



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 12: RITA SAMPSON – THE DAY-TO-DAY WORK OF DIEO

Phil Wagner

Hi friends. There are a few moments in life where the right paths just cross, and everything makes sense. Today's conversation happened because of one of those moments in my life. In Fall 2020, I had the opportunity to meet Rita Sampson, today's guest, in a talk about setting diversity and inclusion KPIs. At that time, Rita was working in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, serving as the U.S. Intelligence Community's Chief Diversity Officer and Director of Equal Employment Opportunity. It's a position she held for over a decade. She brings so much legal and leadership experience to conversations on DE&I, having held numerous attorney leadership roles as well within the Department of Justice, the FBI, and beyond. But full disclosure, we recorded this episode some time ago in early 2021. We had been saving it because we wanted to release it for Women's History Month because Rita is both a powerful female leader and someone whose leadership has made an impact on our nation's future and, thus, its history. Yet, true to Rita being Rita, her gift has made room for her. So while you'll be hearing a conversation recorded while Rita was still at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, she has since moved into a new role, and we couldn't be more excited for her. As of February 2022, Rita now serves as the Director of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission's Office of Equal Employment Opportunity. That office is a neutral and independent office within the SEC that creates and applies best practices to achieve equality in the workplace and compliance with anti-discrimination laws. That office also gives us a lot of expertise in legal and social science analysis, proactive prevention of workplace discrimination and harassment, conflict management investigation techniques, federal sector equal employment opportunity roles and processes, so much. And as you'll hear today in our episode, they could not have possibly picked a more qualified leader to help helm those efforts. So without further ado, let's step back in time just a little bit to spring 2021 and kick off a conversation with our guest. A beloved, appreciated impactful leader of DEI, someone who has made a monumental impact in my own DEI leadership journey. Rita Sampson. Hello from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun.

Phil Wagner

Rita, welcome to our podcast. You have had such an impressive career. As we just heard. But tell us in everyday terms, what do you do every day in your D&I role?

Rita Sampson

Awesome. Thank you, Phil. Thank you for inviting me because this is something that's very near and dear to me. And I don't know this whole impressive career thing, but it certainly is what I've done over the course of many years. And diversity and inclusion is sort of, for me, the culmination of that career. And what do I do on a daily basis in leading diversity and inclusion and leading equal employment opportunity? I kind of break it down into three C's, and let's see if we can get these three C's going. The first one, of course, is conversation. So being a diversity and inclusion officer means that you are the one that is driving internal conversations around diversity and inclusion. You're creating a space where people in the workforce can come and should come to feel connected. So we don't just hire people and leave them at their desk doing nothing. You want those people to be at their very best, feeling fully sparked, safe, secure. We talk about psychological safety, but this doesn't just happen naturally. You have to help create the conditions for that. And so, sparking these conversations is one thing that happens in the diversity and inclusion space. I think the other part is understanding connecting to the mission. And so diversity and inclusion in the air is all well and good, but what we're doing is tying it to our actual business outcomes by being a more diverse and inclusive organization. You're a more high-performing organization. Not because that just sounds good, but it's empirically proven. You have to be able to understand, first of all, what happens over here when we're talking about analysts, what happens in the space when we're talking about rocket scientists. What do we know about covert operations? The diversity and inclusion officer has to know a little bit about every part of the mission and then be able to explain how getting the diversity and inclusion right advances that mission. And then I guess the final C that I'll talk about is continual learning. If you want to stay static, then this is not the area for you.

Phil Wagner

Right.

Rita Sampson

This is a space that is always evolving, always growing. You want to make sure that you are growing as a person in terms of your competencies, that you're able to be a communicator, that you understand and have peeled back the onion off of just superficial, nice to be diversity, but to really understand every aspect of how humans operate in an organization, how they operate in relation to one another, and that takes continual learning. What I do on a daily basis is try to make those conditions all happen because it is not just the right thing to do, but it makes us a safer nation when we do that.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. I love so much about those three C's. Number one, I'm a communications professor, and there's sort of a communication underpinning to all of those in that we think of diversity and inclusion as big, bold initiatives, and indeed they are. But really, that work happens in those small interpersonal encounters most often. That's where people feel included, and they feel safe, and they feel valued. So I think that tells us a little bit about strategy and then the

final note you made on continual learning. I think that's so important because what that also requires is a lack of ego in your D&I work because you're always learning somewhere along the way you're going to be wrong. And you have to check that ego and recognize it's for the greater good, not just morally speaking, but in terms of the business outcomes as well. It's a great foundation.

Rita Sampson

Right. We don't go in saying, I know all the answers. That's definitely not the way to go because you don't know all the answers, and you are learning. So you should have that creative space.

Phil Wagner

And sometimes, there are no answers. Right. You just rest in the discomfort and say, well, what do we do with what we have to get to some semblance of a solution that may never work in its totality? There's such good advice. So tell me, Rita, did you always plan to do diversity and inclusion work? Did you find yourself here on purpose? How did you find yourself where you are doing this work day-to-day?

Rita Sampson

Well, if you went back in time to where I won't tell you what year I graduated from this place. But no, that wasn't a part of the game plan. I knew I wanted to go to law school. I wanted to practice. I ended up practicing in the area of employment law employment litigation, which meant I saw a lot of things happen inside of organizations where conflicts are completely broken down. And it was around that time where I started asking the question, how can we avoid some of these types of encounters within the workplace? How can we get upstream and make sure that our actual culture is healthy, that our leaders and our managers know how to engage with people, and that some of these conflicts that we see could be avoided? And that's when I started understanding that there's a whole new space called diversity and inclusion. And that's when I said, okay, this sounds like it is, right for me. It has some of the aspects of law because there are familiarity with civil rights, but it's more than compliance. It's more than just getting people in a room and talking about issues. It really is being very deliberate and strategic in how you position your organization to succeed. So that to me was very attractive. And then this opportunity came up, and voila, here I am.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, voila, here you are. In that answer, there's this sort of embedded notion that a lot of D&I work is either proactive or reactive. Right. Like, you either react to a crisis, a situation, a discrimination suit, something happens, and then you react, or you're proactive you get upstream, as you know, and that sort of relates to the next question, which is like, which part of D&I enterprise is the easiest to do? I would imagine it's probably easier to be a little bit more proactive. But in your day-to-day position, I know that your goals are to help the intelligence community attract, hire, promote, retain a highly skilled and, diverse and inclusive workforce. That's a goal that I think many organizations have in their D&I work. And this is

probably a tough question, but which one of those is easiest or most difficult? Attracting, hiring, promoting, retaining diverse talent where are the easy wins in D&I work, and which ones are a little bit tougher?

Rita Sampson

Wow. So I was asked a very similar question at a congressional testimony, like, what is the most important thing to focus on in order to be successful? And I couldn't answer the one thing because it's all-important. It's creating the conditions for success. From my own personal perspective, when you're talking about attracting the new workforce, that to me just resonates because I love to help people understand what we do in the intelligence community. I came at it just mid-career, had no idea all that happened behind that secret closed door. And therefore, I know that there are really super bright people out there who also is given the opportunity to understand what we do. Would jump right on that, and those are the people that we need, the talent, because of course we're competing with the private sector, we're competing with other government agencies. We're just out here in this competition for talent. And I think that if there's anything that really gets me excited is when I have the opportunity to speak to colleges and to professional organizations and share with them what happens and why the intelligence community is so important. It's because we're looking for people to bring their diverse perspectives to solve hard problems. And when you start shaping it like that, we don't actually want you to think like the person who sits in the cubicle next to you. We need you to think differently. We want you to think differently. And then I start talking about, hey, did you know if you come into the intelligence community, you could go to some of our internal universities and have a master's degree and learn a foreign language and just travel the world? And so it is in that energy space where I start talking about attracting the workforce of the future that I get really super psyched about. I think on the flip side. The hard part is when we have people when we bring people on board, how do we promote, retain, and advance them? Over the course of years, we've shown that we don't do half bad we're making great progress in hiring. But when it comes to our senior leaders, we're not as diverse as we should be. So those are the challenges that keep me awake at night. How do we make sure that we're positioning people to advance in their chosen careers and that they have the support and the mentoring that they need to see themselves, first of all, as future leaders of the organization and that they get the experiences along the way to do just that. And that's where our strategic partners come in. Diversity and inclusion officers is not a one-man show. Right. It is not an individual sport. We'd like to say it's a team sport. You must get in it to win it and being able to attract more people to understand what we're doing and to help one another succeed. That's what gives me a lot of energy, but at the same time, never-ending continual work.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. That energy space is something I want to speak to as well. I totally agree. Effective D&I work is certainly teamwork, but even on the team, the quarterback might need a little bit of extra rest in prep for the big game. Right. Because it's a little bit of a situation where all eyes are on them. So doing this work as somebody who maybe holds the title or is designated as a D&I officer, that, of course, takes a lot of energy, and it has to come along with some high

points and low points because that's your professional career. Right. So can you share with us maybe some of the D&I high points you've had along your journey, and then maybe from a more vulnerable space, the tougher moments to move through, the ones that required resilience and perseverance? You've been at this work for quite some time through multiple social iterations in the D&I conversation. So we'd love to hear the high points and the low points if you're willing to share.

Rita Sampson

Okay. Can I start low first?

Phil Wagner

Start low.

Rita Sampson

Low has got to be known as 2020, right?

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Rita Sampson

There's all things in at that moment. I think many of the years of the work that we have done in this space came to a testing in 2020 because we sat in the midst, and we're still in a global pandemic. We saw extreme disparities in health outcomes for underrepresented groups, minorities, persons who are poverty. We saw with our own eyes the disparity. We also, in that same year, saw what we call a reckoning and social justice issues, and we had to not be able to segregate those social justice issues from the workplace because each of us was impacted by that. And there was a real call for the diversity officers to lead the response on these issues. But at the same time, the diversity officers were also exhausted.

Phil Wagner

Right.

Rita Sampson

And the emails, the phone calls, what should we do? How do we lead our people from this? What do we do first? Do we listen? Do we come up with a plan? So that was a very difficult space to be in as an executive. But I think on the same or the flip side of that same coin, we saw people making bold moves and making declarations that we are ready for a fundamental change and that we must embrace the imperative around diversity, around equity, to ensure that we're actually getting measurable outcomes. And we're holding ourselves accountable for the changes that we know we need to have. And just seeing the number of allies that stepped up into this space and kind of held our arms up and held us up while we were pushing along, that to me gave a lot of optimism and help to refuel, totally help refuel us. But this is not easy work. It is very rewarding, but it is not easy work. And sometimes, when you think about, oh, I

have a passion for diversity and inclusion, just keep in mind that a passion is not going to do it. At the end of the day, you have to have that passion. But at the same time, it's passion plus more.

Phil Wagner

There is so much more. It's a textured journey. Right. For every up, there is often a down. Victories often come from challenges, but those are challenging to work through, particularly when people I think are looking to you to maybe set the stage or set the agenda in that moment of social shifting. Where do we go? That's a precarious place to stand, I think, as a leader, to direct the story, direct the narrative where it's going next. So, yeah, I appreciate you sharing a little bit more about those challenges and moments of, I think, victory as well. To that point, about energy and energy spaces. What energizes you to do this work? Obviously, we get that energy when things go well, and we've led some great initiatives. But what gets you out of bed every day to do this work? Where do you draw that energy source from?

Rita Sampson

Well, I certainly am a person of faith, so that always is a source of my energy. But I think fundamentally understanding that everybody has a gift. And when you recognize you have that gift, it's your responsibility to use it. And I think I know that I must use the gift that I've been given. My father would say, I'm the youngest of five kids. It's the power of influence that she has. She can make people do things that they didn't think that they were going to do, and just persuading and building coalitions is something that I really enjoy. You wouldn't know, but I am totally an introvert, but I love people. And just being able to connect people one with another, some of that is, hey, listen, I'm going to connect you, and then I'm going to take my introverted self over here and let you all do your magic. Right. But that's one thing that connects me is knowing that I have a gift, and I enjoy being able to pay that gift forward and to create conditions where other people are able to use their gifts as well. And the diversity and inclusion work can be a little exhausting. So we have to refuel at times.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I want to talk about that at the end. The necessity of self-care is really part of the job description and duties to tend to ourself. But you talk about your gift, and I fully believe that your gift will make room for you. And you've found a place of, I think, significant influence, obviously, with what you do in the office of the Director of National Intelligence. Many matters in that office, I'm sure, are not something that we can discuss on a public podcast. But to the extent that you can, we've talked to a lot of D&I officers on this podcast thus far, and you're situated in a very different space. Can you speak to the role of some of the diversity and inclusion issues that you see as they relate to national intelligence?

Rita Sampson

You're absolutely right. There's a lot of things that cannot be shared with the public, and that does make it difficult when we're in this diversity and inclusion space. But for the last five years or so, I've made sure that we publish our diversity numbers so that the public will know

where we stand and how we're progressing in that space. The balance comes. We won't actually tell you the number of employees we have, but we are giving you an optic of the percentages and how those percentages have changed over time. And we're looking specifically at minorities, women, and persons with disabilities. We're looking at the core mission roles that form the intelligence community. So analyst positions and science, technology, engineering, and math positions. And seeing are we having a more diverse impact of our underrepresented groups in that space. And so that's part of the transparency story. Another part is that we've recently undergone this journey where we're being a lot more intentional about sharing. And that's a cultural shift in the intelligence community because there are certain things that are not classified, and we should and can. It's our responsibility to put that out to the public because we serve the public. We have intel.gov. It's a really great source for understanding our people and getting a sense of what kind of people work in the intel community. So that website has barrier breakers. So you get a sense of wow, they're actually normal people cool people that work here in the IC.

Phil Wagner

Okay. So to that point about transparency, I mean, that's especially difficult given where you are positioned. And you've noted in a past session that I was able to attend that you can't always be fully transparent like you give the percentages. And I think that's a great buy-in. I would imagine there are other people who don't work in the intelligence community who at times find it tough to balance that need for transparency with doing their due diligence. So do you have any advice on steps forward when you can't just put out the company laundry, for instance? How do you work to make the public and your employees and everybody in that relationship aware while also recognizing, again, you can't just let it all out there?

Rita Sampson

Wow. So one of the things that we followed industry practices. So not just staying within the intelligence community for our discussions, because if we're just one big Echo Chamber and we're just talking to ourselves, then we don't get better. And that's part of the whole business case around diversity and inclusion in the national security arena is that we have to have diverse voices around the table and include different viewpoints. Otherwise, we have things like groupthink. Groupthink is bad when you are trying to make a decision for the President, for Congress, or for the military. That's not going to work well. If you haven't looked at the vulnerabilities or the blind spots. We intentionally create relationships with the private sector and with University partners and bring them in and Red Cell and Red Team so that we know that we've gotten all of those viewpoints together. I think another part of that is understanding that if we provide more information to the public, then the public will come in and give us suggestions for how we can do better. Part of that is the strategy framework that we just adopted this past year, and it's build intentional partnerships. That's one of our four pillars of that strategy is we're building intentional partnerships to increase access to diverse talent. And the whole notion of intentionality and transparency are part and parcel to that.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I think that's so key, too, is listening to not only the suggestions but sometimes the critiques of the public. Right. When you find yourself doing D&I work, you're often subject to a lot of criticism or skepticism from a variety of different angles, too. So I think there's a fine balance there to figuring out how do we respond in a meaningful way and not just sort of all over the place. Let me be willy nilly with the wind because the winds of this conversation, I think, develop over time. So do you have any thoughts on how to best tune your energy on the path forward when you have maybe competing demands from different constituents or different segments of the public?

Rita Sampson

Oh, absolutely. Different segments of the public, different segments of the workforce. Sometimes you can get caught into a reactive mode. And I think what that tells us is that we always have to have a strategy. We always have to have very clearly stated goals and then hold ourselves accountable. Periodically we check in to see how are we doing on that? What additional resources do we need to actually accomplish the things we say that we're going to do, and then being patient and understanding that it does take time to lead organizational change. Now, we shouldn't be looking at decades from now, but sometimes it won't be the overnight change. And sometimes there are some bold overnight moves that we can make, but just always being very deliberate and moving forward. And I always like to say we are going to disrupt the status quo. As long as you're disrupting the status quo, then you're making progress. One other thing, because with you being an expert in communications. You know, also that how you communicate what you're doing is very important. And in the diversity and inclusion space, it is very important to communicate that this is not a zero-sum game. That this is an effort that will lift all boats, that what we are doing is focused on merit, and it is focused on what is best for the organization. And sometimes, that is a discussion that has to happen. It has to be led by the diversity officer because not everybody understands what we are doing in the diversity and inclusion space.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, that's so good. One of the things I love about you, Rita is that I think in the realm of D&I work, it's easy for some people to become disenfranchised and say, that's a little too touchy-feely for me, a little too like human. Right. I'm a data analyst, and you always come back to one thing, which is key performance indicators. And I've heard you speak on this at sort of a corporate level, but I hear that embedded in your answers here, too, that you've set those KPIs for yourself. Right. So that when the work does get tiring or when you're dealing with competing demands, you come back to that central why that central focus. Those results that you as a professional with a line item to do D&I work have set or established for yourself to do. And I love that because I think it gives a buy-in framework for even those who are technically minded data-minded, that this is still a results-driven effort. And so it's not just that interpersonal stuff, and that's certainly a part of it. But there are real anchor points to strategy, to data, to logic that I think we can come back to. So those KPIs are fantastic. I want to go back a little bit to where we started here, which is the starting point of your career and how it's

iterated over time. I get to work with a lot of very bright, very talented, engaged students here at William & Mary in the Mason School of Business. And I'm really heartened because I see a hunger and a thirst for diversity and inclusion leadership among some of our students. As someone who's been engaged in this work for a lengthy career, what advice do you have for those students who are hoping to sort of break entry into the D&I sphere as a full-time employment opportunity, as a professional area of focus? Any advice for them?

Rita Sampson

Yeah. So I think that in any career field that you endeavor, you need to have good mentors. So you need to identify some people who are doing this work and have some conversations with them because you really want to go in eyes wide open to the greatest extent that you can and understand that you're really now a corporate C suite executive. So you have to understand the mission of whatever organization that you're in. You have to understand the business drivers what is important to the organization because then you can shape your strategy to have a resonance with that. Yes, there is a social aspect to it, and there is a business aspect to it. So you have to be able to do that. I think you absolutely and William & Mary students are great at this, but you have to be a great writer.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Rita Sampson

You have to be able to communicate both in writing and orally. You have to be persuasive and, most of all, resilient. And I think definitely if I got nothing else from my years at William & Mary, it was a great sense of resilience. I got it together by the senior year.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. It's a community right of passage. That great resilience is necessary. I think that's really good. I love the idea of mentorship, and I think that that's so important. You need social support, no matter your professional endeavors. But I think in this space specifically, it can be lonely at times as you disrupt the status quo. That can be an uncomfortable place to be. So my final question for you, Rita, really centers on that as well as you disrupt the status quo. As you get into the business of doing the work of D&I, I think we often focus on action, action, action. And indeed, some of D&I work is never done right. It's ever ongoing as the conversation shifts. And I know that that requires some self-care as a necessary part of the D&I professional sphere. So tell me, over your career, what have you learned about self-care, and how do you practice it?

Rita Sampson

Probably one of the more important parts as people begin their careers. When you're young, you can just keep driving and driving, and eventually, you realize, I'm driving on empty.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Rita Sampson

And so you can't allow yourself to ever get into that space. And so always embedding health and wellness, whether it's physical wellness rather or mental wellness as well. It's very important to always have a check-in. Am I eating right? Am I getting enough rest? Am I surrounding myself with people who are positive and therefore bring me positive energy because you need that? And on those times when my tank is completely empty, am I investing in getting the help that I need? Am I having these conversations, and I'm a big proponent of employee assistance programs. Call them up and tell them what you're going through because it's going to make you a more effective person for the long term. You're not in it for a series of quick wins. You're really trying to play the long game and to do that. You have to be at your best at all times.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. And that long game is going to necessarily come with challenges along the way. That's how you grow. That's how you learn. And I think some of the most helpful paths forward often come in those moments where things aren't working out. We learn, and we strategize and repurpose, so self-care super important.

Rita Sampson

I will admit that 2020 I ate a lot of brownies.

Phil Wagner

You and me both.

Rita Sampson

But to regroup, being graceful to yourself, and being able to put yourself back on track when you do go off track. Those are critical for long-term success.

Phil Wagner

Viewing yourself in that same compassionate light that you sort of preached as the gospel message of D&I. Right? That central message of inclusion, I think, needs to be directed at ourselves sometimes too.

Rita Sampson

That's right. So I've got a new treadmill, and I'm walking, and I limit my brownie intake as much as possible.

Phil Wagner

All right. I'm still working on that last piece. Rita, it is such a pleasure always to speak with you. You have been so impactful to my own D&I leadership, and I so appreciate that you are willing to come on and share with our listeners. Thank you so much.

Rita Sampson

Thank you. Thank you for having me. I can't wait for us to get together again.

Phil Wagner

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