



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 32: SARAH CORDIVANO – IMPOSSIBLE WORK: WHY DEI PROGRAMS FAIL

Sarah Cordivano

That is power. Having control over how money is spent is where power lies. And I think, for me, that's one of the motivators because we can do a lot of grassroots, individual-level work. But if we're not actually changing how money is spent, then there's a limit to what we can do, right?

Phil Wagner

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. Welcome, listeners, to yet another episode of Diversity Goes to Work, the podcast where we center real human lived experiences that shape and define our DEI leadership. I'm joined today by Sarah Cordivano, who works as the head of D&I Strategy and Governance at Zalando. She brings along expertise in data analytics to help implement impactful data-driven DEI work. She's also a professional speaker and a writer, and particularly happy to announce her recently published book, *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion How to Succeed at an Impossible Job*, which is definitely going to be the feel and the flavor of today's conversation, something we've talked about a lot already on many of our episodes. Sarah is from Philly. She's currently living in Berlin. She's got a great story and some great insights for us today. Sarah, welcome to our podcast. It is an honor to have you here. Thanks for joining us.

Sarah Cordivano

Thanks, Phil. I'm so glad to be here.

Phil Wagner

So let's just kick things off and start with maybe a little bit of your story. Can you tell our listeners how you found your way into DEI work and then to Berlin?

Sarah Cordivano

Sure. So I have a pretty nonlinear career path, so I actually originally studied geography and urban studies, and my first career was in tech and data and mapping spatial data. So I was working with geographic data and maps, and that actually gave me a very interesting taste on

how access to resources and opportunities are not equally distributed around the world. And my first taste of what equity is. And eventually, years later in my career, I decided to move to Berlin to just try something new. And that gave me the opportunity to get involved with employee resource groups at the company where I worked. And eventually, that transitioned into working in DEI full-time. And that's a very short story of a much longer a longer story. But I will mention one thing, which is the data side, which has been a huge asset to me as I've developed my career and figured out how to do successful DEI work.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, that's fantastic. Do you think it's the data that opened up the door? Do you think it's passions and, sort of like, proficiency in this language that opened up the door? Was it a coupling? I mean, that's a really nice pathway, and I see how that makes sense, but it's something I think you probably had to push on a few doors to make that happen, right?

Sarah Cordivano

Yeah, I think it was a combination of the community work, so getting involved with ERGs and getting really interested in how community work together can change businesses and then also having a strong core of data analytics skills and project management helped me be really effective in the work that I was doing.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, that's so good. So let's talk about the book. I'm really, really excited about this book, particularly just because of the title, because we know that this is important work to do. But we've talked about it time and time again on the show. This is difficult work to do. I mean, even if you have maybe the identity push to do this work, this is something that impacts your community. You have the passion to do this work because you see social injustice all around you. It really doesn't matter your access point. At some time or another, you're going to get frustrated. You're probably going to get burned out. There's good data to support this. So you own that. Your book is called how to Succeed at an Impossible Job. So what do you even mean? Like, from your context, from your lens, what do you mean by DEI being an impossible job?

Sarah Cordivano

Yeah, so thanks for asking me that because I know that the title is a bit provoking, but I wanted it to be that way. And what I mean is, it's not. I don't mean that it's impossible to do really fantastic impactful DEI work. Actually, quite the opposite. I mean that it's often impossible to achieve all the things that we want in our DEI work. And why is that? The expectations we have for the role typically don't always live up to the reality of what we can actually accomplish, especially considering what resources and commitment we have available from the organization we work in. And oftentimes, when organizations hire their first DEI role, they have all these expectations about what that role is going to do, but they haven't given them any resources, any budget. They haven't positioned that role within the organization to actually have influence, and all of that and the expectations we have on ourselves, the

expectations other people have for us, really makes it impossible to fulfill all those expectations. But what I try to do in the book is talk about if we really understand the situation that we're in, understand the limitations, understand what levers we can pull, then we can actually reset those expectations and actually do really fantastic work.

Phil Wagner

What I love when you open up the first chapter and you talk about this being an impossible position, one of the things you mentioned that I think we don't talk about enough is the emotional labor too. That's part of what makes this impossible, you argue, is that all of those the misalignment of expectation that adds up over time to create this sort of emotional burden. And I think that emotional labor disproportionately impacts often folks of color, women, LGBTQ folks, and other historically underrepresented or minoritized communities. And I think that's a really important conversation to have because it riffs on themes you set later in the book on mental health and wellness too.

Sarah Cordivano

Yeah, absolutely. I think you summed it up quite well. So I don't know if I have anything to add to it. But I think, in general, a lot of people get into this job, and they have this utopian vision of what it will be like. And they feel like they'll finally be able to do that grassroots work that they want to, that they are driven to do. But in reality, it's often much more boring than that. It's change management, influence, communication. We feel like sometimes that we're shortchanging our communities, and that can be a really difficult realization to have.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, that's so good. Making those, I don't know if they're concessions. Right? But I think that also presents just really interesting issues for DEI practitioners to grapple with. Do I have to concede some of, maybe, my social justice-anchored desired outcomes to achieve real change in my organization? And that can lead to some really tough, I think, self-dialogue. Let's move on beyond that because we're going to come back to some of those themes towards the end of today. I want to talk you talk quite significantly about why DEI programs and DEI work fails oftentimes in organizations. Can we own some of those failures here today? Maybe put out on the table some of the things that we should be watching out for in our own organizations to make sure our DEI work doesn't fail.

Sarah Cordivano

Absolutely. And let me speak on behalf of my own experience of working in DEI in Europe, which is, you know, different from the States and other areas.

Phil Wagner

Quite different.

Sarah Cordivano

Yeah. So in the past two years, you know, we've seen a lot of companies hire their first DEI role. And I think that there's probably a lot of internal debate and discussion and pain that went into that ultimate decision to hire that first role. And I think companies often see hiring the DEI role as the solution, as the fix to the problem that they had. And I'm oversimplifying, but I'm also speaking from experience of speaking to organizations, and in reality, we know that it's not actually the solution. It's the very, very early start of a much longer solution that requires a lot of commitment. So with that is sort of the backdrop, let's talk about why DEI work fails. I think one of the biggest things I'd mention is the lack of executive-level buy-in and endorsement. So you've got a DEI role, maybe you've got a whole team, but they're buried somewhere in human resources. They are reporting to someone who doesn't really have familiarity with DEI. There's five levels of hierarchy between that team and the executive-level leadership. And when those teams are siloed within HR, it's really easy for everyone around them to perceive this as, oh, that's just the HR topic, just like a different HR topic, just like talent acquisition, it just belongs in HR. And it's really difficult for this to be perceived as a strategic business topic. So I think that can be one of the biggest ways to fail because everyone around you does not perceive this as a critical business topic. And then, when your organization is making business decisions, they don't bring DEI into it. And there's so many cautionary tales around situations where the DEI team is doing really fantastic work, but business decisions or some other external force undermines that work.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, absolutely.

Sarah Cordivano

And then I'll keep it short because there's so many ways to fail, and I'll encourage you to check out the book to find out more reasons. But another thing I'll mention is working without a strategic focus. So we know that there's so many DEI topics to focus on. And as a DEI professional, you get requests and urgent emails all the time. And if you don't have that strategy, that's always your North Star. It's really difficult to stay focused because you constantly are reacting, and it can be really difficult to actually achieve anything because you're not actually putting all your energy into one direction. And then lastly, I'll mention, and I bring up, the data theme, as you mentioned in the beginning, but when we're not using data to understand the baseline where we're starting from as an organization, we don't know where we're going. And we need that data to understand whether the initiatives that we're doing, we're investing our time and energy in, are actually having the impact that we want. And this is huge. I mean, I think so many DEI strategies are based on assumptions or anecdotes or low-hanging fruit, let's say. And I think it's really important to actually figure out whether the work that we're doing is having an impact. I mean, this is what we're trying to achieve, right? And at the same time, when you are able to say whether your work is having an impact, you're able to recognize progress, and that keeps you motivated. So those two things sort of fit into each other.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, they do. In your work, you talk about also stepping back to assess. Do I even have the power to drive change in this area? And I think that that's a really important thing to step back and ask too. That has to do with those organizational hierarchical structures. But I also think that it also lends itself well to a self-analysis of how do people see me as a DEI leader, a practitioner within the organizations. You have this really brief paragraph, but I love it because you could probably write a whole work on misconceptions that people have of DEI officers or DEI teams, right? That they're going to come in and be the language police, or they're a grievance conduit, or they're trying to gather all of the anecdotes, as you say, and be a personal champion. But those misconceptions can often get in the way of the very impactful work that you're speaking to here.

Sarah Cordivano

I completely agree. I would say that's very true. And I think one of the most powerful things someone in a DEI role can do is be an influence to decision-makers. That can be awkward because sometimes those people are several levels above you. But at the same time, we can't change an organization from the grassroots level only. We really need that influence from the top down. And yeah, that's what it takes.

Phil Wagner

So from the top down comes a lot, comes support. And one of the primary mechanisms of support I think you need in DEI but don't often see, I would argue, is budget, budgetary authority, the ability to spend dollars because this work is not free work. It costs money to do this work well. Right. So I'm wondering, can you speak to some of the budgetary issues? I think this is, again, a theme that we have ripped on a few times in many of our episodes, that there's these lofty expectations, those utopian goals, as you talked about earlier, but then they're like, top-down leadership might be all right, go get it done, good luck. And there's no budgetary commitment. So I'm wondering if you can speak to budget here.

Sarah Cordivano

Yeah, for sure. It's really interesting because I get this question a lot. How much should our DEI budget be? Like, how much should our organization spend? And I actually challenge this question a lot because I say in many ways budget is the cheapest thing, the most inexpensive thing you will put behind your DEI work. There's a lot more expensive costs that are hidden in a successful DEI strategy.

Phil Wagner

Like what?

Sarah Cordivano

Great question. So I think that the number one, most important one is executive sponsorship. And let me tell you why this has a cost. So the time of an executive is finite, right? They are very high paid individuals with huge demands on their time. So if they're spending time

championing your DEI work, they're not doing something else. And if they're spending time educating themselves and being available at short notice on DEI topics, then that takes their focus from something else. But at the same time, that is a very necessary thing that we need, and it does have an actual cost. On the other hand, or in addition, I would say ranking DEI as a strategic priority also has a cost because it means we're deprioritizing something else. And that could be if we have a big expansion for a company in the next year, it could mean, okay, we're going to delay that by six months because we want to make sure we're doing it in the right way. It could mean we're going to invest in a bigger team because we want to make sure that the strategic decision that we make also has DEI considered in it. And then lastly, it's all the costs of actually implementing the work. So that means the willingness to change processes. So people often have this misconception that a DEI team, it's self-contained, it does the work, it sets the initiatives, it implements them, and that's it. But there are so many processes that are impacted by DEI work. And if you want to really transform an organization, you also need to change those processes. And that could be everything from talent acquisition, promotions, compensation, and benefits. So you need the organization to be willing to actually go in and change those processes. And that's expensive. That's very expensive. It can mean that you need people embedded within those teams that are doing DEI support. And I've seen DEI teams with only three, four, five people that are really effective. And the reason that they're effective is because they have people across the organization embedded within those teams that spend their time doing DEI work within their area. And that, I think, might be the most critical thing you need and also very expensive thing you need for success.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, it's so impactful. And I don't want to have you sort of repeat your book to us. This is a good call for our listeners to go buy the book, and we'll give you a link to do that, certainly in the show notes as well. But there's so much in there. I mean, you even give advice in one of your chapters on how to frame conversations with senior executives around ROI and how D&I factors in. I love one of the tips you give, which is just think about what the Glassdoor reviews say, like, what do you want them to say about our organization? And I think the public can often get in front of well-intended organizational deliverables. And so I think that's a great question to ask. And again, Sarah, you give good budget. You give real numbers in your book too. Like, here's what data says are best practices in certain levels of companies and corporations and organizations. Here's how that budget might be distributed. So if you're out there struggling for some budgetary insight, definitely grab a copy of Sarah's book because it is very helpful in starting the conversation. But let's go beyond budget, and let's go back to this being an impossible job. You've highlighted today so many areas of complexity, from budget, from buy-in, from misperceptions. There's a lot. So amidst this sea of impossibility, knowing that DEI work often fails and it costs a lot, and that cost is not just money, why the heck do it? I mean, can you offer us a perspective on what imperatives we call upon to keep us centered in this work? Because it's difficult work. So what's the why here? What do you always go back to keep you on track?

Sarah Cordivano

Well, first to talk about the perspective of the companies of an organization. Why would they do this work? Because often I get that question too. Especially we're looking ahead to the next six months. We're looking at an economic downturn. Why are companies doing this? What is the case for them to continue to work on DEI? So the first thing I would say is they have to do it because their employees demand it. Investors and regulators are requiring it more and more so with actual tangible regulations, and the customers are looking for it. And all of these groups are getting much better at figuring out what is nonsense and what is real. So in the last few years, we've seen companies really have to take this topic more seriously because they have no choice. And then, for the perspective of myself and my colleagues are doing this work in DEI, I think everyone has different motivations. A lot of people have very strong personal feelings around why they want to do DEI work, what change they want to see. I'm also motivated because I would like to have a direct impact on the experiences of my coworkers. I want them to feel the impact of my work. I don't care so much whether the executive team feels the impact of my work, to be honest. I care whether the employees in my company feel the impact of my work. That's what counts to me. And at the same time, I really appreciate one of my motivators is the ability to have influence over decisions and how money is spent and how a business is expanded, or how we focus our campaigns, or how we make our website accessible. That is power. Having control over how money is spent is where power lies. And I think, for me, that's one of the motivators because we can do a lot of grassroots, individual-level work. But if we're not actually changing how money is spent, then there's a limit to what we can do. Right.

Phil Wagner

So what have you found to be the most impactful DEI deliverables? To walk out that why. The things that do the very thing you just mentioned, right? Like, create change and difference in the lives of those I bump elbows with laterally in the organization. Do you have any insight on things that might work particularly well that are really worth the investment in the effort?

Sarah Cordivano

Yeah, so the first, I would say, is doing a DEI survey and actually collecting the data. Because until you do that, you don't know where your issues are. But once you do that, you can really understand the intersection of identity and inclusion, and belonging. And that becomes very powerful because instead of saying, on average, the entire company feels X, you can say, well, these specific communities are marginalized. These specific communities lack opportunity and leadership, and then you can really focus your efforts there. And then I would say another way to have really big impact is to make sure DEI is reflected in your business's strategic goals in the future. So that could be through an operational plan or OKRs or whatever objective setting that you do. And if DEI is really a required element in that and everyone takes it seriously, maybe it is even reinforced through bonuses or some other mechanism where there is accountability, then you actually see people doing this work, and it's difficult for business leaders to really own it until there's some incentive that really forces them to do it.

Phil Wagner

So I want to switch ever so slightly and talk to my Berlin friend for a second because I teach courses on DEI leadership, and I've talked about this openly. I think as DEI practitioners, we've got to admit our strengths and our weaknesses. And one of my weaknesses is in such a limited span of a term or a semester. There's so much content to cover as you prepare students to go out and lead in impactful ways in DEI space because you have to cover everything from very basic terminology. You have to grapple with competing political ideologies and all of the identity affinity spaces, disability, sexuality, race, and race. There's so much to cover, and admittedly I make concessions because we send most of our students into the world of work to globally-minded companies that are often anchored here in the west and particularly in the States. I'm wondering if you have any insight on DEI in the global context. Right? Like how do we take our lens, our landscape, and expand it beyond just one geographic area? Because as you mentioned, doing DEI work in the States and doing it in Berlin is going to look very different. Ideas about race, for instance, are going to differ quite significantly there. So how might even western anchored organizations take on a global mentality in their DEI work?

Sarah Cordivano

Yeah, the first thing I would say is looking at your strategy and making sure it's not just prioritizing or focusing on one geographic area or the needs of one geographic area. So when you work in an organization that has a global footprint, it's very possible that you're getting more complaints or you're getting more interest on DEI from some geographic areas compared to others. But that doesn't mean that those areas are somehow more important to you. And I think it really takes a global strategy that doesn't prioritize on just one geographic area or one location to make sure that you are thinking beyond just one specific area. And what does that practically look like? So it could be having a globally relevant strategy but then having local ownership and the ability to adapt initiatives or focuses locally. So you could do that with an advocate program where you have people based in different geographic areas or different parts of the business that are empowered to take the ambition or the goals of the strategy and adapt them for whatever is locally relevant. And I'll give you a specific example. So one of my previous companies, we did a DEI survey in 50 countries, and we went through a lot of effort to make sure that that survey was globally relevant. But we also did a lot of work around translations. So we used locally relevant language to make sure that when we're asking a question about race, for example, we are not just forcing my own western and American views around the world. And that becomes very challenging because a lot of DEI folks, they are very passionate about this topic, and they think they know the answers to everything. But there is a humility in saying, you know what, we don't know. We have to get advice from people in other parts of the world, and sometimes we have to step back, and we have to center their voices and not our own.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, and you talk about this at length. I mean, I love in the section where you share on some of your own lessons learned. I think it's mistake number one is just thinking too narrowly about diversity, and you talk about it in the sense of identity. But I also think that applies to

sort of Western versus globally anchored perspectives, too, to expand that's part of the work, the self-development work for DEI practitioners. I have a few more questions, and Sarah, I could talk to you all day because I think maybe I'm your target audience here. I read this book, and I'm like, yes, somebody put words around these frustrations or what we need to bring about greater coherency and clarity. I gleaned so much. You've spoken to the economic downturn that seems to be impending. Are there other things on your radar or things you see in the future that might continue to make this even more complicated work? The area of DEI leadership. Things ahead that we might be mindful of?

Sarah Cordivano

That's a great question. I think that we don't even know yet what the impact of the economic downturn will have on our work. I know anecdotally from friends that DEI roles are already being cut, budgets are getting cut, and DEI work is being deprioritized. But I think there's also probably a broader discussion, less about the economy and more about global migration. And I think we saw this with the current war in Ukraine around, how can we as businesses support people to migrate and find either support remote work or find opportunities in different countries? And I think this is a hugely it's in a way, a bit of an immature topic because it's going to require a lot more effort and also policy change in terms of how immigrants, myself included but many others, are able to move around the world and access opportunity because one of the biggest issues we saw during COVID is that all of a sudden, it became possible to work outside of the headquarter location of a company, and all of a sudden, that brings economic development, economic resources to small towns in the US for example. Or it could be other countries in the global south. So I don't have a perfect prediction on this yet, but I'm actually really curious to see how this develops. And I think you just need a few big companies to make a global remote working policy, to communicate a global remote working policy, and then a lot of other companies will follow.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. So one more question for you.

Sarah Cordivano

Sure.

Phil Wagner

This is difficult work. I mean, your book owns that. We've talked about it quite extensively today. There are folks who find themselves every day in precarious positions. Maybe they are CDOs. Maybe they are leading ERGs. They're NHR and tasked to do this work as a sole entity, which, again, your book also talked about why that's bad practice. So what advice can you offer someone who is in a DEI position to create sort of healthy relationship with that work itself, maintain that work-life balance, ensure that they are not being emotionally or physically, or organizationally exploited? What advice can you give to DEI practitioners to keep doing the work but do it in a healthy way?

Sarah Cordivano

Yeah. So, first, I'll say that the advice I'm going to share with you is not just relevant to DEI folks. There is a lot of people who do very emotionally intense work. For example, people working in ethics, human rights, sustainability. And I think this advice might be relevant to them as well. Because all of those jobs, something that we're really passionate about, we want to do a good job, we empathize with our stakeholders, the people that we're trying to impact, and we also want to meet their expectations. We're coming from a place where I want to do a good job, and I want people to think and feel that I'm doing a good job. But all of that boils down to a very difficult situation. So the first thing I would say, let me give maybe four key pieces of advice. The first would be having very clear expectations with ourselves and the people we work with. So being very transparent about what our role is, what is out of scope of our role, what we can do, what we can't do, and then building on that, developing a really good sense of what is within and outside of our sphere of control. This is a tough one because it can be a bit of a personal, painful journey to figure out. I don't have influence over that. But the reality is our stakeholders assume that we have influence over everything. They see a DEI person, they say, oh, of course, you have control over compensation. Of course, you have control over whether the doors of this building are accessible. Of course, you have control over our talent processes or our promotion processes. But in reality, there's typically a lot of topics in an organization that the leadership did not perceive as a DEI topic. But our stakeholders don't know that. So we have to be very authentic and open. And sometimes, it hurts our ego a little bit to say, I don't have any control over that, but if we don't set that expectation, then we're just going to be constantly disappointing them. And I think, again, this is how we deal with that difficulty that building that healthy relationship with the work. And then the next thing is probably really around remembering that even if we're passionate about the work we do, it's still a job.

Phil Wagner

That's good.

Sarah Cordivano

It's a financial transaction. Someone's giving me money for my time and expertise, and I'm going to do my best. But also, I don't want to work for free. And there's a privilege in being paid for this work. There's a lot of people that do this work without being paid. So it's important that we take care of ourselves and that we are not burnt out and that we, yeah, essentially. Lastly, I would say we use that time outside of work to really recharge. We take our vacation days. We're sick. We take sick days. We surround ourselves with people that can support us that we trust, and we really use that time to recharge.

Phil Wagner

I love all of those, and I really like the note on payment and transaction. And if you are in a privileged space where maybe you're not in need of that financial transaction, be wary of the precedent you're setting for other DEI practitioners. No, I'll do it for the team. What precedent are you setting for the value of DEI work? And when that then is in the hands of

someone who isn't more of an economic precarious situation or is again one of those historically underrepresented or minoritized populations, you've then contributed to the expectation that their work, their voice, their value, their outputs are not worthy of payment. So I think it's something to be hyper-mindful of too. Just the transactional nature of it all. That's really helpful insight. All right, final question, but this is an easy one. How can our listeners support you? This book is fire. So I will set the stage and say, go buy the book. What it does is it takes everything you wanted to know about how to build a coherent DEI platform, DEI position, DEI leadership voice, and it just brings it all to the table. So I will put my personal endorsement on this. This is everything I wanted to see in one volume and now do. So it's a fantastic book. Where can our listeners buy, support? How can they support you?

Sarah Cordivano

Wow, I have to say you are so kind. You are too generous. But thank you for saying all that. Wow. The listeners won't know this, but my book just launched yesterday, so it's been a bit of an emotional roller coaster to actually have the courage and confidence to release this into the world. So it means a lot that it has meant something to you. So thank you for that. But yes, you can buy this book on Amazon. It is available in ebook, paperback, hardcover. You can also find it on other Amazon sites, not just Amazon.com, so all across the world. And if you are in a situation where you cannot afford to buy this book, please get in contact with me, and I am super happy to give you a copy in it, just contact me. There's a form on my website, which is my name, sarahcordovano.com. And please just reach out to me, I'll get you the book. And I also have a blog, so if you want to read more about what I write and what I think, check out my blog, which you can also find on my website. And I think that's it. That's probably the key points.

Phil Wagner

No, that's good. And if you're in a position where you can afford to buy this book and can afford to buy a copy for a friend, do it. Do it, do it. Give it to a student. Give it to an MBA student, undergraduate student, somebody who is DEI minded, even if they're not sort of aiming for a DEI-centric position, because it's a really strong manual. So, again, we're recording this on August 4. It dropped on August 3. But as you know, if you're listening to this, it is not those dates. It's been out into the world for a while, so there's no excuse. Go pick up a copy today. Sarah, it's a real privilege to speak with you. Thank you for chatting with us a little bit more about the impossible nature of DEI work and how we can have hope to do that work well to create a different reality for the future. So it's been a real joy speaking with you today.

Sarah Cordivano

Thank you. You too.

Phil Wagner

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