



# Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

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## **EPISODE 46: BERTINA CECCARELLI & SUSANNE TEDRICK – INNOVATING FOR DIVERSITY**

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### **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.

### **Phil Wagner**

Welcome, listeners, to yet another episode of Diversity Goes to Work. If you're a business leader or corporate executive and you have your hands in any way in your organization's DEI work right now, you're probably pretty bewildered. Indeed, the world seems to be spinning faster than ever before. And if you're an organization, it's pretty difficult right now to know which stakeholder demands you respond to and also which you respond to the fastest. Our guests today have some tools for your toolkit based on their work. Interview studies with leaders from Fortune 100 companies, small businesses, and everywhere in between. Our guests have some ideas how to ground your organization's DEI efforts in sustainability, in authenticity, in transparency, and key to their work in innovation. We've got two guests joining us today. Our first is Bertina Ceccarelli, the transformative CEO of N Power, a leading nonprofit empowering young adults and military-connected individuals to kickstart their tech careers. She's a pioneer in bridging socioeconomic mobility gaps and comes from humble beginnings, ultimately rising to earn degrees from UC Berkeley and Harvard Business School. Her passion for making a positive societal impact extends to her various roles in strategic alliance organizations, and she's been recognized as a tech industry's brightest superstar by US black engineer. You'll also hear the voice of our second guest today, Susanne Tedrick. A celebrated writer and speaker committed to promoting diversity in tech. She's author of the critically acclaimed *Women of Color in Tech*. Susanne champions the inclusion of women and people of color in the tech sphere. She's the winner of Comp Tia's Inaugural Diversity and Technology Leadership Award and an active coalition member of N Power's Command Shift Initiative. She's currently an executive MBA candidate at NYU's Stern School of Business. Susanne Bertina, what a pleasure it is to speak with you today. Thank you for coming onto our podcast. I hope I got your bios right, but just so our listeners can hear your voice and get comfortable with you and the work you do, do you mind sharing a little bit more about who you are and how you came to partner in developing this important work on innovation in the DEI space?

## **Susanne Tedrick**

Well, Phil, thank you. It's a sincere pleasure. And yeah, just to round out the wonderful introduction. So, I am based out in New York City and trying to balance my day job as a technical trainer but then going to school as an executive MBA candidate. I joke with people. I'm either an inspiration or a cautionary tale. We'll see which one plays out. But, I did have the pleasure of writing *Women of Color in Tech* back in 2019, where it was published in 2020. That book is mostly kind of a guide for women of color who are looking to come into the tech industry but are maybe not familiar about what are the ways to get in, what are the different types of careers you can have in tech, and what are some tools and some strategies based off my own transition into technology. For the better part of ten years, I actually worked in finance, mostly in admin and operations-type roles, which paid well but were very boring. I needed to find something that spoke to my true passions and my true strengths, and ended up having the opportunity to write that book on my transition. During the writing of that book was introduced through my publicist at the time, book publicist, to Bertina and NPower, which does phenomenal, phenomenal work on bringing more people of color and military veterans within the tech industry. It just so happens they were celebrating women of color in Tech Day, and our publicist was like, Well, I got somebody that you should. So Bertina and I have been collaborating on a number of different projects, including this ever since.

## **Phil Wagner**

Wonderful. Bertina, tell us your side of the story.

## **Bertina Ceccarelli**

Yeah, so, Phil, it was just such an amazing moment. That day, it was, in fact, just prior to the shutdown because of the pandemic. It was March of 2020, and we were on the steps of Borough Hall in Brooklyn, New York. Then Everett Guomo had just assigned March 12 as women of color in Tech Day. It was an important proclamation, and it was such a delight when Susanne's Publicist, who was also working for a local congresswoman, ran up and said, I know the person who literally wrote the book *Women of Color in Tech*, and I thought, I got to meet this person. And it was just such a pleasure to get to know Susanne. And I had the opportunity she invited me to serve on a panel that she was doing in promotion of the book *Women of Color in Tech on Allyship*. And the acquisition editor of Wiley happened to be in the audience and suggested the two of us think about writing what would be Susanne's book number two and my first. And it has been an outstanding collaboration. And she and I both, of course, do have these day jobs, and yet it was driven by a lot of passion. And I think such a deep interest in the topic and the pursuit of the research and the interviews is, I think, what really brings this book to life. Because I think, unlike a lot of books on DEI, this gets deep into case studies with companies as big as Accenture and Fitti and as small as a construction supply company in Arkansas, in recognition that businesses of all sizes can benefit from really thoughtful and, yes, innovative strategies for DEI.

### **Phil Wagner**

Yeah, I had the opportunity to review the book about two months ago, and love the depth and the nuance. Those cases are so helpful. And while your experience comes from tech, really, the lessons learned apply to really anybody in a high-growth sector. And so that's really where I hope to focus our attention today, and we teed this up at the beginning. But my question as we begin our conversation is that look. We know that DEI practices, or at least good intentional DEI practices, advance the bottom line. They make organizations better. And then there's a variety of nuanced conversations surrounding that, where there's a legal imperative, there's a moral imperative, yet we still see some glaring gaps in representation, particularly in those high-growth segments of the economy. Why? Does your work give us insight?

### **Susanne Tedrick**

Yeah, I think there's a myriad of reasons there that I wouldn't say is just one thing, but I'll highlight a few things. So the first is, when it comes to the development of DEI programs and initiatives, there is this almost check-the-box mentality.

### **Phil Wagner**

Say that again.

### **Susanne Tedrick**

Check it off the list. It's like so I've done X, therefore I've solved my problem. I no longer need to think about this, and I can move on to the next thing. And that would be great in a lot of things in life. Just check a box, and you're done. DEI is not one of those things. DEI is really, for lack of a better term. It is a journey because not only is it where you are at the time, but where you become. And at all businesses go through different growth and changes, and your DEI strategy has to evolve with that. So I think there is just this changing of mentality. There's also the compliance mindset. I have to comply with doing this because said regulator, said outside party, is saying I should. And the problem with this type of approach is that you don't care. In fact, the person that did our forward, Michael C. Bush, who is the CEO of Great Place to Work, during a conversation that we had, he said it really best. You have to make it personal. You really do. If you do it from a standpoint of I'm telling you to do it, you'll see the results bear themselves out over and over and over again. And so trying to have that compliance standpoint, I think, can be detrimental to that number of other factors. But Bertina, if there's anything you want to add here.

### **Bertina Ceccarelli**

Yeah, I would just know the thing that we discovered in so many of our interviews that when companies do take, as Susanne calls it, the check-the-box approach to diversity, they're ignoring underlying root causes. Right. And this is why we thought the frame of innovation was such an important lens to write this book through because any good innovator is going to really look at what is the real problem I'm trying to solve, and that begins to get to systems. And a lot of companies and leaders will shy away from wholesale systems change. And yet that require in so many respects for DEI not only to work, but to be long lasting, right? And to have this sort of

organizational commitment and to have it baked into the DNI over a period of time. So that became kind of a foundational issue or idea that we really plumbed in the book and brought to life, I think, of the case studies where, in fact, we do get to the personal. Right. So many of the leaders we profile have their own stories for why thinking creatively about the DEI implementation was important to them as leaders.

### **Phil Wagner**

Yeah, and that's key. I love the role storytelling. It anchors so much of what we talk about on this podcast. And that problem-solving orientation that anchors innovation is key. But I think your work also speaks to so many other dimensions of innovation as well. What does it mean to bring something of novelty to this space? What does it mean to bring something that really creates real value? Beyond that, check the box orientation. What does it mean to actually show up and take some risks, to do some calculated change-making in this space? In your work, you talk about some of the biggest barriers that get in the way of an innovative approach or get in the way of innovation, especially those related to or connected to DEI. Can you share a little bit more about those disruptions to innovation?

### **Bertina Ceccarelli**

Yeah. And again, let's just start at the root level of innovation for a moment. And this is innovation. Whether you think about new product design, you think about new organizational structures or capital structures, as well as DEI. But the three factors that we see repeatedly inhibiting innovation is, first, just inertia, right? We got a lot of things we got to get done in this company, and somehow, the innovation or the longer-range planning that can lead to a later innovation where investment is required today falls further and further on the list. Second is, it's not prioritized. Right? And perhaps the executives are compensated for product sales today. Everybody's doing well. Why take a risk? The third that's connected is what I'll call arrogant, but really, it's the absence of humility. And when you think about humility, when you adopt that characteristic as an organizational trait and as part of your culture, it inspires a lot of questions. Right. You're in a position where you don't always have to have all the answers. And when you open yourself up to questions, you can get really good at problem-solving, which then, in turn, leads to new approaches and new ideas for how you do your business how you think about your customers and your clients. And that's where innovation rises to the surface.

### **Phil Wagner**

One of the things I'm trying to grapple with as we talk about risk is are there, let's say, social moments that are more ripe for innovation than others. I can't help but think about kind of a case study we've chatted a lot about, which is Target. And as you might remember, in June of 2023, as Target prepared for the launch of Pride Month, they introduced a variety of LGBTQ-plus friendly and forward-facing apparel, speaking their values. And they took a little bit of a calculated risk in creating a message that was maybe a little bit more direct than it ever had been, at least from a consumer perspective. And they got a lot of backlash. And this isn't an indictment whether that was a good or bad business decision, but I think it's a testament. It's a

great case to show how divisive this political and social moment really is. Is there anything in your work that helps us figure out when it's the right time to take risks, or is it always the right time to take risks? How do we take that risk? How do we go for it? How do we jump all in but also recognize that this is a complicated space?

### **Susanne Tedrick**

So we spent a good bit of time in the beginning part of the book talking about the impact of George Floyd, the immediate aftermath of that of the proclamations that businesses were making, and then the subsequent, well, what has actually happened in the subsequent two, three years after that, and coupled with the hate crimes that were happening against Asian American and Pacific Islanders all surrounded in the same time period. And those are great opportunities to take risks, I think, for many companies, because while it's great to condemn what's happening in the world, while it's great to say, this is awful, this is evil, then in saying we're committed to doing something about it, it's really making sure that, okay, carry it out. Let's see what bears out from that. And even if it's not the transformational change that we were expecting, because that's the other thing to remember about innovation. Sometimes in our work, sometimes it doesn't always go exactly the way we want it, or it doesn't come as quickly as we'd like it, but nonetheless, we're better for having taken the risk and try and improve and get better than to just be complacent. So I think opportunities such as what happened after George Floyd, kind of what's happening with the remote work, if you know, conversation, I think these are ripe opportunities for companies to take a step back and think about, well, how do we innovate to not only find great talent but to keep them? So, I think that leaders should be brave to take those opportunities.

### **Phil Wagner**

Your work mentions some of the reasons why organizational DEI efforts flounder or fail or just like don't land. Is it just this? Is it just, oops, we made the wrong calculated risk, we made the wrong decision? Oh, shoot. Or are there more dimensions to why those efforts flounder or fail?

### **Susanne Tedrick**

Yeah, there's several. And I think part of that is when you fail, rather than kind of doing a runback and saying, well, what parts worked, what parts didn't? And really kind of bearing down on, well, let's make the good parts better and continue to improve. I think those are missed opportunities for sure. I think people make the argument there's not enough money, not enough time, not enough people, not a priority. And looking at DEI as a cost center versus something that can be transformational for the business, if not an imperative for the business.

### **Bertina Ceccarelli**

I would just quickly add to that, too, which is not approaching it as a business problem, right? And tackling it with the same level of energy, commitment, and resources that you would any sort of business proposition. Right. And we kind of go back to your examples of Target, of Bud Light, you know, the sort of market assessment of what is it that we really want to

accomplish with this campaign? Or, in the case of DEI, what are the metrics that we expect to achieve short-term, medium-term, longer-term? What kind of leadership commitment do we have? How do we make that unwavering? How do we operationalize it at every level of the company? And while taking risks, as Susanne said, sometimes there's going to be some setbacks, it doesn't imply we're going to stop. We're going to learn from it. We'll adjust, and we'll move on, and we'll try something different the next time. But the overall vision for what we have as a company for DEI efforts remains the same.

### **Phil Wagner**

Yeah. And your work shows us that this isn't a copy-paste effort from one organization to another. Right. Different organizations, different sectors, different industries, different localities are going to face different obstacles. You talk a little bit about this as you talk about the unique obstacles that small businesses face when it comes to implementing DEI. Can you share a little bit more about that for our listeners who might find themselves in the small business space?

### **Susanne Tedrick**

Yeah, so I think one of the biggest challenges for small business is that you don't have resources and scale. So, while leaders may very much care about diversity, equity, and inclusion if you don't necessarily have the money or the people who are trained to do this, then you're kind of at a loss, so to speak. In addition, it also has to think about, well, what is your local community? What does diversity look like for where you are? And that's why we say it's incredibly important to recognize where you are as an organization versus trying to do what the Targets are doing or what Citibank is doing. Because they're not even just different industries, but just completely different cultures and ways of doing things and things that we have to think about. So Bertina talked about the construction supply company earlier, and so they're small, less than 30-person office based out in Arkansas. And so what that looks like for them is going to be entirely different. They're also not necessarily going to have people who are educated on diversity, equity, and inclusion. So the leader there was great and incredible about, well, I don't know. So I'm going to find the resources, and if leaders are enterprising enough, there's always going to be some resources and organizations that they can reach out to to be able to help them on that. So that particular leader went to their Economic Development Council, who was hosting a specialized program on diversity, equity, and inclusion and how to implement that within their organization, and not only providing the basis, rather, of the DEI education, but really, what does DEI look like for you? Year one, year two, and year five, and coming up with a plan with actual metrics?

### **Phil Wagner**

Yeah, you mentioned in your work if it's not measured, it doesn't matter. And I want to get to that in a second, but I kind of want to back up to some of the framing that I think we missed because there's so much to unpack in this work right as we talked that it's not a copy paste experience, but there are, according to you, five cultural characteristics that are more universal

and enduring, that are necessary for innovation to take place. Can we unpack those five cultural characteristics just a bit?

### **Bertina Ceccarelli**

Yeah. We approach this from what is the culture that you need to actively promote as a leader to be able to help innovation thrive, and within that, DEI thrive. And remarkably, what drives innovation culturally is not too different from what drives DEI. And that's first and foremost, trust. Second, a culture of collaboration across an organization. Third is appropriate risk-taking. Fourth is courage. And fifth, and perhaps the most important, is leadership. That's not leadership just of the CEO or C suite leaders, but leaders across an organization who have the fortitude and, yes, the courage to be able to say, I think I have an idea to do things differently. And I'm going to figure out ways to get support for the people who I need support from. To pilot, to test, to try in an effort to make my part of the organization operate better by applying some new concepts and, ideas, and strategies for DEI.

### **Phil Wagner**

Those are so helpful, and I think they're a nice North Star when taken together. Right? Things to keep your eye on. Let's go back to that measurement element here, too, because this is a tricky one. You're right. If it's not measured, it doesn't matter. And I want to talk about what that means in terms of DEI initiatives, but also when we look to, for instance, the ESG space, there's been a lot of clamor to measure, measure, measure. And measurement is not a proxy for real progress. So you can measure a lot and not accomplish. How can we couch both perspectives here? Measurement matters, but it's also measurement alone is not action. So, what does your work tell us about how to grapple with those dueling realities?

### **Susanne Tedrick**

Yeah, so measurement does matter. You wouldn't invest in a multimillion-dollar project if you didn't set up some key performance indicators of where you expect to be and your actual performance. Again, applying that more business mindset. We have to apply the same thing to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We don't want to make programs and initiatives where we're not doing the thing that we're intending to do. Maybe in the stretch of developing a program, we might actually find that we are negatively impacting certain audiences or certain people. And having this measurement helps us to better understand where do I pivot, where do I improve, where do I double down on, and why it's so very important to make sure that we're integrating that within these programs. I realize that outside of the United States, it's a little harder because it's not. Laws usually kind of prevent them from kind of measuring certain demographics and metrics, but there is kind of that push to get towards that because we can't see the change that we intend unless we're measuring it and making weeks in progress and having conversations about it. So, for me, it's a starting point. It should never be just the, okay, here's the data. Here you go. We need to have very good, transparent conversations about that. So if we do need to make changes to our programs, we do that together so that we get towards the metrics that we're trying to get to.

**Phil Wagner**

And what is it that we're measuring? So, you mentioned the demographic measurement schema here. Is it just demographics? Are we looking at attitude and sentiment? I mean, what are you recommending in terms of actual measurement outcomes or KPIs?

**Susanne Tedrick**

So, taking, for example, one of the things that Bertina and I talked about during the course of the book was talking about advancement for employees of color. And so we saw that there was not a real problem of advancing employees of color when we were talking about more entry-level-type jobs. But as we started to see what was happening of them trying to move through the ranks, getting to mid-level and maybe senior-level positions, it started to get a little scary. We started seeing statistics about for black employees. Their average tenure rate in most middle positions or early professional positions is anywhere from two to three years. And that's an important conversation when we talk about inclusion. So it's one thing to recruit people of color, but then this leads to the larger question: what are we doing to keep them? What are we doing to retain them and to really advance them in the organization and set them up for a success? So it's not just a measurement of just, again, those demographics, but really getting under the hood and kind of seeing these metrics that really matter.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, you've got under the hood. You talk about three reasons that employees often leave their place of employment. Do you share what those are?

**Susanne Tedrick**

Bertina, would you like to?

**Bertina Ceccarelli**

Yeah, I will come back, if you don't mind, just for those reasons. But I want to just go a little bit deeper on this idea of measurement, though, because there's a great example of worldwide technology of exactly how they approached this issue of measurement but connected it also to all the strategies to help move those numbers. But just in short, the gentleman who is really operating at the leadership level of DEI meets once a week, every Monday morning, with the CEO and the executive team. First item on the agenda is, how are we doing? How are our DEI strategies working or not within the organization? And they review numbers and they review what are the programs that are working and what's not. And when they first started doing this, they had some very ambitious goals and realized, okay, maybe this isn't quite the right approach, but if we can achieve a 1% gain in diversity and they measure diversity very, very broadly, over the course of ten years, we're going to double the number of diverse leaders within the organization. And for that organization, given the extreme growth rate, this is a company that is doubling every five years in terms of revenue and personnel. When you can point to that kind of progress, it's meaningful. And I say that it sounds like, oh, 1% a year. That's nothing. But so many of the corporate examples that we looked at, they would have a huge announcement, right, that the CEO, particularly the weight of the murder of George



Floyd, made all sorts of big commitments but then backtracked. So, the announcement alone, right? The CEO statement alone is not what's going to really yield consistent, measurable support, unlike, say, the more quiet, long-term commitment of a company like WWT. But to go back to your other question regarding the three reasons we find people leaving companies, and this was bore out in our own conversations, but SHRM, the Society for HR Management, did a survey late 2022 that revealed 74% number one reason 74% of people leaving report inadequate compensation. That's in total salary, benefits, bonuses, profit sharing, et cetera. Second reason lack of career development, feeling as though they're working hard but don't have any opportunity to really climb the ladder. And then third, lack of workplace flexibility. And that was 43% of the individual respondents reporting that reason. And we dug into that a little bit more. But especially as companies are reevaluating remote and hybrid working, this is going to be a topic, I think, of greater scrutiny in months to come.

### **Phil Wagner**

Great. That's great. We've unpacked so much but also so little compared to the volume of information that exists in the book. As we kind of wind this conversation to a close, why don't you tell our listeners what they're getting when they grab a copy of your book? I mean, what is unique about the conversation that you two have facilitated here the case studies that we'll find talk to our listeners just a little bit about the work and then also where they can snag a copy.

### **Susanne Tedrick**

Sure thing. So, for those that are coming to read the book so very clearly, it is a book about diversity, equity, and inclusion. And we do spend some time talking about, well, what does that mean? The phrase is used quite a bit, but just trying to get that initial context just in case there was anything that was murky and understanding why historically these programs have failed. But what we're hoping to give end users is inspiration. That just because we talk a lot about programs and initiatives that are not meeting the mark, we want to give kind of inspiration of the companies that are doing it well, the ones that are continuing to try, the ones that tried, and maybe they didn't get where they want to. But what all of these companies have in common are the five characteristics that we talked about and just being willing to put themselves out there to better their organization. So, hopefully, when the reader is done reading these fascinating case studies and hearing these stories, hopefully, it will inspire them to think about, well, what can I take from this and apply in my own organization so that I can help think about more innovative ways to make a more inclusive environment for everybody?

### **Bertina Ceccarelli**

And for those who want to be inspired, you can find the book at your favorite bookseller, whether that's Amazon, Target, Barnes and Noble, or you can also find us [SuzanneBertina@innovatingfordiversity.com](mailto:SuzanneBertina@innovatingfordiversity.com).

**Phil Wagner**

Excellent. I love how you frame the conversation. There's this great quote you both give. You say great leaders don't settle for good enough when it comes to identifying and training diverse talent. I think that's key. Those that are great they push their teams to question what's possible and to innovate scalable solutions. So, yes, please go snag a copy. You'll find case studies from Fortune 100 companies, small businesses, everybody from Target, Coca-Cola, Citi, Accenture, the NHL, and beyond. Lots of great tools for your toolkit in this work. Susanne, Bertina, what a pleasure speaking with you. Thanks for taking time to come on our podcast and share a little bit more about your work on innovation in this space.

**Bertina Ceccarelli**

Phil, thank you so much for the opportunity.

**Phil Wagner**

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