



# Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

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## EPISODE 31: ERIKA CARTLEDGE – BLACK DIGNITY

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### **Erika Cartledge**

At a corporation, if I don't feel good, how can I go out and sell your product? How can I go out and represent a company? It is too important to the work that you're doing, wherever you are, to just be base level and surface level. And does it mean people are going to have to go? Yeah, probably.

### **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. I'm joined today by my friend Erika Cartledge, who I am so excited to host here. Erika Cartledge is just a force. If you've ever met her, even for just a moment, you'll feel it. She's got an energy that just commands the room. She's busy. She bleeds blue as a proud Howard alum go bison. Erika started her personal styling company. Your Chic is Showing to help folks elevate their personal style and build their confidence. She's rocked this space as a personal shopper, wardrobe overhauler, closet detoxer, stycler, educator. She's got ebooks, a thriving Instagram community. And let me be clear, that's like a quarter of what Erika does. She's also served in a variety of marketing roles and is currently the major gifts director for the Key School in Annapolis, Maryland. She's a devoted partner, mom, and, honestly, just one of the coolest people you'll ever meet. So, Erika, it's a delight to have you here. I'm sure that I have botched your background in some way. Can you tell our listeners maybe a little bit more about who you are and what you do? And you have kind of a recent exciting update in that bio. I'm hoping you'll sort of sprinkle in there as well. Welcome, my friend.

### **Erika Cartledge**

Yeah, absolutely. So, first of all, you didn't botch the bio, and if you could just introduce me every time I walk into a room, that'd be great.

### **Phil Wagner**

Deal. Deal.

## **Erika Cartledge**

I love that. So thank you for such a warm introduction. As Phil said, I'm Erika Cartledge. I like to say that I am not in the fashion business. I'm in the confidence business. And so I am the personal stylist and image architect behind Your Chic is Showing. And as Phil said, I help people cultivate their confidence using fashion and style. I also have 13 years of experience in the finance industry and almost five years of experience in the nonprofit space. So a lot of breadth of experience. And so the really exciting development that Phil is talking about is that I am a part of Goldman Sachs 1 million Black Women initiative, and I am in the inaugural cohort of their Black in Business program. And this program is focused on female sole proprietors who are starting businesses or are running businesses and helping give them the tools and information to grow and scale their businesses. So as you think about, black female entrepreneurs are the fastest sector of entrepreneurs that are growing. So they're starting businesses. We're starting them at a faster rate. But the other flip side of that is that most businesses go out of business within the first five years.

## **Phil Wagner**

Right.

## **Erika Cartledge**

And so, part of Goldman's diversity initiative is to focus on black women in a variety of different areas and industries, and sectors. And so black in business is the one that focuses on black female entrepreneurs. And the great thing about it is they are using that as a pipeline to move us into their 10,000 Small Businesses program. They've helped, like, 23,000 or something like that. But this has been an incredible program. It's like being back in school. So we have sessions four days a week. I've got homework and everything else. But it is elevating me as a business owner and an entrepreneur, and a CEO. So it's just been an incredible program. And thanks to Goldman Sachs for putting their money where their mouth is, right? So they're talking about billion-dollar investments into the black community, and this is just one way that they're doing it.

## **Phil Wagner**

That fits perfectly with where we're going. But we have to pause and say, my gosh, what an honor. But knowing you and your work, duh, of course, because, again, you are driving change, and you are leading with such a focus on changing culture around this. So I appreciate the work you do and really excited to see this honor bestowed to you. All right, so let's talk about what we're here to talk about today. Your Chic is Showing is in the confidence industry. And we're here today to talk about something that I think is one of the tendrils of that, which is dignity. We want to center a conversation on human dignity, but also sort of black dignity specifically. I love Donna Hicks work. It's a foundation to what I do when I teach DEI leadership courses. And I think part of what I love about that work the most is it takes not just DEI but leadership in general and boils it down to an explicit focus on dignity. I think dignity is a way to work against the theater that is DEI work. So much of the DEI industrial complex is about optics, and I think dignity is an anecdote to that. So let's talk about black dignity for a

bit. How does that term sit with you? Can you contextualize the idea of dignity for us based on your own experiences?

### **Erika Cartledge**

Yeah, so I've been thinking a lot about that. I love the term, and here's why. So when I think about dignity and allowing for people to have dignity, the base level of that is seeing someone. Right. And it's seeing yourself and then having other people actually truly see you. Right. And that, I think, to your point, about it being antidote to sort of the performative nature that can come with DEI. When you actually see someone, it's no longer performative because you are comprehending them and realizing them as a human being, a multi-dimensional person. And so, so much of the work that I do is around giving people dignity because, for better or worse, how we show up, how we present ourselves, how people receive us, how they perceive us, is tied to how we are dressing and how we carry ourselves. And a lot of times, we don't allow ourselves to have dignity, right? So when you aren't allowing yourself to have dignity, when you are not recognizing realizing yourself as a whole multi-dimensional person, that manifests in your wardrobe, and it manifests in how you show up, right? And so in, this idea of dignity is so interesting because it's internal. But so much of what comes at us externally helps us either decide we're worthy of having dignity or not, right? So I think about my plus-size clients, right? And you are told you don't deserve to take up space. You don't deserve to be here. You don't deserve to show up. So what that internalizes to you is, I don't deserve dignity. I don't deserve to be who I am and to take up space. And so then that manifests, and I wear clothes to hide. Whether it's, I wear things to hide and make myself look smaller. I wear things to hide and blend in and disappear. You are now manifesting that. And so then it's a self-fulfilling prophecy because now you don't look the part because you don't believe it. But then people don't take you seriously. People don't allow for that dignity. And so it's really interesting when I do my styling, I'm always like, it's 20% the clothes on your body, and it's 80% this hard work that we do because I have to get you to believe you deserve to show up. You are powerful. You deserve to take up space. You deserve to have dignity and have people see you. And then, once you believe that, then we can manifest it on the outside. I can find you cute clothes, whatever the size is, right? So I love doing that and helping people realize you are worthy, and you're worthy right here, right now. You don't have to be a milestone. You don't have to be a size. You don't have to be a certain race. You don't have to be a gender. You are worthy right here, right now. And so then, if I take this into black dignity and thinking about that, that is something that, as a black woman, I work to instill into my kids every day, right? Because this idea of dignity and having dignity and being able to be seen, it doesn't just start when we show up in corporate. It doesn't just start when we start working at a company. It starts when we're kids. My son had an experience where there's another little black boy in his daycare. They both have curly hair, they're in the same class, they play together, and so kids mix them up all the time. And I had an instance where a child called my son the other child's name, and I said, no, hey, this is James. James, can you say hi? And the dad got really upset at me for correcting her. Oh, it doesn't matter. It does matter.

**Phil Wagner**

It does matter. Absolutely.

**Erika Cartledge**

My child having a name. My childhood identity absolutely matters. And he's two and a half, so he's not always big enough to advocate for himself. So my job is to do that and to allow him, at two, to have dignity. Because if you think about the trajectory, if he's constantly being dehumanized or having his identity stripped away, and the other child is on a trajectory of everyone going, it's okay, it doesn't matter. Then when they work together, when they're 25 and 30 and 35, and she's his manager, she's been taught black people don't need dignity. I don't need to see them. And so now she's bringing that into a workplace, and now he's fighting whatever workplace politics there are on top of this dignity conversation.

**Phil Wagner**

There's so many reasons why it absolutely matters, right? I mean, even going back to Donna Hicks work, it's an acceptance of identity violation. It's a recognition violation. It's an acknowledgment violation. There are safety issues there. I don't want to put your kid's name out to the world, but kid A and kid B, if I say it doesn't matter if kid B goes by kid A's name when I refer to them. What happens when one of those is running across the street, and I say the name, and I have just cued the other kids a little it's a safety violation. There's so many levels of inhumanity or dignity violation, I think, present there. So I want to talk about, particularly in the context of DEI work in the world of work. We talk a lot about respectability politics, and I think a lot of people confuse dignity for respect, and I see those as two very different terms. I'm wondering if you do as well. Any insights?

**Erika Cartledge**

I definitely see them as two different terms. I think it is possible to respect someone or respect what they do without necessarily giving them or assigning dignity to them. I don't think you can assign dignity to someone without also respecting them.

**Phil Wagner**

That's a good way to put it.

**Erika Cartledge**

And so when I think about it that way, I can take so many examples in my life and my career where I know people respect what I do, but in the same breath, they have shown me that there is no place for dignity, there is no place for identity. I blend into the sea of black people that they may or may not have met, and I think then respectability politics gets into that, right? Because it's layered into the well, I respect you and you do a good job, so you have to behave this way. You have to behave in the way that I'm expecting you to behave. You have to conform to something, and I'm expecting you to do it because I do think you're good at your job, or I do think you're smart, or whatever that is. But if you really allowed me to have dignity, then you would say, I understand why that's not okay. I understand why you're

reacting this way. I understand you are not an angry black woman. But there is a massive microaggression or macroaggression that was leveled against you, and you are having a natural response, and we are telling you to respond in a certain way to something that we have no experience with. Right? And so once you allow someone some dignity, then you can understand the behaviors, and you stop trying to put them in this box and say, well, if you would just soften it or if you would make it palatable. You don't tell white women to make things palatable. Right.

**Phil Wagner**

Ever.

**Erika Cartledge**

We definitely don't tell white men to make things palatable.

**Phil Wagner**

We don't tell white men nothing. I know, yeah.

**Erika Cartledge**

So why do I have to say the same thing but now make it palatable for you? I definitely think there are two separate issues.

**Phil Wagner**

The way it plays out is quite extreme because the flip side of respectability politics leads to Trevon, leads to George. I mean, it leads to acts of violence. So you don't fit in that box. The stakes are high. And so I think the respect thing a nice first step, certainly never enough. And even with what you do in the entrepreneurship circle, I think a lot of people probably respect what you do. But I'm certain I know, I've heard you speak about this, that respecting what you do is say, oh, she does good work. I want to pick her brain without compensating her. That's the dignity. That's the difference. Dignity is saying, I respect what she does and I'm going to put my money where my mouth is. It's Goldman saying she's great, and I am going to fund that. I am going to incentivize her to keep being great. And so I think there's an action difference between those two.

**Erika Cartledge**

That is a great example of it. I think exactly to your point about investing in, compensate, or even negotiating with people, right? I get people who are like, I want to pay you, but I don't want to pay your rate. And I know for a fact you're not over here trying to negotiate and get someone else to come down on their rates. And so, yeah, exactly to your point about allowing for that dignity and say, well, just because I'm a black female entrepreneur, you think I should charge \$1,000 less. You think my prices are too high. I know you're not in someone else's inbox saying that the prices are too high, right?

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah. Okay, so let's talk about some dignity violations. Those are those times to me where our dignity or even just sort of through an observational lens, the dignity of others is not honored. How might we think about dignity violations playing out in the workplace? And I know there are a variety of different ways we could go in this conversation with what you do. I think even some of the professionalism standards that we uphold in the world of work are often coded as white or definitely coded as sort of thin-centric, just the nature of code-switching or the problematic nature of work culture fit, which often puts minoritized or historically underrepresented folks to them. I mean, there's so many different ways.

**Erika Cartledge**

There's so many ways.

**Phil Wagner**

I don't even know where to start the conversation.

**Erika Cartledge**

I want to touch on all of them.

**Phil Wagner**

Let's go, let's go.

**Erika Cartledge**

We could just go bullet by bullet by bullet. Right?

**Phil Wagner**

I know.

**Erika Cartledge**

So let's talk a little bit about the obvious tie into my work as a stylist, which is around thin-centric, eurocentric, just standards of your appearance, right? And how you show up. And especially in the finance industry, they are so archaic and antiquated in a lot of ways. And so I can even think about she's probably not listening to this, but I had a boss when I was a salesperson, and in the summertime, it is too hot to wear your hair straightened and pressed. So I'm like, okay, I wear the hair curly the way it grows out of my head. And I remember I came to work one day, she put her hands in my head in front of everyone and said, what is this? What are you doing? Which is a dignity violation. It's a physical violation of my space. It is a violation of me literally showing up as myself because I have the hair that grows out of my head. There's the violation of you doing it and performing this act in front of all of these people. And then there's another violation because everyone watched her do it, and no one said a word.

**Phil Wagner**

Which is also dignity violation. Right. You talk about bystander intervention all the time, and then when push comes to shove, nobody pipes in.

**Erika Cartledge**

So there's that piece of it. There is the commentary on bodies. Oh, you lost 20 pounds and people think it's a compliment, and you think it's a good thing.

**Phil Wagner**

Been there.

**Erika Cartledge**

Yeah, you know, you don't invite the conversation. Why is my body, and what is happening with it?

**Phil Wagner**

Not an art piece.

**Erika Cartledge**

Yeah, it's not an art piece. I'm not on display. This isn't a conversation topic. It's not a coffee table book. Like backup. Right?

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah.

**Erika Cartledge**

So there's that piece of it. I think a lot about, especially, black women's bodies. We are built differently, right? We got curves. We got butts. We got all of the things. So there are things that I see other people wear to the office. And I'm like, I can't wear that. Not because it's inappropriate, not because I shouldn't be wearing it, but just because of the way that my body is. I will be perceived differently.

**Phil Wagner**

For sure.

**Erika Cartledge**

People will have comments, people will say things, and there's the dignity violation of I should be able to wear the things that I want to wear. But also, you don't. Again, my body is not a topic for conversation. God, like, do not be pregnant in the workplace. Because then it's the dignity violations. It's the touching your belly. It's the all invasive. It's everything, right? So I think there's the very natural, kind of like physical dignity violations. But then I think even for me, the parts that are more difficult, the code-switching because it's exhausting, right?



**Phil Wagner**

Constantly.

**Erika Cartledge**

So I have code-switched my whole life, right? I went to a predominantly white private schools my whole life, but then I would be in church and hanging out with my friends that were outside of school. And so I was already. I've been code-switching since I could talk, right?

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah.

**Erika Cartledge**

And so it came naturally. I didn't realize how exhausting it was until we were in the pandemic and. Everyone was home, and I didn't have to go physically be in white-centered spaces. And if something was too much, I could turn my camera off. I could step away, right? And so then to go back to now we're all in person and having to do that, I was exhausted in a way that I'm like, was I always this tired? And I didn't realize it. Which I think that's exactly what it was. And it wasn't until I could turn it off, right? And I could turn it off for a number of reasons, because of the social and political climate, I could just be like, I'm not doing this today, because we were all stuck at home. I could show up in my head wrap on a meeting, and nobody was going to say anything, right? Whereas I might not do that if I'm physically going into the office. And so I remember that even being kind of more exhausting than some of the wild comments and things that people would fly, let fly. But then I think then I also noticed the unchecked nature when there would be microaggressions, right? So one microaggression. I started my job in fundraising with another woman who was a black woman. We look nothing alike. I was pregnant for most of the time that we worked together. And people were constantly calling us the wrong name. I mean, constantly. And that's annoying in and of itself. But to have coworkers and people who knew me not step in and say, well, no, this is Erika and this is that person, that's almost worse, because then it's like, do you see my dignity? Do you see my humanity? Because you have watched this person.

**Phil Wagner**

Withering in front of their eyes.

**Erika Cartledge**

Right, right.

**Phil Wagner**

Where's the responsibility?

**Erika Cartledge**

Those are the things where I think it chips away at your dignity and at your humanity. But I also think that's low-hanging fruit.



**Phil Wagner**

Exactly. Everybody is like, I don't want to get in DEI work cause I don't know what I could do. And I'm not schooled in this. You can intervene when somebody calls somebody the wrong name. That is the lowest-hanging fruit.

**Erika Cartledge**

That is low-hanging fruit. Or if you call the wrong name, apologizing and say, you know what? I know that you're Erika, and I'm really sorry I mixed it up.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, of course.

**Erika Cartledge**

Right. That is below 101. I don't even know what is under 101.

**Phil Wagner**

Remedial.

**Erika Cartledge**

And those are the kind of things that when people are like, how can I get involved? How can I make a change? By doing that, by stepping in and saying, no, that's not right. I mean, I had another experience where I was working really hope this person doesn't listen. But was working with someone, and she kept making comments about wanting to support a student at the school where I work but not wanting it to be a child of color whose parent is a doctor and just needs a little more financial aid. And it was a little more explicit than that. And because it was a pandemic, the conversation was on the phone. So she didn't see me. She didn't know I was a person of color. The other comment I get all the time is, oh, you don't sound like.

**Phil Wagner**

I knew you were going to say that.

**Erika Cartledge**

Right. So she kept saying it over and over and I'm like, so I got off the call and I called my boss and I was like, so, hey, I know I'm the director of Major Gifts. I know they make major Gifts and they make a lot of money. Here's why I can't move forward with this donor unless you step in or someone else can take over with it. And he stepped in and he was like, I'll take over. I will also talk to them and make sure that they know and understand what they're doing. And so that's the opposite side of someone seeing my humanity and seeing my dignity and saying, I'm not going to leave you to fight that battle. I'll go fight the battle.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah. And I think DEI work certainly collides with development work in more ways than we might ever suppose. I mean, I know even here at William & Mary, we have a very complex and not always flattering history. With that comes money, named buildings, statues that we are constantly negotiating. So I think maybe that's a whole other episode in and of itself.

**Erika Cartledge**

That's a whole separate podcast.

**Phil Wagner**

I got to give props to our advancement and development teams here, who really do it right and who take that stand. But as you give that story reminded all of those comments of even as you say, you don't look like what you sound like. Just chiseling away at full and authentic selves, which is the very thing we're supposed to be bringing into the world of work. Right? That's what we talk about.

**Erika Cartledge**

Exactly, yes.

**Phil Wagner**

Just chiseling away, and I think that is why dignity violations are so monumental, because it's just slow, almost like seemingly unnoticeable. Chiseling away at identity.

**Erika Cartledge**

You don't notice it until you do.

**Phil Wagner**

Until you do, and then it's too late. And there we have burnout. Here we have exiting from the world of work or from specific jobs. That is why we are faced with so many of the problems in the workforce, I think, that we are currently faced with.

**Erika Cartledge**

Yes, absolutely.

**Phil Wagner**

Let's talk about when we see those dignity violations playing out. So I want to go here with you because I know you'll get me on track. I'm a white guy. I'm a white guy. I look like what I sound like, y'all. Okay, so I'm nervous to say the fix here is to teach or equip folks of color to become more resilient. That seems so icky to me. Right? I don't want to teach resilience. I want to change culture. So I know that's toxic thinking, but I also want to create space for us to talk about how to navigate the true emotional and cognitive burden, the very things you talk about here of those negative violations. I think what I'm asking here plays out in two parts. What insights do we give to dominant majority folks? Folks like me, men, white folks, people with

dominant identity power configurations? What are some of the dignity violations you see committed by those folks that we should be aware of and address? And how can we equip them to do some awareness raising? So that's part one. I ask really loaded questions, my friend. I'm so sorry.

**Erika Cartledge**

It's okay.

**Phil Wagner**

And then two, of course, while we are pushing for a better world and a better world of work that acknowledges the dignity of others, what do we say to black and brown folks? To women? To other folks from marginalized communities about how to navigate times where their dignity has been violated? As we're working on the culture too. Does that make sense?

**Erika Cartledge**

Yes.

**Phil Wagner**

So sort of two domains. All right, cool. Help me figure this out from your perspective because you're out there doing the real work.

**Erika Cartledge**

Yeah. So I think I want to answer the second question first about.

**Phil Wagner**

Go for it.

**Erika Cartledge**

What do you say to people who are experiencing it? And I think just it can't be stated enough in our DEI director at our school who, if I can plug someone else to be on this podcast, you should get her.

**Phil Wagner**

Love to have her. Absolutely.

**Erika Cartledge**

But she always says, believe black women. Believe women.

**Phil Wagner**

Yes.

**Erika Cartledge**

So the fundamental number one thing you can do, even if you've never experienced it, even if you've never seen it, even if I'm telling you something that happened with someone that you know, and you're just like, I don't understand. You have to believe the lived experiences of people.

**Phil Wagner**

This is Donna Hicks work. I mean, one of the principles and elements of dignity that she talks about is benefit of the doubt. Treat people as if they're trustworthy. Start with the premise that they have good motives. They're operating from integrity. So believe them.

**Erika Cartledge**

Believe them because there's no world where I'm going to come to my boss and say, this quarter million dollar donor said this really offensive. Right? I understand the implications of having a difficult conversation with a donor, how that financially affects the school and where I work. So there's a world where I'm going to bring something up lightly, or I'm going to make something up. So you got to believe people. The same way we let white boys do all types of crazy. And I work in a school, right? So I know the craziness. Oh, boys will be boys. They're just because we give them that's a whole other issue.

**Phil Wagner**

It's a whole other episode too.

**Erika Cartledge**

They constantly get the benefit of the doubt, right?

**Phil Wagner**

Always.

**Erika Cartledge**

And so we've got to start believing people. And so the number one thing I think you can do, and again, this is not you don't have to take a class, you don't have to read a book. Believe what people are telling you. That is the place to start. Because if I feel believed, then I automatically feel supported. And I feel like we can effect change, create change. We can have these conversations. If you don't believe me, you go out, and now you're like, she's making that up. It's not that bad. I've never seen it. So that's one thing. So now you're hardened to whatever other future people will say, and I don't say anything anymore. So now I internalize everything. And so just at a base level, I think that's that I think you've got to give people of color, women, people in the LGBTQIA community, you've got to also realize, like, we've already been resilient because, by nature of who we are in our identity, it is forced resilience.

**Phil Wagner**

That's so good.

**Erika Cartledge**

And so I hate when people are like, you have to be more resilient. I'm like, how much more resilient?

**Phil Wagner**

How much more?

**Erika Cartledge**

Do I have to be? I'm a black mom raising. Yeah, go ahead, go ahead.

**Phil Wagner**

And when you are resilient again, what happens? Look at how it plays out on the streets. When you do stand up for rights, what happens? You subject yourself to violence.

**Erika Cartledge**

Exactly.

**Phil Wagner**

So don't come at me with that because that doesn't play out in worthwhile or advantageous ways.

**Erika Cartledge**

Right, exactly. So I'm like, don't tell people they have to be more resilient. Do not tell people how they have to communicate. It goes back to making things palatable. Right? How can I put this delicately?

**Phil Wagner**

You don't have to put it delicately.

**Erika Cartledge**

When people said knowing the difference between my two-and-a-half-year-old son and another person didn't matter, that wasn't palatable. Right? When people use the N-word. When people use the B word, when people use homophobic slurs, that's not palatable. So now, why do I, when you violated me, you violated my space, you violated my dignity? Suddenly I have to make it palatable for you to hear. So first of all, you violated me, but now I have to tell you, which is hard in and of itself to tell someone I've been violated in this way, but now I have to do it in a way that feels good for you and doesn't make you feel like, oh, you're not a bad person. You had this bad moment. Like, no. So stop telling people also how to talk about being violated or telling them they weren't violated at all. Well, they didn't really mean that.

**Phil Wagner**

Right? There's a mismatch. It's so ironic, the mismatch here, right? So you're talking about racial slurs, acts of violence, intentionally, just offensive discourse stacked up against the impalatability of natural hair, right? Or like saying things in a different vernacular. Like, these are not even apples and oranges. These are like apples and Cheetos. These are totally different. They are so mismatched. And I think calling out that hypocrisy is important. I think it is important.

**Erika Cartledge**

So I think that's just some kind of low level, which also, again, and I think this kind of answers both questions, but allowing people to also have safe spaces, right? So at our school for students, we have affinity spaces for different groups, and they have come under fire, if I'm honest, because you have parents whose child children don't fit into the affinity spaces that don't understand the need for the affinity space. But why would you understand the need for that? You and your children have always been the majority in every way. But even as a colleague, and I joke because I go to lunch with our director of DEI, and she and I always say, oh, we're having our black affinity meeting, but I need that space.

**Phil Wagner**

Absolutely.

**Erika Cartledge**

I can talk to her in a way that I can't talk to other people. And so, creating the space for people to have affinity with other people who share the experiences that they have is another really powerful thing that other people and organizations, and corporations can do. Because the fact of the matter is when you are different, it is different.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah.

**Erika Cartledge**

It shouldn't be, but it is.

**Phil Wagner**

It is.

**Erika Cartledge**

And so having someone that can just understand that. That can do a knowing look that is important. I even think about I'm not even a teacher in classrooms, and I have to tell you when black families meet me, they come and give me a hug. And I'm always like, I know I'm not in a classroom, but if your kid needs anything, here's my office. Tell them they can come here, right? And that's important. So, again, having the affinity, having a support system is another way that you can create dignity and space for people and really show that you respect

them, and it's not just talking and talking points. So I think that's important. And then, let's go back to the first question now.

**Phil Wagner**

The tough one.

**Erika Cartledge**

Let me make sure I'm understanding this. You really want to know what do you all need to be doing? What do you need to be learning?

**Phil Wagner**

I think so many folks in dominant majority groups just don't create space to sense make. There is a profound lack of self-reflection. And so, you know, you've given us so many insights. Maybe your insights have already sort of answered the question itself of how do you become more aware. And I don't mean to give dominant majority folks, white folks, the out, like, become more aware. You got Dr. Google at your disposal. Do some digging, open your eyes. But is there any sort of maybe non-obvious things to incentivize deeper reflection in the space to be more intentional about acknowledging the dignity of others, particularly those whose dignity is violated?

**Erika Cartledge**

Yeah, I mean, I think so. That's such an interesting question, right? Because a lot of this stuff is, like, mandated. You have to read this book. You have to study this. You have to listen to this podcast. But I think if you can intentionally, and this is going to be like an off-the-wall answer a little bit, but if you can intentionally seek out experiences from cultures that aren't yours. So I go back, and I think about when Black Panther the movie came, right? That was a cultural experience that everybody, right, got behind everybody. And this was, I mean, the way that they weaved an African culture. There were jokes from, like, black culture in America, the costuming, the thoughtfulness, all of that. You were immersed into that world. And it was a superhero movie. What was it, like one of the top five or whatever around the world, right? And so that is a cultural experience that you can immerse yourself in, and you can get a taste of what it is. And then you realize, oh, being black isn't just about being an enslaved person or human trafficked, right? Being black isn't about constantly having to struggle and constantly having to overcome. There's a reason there's a thing. Black girl magic and black boy joy. Right?

**Phil Wagner**

Right.

**Erika Cartledge**

Because we are more than just being enslaved, we are more than just the Emancipation Proclamation. We are more than just Martin Luther King and Barack Obama and these people that we have cherry-picked to highlight and being the model minority, all of that, right? And so that, to me, feels like it's low stakes. Right. I'm not going and saying, I mean, I would



love for you to read Austin Channing Brown and Heather McKee and all of this, right? But I'm not even saying you have to do that. Watch a season of Martin, right, to get a different. Go, and maybe the Cosby show is a little problematic now, but go watch the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air or even the New Bel-Air, right?

### **Phil Wagner**

Right.

### **Erika Cartledge**

Get a different feel for a black experience. Go watch Living Single, which is literally what my 20s was like with me and my friends, right? It wasn't struggle. It wasn't the wire. We were living single. And so I think the more that you can, in simple, easy ways, immerse yourself in, and I'm not just saying in black culture, right? Do it for other cultures. Do it for native cultures, do it for South Asian cultures, pacific island culture, right? Like, do it for everyone and immerse yourself in that. If you even want an even lower-stakes way to do it, do it with your kids. Go get your kids books like eyes that kiss at the corners. We are the water protectors. You can do that, and you'll start to see the humanity and dignity in these other cultures while also raising a child where it won't have to be an effort because it will just always be what they've always known, right? So, my son, he's two and a half. He's like 150 books in this house. We have intentionally curated a library that has everything from stories about Shabbat to stories about India to stories about native people in America to stories about antiracist baby. Right? Because I don't want it to be an effort for him. I just want him to be like, yeah, all families are different. My family has a mom and a dad, and I have two half-siblings, and that family has two moms, and that family has a grandma. And I just want it to be normal for him and not to be an effort. And so your kids are also a great way to just start normalizing all of that without these high stakes. Oh, I feel like I'm going to get into these contentious conversations, but the more you can recognize the humanity in us, the more you'll be actually prepared for that because then it will upset you when you see someone dehumanizing or taking away dignity.

### **Phil Wagner**

And you just gave us the anecdote to cultural misappropriation, too. Like, go see Black Panther. Maybe don't cornrow your hair if you're white. You can appreciate, but there's a recipe for appreciation. No, I think that's so profound. Again, it's exposure. I mean, that's the very premise of the contact hypothesis, right? The more you come into contact with others who are not like you, you deepen your own understanding. It's then easy to recognize those dignity violations, perhaps some that you perpetuate too. And, yeah, I hope you do some deeper digging and reading and exposure, but maybe, just maybe, there's a lower entry point and easier entry point than what you might suspect. So I have one more question for you, which is about embedding dignity into particularly DEI organizational structures, but maybe just organizational structures writ large. Any ideas on how we fully embed this focus on dignity into our work? To ensure we aren't just contributing to DEI theater or doing another check-the-box activity. Any insights on how we institutionalize dignity?

**Erika Cartledge**

So that's a loaded question.

**Phil Wagner**

I know.

**Erika Cartledge**

So I think about it in a few different ways, right? Because when we are trying to change the fabric of an organization, or I even think about building the fabric of my business, what kind of business do I want to create? Because I will not be a solopreneur forever. And so part of building the dignity into your organization and your institution, there's the teaching and the training and the working with the people that is already there. But I think one of the best ways to do it is to think about who are you bringing into your institution. How are you talking to new hires or people in interviews about DEI beyond the performativeness of it? Do you have a set of framework or questions you are asking people to dig deeper into that to understand that? Right? So how are we creating the culture? How are we making sure we align what we're doing with who we're bringing in here? Because if who I bring in doesn't have my commitment to DEI, am I really committed to it? Right? If who I'm bringing in doesn't actually see the dignity in the people I'm working with, am I actually committed to their dignity? And so I think that's such an important thing. And I think about it a lot from working in a school and what kind of families are we bringing in. We say in our mission that we celebrate diversity. Do the families represent that? Do the faculty and staff represent that?

**Phil Wagner**

Right.

**Erika Cartledge**

Are we so willing to commit to that that we say we have this open position? It needs to be filled, but we lack staff of color, so we are not filling it until we find a person of color. Right. Because the qualifications of a person that's not of color can be here, but we say, oh, the person of color has to be here. Right. We hire people that don't take all the boxes all the time, but suddenly when it has to be a person of color, they have to take all the boxes plus 27 other boxes that we didn't know were boxes until we decided.

**Phil Wagner**

Right?

**Erika Cartledge**

And so I think there's that. I told you I have been thinking about this.

**Phil Wagner**

I'm so glad.

## **Erika Cartledge**

But I think that is important. And even I think about it as a small business owner, one of my core values is that everybody in every space body has a place here. So when I think about bringing on clients, I don't just think about, can you pay me the money? Can you hire me? I think about, are there diverse body types. If someone goes to look at my portfolio, will they see themselves there? I think about it because I have a lot of clients of color, so I have to be intentional about I'm going to put some of my white clients on the website. I'm going to put I have a couple of nonbinary clients. So even thinking about that and being intentional around who I accept in when I'm hiring people, if diversity and access to feeling confident isn't at the core of who you are, I can't have you working here because the work that I do is too important to people and how they feel about themselves. And so, in a school, it is too important for the way these students see themselves at a corporation. If I don't feel good, how can I go out and sell your product? How can I go out and represent a company? It is too important to the work that you're doing, wherever you are, to just be base level and surface level. And does it mean people are going to have to go? Yeah, probably.

## **Phil Wagner**

So good.

## **Erika Cartledge**

But that's okay because there's more than enough qualified people to fill in the gap. I mean, it sounds crazy, but I think the only way you're going to build up a place that really makes the space for dignity is by dismantling the first one first.

## **Phil Wagner**

I'm like tingly. I'm processing. I'm processing. I love this. And I think to the point. Speaking on your fashion experience, I know you're in the confidence business, but the fashion industry is not just sort of supplemental here. It really driven a lot of representative change, too, and I appreciate how you model that and how you weave all of those things together. This has been so good. I have one final question, which is the easiest one? Please tell our listeners where they can find you, where and how they can support you because you are doing the work. It is good work. I'm excited to follow it and support it. How can our listeners do the same?

## **Erika Cartledge**

Yeah, well, thank you for that opportunity. So you can find me on my website. It is your yourchicisshowing.com and Instagram, and Facebook. So Instagram is, again, Your Chic is Showing, and Facebook, if you put in Your Chic is Showing, you type in your chic, I'll be the first thing that pops up. So that is definitely where you can find me. And I would encourage you. I think a lot of people get intimidated when they hear fashion stylist because they think, celebrities, I have to be a millionaire. And I do have some clients like that. But one of my core values is that fashion style and elevating confidence should be accessible to anyone, anywhere. And so I have a lot of programs that are at accessible price points so that even if you feel like I don't have, you know, XYZ dollars to invest, you can get a rapid session with me for, like, \$50.

So you can have that because that is important to me. It is important to me. Your financial status shouldn't dictate if you deserve to feel confident or not. It's available to you right now. And so I just would encourage you to visit the website. Hang out with me on Instagram. That's where I am. And I'm always talking to people on Instagram, people love to DM me, and I love to talk back. So please come hang out with me there, and I would love to get to know you.

**Phil Wagner**

Excellent. Well, of course, this is just one of many conversations to follow. I'm so thankful to have met you. You've brought a lot of insight to my life, into my family's life. So much love, much appreciation, much thanks. Thank you so much for hanging out with us today, Erika. Truly a privilege.

**Erika Cartledge**

My pleasure. Thank you.

**Phil Wagner**

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