

Transcript for today's vlog

Creating a thriving work environment: How to provide constructive and loving support (#111)

(Note from Leading Consciously: the sound quality of this interview is less than ideal. To listen to the interview, please follow along with the transcript.)

Jean 0:01

Hello, everybody! The very friendly, competent, intelligent-looking face in front of you is Helen Stagg. Helen is executive director of Change Happens, which is an organization right here in Houston, right in a community that I used to live in, and where University of Houston is set up. It's a nonprofit that serves the community, and I'm going to let her tell you how.

As a field instructor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, we had students placed there. And first time I went – it just sprung up, came out of nowhere – but the first time I went, I was shocked to see what they were doing.

That was decades ago. And since that time, Helen Stagg has assumed the helm. And everywhere I go, I hear her name. Something happens, somebody says, "Oh, see what Change Happens is doing?" One of my relatives fell on hard times, and someone said, "Oh, you need to contact Change Happens."

So, I'm hearing about Change Happens. And I wanted her here so we could get her story and understand how it is that she's able to lead her organization, their organization – I know she'll be more modest than that – their organization into the huge success that it has become and provide such tremendous services to the Third Ward community and beyond.

Welcome, Helen.

Helen 1:51

Well, thank you so much. Thank you, Dr. Jean, for inviting me, I really am thrilled and honored to be able to share my story, and to be even invited to share it. So, thank you very much.

Jean 2:06

It's my pleasure. Okay, so let's just begin with you. As you probably know, Leading Consciously is about leadership for racial and social justice. And that's exactly what Change Happens does in a nonprofit setting. So, I want to know first about you and how you grew up. What was your earliest leadership activity?

Helen 2:34

Okay. Well, I grew up in East Texas in a town called Nacogdoches, which I still consider to be my home. I'm a child of the '60s. And so, I grew up during the time of the civil rights struggle. I attended a segregated school all through up until high school, and graduated from that school and then went on to college, to an integrated setting. So that was my first instance in a school with other cultures and people.

Jean 3:05

Okay. I'm going to ask you, because I went through that very same transition in high school. Okay, from segregation to integration. I was fortunate, I went to a very well-integrated Quaker school, where prejudice wasn't even in the equation. When you went from segregation to integration, were you accepted? How did it feel?

Helen 3:34

I went to Texas A&M, but at that time, it was East Texas State University in Commerce, Texas. And there was a high concentration of African Americans there so that was one thing. But also, when I first got to... I did a visit during the summer, and the sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha had just become a chapter on that campus.

And somehow in my process of learning about the campus and everything, I met some of the sorors there, and they kind of took me in, which gave a whole different kind of relationship to the school and the community and the support system, and we had our own dormitory on campus. I moved from the dormitory I was in, into the sorority dormitory.

And so, it was that sisterhood. It was much like what I experienced growing up at home in Nacogdoches, in terms of this village kind of arrangement where everybody - church, family - I never knew that anything was missing out of my life because of the people that surrounded me, always made me value who I was and what I could do and support it. And I felt that same way going off to college.

Jean 5:00

You didn't go through the shock I went through then, it sounds like. So, you're in college, what was one of your earliest leadership activities?

Helen 5:14

I think probably with the sorority. Any task or any group that I'm involved in, I take on these responsibilities and commitments. And, I went in as a pledge as the vice president of the pledge group. And so, that was probably my first leadership role at the school.

Jean 5:46

When you say any place you go, you take on responsibilities, this is what I've sensed about you. What happened that you're willing to do that, because, you know, a lot of people are staying back, and they're afraid to take on responsibilities, what's in your mindset that you just do that?

Helen 6:08

I think probably it was how I was raised. My grandmothers, both my grandmothers, my mother, I had a great-great-aunt that was like a grandmother, they were really strong. I think Renaissance women for me growing up. They believed in ownership of businesses, hair stylists, rental property.

They worked hard, they saved money, they bought property. There was nothing that seemed to stop them, even though they were growing... You know, my mother was born in 1924, my grandmothers in the late 1800s. They didn't let racial injustice or the fact that they didn't have access to education stop them.

That's what I grew up around, and they also believed in working hard, and being filled with integrity, and respect for people. And that, you know, you could accomplish all things and they lived that out. So that is what it came from.

Jean 7:25

Whoa, what a foundation to have multiple strong women in your life doing things, owning things, running things!

Helen 7:34

Yes.

Jean 7:36

Okay, so it was natural, then for you. You just soaked it up and stepped right into it.

Helen 7:45

I did. And it was not one of those processes where you were forced to or taught to or... none of that. It just happened. You know, it was all so much filled with love. You

just felt like that was what you had to do. It was not anything you ever thought about or questioned, it was just as it is.

Jean 8:11

Filled with love. Say more about that.

Helen 8:15

That's what I saw, that I was surrounded with. It was an idyllic kind of childhood. I mean, you could take a page out of Huckleberry Finn kind of and apply it to what my life was like with my brothers and, you know, just being free and liberated to go into the woods and do things there and to fish and just build clubhouses and all sorts of freedom, that we were allowed to feel these kinds of activities and do things.

And then we always knew that no matter what, we were okay, we were loved. And it was this kind of unconditional feeling that was generated by all of them to my siblings and myself.

Jean 9:09

That's just flat storybook, and I know where you're sitting now, you know that so many kids don't have that benefit. So, you see that contrast?

Helen 9:20

I do, very much so.

Jean 9:22

Okay, we're going to get there. Listening to you, I'm literally thrilled. My husband grew up in a small town in North Carolina and he roamed the woods, he and his buddies, and built ponds and chased squirrels and so he has that independence and yet he also grew up with unconditional love. He has an independence and a can-do

spirit that I don't see in that many people and I'm seeing it right now in you and it makes that much more sense.

I think when I was hearing about Change Happens in the community, and people mentioned it, it was that can-do spirit that I gravitated toward, and that led me to want to invite you here.

Okay, so we're in the woods, we're filled with love, we're building tree houses, then we go off to college. We go to A&M, we're still in a protected environment, and we still have a loving environment. We're in a sisterhood environment. We get out, and then what?

Helen 10:37

We get out and I had a choice, I could go ahead and work on my master's degree at that time, or I could take a job. I wanted to finish college really quickly. Because I didn't want to be a burden to my family in terms of having to pay tuition and all of those costs.

So, when I went to college I was 17, when I finished I was 20, that was three years later, and I decided that I would get a job before I went to work on a master's degree. And that's when I returned back home to Nacogdoches, my hometown, to figure out where I was going to go or where I was going to apply.

At that time, there was a state agency, the Department of Human Services, which has all of the entitlement programs like food stamps and TANF and all of those programs under it. And I applied for a job there, because I had majored in sociology, and wanted to go into social work as well, and I applied there.

And that was one of the times where I was faced with this kind of actuality about racism and all of that. Most other people would have applied for the job, went

through the interview process, and they either got it or not. I applied for the job, it was in the early... it was in 1970. But state agencies, particularly in small towns were not, you didn't see Black people working in those agencies.

So, before I could be hired, of course, there would be external threats to the state agencies to hire more people of color. So, they were faced with that, even if they didn't want to, but they had some kind of quota they needed to fill. But before I could be offered the job, I had to go through the interview, not just with the supervisor level, I had to go through a series of interviews that gradually went up the hierarchy.

Not only that, I had to go through an interview with the county judge in the place where I was going to work, because the county judge, as they probably do still, holds a lot of power and influence in small communities. So, it was that process and once I was deemed acceptable then I got the job.

And the job was in a place called Combes, Texas. Not sure if you've heard it. It's in Southeast Texas about 20 miles from Beaumont. But it is a classic story of a railroad track with one side of the town for Whites and one side for Black people. And so, I was probably the only Black person that had some kind of job in that county outside of custodian or some kind of laboring job. And so that was a total shock to me as well.

Jean 14:09

Oh, my word. So, what did that do to you internally? It was a shock. But did it depress you? Did it make you sad? Did it make you committed? Did it make you rebellious, angry?

Helen 14:22

It did not. It did not make me sad, it was a call for me to try and represent who I do, but also what Black people can do. It was this kind of system where the county judge, as I said his wife was working alongside me. So, it was that kind of nepotism that went on there.

So, I went to work there, and I was working with the wife of the county judge and this environment appeared to be racist in terms of how they treated people who came through, how they talked to people, the terms that they used.

Once, I interrupted a conversation, not interrupted, but I observed a conversation that the judge's wife and someone else who worked there was having. And they referred to a person as a Nigra.

So that's the kind of atmosphere that I'm talking about. But I did get angry when I heard that, and I interrupted that. I'm also a person that believes in that, when you see something that's not right, that you speak out about it. So even though I was 21 years old, and these people were older, and they controlled everything there, I spoke out about that shameful behavior.

Jean 16:02

What did you say?

Helen 16:05

I just said that I was, you know, concerned about the word that was used, that that was not respectful. I explained who I was and what I did, and how using that kind of language was degrading, and all of that. And they were kind of taken aback. Nobody said a word.

And after I said what I needed to say, I just walked out. And but I didn't, I did not, I had to work with the lady that I was working with. And something shifted after that with her. I'm not sure what happened. But there was a shift in there. And so, her attitude became to be more, I would say, lighter, enlightening, more respectful from there.

Jean 17:18

I am blown away by this. This is 1970/1971, you're 21, someone makes a blatantly racist comment, whether they thought it was or not – in our world it is. You said something, you explained who you were, you had a conversation telling them, it wasn't you called them names, you just talked about the behavior, how it felt to you and who you were, and then you left, then you got a response.

That is so wonderful, people don't know how to do that in 2022. You did it in 1970, that's marvelous. And no repercussions, instead you gained more respect.

Helen 18:16

That's right. That's right. You know, even I worked there for eight months. And even when it was time for me to leave, I had some misgivings about leaving, because I had... and I say this with all humility, not taking any credit for that. But there was a change in how people were treated, and looked at, even in terms of the recruitment and bringing in people to work for that state agency.

You know, the judge and his wife then invited me to dinner, for instance, which would have been unheard of before. So, it changed and it shifted, and I felt that because of my being there, not me, Helen, but as a Black person being there, that it opened it up for other Black people and people of color to be more accepted and what they could do. So, I was really grateful for that opportunity.

Jean 19:26

You've had ample proof, you've heard the phrase, "the power of one." You've had ample proof of the power of one person, who's determined to be respected and respectful.

Helen 19:43

I sure had the proof of it and you know, I had it long before, growing up, everything, but I certainly had it in that particular situation, which was probably one of the most difficult ones that I had been in.

Jean 19:59

When you went home that night after you had spoken out, did you tremble in your sleep?

Helen 20:06

No, I felt just kind of good. I shared that story with my mother. There was no place there for me to live, so I had to drive to Beaumont, Texas, which was about 20 miles away to find an apartment.

My mother and my grandmothers wanted me, you know, back in the time where you see like the green, the movie, the green... I forget the name of it, where Black people could not travel and get...

Jean 20:26

Green Card.

Helen 20:28

Green Card. So, my grandmother rented out rooms to particularly for – or they stayed at her house – she made it like a boarding house particularly for pastors who came into town to pray just something. So, they wanted me to live with an older woman there in that city, and like rent a room from her.

And I didn't want to do that, it was the '70s at that point. I wanted to live independently. So, I drove back and forth, from Beaumont to this little town. But

when I got home, I felt good in that I had had the opportunity to address it. And, it felt rewarding and liberating as well.

Jean 21:31

Okay. You could probably tell, I'm really sort of blown away. I've never met someone who at that age did what you did, and actually had the conversation. Okay, so we're at a job. So fast forward me to Change Happens. Did you start off working at Change Happens? How did you get to be the Director of it?

Helen 22:03

Well, I had a 22-year career with the state agency that I started off with. I had moved, got married and moved to Houston. And that's where, you know, I've been here for over 40 years.

So, I had worked in state agency, and both my daughters, I later got divorced, I had two daughters. And I stayed at the state agency because there are certain things that I believed as a single parent that I needed to do. And one was to provide stability, but also to be able to really work, be able to work and I needed to work, but also to be able to spend all my other available time raising my daughters.

So, I stayed with the state agency, although there were many opportunities for other careers, I knew they would take me away from them. And once they graduated from high school and went off to college, I thought this is the only job I've had, and after 22 years, I'm going to try something else.

And someone approached me about heading up a firm that was coming to Houston to work kind of in the same field, get the office set up and to direct it and all of that. And that's when I left the state agency and went to work for a private firm, and worked there for a while.

And then I met the founder of Change Happens; it was called Families Under Urban and Social Attack back then, Reverend Leslie Smith.

Jean 23:41

Sure was, yes.

Helen 23:44

And I met him doing some work. And he invited me to come to work in the nonprofit organization, and I accepted, that was in 2000. So, I've been at Change Happens for 22 years.

Jean 24:05

So, you rose up to your current position?

Helen 24:07

I did, three years ago.

Jean 24:13

How many promotions did it take you to get where you are now?

Helen 24:18

It was two and then offer of a CEO position.

Jean 24:23

Okay. Let's stop here, and let's talk about Change Happens as an organization so people can picture it. Please describe it, what it does. What was it about Change Happens that made you want to work there?

Helen 24:41

Okay. Change Happens started in 1989. So, it's been around about 33 years started with one program, substance misuse treatment program. And it's grown from that one program to over 25 today, from three employees to almost 80 employees today.

It's like Audre Lorde said, that it started with that one program, but you don't meet people with a single-issue life. So, substance misuse is caused by many things, and exacerbated by many things. And it could be lack of housing or not having access to health care, or insurance and all of that.

And that's what we found out as we began to work through that. There were many needs that our communities had. And our response with that was to try and address those needs. And as you go through [what we offer], we have programs of after school, programs dealing with youth incarceration, case management for children, mental health counseling, treatment, HIV prevention, and outreach and care.

Pulling together neighborhood groups of people to work on issues of affordable housing and economic redevelopment, access to health insurance, we've grown to have services in 59 counties in Texas.

Jean 26:11

Fifty-nine counties, okay.

Helen 26:14

Our Health Insurance Program was one of those federal navigator programs, and we're at 59 counties. So, we've grown in that way. One of the things that really, that I wanted to stay was because there was this opportunity to just do things, I've never liked to do just one thing, so I had an opportunity to...

I remember having a conversation with the CEO at the time once, when I first got there, maybe a year. And he said, I want to build a building, because we were in a rental property then. And that's all I had to hear. And when he said that, I thought, okay, I'm going to help him build this building.

So, I went to work on fundraising, and meeting people. And I even have sketches of sitting, where I just hand drew, how that building could look and what the rooms in the building would be. But it was that freedom that would allow me to expand on all of that.

When we moved into that building, we had raised the \$2.5 million to build it, pay it off, all of those things. And that those classrooms that I drew before, how the diagrams were, is how the architect took the renderings, and brought them into reality.

So, it's seeing things like that, learning all of these new things, I knew nothing about construction and architecture or even land development and all of that. But I had the opportunity to do that.

Also, for grant writing, I had not ever really written applications for grants before, but I learned that and developed that skill. And now I teach a grant writing class for social workers at UH, so it's the opportunity just to continue learning and engaging and putting all of that out, and that's what I'm trying to create now there for other people as well.

Jean 28:33

Okay, let me finish up my question then I want to come to what you're saying. So it took you three promotions to get there. You were approached to be the CEO, or you applied for the job?

Helen 28:47

No, I didn't really apply for it. Because I never really wanted to be a CEO. I liked what I was doing even though I performed CEO kinds of things, they were behind the scenes kind of stuff, I liked that. And I didn't want to be a CEO.

This is like Enron falling. It's like too big to fall and something like that, the unthinkable kind of happened in that the longtime founder and CEO decided to transition out. That was not anticipated or projected, and it happened really quickly as well.

And even before that happened, years before that, there was something intuitively that told me that I was going to be put in a place that I had to fill that position. I can't explain it, it was just what I knew.

Jean 29:48

Yes.

Helen 29:50

And that is what happened. So, I was put there in that place at that time. And I was put in as an acting at the time, and acted in that capacity for about a year. And then I was offered the position, and I accepted it.

And even though I didn't want to be CEO at the time, I knew that I was the person that needed to be CEO at the time through this transition.

Jean 30:24

Okay. Helen, I'm going to stumble on this question, I need you to help me. You know something about how life works and how opportunities happen that a lot of people don't know.

You're nodding your head. So, I know you know what I'm talking about. And I've sensed this about you, before I met you, as I heard what was happening with Change Happens. Again, this is why when the opportunity presented to interview through Sheara, I took it. What is this thing that you know, that a lot of people don't know, about opportunities?

Helen 31:12

There's nothing that I do that's apart from my belief in this universal voice of God. And I see that happening in all things and all creation, I see it. And so, I think it's that connection, and that belief and that faith in that. And my being a witness to it, not just in my own life. But seeing it, what He can do in the lives of other people. I think it's that simple, I guess.

Jean 31:55

Okay, yeah. So, for those of you to whom the word God is anathema, substitute your own words. Substitute life force, substitute Allah, substitute universe, make your own substitution, but listen to what she's saying.

Say it again. And, we know you mean God, but just use another word just so that it can be [applicable to all parties], you have sensed it, you could have a profound and simple belief in what?

Helen 32:28

In a universal love and connection that surrounds me, that provides me with the support, the opportunities, that no matter what, that everything will be alright.

Jean 32:48

Okay. Now, through Change Happens, you meet a multitude of people who think they have that but they wonder what the universe is going to give them, right?

Helen 33:07

Yes.

Jean 33:08

What's the difference?

Helen 33:13

I think one of the biggest differences might be the value of self, and knowing their own worthiness. I think that people may see themselves as not being worthy of certain things. And it can't happen to me because I don't have this or that, or I'm flawed with these many different things. So, I believe that that plays a big role in self-acceptance and self-love and knowing that you're worthy of all things.

Jean 34:01

Okay. I'm just so delighted, because so many people need to hear this and you're a living example of it. So, it's not just, "Oh, I wish, I wish, I wish," and "there's something external that's supposed to help me and it's not here." It's "I believe in myself," which you call - and I don't know if this is a phrase - a "no matter what-ness," you have a no matter what-ness, so that if this doesn't work out, that doesn't work out.... Finish the sentence.

Helen 34:36

Everything's going to be alright. And it's also knowing that you're going to work for that. You're working. I always strive to work in excellence. Not just to get by or not just to say that I've done it.

Everything that I try to do, no matter if I were digging a ditch or whatever I was doing, it's going to be to try and do it the best way that I can do it. And learning and bringing all of that to whatever it is that I'm doing. It's from the smallest because there really are no small things, everything has an impact and an effect on something else.

Jean 35:27

What do you say to the people who say: "if they won't pay me what I'm worth, I'm going to give them only what they pay me. I'm not going to put myself out because if they're too cheap to pay me, why should I put myself out for them?"

Helen 35:44

Well, and you know, I do a lot of talking to the people who work at Change Happens. And one of the things that I say to them is that opportunities present themselves as you show up, and you present who you are, which means that if you are giving and striving to do the best job, you're not hurting the organization, you may be hurting it in some ways, but the person that's being most affected is going to be you.

So, as you try to do the best that you can do and strive for excellence, opportunities then come and present themselves. And that's basically what I would say. And that's what I've seen happen as well.

Jean 36:40

When you put yourself out, regardless, opportunities will come to you. And they may not come in the form you want, but it's still an opportunity.

Helen 36:54

That's right.

Jean 36:55

I'm struck that you say that you did not want to be CEO. I'm struck by two things, actually. The first is you said, you had an intuitive hint years before, that you might one day be asked to serve as CEO. That's number one.

A lot of people get in their head with this message and say, "Oh, no, that'll never happen to me." You didn't dismiss it, you just noticed it and kept pushing, kept doing what you were doing.

Then, the second piece was when the opportunity presented itself, and you looked around, and you said, I'm best suited. And you did that with all humility, as I'm hearing it, and all awareness of your self-worth and what you were contributing.

Helen 37:48

Yes. I looked around, I was a senior director, I was over everything in the organization, and I knew we had a group of talented, committed people. But the leadership role was lacking in terms of something. So, I knew that I was the best suited.

Jean 38:13

Say more about the leadership role that was lacking. And I know, Helen, I'm asking you to be very immodest. But you also have the capacity to assess, I can see that. You can sit back and assess people and the situation. What was the leadership role that you knew you could bring to the table that wasn't otherwise there?

Helen 38:42

One of the things that I knew when I decided to accept the acting position, and I spoke to the group of people, our staff there, and I said to them, this is what my consideration is, that I'm not going to be the leader that that society tells us we need to be.

Society would tell us we need to be competitive, but I want to be a collaborator and collaborate with others. It would tell us that we need to be aggressive and go after things, but I wanted to be bold and accountable.

It would tell us that we didn't need to live in love. But I am a leader in love and you can hold people accountable. You can work in excellence, and you can do all that in love. So, I laid out before I even started who I was about, and I thought about that and I thought before I accept it, I thought can I bring that and still succeed in this position? Are they ready for that?

And I came to the conclusion that I could serve, maybe, maybe make a difference in some way, and provide some testimony to somebody that you can lead with those values and still be successful. And that's what changed my mind about accepting the role and the responsibilities, because it is an all-consuming proposition.

Jean 40:32

Nonprofit leaders don't last. They don't last, they have the board telling them what to do. Each individual board member thinking they're the victim, to tell them what to do. They have the community saying you're not giving us enough, they have the staff saying you're not paying us enough. You have a hard job.

Helen 40:52

Yes.

Jean 40:53

In the context of all of that, you decided to lead with love?

Helen 41:01

Yes.

Jean 41:01

Can you make that really concrete for somebody who is wondering, what the hell is she talking about? Can you think of an example where you held someone accountable, or you responded to someone who was about to get on your last nerve or whatever, and that you chose love, and stuck to lead with love instead?

Helen 41:25

Well, I have a couple of examples. I was having a conversation with a program coordinator, for instance, about areas that needed improvement, and things that they could do, the support and the coaching, so I was going through that.

You could go through that kind of exercise, you know, really aggressive and really dogmatic, you need to do this and that. Or you can talk about ways that... you can give the data and the facts of the performance, which you certainly need to clearly lay out, you can talk about expectations, you can talk about the impact.

And you can do all of that in a respectful manner. And then you can include them in the discussion to find out how you can help, how you can support, but really being clear in expectations and how you can support and help. And also laying out the expectations in terms of consequences, what happens.

And I think just doing those things is an act of love, because you're helping people understand what the job is, what the roles, responsibilities, how we can support one another, but also helping them determine is the job a good fit for them, and helping them to come to that conclusion.

You know, in all of my years, even with state agencies if there were terminations, the state agencies used to be notorious for having lawsuits and grievances filed. But in any terminations that I've worked with, people kind of arrived at that themselves, because all of the other things had been done upfront. Job expectations, support, training...

Jean 43:30

You wrote a textbook, right?

Helen 43:31

Yes.

Jean 43:32

You wrote a textbook. I could just take this segment, write it up, submit it for publication, it will be published. So, what you're saying is, you don't let go of respect. What do you do with your emotional triggers?

Sometimes people are doing stuff that must irritate you, you must think how dumb can you get? You must have ugly thoughts. What do you do?

How do you go from your ugly thoughts, to leading with love and sitting down and saying, I want to make sure you're clear about expectations? Let's talk this through. Here's the standard, and here's your performance. They're not on the same level. How do you go from ugly thoughts to that?

Helen 44:33

Yeah, so you do sometimes have frustrations and I don't really... I see human nature, I think. None of it is personal, I don't take it. I don't have attachments to having things my way or any of that. I'm not ego driven, kind of.

I see people, it's looking past whatever the exterior is to really listen to what people are saying, to observe them. Even before I talk with or meet someone, I'm listening, and I'm observing, and I have a real sense of who they are.

I can read in an email how people are feeling, and where they're coming from. And so, I can anticipate that. And when I respond, I try to respond back to support or alleviate whatever that I hear in that email, or in the conversation.

Jean 45:42

There we go, I get it. Here are the magic ingredients, as I'm hearing it, you have a sense of the universal connection of all things. You believe in love and respect, you're highly intuitive so that you have an ability to read people in an unfiltered sense.

And it's an extraordinary act from what I'm picking up. It's an extraordinary gift that not that many people have, so that if you can look at an email, because I can do that, I can look at an email and just know, it's like almost a physical sensation. Do you get a physical sensation?

Helen 46:32

I do. I do. Absolutely.

Jean 46:35

Okay. So, you look at the email, you get that physical sensation. And you trust it.

Helen 46:44

I do.

Jean 46:45

You don't second guess it and say, "Oh, I shouldn't be thinking that." You trust it.

Helen 46:52

Yes.

Jean 46:52

Because you're telling me that when you're talking to this program person about the expectations, for example, you must have said at least three times just now. And then you listen. So, you're talking and you're listening, and you're watching and you're talking. So that's testing, am I on the right path here? Am I talking to this, am I getting through? Is the person engaged?

Helen 47:21

That's exactly it. Exactly.

Jean 47:25

How do you get to share your philosophy with people at Change Happens or beyond? Wait, let me back up. You know what you're saying is not widely known, right?

Helen 47:40

That I do know, even just not widely known, even when you say, it is not widely accepted, either.

Jean 47:47

Yes. Okay, so how do you get a chance to share your philosophy?

Helen 47:52

And it has to be done repeatedly too, you know, even with the people that you work with that, you know, they may not see it and believe it. So, it comes through modeling

it and doing it. But I try to talk about it a lot in terms of, we have, you know, our staff meetings, for instance, we have a staff kind of retreat coming up. So, we're going to be doing a lot of those kinds of conversations, then.

You know, I send out emails to people. I sent out one just this morning, preparing everybody for this retreat that we have coming up, where we're talking about thinking brilliantly. And it's not about these wonderful ideas. It's about letting the light in so that you can think deeper. We begin to have discussions about where we're going to be in the next year, and what do we bring to this? It's through those kinds of things.

And then just in the meeting people, walking down the hallway, and I'm attuned to watch people, even though they're not directly reporting to me I'm looking at and I can sense if something's going on with them, and then just kind of following up.

I was having a conversation with a coordinator yesterday and there was something about her look, and I said, "You're not feeling well today, are you?" And she told me she wasn't you know, so it's just paying attention to people and letting them know that they are important, as well. And I try to take every opportunity to be able to do that.

Jean 49:53

I'm just sort of stunned that you exist in the world. Okay, this is wonderful. The word that comes to mind is other-focused. So, when something happens, a disappointment happens, or something's not right, you trust your instinct, something's not right. And then you look at the other person. And your concern is, what can be done in the context of this person.

There is someone I know who sends off emails focused on what she wants to say. And half the time, a lot of the time, I won't put a number on it, it doesn't hit. People don't know what she's talking about. That's because the focus is on what she wants to say.

What you're saying is you instead keep a focus on the recipient, on the other person, how are they feeling? How might this be coming across? Even when someone has messed up on the job, or not met expectations, your focus is on who is this person? What does it take for me to reach them?

Helen 51:07

That's right. That's correct. It's just like the email I sent this morning, about the upcoming retreat that we're having. It was four sentences. But it was about the focus on what we could do together with this retreat.

Jean 51:26

I'm so delighted you decided to join us and be here and to share your wisdom. I totally applaud what you're able to create at Change Happens. And I do know that you've expanded - and by the way that new building, it had just been erected when I became field advisor. [The staff] walked me through it, so proud to show me their brand-new building.

How do you handle staff discontent or board discontent or community discontent? How do you handle it when people come at you?

Helen 52:08

I just face it head on. First of all, I'm going to try and know what's going on and anticipate anything and prepare and plan for it. But I believe in direct, open, honest communication, so I don't believe in overlooking things or whatever of that.

Thomas Freeman tells a story about a Bedouin, he's on the desert, somebody comes up and steals his turkey. And he says, he tells his sons that, you know, you need to go after them, they stole my turkey, and the sons kind of just laughed it off and said, oh, no.

And then the next time they came back, and they stole his camel, and he goes back to the sons again and said, you need to go after these people, they stole my camel, and the sons, they just kind of ignore him again. And then the next time they came and they raped his daughter, and the man, the Bedouin said to them, you know, if you had gone after them when they stole my turkey, they wouldn't have done this.

And so that's kind of how I see it, if we have conversations and if you notice something that's wrong, or anything that you have that you need to say, I think that you'd say that directly, openly, respectfully, and look for opportunities to bring it together.

Community is messy. When I talk about that – 24-member steering committee, when we first formed it – that's a messy thing to do, but you hang in and you dialogue, you bring people together, and you try to get that higher road to remind people of who we are, what we are, what our values are and what we're trying to accomplish.

So, whether that's community or the people that I work with, or whoever I might be interacting with, I believe open, honest, direct, respectful conversation, and listening and really understanding their point of view and then trying to reach some kind of agreement.

Jean 54:23

Helen, it's been a sheer delight to have you. The wisdom that you have given us will just build me up the rest of the day if not weeks. I am so delighted with what you are doing. I know you're making a difference in the community and beyond if you're in 59 counties.

And what you have said, I wish there was a way to distribute it widely, so that people can get that being a leader is possible if you're willing to follow the precepts that you just laid out for us.

If anybody wants to know about Change Happens, what's the website?

Helen 55:24

It's www.changehappenstx.org.

Jean 55:27

Change Happens Texas, TX, dot ORG.

Helen 55:37

Yes.

Jean 55:37

If someone wants to contact you personally, is there a way for them to do that?

Helen 55:42

They can do that through email on hstagg@changehappenstx.org.

Jean 55:50

Okay. Thank you kindly. Is there any question I didn't ask?

Helen 55:58

No, you covered it all. And it was just really thrilling for me to be able to share this story with you. Thank you for the attention and thank you for really hearing me and understanding what I was trying to say and accepting it. It was just a joy for me, and I'm really humbled to be asked. Thank you.

Jean 56:23

I'm thrilled beyond measure.