go to a cliche like the glass half full or the glass half empty. That would be an example of, are you a very positive person? And you always see that glass half full. And so you point to those positive aspects of what the context is providing.

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 05:00

You or, you know, do you think the sky is falling and you're constantly talking about the negatives? That would be a great example of that. In the leadership context, though, I would just add that it's not just the leader who creates meaning, and that's what I think is different about a communication approach as a as opposed to, let's say, psychological approach that looks for you know, what are those, those cognitive abilities that leaders have? A communication approach is going to look at how we together negotiate meaning about whatever is the task before us, whatever our identities are or what our relationship is like together,

**Kara Driscoll** 05:41

Interesting, and I can think of a million different ways that we would use that in daily situations.

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 05:50

You know, on a larger scale, we've seen a stark contrast of leadership styles nationally and internationally in recent years.

**Kara Driscoll** 06:01

We're just coming off of an election. How has the current political and civic landscape changed the way that you think about organizational leadership and leadership communication as a researcher and as a scholar?

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 06:17

A very complex question, but an excellent one, I would say that the current political landscape has influenced me for about the past eight years, because we're in an era that many scholars would call a post truth leadership era, in that we have in Donald Trump, an individual who has a facility with language, but he tends to tell more fabrications, more lies, if you will, than the average political candidate or average elected official. I mean, we always assume something on the part of politicians, but if you look at fact checkers in various news media organizations, you'll see that he has gone well beyond that. Okay, he's not alone, though. I mean, in the business community, we've had Enron and we've had the 2008 banking crisis. So Trump certainly didn't invent that. But what's important about this notion of post truth leadership is that communication doesn't matter all that much, right? And it's only what actions you take are important. And boy oh boy is as a person who teaches undergraduates and feels that you know, desire to want to help them become leaders, if I tell them that their communication doesn't matter. I mean, it goes against everything that I know about how trust is built in relationships, in organizational cultures, in society. So I think the idea that communication doesn't matter is, you know, one of those things that communication professionals like myself really has to help students understand that you might see this going on at a national level, but for you personally, this is not a style that I would encourage you to embrace. And I think that in certainly in the case of Enron or the banking crisis, individuals probably didn't start out with that particular way of deceiving individuals. But, and I think people get to it incrementally based on the organization's culture, nevertheless, it's it's not a good starting point for educating our leaders of tomorrow.

**Kara Driscoll** 08:42

No, and you know, you talk about this post, post, truth era. I'm curious. You know, in the conversations that you're having in the field, is anyone talking about how having this type of communication style and this type of leadership style, where truth might not be of importance. Is that trickling down in different situations, or is there any research, or, you know, conversations happening in the field about how that's that's impacting communication on all levels?

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 09:18

I well, I think we've always had a certain amount of it in society, for example, individuals who are very verbally skilled, right? Have you know that choice to make as to whether they're going to use those verbal skills to manipulate the situation or not? I'm thinking in Bill Clinton, for example, during the Monica Lewinsky debacle, right? And in his testimony, he was he was quoted as saying, Well, it depends on what the meaning of the word is, is right? And of course, he was lambasted for that, because that was someone who was very skilled in a vocabulary, but yet was this look like he was trying to manipulate the situation a little bit. So we've always had some of that, okay. But what I would say is different about now is that one can be contradictory. One can say one thing, you know, the sky is blue, the sky is black, whatever that is. And there seems to be now an indifference to contradiction. And so I think it goes to the heart of you know, what are your values? What what is, what is your integrity? What kind of culture are you trying to inculcate into your organization? Because I think that that level of indifference to contradiction is what's new. And I hope it's not trickling down, but I suspect it is, yeah,

**Kara Driscoll** 10:47

Sure, um, you know, and to that point, we're, we're, we're certainly seeing, I think, plenty of, if not more, over, you know, the past eight to 10 years more what you would call wicked problems versus tame problems everywhere across society, not only in our country, but across the world. Can you explain what that term means and how leaders and everyday upstanders can kind of work together to come up with solutions for a wicked problem?

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 11:19

Yeah, yeah, a wicked problem is, is a problem that has many tentacles. You can think of it that way. It keeps morphing. It doesn't, you don't... you aren't able to solve it. No one individual can solve it. You. It requires collective leadership, collaborative leadership, it requires that leaders have the kind of collaboration skills and perspective taking skills to understand that this is a sort of always kind of a, you know, a moving kind of entity in terms of tackling that problem. So a wicked problem is just particularly tough with my students. I make a distinction between a wicked problem, such as, for example, our health care system, or problems in the Middle East or the climate change, and problems that are very complex but potentially solvable. And I think that one of the things that I try to get my students to try to understand is that there is a difference between the two. And if you are a good collaborative leader, and you bring the right amount of resources to that collaborative team, or set of teams that you have to create, then those are potentially solvable. And I have seen upstanders work in that context.

**Kara Driscoll** 12:51

Yeah. Can you give me an example of what? What a good example of how people have come together to solve one of these complex issues?

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 12:59

Yeah, several years ago when we had Fernald, do you remember as a Cincinnati? And you might remember it was a site that was producing uranium products for the cold war effort, and so we saw generations of workers contributing to this cold war effort. Well, there was a lot of environmental contamination. They decided. The government decided to shut the site down, and we saw Fluor Daniel, which was a construction company, come in and get the contract. But it was an unusual site, because the Department of Energy had its own operation right there, side by side, and so, you know, as a construction firm, you know your building goes up or the building goes down, you're out the next day, right? Well, Fluor started to do some downsizings that werecquite problematic. The first one, you imagine yourself a worker, and your parents, grandparents had worked at this place. You show up for work one day and you are invited into your manager's office, and he or she tells you you have a half a day to conclude your business at the other end of camp campus. Here's a box for all your stuff.

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 14:20

People were just blindsided by that. And this human resources manager, who was quite a character,cwas former high school principal. He's a hog farmer. It is off hours. He watched this, and was really surprised by, you know, the reactions, I mean, people, there was just a tremendous amount of emotion, not only on the part of the people who got downsized, but also the legacy workers that were left and having to watch their coworkers. So the government ended up throwing money, and the money that was. Therefore, was quite an attractive package. And what the this human resources manager did was he paired with a Department of Energy official who was on site, and the two of them across their cultures and cultural boundaries to try to talk to employees and find a way to soften the nature of the downsizing. Well, the resources for that downsizing were so great that so many people volunteered to be downsized that they had to say no to a whole bunch of them. So So together, this human resources guy, this middle manager, this former high school principal, you know, he had his ear to the ground about what might work, and he and this Department of Energy official came up with a plan that they called managed attrition,and essentially employees would learn two years their job was about to be downsized, but in that two years, they could use government resources for training, for getting a degree, going back to school. And it was, it was one of those plans that had been formulated based on keeping your ear to the ground, talking to a lot of people on the government side, talking to a lot of people on the Fluor Daniel side, talking to a lot of people at the plant and the Department of Energy loved it. People at in the HR department at Fluor loved it. The employees loved it, and it worked for several months, but Fluor Daniel ultimately didn't love it, and so, you know, they tried to get they couldn't get rid of them, because the Department of Energy really thought so much about this individual, but they downsized all eight people that reported to him.

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 17:02

So here was a guy who was at middle management, who was trying to fight for downsized employees, legacy workers, who just, you know, needed some help in this downsizing process because they were so overwrought, and he thought he came up with a plan that would help both the company as well as employees. Ultimately, he was sacrificed for that. But he, you know, he was an upstander. He was one of those individuals who, for a time, at least, worked well with the system and tried to do what was right.

**Kara Driscoll** 17:40

You know, we talk all the time about how it's not easy to be an upstander. You know, it can sound kind of lofty, and, you know, do the right thing. And if you if you say it in a big way, sure it sounds like a nice thing to do, but often you as an upstander, you are the one who's sacrificed, or you are the one who, you know faces the ramifications of doing what's right or what's hard and in the moment. So that's a great example, and it's interesting to think about the concept of being an upstander with this framework, and how you can use framing and communication and collaboration to do that kind of upstanding work. I'm curious. That was a great example, but in your own life or in the experiences that you've studied, how have you seen people activate the power of framing and leadership to better themselves and others? That was a great example. But I'm curious if you have any others in recent moments.

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 18:44

You know, actually, it's interesting. I was thinking of one of the former department chairs of my unit who has now since retired, but she had a previous spouse who caused her essentially to go to Al Anon on a regular basis to help support him, but she was a very big believer in Al Anon and its principles about equality and its principles about fairness and the greater good. And I saw her for eight years, essentially use Al Anon principles related to equality and related to the greater good. And that framing in particular came in time after time after time, because faculties can be quite petty. I don't know if you knew that... faculty members...

**Kara Driscoll** 19:38

I mean, they're human,

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 19:42

but that notion of the greater good was a frame that just resonated time after time after time, and you could really see how this became a foundation that allowed her to reflect as have a mental frame, if you will, a cognitive frame related to the greater good, but then to pose that in a collective setting, and to say, "What is the greater good?" and to arrive at a consensus about what that might mean given the situation so that would be, I think, a great... An everyday example that I got to see close up for eight years, and I was always, I was always struck by the simplicity of that kind of orientation, but yet the power of it.

**Kara Driscoll** 20:26

Sure. It's such a great reminder that you know something as simple as communication, something that we don't you know cognitively think about what we're saying all the time, is a way to be an upstander, right, being thoughtful about the way that we speak and and use our words. And it's a it's a great example of that. I want to ask you one more question. You know, if you could give people three things to think about to become better leaders, whether they're in a formal role or not, what would they be? Kind of the basic starters.

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 21:03

I guess the first thing would be, would be to know yourself and your values, right and and to make sure that you have, you have a good value foundation, because I think that's so critical to integrity and making sure that that if you have that facility with language that's used properly, right? The second thing I would say is reflexivity. And by reflexivity, I mean taking the time weekly or daily, if you have that capacity, but at least weekly, to reflect on how your communication went over the week, not so much to you know, kick yourself that, oh, I wish I'd said this, or, Oh, I wish I'd said that, but to think about how you might do something differently if you wanted to change it, and let that be an opportunity to essentially prime your unconscious brain for your next communication. And then the third thing I would say would be to develop a heightened sensitivity to language. And by that, I mean, regardless of where you see it, if it's you're reading a novel, or if it's a blog, if you see something in a Netflix drama, whatever it is, just take that moment to reflect on what was what was it that hooked you? I mean, if you look at the best speakers in history, the best best leaders in history, who we regard as individuals, who are were particularly articulate. People always think, Oh, I was born... They were born that way. But actually they were all wordsmithers, right? A Ronald Reagan or a Barack Obama, a Martin Luther King, you know, we could go on, but those individuals were wordsmithers. By that, I mean that they understood the power of language. They played with it a bit. They understood what that what particular phrasings could mean, and what would might be the consequences of that. When I do executive coaching right, most of my job is helping leaders understand the consequences of their communication, and understanding that language that they may be using, that they're really quite unconscious about, has particular kinds of effects.

**Kara Driscoll** 23:14

Those are incredible three tips that hopefully we can all think about in the next week or so.

**Kara Driscoll** 23:21

Dr Fairhurst, I just want to thank you for being with with me today, and I'm sure we could talk for hours about all of this, and I need to reread the Power of Framing and so soak it in again. Thank you. Yeah. Thank you so much.

**Dr. Gail Fairhurst** 23:40

Thank you so much, Kara, I appreciate being invited today.

**Jackie Congedo** 23:43

Our thanks to the Mayerson Family Foundation and the VIA Institute on Character for supporting this series. We have a link in the show notes so you can take your own free Character Strengths survey and learn more about your strengths. We'd love to hear about your experiences with character strengths and how you're using them to stand up. You can reach us anytime by email, and you can listen anytime on Spotify Apple podcasts or visit Holocaustandhumanity.org/podcast.

**Jackie Congedo** 24:09

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