



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 36: LAURA SHEPHERD – EBONY AND IVORY

Laura Shepherd

White people can be well-versed and knowledgeable on issues that matter in terms of equity and inclusion in the pursuit of diversity. This isn't a space that black and brown and BIPOC people have a monopoly on, but are you willing to do the work?

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's guest is Laura Shepherd, who is the Global Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen, and Hamilton, a leading international law firm with 17 offices located in major financial centers throughout the world. Laura has an extensive background in higher education in the legal sector. My friend, it is so good to chat with you here. I know that you're in a relatively new role. We've interacted and collaborated in the past, but can you share a little bit more for our listeners what you're doing these days?

Laura Shepherd

Sure. And first, let me say thank you for inviting me to participate. This is my first-ever podcast.

Phil Wagner

No kidding. Okay. Other podcasters get on this. Laura is great. So get her on yours but okay.

Laura Shepherd

So if I seem overly excited, it's because it's not only my first podcast, but it's with you, and I agree.

Phil Wagner

Very kind.

Laura Shepherd

My kindred spirit. But no, thank you for welcoming me. And yes, I'm in this really new role. I started at the law firm in July. And you know this because we're friends, but totally unexpected

and out of the blue, opportunity came to me. And I think that in my lifetime, I've felt like my career has sort of evolved in ways that I didn't really anticipate and expect, but I've tried to welcome the opportunities and welcome the group even when I've been anxious about it. And this was a move that caused me a lot of anxiety, but I felt like it was a good opportunity for me to learn and grow. And so, as you said, my title, it's a long one, is the Global Director for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for Cleary Gottlieb. And essentially, the firm has really tried to root their commitment to DE&I and build out a team that is solely devoted to these issues. And as you noted, the firm has a lot of offices internationally. There's only four offices here in the US. And the majority of them live in Europe and Asia. And this position was an attempt to try to really think about a strategy that was universal to all of the offices but that also considered the differences culturally between even the offices here in the United States and then offices across Europe in Asia. And so it's really a big job I'm learning, but exciting and fascinating because as much as I love living in the DE&I space, it's now allowing me to be more thoughtful about what does DEI mean in Germany versus London, what does it mean in San Francisco versus DC? And so it's trying to create what I think of as a high-level strategy approach to DE&I with some very individualized prongs that speak to the needs of each office. And so the first few months have been challenging and exciting, and I think that there's a lot of room to grow here and a lot of impact to have, but a lot of progress needs to be made because a law firm is a very traditional space. And so I feel honored to be able to have been invited into this conversation. And I hope that I can move the needle even slightly.

Phil Wagner

I put all my money on you moving the needle forward. That's what you did here. And we met two years ago or so. We partnered together on a lot of programming and some initiatives, and I would say the first time that you and I met, something just clicked, right? And we're not perfect, and I don't think we should present ourselves as, like, a perfect case study. But I do know that we have spent a lot of time talking about sort of collaboration between BIPOC folks and white folks who can come together and do this work in meaningful ways. So I thought maybe we'd chat about that for a little bit. What do you think?

Laura Shepherd

Of course.

Phil Wagner

All right.

Laura Shepherd

I love it.

Phil Wagner

All right, so let's do that. Let's start with just entering the DE&I space. You're a DEI leader. You've been in that capacity for quite some time across a variety of different spaces and places. Obviously, white folks, black and brown folks are going to come to or at this work from

different directions, from different places, from different lived experiences. Based on your insights, are DEI leadership roles even appropriate spaces for white folks to land? I know this is like a personal conflict I've had in my own DEI leadership journey. What do you think, my friend? I'm going to ask you.

Laura Shepherd

Yeah, that's a deep question. I would say, fundamentally, yes, I think it is a space where white people can reside with some caveats. Right.

Phil Wagner

Okay.

Laura Shepherd

And so in my two and a half months at the firm, I've had to hire people already, and I've thought about this really firmly, sort of, is this a space where white people can live authentically? I think that my answer is clearly yes, but I also feel like it does require some, I'm going to say, a bit of a shift and a lot of empathy, a lot of understanding, a lot of sort of internal resolution, let's say, of someone who may be white and wants to enter this space. What I think it can't be is someone who sees themselves as sort of a do-gooder, right? It's sort of like, oh, I'm going to just fix all the woes of the world because it can't look like that.

Phil Wagner

Right.

Laura Shepherd

I think it has to be somebody who has really done their work to understand how they live in privilege and where the lack of privilege exists for people who don't live in that dominant membership group. So, yes, I think it can be owned by white people, but I suspect that there's probably a little bit more work that has to be done and a little more work to demonstrate their authenticity in this space. And to me, right? What makes me believe it can be done is you. I know you, but you've been very honest with me, with audiences that we've shared about your journey in this space. But what has helped me see it better is that work with you and what you've shared because what I've realized is that you've made it possible for me and hopefully others to realize that, yes, white people can live in this space. And the advantage of having white people live in this space is the acknowledgment that the real work that needs to be done in DEI and changing our culture and changing our systems and changing our structures largely has to be done by white people. Because in most institutions, that's where the power and authority live. And you and I have shared this, right? If we leave the real work of DEI to BIPOC people who then don't have any power in most institutions, then this is really just performative talk, right? And so, you know, that's been my struggle. And my identity as a black woman is sort of like, yeah, let's put these people in these positions and give them a title. And they don't really have any ability to change the culture. They have the ability to do performative work, which I am vehemently against doing. And I think that creates a conflict

for people like me that you can't really get to the spaces and places where the conversations need to be had. What I love about you existing in this space is your willingness to be so completely honest and acknowledging that there are experiences that you've never had. But what has value for me and what endears me to you as my dear friend is that you admit that, and you know that you don't know the experiences that I've had. But you've never questioned my experiences. You've never questioned the way I see the world. You've never questioned that my existence may look different than yours. You've always acknowledged that and validated that. And that's what makes it so meaningful because I feel like what you represent for me, and I know for many others, is how allyship in its purest and most needed form.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, well, you're very kind, and yeah, I love our ebony and ivory, right? And I think those partnerships are certainly very valuable. And I think one of the reasons that I've gotten and maintained space in this space is that and you and I have talked about this extensively so often. There's this sort of, like, double exploitative effort that DEI roles often subject black and brown folks to. There's this foreboding sense of expectation of, like, well, yeah, you're BIPOC. Of course, you need to be on the diversity committee. And because we want somebody of color on the hiring committee, you got to be there too. And you're on the party Planning committee and the year-end Audit committee. And so it's just this impossibility of two less-than-ideal outcomes. One, the person of color gets overburdened and burns out, or there isn't adequate diversity in the representation on certain initiatives or committees, which we know hurts candidates of color too. So what advice can you give to organizations you've thought about higher level DE&I strategy? What advice can you give for how to think more strategically about how to spread the load so that it's not disproportionately on the back of black and brown folks or just other marginalized folks writ large?

Laura Shepherd

Yeah, I think that's a challenge. Right. And we know that when that happens that people BIPOC people who occupy those spaces often express that they feel exhausted, right? And it's because what we know is sort of the black tax, but you could call it the Asian tax, the Latinx, or Latin. It's that extra burden that people have to carry because when we want to create diverse committees or diverse teams, if you only have one person who fits that bill, then they get tagged for all of it. And I have worked with people who have rejected it. I'm not doing another thing. It's not my fault that this institution has not been able to create more diverse representation so that I don't have to be tagged to do everything. So I think first and foremost is, you have to think about how you build out your talent, right? If you only have one person who can check that box, then that's your problem right there.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Laura Shepherd

But then you can't make that person pay for the fact that you haven't made a true and meaningful, intentional, authentic commitment to diversity. You have to then go do that in any way that it makes sense for your organization. Right. What are you lacking? Is it women? Is it black and brown people? Whatever it is, then you need to be thoughtful about why don't you have the representation. But you also need to be thoughtful about the burdens that you put on those people. If you don't have other people who occupy those spaces in the current moment, then I think it's incumbent upon organizations to think about, well, then what do we need to do in terms of providing the education and the foundation for the people who exist? Because it goes back to your first point. White people can be well-versed and knowledgeable on issues that matter in terms of equity and inclusion in the pursuit of diversity. This isn't a space that is black and brown and BIPOC people have a monopoly on but are you willing to do the work? I think too many organizations look at those people and think, oh, they shoulder that burden. That, to me, comes from the top. And that's where leadership should say, this is a responsibility that each of us has, and I will hold everyone accountable. And so whatever it takes, whatever education you have to bring, and you and I subscribe to the same belief. Education in this space can't be a one-and-done. We can't have, like, a brown bag lunchtime, 1 hour, and then we're all finished, and everybody's good. There needs to be conversations that are continually woven into the environment, and the accountability has to be there. And if you do that, you should be doing both, right? You should be pursuing more diverse talent in your organizations, but you should also be requiring that the people who currently exist, particularly the people in power and the people who have a seat at the table, know that they're accountable for this. There should never be a conversation that takes place in an organization where people aren't challenging whether what's being discussed, what's being implemented. Is it equitable? Does it consider the diversity and representation of everyone in our organization or everyone we serve? Clients, customers, stakeholders? And are we creating inclusive spaces, practices, language, initiatives? Everybody should be asking that question. And it shouldn't matter if there's a BIPOC person at the table. Everybody at the table should have responsibility for ensuring that that's happening.

Phil Wagner

So having a seat at the table is its own form of capital. It's its own form of power. If you are a white DEI leader and you have a seat at the table, you seem to tee up some important themes here, that there is then an imperative for you to do some deeper digging, some more professional element. I mean, what would you say to white leaders in the DEI space? How can you challenge them to ensure they are adequately prepared to deal with the realities of this work, and what pitfalls or challenges, maybe, should they be aware of if they're leading in this space?

Laura Shepherd

I think that they should be probably prepared for a lot of pushback and resistance. A lot of people sort of poopooing it. And I suspect because, again, I've never walked in the identity of a white person, right? But I would venture to guess that there may be spaces where someone will

say something in your presence because they think, oh, there's no black person here, there's no LGBTQ person, or whatever. So I can say these things. I think that if you are going to occupy space, DEI space, as a white person, you have to be courageous, you have to be brave. I think you also have to be almost unapologetic in the ways in which you interrupt conversations and seek to dismantle those structures or systems that we know exist in any organization that serve to work against marginalized populations. And so I think it means that you have to be thoughtful about what you hear tenacious in what you say. And I feel like you can't be in a space, and you make the decision not to speak up because in those spaces that may be all white, you have a lot of influence and power, and you have the ability to provide a different perspective. And so I think it requires having that ear to hear, well, okay, that comment or that conversation doesn't impact me and my identity, but I know that it's patently wrong or that it's going to work against some population. And it is my obligation, it's my duty, it's my responsibility to speak up. I think you may risk losing friends and losing allies because I think oftentimes in those spaces, people think, well, you're one of us, right? And so you get it, and it's just a joke. And so I think you have to be willing to lose some friends or maybe to lose some allies, but in the name of the pursuit of justice, I think you have to be willing to do that because think about all of the black and brown and Asian and native and Latinx, Hispanic, LGBTQ+ people who have pressed and pressed and pressed for years and years and who have lost their lives, who have lost their livelihoods, who have lost everything that they put on the line in the pursuit of justice for these marginalized groups. And so if you are going to be a white person who occupies the DE&I space, I think that you have to remember that these people had so much to lose, and they did it in spite of and so you can't occupy this space any less than that, and you have to be willing to lose something. And I've always said that in this work, is that I'm willing to lose popularity. I'm willing to lose friends. I'm even willing to lose a job in the pursuit of what I know is right. But what I know is if I'm always doing the right thing, that the right thing will ultimately come to me. But I won't sit in a space and allow something to be said or done that I know is going to have substantial or even minimal impact upon a discrete group of people and not speak up. I may not be able to change that outcome, but I'm always going to speak up in the name of justice.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. And I know we're being overly reductionist here as we talk about white, black. Of course, there are other intersectionalities that make your access point to the D&I landscape, right? If you're a neurodivergent, if you're LGBTQ, right? There are a variety of access points here, but there's something so significant about race for this social moment, this era of reckoning. I really do think this white-black dichotomy is something to reconcile. And as you speak about speaking up. So often, I think that a lot of that can become just very performative. You see a lot of white speaking out, white rage, not in the way we think about white rage, but like rage from white people, about race-laden issues. Post George Floyd post like, how do we make sure as white? How would you recommend that white DEI leaders, I should say, continue to do the right thing even when there's not, like, this social wave that they continue to do day in and day out, those things that actually promote the dignity and value of black lives, not just when it's performatively Kosher to do so.

Laura Shepherd

I think it's what you said. I mean, I think it has to become almost second nature and a part of your daily walk in life. I think it means continuing to challenge your own assumptions and biases and scan the environment to see when those biases and assumptions and stereotypes pop up. It's probably, and again, I can't speak from experience, but I would venture to guess that if you live in a privileged identity as a white person that there may be things that you don't see. I think it means fine-tuning your lens and understanding that while I may have this experience because of my privilege, consciously let me think about how would this have worked for someone who didn't live in that identity. And I think it's something that we can all do. The example I give is in the space of neurodiversity. I have a child with special needs, and what I found in my experience in managing his needs in the public school system, when I show up in the space, they have family history, demographics, they know I'm a lawyer. And so I've never had an issue getting any of the accommodations that I've needed. I think that they just look at me and think, oh, we're not going to challenge this woman like she probably knows more than we do. And I go in with my binder, and I'm prepared, and I have my talking points, and my questions and I'm like, okay, we need to talk about this. And I make modifications. I read all the documents. But that's privilege. I have a privilege that I know other parents don't have. I have the privilege of my education. I have the privilege of my socioeconomic status. I can take off a work to go to a meeting at a school at 10:00 in the morning, right? And so I recognize that in that space, I have a privilege. I know what the opposite side of that looks like. And so oftentimes when I'm in those meetings when they push back on an accommodation, I have said this is not just important to my child, this is important to any child who shows up in this space. And so I hope that this is not something that just become pro forma, that you just push back. Like every child is entitled to this. Look, I don't know if that makes a difference or not, but I at least want to raise that awareness in that space where I do have the floor that what you are doing is categorically improper. And I'm telling you, not just in the context of my child, but hopefully, you think about this in the context of any child who comes before you and any parent who may not recognize that they have the right to advocate strongly for their child. I think that it means understanding when privilege is enacted for you and how you can use your privilege to the benefit of other people. And so I've said in spaces to men if you know that the women that you work alongside make less than you simply because they're women, you have an obligation to speak up. You can't call yourself an ally if you don't challenge the system and say, why is my colleague making less than I am? I want to understand why is that distinction necessary. And what I've said to people is they're not going to take any money out of your check because you asked the question. But you might then be able to say, look. We really should be thinking more thoughtfully about the way in which we approach pay equity across gender lines. So I think you have to be able to consciously and deliberately challenge the privilege that you have in the spaces in which you exist. That has to be a daily walk. I think it's something that is probably hard to do but that you continue to cultivate. But I think I do it too. I only live in my own identity, and of course, I occupy a lot of intersectionality, but I recognize that I don't live in other identities that I'm responsible for serving. So I have to constantly challenge myself and look at things and think about how would this work if a person showed up in this identity. And you have to keep pushing it. You have to know that you're not always going to get it right. You have to be

willing to be corrected and to be called out or called in on it. And you have to take that information and move forward and know that if someone challenges me on an assumption that I have, I have to do my work to overcome it. And I can't repeat that again.

Phil Wagner

There's so much to unpack there. Number one, getting called out or called in. Been there, been there, right? I think a good testament to your real commitments is when that happens, do you wash your hands and move on or do you hang tight and do the self-work there? But I also love how you speak of privilege. Oh my gosh, it's such a loaded term, right? People roll their eyes the moment we say it, but I think you just paint a different visual picture there. Privilege is about showing up to the tables that you have access to with your binder in hand. This is about asking, well, what's in your binder? What are the commitments that you bring to the table? And not in that Mitt Romney, like, binders full of women thing, but, like, really showing up and bringing commitments forward, bringing advocacy forward, bringing recommendations forward that reflect those true, authentic commitments to DEI. And I think that then changes the landscape for who can do this work and how they might be able to do it. But let's talk about black or BIPOC leaders in the DEI space. You're a prolific leader. So many people would love to walk in Laura Shepherd's footsteps. Can you speak to younger Laura? I mean, I know you're young and vibrant now, but, like younger Laura, are there things that you wish you would have known as a leader, a female person of color leading in this space before you jumped into this work? Are there challenges that befall BIPOC leaders or female leaders in this landscape that we maybe want to talk about?

Laura Shepherd

Oh, gosh, yes. So many things. Right. I think, first and foremost, I would have been more thoughtful about seeking out mentors so that I could have gotten some guidance. Because I think the younger you are, no fault of your own, but the less life experience you have and the less sort of the lessons that you have in terms of learning and failing and right. You don't have it, and you don't have the ability to cultivate wisdom, the wisdom I have now. So I wish I would have been more thoughtful about really the value of a mentor. I wish I knew the difference between a mentor and a sponsor. I now know that there were people in my career who were sponsors of mine, but I didn't really know what that meant. I know now because I understand the landscape much better. I now appreciate what those people were doing for me and how they advocated for me outside of my presence. I don't think I was always really aware that that was happening, but I do know now. I think also just I wish that I had more courage to speak up in spaces where I knew that there was something wrong, but I didn't know that I had a voice. And I think that I was probably scared of what would be the outcome if I said, hey, that's not appropriate. There were times that I did do it, and you get that sort of pit in your stomach, but I wasn't always sure what to do in that conversation. And I think the challenge is not wanting to attack people but to be able to have a conversation where you try to explain to them why you're troubled by the words they've used or whatever it is that you're trying to call attention to. And I think just having more confidence to do that. I think now, in my cranky old age, I'm not sure that I'm much more competent, but I think the difference now

is I care a lot less about what people think of me because I know that with 99.9% surety that what I do is out of the best of intentions and with the best motives. And that's really all I care about. I don't try to hurt people's feelings, for sure, but I tell the truth. And what I tell people in most instances is, don't ask me a question if you don't want to hear the truth. Now, I will be as kind and compassionate as I can, but I will tell you the truth even if it hurts your feelings. Not because I intend to hurt your feelings, but because the pursuit of justice to me requires some really stark honesty, right? And we can't defend and pursue justice if we try to shape-shift around people's feelings. And so I will say to people, I was in a meeting recently where there's a bunch of people on a zoom screen, and somebody asked me a question, and I thought, this answer is going to be a little controversial. And I said to the person, I need to say this before I answer. And everybody sort of looked up, and I said, I tell the truth, and I tell the truth even though I know it might hurt people's feelings. Now, I'm willing to deal with the backlash of that. I take responsibility. But if you ask me a question, I'm going to tell you the truth. So before I answer, I want to ask you again, is that the question you want to ask me in this time and space?

Phil Wagner

Yeah. That's good.

Laura Shepherd

And he said, everybody kind of looked up, and he said, this is definitely the question I want to ask you. So I answered the question. And look, I may have heard some people's feelings, but I always try to give a context, and I try to explain why I believe it's my responsibility, it's my duty, to tell the truth. You cannot speak up for marginalized groups of people and be so concerned about whose toes I'm stepping on. I don't want to step on people's toes. And I'm certainly always willing to have a conversation with someone about why I said what I said. And what I often say to people is what I'm saying is not an indictment of you, but what I'm saying is my thoughts on what is occurring in this space. And if you ask me, I have an obligation to say it. What I'm hoping to do, though, is to prime people for don't ask me questions if you don't want me to tell you the truth. I think our societies, our institutions need more spaces where we challenge assumptions. And that we're willing to hear the truth about what's happening so that we can really get down to doing the work that's going to dismantle these systems.

Phil Wagner

And it might surprise you who calls you out in those spaces. They might be the wokest of them all because you are revealing realities or fractures or fissures that have worked just really well being a skeleton hidden away in a closet. A tough reality to acknowledge. I've been there too. But how do you get there? Earlier, you mentioned what it's like to feel powerless, having titles but not real power or real emotional or social capital. So what if you're a younger leader from a marginalized group, particularly? How do you hold your C-suite accountable? How do you get to the place where you set the standard of I'm a truth teller? How do you self-advocate? How do you get to be bold like you are now? What if you're just starting your career? What are steps you put in place to get there?

Laura Shepherd

I don't think it's easy. Right? I don't want to sound like I have some magical sexy elixir that would make this all work well. I think that I would probably start it. Look at the institution that you work at. What do they say their commitment to this cause is? Right? Because everybody has a shiny word smith statement on we're committed to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, justice, whatever the words we use, I would start there and look at that statement and then start to assess, well, how do I see this in action? Where do I see it in action? Or where am I not seeing it in action? And then I might take those sort of accounts, right? Here's your statement. And then here's instances where it's not clear to me that that commitment is being lived out, right? And then I might go to whoever it is, your immediate manager, supervisor, and start to point that out, right? So we're saying we're committed to this, but can we talk about this initiative, this project, whatever? This doesn't feel to me like it's living in that commitment. And I'm trying to understand where the accountability. Who has responsibility? How can we get more aligned so that everything that we do lives in this commitment, lives in these institutional values? Now, you know me well and know I've challenged that a lot because I don't like to see language and words thrown around in a performative, perfunctory way. And so I think that I would start there. Look, I acknowledge that if you are early on in your career in these spaces that, there may be times that you don't feel comfortable doing that. I recognize the reality of I got to pay my bills, right? I got to live, so I can't just risk being fired from institutions. Recognize that, and so I think it may be, for some people, a space where you have to tread carefully. I think the goal is to be strategic and to use data as much as you can to support your view. So if you can say, look, I see that we have this commitment, but look at this statement that says X, I don't see how that you can find more examples. You have this data point. Like, I found six or seven examples of where this doesn't appear to be living in our commitment. Can we talk about that? Think about who the stakeholders are, right? And weave that in. How would our stakeholders' internal, external feel if they saw this? How does this breach our commitment to these values and to try to bring that conversation? I think it's important to make those conversations based in data, whether it's qualitative or quantitative, and less based on your gut feeling. Because I've learned if you go to people and just say, I don't like it. I feel like it's bad. People are more willing to write you off, but hold them accountable for what they say. Take that. You said that this was our commitment. You said this is what we were going to be doing as an institution. I'm not seeing that lived out. How can I help us achieve that?

Phil Wagner

I feel like I've heard you say those exact words, and I've seen you hold people accountable. So I can corroborate you don't just talk a big game. You walk it out too. Look, we started this conversation by saying maybe we're not the perfect case study, but you know what? I like us. I like you. I like me. I like what we've been able to do together. So let's talk about that Ebony and Ivory collaboration. Final question for you is, in your mind, what is effective white, black, black, white solidarity look like in the context of collaborative DE&I work? We know that many hands make the work light. How do we bring all of those differently colored hands together, right, to really lift off our DEI efforts and make them something that is impactful, collaborative, healthy, effective? What's effective white-black solidarity look like in this space?

Laura Shepherd

It looks like me and you. I mean, look, I don't pretend to have all the answers, but what I know is I think it looks like what we've been able to do in all of our imperfections. You and I share this great view that we're messy, and we live in the messiness of our lives. And that's what I love about you. I think it looks like figuring it out, being compassionate and forgiving, and willing to step into spaces that might be uncomfortable. We have shared things with each other about our stories and our history that are personal and palpable, and that really speak to who we are and how we've gotten to where we are today. I think it requires that willingness, to be honest, and compassionate, and empathetic. I know that I've said things to you about my past where you just said to me I didn't know that about you, and that helps me understand more about you. It's validating people's experience. I wonder, in some instances, if white people understand that what most BIPOC or marginalized people want is a place of safety in spaces with people that don't look like them. I think what you have added to this friendship, to this synergy that you and I have, is you've provided a safe place for me to tell you my story, my experience, with no judgment. And I can be completely unfiltered. You know, I say this all the time, right? Liberation, for me, means that I can exhale, and my shoulders go down. I feel like every conversation I've ever had with you, from the very first time we interacted, I've never felt the need to be anything other than who I am. As I show up in my multiple identities that, I can be completely unfiltered with you and that there's no judgment, and I can be fully in my blackness and my womanness and whatever else is with you. And that you don't judge it, that you accept me as who I am. You see the value in what I bring to the table. I think it's true. Likewise, I look at you.

Phil Wagner

Absolutely.

Laura Shepherd

And when I see you, of course, I see you in your identity as a white man. But that never enters my mind in the conversations. I never think, oh, I have to be different because Phil is white. Or I do think that in other spaces with other white people. Right. But you have provided a space where I can be fully and authentically myself, fully liberated in my identity. And even if we don't agree on something, we can just talk about that because, again, I know that you value what I bring to the table. I value everything that you bring to the table. You have given me the ability to think about this from a lens of someone who's not a black woman. I don't know that identity, but you've allowed me to think about it. You've also allowed me to understand, just as you said, that white people can occupy this space. And you've shown me how that can be done in a way that honors the work but that acknowledges the differences. And it's made me realize that you don't have to be insert white, black, brown, LGBTQ, whatever to recognize the challenges of how people who live in those identities live in our society. And then I see you and think, gosh, this human being wants so much for the world to be better for people like me. And so I think that in the way this works is the way we work, is that I get to be fully me with you unapologetically, and you accept that, and you get to be fully you to me, and I don't want anything about you to change. Right? I don't look at you and say, oh, this white man with

his privilege. No. I look at you and think this white man who has privilege recognizes he has privilege and is doing his everything he possibly can to get people to understand that in the privilege in which he exists and holds, there's power in that, and there's power in your allyship. And I like to say to people that allyship really that's thrown around as a buzzword, right? I'm an ally. My view is if you have to tell me you're an ally, you're probably not an ally. And so I think that allyship needs to show up in a way that is more than allyship. And your allyship, to me personally, in my identity as black as woman is evident without you ever having to tell me you're an ally. I know categorically you are on my side. And I know if I came to you and said, Phil, this is my experience, this is how it made me feel that you were going to validate and honor that and not try to talk me out of it. I know that you would advocate for me when I'm not around, and that's what it needs to look like. And I know that you have always been willing to admit these aren't experiences that you've had, but you recognize that no one should have.

Phil Wagner

I'm incredibly moved on this side of the microphone, and I'm like, wow, Phil, what a gross toss-up to the question that was like the biggest ego boost, which was not my intent, but I appreciate that, and I appreciate you. I mean, allow me to likewise, just gush. Thank you for being you and not withholding. You have taught me so much, and that's not your responsibility. But just by being Laura in this space and being you, I have just gleaned so much from you. I appreciate the collaborative partnership that we've been able to cultivate, and I hope that for others, I see such potential in the DEI space, which is messy, and sometimes it's gross, and oftentimes it's really overly performative, which makes it even grosser. But when you can foster those real human-to-human relationships, you can be full and authentically yourself. You can hold space for each other's pain and trauma and stories, the ones you see, the ones you know, the ones you don't. There's real potential there. There's real, real potential there. And so, amidst all just the racial divide, I don't want to gloss over this and make it all bubblegum and frou-frou.

Laura Shepherd

Sure.

Phil Wagner

There are real issues, but I think we can collaboratively work on those issues together. And that also means sometimes this isn't the space for me. I got to tap out, right? Like not every space do I have to come in and sit at the table or use my voice, but I really do believe in the power of potential, and I wanted to just explore that with you over the last few minutes. And again, I'm incredibly moved. I love you and the work that you do. I think the world of you. I miss you every single day, but I know that you are driving change in the realest of ways. So thanks for taking time to share with our listeners on our podcast.

Laura Shepherd

There's so many thoughts in my head, but I will just say thank you for thinking that I should be a guest on your podcast. I think I love you in ways that you probably don't even know because I think what you've said is so important that you know what spaces you belong in, and you know what spaces you don't belong in, and that's important. And you just said something that I do want to say. You said it's not my responsibility to teach you. I do think it's not the responsibility of marginalized people to teach other people. I think the difference is it is your responsibility to learn, and you have accepted that responsibility.

Phil Wagner

That's good.

Laura Shepherd

I think that's the difference is you've never shown up to me and said, Laura, tell me why this? But you have done the work to hear what I'm saying and to take that and translate it into a learning opportunity for yourself without making me feel as if it is my duty to help you understand. And I think that's the difference. And I would say that for anybody who is white and wants to occupy the space, that's the difference. Do the work on your own, which you do and continue to do each day. Recognize the spaces that you should occupy, advocate for the spaces that you shouldn't occupy, and explain to other white people we don't belong here. This is why they need that safe space. You've done that. And I think it is making an unwavering commitment to learning about other cultures and understanding that difference is good. I don't have to walk in that person's shoes to understand that they have a right to exist fully and authentically. And you've done all of that for me and for others. I think the first time that we ever met was on a zoom.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I think so.

Laura Shepherd

Chatting you and saying, hey, let's get together, I knew then that there was some connection that was intended for us. It hasn't disappointed.

Phil Wagner

More to come. More to come.

Laura Shepherd

Invite me back, and we'll talk about some more good stuff.

Phil Wagner

You got it.

Laura Shepherd

And I'm going to have you come talk to my folks about some. But I honor the work that you do. So thank you.

Phil Wagner

Thank you, and thank you to our listeners for tuning into Diversity Goes to Work today. Thank you for tuning into Laura and Phil gush at each other, and you see our friendship sort of play out over zoom. But you know what? In a tough world we live in. We need these relationships. So thanks for coming along on our friendship journey here over the last 45 minutes or so. And hopefully, you gleaned something helpful about collaborative partnerships in the D&I space. Until next time.

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. Until next time.