



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Summary: We chat with Dr. Lisa Jackson, Interim Director of New Student Programs at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

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B E G I N T R A N S C R I P T

Stuart Brown: Welcome to the Student Affairs. One Thing, a podcast that asks a simple question of seasoned student affairs professionals - "What is one thing you have learned that has helped shape your professional career?" I'm your host, Stuart Brown, the developer of studentaffairs.com, one of the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. On our pages, we have the most cost-effective job posting board, listing hundreds of open student services positions and a wide range of webinars. On today's episode, I am very pleased to have Dr Lisa Jackson, Interim Director of New Student Programs at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Welcome to the program, Lisa.

Dr. Lisa Jackson: Thank you so much to.

Stuart Brown: So Lisa, what is your one thing?

Dr. Lisa Jackson: My one thing is understanding the power of words. As a young child, I heard the phrase 'sticks and stones may break your bones but words will never hurt you.' And in that same realm, I was also taught to, to speak my mind - to be able to say whatever it is that you're feeling, however you're feeling, to whomever, basically without a filter. And I have learned over my 20 plus years in the field that words matter - that words carry power and how you say something can really define a moment or a relationship that you have with an individual. I will share a story or it's kind of multiple stories, in in one when I talk about the power of words.

So at one institution that I was at in, in northern part, northern part of Baltimore, Maryland, I was an area coordinator and I was managing two residence halls at that time. And I had an RA that was on call. And you know, when you're on call, for those of you that may not know you're not supposed to go outside of your parameters, you need to stay within your residence hall area, whatever that defined area is. Well, this particular day that she was on call, she began to have some suicidal thoughts. And when she had the suicidal thoughts instead of her calling the person that was on call or even reaching out to me, she reached out to her friends and her friends were not RAs - being resident assistants. They were just girlfriends that were all going to college together. Well, they decided to take her to the mall to get her mind off of things. So a couple of days later, we're talking to me and this young lady have, even to this day, she and I still have a really good relationship. We were having our bi weekly one on one and she shares with me, Miss Lisa, I got something I want to tell you. And I said 'okay.' So she went ahead and shared some things that have been going on with her life that had began to cause her to have these suicidal thoughts.

And she went on to further share with me that she left the area that she was supposed to be in while she was on call. So I took a deep breath because I knew kind of, you know, what that meant. But I was hoping that I would be able to justify to my supervisor, her circumstances and being able to continue her in the position. So we kind of paused our conversation and as appropriate, you know, I went forward and I shared this with my supervisor. And he, he asked me, he was like, well, why, why should you not remove her from the position? And I was like, you know, life happened. And he's like, yeah, I did, but she still did something that she was not supposed to do and she needs to be held accountable for it.

So fast forward to me having a conversation with her. And I told her, you know, unfortunately, I need to remove you from the position. Emotional conversation for a 19 year old to hear that. And it's just as emotional and challenging for the individual giving it. So we talked about about it and she was okay. She understood fast forward a few years later to my next institution. This was the first time that I was supervising full time staff. And I had been told when I came into the position that this full time staff member had some challenges and that I

need to be able to clean up for lack of a better word of what was going on because I will now be the eyes in that hall that they have not had in order to confirm and verify what this staff member was and was not doing.

So, we went through a series of conversations with her disciplinary actions with her. And when I gave her the initial first morning, I just said to this person, I'm like, you know what? You are unacceptable. I said your actions are unacceptable, your words and how you speak to students and how you build relationships with students are not appropriate. I didn't say it quite like that, but I said it a little bit more of a raw fashion if you will. So she kind of looked at me and I was like, 'what you're thinking about' and she was like, you know, I'm okay with what you said, but it's how you said it to me.

And I said, really, I said, well, how do I say it to you? And she's like, well, you kinda mean, you're kinda harsh, you were kind of straightforward. And I was like, so you want me to sugar coat it? And she was like, you know, you could have said what you had to say in a different manner what you said.

So fast forward a couple of more years to my next position in Boston. I have some situations going on with that staff members and I tell them dry cut and dry this is how I feel and this is where you step inappropriate thing. And I had another staff member yet say to me, you know, Dr J is not what you said is kind of how you said it and that's why I'm crying. And the last thing that I have ever wanted to do was to have someone cry because of something that I said. So at that point, I stepped back and I said, you know what, let's do a self evaluation. And I began to become very self-reflective of how I say things and why I say things the way I say things - being born and raised on the south side of Chicago. You know, many times I had to learn how to fend for myself. I spoke what I needed to speak, depending on the type of people that I was around. And my, my parents always told me say what's on your mind. And it's even kind of funny because uh there have been instances where my mom has said something to me and I'll come back to her and I'll say what's on my mind and she's like, Lisa, really? And my dad is like, well you told us speak what's on her mind and that's exactly what she doing. So you cannot be upset with her about speaking what's on her mind. But it was then Stuart, that I began to have a deeper learning and understanding, not only of self but the impact that words can have on you. And I even go back to things in my childhood, you know, when I was in elementary school and I think about things that, you know, my so called friends would say to me and I was like, you know, you told me sticks and stones may break my bones, but words ain't gonna hurt. These words are kind of stinking a little bit and it wasn't until I was in my probably early forties that I actually began to realize that it's not always what you say, but it is how you say it and how those words can have an impact on an individual.

Stuart Brown: I think that's really tough because especially when you're dealing with, let's say undergraduates and you want to try and maybe not sugarcoat it, but you don't want to be harsh, but you want to be real. You want to be straightforward. I had an instance once where and I mentioned this, I think in a previous podcast episode, I had a student that I had to fire and I was just going round and round. And finally the student looked at me and said, Stu if you want to fire me, just fire me. And I was so taken aback. But looking back on it, it was because I wasn't straightforward because I wanted to let the student down and I really wasn't measuring my words the way I should have. So I think it is very difficult to, like you said, speak your mind. This is who I am, but also in a maybe diplomatic way.

Dr. Lisa Jackson: Yes, indeed. I, I totally agree. And I think, you know, in those instances where I've had to remove staff members, the one in, in the Maryland area, as well as in the Texas area. I think it was bothering me because I had never been in a position to do such a thing. And, you know, supervising students staff, uh, it's a little different, not a little, it's a lot different than supervising professional staff. And I think with that particular situation in Texas, I just, I was taking away somebody's livelihood. I was taken away the provider for the family, you know, I was taken away their living arrangements. So I had all these different things weighing on me. And this was, as I mentioned before, my first time supervising full time staff. And I'm just like, is this how I get introduced to supervisor, full time staff? Really? You know, so I was kind of going back and forth and wondering if there were things that I could have done differently to have had a different outcome. I had to kind of lighten up with myself a little bit more, but, you know, you kind of did all that you could do. You gave this person ample opportunity to, you know, have corrective action yet they still chose to not do it. So it just gives you a different mindset and it has you take pause and how you move forward.

Stuart Brown: So if you were presenting at a graduate seminar or at a regional conference, speaking to new professionals, what pithy advice would you give them?

Dr. Lisa Jackson: I would tell them initially to be authentic to let them know that it is okay for your emotions to show. And it is also okay for you to let that individual know that you have come to a decision that has not been the easiest for you if that is part of what your challenge has been, if that's been a challenge for you. I would also let them know that depending on the individual depends on how you approach the conversation. Everybody is not a straight shooter. Some people want things to be sugarcoated and then you, you know, you kind of just coast into the conversation where others are like, you know, like you just said, with this student that you had, you know what you if you want to fire me, fire me and you have individuals like that. So you just have to be able to know the person's character well enough. To know how they are. So be intentional and how you deliver that conversation with the person And also be intentional in how you use your words to have the conversation. Because that can make a difference. Some of the, in my 20 plus years, I have done more removal from student positions for students mainly than I have full time staff. But some of those situations sit with me a little bit differently than others. And that's because of how I've matured and how I've grown and how I have learned how to move differently. Know that it's okay and I'm not saying that it's okay because you're taking away someone's job. No, don't, don't get that twisted. It is okay because you're letting someone know that this is an area that they need to work on and improve in and use it as a conversation, a developmental conversation, especially if it's a student. You, you can really focus in and hone in, on what they did could have been done a little bit differently and talked with them about it if they're open to it, you know, processes a situation with them.

Stuart Brown: I think those are two good pieces of advice, being genuine and being intentional when working with staff. And it is a challenge. It can be a struggle and it's something that we all face and it's something that we probably have to face sooner rather than later. And really approach as someone who needs to do this because this is going to impact your professional career, like you're saying, for 20 years, for other people, 30, 40 years. So let's work it out now and not try and figure it out when you're more of a mid level or senior level professional.

Dr. Lisa Jackson: I agree with you. You know, regardless of what level of professional you are, the conversation never gets easier. You know, regardless if you're having it with the student staff member or a full time staff member, it's still the same type of conversation and it still is going to cause you to maybe have clammy hands, have restless nights. I know I have, I have had restless nights when I have had to make some tough disciplinary decisions. That's okay.

Stuart Brown: Lisa. I want to thank you for sharing your one thing today. You have been listening to Student Affairs. One Thing, a podcast that asks a simple question of seasoned student affairs professionals – 'What is one thing you have learned that has helped shape your professional career?' I want to thank today's guest, Dr Lisa Jackson, interim Director of New Student Programs at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. I've been your host, Stuart Brown, the developer of studentaffairs.com, one of the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. I hope you'll join us next time for another episode.

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