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Recorded Message: The Hennessy Report, from Keystone Partners, a free-flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

Dave Hennessy: Welcome to the Hennessy Report. I'm your host, Dave Hennessy. First, a little housekeeping. Today's podcast is our first remote guest. Her name is Mary Gentile from the Darden School of Business at University of Virginia. So we've got the Hennessy Report going global now. And, I want to tell you about some of our great guests coming up for summer, for beach listening. Fidelity Investments' head of talent acquisition, Paul Lesser, the Director of HR at Bright Horizons, Scarlett Abraham. Also, Scarlett is a fellow board member at NEHRA. ezCater's CEO Stefania Mallett, and MFS Investments' CHRO, Mark Leary.

Here to begin our summer series, I Skype interviewed Mary Gentile, the founder of Giving Voice to Values, which is the curriculum now being taught in over 1,000 business schools worldwide. I learned about Mary through my interviews of two earlier podcast guests. As Mary wrote the Harvard Business School case about Russ Campanello, episode three, and she co-wrote the Simmons Business School case about Helen Drinan, and that was episode six. Mary's very influential in the world of values-based leadership and she's a great storyteller. I think you're going to really enjoy this podcast. Now, I bring you my discussion with Mary Gentile.

Well, welcome to the podcast, Mary.

Mary Gentile: Thank you, Dave.

Dave: I first learned about you and your work at an earlier podcast, two earlier podcasts. I interviewed Russ Campanello and I interviewed Helen Drinan. I think you might remember both of those people.

Mary: Absolutely.

Dave: I think they were both Harvard Business School cases at the time.

Mary: Well, actually, I wrote the Harvard Business School case about Russ, and Helen, I co-authored a case that actually we did through Simmons School of Management. So, yeah.

Dave: That's right, where Helen is president and just had her big leadership conference.

Mary: That's right.

Dave: We're going to get into your work and what you do. I've certainly read about it and seen your presentations on the topic. One of the things I've learned is that as you were starting to teach ethics in the business schools, you realized that it wasn't so much about knowing what to do or knowing what the values are that people believe in and knowing what's right and consistent with that. That wasn't the issue. It was more about how do people take action and live their values? And, as you say, "Give voice to values."



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I was wondering, before we get into that concept, because I want you to talk about it in a little bit deeper way, maybe we could find out a little bit about your background. Was there anything before you got into education that ... an experience or some influence that kind of shaped who you are and kind of informs your work still today? Is there anything that you'd be willing to share?

Mary: Yeah. Actually, it's interesting. I've always seen myself as something of an introvert, perhaps even somewhat sort of risk-averse, not somebody who was actually seeking out arguments. I also have been always kind of an earnest person, I guess. So I would witness behaviors, I would witness treatment of people, I'd experienced treatment or behaviors myself that I was concerned about. But I kind of thought, "I'm not the kind of person who can actually act on this." Even though I think this should be stopped or changed, I didn't feel empowered or skillful about it. That was something that troubled me. It was disappointing. I sort of accepted it, but it was disappointing. But I think at some level I didn't accept it, because I was always searching for stories from people and how they handled situations.

I think the beginning of the work I do now, Giving Voice to Values, really came from starting to hear from people about experiences that they had and how they handled them, and realizing that you didn't need to be a huge extrovert, you didn't need to be a huge risk taker. You could be those things, but that there were many different ways to act effectively on your values. Obviously, this applies not just to ethical values, but to leadership in general. But that for me was kind of the motivating force, the kind of "Ah-ha."

Dave: Maybe you could give us a little bit of an overview of Giving Voice to Values? It was new to me, so I imagine there's some people in HR that haven't heard about your work. I know it's well-traveled throughout the business schools. I think it's a core curriculum in ethics training in business schools now. Maybe you can talk a little bit about where it's come from and where it is today: your work?

Mary: Sure, be happy to. I like to tell people that it basically, for me, developed out of a crisis of faith. I had been working in business schools, originally Harvard Business School, then I was at Babson for a while, now I'm at the University of Virginia Darden School of Business, but I've consulted in many other business schools.

But a number of years ago, in the late 90s, I guess, after having worked in this field for several decades, I began to feel that the way we were trying to teach about ethics in business schools, and by extension in corporate training, was ineffective at best, and sometimes kind of hypocritical. It felt to me that ... I like to refer to it as "preach and pretend". You know? We kind of preach about what the rules are and the policies and the corporate value statements, and then we pretend people know how to do it.

I also saw that, so often in corporate training rooms or in classrooms, we spend all our time talking about coming up with some sort of ethical decision-making framework, as if people couldn't figure out what was right. And, of course, that's true sometimes. There are a lot of complex issues that truly are gray. But there's many, many issues, some of the most egregious scandals we've faced are situations where a lot of people actually knew what was right. They just didn't think it was feasible in their organizational context, or it was too risky, or they would be unsuccessful.



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And so I started realizing that we were treating it as if it was entirely a cognitive issue, an intellectual issue of understanding, when a lot of it was more of a behavioral issue of, "How do we act effectively?" And I just decided, "Let's create a new pedagogy, a new curriculum approach." It's what I call the Giving Voice to Values Thought Experiment, where we present scenarios to people, but rather than asking them what's right, they're post decision making. The protagonist in the scenario has already decided what they think is right. And the question becomes, "If you were that person and you thought what they thought, how could they get it done effectively?" So you're giving people safety, cover, to actually apply their most skillful communication strategies, influence and power strategies, negotiations to the ethical position.

I do this because I find that if you ask people, "What would you do in this scenario," you get three kinds of answers, and none of them are that helpful. You get the people who say, "Oh, I'd do the right thing." And they may really believe it. But we know from the research that many of them won't, for a lot of reasons. And then you get the people who say, "Well, I know what you want me to say, but it's not possible." And then you get the people who argue with the premise and say, "Well, it's not even wrong." And none of those answers will get you to what I'm talking about; get you to actually rehearse and rescript and peer coach, develop a voice for enacting your values effectively.

So we do the Thought Experiment. We say, "What if you were this person who wanted to do this? How could they get it done?" And it kind of jumps over that unconscious barrier that we all have where we think, "I'm not sure I would do it. I'm not sure it's possible. Too risky." We jump over that.

Dave: Right. Get them to think like a consultant. Right?

Mary: Exactly. Exactly. It's kind of a pedagogical sleight of hand. That's the approach, and I started sharing it. My goal was to get it into business schools, and it has in fact gotten into business schools. It's used all over the world now. I wanted it to not just be used in ethics classes. I wanted it to be an approach that could be used in an accounting class, or a marketing class or a finance class. That is in fact also happening.

Dave: You know, on my podcast I'm noticing that the organizations that are really doing great things and have great leadership seem to be much more focused on values-based leadership. Are you feeling more optimistic about your work and where things are going with regard to values-based leadership?

Mary: Yeah. Well, I would say, yes, I think that there is a growing understanding of that focus on values, as opposed to simply a focus on ethics, as it's more traditionally defined, is a more empowering, a more motivating approach. I always tell people, I called it Giving Voice to Values rather than Giving Voice to Ethics, because ethics feels like some sort of external set of rules imposed from outside. It's about constraints on action, which doesn't really appeal to most business leaders that I run into. Whereas values is more aspirational. It's something that you care about and it's appealing to what matters to you. And I think that that's more motivating."

I see that happening more broadly. There's many folks who work in this field, and I think there is this growing emphasis on values for those sorts of reasons. One of the things that I think is a good indicator is that when I first started getting invited to share this with companies it was often the ethics and



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compliance people who would reach out to me. But now I get calls from talent management. I just came back from a program with the Caribbean Development Bank where it was their HR talent management people. Or I get calls from leadership. It was the leadership people at Unilever who brought me in to work with some of their organizations in Nigeria and Guyana and South Africa. Or from senior leadership. I've been working with the president of a mid-sized, multinational US-based company, B2B, recently. And it came from him. He'd heard me speak somewhere and wanted to bring this to his company.

So I see that as a very good sign when it's not just coming from the ethics folks, important and essential as they are. But, you know, it's great when they can be the people who the management is going to and saying, "Will you help us do this? We want it." But if you really want to make change, if you really want to have an impact, it usually means having to be a little more skillful at it.

One of the things that I point out to people is that, people who are successful in organizations have great communication skills, great negotiation skills, power and influence skills, all of that stuff. Then, when it comes to ethics it's like it's a different animal. Now we have to have a defining moment where we test our character, and they kind of dumb themselves down and they forget about all those skills they have and they think it's just about character or morality.

What I think is that if you can actually be playing to those strengths that you have, it becomes less of this kind of Herculean moral risk that you're taking and you're just acting as you normally act to influence behavior, to make change, to learn and to help others learn. Part of that means being willing to understand that some of these issues are ... it's not a matter of a one-off conversation where you're going to transform an organization. You know? It means having to have a plan, an incremental plan, often, building a set of allies. The same way you would try to make any other systemic change in an organization.

Dave: Why do you think most people don't do this on their own, you know, Give Voice to Values? Why do you think it needs so much teaching and guidance? Is there something about cultures?

Mary: Well, I guess, first of all, I wouldn't say that most people don't do it. I think we all do it to some extent. One of the core exercises in Giving Voice to Values, there's something we call A Tale of Two Stories. We ask people to reflect on a time when they have in fact effectively acted on their values, voiced their values, and a time when they've failed to do so. That becomes a kind of beginning to learn about, "What enables me, what disables me, and how I can maximize one and minimize the other?"

So I wouldn't say that we ... But we don't always do it in every aspect of our lives. We don't always feel empowered or skillful to do it. I think when I interview people about times when they have or have not acted on their values, if I ask them, "Why didn't you when you didn't?" They almost always say it's because they didn't think they had a choice. So that's what I'm trying to do, is to give people the opportunity to build the skill, to build the literal scripts, to rehearse, to practice, to feel like they have more options, they have more arrows in their quiver.

Dave: Right. That's great. How have societal norms changed your work? What happening in the world?



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Mary: That's a really interesting question. I guess one of the things I'd say is that right now ... When I first started doing this work, and GVV is now about ... I call it "GVV", Giving Voice to Values, it's now about 10 years old. When I first started doing this work, people were really giving me questions about, "How does this encourage more business ethics, more ethical business behavior?" Then, for a while there it seemed like I couldn't give any sort of presentation or training without people asking, "Well, could this work with my children? Could this work with young people in high school or secondary or elementary school?" People started wondering about passing it on to the next generation.

Now when I give this talk and do these presentations, I almost always get questions that have to do with, "Can this apply to our political context? Can this apply to our civic context?" Because people are feeling that there are huge values issues that are being played out every day in the political arena and that the effectiveness of our public discourse seems to be waning. People seem to be arguing more than communicating.

Dave: This podcast is for HR. It's an HR podcast, and we have a lot of people listening that might be trying to make their organization more of a values-based leadership organization. How can they influence others inside their organization?

Mary: We have kind of a protocol, a set of questions that we encourage people to think through when they're trying to figure out how to act on their own values, how to voice their own values effectively. One of the questions always kind of confuses people at first, but it's where I ask them to think about, "What's at stake or what's at risk for all affected parties, including the person or persons that you want to influence?" And often, people will think I'm asking that question because I want them to do a stakeholder analysis and decide what's right. And that's not what I'm doing.

I mean, Giving Voice to Values starts with this post-decision-making premise, where we're starting from the fact that you've done some thinking and you have this values-based position. But by looking at the risk for the individuals that you would like to influence, a couple of things happen. Number one, you test your own thinking. If you are acting on a bias, it may become more evident. Another thing is that it may give you some tools for communicating with that person, because you'll begin to understand what they're worried about. That might give you an opportunity to reframe what you're asking, to try and reduce the risk that you're actually inviting them to take. At a minimum, acknowledging that you are asking them to take some sort of risk or pay some sort of price. And it means starting from a place of respect.

I've found that, especially when I go globally, it's just so important to not take the stance that, "Here, I have my values and I'm giving them to you." It's more that, "I know you have values and I know that they're not always easy to act on." So trying to find the part in that person that you actually can connect with and play to that.

It may be that there's a lot of their behaviors that you cannot connect with, that you feel are opportunistic or even unethical. But if you can find that place where you're connected to the common piece, that's what I find is most useful. It becomes especially evident when I work globally, because people will often say, "Oh, well, you know, the values are different here." I've looked at the research, and of course, and I've traveled the world and I know that behaviors and contexts do differ. And you



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have to acknowledge the reality of the context. You can't pretend that everything's easy or the same. But if you do start from that place of respect, what you can do is understand from the research that there do tend to be a number of values that are pretty much commonly shared across cultures, across people. The thing is, it's a really short list.

So one of the things I talk to people is...when I'm trying to communicate with you about something like that, I need to appeal to a value that I know we share, rather than presenting it within the context of what I care about. That can be scary, because it means I need to go to the place, not of giving up my values, but of really trying to understand where you're coming from.

Dave: Sure. Can you give an inspired example of Giving Voice to Values in action? Maybe inside an organization that you've really seen it make an incredible difference to all or a group of people?

Mary: I had a really interesting experience when I was in Nigeria working with Unilever. This was, again, as I said, it was their leadership people who invited me in. And they did an interesting thing. The learning and leadership group within the company sort of put out a call and said, "You know, we want to experiment with this approach, Giving Voice to Values. Who'd like to put up their hand and be the pilot site?" And interestingly, it was the head of the Nigeria operations who raised his hand, a really impressive guy.

So I went to Lagos and spent a week or so sort of gathering stories and trying to understand the context. Then, the idea was, the original idea, which later changed, was that I was going to go back a few months later, we were going to have ... They had identified a group of "Change Champions", they called them, who I was going to train them and then they were going to cascade the approach throughout the organization. We had a series of online interactive modules that they completed first, you know, six modules. Then, I came and was going to spend a couple days with them.

The idea was I would spend a couple days with these Change Champions who were kind of high-potential middle managers. Then, I'd spend maybe an hour or an hour and a half with the senior leadership team, just to socialize them to the idea. You know? Not to really do a training. Well, interestingly, a few weeks before I was supposed to go to Lagos, they called me up and they said, "Well, we'd like to suggest a change. We would like to have the senior leadership, the entire senior leadership team, which is about 10 folks, attend your entire training with the Change Champions."

Now this was, as you know working in this field, this is what you want. Right? But you never get it. So on the one hand I was thinking, "Wow, what a great opportunity." On the other hand I was pretty scared, because I thought, "I don't know how this is going to go." What was inspiring to me is what actually happened. The senior leadership and this 35 hand-selected high-potential middle managers spent the day and a half with me. We did the introduction to GVV and all of that.

But then when we got to the classic Giving Voice to Values scenarios, the post-decision-making scenarios, which we had customized to be relevant to Nigeria and Unilever, we did something different. We put all the middle managers at their own tables and we said, "Do the regular GVV exercise. Here's an ethical challenge. Figure out how you're going to raise it effectively, or act on it effectively." But then we put the senior leaders at their own tables separately, talking to each other. We said, "Your task is to talk



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about how could one of these middle managers bring this issue to you in a way that would make it easier for you to respond appropriately?" So they weren't being asked ... You know? It's different. It's like, "How can you hear it?"

So when we brought them back together, I really didn't have to do anything. There was this kind of natural social contracting that went on, where the middle managers were saying, "You know, well if you ... " Well, the senior leaders were saying, "Well, if you wouldn't catch me in the hall and you wouldn't just come and complain, you wouldn't drop it in my lap and leave it, you wouldn't come to me with an opinion but no data and never have any solutions." And then the middle managers were, "Well, if you wouldn't kill the messenger." You know?

So what was interesting is they started coming together in that way, and their idea, nothing I ever planned, which was the part that inspired me, is that they then came up with this idea that they were going to create what they called the "GVV Deal" or the "GVV Contract." And it was a set of maybe three or four behaviors that senior leaders committed to, and three or four behaviors that the rest of the management agreed to, saying, you know, "If you will agree to do this, I will agree to do that." And they did a sort of town meeting and they signed the contract. It was really sort of establishing some new norms about what was appropriate to raise and how to raise it.

Dave: How to do it. Right.

Mary: So it wasn't just speak-up-culture stuff, and it wasn't just reporting. It was actually, "I'm a middle manager. I'm going to come and problem solve with you. I own this, too. We all own this company and this enterprise." So that was, to me, very encouraging.

Dave: That's great. This podcast is in cooperation with the Northeast Human Resources Association and we have the question of the Podcast, and it is: "What advice would you give to somebody early in their HR career, as somebody that's maybe interested in values-based leadership and just career advice? What would you recommend to them?"

Mary: I think one of the most powerful things for me is learning from other people about how they communicate about difficult challenges. Giving Voice to Values is based on the power of stories. So I think one of the most useful things to do, anywhere in your career, but especially early in your career, is to ask people and listen to their stories, and, in particular, to listen to their stories and ask for their stories of times when they have been effective. And not just to get them to tell a story, "And then this happened ... " but to really explain; to ask them the questions about, "Well, what were you concerned about? How did you neutralize that resistance? How did you appeal to that interest? How did you reframe your challenge?" I think gaining, collecting stories. Because what you're doing then is, (a) you're learning technique for yourself; (b) you're reinforcing your own belief that it is possible to act on these issues; and, (c) you're building relationships with these people.

One of the things that I think happens with GVV, with the storytelling in GVV, is that it can sometimes be a sort of stealth training, because simply asking people to reflect on times when they have been effective and how they were effective, becomes an opportunity for them to begin to play to that strength. You know? Because one of the things we know is that people will generalize more easily from



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negative experience than from positive. So what you want to do is give them the opportunity to experience and re-experience and hopefully begin to generalize from their own positive past.

Dave: Great advice. And this is a question I ask, it's a little bit different, I get different answers. If you could give advice, write a letter to your 25, 30-year-old self, giving yourself advice about your career, what would you write to yourself?

Mary: Well, I think the first message I would give is, "Have hope. Don't give up hope." Because when I was 25 or 30, I was not feeling like I could find the path yet. You know? Assume nothing. I mean, I never would have guessed that I would be doing what I'm doing now. At that age, I was doing a doctorate in literature and film. And, in fact, I never would have created Giving Voice to Values if I hadn't done that, because it was an education in narrative, how the way you ... I look at the same set of facts that you might look at and we can create entirely different narratives about what's possible. Understanding that and understanding the power of narrative, and also understanding how you can reframe stories, it's what GVV is all about. It's about helping people who all have the same experience begin to think it might be possible to do something that most people say, "Oh, you can't do that here." So learn what you can and have faith.

Dave: Are there misconceptions about Giving Voice to Values that you want to share?

Mary: Yes. There's one that really is important, which is that people often read the words "Giving Voice to Values" and they'll think it's about whistle-blowing, whistle-blowing externally or reporting internally. It's not that those things aren't sometimes necessary. Certainly there are times when lives are at stake or time pressure is such that someone does feel that they need to blow the whistle externally or report internally. But a lot of times we're talking, you know, with Giving Voice to Values, there's so many situations that grow incrementally that are small pieces of behavior that build into a kind of slippery slope and then addictive cycles. Then, it becomes sort of hardwired.

So Giving Voice to Values is really about people being able to make change within their team or within their group or with their customer or with their manager before we get to that sort of higher-stake kind of dramatic situation.

I can give you an example. I mentioned that Lockheed Martin was the first company to use this. They've been using it for seven or eight years now. I was talking to them, oh, it was a year and a half or so ago, where they had begun to do some surveying to sort of try and understand the impact of what they were doing with GVV. It was early days, but what they think they were finding is that, yes, people were raising issues more often, but they were finding that people were bringing values issues to the ethics officers in the organization and saying, "Look, something's going on. I think it's not right. But I want to deal with it. But will you work with me to create an effective strategy and script so I can go back and deal with it in my own team?"

From Lockheed's perspective, this was more true culture change than simply having people come and dump things in the ethics officers' laps. They were feeling that, they were getting more and better information, but people were owning the responsibility and the desire, actually, to have an impact in their groups. And secondarily, what was interesting is, you know, they're government contractors, so



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some things, there's a mandatory reporting requirement for some kinds of behaviors when they reach a certain level. They were finding that when people did bring an issue to them that required investigation, that they were requesting investigation, they tended, more often, to be truly investigable offenses, as opposed to the false positives when people just don't know where else to go or they just want to complain.

So they felt that it was operating at multiple levels. It was making their work deeper. It was encouraging true culture change. And for the times when investigations were appropriate, it was a more efficient use of their time.

Dave: If you could go to dinner with any living person, who would it be and why?

Mary: So that's a really tough one. I thought about it a lot. I was thinking, "Well, you know, I want to talk to somebody who's making change in the global political arena," so I was thinking about Macron in France. Then I thought, "Well, maybe I should talk about somebody who's really changing the way people think about the meaning of their lives," you know, you think about people like the Dalai Lama. But who I really ended up wanting to talk to was Philip Pullman. He's a British author of a series of novels called *His Dark Materials*. It's been made into successful theater and there's been a movie. But it's a trilogy of books. He's actually working on a sequel trilogy now. It's actually considered young adult books, you know, sort of along the lines of *Harry Potter*, but it's much more ... I find it much deeper in the sense of understanding human behavior and, in particular, the thing that fascinates me is that his main characters have this truly internalized sense of responsibility. It's exhausting to read these books because of what these characters have to go through. But I think it's inspiring.

So I would want to talk to Philip Pullman about that. I actually read a review and a bio of him, I think it was in the *New Yorker*, and they were asking him some question about life. And he said that, "You have ... " I probably will get the quote a little wrong, but it's something like, "You have to live your life as if life was going to win." And I thought that was really interesting. He's not going to the point ... he's not an optimist, like, "Everything's going to work out," in fact, you might say he's even slightly pessimistic. But the fact is that life is about how you live it, rather than what actually is the outcome. And I found that really compelling. So Philip Pullman.

Dave: That's a good one. I think I got this answer, but I'm going to ask you anyway. What gives you energy? We certainly have got a lot of answers about that already, but maybe about topics we haven't talked about. What gives you energy?

Mary: I think my favorite thing to renew and restore myself is to go out to breakfast on a Saturday morning with my partner and sort of find out what we're each thinking about and how we're making sense of, or not making sense of, our own work, but also the wider world. You just need to connect and bounce off someone you respect.

Dave: Well, Mary, it's been so great. I'm really honored to have had the chance to interview you. And, continue to do some great work out in the world. You're really making a big difference.

Mary: Well, thank you so much, Dave. It was a lot of fun.



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Dave: Thank you.

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