



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 2: JEFF TRAMMELL - POLITICS AND HOPE

Jeff Trammell

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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. Welcome listeners to yet another episode of Diversity Goes To Work, a podcast where we center the real human lived experiences that make and inform our D&I work every single day. I'm very honored and excited to host today's guest Jeff Trammell. Jeff is the former Rector and member of the Board of Visitors here at William & Mary. Jeff received his BA in History from William & Mary, and it's JD from Florida State University. His professional experience includes an impressive array of both academic and public policy engagement. In addition to serving as Rector and as a member of the Board of Visitors at William & Mary, Jeff has served on the Board of Trustees for the Association of Governing Boards for Universities and Colleges and is on the Board of Advisors for the Institute of Human Virology at the University of Maryland. Jeff's public advocacy includes serving as the former chair of the Board of Directors of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, sitting on the Board of Directors for the Human Rights Campaign, and the Board of Advisors for the US Holocaust Memorial Virginia. Serving as the Senior Project advisor for the LGBT Victims Remembrance Project and serving as senior advisor for LGBTQ Outreach for the Gore 2000 and Carry 2004 presidential campaigns. Jeff, it's a true honor to speak with you and geez loulou. That is quite an impressive biography. I'm so glad you were willing to join and make time to chat with us. Have I missed any details in reading that biography? I'm certain that I have given your impressive array of experience. Can you share a little bit more about who you are and what you do with our listeners?

Jeff Trammell

Well, I'm an old basketball player, too. I mean, I was captain of the basketball team at William & Mary. That's still somehow graduating, probably to the surprise of a couple of my professors. No, I love William & Mary. It took a kid from North Florida and introduced me to the world. And as our Liberal arts education does so well, I think we're second to none. And as we say, taking kids at 18 and turning them out of 22 with a skill set to change the world. I'm

not sure I've changed the world, but I've at least had a good education that's allowed me to try to make some contributions. I would just say in terms of things of which I'm proud. One of them is that in electing me as the Rector, William & Mary became the first major public university in the country to elect an openly gay chair of their board.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jeff Trammell

And I'm proud that it happened in Williamsburg, not in Madison, Wisconsin, or Berkeley, or a myriad of other places where one would think that that would have happened first. But I'm very proud of that. And, of course, in a personal level, but an institutional level too, that William & Mary was a place where that could happen because most major universities in the country were not at that point in 2011 when I was elected the Rector.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. And thank you for setting the standard for the institution. And I share that same love and affinity for William & Mary and that focus on inclusion to see how it's grown since 2011. I think it's quite heartening as well. Jeff, our goal today is to really center a very tricky topic within the sphere of diversity and inclusion work, and that's politics. And you have been engaged in political work broadly speaking before we get to sort of your work on the Gore and Kerry campaigns and the political discussion that we're going to center here, I'm wondering if you could sort of tell us a little bit about the work you've done that scaffolds under that umbrella of diversity, equity and inclusion work. Can you share any insight from your career about maybe in our current iterations of diversity and inclusion work, whether they're effective? Whether they're just window dressing? Where they fall short? You've got got a great bird's eye view given your impressive career. Any insight?

Jeff Trammell

I would say that the one insight that has continued to develop within me as we've all been on this journey to better understand what inclusion really is, no matter the organization, whether it's society at large, down to the smallest organization, it's often truths. Pursuit of truth, and maybe that's my history degree from William & Mary coming through loud and clear. But when people tell me that the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow are not relevant today, I say that is not truthful.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jeff Trammell

Let me take you and show you the direct legacy of those governmental political decisions that were made over centuries and the impact they held on American society. So this is truth we're talking about. When we talk about why do traditionally marginalized communities not fair as

well, sometimes in business or in other organizations, why they're not as confident? Well, I would cite Mya Angelou's observation that the worst thing they do is they teach us to hate ourselves.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jeff Trammell

And when that happens at an early age, it has a lifetime of ramifications. So in the corporate world, I saw young gay men and women and others who came from those types of backgrounds. Less willing to pound the table and say, I know I am right or to swagger into the presentation and said, I'm going to tell you what you need to know. That reticence about one's own role is a legacy of political and policy decisions that marginalized people for a long time and affect real lives, real organizations, in business or otherwise.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. I think that's important in the corporate world. We use this a little bit of a cheesy cliché that bring your full self to work, bring your full. But there's a degree of truth to why that's so necessary, right. I think you're speaking right to the heart of that issue. So then centering the political role of D&I work. You've served in some high-profile advising positions for the DNC, working on both the 2000 Gore campaign, the 2004 Kerry campaign. How have you seen diversity, equity, and inclusion issues, broadly speaking, ploy and progress for the DNC since those campaigns? We come a long way since 2004.

Jeff Trammell

Yeah, we really have. And I think that I start with the recognition that we're all privileged to live in a time of change. Hopefully, in a generation or two, people will look back on it and say, Well, I don't understand why the big issue, right? Why is a big issue that someone who was LGBT was elected to a position of leadership? But we know in the time of which we live. There is a reckoning occur on multiple levels. So I would say some of the things that I saw were that we went from a sort of limited awareness of what diversity meant. It was window dressing in the early days. It was though with the picture has to have some people of color in it. Or we'd like to say that we have a lesbian partner in our law firm. And those were all important steps. I mean, arguably, where we are today could not have been achieved without these sort of baby steps that were taken. And certainly, I look back on my own experience. I remember when being working for a consulting firm in the early 80s, and when they found out I was gay, they asked me leave.

Phil Wagner

Oh, my goodness.

Jeff Trammell

So I felt like I knew, right? I mean, here I am, white, jock, former basketball player, the world at my feet, right. I'm a William & Mary alum. And then suddenly, when someone finds out you're gay, they could yank the rug out from under you. Well, that's eye-opening. And for me, it helped me crystallize in my mind what perhaps people that can't hide, like women and racial minorities, deal with all the time. But the point is that over these years, sometimes one step forward, two backwards, but usually taking two steps forward and one backwards, we have progressed remarkably and sometimes through pure fertility. Look at the way in which marriage unfolded. I remember, as late as 2011 and twelve, trying to get the Virginia Council and Higher education business leaders interested in domestic partner benefits for the faculty and staff at William & Mary and other universities in the Commonwealth and being told not to raise the issue because it made some of the businessmen in the group uncomfortable. Well, we had within a few handful of years, marriage was the law of the land, and parenthetically my husband and I had the privilege of being married in the US Supreme Court by William & Mary's Chancellor, Sandra Day O'Connor.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jeff Trammell

So an all William & Mary event that was unimaginable, just two or three years prior to that. When we were fighting literally just to make sure that faculty at William & Mary who had a partner that might have cancer could get health insurance. And it was a struggle. We came up with creative ways at William & Mary to try to protect our own.

Phil Wagner

Two steps forward, one step back conversation, I think, is an important one because I think, particularly in the era that you were advising those campaigns that really defined the progress of LGBTQ rights. I mean, you think about what was it 2004 right, Del and Phyllis getting married in San Francisco and then a little bit later annulled and then married again, and then prop eight came. I think that's sort of been the tug of war, particularly for LGBTQ rights. And I think in some ways, it seems that we're taking multiple steps back right now, here in 2021, as it relates to LGBTQ rights specifically. I'm wondering if you can speak to the opposite side of the fence, right. There's been a little bit of movement or a lot of movement in a myriad of ways in the Republican Party. How has the D&I conversation shifted in the RNC over the years? From your perspective.

Jeff Trammell

Citing a recent example, it hasn't shifted very well. In the last few weeks, I've been working on a resolution with Senator Tim Kaine to have a formal federal apology for the mistreatment of LGBTQ federal employees, service members, civil servants, foreign service officers during the lavender scare the witch hunts. The mistreatment and discharging of hundreds of thousands Americans who were basically punished by their own government because of their orientation

or expression. And we just introduced the bill this past week. Senator Kaine did with Senator Baldwin and 17 sponsors we could not get a single Republican even a sponsor at resolution, which is nothing more than an apology for what happened decades ago. I think that speaks to the leverage within the Republican Party at present and the fear. I don't think most Republican officeholders have anti-LGBT views, but there is the leverage from the social conservatives as such within their party. They fear the primary, and they don't want to provide any ammunition to a critic. That would say that they don't uphold traditional power. So, yes, we're at a two steps backwards when it comes to the Republican Party. Not always true. There are some places where progress has been made. I mean, I tell you, the place it's been made, and it's often cited, is in the corporate world. Today, when we have a congressional hearing, as we did on the Equality Act, we bring forth CEOs of Fortune 500 companies or even small businesses because the reality is that the political process of social issues often tracks behind the public.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jeff Trammell

In certainly the business world.

Phil Wagner

You know, as of late, it seems that we are engaged or bombarded with a constant stream of rhetoric. It's really gotten louder over the years, positioning almost all diversity, equity, and inclusion work, or just diversity equity and inclusion stuff as something that is inherently political, inherently Liberal. I'm thinking about recent conversations on critical race theory, for instance. I mean, this has just blown up. There's a lot of political discourse on this right now. And even just two years ago, the Southern Baptist Convention, which is about as conservative as you can get approved the use of critical race theory as a supplemental tool. And so it seems that there's just been this grab hold of diversity, equity, and inclusion as something that is now inherently political. And I'm wondering, is it? Do you have any thoughts on is this work truly political?

Jeff Trammell

It's not political. It's truth. And I go back to that North Star if you will. How can it be unacceptable to say that which is what critical race theory does to say that government decisions made in the past on slavery and Jim Crow have an impact on societal challenges today? How can you possibly say that redlining did not help create poor neighborhoods? They're largely people of color. How can you say that school segregation did not have a lasting impact on the Commonwealth of Virginia or the nation at large? I put the attack on critical race theory in the same category as other untruths that are promulgated from whether it be who won the presidential election to whether there was massive voter fraud to a general and a great corollary question here is the role today of social media and making untruths, perhaps dominant over truths. But I put it in that category.

Phil Wagner

So does our goal then become to try to depoliticize diversity? Do we put a label to say this isn't political? This is for everybody? Or do we focus on telling the truth? What about those instances where there are multiple versions of the truth sort of playing out particularly politically?

Jeff Trammell

I think you ask a great question here because, yes, we want the concept of inclusion to not be politicized. We want it to be an intrinsic part of the way we see ourselves, whether it be as a business or a University, or any other subset of American society. And I think that we've made progress in that regard. But I do think that we have to not talk in terms of what Jim Carville is fond of calling faculty lounge talk. There's a legitimate debate of whether using the term Latinx people of Latin American origin in America want, and it's not up to those of us who are, quote, the academic elite to tell them this is what you shall be called, right. I just use that as a

Phil Wagner

That's a great example.

Jeff Trammell

example, of our challenge, and our challenge is to bring it down to the individual personal level where someone understands that when you include everybody and you're thinking you're stronger. I mean, if you're putting together a strategic plan and you don't have the perspectives of people who make up a major segment of American society and your marketplace at the table. Your strategic plan is going to be flawed.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jeff Trammell

So we want to get beyond the sort of the theory, the faculty lounge theory, down to the practicality of what?

Phil Wagner

Yeah, and I love that focus on practicality. And I teach so many bright, you know, our students, Jeff. I mean, they are bright, they are engaged, they are passionate, and they have a mature approach to diversity and inclusion work far beyond, I think, what would be expected, particularly of an undergraduate student. But you bring up a great theme here, which is that often academics or people who are young in their D&I journey D&I advocacy journey may come out ahead of what's really needed or desired for the communities that they're working on behalf of. So I think the Latinx is a great example. Do you have any advice from your career on how to temper your D&I work to make sure that it is truly well balanced so that particularly younger, more social justice-minded D&I advocates approach this work with a sense of maturity? A sense of balance.

Jeff Trammell

Yeah, and I think that is you just put your finger on our challenge as educators. Is to move beyond our sort of academic and theoretical view to the practical, the real, the on the ground application. And I'll turn to a brief example. We had a group associations of governing boards of universities and colleges to work on free speech on campus a few years ago, which obviously critically imported issue, and they needed they realized they didn't have a student on the panel, god forbid. Even though we're talking about free speech on campus. So, of course, I volunteered a twamp. I'll go find a typical William and Mary person, a swamp student who will, as you just describe, be the brightest, the most articulate, the most caring and engaged. And this is an overall remarkable human being. And of course, I'm describing the typical student at William. I married. So this wonderful young man joined our talent. He was just what you would expect. But then he got into this area of microaggressions, and he talked about how that students feel like they shouldn't have to be exposed to things that make them uncomfortable. And I asked him, what did he think the real world would be like after they left the University? And if we were preparing them for jobs in the private sector or working for any nonprofit working on issues around the world? Did they think that they weren't going to encounter cultural issues that make them uncomfortable? And isn't it our job to prepare them? And we had that lengthy discussion, but I think it's one area that students need to understand early on, which is a part of a good education. It's not to shield you from having to learn that people may not like you or however you identify, but it's how to deal with it, right. So I would just say that's just one example of the disconnect between good intentions by students and the world in which they will live after they leave campus.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. That's such a great example to share, too. And I think it's a well-intentioned off-ramp. We come into contact with an uncomfortable idea. We're immediately looking for an off-ramp to get back to our comfort zones. And we're talking about politics, and I think that politics can do that well. Maybe not even just with students. But when you're working with other perhaps conservative-leaning professionals, necessarily, as we've talked about diversity equity, inclusion work is going to hearken to political themes. It's going to hearken to political policy because it simply cannot. And so as we get to that space in conversations and we find our colleagues wanting to take an off-ramp, I'm curious how you've built consensus across the aisle, how you've found middle ground, how you've built middle ground, or how you've built a third space that maybe isn't middle ground. But get some buy-in from those who may not give it freely, at least initially.

Jeff Trammell

Absolutely. And the HEBS asked me to write a pamphlet, which I did on chairing a University board, and I told them that the best experience I got was working as a congressional staffer because when I worked in the Congress, or a committee made up with people of all different philosophies from different parts of the country, different backgrounds, you learn that you have to build consensus. And what does that come down to? Well, it comes down to personal relationships and listening to people and understanding their positions, even when you don't

agree with them at all. So I think that certainly, for me, being in that intense political environment was invaluable. And when I was Rector, half of my board was appointed by a Republican governor. But I made the point of going and meeting with each of them often in their offices. It took time. It took effort. But I wanted them to know that they could talk to me. They could let me know what they wanted to accomplish, and the personal relationship is essential. And I would encourage anybody to build relationships with people who have different points of view, come from different backgrounds, and don't avoid them. But find the common ground, and you will be improved. Your relationships will be improved. But more importantly, you can be more effective at whatever your task is if you build the types of relationships that get outside your comfort zone but allow you to operate in the world as it exists. And that's what we're talking about, after all, is in a University. We're trying to prepare people for success, whatever goal they put before themselves. And the one bit of advice I would get, don't disappear into yourself but reach out. You know, it's the essence of politics. It is building up your relationships and having a system that will allow you to be successful.

Phil Wagner

I don't mean to paint so O'Neill's picture here. I'm thinking back historically, there have been some great relationships cultivated across the political aisle from like Reagan and Tip O'Neill being a great example. Kerry and John McCain, Michelle Obama, and George W. Bush.

Jeff Trammell

Exactly.

Phil Wagner

But it seems right here right now, the political environment we find ourselves in 2021 is not conducive to building. You don't see the same. I don't see the same foundation set to be able to cultivate those relationships. I'm wondering if you can offer a perspective. And how do we get out of the toxic political culture win right now to get back to that place where we truly can forge relationships across the political island, get stuff done.

Jeff Trammell

Obviously, that is essential. And there are people like writers like George Packer who say that we're in a new era where the consensus is gone and that we may never get back there. But I think we have to be optimistic and say that we have to reinforce the system. Imperfect it has been. It has brought us where we are. It's allowed us to flourish in ways and fail in others. But the American system is critical to this whole endeavor, obviously, and that's what I hope will see us through this. I don't have the magic answer, but I do know that we've been in dire times before we've found our way through it. And when I look at the next generation, such as our students at William & Mary, I'm encouraged.

Phil Wagner

Me too, me too. And I have a sense of optimism. And I think that you need that for this work. I think that you need to remain hopeful for what the future could be, to remain hopeful for

the potentials of a better tomorrow, because that's what carries you forward. And I think is what carried us historically through all of the ebbs and flows in social inclusion. I'm wondering if you can provide just some insight on where you see the next trends or major milestones in diversity, equity, and inclusion going. Particularly within our current political climate or complicated global environment. Where do you think we can set our sites to next?

Jeff Trammell

I think that where we are today, as you and I are talking, which is under the auspices of a business school, tells us a great deal, doesn't it? Change is coming in many ways through the business world, as opposed to the political world. Gridlock in the political world, which is largely all caused by massive amounts of money that make well-intended members of Congress unwilling to vote on the basis of their own views. But on the basis of making folks happy on the outside. We're in that situation. I don't see an easy way out of it. But what I do see is progress is being made in the business world. And when I see, I mean there's a long way to go. We don't have if you look at boards of directors, look at corporate boards, for example, one of the great next frontiers, where we've seen some backsliding in recent years. We have a great paucity of LGBTQ directors of Fortune 500 companies. Virtually none. I've been involved a little bit with some groups have been working on that. Why? We know that the LGBTQ market is huge and growing. As more young people identify as LGBTQ, the percentage of consumers is going to go from four or five to eight or nine. Even higher with some of the youngest consumers. So how can there be a disconnect? We don't have directors. How can Fortune 500 companies feel it's okay not even to think in those terms where they may have one black woman or one Hispanic man. I mean, there still is so much sort of tokenism and disconnect in the leadership of corporate America that's one of the next frontiers. Government will play a little role in that. States have been legislating in this area. California has taken the lead and mandated greater diversity in their corporate boards. Other States are doing it in bits and pieces, probably a dozen States out there right now. But this is one of the areas to watch because, again, the actions in the corporate world and not in the halls of Congress.

Phil Wagner

Such great insight, Jeff. I've got one final question for you if you're willing. I'm trying to synthesize everything we've talked about today, and I'm reminded early feminist advocates reminded us that the personal is political. And as we've noted today, even the professional as it relates to DEI work is certainly political. I think your life has wonderfully synthesized all of those. And I'm wondering if you can share a little bit more for our listeners, particularly those that may be our younger students just beginning in their DEI advocacy journey, on what they can learn from your journey and what they can come back to as they hit those bumps in the road as they find themselves in the one step back, not two steps forward part of the DEI journey. Any insight for those just beginning this work?

Jeff Trammell

I would just say that understand that you can't script where life will take you but be prepared for with a mindset that everything's possible and that you're going to be open to getting to know and understanding society better as events open around you. I grew up in a two-traffic light town 50 miles west of Tallahassee, Florida, and what is the Deep South really? And if you'd ever told me that I would grow up to be chair of the board at William & Mary, or married in the US Supreme Court or work on presidential campaigns, I would say never. You know, I'm a kid who is struggling to survive in a very conformist society in a small town. And you and I know there are millions of kids like that, and that's the reason that I'm so encouraged by groups that are now reaching out and working with those kids and that they have an opportunity to see people like themselves an early age. But you believe in possibilities and believe that you can prepare yourself for whatever comes your way, and you will get the opportunities. Again I don't want to sound too overly focused on our students at William & Mary, but I cannot help but just be so impressed every time I'm on campus that our kids are doing a pretty good job of preparing themselves for what lies ahead. And I would say if I could offer any advice to William & Mary kids, is maybe to understand and better appreciate what you're getting. You're getting an education second to none in terms of the teaching experience, the classroom experience, very few of your peers around the country are getting that. This high of quality of education you're getting. So when you leave, William & Mary have a bit more swagger, have a bit more belief that you can run through any barrier in front of you because you can. And if there's any problem, I see with our kids is too much humility sometimes. I want them to be very aggressive in the political and corporate world, and they are, but I want them just to understand just what they're leaving Williamsburg with.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I would agree. And I think you'd be quite proud. I've only been here one year, but to see their work is just it's truly impressive, and it's inspiring to think about what change could be coming down the pipeline if they go and apply that same tenacity out there that they do here. Jeff, thank you so much for your insight. This has been truly personally rewarding for me. I know William & Mary has been shaped greatly by your influence, and I'm so thankful that you've remained connected and always willing to pour back out into our community here. So thank you for your time. Thank you for a very stimulating conversation. It has truly been a privilege.

Jeff Trammell

Well, the privilege is mine. The pleasure is mine. Anytime I can help William & Mary in any way, I feel like I'm giving back in a small way. The incredible things that it did for me. And it is sort of what I encourage everyone who has had the privilege of being a student at William & Mary to remember is that we all have to pay it forward.

Phil Wagner

I'll have to pay it forward. I appreciate that. I think it's a great note to end on. Jeff Trammell. Thank you so much for your time and for joining us today.

Jeff Trammell

Thank you so much, Phil. I appreciate it.

Phil Wagner

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