



Podcast

Creating a level playing field for collaboration

Tonnie van der Zouwen

#13 Fiona Frank: Creating inclusive activism - courageous and intersectional leadership



Keywords

Fiona Frank, activism, Black Lives Matter, grassroots movements, leadership, diversity, equity, inclusion, cultural communication, accessibility, intersectionality

Episode description

Join us for an inspiring episode with Fiona Frank, an educator, politician, activist, and consultant from the Netherlands. With over 22 years of experience, she teaches at the University of Applied Science in Amsterdam and the University for Humanistic Studies in Utrecht.

In our conversation, Fiona shares her political journey and dedication to activism, particularly in diversity, equity, and inclusion. She recounts coordinating the Black Lives Matter demonstration in Utrecht during the COVID-19 lockdown, emphasizing the importance of accessibility and inclusivity in activism. Fiona advocates for courageous leadership that challenges the status quo to create real change. She highlights the power of collective action among diverse communities embracing intersectional thinking. Don't miss this chance to discover how fearless leadership can pave the way for a more equitable future!

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Transcript

Italic words are spoken by the host, Tonnie van der Zouwen

Introduction to Fiona Frank

In this episode, we welcome Fiona Frank. Welcome Fiona. Thank you, Tonnie, for inviting me for this podcast. Maybe you can tell a little bit more about yourself. Yes, I can. I'm Fiona Frank. I'm well, as I told you, I have a lot of different roles. And just for the introduction, I will scatter them. I'm an educator in the first place. I teach at the University of Applied Science of Amsterdam already for 15 years. And besides that, I also teach at the University for Humanistic Studies in Utrecht. And I've been an educator for 22 years which is already quite a long time when I thought about this podcast, thought, oh, that's actually already quite long. And I'm also, well, I was a politician, but they say that you never lose that job if you once were a politician. So I'm still a politician. And I was in the city council and had a lot of active jobs in a political party. And I'm still actually doing a lot of things that are related to politics, but they're more as an activist and besides that I also am a consultant on the topic of diversity, equity and inclusion and I'm a language and communication expert so that is also what I teach and mostly communication skills and intercultural skills.

Okay, thank you. So you have many roles. I like doing a lot of different things. I hope many stories to share. we met in a restaurant. didn't know each other until we were at the same table at a special occasion, a dinner in 's-Hertogenbosch and we started talking and to my feeling we never stopped. I agree. You were in the dinner. ***So when I invited you, what intrigued you?*** Well, what intrigued me in the first place was that we had such a good conversation during dinner because I sat down not expecting it at all. I was there to talk to my friends and to meet my friend and I thought, we're at a long table. I hope I get to talk to my friends. Well, I didn't really, because we hit it off. But I really thought it was intriguing the way you combined your background in biology and ecosystems with organizational structures. And I thought it was a really interesting take on viewing communities because I think it is a very organic and probably very realistic view on it. So that's why I said, sure, I will join the podcast.

Activism and the Black Lives Matter Movement

OK, and I'm happy you're here. So I hope something comes to mind that sticks with you related to co-creating a level playing field. Yeah, I think a lot of things, but maybe it's good to start with what we started talking about during the dinner also. That I, for example, coordinated the Black Lives Matter demonstration during the COVID lockdown times here in my city Utrecht. And I think it was very special. And of course there's the whole dramatic and sad and serious background of what actually happened. But I think it turned into a very massive movement around the world, which I think was very special



because I have been organizing demonstrations since I was, well, my first demonstration was when I was eight. And it's always really difficult to get enough crowd together. And I also truly believe nowadays that the critical mass you need is really big, even in a small country like the Netherlands. And with this Black Lives Matter movement, we actually had this critical mass. And it showed me that while not only dramatic situations can lead to something, but also it was, I think, one of the true grassroots movements that succeeded, because we tried a lot before but a lot of the times it gets stuck somewhere. And I saw that this succeeded because of the actual huge numbers of people that came to the demonstrations and also showed interest in other ways. And within the demonstrations, we also thought because it was during COVID times and the last thing we wanted was that it would be about us not adhering to the COVID rules because that's what happened in Amsterdam and everybody was only talking about how people were standing too close together and stuff like that. And it took away from the message. So we took really great care to not only for the image, but also of course, because we wanted everybody to be able to participate, also people that might have a weaker health and were afraid of COVID. So we took a lot of extra care. And when I started thinking about those things, I also started thinking about other types of, well, thresholds that there might be for people to, well, actually just join a demonstration. We also made sure that we had sign language interpreters, which was quite new at the time in the Netherlands for demonstrations. We made sure we had a lot of chairs in the front for people who cannot stand too long. We made sure we had a really good sound system, which was actually the most expensive part of the demonstration.

Was it inside or outside? No, it was outside. We actually found a festival sound company who actually provided the sound system that they normally provide for a small festival. So we took all those steps to make sure that really everybody could participate in a way that was accessible for everyone. So this is one example of how you can think about it. And I think there are also a lot of examples that of course, well, fail at providing accessibility for everyone.

Just about the Black Lives Matter demonstration. How did you invite people?

Mostly through social media and telephones. Yeah. Because that's where the action happens really. And of course, we did invite the press and people like that through more conservative ways. the rest was all through social media. We also crowdfunded through social media, which actually led to quite an amount of money on which we also did some other projects after the Black Lives Matter demonstration. But yeah, it was like wildfire through social media. This is also why I say it was one of the few successful grassroots movements because normally, and it might also be because of all the algorithms on social media that of course, well, hamper the communication of certain demonstrations. But in this case, the mass was so big and the amount of people was so great. **How many?** Well, I think just in Utrecht there were 14,000. So, yeah. Which for the Netherlands is quite big and especially when you think that there was a demonstration in many other cities, okay, days before. So yeah, the community, the municipality was also a bit worried about the number of people and they started saying



that people shouldn't come to the city anymore. And but for the rest, they were actually quite good about it, because they provided even another square behind the square where we were demonstrating and they provided another very big video screen so that people could watch the demonstration and the speakers there. So it was actually quite a good co-creation also with the municipality, which is not always the case. But how come, was it you who invited the municipality or someone else? You always have to tell them, especially with such a big demonstration. And luckily we're in a country where normally this is supported and you can demonstrate. It's not always the case of course nowadays it's getting more difficult. But so we talked to the municipality and they also asked how many people do you expect? What can we do? They also didn't tell us upfront that they organized this other square with a screen, because they were afraid that even more people would come if they would say that. But overall, it was a good co-creation.

Community Engagement and Municipal Collaboration

While at the same time, the same municipality also has its problematic sides, of course. Lot of the times a municipality asks activists to, advise them on a lot of topics. And I have been doing that for 15 years. And it's sometimes quite takes quite a lot of time. And it's basically free labour because they don't pay. So after the Black Lives Matter movement, we also told the municipality, we're not going to do this for free anymore because it's, you know, what, what happens before, right before the demonstration is that we were running a project and we advised on it. And then the municipality turned around and hired a very expensive consultancy bureau from a different city that didn't know anything about the local situation. And then even the consultancy bureau called us to ask, well, who should we invite? What should be the location? Can you get catering for us? And so we were like, well, do we also get the money? And of course, no, we wouldn't get the money. **Why not?** Well, exactly. So this is one of the things we told to municipality, we're not going to do it for free anymore. And this is also my advice to municipalities. If you want people from marginalized groups to help you improve your policies, you should also make sure it's worth it for them. Yeah. And this is of course just for this organization, but it's a lot of times, for example, especially people that have less money, they don't always have the time to sit there for hours and give you their free advice. So it's very important that we also hear those people and not just the people that have enough money to have the free time to actually be there. So I also feel very privileged that I have the time to actually be there. But I think it's very important. And sometimes the municipality actually does realize this because they had a very big city participation council for citizens. They invited randomly, I think 250 citizens. And it was for five Saturdays and they actually told them, you will get paid for your time and together we are going to decide on the climate and energy agenda. So sometimes they realize it, sometimes they don't.



The importance of diverse perspectives

What I get from your message, if you find it's important to hear their perspectives and you take them seriously, then you have to reward them.

Yeah. I don't know if it's like this in all countries, but especially in the Netherlands, there is a bit of a problem between experience and expertise because a lot of the times people from more dominant groups who want to hear the marginalized groups think, you you're an expert because you are something. So that is enough. And it isn't always because talking about inclusion and equity and diversity also takes sometimes a lot of expertise. Now you cannot just say, well, you're brown skinned. So you know everything about all this D-I-E-I or U-I for example also have hearing aids. So I know everything about accessibility which is of course not necessarily true. No. And this is a perspective a lot of organizations and companies take, I think.

Rewarding voices of marginalised people

So whose knowledge, experience counts?

Exactly. while my main question always when I organize something is whose perspective didn't we hear yet? Who should we still invite? Is their perspective important for this meeting? And then we definitely should invite someone and not organize it without them. We saw the same thing, for example, with already a few years ago demonstrations for Palestine. Yeah. And we saw that's well, a lot of Dutch white people wanted to take the stage. And there are actually no Palestinians on the stage. And I'm not saying there should be only Palestinians, because I think you have to work together. And sadly enough, it works that way that white people listen to white people better. So we need each other, I think. But it is still also a very sensitive topic sometimes in activist movements, because people, of course, mean well. And they are there and think, I'm not racist. I'm not racist. And then they skip the most important voices and perspective of the topic that you're demonstrating against.

And how do you get the diversity in the room? So how do you know which perspectives to invite? Talking to a lot of people. Okay. Having a really big network, I think. Because a lot of it works more informal. And if I don't know someone, I know someone who I can ask who knows someone. Who might know someone. Exactly. OK. And that's the way it normally works. And I think it's very informal. And then you can formally invite people after that. I don't think there is a formal network, which I think might be nice to have. And I think it would be good if that would be set up. But for a part, it also changes too quickly because there's always new people coming and going and new expertise or new topics. So I think for a part, it is a very informal system. ***And when it works it's okay?*** Yeah, yeah, and I think well, yeah when it works and it doesn't always work, I think.



Tailoring communication and participation to different cultures

So, what else comes to mind?

Well, there are a lot of when we talk about, for example, because we also talked about cultural, intercultural communication and intercultural behaviour. And I think that's also very important to realize for people, facilitators or organizers that inviting people from different cultures also brings along different rules, behaviour, et cetera. When I talk about cultures, I don't only mean like country cultures, national cultures, but I think everybody has a different culture. I mean, you have a different culture than mine. And I also always tell my students this, like we're in a classroom with 25 different cultures and you have overlap with some people but it's not a thing of only the other people that they have a culture and you don't have a culture of course you also have a culture also about habits and values yes exactly and of course there are cultures or groups let's call it a cultural group that have different ways of doing things then you might do them and it's very good to actually learn about this or at least give people enough room and enough space and maybe also different ways of participating to voice their opinions. And this is not only for example, we had I teach in an international minor and it was just finished and for example, we have had a few international students also. But we also had a Korean and Japanese or two Korean and one Japanese student. And I noticed that my Dutch students found it really difficult to interact with them. And I think also for us teachers, it is sometimes still a challenge because our cultures differ so much. And I think I understand it partly because my parents were Indonesian, which is also a bit more of an indirect communication culture. But I noticed that a lot of students found it really problematic. And I also noticed that a lot of our classes and the way we do things are very cantered around the Western idea of being focal and forcing European all the time. For example, the end assessment was a negotiation in a group. So this means that four students negotiated with four other students and they have like 45 minutes to get to a deal. And for some students, this is really not a good way to get assessed on their negotiation skills. It's a very Western way of getting it said. And maybe that's also what counts in business. I don't know right now, but I don't think for educational purposes, it necessarily was the best way. Well, those people also had to do a resit because of that, because they didn't say anything during the assessment. And at one point, it was so awkward that one of my Dutch students started whispering to one of the other students what she should say. And she wouldn't understand it. So it was a very very awkward situation. And then they did a resit which I said on purpose it has to be individual. And then we actually had a discussion about should we have people from the same kind of culture negotiate against each other or a more western student. And then, well, first we thought, well, maybe we should mix it. And then actually we thought, well, maybe it's actually interesting to see how two people from a more overlapping culture would negotiate together and maybe come up with something completely different. So that's what we ended up with. So also in education, we're always, well, trying to find ways to include everyone. And there's always things you missed. Yeah. Always. I mean, when people tell me, I'm done. I'm finished, I know everything, I get suspicious.



Appreciating silence in a conversation

That's a great example. I think in Asia, maybe more indirect cultures, they negotiate in a different way. Maybe also in business. Very much, I think. Well, and then we should specify, I think, South East and East Asia. Yeah. Because Asia, of course, is very big. And I do know from especially Japanese culture, they have a lot of rituals. Yeah. Around negotiations and doing business also. And also, silence is much more important. And it's okay to be silent for a while. When someone asks you a question, you're going to consider the answer and give a good answer. It's okay if you think about it for a minute. While in the Western culture, when someone shuts up for more than 10 seconds, I think we find it very awkward. It's also something we teach our students for professional conversations. If someone is quiet, you have to be more quiet because then they will start talking. And then of course there is this national culture or business culture. But of course when doing business with Western countries, you also see that a lot of Japanese people adjust. I mean, everyone is adjusting to some kind of common ground. There are lots of examples like this and very interesting. And I also noticed that students find it really interesting to learn about it because even though my classes are very diverse, I would say for a Western country 65 % of my students have a migration background and they get along fine most of the time but they don't know that much about each other's. So they talk about shopping and music and stuff like that, but not about culture. So it's very interesting to talk to them about it and also hear their perspectives, especially while working with young people. I find it very important that they can share their perspectives and learn to think and reason their way to a point as a teacher. So those classes are also built together. And everybody shares something of their own background and of their own behaviour and way of doing. So we learn a lot from each other most of the time.

OK. And I like what you said about learning to appreciate silence. Yeah.

Yeah, I think Dutch people could learn something from that. Yeah, even researchers, when I teach students on action research, they start with a whole list of questions. Often, they don't even listen to the answers. They just fire away the next question. Yeah. What I'm trying to teach is, okay, leave your Questionnaire at home and just talk together and listen. And think together and make a together. And invite the other one to tell the stories regarding the topic you want to work on. Of course, yeah, I agree. That's very difficult. Yes, it is.

The need for courageous leadership in activism and politics

Is there something else you would like to share? Could it also be more in general?

Well, I think also from my work in politics, because we started talking about these grassroots movements. Yeah. And I think normally, like I said, it's not necessarily as successful as the Black Lives Matter movement. And what I have noticed from working in



politics also on this, well, sometimes very controversial topic is that I don't think that just a bottom-up movement is going to work in most cases. And I think as leaders of any organization, whether it be political or educational or whatever, or even business, you need to take the lead. And I think we need activist politicians, we need activist leaders. When I think back to the 1960s and to 1980s, our mayors were still the most activist people. And they were actually fighting for labour rights. And now we have this idea that as a leader, you have to sometimes be kind of centric and neutral. And I think we need leaders with courage that are willing to take difficult decisions and face the consequences and backlash but still do it. I think it's a very Dutch saying that I really like, which in English probably would be without abrasion no shine. Yeah. And I think there's always talk about a lot of polarization. And I think you need a certain degree of polarization on these kind of topics to get move forward.

Can you give some example from your experience that illustrates the leadership you wanted or maybe the lack of leadership?

Yeah, I have a couple of examples, I think. I remember when I joined the board of the political party that I was in for a long time. There were more people in the board, of course, and one of them later became the chair. And we have become good friends because we had become partners in time, but when she started she was not activist at all and later she told me once that she was very grateful that she saw my activism because then she decided you can actually be in politics and be activist and still get a lot of things done. So when she became a chair, she took a lot of difficult decisions and we did it together. of course as a chair, she was the face to the party. So she was willing to take a lot of risk to improve the DEI situation.

Mm hmm. So I thought that was really good. I think we need leadership that sometimes takes these unpopular choices. Yeah, and they are willing to take the risk. When I listen to your stories, I think that's one of the problems that in the Netherlands and maybe in other countries, when you take risk, you're fired or degraded or whatever. Yes, and I think especially as a woman, you get even more backlash also as a politician, by the way, the amount of hate and threats I also got online through those social media that we also love. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement. The same way, of course, that the messages reach you. And I know from a lot of women in politics, it's the same for them.

And how do you deal with it? You grow a thick skin or?

When I sometimes hear myself say, yeah, it's normal. And then I think, because when I hear my students say, for example, I have a lot of students that are ethnically profiled a lot, like two times a week on the pavement of their own street. And I, and they always tell me, yeah, miss, but it's normal. And I always tell them, NO, but it's not normal. It's bad that you have come to see it as normal. So when I say, well, it's normal, I think immediately, no, I shouldn't say that. But sometimes when it's really bad, I file a complaint with the police. At other times, I do make sure that everything is set to private. I block people and stuff like that. I talk to friends about it. But I don't think there's a lot else we can do. So you really have to be, in order to be an activist, to get



things done, like the definition, activist wants to get things done, not only talk about it, no, hands on. Hands on.

But you have to take leadership, risk things. Yeah, unfortunately, that's the case. And I think, you know, here in the Netherlands, most of the time we have it easy, because I was at a green political conference internationally once. And I think during the conference three environmental activists died in their own country. And then I thought, we have it easy here. Because over there in Brazil, in the rainforest, or in, I think one other one was in Nigeria, they are actually taking the real risks. With their lives. Yes, exactly. So yeah, there is also a gradient in it. And none of it is okay, of course.

But what keeps you going? Well, I think for the part it's character because when I come somewhere and I see things go wrong and nobody's fixing it, I think, well, then I will fix it. For part, it's also having a very good network that you can fend to and spar with and fight with and all this stuff. Because when I was in a political party, I at first didn't have this network, and that is it's not doable because you need to be supported also. Sometimes also taking a break is very important to take care of yourself. I just look at the world and I think a lot of stuff needs to get done. It's about purpose. Yeah. And I always want to make everywhere I go a better place. So that is what keeps me going.

Embracing intersectionality for collective action

OK, beautiful. Thank you very much. As a closure, would you like to say something as a check out? Or maybe looking back at our conversation?

Yeah, think one thing to add is that, you know, one of the more mainstream terms right now is also intersectionalism, in which, well, aspects of your life intersect with each other, so create a unique situation for a person. And I think we need a lot more people that are truly thinking intersectionalistic and not just from their own perspective and their own group. So we need to fight together for each other and not just fight within our own box.

OK, thank you. So thank you Fiona for being here. Thank you for inviting me having me.

More info

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