

Episode 4 Transcript: Leadership for the Common Good

Dean Nisha Botchway

If we go in to try to solve a problem and we are not equipped to solve it, we're going to break something and sometimes it's going to be irreversible. What that requires, though, is that we put learning at the very forefront of every single thing we do.

Makeda Zulu

Welcome to Rules of Engagement, a show that highlights the projects and partnerships of the University of Minnesota Robert J. Jones Urban Research Outreach and Engagement Center. I'm your host, Makeda Zulu. In today's episode, we will discuss the University of Minnesota, Humphrey School with Dean Nisha Botchway. It's good to have you here.

Dean Nisha Botchway

It's great to be here with you, Makeda.

Makeda Zulu

Please tell us about yourself, Share any identities, experiences, or all that is important for you to share with us today.

Dean Nisha Botchway

Well, thank you again for inviting me. This is a fantastic space to be in. I just love being in your company. I deeply value the work of UROC and the commitment that you have to university community partnership research to inform the life and well-being of the residents that you serve right here in North Minneapolis and throughout the state.

Dean Nisha Botchway

So about me?

Makeda Zulu

Yes.

Dean Nisha Botchway

I have to start with the identities of being a daughter, a sister, a mom, a friend. A wife and a community member. I often will say that it's not necessarily my title that is most important, but it's the seed and the earth that I come from that informs where I stand today, how I stand, where I stand today and where I want to go.

And when I say I want to go, that's with the full notion of this frame of Ubuntu. I am because we are. And that "I" is not just me as Nisha Botchway, the dean of the Humphrey School, but it's Nisha Botchway as the daughter, and the mother, and the wife, and the sister and the friend, the girlfriend. And the community member and the leader of the Humphrey school knowing that the work that I do and we do together is really meant to advance the common good for all of the communities that we're able to serve. So, I could say more. I love swimming and I can go more into that. You know, other folks have heard me talk about my love for swimming, so I'll pause there and let this actually be a conversation.

Makeda Zulu

Okay. Okay. It will be a conversation. I will still refer to my notes because I want to make sure I ask you really good questions. But you answered the question, I think, in a way that was really important. People sometimes identify themselves so closely to their titles when people are trying to connect with them authentically. And usually if they ask you, again, it's because they know there's an authentic self that is there and that's what they're hearing.

And so you being able to just come out of the gate talking about your authentic self and who you're connected to and how that the seed, you know, I think it just reminds us, which I think is the most one of the more important parts of this podcast of how do we show up when we're doing our work.

Dean Nisha Botchway

Yes. Well, and the other part of that that I'm reminded of daily is that the work I do, the work you do, the work all of us do is hard. That's what work is. Work is hard. It's not easy. If it was easy, it would be vacation. And in order for us to do work, we have to go beyond the surface.

We have to go beyond the immediate that allows us to get from 9:00 to 9:15, and that requires us to dig deep into what is the nested doll within us. So if you think about, you know, these nested dolls where you of the really small, itty bitty one, and then you have that doll that crowds around it, and then the next doll stacks around it, and the next doll stacks around it, and the next doll that stacks around it.

Well, what you see on the outside is that exterior, the big doll. But as we do our work and when we do really good work, it's because it's based on that small inside nested doll who is the authentic person who is doing the work based on their art, their true passions, The finish line they are hoping to achieve that hopefully aligns with the organization they're working with.

Because what I find is that when you're working outside of your vision and your passions and your motivations just to get the paycheck, it's hard. It's harder than it should be. And sometimes we have to do that hard work, right, to get to the next step.

And so my hope is that as all of us approach our work, as all of us approach, presenting ourselves to the world, that we can be comfortable to present ourselves as the authentic, small, small inside

nested person. We are and not feel like we have to present a mask as we are in the outside world. And it takes a lot to find a space where we can present authentically.

UROC is one of those spaces.

Makeda Zulu

You brought that home, didn't you? The Humphrey is also a place where people look nationally, statewide, and locally. We all look to you for thought leadership, for research, for engagement. Tell us. Tell us about the Humphrey as you have led it.

Dean Nisha Botchway

The Humphrey School is one of the very best schools of public affairs, public service, planning, science, technology, environmental policy, development, practice, human rights. We are a public service school and one of the top ten in the nation, one of the top ten public affairs schools in the nation here at the University of Minnesota. And that has taken a lot of hard work.

It's not just that we have students coming in and taking classes and learning a lot. Those students are graduating. And we've had over the history of the Humphrey School, over 6100 alumni out here in the Twin Cities, in the state, throughout the nation and the world.

Makeda Zulu

And the world. Yeah.

Dean Nisha Botchway

Having impact in ways that have a positive influence on people's lives. Our faculty have been doing work around food justice. Fernando Burga, who I know has been a key member of the work that you've been doing here. We have Ryan Allen, who worked on the legislation to advance driver's license policies to allow undocumented immigrants to be able to have driver's license.

Angie Fertig, who's been doing a lot of work around health equity. And I could go on and on. And then, you know, we have alum who are working right here in the state, in the state legislature. In D.C. working there. The Humphrey school is a place where people come to learn to expand their leadership skills because they come to the Humphrey school already as leaders, they made the decision to advance their knowledge and their capacity to lead and sought the Humphrey School out as the place to take the next step.

And then what they're learning when they're in the Humphrey School are the things that allow them to advance the common good in the ways that are important for them. Driven by their passions. Whether it's, again, food, justice, whether it's climate action, whether it's affirmative action and

diversity, equity, justice, inclusion, belonging and all of it. Whether it's pay equity. Whatever the topic of interest is, education and educational reform.

The Humphrey School equips students and professionals to advance their careers and their capacities so they can lead in public service. Now, let me say one other thing. We know that 30%, three in ten people across the nation who are public servants, so 30% of all public service workers are going to retire in the next five years.

So imagine 30% of your workforce gone. The Humphrey School and other schools of public affairs are in position to educate masters and bachelors level students in addition to professionals who are in the field. And they say, "Hey, you know what?" I want to move into public service. Come on, let's do a certificate. Let's give you some training so you are informed, capable, professional in this field.

In this field, who will be able to continue to make sure that our governance and our democracy stand.

Makeda Zulu

That's a heavy lift. That's a heavy lift. And you've been doing it. Top ten.

Dean Nisha Botchway

Yes, Top ten. And let me say, I'm in my second year. I'm in my second year as dean of the Humphrey School. And it's been a fantastic two years for a number of reasons. One, the deans that have come before me have been fantastic. They've laid a solid foundation that I'm able to build on with an amazing team of deans, and directors, and managers, and faculty and staff, and and students who lean in to solve the most complex problems that we face today right here in the Twin Cities, throughout the state, and elsewhere.

Makeda Zulu

That's a lot, Dean. And this is your second year, and I feel like when you came in, you came in ready. Ready to make change. Ready to hold folks accountable, and not that they hadn't been but to high expectations. Can you share more about engagement?

Dean Nisha Botchway

Engagement requires that you, in my opinion, and the approach that we take is that you first listen. And not listen to hear what you want to hear, but listen to hear what is being shared and not just the what, but the why. What is the motivation? And once we understand the why of the motivation of whatever the the topic is, then we can take the next step to assess what is necessary, what are the resources that are available, what are the challenges that are present, and how do we move together not just as the researchers, not just as the professionals, but together with the community members who are partners to be able to realize, to be able to get to the finish line, that's been articulated by our community partners and shaped by research and evidence to make sure that's

the right finish line. One of our faculty members, Yingling Fan, she's been doing amazing work in the transportation area for a number of years. She's recently been highlighted for her work on transportation happiness, the Transportation Happiness Map.

And what she's done with that Transportation Happiness Map is she's listened to first. And how has she listened to thousands of people about when and where they're happy? Through iPhones, through technology. And so you will receive a ping to ask, how are you feeling? And are you on transportation or, you know, how are you moving around? And based on that feedback, listening to individuals and hearing them say, I am happiest when I am biking, taking reliable public transit in safe and scenic paths and avoiding traffic behind the wheel.

That's when I'm happiest. If we want our residents here in the state of Minnesota to be happy, would we not invest resources in biking, in reliable transportation and safe and scenic paths, and ensuring that people can avoid being behind the wheel? That's the kind of engagement that we do and that we want to continue to do. First, listen.

Understand what's happening and then figure out, okay, what are the steps we can take to lead resources in the direction to allow people to be in these spaces that allow them to be happy. So we know that. So that's Yingling and the work she's done around transportation. Some of the work that I've done around youth advocacy, specifically youth engagement and action for Health, focuses on middle school kids.

And there again, we start with listening. What are the kids interested in as it relates to improved physical activity or opportunities to move more? What we found and working with kids across the nation from Hawaii to Maine, while super cold, Maine, I feel like it could be colder than Minnesota some days. All the way down to Miami, Florida. That could melt icebergs.

Makeda Zulu

That is a range.

Dean Nisha Botchway

Is that youth had ideas to improve parks, to install water fountains, to have dance classes. And in one of the examples, are kids in Hawaii said that they wanted to improve a neighborhood park. They made a presentation based on evidence to their county council. County council listened and then presented them with an \$80,000 allocation to do a park study.

That park study moved forward and now the park has been renovated and those students not only were able to say to the adult facilitator, these are the things that are of interest to us. Those adult facilitator support aided them in finding the information they needed to make an evidence based argument to present to decision makers. And those decision makers showed up.

They listened. And then they made the allocation to take the necessary next step. So now they have a park that's been renovated. Those kids, the lesson they learn is that their voice is powerful. They

can create change as long as they have the kind of support and the attention and the engagement from the adults who in some sense in this example, shared power with them, both with resources and with their time and attention.

And I'll just give you one other example. And this comes from South Africa. So in working with two villages in the northern region of South Africa, we, a multidisciplinary team of doctors, engineers, planners, anthropologists, sociologists and others worked with two villages to assess water and health in the Limpopo region. With that project, we asked the villagers, What does water mean to you?

And this was during the time about ten years ago or so when we were looking at HIV/AIDS, and our initial thought was the community's really concerned about the prevalence of AIDS in their community. And they said, yeah, you know, people are sick, but we don't have water, we need water. So all this medicine stuff, that's good, but we need water.

And so if you can help us with that, then we can talk about the medicine stuff and the HIV stuff. And so we went in. We helped them establish a system where water was piped that they helped to build from the nearby river all the way to the two villages. The water was then put into a collection basin.

The rotary locally provided resources so we could pay for infrastructure. And then we got chlorine tablets from the local health department. And twice a day the water committee from those two villages decided when the water would be turned on and off and when people could come and collect water from the standpipe. Now that alleviated or saved hours for the women going to collect the water, and it was fantastic until it wasn't.

And now you're looking at me like, what do you mean?

Makeda Zulu

You're right.

Dean Nisha Botchway

So imagine you and I get to go and hang out 2 hours a day. We're walking and talking. We're debriefing or reflecting or, you know, you're helping me process right now. I don't have 2 hours a day with you. Yeah. Who am I processing with? How am I filling that time? And so there were other issues that presented as a result of this innovation.

And we've been able to, again, with this multi multidisciplinary team, talk through how do we navigate now this, this issue that's more of a sociology issue and not so much a planning issue. And as we were navigating that, the community said, okay, so you helped us figure out the water thing with you. Let's talk about this AIDS, HIV stuff.

And the physicians on the team were able to then move ahead with that question. But that took three years to answer what was the initial question that the team wanted to ask. But that was

important because we moved at the speed of trust. We moved at the speed of trust. And what that means is that we listened.

We engaged on the things that were of interest to the community. And then once they were able to get what they needed in this relationship, this research, collaboration, relationship, they knew that... "Okay, well, now maybe we can engage on your question." And they've engaged on that question, and it's just been a fruitful relationship.

Makeda Zulu

That is fantastic. And one thing that it raises for me, one wonderful piece or two wonderful pieces is one, Ubuntu that comes back. It's demonstrated in this, this illustration you share with us, but also sustainability, because, you know, a lot of times we want to come in and do something. You know, folks have told us what the issue is and we might come at it together, but a solution is presented that would mean that other people would always have to be around.

And so you created one that was sustainable. Moving at the speed of trust is so powerful because you all could move to talking about HIV and AIDS. But that 2-hour conversation that is now lost. I know that something that you all will look to, but I would say that that is also probably the one of the same issues we're facing as our cities have grown.

And so I'm curious what you learned from that, so that maybe we can figure that out in our cities, you know, back to the block club or the neighborhood house, people moving so much or when young people used to all get on the bus together and so they wrestle and fight. But they were friends 40 years later. I'm sure we still have that in places.

But I think what we've done as we've matured and created wonderful solutions to save money we may have, we need that processing time. So with all of that, how did that bring you to the Humphrey?

Dean Nisha Botchway

Oh but I have to give you a reflection here.

Makeda Zulu

Okay. All right. I love it.

Dean Nisha Botchway

And that is, you know, as you talk about the cities growing. Yeah. And the experience of youth being together on the train and going to school and all these things. And the story I talked about with regards to South Africa and even to some extent, the Youth Engagement and Action for Health Project, where the kids were coming together and talking and figuring it out.

I think one of the things that we have seen change over time is that coming together is the 2 hours consistently together talking and reflecting. We have become a much more individualistic society and with that has come a fair amount of efficiency and increased production. But to what end?

Makeda Zulu

To what end?

Dean Nisha Botchway

And so I deeply value our institutions. One of the areas that we focus on at the Humphrey School is nonprofit organizations. We have a nonprofit leadership certificate for those who are working in that area and want to deepen their skill set. I think about the institutions in our communities that have been our center, have been the gathering spot, have been the resource for trusted information and knowledge and to what extent we can strengthen these institutions again, whether they be our schools.

I remember going to my neighborhood school in Miami, Florida, for a Jazzercise class on Wednesdays with lots of aunties and moms and and friends. And, you know, those cafeteria middle school floors were not the best to do Jazzercise on, but they were the best places for us to come together, to have the conversation and to know that we could work through some challenging situations when they presented themselves.

As my dad said, "You have to make a friend before you meet a friend." We had a friend because we were coming together consistently. And so when the challenge came, we had the friends in place to help us sort through those challenges. And so at the Humphrey School, we want to be that space where we can continue to have these conversations, whether they be on liberal and conservative topics, whether they be on subjects that relate to agriculture in Greater Minnesota or transit public transit systems here in the Twin Cities, whether it be safety and security locally or it be issues around national security that, you know, we may think, well, what does national security have to do with what we do right here in the state of Minnesota? The decisions we make here have impacts that resound throughout the world.

Makeda Zulu

So I'm going to ask you to leave the podcast audience with one nugget.

Dean Nisha Botchway

Goes back to what is our number one value at the Humphrey school. And I think this is the nugget that hopefully is of deep value for all of us, and that is quality education, student success. And not necessarily a student success, as you may think, K-12 or college grad school, we are all students. We should all be learning every single day.

We should be reading the paper, we should be listening to great podcasts. We should be curious and want to understand. We should push through that difficult first layer of ourselves and find the next layer that can allow us to do the hard work. What that requires, though, is that we put learning at the very forefront of every single thing we do.

If we go in to try to solve a problem and we are not equipped to solve it, we're going to break something and sometimes it's going to be irreversible. And so at the Humphrey School, student success is our number one value that hands on experiences learners have all they are engaged with the Humphrey School and their impact in the world is the approach that we take, that experiential learning.

And so the nugget I would leave with you here at UROC is to dig in to student success, to learner success for all of our community members, not just those who are enrolled in a four credit program somewhere. Because as you're sitting at home and you may not be enrolled in a program, whether it be tech school, a technical school or university, you can enroll in your own learning program, in reading, in listening to podcasts and exploring those things that are of interest to you in growing yourself and stretching so you can be a better asset to the community.

And UROC, I know, has a ton of programs that they can come in and learn and grow through in addition to what they can do at the University of Minnesota and the Humphrey School. So education and that's what my dad would say to you. The most important thing is education, education, and education. And so student success.

Makeda Zulu

That is a great nugget to live on and you have demonstrated it well. Educational success, leadership and educational success. So I thank you for that. A special thanks to you for joining us. You can learn more about the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at WWW.HHH.UMN.EDU. A special thanks to Nina Shepherd, Senior Communications director for the Office for Public Engagement and UROC.

Today's episode was produced by Blackbird Revolt, engineered by Stan Tequila, edited by Jordon Moses. Please make sure to subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts and Spotify. To learn more about UROC and our many community partnerships visit UROC.UMN.EDU.

Thanks for listening.