



# Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

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## **EPISODE 33: BRITTANY BOONE – PUSH/PULL: FIGHTING FOR PROGRESS**

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### **Brittany Boone**

My appeal to people in the D&I space would be this work is too important for you to not take it seriously. It's too important. It's so important. Like, people's livelihoods. Like, this is too important.

### **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. Today I'm joined by a true friend, somebody who I have known for the better part of gosh over a decade now, and I'm so excited to have a conversation with today. Brittany Boone, or Doctor Brittany Boone, I should say, has over a decade of experience in DEI work. She's a trained industrial and organizational psychologist and began much of her DEI work in the insurance industry, particularly for Farmers Insurance, which is my insurance company. So I'm hoping I get the discount by name-dropping. Just kidding. She was a founding member of the ALPFA chapter of the Black Professionals Alliance, ERG, in Olathe, Kansas. She's now a consultant for ValloKarp in New York City, doing amazing work. Boots on the ground. Brittany Boone, it is an honor to chat with you here. I'm so excited to catch up with you, my friend.

### **Brittany Boone**

Dr. Phil. I'm so happy to be here. I'm so happy to see you. That was the best bio I've ever heard.

### **Phil Wagner**

Are you sure? Did I botch it in any way? You can tell our listeners more if you want to.

### **Brittany Boone**

No, that is perfect. That's perfect. I wouldn't even add anything that's perfect. You said all the names right? All of that.

**Phil Wagner**

All right. Awesome. So, Dr. Boone, here's what I want to talk about today. I'm hoping we can have a conversation on comfort zones because I know that this is something that you can really speak to. Well, I mean, as a woman of color in DEI consulting, you challenge people on certain to push past their comfort zone. So let's have a conversation about comfort zones in the DEI space. First up, can you give us insights into how you, as a DEI consultant, sort of see comfort zones and the role they play in moving forward or maybe even not moving forward? The needle on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Any thoughts on comfort zones?

**Brittany Boone**

Yes, I have a lot of thoughts on comfort zones. So I think that the comfort zones are the thing that is the determining factor of how far we're going to go. In my opinion, that's what I've seen, and sort of this tendency to want to avoid going outside of them, and we want to maintain our comfortability in all of these conversations. And we can talk about D&I, but if I'm uncomfortable, like, let's get out. That's what I've seen. And I often tell people when I'm doing workshops and things like that, I always tell people, if you feel uncomfortable, you're doing it right, so keep going in that direction, go in the direction of your discomfort. Because I think that's what we all have to do. Because I think if we look at people who are members of historically excluded, which I use intentionally, I don't say represented historically excluded groups.

**Phil Wagner**

I like that.

**Brittany Boone**

Yeah, I saw that on Instagram, I think, somewhere.

**Phil Wagner**

No, I really like that, and I'm going to change how I say that because I typically say historically underrepresented, but you're right. Historically excluded.

**Brittany Boone**

Underrepresented, it sounds really passive. It's like, oh, they just happen to.

**Phil Wagner**

Not that's good. Language matters groups.

**Brittany Boone**

They don't have an option to not be uncomfortable. Like, people are experiencing racial trauma sometimes at work. It's being one of one in your workplace, in your department, on the floor of your building. That can be a lot. And that you don't have an option to say, well, I don't want to be uncomfortable today. You have to press through. You have to adjust. You have to adapt. And so I think we all need to be uncomfortable to some extent, even when

we're talking about things that aren't DEI-related. There's the thing the saying that growth doesn't happen in your comfort zone. You have to get out of it.

**Phil Wagner**

Right?

**Brittany Boone**

I think we got to destroy those and get outside of those, for sure.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah. No, I agree. And again, I love that language. So thank you for clarifying there. I think language is so important. As a consultant, I'm certain that you have many conversations with people that know they ought to push outside of those comfort zones but just haven't done so yet. What are the most significant elements of those comfort zones that are sort of the hardest to chisel away at, to break ground, actually move the needle forward? What are the elements of comfort zones that are really difficult to grapple with?

**Brittany Boone**

I think that, so I'm going to say this first part, and then I'll say the second part, and I'm going to apologize before I say the second part because it might take us in a different direction.

**Phil Wagner**

That's all right. Go for it.

**Brittany Boone**

First part of what I will say is I think that one of the biggest parts of people's comfort zones is challenging their perception of themselves. And so it's like if I do this, and this is what I'm doing, and this is the impact of my actions, then that means I'm not a good person anymore. And so I don't want to look at that. People sort of connect DEI stuff to their goodness as a person, and to there, I've always been this, and it's the Obama effect. They say I voted for Obama, and you can vote for Obama, and you can still do racially problematic things, even though and people don't want to look at that. And so I think that, to me, that's the biggest thing. It's like being able to look at your actions and say, it doesn't mean I'm a bad person. But because racism is a system that we all live in.

**Phil Wagner**

It's all of us, like even the most woke right or the most advanced people, who have been in this journey for years or decades. You are not exempt from that self-reflective process. It's for everybody.

**Brittany Boone**

Everybody. And so the second part that I was saying that I was sort of offering a pre-apology for was, as I was thinking about the last few days, just thinking about comfort zones. I was

thinking about how, when you talk about age. No one gets really uncomfortable talking about age. No one gets uncomfortable talking about if we have a group of neurotypical people asking them to talk about a population that's neurodivergent. That's not really uncomfortable. There's usually these moments, like, there's a moment where it's like, oh, shoot, I didn't think of that. Or, yeah, there's a moment, but there's not necessarily discussion of a comfort zone. That discussion of that comfort zone comes along with race.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, you're not kidding.

**Brittany Boone**

Only race. Because that's the one where people are like, I didn't mean that. That's not what I said. And I'm still a good person, and I voted for Obama, and my mom didn't raise me that way. No.

**Phil Wagner**

I got friends who are black. How could you?

**Brittany Boone**

Yeah, I'm married to a black man. Like all of those things, that's the interesting part is being able to get people to see that it's a system that we live in, and it doesn't feel all the time, doesn't feel great to know that we've participated in the system. But to your point, we all have, like, even people of color. Even me.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, of course.

**Brittany Boone**

There's this story I often tell when I'm doing workshops because I'm a talker. Clearly, you know that about me. I'm a talker, tell stories. There was this one time I was on a plane a few years ago. I was on this plane, and I had a black pilot, and it was only the third black pilot I've seen in my lifetime. Literally, I've only seen three. And it was the very first time I was on a plane piloted by a black person. And I was like, oh, my gosh, I felt so proud. I even told him when I was getting on the plane, I was like, oh, my gosh. I felt it was just such a heartwarming moment for me to see him. And so I was just I couldn't wait to tell my friends. And so I think I was flying to Atlanta or something like that. And so I saw Park Field, Jackson, I saw the airport, and we flew right by it, and I was like, I hope he knows what he's doing. There was this thought that I had in my head, like, I hope he knows what he's doing. And then I was like, why would I say that? Why would I think I hope he knows what he's doing? He's flying an airplane. Like, he's not there by accident. He knows what he's doing. But it's because I did not see your standard, run-of-the-mill, middle-aged white man flying this plane. My brain is like, that's not who flies planes. And so even me. I'm a black woman. I'm a diversity and inclusion consultant. I do this for a living. I talk about this all day, every day. I live it, and I still have that

thought. And so we're not responsible for our first thought, our first thought. We're programmed. We're receiving messages from the time we are born about who is capable and qualified, and competent. We're always receiving those messages. And so we have to be intentional. You're not responsible for your first thought. You're responsible for your second. That's what we tell people.

### **Phil Wagner**

Oh, that's so good.

### **Brittany Boone**

It's like, I had to be like, but I think oftentimes when people have those thoughts, they try to tuck them away, and they're like, and I didn't think that or that's because this, and then they rationalize it, as opposed to being like, wow, I thought that. So let me be intentional about pivoting and say, this is why I thought that, and then keep it moving. But you don't have to. I'm not a bad person because of it. And I think people just don't like that to be challenged.

### **Phil Wagner**

Yeah. Your misgivings or your small failures aren't a moral indictment. Right. It's not that you are above recovery, but you can't possibly work to overwrite those microaggressive thoughts without that self-reflection. I think that's so good, and there's so much guilt, I think, slow baked into how we arrive to the DEI space. And I think that's something we kind of have to move to the side because when you push that to the side, you could have those honest conversations with yourself and be like, why did I say that? Why did I think that? That goes against my value system. But I'm overriding messages I've received from family, from religious groups, from the media, from all over, and I've got to unpack those. Not every message is for me to download, but I've downloaded some that I got to unpack, I got to rid myself of. Yeah, I think that's such great insight.

### **Brittany Boone**

And the work can't just be done at work. When you're going to a diversity workshop at work, like, it has just continue outside of it. Like you said, you have to think about what your Uncle Pete used to say at dinnertime. Like, yeah, I work with Brittany, and she's black, but she's a cool black person. Those are the things you hear, and you have to do it outside of here. It can't just be a check the box.

### **Phil Wagner**

Which is exactly what we're here to not do. So thank you for that. I want to talk about pushing people then because this is work, work. This is hard to do work. How do you know if you're pushing far enough? Like, how do we measure? Yeah, I've pushed them outside of their comfort zone. Yeah, I can measure growth and progress, maybe for ourselves, maybe for others, those you're consulting with. How do you measure if you pushed people far enough outside of their comfort zone?

**Brittany Boone**

I think maybe when you start getting the resistance, maybe that's a good barometer. And I'm hesitating. You notice my rate of speech has slowed a little bit because I'm trying to be thoughtful about this. And I think that pushing people in spite of the resistance, and I'm saying that slowly because there are some people are open to having the conversation, and some people are like, hey, well, yeah, let's explore. I think the resistance means you're going in the right direction. Like I said, I tell people that. So I think that's how you know you're doing it right, because it is going to when you're having to look at your patterns and look at how you've shown up and how you presented, and maybe looking at even where you are and thinking that maybe that had something to do with why I'm here. Hold on, let me backtrack a little bit because I don't like how that sounded. I'm not saying that people are in their positions because they're not talented and qualified and because they're white or men or whatever. I'm not saying that. But in some instances, there is privilege associated.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah. Parental input. Absolutely. Without a doubt.

**Brittany Boone**

Your socioeconomic status, all of those things. But when people have to look at that, that's going to be disconcerting for a lot of people. So I think once you start getting that resistance, it's like, okay, we're onto something. Let's keep going in this direction.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, I think that goes back to the guilt thing, right? Because we've, again, slow-baked guilt into our response mechanisms in the DEI space, and people don't know what to do with the fact that, oh, yeah, I had two parents who went to legacy universities and I got into the same ones, or, yeah, I grew up in an upper-middle-class household. And maybe those are just facts. And again, they're not character indictments. They're not moral indictments. They just exist. I think we need to just figure out how to grapple with those better, not necessarily come to those with the perspective of guilt. Does that makes sense? I don't know. I let all my guard down with you, my friend. Like, this is a friend of friend. I'm taking notes.

**Brittany Boone**

Let me ask you a question.

**Phil Wagner**

Oh, I like this.

**Brittany Boone**

My boss did a panel discussion yesterday, and so it was with some law firm in New York City, and I was listening to the panel discussion, and they said something that I had never heard before. So I want to see have you heard of this concept of sort of diversity fatigue.

**Phil Wagner**

Absolutely, but probably in different contexts.

**Brittany Boone**

I've never heard that. I guess the verbiage maybe. I don't know. Of course, I know this is something people get tired of.

**Phil Wagner**

So explain to our listeners your conception of diversity fatigue.

**Brittany Boone**

So diversity fatigue, people are just over it, especially, if you will, post-May 25, 2020, which is the day George Floyd was murdered, especially after that day. Companies are really looking at it, and companies are focused on it, and we're looking at numbers, and we're doing these workshops and having these discussions and all these things, and people are there's a sense that sometimes people are just over it. And I know that to be true, but I didn't know that it was big enough for there to be a title, like a name of it. And they taught me how to combat diversity fatigue. And I was like.

**Phil Wagner**

This is something we talk about, actually. So I teach a course on diversity, and we talk a little bit about this. And I think it's really hard to pinpoint one cause. But I think what happened sort of post-George Floyd is that we see a lot of companies, a lot of corporations sort of standing up and speaking out. You, as well as I, know those are very cheap efforts. Most of the time. They are one tagline. They are a 3% donation off of total profits. So they're very sort of inconsequential. But they are everywhere. There's the same reason why Amazon can slap Black Lives Matter on their main web page but then treat union workers in abysmal ways. Right? So this is do say one thing to another. And so I think part of it for me as a communication scholar, I'm always looking at I think there's just so many messages, but none with real meaning, none with real authenticity. And so because it's everywhere, but it means nothing in most cases. We haven't personalized it. We haven't brought the humanity back to it. And so I think that's one of the reasons why I'm so sick of doing another microaggression training. Why do I have to give up my lunch to do this? And it's because we haven't sort of explained the why behind it.

**Brittany Boone**

Yeah, I like that. And like I said, I just heard it yesterday, and so it's still just running through my mind. And my initial reaction, I'm thinking being a woman in a lot of my workshops, I use a lot of sports analogies. I'm not like the most athletic or sports-oriented person, but I just kind of think I can do that in a way that if a man does it, it might be looked at a little different. But I'm a woman, and they work. And I'm thinking, like, okay, diversity fatigue. Well, if you all would get it, and if you would do it, then we wouldn't have to keep talking about it. We would have to keep having these conversations if we're doing all these efforts, and then we look up in

two years, and nothing has changed, and everything's the same. So if you would actually take it seriously and actually do it, then we wouldn't be talking about it anymore.

**Phil Wagner**

Everybody wants the benefits that come from a diverse and inclusive organization, but few want to put in the real work.

**Brittany Boone**

Yeah. And so I feel like if we go with the sports example, if I have trouble dribbling to my left, I can't just say, hey, I'm tired of learning that. I'm tired of you telling me to learn how to dribble. Can you all just not play me to my left side and just play me to my right? Because I'm tired of trying to learn that. I'm tired of trying to learn this backhand in tennis. Can you just hit it to me this way, so I don't have to? That sounds crazy. And I feel like it's the same thing. Like, we'll stop talking about it when you get it right. And it's not a nice to have this is a must-have. Like, we have to do this. And so I think that I have to think about that diversity fatigue some more because I'm not really buying that right now.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, yeah.

**Brittany Boone**

It just feels like another reason for people to say they don't want to talk about this stuff to me. And now we have a fancy word for it, like diversity fatigue. We can't talk about this anymore.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah. No. And I think that's really it, and I think that's the real sentiment behind it is I don't think it's actual real fatigue. I think that it is an easy out. David Camps's work it talks about racial skepticism and how it's not really like, I'm not a racist. I just really wonder, could they pull themselves up by their bootstraps a little bit more? Could he have been nicer to that cop? Right. It's the same thing. I'm going to ask questions. I'm just critically thinking. Right. No, you're sort of masking that. And I think that's the same thing that happens here. Right. It's not an illness. You're going to be okay. You're not really fatigued. Take a nap and then get back in the race. Get back in that microaggression training. Whatever you need to do, keep doing the work.

**Brittany Boone**

Absolutely. Okay. I just wanted to see what you thought about that.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, it's interesting.

**Brittany Boone**

It was brand new for me yesterday. Brand new.



### **Phil Wagner**

Okay, so let's talk about this. We talked about pushing people. Do you think that you can push too hard or maybe, like, push too fast? Because sometimes you have this outcome, and there are people who have these comfort zones that are really difficult to chisel away at. Again those family narratives run deep. Those religious ideologies run deep. Those social beliefs, those political beliefs, those run deep. So if you're trying to move the needle forward to actually get to outcomes, do you think you can push too hard, too fast?

### **Brittany Boone**

So I have two answers for that. What I believe is, no, we need to talk about this. We need to be uncomfortable. We need to confront the issues. We need to use the real words. We don't need to water things down for the sake of making you comfortable, making them more palpable for you. We need to no. We need to just address all these things. That's what I believe, but what I know to be true from the work that I am doing is that my boss says, do you want to be right, or do you want to be effective?

### **Phil Wagner**

Oh, that's good. That's good framing.

### **Brittany Boone**

If you're wanting to be effective in this work, you have to meet people where they are. And everybody's not able to talk about systemic racism and how it operates on these levels and how it's baked into every single thing we do. Sometimes they got to start by talking about bias. Let's just talk about bias. Let's just walk you in. I think if we talk to someone who's never or if we go into an organization and do a workshop to a group that's never had any of this or had any conversations and we're not going to start off talking about anti-racism because it's just not going to be effective. People are going to. Is it right? Yeah. Because all of this stuff is still true. It still applies, but it won't be effective. So I think that if you want to be effective, it is important to meet people where they are. Yes, these conversations will be uncomfortable to some extent, but I don't think you can overwhelm people with the discomfort if you're wanting to be effective.

### **Phil Wagner**

Yeah. Again. I go back to David Camp's work. I think very highly of him and what he does. And so he says that meeting people where they are is not a values concession. Right. It doesn't mean that I forgo what I really believe or my real values here. Rather, I get sort of intellectually curious, and I ask questions that invite the other person to share not their beliefs but what led them to their beliefs so that then I can start to build community, build connection. And I'm not sacrificing anything. I'm not putting my antiracist values aside, but I recognize maybe we don't start there. Maybe we back up and talk about where did you even get the idea that being color-blind is a good thing. Or that we can all just pull ourselves up. Where did you get those ideas from? And then, can we build community around any sense of shared values to then move the needle forward? And so I think maybe another question here is how do you decide,

okay, here's where I'm going to draw the line I'm not going to concede. I'm not going to drop my values. I mean, that's a really difficult thing to do because we want to be right, or I think we build our idea of effectiveness on, yeah, I was right in that situation. Yeah, I dropped the mic. Yeah, I did what I needed to do. I checked my box, my performance box. How do you decide where the line is? I'm asking you the worst, the toughest questions. Dr. Boone, I'm so sorry.

### **Brittany Boone**

These are a little they're a little tough, and I think so I think that my answer would be different if I'm talking to an individual versus if I'm going into an organization. Because if you're going into an organization, I think they will both be equally as, maybe difficult or easier, whichever way you think they are. But it would just be a different approach. If you're going into an organization, you have to figure out what kind of conversations they're having, what is the culture like, what is leadership believe. Because that's where that is, where the book starts and stops is leadership. And so a lot of times, people want to do this diversity stuff, and they want to diversity stuff. You all can't see my air quotes diversity stuff, but people come in, and they want to start at the middle. So the leadership, we're too busy to talk about that, and we won't have time. So can you all, can you all do that? And so then the middle is supposed to start it, but nobody cares if it's coming from the middle. It has to come from the top. And so it's figuring out, is there a leadership buying in? What is the culture like? What are the demographics of the organization? Because then maybe I can start a little bit further. If they've had these conversations before, if they're starting from scratch and it's a company that has two people of color and 92% of the people are white men, straight, heterosexual white men, that's going to be a different starting place. If I'm talking to an individual, you can sort of ask questions, and then it's important to then try to validate. And, like you said, validating. And validating doesn't mean that you agree. I don't have to agree with what you're saying, but I can see you. I can signal to you that I see, and I see why you might feel that way. I see why you might feel like giving these people jobs means fewer jobs for you. I can see that. But let me explain to you why it's not a zero-sum game. So I think it's sort of knowing your audience. I guess I said the long-winded version of it.

### **Phil Wagner**

No, it's so good. And again, that fits very much within how I see this work, too, right? When you say, well, if people of color would just work harder, their economic situation would improve, okay, I cannot get there. But where I can get is this sort of shared idea we might have that within the overall economic equation, there is some individual effort that does factor in. I was going to look differently among different groups who have different level of access, but there's a nugget of truth in there that we can sort of maybe both agree on, even if different ways. That allows us to then move the needle forward. And another person whose work I'm a big fan of is Donna Hicks and her work on dignity. And I think if you really want to move the needle forward, you have to afford dignity to the other person you're in conversation with. Otherwise, you're kind of guilty of the same things that you preach against, right? You're looking down your nose at people, and that's not really the goal here. Again, I go back to this is about building community and moving people forward, and that might look different for

each individual person. So it's not a values concession, but it's individualized, and that's what makes this diversity work with air quotes really difficult.

### **Brittany Boone**

And I think you just said something that resonated with me, and I think it's something else that's important is bringing in white men, like bringing them into the conversation. I do a lot of when we're prepping to go into a client, sometimes we do interviews, and we'll talk to just a handful of people from the organization just to see culture, what things are working well, areas of opportunity, all that stuff. And so sometimes you'll be talking to a white man, and maybe it's a white man who's on a D&I committee and those types of things, and he's like, well, I just always feel like there's sort of this feeling like they can't be the ones that talk, and they can't be the people that they can't be the voice. And I don't know about this, so I would defer to someone else. And while the sentiment behind that is good because that's part of allyship, you don't want to come in like the knight in shining armor and feel like saviors. However, there is something to working with white men who feel like this work is important and who talk about it and don't let all the people of color and all the women in your workplace carry this by themselves because in order for it to move you all have to think it's important too. And so just bringing in white men, sometimes white men feel like I'm not diverse. This isn't for me. But it is. It's for all of us because everyone is diverse. We're all these things. And I think it's important to that is an important piece is making sure that people know it is for everyone. It impacts all of us.

### **Phil Wagner**

And this goes back to the comfort zone. All on my vulnerabilities, here I am if you can't tell super white guy in the DEI space. I have had DEI leadership positions. Paid leadership positions. And I have had to do that self-work too. It's something I haven't ever found the answer on of how much space should I be occupying and how much space should I not be occupying. And I carry a lot of sort of comfort zone tensions there too. I believe in this work. I will do this work constantly. But when it comes to then having space with really impact, I struggle. There's a lot here. I don't want to just throw it to all the women of color or people of color or LGBTQ folks just because that makes sense, and that's what often gets done. So I think this is just about being reflective and saying, no, I'm working through the tensions, and maybe that's okay. Right.

### **Brittany Boone**

And just talk, verbalizing it like you just did. Like saying, hey, this feels weird for me as a white guy to do this. What makes you comfortable with this? Because I want your voice to be heard. But also, we have my team that I work with at ValloKarp. We have three black women. We have one Latino male, and then we have one white guy. I said white guy, like I said, guy different in it. So we talk about sometimes the messenger versus the message. And sometimes, when we go into certain settings, if we're in a law firm like the super conservative, there are certain things that will sound better coming from the white man. It will not sound better be more effective.

**Phil Wagner**

Because it's not seen as, like, self-preservation.

**Brittany Boone**

Exactly.

**Phil Wagner**

Right. Oh, you're just saying that because you're black, and this benefits you. Yeah. No, it makes total sense.

**Brittany Boone**

And that's how you can use your identity, and that's helpful. So sometimes, it might have to be your voice.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah. I think it's just looking at the realities of where the DEI equation is. We're talking about pushing people out of their comfort zones and towards the DEI industry and what the DEI industry does. But you and I have done this work and talked about this work for a while. We publish on this work. We've been in this work. And I think we're coming to this from the other side, where we may now be looking back at the DEI industrial complex with a little bit of skepticism because that has sort of become something that I don't think it was ever really meant to be. Right. I mean, you know, like the history, like, post title seven, when organizations got more diverse, and they were like, oh, shoot, now we need to make sure we tend to this diverse workforce. And then from there, things kind of moved out of HR and into the hands of DEI consultants, and you are one. This is not delegitimizing that you do such important work, but, you know, because you are one. For every good one, there are ten bad ones who are not qualified or who may be moving the needle the other way. And so this DEI industry has gotten. Yeah, exactly. So how do we push the DEI industry out of its comfort zone to keep it accountable, to make sure that we're pushing in the right places, we're consistent in our message? We're not just settling for a check-the-box template from this other side. How do we push this industry, this industrial complex, to do this work and to do it well?

**Brittany Boone**

That's something I struggle with because not literally, like, day to day, I struggle with it, but in thinking about it, I struggle with it because you're sort of fighting against dollars. And how do you measure against dollars? You know what I mean? Especially, like you said after Title Seven, but even like we said after George Floyd, all these people popping up. And then the firm that I work for has been around for 20 years. And so there are even some people when we're asking, we're potentially talking to new clients or potential clients, rather, they ask us about our pricing, and they're like, so is this sort of this idea that maybe we've hiked our prices up since George Floyd got murdered? Because there are people doing that.

## **Phil Wagner**

No kidding.

## **Brittany Boone**

I just think that my appeal to people in the D&I space would be this work is too important for you to not take it seriously. It's too important. It's so important. Like, people's livelihoods. It's too important. And so I don't know, other than that, how to go against the money that people are making because that's what has happened. People saw a niche for it, and they're like, oh, I'm a person of color, and I can go in here and do this, and I can just do this, check the box and get this done.

## **Phil Wagner**

I mean, it's also white people. You look at the number of white consultants in this space, which, again, everybody has a unique access point. And I'm not here to call out people and say you're a real one. You're not. That's not what I'm saying at all. But there's a lot of junk out there, right? I mean, there's a lot of stuff that is just settling for status quo and nothing more. And I love that appeal, again, bringing it back to a central, bringing it back to humanity, bringing it back to dignity. There is too much at stake here to settle for just a check-the-box format.

## **Brittany Boone**

And when I first started doing this work, I found I would get really nervous. Before, like, if I had a group that was all white people, I'm like, I'm going here and talk about, this is nothing. But when I would have a group that had, like, a large number of people of color, I got more nervous. And I had to really like, why am I so nervous? And it's because these are the people that this impacts, and I need to get this right. And I don't want them. I'm in this room, and I have a voice. I have a level of power in this room that they don't have because I remember being in that workspace and coming in and looking at the art on the walls, and it's all white men, and I remember that, and I remember trying to bring it up and getting in trouble and getting told that. I remember that. And so, since I have a voice in this room, I need to make sure that I talk about this in a way that these people in this room will be satisfied. I don't want them walking out of here being like, See, she missed it. I don't want that. And I think that maybe that would be how I answer that question. What would the most oppressed person in this room say about what you just said? Would they agree? Would they feel that it was helpful? Did you help them? And maybe that's the measure.

## **Phil Wagner**

And if everybody in every capacity would just take on that orientation, the ones who are impacted the most by this, what will they walk out thinking, feeling, doing, believing about themselves or their roles in this organization? If you would just take that orientation, that's a good communication orientation. That's not even DEI work. That's just being a good communicator and thinking about your audience. And so I think it's so simple, but obviously so difficult to actually put into practice. I got one final question for you. All right, so we're

talking about comfort zones, and I want to know, as a DEI consultant who has done this work, written on this work, is in it every single day, what do you do to push yourself outside of your comfort zone? And can you offer suggestions to our listeners for how they can intentionally step out of theirs?

### **Brittany Boone**

So my comfort zone, it's a little different because I grew up like, my mom would always talk to me about racial equity and racism and how it showed up. So race was my in to this work. And then being a black woman whose experience of growing up in the Midwest, like, you know that. And so the things I've heard, the things I've seen as a kid, I always want to confront it head-on. So for me, the challenge, the area for growth for me, has been what we just talked about a moment ago with regard to finding the commonality and not going in like a bulldozer and trying to steamroll over everything. And it's being able to hear people so that I can be more effective. Because I think that there are, like we were saying earlier, there are different styles of consulting that you have out there. You have some people that go in, and they're really like, check the box. Like, we're just going to do this. But then you have some people that go in, and they're like balls to the wall if you will, and they're like, hey, no, that is racist, and that doesn't necessarily resonate with every group well. And so being able to dial it back and being able to be fluid in my approach, even if I really disagree with something that somebody said, and I really feel strongly about that, really learning to be more effective by being fluid in my approach has been my biggest learning point. And I'm still a work in progress on that.

### **Phil Wagner**

Yeah, you and me both. But that's intellectual maturity, right? I mean, I think a lot of the critiques of DEI work are really sort of self-appointed white allies who have done just that. I'm going to check my own box. Look at how, like, yeah, I can shut you down and walk away and wash your hands, and nothing happens to the systemic oppression that you're, quote, unquote, trying to address. Right. You have not made life better for anybody except yourself because you feel good right now. That doesn't actually lead. You patted yourself on the back, and you moved right along, and you don't have to think about this anymore, and you might have made the situation worse because that person you are, quote, unquote, trying to change, is now more emboldened. See, I can't satisfy anybody, but you know what I mean? So there's an intellectual maturity that I think this requires, and I think that really goes back to where we started today, which is on comfort zones to get out of them, it requires, I think, higher order skills.

### **Brittany Boone**

That's what I would suggest to people. It's just being able to be don't just have one approach. Develop multiple approaches so that you can be effective with any group that you're confronted with. Confronted is a very confrontational word. Any group that you are presented with be effective with them. Be willing to adapt, and don't require everyone to come to you. And that's something we tell. We're doing inclusive leadership seminars and everything, so practicing what I preach, even in this work, is important.

**Phil Wagner**

And it's harder than what people might think, isn't it, to practice what.

**Brittany Boone**

Man.

**Phil Wagner**

I know it.

**Brittany Boone**

It is.

**Phil Wagner**

Dr. Brittany Boone. Gosh, to say it's a privilege is just a monumental understatement. I have been looking forward to this conversation forever. I am so excited. I love watching what you're doing. You're doing such important work. Thanks for sharing some of that work with us today. A true privilege, my friend.

**Brittany Boone**

Thank you, Dr. Phil. So people want to know when you're having me back, so just make sure.

**Phil Wagner**

People, yeah, I see that. Right. They've already written as this. You're coming back for sure. For sure. What a great conversation. Thank you.

**Brittany Boone**

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.