

## Rapid Response Transcript — Gayle Smith

“Rebooting global crisis response”

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**GAYLE SMITH:** Let's be frank. The global response to the pandemic wasn't exactly stellar. Now we're going to have this food security crisis and Ukraine. There is a lot of our system, a lot of our international institutions, that were not built to respond to the kinds of crises we're seeing. Add climate change on top of that.

So the opportunity here is to ask ourselves: is this not the moment to modernize and reboot? Because we're going to see a lot more of these transnational threats, these crises that sweep over the whole world in waves.

Collectively, we're not going to get there if we do a whole lot of really good one offs. My framework is how do we think about scale? Companies that do logistics, if they can collaborate across a sector and provide logistical support, that's a game changer.

Are we going to join forces? Are we going to retool the systems we have? This is not an impossible task. What's at stake for us is making sure that the world makes the right decision.

**BOB SAFIAN:** That's Gayle Smith, CEO of the ONE Campaign, the advocacy group founded by U2 star Bono.

Last year, she was tapped by the U.S. State Department to coordinate America's COVID response and vaccine distribution globally.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of the Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk with Gayle because her experience both inside and outside government gives her a unique perspective on the varied social and economic crises facing our world today.

She's got a distinctive outlook on how businesses can and should help on humanitarian issues, from Ukraine dislocation to climate change.

She also shares lessons about effective advocacy: tactics pioneered and deployed by ONE that can be useful to any organization trying to generate impact.

Bono and ONE's approach, she explains, meshes attention-getting initiatives with sophisticated policy — a double-edged weapon that works at places like the State Department as well as in the marketplace.

By moving with the times, Gayle and ONE are addressing delicate issues with determination and empathy — and challenging all of us to emphasize human values in building the world of tomorrow.

## **[THEME MUSIC]**

**SAFIAN:** I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Gayle Smith, the CEO of ONE Campaign. Gayle is coming to us from her home in Washington DC, as I ask my questions from my home in Brooklyn, New York. Gayle, thank you for joining us.

**SMITH:** It's a pleasure to be with you.

**SAFIAN:** So you have had a dynamic career as a journalist in Africa, working for organizations like the Center for American Progress and the Clinton Global Initiative. You served on the U.S. National Security Council twice, and as administrator of USAID, the U.S. Agency for International Development. You joined ONE Campaign as CEO in 2017, five years ago, but then you stepped away last year for much of the year to coordinate global COVID-19 response for the U.S. State Department. I'd like to start by asking you about your return to ONE Campaign. When you came back late last year, were there things about the organization that had changed, and were there things that you came back with, that you had changed, different goals or new ideas, coming back after having been away?

**SMITH:** I think the organization hadn't changed as much as it had continued to grow. In the previous years, we had done a lot of work to build out what One does in Africa, to update and modernize some of our comms, some of the ways we do activism. And I found all of that was thriving, which was great because it really means the organization is in its groove.

I think the biggest difference though, Bob, was the world was already in quite a state with a global pandemic raging. And by the time I came back, the world had continued to grow more volatile and complex, and the demand for the kind of work that we do had grown.

I've served in government three times now, three administrations. And in between, I've pretty much been an advocate. And going back and forth between those two worlds is always really helpful because you can take an advocate's view in the government, but you come back into advocacy with a deep understanding of what makes governments tick.

**SAFIAN:** ONE was such a breakthrough organization when it launched in 2004, but that's almost 20 years ago. So, how do you think about keeping things fresh nearly 20 years later? Or is that not as important as other priorities?

**SMITH:** The reason I took this job as CEO was that both times I had been in government before, I found ONE to be an extraordinarily effective advocacy organization, because it really knew its stuff on the policy side, but it also did this wild and crazy stuff in terms of communications and creative and so on to get people's attention.

And that core model still works. I think what we've had to learn: how do you refresh and update what your creative looks like? We're in a much more digital world, even more so now with the pandemic. So we had to think through what's the way you get people's attention, and we did.

How do you refine your political game given the changes in politics? We're fortunate that on things like global health, international development generally, there's been a bipartisan consensus for a fair amount of time. We're living in very partisan times right now, so how do you keep nurturing that, so we can keep things moving?

And then finally, we do something every year where, in the United States, activists come from every state in the country, one champion activist, to meet with members of Congress. And it's huge. This year, we did that virtually, and they had over 200 meetings with the House and Senate virtually.

Look, all virtual all the time is exhausting and suboptimal, but some virtual some of the time is probably a good thing that we should think more creatively about as we get out from under this pandemic, from which we are not yet out from under.

**SAFIAN:** The Ukraine war has refocused the efforts of a lot of different organizations, aid organizations. We had Mercy Corps' CEO, Tjada McKenna, on the show a few weeks back talking about their efforts. How do you think about ONE in relation to Ukraine?

**SMITH:** I'm glad you had Mercy Corps on. Tjada is a friend and colleague and really very talented. It's a great organization.

What we're looking at is, in addition to the massive impact on the people of Ukraine, what is the impact of this invasion on the rest of the world? And often, you talk about ripple effects. Ripple isn't the right word here. These are seismic waves of impact rolling over the rest of the world, hitting low and low-middle income countries the hardest. You look at the dramatic increase in the price of wheat, given that Russia and Ukraine together are massive suppliers of key commodities in the world.

The price of fertilizer in some parts of Africa has doubled. So we are seeing the beginnings of a global food security crisis, on top of a pandemic that hasn't ended.

These waves are roiling over the entire world. We've got to open the aperture and be looking at the impacts of this war broadly, because think about this. During the pandemic, we saw the first increase in extreme poverty around the world in 25 years. We're slated to see another bigger increase. And in 2007, 2008, when we saw big spikes in food prices, 100 million people were plunged further into poverty. This makes that one pale by comparison.

**SAFIAN:** It can sometimes be hard to maintain intensity around these long-term issues around hunger and poverty and so forth. And so these disasters, these crises, as terrible as they are, in some ways they're opportunities also, to focus attention when you have it. How do you think about using these crises without exploiting them?

**SMITH:** The crisis of the pandemic, the narrow one-dimensional view was, oh, well these poor countries can't do anything. They don't have vaccines. But there was another story there that, interestingly, probably the most organized continent in the entire world for the pandemic was Africa, where they mobilized their own resources to buy 400 million vaccines. They set up a supply chain. So being able to tell a story that says, yes, many of our partners around the world need our support, but they are not passive partners, just waiting for the world to rescue them. They're people asking us to meet them halfway.

Let's be frank. The global response to the pandemic wasn't exactly stellar, if you consider that in wealthier nations, we're looking at a vaccination rate of 70, 75%. In low income countries, we're looking at below 14%. That's certainly not fair or equitable. It's also, from an epidemiological point of view, it's probably not the best way to go about this.

Now we're going to have this food security crisis and Ukraine. There is a lot of our system, a lot of our international institutions, that we're not built to respond to the kinds of crises we're seeing. Add climate change on top of that.

So the opportunity here is to ask ourselves, is this not the moment to modernize and reboot some of these international institutions that we have? The World Bank, the IMF, multilateral development banks, so that rather than having proven to be pretty effective over the last 75 years, how do we imagine them to be effective for the next 75 years? Because we're going to see a lot more of these transnational threats, these crises that sweep over the whole world in waves.

**SAFIAN:** Yeah. As you go through that list of poverty and pandemic and war and climate change, it's not a smiley situation. And it could be a little, I don't know, could make some people sort of throw up their hands and say, "this is just too much."

**SMITH:** I've always been an optimist. I've always kind of felt that cynicism ... I don't know what you do if you're cynical. You just sort of give up, and I don't really see the point. And at the risk of sounding naive, I do think that this is the moment, I think historically,

when we as human beings around the world are going to define what the next 50 years are going to look like. And a lot of that's going to be determined by how we manage the crises we're looking at right now.

**SAFIAN:** So last year, around this time, you took a hiatus from ONE and you headed over to the State Department to coordinate COVID 19 response. How did that come about?

**SMITH:** I was in the Obama administration, as you said, as the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development. But before that, I was on the NSC staff. I was one of the leads on the response to Ebola. I've done a lot of emergency responses. The secretary of state, Tony Blinken, who I've known for many, many years and worked with, called and said, "Hey, would you come in and do this and help kind of get the international response on the U.S. side stood up?" And I said I would be able to do it, but on a temporary basis, come in, work with the department on how it thinks about what we call global health security over the long term — how do we prepare for the future? The board and staff of ONE were very generous in saying, "Sure, this is important. Go ahead, and take leave, and go do this." The deal was to do it for six months. I did it for eight.

One of the key things we were able to do is get up and running a system to share and provide vaccines to other countries. By now, the number that have been shared with other countries is in excess of 500 million.

I was part of the team that got that started. It's really complicated. It's not like you go to the airport with a box of vaccines and say, deliver this to country X. There's regulatory, health, legal requirements. You've got to move them carefully. But we really built a machine to get that up and running.

The pandemic was politicized from day one. And look, this is a virus. This virus does not care what country you are in, so long as it can just replicate, and replicate, and mutate, it is happy. We humans allowed it to be politicized. I would not describe the global response as symphonic.

**SAFIAN:** A lot of the audience for this show are business leaders. And one of the questions that comes up perennially about these large systemic challenges, whether it's COVID-19 or poverty, global poverty, is sort of, what's the role of government? What's the role of nonprofit agencies? And what's the role of industry and addressing these challenges? Do you have a framework about how you think about what those different roles and responsibilities are?

**SMITH:** I do. There's a lot of talk now about public private partnerships and multi-stakeholder partnerships. And I think what I've learned and my observation over the years is I've seen a lot of really good ones that are one-offs. There's a problem somewhere, you get a solid NGO that may be on the ground, a government that's got some resources, and you do something about it. I think what we haven't yet achieved

and what we should really be looking at is: where and how can we combine those things to get to scale?

In crises like this, climate, conflict in all of its impacts, a food security crisis, a pandemic, collectively, we're not going to get there if we do a whole lot of really good one-offs. They will help some people, don't get me wrong, but they're not going to be game-changers. So to me, my framework is: how do we think about scale?

In a pandemic, companies that do logistics, if they can collaborate across a sector and provide logistical support, that's a game changer, right? Food security, and I know this is a little crazy, but think about it. We've got all this volatility and commodity prices. If some of those companies got together to say, okay, here's what we do at scale. What can we do, even if it's to stabilize some of the supply chains so that we reduce the volatility. Those are the game-changers.

**SAFIAN:** More business leaders today than ever talk about their mission as being broader than just making money. But if I hear you right, to this point, that's been more one-off efforts as opposed to things that are more systematic and integrated.

**SMITH:** I think that's right. And look, some of the one-offs have been terrific. And some of them are: a company may adopt a commitment that they sustain over 10 or 20 years, and maybe they support education, and they end up with thousands and thousands of kids being educated. I would never discount that. But I think to your point, it's systemic and at scale.

**SAFIAN:** I mean, because a lot of business leaders and nonprofit leaders who I talk to, they sort of stress that the dollars they have available pale in comparison to government resources. And that in that way, it's sort of really up to the government to implement this systematic change and impact.

**SMITH:** I mean, respectfully, the government's got a lot of money, and I had a huge budget when I was the administrator of aid. That doesn't necessarily buy the kind of capacity that the private sector has. If industry could do a bit more on coordination by sector, for example, that's a scale the U.S. government can't afford. Bear in mind, our aid budgets for most of the world's donors pale in comparison to our defense budgets. They sound big. But when you look at the number of crises around the world, the number of things that are being done, it's spread pretty thin.

So to me, it's kind of, how do you think about a division of labor? Right? You've got the NGO community. Then you've got governments. Then you've got industry. And philanthropic capital can play in any of those sectors and often be the glue or the filler where there are gaps.

Again, if you want a systemic response to something as big as any of the crises we're seeing, I truly, truly believe that the private sector looking at it systemically and by sector, if sectors were able to say, let's take a step back, and why don't we as the world's logistics companies, why don't we volunteer? We'll do all the logistics for this pandemic. We will cover it for everybody. We'll work with the UN. We'll take on delivery of vaccines on the logistics side. We'll own that piece. That's a game-changer. Now, I realize it's hard. I think at a time when a lot of consumers are looking for industry to have brands that represent values in addition to making profit, I think it's a pretty good look if industry comes together and says, "Collectively, we're going to join forces to take this piece solving a problem." I'm not the CEO of a private sector company, but as a consumer, I think that's a really good brand.

## [AD BREAK]

**SAFIAN:** Before the break, we heard ONE's Gayle Smith talk about why and how she helped the U.S. State Department in organizing a global COVID response, and how the private sector could play an even bigger role in addressing the crises of tomorrow.

Now she talks about her relationship with ONE's co-founder Bono and how ONE has evolved over the years and through the pandemic. She also talks about new advocacy techniques and the importance of pairing creative initiatives with deep homework on core issues.

Plus she shares lessons on embracing basic, fundamental values and on how doing the right thing can become its own reward.

You had a lot of exposure to a lot of different organizations when you were in government before joining ONE.

How did you decide that ONE was the place to go?

**SMITH:** Well, I had known ONE since the very beginning, and I had known Bono for longer than that because I've been in this field for a long time. He and I have similarities in our history. One of them not being that I ever fronted for a rock band, although I was in a really small band in cartoon for some years, a long time ago. But the Ethiopian famine in the '80s was something that I think was an igniter for both of us.

And it came about in two ways. One was in fact a conversation with him. It was sort of a cheeky conversation like, wouldn't this be crazy and wild? And the second was they did a formal search, and the team they had doing the search contacted me and asked if I would be interested. And to me it felt like a fit. The issues ONE works on are the issues I've worked on my whole life. I knew it to be an effective advocate and to have been an effective partner to me a couple of times when I was trying to get big things done. So I figured, "Hey, let's go do this."

**SAFIAN:** My recollection is that ONE had been going through sort of a difficult transition just before you arrived. Right? The previous CEO had had some health issues. Maybe there was some drift in the organization. Was there something there that you had to address when you came in?

**SMITH:** My predecessor, Michael Elliot, a very good guy, but he sadly and tragically died. So, there was interim leadership for a period of time. I think, like a lot of nonprofits, ONE had been around for 10-plus years, and there were some things that needed rebooting, modernizing.

So yeah, I had some challenges when I started. I was aided by a terrific team, and I think a staff and a board who were very open to this kind of theory of a ONE 2.0. That meant looking at: how do we update what we're doing externally? But also, how do we really run a solid, healthy organization internally? That's the kind of investment of time and energy you have to put in if you want to do this work. The external stuff is great and exciting, but you gotta be working on the insides also. So, that took a lot of time.

**SAFIAN:** And for a lot of organizations, COVID sort of became another reboot point. I don't know whether that becomes ONE 3.0.

**SMITH:** I had been to Africa and London. I literally arrived back in DC the night before the lockdown started, and in the first couple weeks of lockdown, we all met virtually. And I said, and others said, "A lot of what we do is in this space, and we've got to just focus on making sure there's a global response to this pandemic." So we made a shift almost entirely into advocacy around the pandemic really, really early. It was kind of a natural shift.

**SAFIAN:** So the first move is, sort of, shift, in other words, adjust your emphasis. But then in the long run, if I'm hearing you right, it's getting back into some of the poverty-focused areas that you were in.

**SMITH:** Like everyone, we are evolving with these multiple crises and this damn virus. One of the things we are focused on now is the replenishment or the recapitalization of the global fund, which is the big multi-level fund that does all this work on AIDS, TB, and malaria. That's something ONE does really, really well. That's a campaign we are running, and we will run hopefully to a successful conclusion. So those are balls we were never going to drop, and won't.

I think on the economic side, while surely it would've been our preference to focus on some of the more proactive things, some of more investments into the future, I think of necessity, we're focused very much on the economic recovery. This pandemic, it's estimated by the opening of 2024, it's costing the world \$14 trillion. If you look at a lot of African countries, I was on a panel with the Finance Minister recently, who talked about watching one of their revenue streams in a matter of weeks go from 12 billion to 8 billion.

So, we've got countries facing a debt crisis. It's not the health impacts of the pandemic. It's the economic impacts of the pandemic they're recovering from, and now they're being hit by this food security crisis.

**SAFIAN:** Bono's celebrity was such a clarion call, a way to sort of pull people into an idea, and an approach, and awareness that really hadn't been activated in that way before. When you think about the future of ONE, how important is Bono, is other celebrities? Is using that technique something that's important, or is that one part of yesterday's technique, and tomorrow's technique is different?

**SMITH:** I think it's evolved, right? We are very fortunate to have Bono as a co-founder and a voice, and he's still active. He was just recently in Washington, on the hill, meeting with the administration. I think he and others sort of set the tone for an advocacy technique that lots of others have done that's proven to be very effective.

Early on in the pandemic, we ran this campaign called PassTheMic, and Bono was involved in it, but it certainly was not only him. And what our theory was, that we knew a lot of artists that wanted to do something. They also felt like this is not necessarily the time we need to get out in front, because our expertise on what you do in a pandemic is pretty low. So what we did is we worked with them, and they handed their social media platforms over to experts, from Tony Fauci to frontline workers.

So that the experts on the pandemic — and this was really early in the pandemic — could use those platforms to tell people what they're doing, explain the virus, give people background. And it was really effective. It did really, really well. We did this animated series recently called “Pandemica, the world where the pandemic never ends.” We had fantastic talent on the artistic side, voiceovers by a lot of famous people whose voices you'd recognize, including the lead singer of U2. But that's a different model than just standing on stage and calling on people to act. I think that through ONE, in his individual capacity, he still does that. But I think the way, in my experience, smart celebrities engage on this set of issues, or other issues, has really evolved in a way that I think is still really effective.

A lot of people have asked me ... You find some people who I think that find celebrities engaging on these issues is fantastic. Then you run into a fair number of people who are pretty cynical about it. And my very strong view is if somebody's got a platform, and they do their homework, then absolutely yes. Use their platform to get more information to more people, so we can do more things. It's smart. Why wouldn't we want to do that? The key thing, and this is something that Bono, quite frankly, is spectacular on this, is doing the homework. He knows these issues. He's not just a mouthpiece.

**SAFIAN:** I mentioned that you were a journalist earlier on in your career.

**SMITH:** Yes.

**SAFIAN:** I actually worked at TIME Magazine with Michael Elliott for a brief time, when he was the international editor. When I was there at TIME, our research folks used to say, "People don't care about foreign news." And we'd struggle to get pages for international stories, certainly covers. Responsiveness to the plight of those more distant was just lower. Has that changed at all? Has the pandemic made us more responsive, less responsive? Or is this just something that's like, "This is just the way it's going to be, and we have to manage?"

**SMITH:** I'm not sure I buy that people aren't interested. I think some of it is, though, how we report. If we're reporting on other parts of the world, we've got to find ways to give people access to those stories. If you don't have the background, and the "why should I care?", and "how does this relate to me?", and "what does this really mean?" stories are going to be either uninteresting or slightly intimidating. So, how we report and tell those stories.

**SAFIAN:** It has been noted that the humanitarian crisis out of Ukraine has riled up and animated people in the West in the way that other humanitarian disasters of comparable scale that have been not-that-long-ago did not spark that same kind of response. I guess I'm wondering whether you feel like, is that a question of timing, or is that like, "Well, it's a European country, and that's why?"

**SMITH:** I think it would be foolish to suggest that the fact that this is a European country isn't one of the factors. There's no question that it is. However, I go back to the famine in Ethiopia in '84, '85, when the response of the world was unbelievable. When it's very dominant on the news and people are hearing stories of real people, they respond. I think one of the differences is the coverage, the constant and steady coverage of Ukraine, from the political to the military, but to the human, is massive.

You go to any news outlet and the front page, or digital front page equivalent, is overwhelmingly Ukraine. That's fine. It's rarely that focused on other crises, and I think that's part of the problem. I think if people were seeing every day what's going on in Myanmar, or in Ethiopia, or in Sudan, or some of these places, I think we would see more of a response.

**SAFIAN:** What do you think people most misunderstand about international aid efforts and the needs they address?

**SMITH:** When we think about foreign aid, and having been an advocate, and having served in government, there are usually three reasons that are talked about as the rationale. One is a national security interest. It's important to invest in stability, and so on and so forth. The other is enlightened self-interest, particularly on the economic side. There's a need for, understandably, new markets, new partners.

But the third is basic and fundamental values. That it's the right thing to do. I cannot tell you how many times I was traveling, and somebody would come up to me who was running an NGO that was responding to a crisis and saying, "I'm only here today because my country blew up 30 years ago, and the USA made sure that I was fed." That makes a difference. That tells people who we are. That last in people's memories, and we should be proud of it because it is the right thing to do.

**SAFIAN:** My colleague on this show, Reid Hoffman, always says, "First, be human." Right?

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**SAFIAN:** First, be human.

**SMITH:** Totally.

**SAFIAN:** In this moment, when you look at ONE Campaign and what you're trying to do, what's at stake for ONE right now?

**SMITH:** There's a line we use often that: where you're born shouldn't determine whether you live. That's what's at stake. I kind of feel like we're living through an unofficial global referendum.

This is the moment where we're going to determine how we, as an international community, tackle crises that are upending the lives of literally billions of people. And are we going to join forces? Are we going to retool the systems we have? This is not an impossible task. What's at stake for us is making sure that the world makes the right decision.

**SAFIAN:** Well Gayle, thank you so much for doing this. I really appreciate it.

**SMITH:** My pleasure. I really enjoyed it. It's been great.