



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 39: DEVON PETERIKA – NO, YOU CAN'T TOUCH MY HAIR

Devon Peterika

I remember, and probably about last month, someone came up to me and said, can I just rub your head? I said no.

Phil Wagner

No.

Devon Peterika

Why is that even something that you want to do? Like, that's just freaky, like, ugh.

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 another episode of Diversity Goes to Work, the podcast where we center real human lived experiences that help us shape and define effective DEI leadership. I'm joined today by Devon Peterika, who is a dynamic and accomplished HR professional with over 20 years of work in HR and leadership in the DEI space. Devon has a multifaceted background in HR at a variety of institutions of higher ed, and she currently serves as a diversity and inclusion leader in the oil and gas industry. What I love most about Devon's work is that she advances DEI work through very intentional and very specific organizational and HR strategies. But Devon also has a great personal perspective on DEI, which I know we'll talk a little bit about today. I'm so excited to host her here.

Phil Wagner

Devon, my friend, thank you for joining us. I'm sure that I've botched your background in some way. Can you tell our listeners a little bit more about who you are, what you do, and maybe a little bit about how you've found your way into DE&I work?

Devon Peterika

Absolutely. It's funny because when you hear your background ran off, you're like, is that me?

Phil Wagner

That's you. That's you.

Devon Peterika

So I actually fell accidentally into human resources many moons ago because my bachelor is in arts administration, and I have a minor in dance. And then I realized, yo, this don't pay the bills.

Phil Wagner

Been there.

Devon Peterika

And unless you're in New York or California, but guess what? The cost of living there. I'm like, oh, my. So I shifted my career over into HR leadership. I got my masters in HR leadership and the roles that I kept getting kept expanding. So, like regional territory, like Southport, it started, then it was like up the coast and the full east coast, and then multi countries and blah, blah, blah. I've really had favor in this space. I guess you can say. And then from there, when I had my little guy, he'll be seven in a couple of weeks, I moved back to Kentucky to be close to family. And in Kentucky, there's no big organization, primarily higher education. And so that's really when I kind of got my feet wet in the higher ed space. And there I was really advancing into this for disciplines in human resource. I was leading the office at this particular institution, and it was just kind of exhausting, almost because with my personality, I feel like everyone was like, oh, Devin, you can manage this employee relations. I'm like, yo, that's not my job. But it was like, you can disarm people so easily. Yeah, that's great, but it's exhausting. I really want to finesse in other areas. And I was trying to find a space that I was more proactive than reactive. And so I got a job at it was actually Maria College, and I saw a position for Title Nine, and it was a D&I position. I was like. I think I like it. And so I didn't even know anything about it. Started doing research on it, and I applied. Didn't get the job. However, in the midst of that, I was actually someone reached out to me for a Frontier Nursing University, where I was able to be the Assistant Director as the diversity, equity, and inclusion role there. And it's funny because the HR experience really fed into the needs that I needed for the D&I space because kind of the HR kind of facilitates some of the movements around the cultural awareness, cultural adjustments, and all that great and all changes. And, long story short, I'm big on development. I don't believe that D&I could be implemented based on lived experience only. So I got my certification as a diversity professional. And then another organization was like, hey, I see you. And they tapped me on the shoulder, and I accepted the role. And then, I had the opportunity to support several countries, US, Canada, and Latin America. Love what I do, love the space. And I truly feel like I am working in the purpose and the calling for my personal life.

Phil Wagner

I love so much of that. And you speak to attention that I think is so difficult in the DEI space, which is lived experience matters. It informs our perspective. It shapes the lens, but it alone is not enough to drive change. And so I love how you're able to speak to that. And I think it's perfect for where we're planning to go today. So what I want to talk about is our sense and sensibilities surrounding professionalism and professionalism standards in the world of work.

And I think, as an HR professional, you particularly are in a perfect position to help us contextualize that conversation. So I'm wondering, can we unpack that term just a little bit today and maybe dismantle perhaps some of the ways in which our standards of professionalism might disenfranchise historically underrepresented or minoritized workers or applicants? So let's unpack this professionalism idea. Tell me from an HR perspective who's DEI-minded how you grapple with that term.

Devon Peterika

I struggled with the term personally because one of the things that I've learned in HR is that I flourish in the jobs that I do. I do my job well. But I had so many people tell me, across the path of my life and my career path, that I need to suppress my personality or do this. And I have fully embraced. I am an extrovert with an extra dose.

Phil Wagner

Same good company.

Devon Peterika

And I'm just like, what I'm not going to do is minimize who I am to make someone else feel comfortable. And I've always said I am not the traditional HR person, and when I even go into interviews now, I'm just like, I'm not so know what you're getting upfront. But I feel like the term professionalism is a coined phrase to keep people in this comfortable box for others that manage the world in which we live, which are unfortunately white males and females. And it's not to say anything mean or nasty about it, but it's just the fact that they are usually the ones primarily in leadership. And so it's like to make them feel, oh, this is how you're supposed to speak, this is nah, that's not me. And if you want a diverse perspective or people to be their authentic self, you need to allow them to be that. And research actually shows that if you do not come to work as your authentic self, you actually minimize your creativity. You create your flow of work, your productivity. And it's like, so why not allow people to be their authentic self? And I'm not saying let people come in like everything's hanging out and showing and tell hanging out. I'm not saying that. I'm saying allow people to express themselves the way they do, and you figure out and try to make it palatable for you.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Devon Peterika

How about you adjust for them?

Phil Wagner

Yeah, somebody once told me that if you think about the box is built for white people, and if you look at how a box is drawn, it's often a big white square with black lines at the margins. And I'm always like, oh yeah, I think that's profound. And so our very ideas of professionalism, I think in that sense, the box is sort of built-in those very Eurocentric or thin-

centric ways that are, I think, problematic. One of the things that I was really hoping we might get into today because I know this is something you have spoken to pretty extensively is on the conversation of hair. And it's not a conversation we've had in-depth on this podcast, but I teach a variety of courses in DEI leadership in organizations, and this comes up pretty significantly, and I'm really kind of doubly removed from this conversation. I'm a white guy, and I am as bald as you can imagine. But the discourse on natural hair particularly has gotten a lot of attention in recent years. The Crown Act really helped ensure a discrimination-free environment based on natural hair. Can you speak to the role of hair as an HR professional, as an identity element, and how it might be something that we should better factor into our diversity work?

Devon Peterika

Well, the funny thing is that people, this is like a touchy topic to me again, personal experience, because, well, your listeners don't know, but I am bald. I have alopecia, and I decided to go ahead and shave my hair completely bald just because I was tired of hiding the baldness. And it was almost bringing up insecurities because I was always weird in the space showing or whatever. And people have a tendency to say you should wear your hair like this or wear hair, having no idea the cost that it takes to maintain that, knowing what it does to the damage of your own hair, and just so many dynamics to satisfy you. Why? And it's like, my thing is, what does hair have to do with the productivity of my work?

Phil Wagner

Right.

Devon Peterika

And the thing that and I love the crown act so much, and it's unfortunate that we even have to have something like that to say, hey, people need to be able to rock their hair the way they desire, because some even applies to cultural differences, and people don't even take that into consideration. My son is half Samoan, so they identify him as afakasi because he's half Samoan and half African American. I allow his hair to grow long because, in their culture, I believe it's age 15 is the time that they kind of cut it off and allow it to grow. Well, a lot of people like, oh, he looks like a girl. Why don't you cut it off? Why don't you allow people to connect with their culture the way of this? When we came over here from slavery and all that? We were so disconnected from our culture on so many different levels. It's like, let us reconnect and be great.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Devon Peterika

And that's the frustrating piece for me. But when it comes to hair in the workplace, I feel like it's another mechanism for people to just control the way you speak, the way you talk, the way

you look, and all these aspects, it's like, stop. And it wears me down when people try to touch your hair because they're so curious. I'm not a snippet. I'm not a dog.

Phil Wagner

I want to talk about all there's, like, 17 things you just brought up, and I'm like, I want to talk about all of these. So I'm going to talk about touching. I want to talk about cost of hair treatments. I want to talk about natural hair, which we kind of just did. And if you're willing, I want to talk about alopecia. I mean, this is kind of like a significant cultural time to talk about these things. We're just a few months out from Will and Jada and Chris, and that has shaped, I think, a lot of white discourse on alopecia. Let's be honest. Not a lot of white folks sort of think about alopecia in their day-to-day lives particularly. So let's start there. You have such an impactful story. You've shared that story openly on Instagram, and it's one of such empowerment and dignity, and I love it. So give me a perspective on alopecia and maybe the cultural moment your willing to talk about and contextualize alopecia as part of DEI work.

Devon Peterika

Well, alopecia there is three main types of alopecia. Alopecia, I can't pronounce it. A-R-E-A-T-A I want to say it's like areata. And that's the form that I have, which are bald patches. Then there's alopecia totalis, which is like above your head, there's no hair. So maybe your eyebrows, your eyelashes. And then alopecia universalis, which is you ain't got no hair nowhere. There's three different types when it comes to alopecia, especially with the treatment. Sometimes, it can be exhausting. It could be, I don't want to say degrading because I've had them take pieces of my head out trying to examine it. I've had steroid shots in my head, and it's like it's exhausting. And it's like to fit the mold of who?

Phil Wagner

Right.

Devon Peterika

Who am I trying to do this for? And Phil, if you knew how much my hair bill was, my husband's going to be happy I'm bald now when I get married. But alopecia is just let me tell you a quick story. I was at this one particular organization. I won't name them. And it was actually the time that I decided I'm going to shave it all off. Like I'm tired. I'm over it. And for me, it was so freeing.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Devon Peterika

But what's so funny was about so many other people. So from a personal aspect, I had so many people in my DMs and on Facebook when I posted my first picture asked me if I was a lesbian now. I didn't know my hair had to do with my sexuality, and asked me if I am having a

nervous breakdown and I'm not Britney Spears having a moment. They were asking me if I had cancer. It was, so are you serious? So people's perspective just went out the window.

Phil Wagner

So limiting. It's a haircut. It's a hairstyle. Wow.

Devon Peterika

It had to be a root cause to whatever you're going through.

Phil Wagner

It had to make sense in their minds.

Devon Peterika

Exactly. Without asking. That was the thing that was challenging for me. And in the workplace, my supervisor at the time said she knew I was trying to progress just in general in this space. And she said people are likely not to take you seriously because you decided to shave your head.

Phil Wagner

No kidding.

Devon Peterika

Not knowing the financial, the emotional toll that I had gone through to get to this place. Are you serious?

Phil Wagner

And again, I'm a bald white guy navigating the world. I got to tell you. Nobody's ever talked about my hair being a barrier to effective leadership or change management. So, I mean, there's multiple hypocrisies, and just ironies slow baked into that sentiment.

Devon Peterika

Yeah. So I like Criminal Minds, and the reason I like Criminal Minds because I want to know the why behind the why, but nobody wants to take the time to understand, and I believe that the true issue in our world today and this is the need for D&I is because there needs to be cultural awareness and cultural competency. But in order to do that, I believe relationship is needed.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Devon Peterika

I'm not saying you got to be best friends, but I need to have some level of relationship or vulnerability to say, I don't know anything about this space. Can you tell me a little bit about it? Now, I'm not saying it's my role to educate you and bear the burden for you, but at least to shine some light or some direction for you to get guidance on your own. But people don't want to do that.

Phil Wagner

And it's a call for true and authentic relational development because it's not, hey, let's get into relationships so you can be my teacher mentor on black hair issues. Right? It's, hey, let's come into community together because I think you're a great person. I think we share a values framework. And guess what? The more we go to lunch, the more we talk, the more we have casual conversations, the more we become more vulnerable and deepen relational development. Peel back the layers of the onion. The more I'm just going to naturally learn through sort of osmosis, through just sort of like, I care about what's happening in your life. This is meaningful to you. You're not teaching me anything. We've just got community, and through community comes greater understandings. I think that's a profound recipe for how to do that in a healthy way with not exploiting the knowledge or lived experiences of other folks.

Devon Peterika

Yes, absolutely. I totally agree.

Phil Wagner

So let's talk about Will, Chris, and Jada. I mean, you talk about raising awareness. I don't know that anything has raised awareness for alopecia or the cause of alopecia or just recognition that this is a thing that exists in a very impactful and high-profile way. Did that help? Did that hurt? Do you not want to comment? I know you're not a social.

Devon Peterika

No, you know, I got comments today.

Phil Wagner

All right.

Devon Peterika

I'm on your podcast. I'm ready to rock it out. There's a challenging piece with the Will and Jada situation, and then I'll talk about how I feel like it impacts them. The thing that pisses me off so bad. Yes, I said, pisses off. Me off.

Phil Wagner

No limits here. You know that.

Devon Peterika

Is the fact that you heard more people talk about violence when it came to Will getting up and slapping Chris, and I'm not saying it's right, wrong, or indifferent, but from an ethnic background, I feel like a lot of the black people were like, yo, this could have happened at a barbecue. You talk about somebody's people, hey, you're going to get smacked. So we were like, oh, dang, that happened in public, in front of company. But I felt like our white counterparts were like, oh, my God, the violence. But where was you all's asses at with all this social injustice? When all these black boys were getting shot by police? Where were you all at when this little boy crossed state lines with a gun that he ordered online, and then where was you all talking about the violence then? And then they tried and then suspended Will from the award. Again, where I just feel like there's such hypocrisy. You want to talk out when it's convenient for you.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, there's so much, and I don't feel qualified to talk about every aspect because it's not my space. But I think there's so much that we can learn from that interaction. And one of the poignant notes to me is the erasure of Jada in that conversation, too, of how most impacted by that dignity violation and the person least talked about. It came down to the act of violence, not so much even just, oh, this is playing out at her expense in front of a very public audience.

Devon Peterika

One of the things that when it came to the situation because someone asked me was like, how do you feel about it? And I was like, Well, alopecia is very sensitive for everybody. And again, everyone's unique difference because I embraced it. And now, granted, I started developing alopecia when I was pregnant with my daughter, and Destiny is now 21. She's going to be mad because I told her age, but literally, it took me almost 18 years to finally say, you know what? And I love this look now, you know what I'm saying? I feel bold. I feel courageous. I feel like I feel sexy, you know, the whole nine. But everybody is not in that place, and we must honor and respect where they are at in that journey.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Devon Peterika

Even though Jada wasn't, because everybody was like, oh, it's no big deal, and whatever. And I don't know how Jada feels about it. I don't know because I don't know Jada. I would love to meet her one day.

Phil Wagner

You and me both. Yeah. But I think that's an important point, too, is to not assume that these experiences are monolithic. You've spoken to some of the issues that you have faced in sort of coming out with alopecia, for lack of a better term. Right? Not everyone is in a place where they are resilient enough or capable to do that. So I think this is about opening up space for

people to be their full, authentic self, even if it doesn't make sense to how you think about how authentic self should play out. It's maybe not our business to do. With alopecia, let's go back to the natural hair conversation because I think this is something that I work with grad students. I work with MBA students and Masters of Accounting students, and undergraduate students. And particularly, my female black students have an experience that they often share with so many others in the class that never think about it, which is just the cost. I mean, the profound economic impact to their paycheck that it takes to align to professional ideas of hair in the workplace. Can you enlighten our listeners on

Devon Peterika

Absolutely.

Phil Wagner

is it really that costly, Devon?

Devon Peterika

Oh, it's expensive.

Phil Wagner

Talk to us about it.

Devon Peterika

Like I told you, my husband, my new husband, when I get married again, will be happy. So for me, I did hair weaves, and this was before and after alopecia. My hair could cost anywhere between \$600, and this was hair and installation, so it could cost anywhere between \$600 to \$1,200 a session. That would last me maybe about four to six weeks, depending on how I maintained it. A lot of times, I did kind of go on the higher end and wanted human hair because I want it to last longer. I wanted to be able to curl it, like whatever. Because if you get authentic hair, yes, it is cheaper, but you put a curling iron to it, it's going to melt. And then if you're looking at just natural hair, where you're taking the natural coils or different curl patterns from the hair, and then straightening their form, depending on how the length is, depending on the process, that could be a 200, 300 session fee, depending on what city you're in. In bigger cities, it costs a whole lot more money. And on top of that, you tip them. You know what I'm saying?

Phil Wagner

Yeah, for service.

Devon Peterika

You want to make sure yes because you want to make sure they take you back. And then if you're getting braids, braids take about okay. I used to get micro braids. My booty would hurt so bad it would take about twelve-plus hours to get it done. And I want to say I paid probably about 80 to 100 something bucks for the hair itself, and then paid about 200 to get it done.

My girlfriend just got goddess locks. Goddess locks. Oh my God, they're so gorgeous. I overheard the fee, and I was like, you'll make me want to grow hair just to get my goddess locks. But it was like \$800. It is financially an investment to look great.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Devon Peterika

Go ahead.

Phil Wagner

Well, and to straighten, too. And I want to be very clear, no shame. You all do what you want to do with your hair. You do what you want to do. People like different things. People prefer different things. So this is not to say anything is wrong. We're not creating rules here. But for those that choose to straighten hair through chemical means, can you speak to that process? That also takes time. It takes money. It can be risky. It's a risky endeavor in some places. Am I incorrect in my framing here?

Devon Peterika

Absolutely. And that's why a lot of people stay in natural form because a lot of times and again, it can be up in the hundreds of dollars to get your hair straightened in general. Whether it's flat iron, whether it's if I forgot what they call this, it's like some type of blow drying out that actually stresses your hair out, and it can cause it to thin out and burn the follicles. So we're basically damaging our hair to satisfy everybody else. But it can range from anywhere between two to \$500 easy, depending on where you're located. I live in Florida, so imagine.

Phil Wagner

And then the humidity, because I know I was in Florida for many years too.

Devon Peterika

Yeah, as soon as you walk outside, it's just into an Afro. Like you all wonder why we don't go swimming. I bet you don't get my hair wet because of the investment and time that it costs to get it done. It costs a pretty penny for us to get our hair done. And a lot of times, again, a lot of my friends that have decided to go natural is to make sure that they have healthy hair. They just want healthy hair because chemicals basically can burn it out. Let blow drying it out. What is that term? I keep forgetting what it's called, but my daughter got it once upon a time. And the best part is it messes up our curl pattern sometimes. If we took too much heat to it, it actually can adjust the curl pattern in certain parts of our hair. Who wants that?

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I think the anecdote is okay. Well, you don't want to pay for long braids. You don't want to pay for locks. You don't want to pay or risk the chemical treatment. Go natural. But in the world of work, natural hair is not the cure-all. Right. This is not always accepted as meeting a

professional, and I like to think that things are changing. We've had a variety of guests who have talked about changing senses of professionalism codes, particularly the pandemic has changed a lot of what we think of as now a professional. But natural hair historically has not always just been widely accepted in the world of work, correct?

Devon Peterika

No, it has not. It is doing better, much or better. And I want to say I've only I say it's improved probably over the course of the past couple of years because of all the things that have been going on as it pertains to the D&I space, and even down to head wraps, because sometimes African Americans wear head wraps to keep their hair they'll have their hair braided underneath, put a head wrap on. And people like, oh, that's so unprofessional. We did it in Africa. Let us be great. So it's, like, very frustrating that we have to sit in this cookie-cutter model to be professional. And then my question is, who determines what professionalism was?

Phil Wagner

Who determines? Yeah. Who is that term most inclusive of? Who does it create the most latitude for? Not often workers of color or other historically underrepresented folks.

Devon Peterika

Yeah, absolutely.

Phil Wagner

Let's talk about touching. You talked about this earlier, particularly within the sentiment on natural hair. I read Phoebe Robinson's book. She had this great book called *You Can't Touch My Hair* and other things I shouldn't have to explain. And again, you're here to educate us. We've sort of negotiated like we're going to talk about this. I want to be very clear. I'm never just going to go up to somebody and be like, hey, tell me about natural hair. But I appreciate you coming on to share, but can you speak to a little bit about that dignity violation of reaching into someone's personal space? You've had some stories on that as well. Talk to us about touching hair and maybe why we shouldn't do it. I like to think that's obvious, but I guess it's not.

Devon Peterika

But here's the best part. People will be willing to rub my bald head too.

Phil Wagner

No. Are you serious?

Devon Peterika

It's very dehumanizing.

Phil Wagner

Dehumanizing. Absolutely.

Devon Peterika

It is almost like I am a model that says I am not normal. Let me touch and see. Let me, and then it's like, you are entitled what you're entitled so the audacity.

Phil Wagner

It's like when people rub pregnant bellies, right? It's like, what are you doing?

Devon Peterika

But even that's her what. Can you ask? Hey, can I go? Can I rub? Okay. I understand. I'm excited. I see a baby belly. I won't rub if that's not what she desires because it's her body.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, yeah.

Devon Peterika

Like, who wants to be touched? And then to be petted on like a pet. Like, that wears me down. Because I remember, and probably about last month, someone came up to me and said, can I just rub your head? I said no.

Phil Wagner

No.

Devon Peterika

Why is that even something that you want to do that's just freaky, like, ugh? But even on hair, like no, go rub your dog.

Phil Wagner

Right.

Devon Peterika

Why do I have to satisfy your curiosity to be the experiment today? So you can satisfy, see what the texture is like? No. For me, I feel like it's a violation on so many different levels. And it's funny because usually, of course, it's white people because they don't have that texture of hair, because they're curious, and I get the innocence in their mind, but it's perceived as microaggression because you're treating me as if I am not normal or human.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, we don't pet other humans. That's not a practice that we do.

Devon Peterika

Say it again for the people.

Phil Wagner

I know, it's so true. Again, it reduces somebody to sort of like an art exhibit at best.

Devon Peterika

A dog.

Phil Wagner

A dog. It's so dehumanizing. And I think people just maybe don't think about it, but again, part of this is normalizing. Think about it. Think about it. Think about how your direct actions are contributing to the development of somebody's dignity and self-worth and or working against that. And I can find no formula where putting my fingers in your hair. I would never do that. But I can find no formula where that leads to you leaving that conversation, feeling better about yourself, having more dignity than you walked into that conversation with.

Devon Peterika

I've seen people be like, oh, my God, your hair is so gorgeous. You don't see us going up to white people. Okay, I'm not going to say never. I don't want to say never, but I have never in my life of 43 years seen a black person go up to a white person, like, can I touch your hair? Or just going or feeling I have the right to go and just touch their space. I've never seen that. And it's like, can you show us the same level of respect?

Phil Wagner

Yeah, and hopefully, the pandemic has taught us, like, hey, maybe we don't need to be touching each other at all. That and me too, I think, are like, okay, maybe I'll just keep our hands to ourselves in general. But I think it's just a powerful reminder here of if you are white and navigating this space, it's not even white folks. It's just maybe people who don't have this hair experience. Raise the profile of your awareness. Do the digging again I mentioned on a previous episode. You've got access to Dr. Google. You can find information as to why this is not an acceptable social practice. You can find information about the cost, the burden, the ways in which this does put undue stress, particularly on black women, but also just sort of black and brown folks in general, to align. I mean, you can do that research yourself. So let's wrap this down a little bit, too. I want to talk about that standard of professionalism that we opened this conversation with, professionalism codes, hair codes, dress codes. As an HR practitioner, do you really see those as DEI issues? I mean, how can you give us some understanding on how DEI and HR might understand those issues in tandem? Does that make sense?

Devon Peterika

Yes. I feel like it definitely is a D&I issue, or I'm not going to say an issue. I'm going to say a D&I matter that probably will fall under our umbrella. And the reason being is because when it comes to professionalism, my thing is if it doesn't impact the productivity of the person's work, it doesn't matter to me. There was funny because I work for a global company, and

someone told me the story that they were in another country. I can't remember what country they were in. The women wore a lot of sheer stuff, and they were like, oh, my God, she needs to cover up. She needs to whatever. You're not in America. You're in another country. And when they started talking about it, because they didn't go to the employee immediately, they realized it was a cultural thing. That's the thing. Assess your environment. Assess the culture. Don't go in there gun blazing, assuming people to take on the perspective of what you have. Is the girl doing the job? Are you tempted about her sheer shirt? Like, why are you bothered about her sheer shirt? Is she doing her work? You know what I'm saying? As long as she's not showing out places of her body that are her private parts, let her be great. That is my coin phrase, let them be great. Because a lot of times, when we say this is not professionalism, and it all goes down to cultural competency to me, and when we don't have relationship, and we lead by do what I say in this dominating manner, we won't get nowhere in this space. And I feel like it kind of aligns with HR because, in human resources, we are supposed to make sure that humans are effective in the workplace. And just what I wear and how my hair is, as long as it's presentable and I'm doing well at my job, I feel like the rest doesn't matter.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, and I think that's just such a balanced framing, right? That, sure, there are standards it's fine to have. Like you said, you want everything hanging out everywhere. There are standards of propriety, but this is a much bigger conversation, and we have created nuances, and we've created rules, and we've created sort of unsaid structures that definitely disenfranchise certain folks. I think we have to step back and take a lens as to why that is and what purpose it serves. All right, so final question for you, my friend. As we end our conversation today, I always like to end by asking guests to share more on their suggestions for sort of creating organizational environments that are places where employees can truly survive and thrive. And I think that's key because a lot of workers are not even surviving. They are leaving in droves. We want to help address that, but also, like, create those environments where they can thrive. So can you speak directly to leaders, to managers, to executives on what they can do right here and right now to improve the world of work based on the conversation that we've had today?

Devon Peterika

I would say for especially the executive and senior leadership to take a beat and step back and think from a cultural competency standpoint and also get down in the trenches. What happens is, a lot of times, group executives and senior leaders, they come up with these theories of things they want to implement in the organization. Everything's fine, everything's fine. But then, as things cascade down, there begins to be bottlenecks. Whether it's inefficient processes, whether your front-line leader doesn't believe in the hype of what you're trying to do, they're not drinking the Kool-Aid of diversity, whatever, get from your C suite and get down in the trenches and see what your people are doing and saying. Don't do no formal survey. Go out in the field so they can see you, see that you care, and then say, what does this look like? Why is she over there? Seeming like she's disconnected from the rest of the group. It doesn't seem like we have a lot of ethnic people out here. I thought our data shows this, but oh, I realized that are only African American represent our entry-level positions. Go out and

see what the actual work environment looks like instead of just looking at reports. That is my recommendation.

Phil Wagner

That's it. It all goes back to relationships.

Devon Peterika

Yes.

Phil Wagner

You can deepen those relationships. You're going to strengthen your organizational processes, and you're going to help make your DEI work more meaningful too. You're going to embed it throughout all parts of the organization, and it starts with such a personal commitment. Thank you for sharing so personally today, so vulnerably and openly. Thank you for your story, thank you for your work, and for your insights. It's been a great pleasure speaking to you, my friend. Thanks for a great conversation today.

Devon Peterika

Thank you for having me. I'm always excited to chat with you.

Phil Wagner

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