

Agency for Change Podcast: Changemaker Dr. Helen Fagan, Assistant Professor of Practice at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of change-makers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman:

Hello, Changemakers. This is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov, and welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Now recently, I attended an online CEO event titled *A Conversation on Inclusive Leadership for Nebraska's Future*. And during this event, there was a presentation from Dr. Helen Fagan on the action steps to becoming an inclusive leader. And honestly, I was so moved by her presentation and just intrigued about her mention of an upcoming book that I asked her to be on the podcast that very day, and here we are. Dr. Fagan, how are you?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

I'm great, Lyn. Please call me Helen. And thank you for having me today. I'm excited to be able to connect with you and have a conversation.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. Thank you, Helen. I have to tell you, as we jump into this, I have always wanted to write a book myself. I'm not sure what on, what I really want to say, but I always admire people that have taken the time and energy to write a book. And since we're going to spend most of our time today, talking about the new book, I'd love for you to first tell our listeners just a bit more about yourself.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Sure. Well, the book does a deep dive into me.

Lyn Wineman:

It really does. It really does.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

I'm originally from Iran. I'm a transplant to Nebraska and I moved from Iran to England when I was 12 years old. That's when I learned to speak English. And then I eventually moved to United States to boarding school in Florida, and then eventually got married and moved all over the country. And then ended up in Nebraska because my husband wanted as far away from the ocean as he could get.

Lyn Wineman:

Usually people want the opposite. That's very interesting.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

So that's a little bit of a background about me and I do the work of diversity, equity and inclusion, whether that's in teaching, researching, consulting, coaching leaders, and also just living it.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, we talked for a minute before we hit the record button today how there's just a great awakening happening right now. And people are really interested in becoming better, becoming better at diversity, equity and inclusion. And maybe that starts to answer my next question. So the book is titled *Becoming Inclusive: A Worthy Pursuit of Leadership*. So really Helen, what did lead you to write this book?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

I never, in my wildest dreams, thought I would ever write a book. And for a long time, I wouldn't admit to being Iranian. So telling my own personal story was not something that was even on my radar. The reason I wrote this book is, more than anything else, I wanted my descendants, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, to have the history of how they came to be part Iranian, part Persian how kind of my story. That was the number one reason I would say. The number two reason is I have a deep and sincere passion and desire to help individuals to become inclusive. And I feel like I've been living this journey of becoming inclusive myself since I was very young. And so what better way to help others grow in that than to share about my own journey as a way to help others to reflect back on their own journey and take the action steps necessary to becoming inclusive.

Lyn Wineman:

That is fantastic. All the way from a legacy to really helping people. I'm going to say, you sent me an advance manuscript, and I feel honored to have been able to read that. And your storytelling in the book is so powerful. As a matter of fact, you start with a story that I actually have thought about often since I read it. And you talk about arriving in Heathrow Airport and your father saying to you and your siblings, because you might've been messing around a little bit, like kids will do. And your father said something like, "You need to behave. You must realize you may be the only Iranian people will ever meet." I imagined there was some sternness in his voice when he said that. Yeah. But then you go on to say, "With those words, I began the painful transition from my life as a native Iranian to my life forever after, as a foreign resident of the United States." And when I read that, when I see it right now, it gives me chills and I just feel the weight on your shoulders. How has that one moment defined your life's journey, Helen?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

It was definitely a defining moment and it's become more defining throughout the years as I've reflected on it. As a 12 year old child, you think, "Oh, I did something wrong. I shouldn't have been doing this. Dad is having a talk with us, so I'm going to listen." But then as you live life and you recognize the essence of the words, "You may be the only," and how people judge others based on a single experience, a single person, a single exposure, that this really is an important lesson for all of us to learn. I may be the only Nebraskan people ever meet. I may be the only American people meet when I'm in other parts of the world. I may be the only professor somebody meets or whatever it is, I want to live my life in a way that honors the sacrifices of those others who have gone before me and have given me the opportunity to be here in this moment, in this time, doing what I do.

Lyn Wineman:

That's really beautiful, really beautiful. And I think many of us recognize those who have gone before us have sacrificed, but I think Helen, you really just have illustrated that in such a great way. Because even within that same chapter, there was another story, and it was kind of a painful story as I read it, of your father being hospitalized and a really difficult situation with an impatient and probably insensitive nurse. This, in particular, really helped me feel the indignity of bias. How did this instance influence you also?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Couple of things. At that moment, I tell people I was emotionally hijacked.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

I was a slave to my emotions in that moment. I couldn't govern my emotions. I chose not to govern, I could. I chose not to govern my emotions. And so I regret the way I spoke to that nurse. I regret making her cry. I regret how I represented my family and my Iranians. I regret those things. At the same time, I feel like that those moments where we regret can be a great opportunity for lessons learned. And so what it did was it really pivoted the direction of my career. I was in human resources. I reported to the vice president of human resources for a company that owned 16 hospitals around the country. We were just beginning to talk about moving, that we were going to be moving from Virginia to somewhere else.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

And so my boss said, "Helen," when I shared that story with her, she empathized with me and she said, "Helen, you can do something about this. You're smart, go back to school." She had met my dad. And so she was there when I became a US citizen. And so she knew everything, the struggle of everything that I had gone through. And so she really encouraged me. And she had been a non-traditional student herself, a single mom with two kids, went back to school, got her degree, and then grew up the ranks to become a vice president who reported to the president. And so she really encouraged me. And so when we moved to Nebraska, I decided to go back to school with the goal of I'm going to do something about this so that when the opportunity came up at Bryan Health, it was like this is my chance to do something about this. And so that really shaped and changed the direction of my career and led me down this work. As I mentioned, I didn't have any intention of going down this work or writing about it or any of that.

Lyn Wineman:

Helen, you're a pioneer in this industry, I think too, or in this topic. Right? Because right now it is a big topic. There's an awakening. Everybody's looking for training, information, books. But when you first went into it, you knew it needed to be done, but it probably wasn't quite as, not that it's easy now, it's not at all easy, but people maybe weren't looking for this type of thing early. I also want to say, from your stories, it sounds like your father was an amazing man. And it sounds like you have just a really great and interesting family. You shared so many personal stories about your journey in the book, all the way from being a young child to being maybe somewhat of a rebellious young woman to getting married, raising a family now being a grandparent. Why did you choose storytelling as a primary vehicle for this message?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Yeah, that is a really a great question, Lyn. I come from tradition of storytelling. Iranians, Persians, I'm from what's called the Bakhtiari tribe, which is known as strong storytellers, strong women, courageous. So I come from that background and storytelling was something that I grew up with. I grew up with the family gathered around and telling stories and hearing stories and sharing experiences and learning from those experiences. And so that was part of the way I grew up. And it felt very natural. The other reason I chose storytelling is because I feel like I can't teach something I'm not living.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Right?

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

And I always believe that individual transformation, individual awakening, precedes organizational transformation, system transformation, community transformation. And so the leader has to be the person that looks within. And so my story, the way I tell my story, is a way for me to get the reader engaged in their own story.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely. I felt like I wanted to just keep turning the pages. We've all read those kind of business books that are a little bit dry and you're reading them and you're taking notes and you're highlighting. But what I really love about a book like this is that the lessons sneak up on you and then they stay in your head and in your heart because of the storytelling. So are there any of these stories in particular that you'd like to share with us today?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Well, we've shared the story of me being naughty at Heathrow Airport. The story at the hospital is the one where my father, who's multi-lingual, had a stroke and he traveled all over the world. He was in charge of human resources and then later export oil and exploration for oil. He hired people from all over the world. And so I learned from him so much in terms of how to engage with people, how to bridge differences, how to just be curious about others. My dad loved people and he loved this country. And so I feel like I learned a lot from him in that respect. And that's why when in this moment, when my dad was laying in this hospital bed, after having one of the most severe strokes you could have and not being able to comprehend our English or any other language and only comprehending Farsi, our native language, and the nurse saying to the person she was training, "I wish they would learn to speak English, it would make our job so much easier."

Dr. Helen Fagan:

She said that in passing, as she's walking out the room. It felt like she stuck a dagger in my heart and just kept twisting it. And I just couldn't let it go. And so that story really was the direction. That is a story that I'll share. And then there's several other stories, but the story that led to me wanting to research this was

the story with the organ donation, and the fact that it was the first time in the history of organ donation in the State of Nebraska, which had been going on for 25 years at that time, that what we did in accommodating the needs of the family led to a family, a native American family, agreeing to donating the organs of a loved one. And so the difference between the nurse and then our chaplain who was involved in the situation led me to want to understand, what does it take for people to become inclusive?

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

And so those two stories are really the stories that are kind of the beginning and the reason for the research that set that.

Lyn Wineman:

Those are both great stories. Very emotion-provoking stories, I would say for sure. So what is it like, Helen, sharing these deep personal stories with the world? And did you have any resistance from those around you?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Yeah. So I was very careful to not share other people's stories without permission, because I believe that it's their story to tell.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. That's very considerate of you. Absolutely.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Yeah. So I really asked people, if there was something, even my sons, even their wives, even my husband and other family members, I had them read sections, my sister, read sections and say, "Hey, how does the sound when you read this?" I want to be authentic. I want to be real. I don't want to hide anything. And at the same time, I want to be honoring of other people. So I want to gain permission in sharing the story. There's definitely hesitancy in telling the story. No resistance from others around me, but hesitancy on my part because I'm giving you insight into me at a deep level. And I know there's going to be people out there that will take that and maybe use it negatively.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

But my hope is that in me doing that, I am modeling the way of how others can deeply look within themselves and identify those crucible moments that have shaped their perspective of others and their perspective of diversity and equity and inclusion. And what are those things, and how do those serve as either bridge to creating that being inclusive or as a barrier to being inclusive. We each have to wrestle with those things for ourselves.

Lyn Wineman:

Now you mentioned about how your ancestors were known for courage, and I know that it must have taken great courage to tell those stories. But my experience is I think exactly what you wanted to

happen. The fact that you have modeled for others, that you've told stories that make a meaningful difference. And I really do to get to the lessons that are in the book. This seems like an obvious question, but would you just summarize it for us? Why is inclusivity an important factor in becoming a strong leader? Wow. That almost sounds silly just to ask it because it seems so obvious, but yet again, I think it's worth discussing.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

I agree with you that it seems obvious Lyn. However, it is such a great question and one that every leader has to answer for themselves. Why do this work? What, honestly, I have found is while there's great research on the return on investment, the higher the diversity and the greater the inclusion, the more likely you are to outperform your competitors and have greater financial returns. There's that information. There's also, it's the right thing to do, kind of the angle that you could share as to why people should do it. There's also this—leaders set the tone that others follow. So what tone are you setting? What tone do you want your followers to be using? And there's research on that, on how, when a leader sees diversity as a positive to the organization, the teams outperform those who are homogeneous teams when they add diversity.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

And then when the leader says, "Hey, this is an obstacle, diversity is an obstacle to overcome," then that team's performance reduces. They have negative return on investment in diversity. And so there's all those things, right? But the reality is I've never seen a leader truly walk down this road and take the organization down this road until it becomes personal. And the personal saying, the question that I ask is, who would you not want your child to bring home as their future spouse? If you can identify that, and you're being sincere and honest with yourself, because that takes courage to look within yourself in that way, and then ask yourself, how does that limit and influence my leadership capacity, who I am as a leader? Until you're able to do that, I don't see a lot of shift. I see platitudes, I see doing it, some efforts, but not really deep change.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

And so that's why I say every leader has to answer that for themselves. Why should I do this?

Lyn Wineman:

It's a great question too. It's a great question because it really takes you deep very, very quickly. And then as you answer that, you do the work, right? And that's my next question for you, Helen, is what are some the important steps we can take to become more inclusive? I know step one is you could buy and read the book, right?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

There are so many great books out there, in this genre, in this topic area. Obviously, I'm going to say yes, buy my book because I think it's a great way. But honestly, there's so many great books out there. And I would say, challenge yourself. Challenge yourself, put yourself in spaces that challenges your thinking, challenges your perspective. When you're in a meeting, ask yourself whose perspective are we not

hearing, look around the room. If people look like you, think like you, believe like you, behave like you, then you're high likelihood not getting a diverse perspective. And there's an audience or a group that is being influenced by decisions that you're not thinking about.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

And then also have someone that you give permission to, to hold you accountable. My husband does that for me, and then I have a friend, Dr. Gina Matkin, who's also a colleague that I've given permission to because I want to be inclusive, but I'm a human being and I fail.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Right? And I need to have people that can say to me, without fear of repercussion, that can say to me, "Hey, you probably didn't intend this, but this is how it landed," or "That decision is going to affect this." You need people like that as a leader. If you don't have someone that can do that with you, you are missing out on that opportunity for growth and development. So those are just a few things that I would say, but there's so much more that people can do.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. Yeah. What you just said was so powerful. I want to try to recap it for people. I heard you say start by challenging yourself and putting yourself in different types of situations. And then I heard you say, think about whose perspective is not at the table, who's not being heard in this situation, and then find someone or multiple people and give them permission to hold you accountable. I think all three of those things are really very, very, very powerful. So I was able to get the advanced copy of the book. And once again, thank you. I thought it was very powerful. I'd recommend it to anyone. But when will the book become available and how can people acquire their own copy?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Well, I am excited to tell you, Lyn, that May 25th book is being released. And then we're going to have a book signing event at Francie & Finch in Lincoln, downtown Lincoln, on June 3rd, where you can purchase a copy and I'll be happy to sign it for you. And then I'll be sharing just a little bit as well at that event. So it will be a great opportunity to meet people. But then also it'll be available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble and then Information Age Publishing their website, that's the publisher, will be available there as well.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. And I'm just going to remind people, the book is called *Becoming Inclusive: A Worthy Pursuit of Leadership*, by Dr. Helen Fagan. So a couple of other questions for you, just changing directions a little bit. You referred to this earlier, but we know that leaders are learners. And other than your own book, are there any favorite books, blogs, or podcasts that are meaningful to you?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Yeah. I will tell you three books that have really impacted me. They're not necessarily in the genre of diversity, equity and inclusion, one of them is, but really leadership books. One of them is *Deep Change*

by Robert Quinn. And it's a great book to really, for us, to think about both from systemic change, organizational change, what does it take and what are we willing to do about it? *Emotional Intelligence for Managing Diversity*, by my friends Anita, Lee and Jorge. And they wrote the forward, Anita and Lee wrote the forward for the book. It's a great book and it has activities in it. And so I highly recommend that book. It's an easy read and the activities are wonderful to be able to do both individually and then also with a team and a group of people. And then another book that has great questions for reflection is *Leadership from the Inside Out* by Kevin Cashman.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Those three books, from a leadership standpoint, have deeply impacted me in terms of the kind of leader I hope I am, and I hope to continue to be. And then of course, there is *CAST, How to Be an Antiracist*, and a book by my dear friend, Deidra Riggs, *Unity*. It's called *One: Unity in a Divided World*. It's a great book. And I love the podcast, what is her name?

Lyn Wineman:

Does always happen? It's on the tip of your tongue, right?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Right. It is at the tip of my tongue and I listen to it. Krista Tippett, *On Being*. The reason I love the podcast is because she invites people whose perspective I would never hear had I not been listening to the podcast. And so that is one of the reasons I enjoy. I don't listen to a lot of podcasts. Obviously, your podcast, I would say you've had some great people.

Lyn Wineman:

Well thank you for that.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Yes, you've had some great people on that have really taught me stuff. And I appreciate the opportunity to be on this podcast.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely. Well, I'm going to add all of those to my list. I do have to say, I am a listener of *On Being*, and I would agree with you 100%. And for anybody who wants, all of those books will be listed in the show notes on the website as well. One other thing I want to ask you about, I'm also inspired by motivational quotes. And often I get to talk to really smart people like yourself, and many of them are so humble, but I love to get Helen Fagan words of wisdom for our listeners. Do you have motivational words that you could share with us today?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

A few that come to mind, I think is one that I ask myself this every day and I journal about it is how have you sacrificed for justice, equity and inclusion today?

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, wow. That's amazing.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

So I ask myself this question because I recognize that anything worthy of doing is worthy of some level of sacrifice. And so I ask myself this question as a way to hold myself accountable. One of my favorites from my mother is, as long as I have breath, I'm a work in progress.

Lyn Wineman:

That's lovely too. What was your mother's name, so we can attribute it to your mom?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Oh, boy. I'll tell you it and then I'll have to spell it for you.

Lyn Wineman:

Okay, all right.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Khorshid Yazdanipour Soosan.

Lyn Wineman:

Okay, You're right. You will have to spell that one for me. I'll catch it from you after and we'll get it right at the end.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

Okay. Fantastic. Oh, fantastic. Helen, as we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

I think the most important thing that any one of us can do is to recognize that we need to extend grace to ourselves and to others who are on this journey with us, that we're human beings, we make mistakes. Our differences are truly our common bond as a humanity. And when we get to a place where we can celebrate and really want those differences as a part of our lives is when we can say we are living in that inclusive space.

Lyn Wineman:

That is so lovely. I really do feel like there are some situations where people are so scared to do the wrong thing, that they then do nothing at all. Right? And the fact that we're all in this space authentically, figuring it out together, right? We will make some mistakes as we go down the path, but the important thing is going down the path with the right motivations, I would imagine.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Beautifully said. Beautifully said.

Lyn Wineman:

Well, this has been so much fun. I really enjoyed the book. I really enjoyed talking with you. And honestly, I think I can't say it better than one of the quotes that's in the manuscript from the esteemed Dr. Fred Luthans from the University of Nebraska. But he said, "This is simply the right book at the right time in our country and the world. See and transform yourself and then have the understanding, confidence and tools to transform your workplace, school and community." I think that's really powerful. Dr. Fagan, you really are changing the world and I'm going to encourage everyone to read the book, *Becoming Inclusive: A Worthy Pursuit of Leadership* when it becomes available in just a few weeks. May, what did you say, 24th?

Dr. Helen Fagan:

25th.

Lyn Wineman:

May 25th. May 25th. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Thank you. It was a pleasure to get a chance to chat with you and get to know you better.

Lyn Wineman:

And I'm looking forward to meeting you at the book signing on June 3rd. Thanks again.

Dr. Helen Fagan:

Thank you. It'll be fun.

Announcer:

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities, or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from visit kidglov.com, at kidglov.com to get in touch. As always, if you like what you heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.