



# Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

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## **EPISODE 34: LIZ STIGLER – MOVING THE DEI NEEDLE FORWARD**

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### **Liz Stigler**

And maybe it's unfair of me to ask people to stay tuned in, but I think when you tune out, that is how structural systems of inequity persist and get bigger is by people not paying attention.

### **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. Have you ever been in a room full of people, and suddenly the reality sets in you're not the smartest person in the room? This happens to me more often than I care to admit, but it happened every single time I found myself in the same room as today's guest. Liz Stigler and I had the opportunity to take a number of graduate courses together at the University of Kansas, Rock Chalk Jayhawk OKU. She is that person that everyone wanted to buddy up with when it came time for partner work or group work. And I'm super stoked that we could buddy up today for an extended conversation. Liz isn't just the smartest person in the room. She's out there doing the real work. She currently serves as the Inaugural Director of the Community Equity Research Center for the Chinese American Service League. There she leads the development and implementation of CASL's formal DEIA efforts, including in community development and programming in areas that advance social change. I'm so excited to connect with her here. Liz, welcome to our podcast. I'm sure that I've gotten something wrong about your bio. Can you tell our listeners maybe a little bit more about who you are and what you do every day at CSL?

### **Liz Stigler**

Absolutely. I appreciate the generous but totally false introduction. I am rarely the smartest person in the room, and certainly not when we were in classes together, but it's kind of you to flatter me. So on this podcast, yes, I am the Director of CERC at Chinese American Service League. We call it CASL. It's a lot of words. CASL is the largest ANHPI, which is Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander serving nonprofit in the Midwest. We have about 600 employees. We've been here for 44 years, and in 2021, we served about 6,000 individual clients. So we're a direct nonprofit service provider. Cradle-to-grave kind of services, right? So early childhood, head start, and head start all the way through in-home care and adult day services and everything in between. Yeah. And that's what I do. As you mentioned,

as Director of CERC, I oversee those three areas of sort of our external equity and inclusion efforts, our government policy efforts, and our Anti Hate Action Center, which is one of three in the nation. There's New York, Oakland, and us. And that is made possible through partnership with the Asian American Foundation and that was just launched last fall. So we are still in the first year of the Action Center. But yeah, that's what falls under CERC's umbrella.

**Phil Wagner**

Fantastic. And I know you're helming those efforts. And yes, there's some well-placed flattery there, but also sincerity in that I know you to be somebody who asks really critical questions and always digs deeper. And so that's where I sort of want to guide our conversation today. You're doing the business of DEIA work every single day. DEI work, broadly speaking, often gets a bad rep. And I think you and I would probably both say that we've kind of dunked on the DEI industrial complex a time or two ourselves. So as someone who's out there doing this work, I'm wondering, can you clarify maybe some of the biggest misconceptions people have about doing DEI work in a day-to-day formal capacity?

**Liz Stigler**

Yes, we have dunked on it with good reason. I think we should continue to dunk on it.

**Phil Wagner**

Absolutely.

**Liz Stigler**

Industrial complex. I was speaking I was a keynote at Roosevelt University's Laker Leadership Summit last month, and I talked about diversity industrial complex. I think some of the misconceptions that I see most often are that DEI or DEIA or DEIB or sort of broadly inclusion efforts are just sort of a nice-to-have addition, right? So it's like a little like, well, we can just let kool aid stir and mix. And if there's time, if we have resources, then we can do that diversity stuff. But that's not the main focus of whatever it is. Our agency, our business, our organization. It's thought of as this sort of like the sprinkles on top. And I'm sure, as you know, that's not really the case, right? I mean, I am fond of saying equity is everyone's responsibility because really it is. And so I see that a lot. I also see, and it's strange because, of course, you want to encourage people, wherever they are in their journeys to critical consciousness, so trying not to shut anybody down. But I see this assumption a lot that the work of equity and inclusion is just about being a good person. And if you can support or encourage somebody to just be kind, be a good person, that that will get us to equity.

**Phil Wagner**

Right.

**Liz Stigler**

And it won't. I mean, it won't, right? It's great. I think you should be a good person. You should be kind to the capacity that you can be kind and hold your own boundaries. But that will not bring us to structural equity, right?

**Phil Wagner**

That's it.

**Liz Stigler**

It will not bring systemic change. And so I see those two a lot that, like, diversity is kind of like, well, when we get all our other things in order, then maybe we can add in that diversity. And also this kind of like, well, it's just about being a good person. Those are the things I think I see most often.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah. Okay, good. So you're somebody who I know to stand by some deeply held values and commitment to justice, to equity, to belonging, to inclusion. And as someone who has no problem critiquing the problematic facets of the DEI enterprise. If you're giving advice to our listeners, many of whom are really interested in doing the work that you do. Advice on how to sort of sniff out or identify really valuable and impactful DEI opportunities versus those sort of surface-level or performative or optic opportunities. How did you find yourself into doing DEI work that has impact to the degree that you have?

**Liz Stigler**

That's a great question. Well, I know I think this is the pros and cons. I think of the diversity industry blossoming as it is, is that there are a lot more opportunities, right? So that's great because that means more space for more practitioners to bring the message or the content to wider audiences. But it also means, as you say, there is a much greater landscape that's not always earnest or authentic.

**Phil Wagner**

Or consistent, right?

**Liz Stigler**

Or consistent.

**Phil Wagner**

Who's not reading from the same book?

**Liz Stigler**

I mean, this is right. This is just basically one of the things we did at CASL here for the first time last year when I joined, was we did our internal DEIA assessment for the first time. And a big thing about doing that and talking through the results is, like, there aren't universal

benchmarks I can't go and look at. Oh, well, nationally, the employee engagement score for work from home is this. I can't look at a national aggregate score for, like, equity. Right. So the metrics are very complex, which I digress. That is not the actual question. That's just my fussing about it.

**Phil Wagner**

That's important, though.

**Liz Stigler**

So I think when you're looking at opportunities and feel free to let me know if this is something your students are telling you about or thinking or if folks who you know you are working with are seeing. I think some of the things to be aware of, for me to know if an opportunity is going to be useful and generative, is like, where does it sit in the organization? Right. Does this report to the Chief Operating Officer or the CEO, or the Chief Administrative Officer? Or does this role report to a manager five steps down? So would this role be that mid-level management or that coordinator level in that you have three or four folks in between you and the executive leadership team? And that is really critical. I think because that will indicate to you how much influence you have to really impact systemic change, right? If you're someone who has that reporting directly to the executive team, ideally, you're able to influence what sort of the metrics look like. What does training look like? You can have that direct conduit, even if it's a dotted line of reporting.

**Phil Wagner**

For sure.

**Liz Stigler**

But if you're all the way sort of stuck in the middle of a sandwich somewhere and you have four people just to get your idea up to leadership. It is going to be arduous. And not always, but often, I think that indicates that the commitment is either not earnest, like the company's commitment to DEI is either not earnest, or it's not fully understood. And so it could take you the better part of years to move up to wherever you should have started at. So I think that's something I think about.

**Phil Wagner**

The whole passion project a la carte model is not just problematic structurally. It's problematic for those folks seeking out those opportunities because often those passion projects are going to fall often in an unpaid or service capacity to queer folks, people of color, women, and it just further problematizes the very thing we're here to help address.

**Liz Stigler**

Absolutely, for sure. I think another thing I think about is how well resourced is the role, right? So is there a budget? Right. Do you, as whoever you are, if you're leading the DEI efforts, is there a budget for those efforts? If there's a committee, is there a budget for the committee?

Are folks who are serving on the committee going to be compensated for time? Or is there another sort of flex option there? Other resources, just generally your own professional development, right? Like, are you if you're often if you're a mighty team of one? That's usually been my experience as a DEI practitioner. This is the first time I've ever led a team. And they're not all focused on DEI, right? It's a team of folks working on anti-hate, community engagement, government. If you're a team of one, what resources are available to you, and what's sort of the full commitment there? Is it good, I think, a good indicator if you're looking for an opportunity that's going to be useful? And I also think asking, why now? Why did this opportunity emerge from your organization at this time? And if it's in response to, like, oh, well, we said something problematic, and the Internet came for us. Right.

### **Phil Wagner**

Right. Yeah, the reactionary model.

### **Liz Stigler**

Exactly. Then you're walking into a very different situation other than, like, for example, the reason my position was created, the reason the Community Equity Research Center was created was because last spring, in light of the Atlantic Spa shootings, Board of Directors said, we're tired of just thoughts and prayers. We want to create an actual measurable change. We want to resource it, and we want to really put our substantial long-term efforts behind it. And so, CERC was created. My role, which I came in as the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility Officer, and then was promoted to Director in February. So I came into an organization that saw consistent tragedy after tragedy right the 339% increase in anti-Asian hate over the past two years. So that was concerted effort that propelled the organization to implement our DEIA efforts. But if you're going into somewhere that's doing it because of a lawsuit or because of sort of internet shaming or because of some sort of otherwise not great publicity situation. It's going to be different. It's going to be a really different vibe. And not that it's good or bad, but I think to know if you're stepping in as a solution to a problem that's very different than you're stepping in as a proactive, you're on the leading edge, not the bleeding edge of creating these programs.

### **Phil Wagner**

Absolutely, yeah. I mean, proactive versus reactive PR is going to look very different. Right. So the same, of course, applies to DEI work. We're talking a little bit about getting people in the door. What about developing people? So you're there often DEI leaders, mentor, shape, guide, and sculpt people who they work laterally or who might fall beneath them within the organizational structure. So how do you sort of inspire a commitment to real change, to real outcomes in the DEI space, maybe among those who are sort of skeptical of that DEI industrial complex, maybe from all sides? I mean, how do you actually shape people so that you're shaping people towards realistic and impactful outcomes?

## **Liz Stigler**

Yeah, that's the big work, isn't it? That shaping, and I think this is where it's useful to draw a distinction or to think about diversity, equity, inclusion efforts in the workplace versus just generally in society because they're different. And your capacity to affect change is going to be very different in one of those realms versus the other. So if I'm thinking about like my professional sort of DEI practitioner hat in a workplace, I think what I think about is not necessarily changing hearts and minds, right? Like, yes, of course, I would love to be able to influence the way someone thinks or feels about something, but ultimately that's not really what I care about. What I care about is how do you behave and how are your actions specifically in the context of the workplace. Right. I might not ever be able to convince you that gender-neutral pronouns are relevant, are authentic, are useful. Right. You might always think that they are absolutely just annoying and foolish and that those people should just get over it. But if I can get you to consistently use gender-neutral pronouns in our workplace, if I can get you to be respectful of folks who use those pronouns in our workplace, then that, for me, feels successful. Right. And I think that is where in the workplace, but again, I don't think that that's socially outside of the workplace. Of course, I want the hearts and minds change, but in just the boundary of professional space, if you can get people to change their actions and behavior and the way that you think that I think that needs to be done. And I think when you see the most successful efforts is that it has to be something that can be metricized and assessed, right? And that there has to be consistent training behind that. And not to just say that training is the ultimate. That's how we get to diversity. Because it's not just training, but it's like one of the things we talk about here a lot is thinking about direct communication, right? So how do you metricize that? What does that look like if you put it on your annual performance evaluation? Right? How do you evaluate if someone is engaging in direct communication from an equity and inclusion standpoint? And then that becomes part of how you are evaluated at work. Right, so that's, I think, a big part of it really trying to change those behaviors, trying to change the action, I think, is where I tend to put my focus. I don't know. What do you think?

## **Phil Wagner**

You know, what I think is that you're speaking to one of the most nuanced and significant issues that we don't talk enough about in this space. You're hitting a really sort of personal area for me, which is how do I reconcile my social justice orientations writ large to needing to be able to move the needle forward within very rigid structures and organizations where that social justice orientation may not fly. And so I think that leads to a lot of imposter syndrome that's one of the catalysts for burnout. It just leads to a lot of emotions for me of, like, okay, how do I reconcile these? And am I making concessions? Am I conceding my values? And I think that's a really tough space to play in as a DEI practitioner. Because obviously, your goal is to push. I mean, that's what you do in this. You push in this industry. Yes, you measure, but those outcomes or outcomes you often have to push towards. And I think to me the biggest thing I end up thinking about is, am I pushing far enough, or am I pushing too far? It's trying to find that balance. That's what I think as I hear you talk about those things.

**Liz Stigler**

Yeah, absolutely. I feel you for sure. And I think it's, I don't know if this is just what grad school does to you, but I think it's that balance of, like, it doesn't have to be all one or the other. Right. I feel like we're very conditioned to be like, I'm all in doing this thing, or I'm not doing it at all.

**Phil Wagner**

Right, yeah.

**Liz Stigler**

And I think it's more of a negotiation around like, well, is that always true? Is that always useful? What can you do that is going to be the most impactful in the space that you're in? And I think we've talked about this a little bit, but it's about creating those structures and systems, right? So beyond just fun celebrations or having a potluck that makes people feel good about Hispanic Heritage Month or whatever sort of these one-off events, right? Having a film festival for Women's History Month, like, sure, those are great, but I really think if you're thinking about creating that impactful change. It's about those behaviors, those actions, and systems, right? So what's the strategy for recruitment, retention, promotion, development? What's the strategy for making sure that the workplace is accessible both physically but? Also, do you have a flexible work policy or whatever your other sort of options are? I think it's not just about having one-off trainings or, like, oh yeah, one time we did a racial justice workshop, so we're good now. It has to be both that training and the real systems change where I think that creates impact.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, I agree. I think it's the stuff that you don't put out on a flyer or a poster. It's the day-to-day stuff that is the toughest stuff. It's not very sexy or tantalizing. It's not going to draw a lot of attention, but that is often the most impactful to leading to those outcomes. Let's rewind just a little bit and talk about pushing, if you wouldn't mind because I want to talk about how you have figured out how to sort of read the room. As a DEI practitioner, how do you know? Haha, here's where I can push a little, or how do you know, okay, I need to just sort of step back a little bit. That's such rich, nuanced emotional intelligence that's required there. How do you know how to make those concessions without sacrificing values and how do you know where to push without pushing too far too fast?

**Liz Stigler**

Yeah. So the first thing I would say is I don't know that I have a good formula for this, right? So if someone else out there, a listener, has perfected the, like, I know exactly when to push and when not to push, I would invite them to email you, and then you can pass it on to me.

**Phil Wagner**

Share broadly. You got it?

## **Liz Stigler**

Right. So with that said, this is an imperfect whatever that I do. And I think maybe this is also where I see a lot of more inexperience, just in like sort of junior colleague DEI practitioners, come into an organization really excited, really hot, really ready to do a lot of change. The organization is not actually ready for that. They hired this person because it sounded great, and they were excited. And they get told this person right, gets told no at every turn, and it burns them out. Right. And I think that is a disservice that the diversity industrial complex is doing to, especially our younger colleagues, our colleagues of color, right? These younger folks who are coming out of programs ready to apply the lessons they've learned, and they just get turned and burned by the diversity industrial complex over and over. So I think for me, what I think about, I'm a very strategic thinker, so I really try to think about, okay, is pushing on this issue, is going further on this, what am I going to potentially gain from pushing further? Right. Is what I am going to gain either is it a moral, ethical imperative, right? Like, is this something that I absolutely cannot work at an organization if we don't do X, Y, or Z? Then that's pretty clear for me. Outside of that, it's that strategy of, okay, if I push on this, what ultimately am I hoping that I get from it, right? Where is the best place we could end up if I keep pushing on this? And does that potentially outweigh the negative sort of accumulation of top scum that could happen if I push on this, right? To illustrate that point, when I was hired here, my final round interview, which was with our CEO and my now boss, our COO, I told my CEO if you hire me for this job. We're going to have conversations you don't want to have, right? And he hired me. And true to his word, he has, right. And there have been a number of times over the past year that I've been like, okay, Paul, we're going to have one of those conversations. And so I think it's, for me, being pretty transparent and upfront, either when I was freelancing as a DEIA consultant or in a full-time role of, like, listen, I just need you to know right now there are going to be times where I'm really going to bring to you conversations and issues that you probably wish we wouldn't talk about. But we're going to have to talk about them. And so I think I try to strike the balance there between like, okay, this is something we really need, or this is something we should have done a long time ago. We're not yet at a place where is going to be useful or is going to be. We're just not there yet. And sometimes that's really disappointing. That's a real boner killer for me. A lot of the time is like, wow, I wish that we were here, and I really want us to be here, but you got to run or walk before you run. And so if you're trying to do that too quickly, you can end up it can backfire really spectacularly. And I think that maybe is worse. Right. Rolling something out, pushing too far on something that's not fully realized, that people are not bought into, that there's not an affinity for, and then you roll it out, and it blows up in your face. And that, I think, is worse. So, yeah. I don't know. I feel like I don't have a great system. How do you balance? When do you know when to push and when to take a knee?

## **Phil Wagner**

So the only thing I can say that sort of riffs off some of your themes are the subtext of what you say is to kind of lead with humanity, being honest enough with your people to say, look, I'm not here to make you feel good. I am here to push. We're going to have to have tough conversations, but any good organization knows how to lead from their values framework. And so, I only affiliate with organizations who make those values clear and demonstrate how



they walk them out. And I can always point back to that to say no. I mean, here, for instance, belonging is one of our core values. Flourishing is one of our core values. So if I'm sensing in the classroom and student success initiatives that students of color, queer kids are not flourishing at the same rate, our values have been compromised. So we need to have that tough conversation. And so, to me, it's not pointing a finger and saying you're wrong. You dropped the ball. This is horrific. It's saying, look, we're on the same page. Let's take it back to values. Let's figure out how we can have a tough conversation to acknowledge the realities so we can make those values come to life. And again, I don't have a formula, which is why I'm always asking, what do you do? Because I'm going to write it down. And I think part of being in this space is not always knowing exactly how to move forward. That's why I get sort of wary and concerned about just the number of DEI consultants that are sort of manifesting themselves without quality training, without deep theoretical knowledge, without training in change management because it becomes very messy very quick, and this is too important to drop the ball.

### **Liz Stigler**

Yeah, that's something that I struggle with, too. Is far be it for me to suggest that you need a Ph.D. to do this work because you don't, right? Like, for sure, you don't. And I think, in a lot of ways, a Ph.D. is not useful or worth it.

### **Phil Wagner**

I'm with you.

### **Liz Stigler**

But I feel like because there is no standard curriculum or training for what it means to be doing this work, and like, yeah, there are some pop-up, like diversity certificates. I've heard that some are more rigorous than others. I can't attest because I haven't personally gone through any of them, but I think it's that lack of standardization or consistency or just like, what is it? When is that label, right of like, okay, I am a DEI practitioner, or I can market myself as a consultant? When do you know that you have arrived at that point? And again, not to say that anyone needs a formal degree of any kind to do this work, but I think I get similarly concerned or wary of, like, are you not only prepared from an intellectual standpoint but, like, the emotional labor required to do this work every day? Right. And to do it on a sustained basis to do it, especially if you're someone who occupies a dimension of an identity that's marginalized, like, to do this work and show up is very draining and really can take it out of you.

### **Phil Wagner**

Absolutely.

### **Liz Stigler**

I struggle with, like, okay, do we need a more, I don't know, centralized. I don't want to say a course of curriculum, but some sort of like, okay, this is what it means. These are the areas of focus that you need to demonstrate acuity in before you can be a consultant. But I don't know.

## **Phil Wagner**

And I'm with you. I have so many competing tensions here, too. There's an OSHA manual, right? Like, we know the OSHA regulations to make workplaces safe. Shouldn't there be something similar? But then I know what would happen is if we had one, probably you and I would get back on and be like, look at these power structures that have manifested themselves. How much money are they making? I don't know. I do think there has to be some deeper level knowledge structures or consistency because I see a lot of young, passionate social justice advocates, and there's a place this is not to diminish that going into this line of work as a consultant, never having been in organizations or working with an organizational change, suspecting that it's just going to be sort of a pushback against a conservative rhetoric. And, you know, this work can actually sort of disenfranchise folks from all sides because you can be sort of a white savior model, and you're not helping what you came in to help either. So there's tensions from all sides. And so, to me, there's deeper theoretical strains that must sort of be invoked necessarily in this space. And so, yeah, I don't know. I'm skeptical like you are. I'm going to talk about some of those identity tensions if you wouldn't mind. So this DEI space is complicated, and it's a context where multiple identity elements might enhance or complicate our work. And I'm wondering if you have any insights on whiteness, specifically. Self-identified white guy here. Right. And I know that DEI obviously goes beyond issues of race, but I have a lot of competing tensions about being a white person who is leading DEI initiatives. I'm sometimes compensated for some of that work. I'm sometimes acknowledged or awarded for that work, and I don't always know how to grapple with that if I'm being completely honest. So do you have any thoughts as a DEI practitioner on how we can sort of grapple with those identity elements and how they might shape or complicate or enhance our DEI work? I'm asking you all the tough questions, Liz, because I was like, of course, I am.

## **Liz Stigler**

No, it's just I was just the audio. But yes, as a white misgender female, this is something I think about a lot as well and something that I weighed very heavily before stepping into the role that I have now. Whether really should I be one to be leading these efforts? I think there are some days where I still feel like, oh, yeah, no, I'm not qualified for this. This shouldn't be me. And then some days where it's better, and you feel more confident. I think one of the things that I think about and one of the reasons I do the work that I do is because, as a queer person with an invisible disability, this work is deeply personal to me. It directly affects the way I move through the world, the structures that do or do not oppress me. But also, as I mentioned, as a white person, as misgender white female, I feel like I am called to the work because it's my responsibility to leverage my privilege in situations where I can do so. Right? And so I think for me, a lot of acknowledging or working through what it means to be a white person in this space is acknowledging that right. Like, acknowledging that my identity, my racial identity as a white person, means that I do not know what it means to move through the world as a person of color. Right. I don't have that experience. And so when I am working on DEI-related issues, I always try to amplify the perspectives and voices, and experiences of folks whose lived identities are different from mine. And when I'm in rooms where those folks are not, how do I make sure that that need or that experience is still at the table? Right? How do I do right by the people who are not in the room? And I also think there's something to be said about white

people doing the work of DEI in particularly or predominantly white spaces. Right. So do we need to have someone who's a person of color exploiting their identity just for the benefit of all the white people in the organization? Right. So, no, I think that's a place where, especially if you are a white DEI practitioner in a white space, you have the burden to really pull your team along. You can hold people's feet to the fire in a way that I think when you're a white person working in spaces with people of color or communities of color, that is a different experience. And knowing when you can and should use the privileges, the tools, the resources at your disposal to amplify the work that's already being done is really critical. It's hard. I think also, and I think this is where I get into the bigger confusion, the bigger tension around, like, well, okay, is it all about identity politics? Right? Does it have to happen to you for it to matter to you?

**Phil Wagner**

So good.

**Liz Stigler**

I think it doesn't. Right. I think a big part of, like, it doesn't and it shouldn't. And also, the assumption that just because someone occupies a particular identity does not make them more or less qualified to do this work. Right. I know a lot of queer people who should not be doing this work because they're just, like, terrible at acknowledging other non-white queer identities. I don't think membership in a specific identity category qualifies you to be a better or worse practitioner. I think as we talked about that training, the location in intersectional social justice, being attuned to the community needs around you. Those are the best ways you can ground yourself in the work. Yeah.

**Phil Wagner**

That's so perfect. There's such a succinct answer that really grapples with so many dimensionalities, and I think it really clarifies. There's a space for everyone but read the room. Think about how you're moving about that space, how you're occupying power and privilege in that space, what you're doing with that power and privilege in that space. Wonderful insights. Okay, so four rapid-fire questions to conclude our interview today. Really quick, but we really do want to glean from your insights as a DEI practitioner. So I've just got four, and I'll go through them. I want to know, first and foremost, what lights your fire? I mean, what really motivates you? You talk about this work being difficult. I know this work is difficult. There's a lot of emotional labor. What lights your fire and motivates you to do this day in and day out?

**Liz Stigler**

It depends on which day you catch me. I have the belief, right, that we can work towards collective liberation and that if we're not in it together, working towards that struggle, we won't get there. Right. And it's a lifelong struggle. The work is lifelong. Right.

**Phil Wagner**

For sure.

**Liz Stigler**

It started before I showed up. It's going to continue long after I shuffle off this mortal coil. But I firmly believe that it is the responsibility, especially those of us who have privileged positions, to be agitators and co-conspirators and really doing this. So that belief that something better than this, like capitalist hellscape, is possible is what propels me most days. And a lot of coffee. A lot of coffee.

**Phil Wagner**

I'm with you. I'm drinking as we record.

**Liz Stigler**

Right now.

**Phil Wagner**

Right, together. All right, so flip side. What pisses you off the most about working in this space? Like, what just gets your goat?

**Liz Stigler**

The whole world. I think it's like seeing that in 2022, people are still using the business case to justify diversity.

**Phil Wagner**

Say that for this podcast. Say it louder. Yes.

**Liz Stigler**

Right. And no shade. I understand. Right.

**Phil Wagner**

It's one part.

**Liz Stigler**

In this school.

**Phil Wagner**

I got you.

**Liz Stigler**

But I think that we are still so far into the research, and we have now decades, decades upon decades from the first compliance space, diversity program, the 1999 Coca-Cola lawsuit. It might not have been 99, but from that place to now and that people are still using. Right. Like the business case, is endlessly annoying to me. And I think, again, we talked about this before, but just the fact that a lot of diversity is thought of as an add-on, or just a thing we can just

sprinkle on later and, like, it's not the actual work, it's the stuff we do once the actual work of our business is done, then we can do the diversity stuff. And that is endlessly just pisses me right the f off. Because if it's not baked into the foundation of your work, right? If you're not building equity and inclusion from the go, if it's not in the strategic plan, if it's not in the mission vision, values, if it's not in the core guiding principles, then it's nothing. It's garbage. Right? And so those are two things I think that really annoy me most quickly.

### **Phil Wagner**

All right, so similar to question one. When the going does get tough, you're in the thick of it, and you're hearing all of the business case for DEI, but nobody's actually putting in the work. What centers you? Like, what brings you back? I think that's sort of a similar theme but a little bit different. What keeps you where you are?

### **Liz Stigler**

You know, I think. Right? I take solace in one of my favorite liberation strategists, Mariame Kaba says hope is a discipline. Right? And so, for me, I remind myself that it is a discipline. And so when it feels like there's no progress, when it's not fast enough, when we're rolling back something, we said we were going to do, and now we're rolling it back. When you think that something is clear and then you run into the same roadblocks again and again, I think it's that reminder of being disciplined and still seeing that vision for the future, still having that hope is work. And I also think about if I leave, if I'm not doing the work, then someone else is going to have to pick it up, and like, it doesn't just stop. So those are the things I try to remind myself of. But for sure, a lot of angry car rides home, angry gym sessions, just like real. Lots of getting that out.

### **Phil Wagner**

All right, so final question of the day. You're out there. You're doing the work, the real work, the tough work. Tell it to us straight. What can everyday people or everyday leaders do to make your job, to make your life as a DEI practitioner easier?

### **Liz Stigler**

Oh, yeah, that's a great question. I think not tuning out, by which I mean I see this a lot, and I'm not sure if you do too, but people who are just like, oh, I don't watch the news because it's so depressing, or well, I don't really follow politics because it's just so everyone's corrupt and it's so sad and it's so negative. And if you have the option to not listen to the news or not listen to politics, you already occupy a space of privilege because whatever you're telling me is what's on the news, and what politicians are doing does not impact my day-to-day. Therefore, I give myself permission to check out of it. And I'm not saying compost your mental health at the expense of being constantly plugged in. Like, I'm not saying doom scroll, none of that. But if you're not paying attention to what is happening on a consistent level, not just national federal policies, but your older men, right or older people, your ward representatives, your commissioners. If you're not paying attention to what's being done at that level and what's happening on the news, you're not really being an actionable partner or co-conspirator in this

work. And I know that's hard and can feel overwhelming, and maybe it's unfair of me to ask people to stay tuned in, but I think when you tune out, that is how structural systems of inequity persist and get bigger is by people not paying attention. And so I think if that is something that you feel you can safely engage with and have the capacity to engage with, especially folks who may have more privilege in certain dimensions of identity, I would strongly encourage you to stay plugged in and stay attentive.

**Phil Wagner**

That's so good. I think a challenge for all of us while you remain willfully blindfolded. What structures, what power structures, what systems are being built? I think that's such a great challenge, a great way to conclude. Liz, I love everything you do. I love everything you share. Thank you for bringing me back to good old KU days, grad seminar days. It's wonderful to have a conversation with you here, my friend. Thank you so much for joining us today.

**Liz Stigler**

Thank you so much. It was my pleasure. Always nice to see you. Thank you for having me.

**Phil Wagner**

Thanks for taking a second to listen to Diversity Goes to Work. If you like what you heard, share the show with a friend, leave us a review on Apple podcast or wherever you listen to podcasts, and reach out because we're always looking for new friends. And if you'd like to learn more about any of our programs or initiatives here in the business school at William & Mary, be sure to visit us at [mason.wm.edu](http://mason.wm.edu). Until next time.