



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 42: TARA BORCHERS – GLOBAL DEI WORK

Tara Borchers

But you're not going to get everyone on board. And if that is your intent, you are probably setting yourself up for some sadness.

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 get 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, Tara Borchers, is one of our own and a graduate of our MBA program. She's had a multi-dimensional career since leaving Miller Hall and has served for the past two years at PRA Group, first as the Global HRIS director and then most recently as the head of Diversity and Inclusion and HR technology. She's out there doing the work, the real work, every single day. Tara, welcome. It is always good to speak with alumni. I'm certain I've messed something up about your background. Tell our listeners a little bit more about who you are and how you found your way from the MBA into DEI work.

Tara Borchers

Hey, Phil. Thanks. Yeah, no, actually, that's probably the best way of describing me. When you said that, I was like, I like it multi-dimensional. That's another word of that could be kind of random. I played inside of DEI space, HR, technology, risk. And that's fun. It's like one of those things that allows you to have a really broad perspective and be able to kind of weave in and out of people, processes, programs, technologies, and it's been great.

Phil Wagner

I'm already going off-script here because, of course, I am. A lot of times, I think we see a natural progression from HR into DEI. Based on your experience, do you think it's helpful, particularly for students, our own MBA students, who want to find their way into DEI work, to have done coursework or have done experience in HR, or do you think the tech has helped you? Do you think it's a mindset that has helped you most in that space? Is there any particular aspect of your education or training that really naturally propelled you in the DEI space?

Tara Borchers

No, I think some of the best experience I have comes from working inside of talent management processes and consulting with leaders and coaching leaders. And I think that's because you think about the lifecycle of an employee, understanding that experience from how you hire someone, how you identify talent and build talent, how you prepare someone for the next level so that they can be successful. Those things actually, I think, have been most impactful and helpful because those are the areas where if you're really thinking about building a diverse or robust talent pipeline, those programs and practices really, really matter.

Phil Wagner

That's so good. I'm already taking notes. I'm like, that's a perfect framework, I think, for when we work with our own students here. So during the first time we met, you talked about your work, and you positioned yourself as someone who thinks globally. You said directly I tend to think globally. I think I am guilty so often of taking not just a Western lens but just a US-centric lens to DEI work because we work with 200 to 400 students every single year, many of whom will work here in the States. So I'm hoping I can learn from you today. Can you speak to where your global lens sort of came from, how you developed it, and how it shapes and defines your approach to DEI work?

Tara Borchers

My brother and I often joke that we have the best childhood. We grew up in a little nook in Northern Virginia where no one on the street in which we lived in was the same. Socioeconomic status, family status, race, religion. It was all different. And so, as a child, I just had fun. Like, I had friends, and I had their parents, and I had their grandparents, and I had their cousins. And people were very real to me. And I think that that's one of the things that was so helpful for me was that I was always around people who we had a lot of similarities and we had a lot of differences. And I loved them. They're my friends. I think about how that translated to work. I've been able to work at a lot of global companies with people who either emigrated to the US and work but they come from a different culture or from people who are still living in their country of origin. And I think the things I learned as a child have been really helpful. Just like that natural curiosity of being able to kind of ask questions that make you familiar with each other, of being able to actually understand the nuances of why people might approach something different and not being worried about their differences threatening my own sense of myself.

Phil Wagner

Oh, that's good.

Tara Borchers

And I think that when I think about how that matters in the workplace, people who have less experiences, I think a lot of times that's the harder thing is being able to kind of break it open a little bit and be able to appreciate and ask questions and engage and be okay with differences because those differences are actually where the beauty comes in. Like the cracks in the

window where the sun shines, and so it just allows you to really kind of be able to see and appreciate the value that comes from a group of people who are really super different.

Phil Wagner

Love that. So I think as a guiding mental model, that really sort of sets the bar very high for us. It gives us something to aspire to. I'm wondering, on the ground level, what sort of differentiates a global approach to DEI as opposed to maybe just sort of, again, like, my own approach, which is often misguided sort of focused here on the nuances of the States and DEI within sort of our own complex political and social system right now. Looks a lot different than how DEI work might play out globally. Right? Like racism in Europe operates differently than how racism in the US plays out. Same system, different structures. So can you speak to how DEI work might play out differently globally?

Tara Borchers

Yeah, I think one of the things that is really interesting is that you can measure things, but measurements have no feelings, and they don't really tell you the story.

Phil Wagner

I love that.

Tara Borchers

It's important. Data is incredibly important. And I once had a leader that I had the pleasure of learning from when I was doing executive development. And he gave advice to this cohort, and he was like, data is not good data, it's not bad data, it's just data.

Phil Wagner

Yes.

Tara Borchers

Out there.

Phil Wagner

Yes.

Tara Borchers

And if someone can trust your data, then you can have a conversation about what does this data say? How do we feel about this? Is this representative of this? Right? But data has no feelings. People do. So you can decide that you're going to do a program from a global standpoint, such as an ERG, an employee resource group, and you can say, yeah, we're going to talk about caregiving. Because if you think about generationally where people are, there are people who are caring for their children, they're caring for their adult children who are not going to leave their home due to neurodiversity issues or health issues or any other kind of diagnoses, and then they may have their parents they're caring for. So caregiving is like one of

those things that you might look and be like, oh, it's like a universal global matter. Everybody's doing caregiving. Everybody is. But depending on where you are around the globe, the cultural norms about how a family cares for each other are very different. Even in the States, how families care for each other are very different. Sometimes it's regional. Sometimes it is related to economics. Sometimes it is truly cultural and based upon someone's, like the culture of their home, of native origin versus their American. But if you go into Europe and you go into the Nordics, the Nordics, that is a country that provides so much as a part of being a citizen, in Sweden or in Norway or in some of the other countries in the north region. So that experience is different than a person in the UK who also has some government-provided benefits versus the US who has less government-provided benefits. So the burden is different on a family. The approach is different on a family. The needs are different on a family. So it's one of those things that you all share the common element, but the practice is different, and the nuance is different. And so if you tried to tell everybody that we were going to have an employee resource group that was focused on caregiving and it was going to be from the US point of view, it would really miss the nuances of what is happening locally or regionally. And at the same point, if you were having one from the Swedish point of view or the Norwegian point of view, everyone would be trying to move there because you'd look at it and you'd be like, wow, that is a very different perspective. And so, to me, that's the concept of being able to understand that the way of life is different and what is available to you is different. And frankly, how you age is different. It's upon how you lived your life anyways. And we all know from the data out there that that is different based upon the country that you're in.

Phil Wagner

No, I really love this. So I have a dear friend, Liz Stigler, who's at the Chinese American Service League. She's been on a previous episode, and we asked her what would make your life like. What could everyday normal leaders people do to make your life as a DEI officer better? And she gave something that was so surprising, but it really resonated with me, and she said, don't tune out. Pay attention to what's sort of going on in your political systems, not just nationally but globally and at the community level. And I hear those themes here too. To be a good DEI practitioner means globally pay attention to how structures are different, how systems are different, how institutions are different. How did you learn to grapple all that? One of the things grapple with all that, I should say one of the things I struggle with is that there's no one canon for DEI work. When it comes to workplace safety. We've got entire systems and structures and manuals. When it comes to the law and or HR policy, we have sort of a consistent canon, but not really in DEI. So you've got a sort of self-fashion and education in, I mean, everything race, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, like all of the different identity affinities. That's a lot of education to sort of self-develop and then to think about how those play out globally, how that looks in Russia, how that looks in Israel, how that looks in East Asia, how that looks in South Africa. I mean, these are all so different. How do you, as a DEI practitioner, do the professional development to become aware of all the different global nuances? That's a lot to take on, isn't it?

Tara Borchers

It is. And one, I think you should never expect yourself to hit the level of mastery. I think you should just commit yourself to lifetime listening and hoping that through the listening and discovering that you're actually learning so that you can apply. I do think that one of the courses I took at a different university when I was studying human development was on understanding really cultural nuances and having some context for how it is different, how conversations are different, how conflict is different, how based upon the society, how men and women interact differently just based upon those things. I find myself having that conversation with friends and colleagues on the US side. Sometimes we tell ourselves that we hear like, oh, I don't see differences, which is a dangerous thing. It's a limiting thing. Right. See the difference so that you can put it in perspective and make the assumption that someone is not behaving a certain way. Understand why they're behaving differently than your norm. What is their norm? Just ask a couple of questions about that. How comfortable are you challenging that, and why is that? And I think part of it is getting really good at asking questions and just assuming that you need to always be listening and learning and asking questions and getting very comfortable asking questions. I had the person who worked for me once while I was in the tech side of my life, and like you ask so many questions, it really is embarrassing. And I was like, oh, okay. And so it made me really self-conscious. So I stopped asking questions that were still swimming in my head. And then I started watching things play out, and I was like, you know what? I need to have confidence in the fact that I can see something and I'm asking questions for a reason. So maybe I need to be better at putting context around why I'm asking a question.

Phil Wagner

That's good.

Tara Borchers

Or be more intentional about pulling the thread. If I ask this question, because now I'm asking this question, so what does that mean? And I think especially when you're in DEI work, where you're going to pull the thread. We are a tapestry, right? And there are very many threads that are coming through, and the back end of a tapestry is just gnarly, and the front end is beautiful. There's somebody who's always weaving, and if you are in DEI, you are weaving. You're always kind of like coming in and out. You're pulling threads, you're finding things, and you have to be okay knowing that you do not know it all.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. And having, I think, the intellectual humility when you thread the wrong way to back it up. Right? I mean, I'm certain that you've been there too, right? You've been in places where you've dropped the ball, certainly, right? You've done things the wrong way. How do you recover from those types of things? Any advice to people who might find themselves having dropped the ball? Well-intentioned in their pursuit of outcomes, but maybe not perfect in the achievement?

Tara Borchers

Well, good old-fashioned owning it never hurt anybody. I mean, it does. There are times you can really mess something up, and you're like, oh, I got to take it, and I got to own it. And it does hurt. But what you're doing is showing some integrity that bridges any kind of position, right, of saying like, this was mine and I failed to execute, I executed poorly, I missed it, whatever. And I think that that's just a natural being of being able to do that. I also think that there are times, and especially what I found in DEI is, that sometimes when we miss it is because we have failed to ground ourselves in meaning. A good old-fashioned operational definition. So another part of my random past is I have a black belt that I generally refer to as agree belt because I don't use the black belt, but I use so much of it. I pick and choose the things that I think are super meaningful. And what I apply to my talent world, to my HR technology world, and to DEI is operational definitions. When I say orange, this is what orange looks like to me. What does orange look like to you? And then I'll hear you say something, and you might say something like, oh, interesting. Okay, so that's orange to you. To me, that is a mandarin. And so you're just starting to talk about the nuances of differences. And that's an important element that I think sometimes can keep you from failure in the first place is to be really kind of clear. But I also think the most important part of failure in DEI or any other scope is a fast follow of not defending but not attacking. How did we fail? And let's capture it now. So that we're really thinking about how to adapt and learn quickly while it stings is the best time to actually figure that stuff out and document it so that you don't like when you're going back to that program, process, conversation, or whatever, you're less likely to fail in the same time. People will forgive the first failure usually, right? They'll even forgive the second failure. But if you keep failing, they're going to start questioning whether or not you have the discipline to execute something. And so you're better off not failing a second time. And you actually can control that most time if you're really thinking about how to prevent it being maybe a little bit more cautious, muscle memory get you in a good space.

Phil Wagner

This is so good. And I'm still stuck on the oranges and mandarins sort of thing you tee up here. Because what I think of then is that we can do such a great job of establishing context, or I would say like establishing the why, right, that we would all have this clear understanding of why we do what we do, but we're still going to have different access points. You've managed DEI initiatives. How do you sort of corral your human capital around this central why, recognizing that everybody has different access points, right? Our personal experiences or some people will only get to this commitment through the business case, which I think is a little nauseating, but if I can get you, I can get you. Some will do it only out of compliance. Some do it out of sort of a moral obligation or political buy-in. Like, how do you corral everybody's different access points to the central DEI? Why that you try to situate within your organization?

Tara Borchers

Do you need to corral everybody?

Phil Wagner

That's good.

Tara Borchers

And I just say, like, think Gladwell. Isn't Gladwell the one who talks about, like, mavens and connectors? I think it's important to know who you need to corral versus trying to get everyone on board. And I think that sometimes is probably a little bit clinical, maybe a little bit surgical, but you're not going to get everyone on board. And if that is your intent, you are probably setting yourself up for some sadness, some stress, some dissatisfaction. And so I think it's about being more thoughtful about what is it that you're trying to do. Who are the people who can best influence, advise, empower? Who are the people who are committed? The difference between commitment and compliance, right? Compliance is just like transactional, and commitment is much more emotional. And so it's kind of like, who's going to be there? And I think that once you do things well, over time, you continue to listen, evolve, put more chairs at the table, then you start to gain momentum. One of the things that I say a lot inside of the talent space because I think if you're thinking DEI is not talent, but they really are connected. You need to keep an abundance mentality. You have to keep putting chairs at the table. Maybe you need to add an extension to the table. Don't keep the table to a finite amount of people who can be engaged. Make sure that there's room for everyone and people can come to the table, or they can choose not to come to the table. But if you're in DEI, you are best having a big table and to just keep thinking about making space and making meaningful space. Don't burn people out on non-value-added things, but keep room at the table for conversations and for insight and for, storytelling and for, data gathering, and all those things.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. I love so much of how you speak about DEI because you have such balance. You and I, in a past conversation, have talked about the balance between sort of DEI as an art and also as a science. And I agree that data is monumentally important, but you also don't flee from emotions, and I think that's so important here. You mentioned storytelling specifically, and I think that specifically can just light a fire in otherwise skeptical folks. To hear the real lived experiences, to see through a different lens of reality. How different folks walk through this world differently, I think, can really illuminate a lot. Let's talk a little bit about the balance of DEI as an art and a science. First, let's talk about the science. We talk about measurement. Measurement is so important. How do you measure and set metrics or KPIs globally when different parts of the global community see identity-related and employment issues differently? Like, how do you establish coherent KPIs, metrics, goals that can be actualized when this plays out so differently?

Tara Borchers

Yeah, it's really true. And part of it is there is no perfect way, or maybe there is, and if you find one, please let me know or send that person to me to have a chat.

Phil Wagner

You got it.

Tara Borchers

But I don't know of a way where you can get grounded in one place on what it looks like to have representation of people who are qualified to work in your organization. In the US, we have that with the EEOC. That's a good place to start to be able to really understand the industry you're in, the locations that you're in, and then be able to say, so, if that's the case, what does the EEOC tell me? Based upon all of their data, and they have all the data, what does it look like? What is a good expectation of the available population wherever I am in the industry, I am? I think that's a good place to start at times is starting with the data that you have and being able to kind of say, if that is what it is, let's look at our US population. Because sometimes you do have to just kind of break it down to your point, place by place, what's our US population? And let's look at our jobs and our roles and kind of look at it that way. And you can choose to look at other countries or regions the same way. You can break them down country by country. I don't know of other countries, and that is probably a short sight of mine, that have the same amount of data available, though some of them make a lot of data available. I just don't think it's, to my knowledge, as clean and crisp as the EEOC data. But it might be, and I actually might give myself the task of doing some exploration on that. I think that's one thing you look outside. I think the other thing is where the art and science is where you look inside, and you really look at your roles, and you really think about, and you do your data, and you do your analysis, you chart things, you see where people are in your organization and the types of roles they're in. And then you do have to start to say, where are we missing an opportunity to be intentional about finding talent that is different than what we have today? Finding or developing talent internally so that they're ready for another organization and things like that, or another part of the organization and things like that. I do think that it's something that you can report on globally, but it is not global work. If that makes sense, because once again, it's just data. You actually need to put people together in a room who can talk about the meaning of the data. I feel like I've totally rambled on that, but it's just that there's no silver bullet.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Tara Borchers

And I think that's the hard thing for any of us when we're working through it is like there is the nuanced conversations, and there might be the reality of, hey, in this country, they are predominantly white. In the culture of the country, it is predominant that men have college educations, and we have an industry that requires certain skill sets that you acquire typically through college. There may be all of these extenuating circumstances that already really narrow the pipeline. And so then you may look at that and say, okay, so if that's the case, then let's understand and accept the reality of the situation of the country. And then let's look at the culture of our organization in there. And that's where having engagement surveys for where I

work now, we have an engagement and inclusion survey where we're really kind of asking questions. That's where you can kind of get a toad and a temperament of how are you doing? It's also really important to know that not every country allows you to have access to all that data.

Phil Wagner

And that's one of the things I was wondering, too. Like global privacy laws, right? Even just around data protection, there have to be sort of country-specific deterrence to even getting good data, right?

Tara Borchers

Well, and so I would say there is no such thing as a global privacy law. There are country-specific privacy laws.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, that's what I should have said.

Tara Borchers

I liked how you said that. Gave me a little good entry, and so I could kind of challenge that. So I appreciate that.

Phil Wagner

You got it. That's what I'm here for.

Tara Borchers

Yeah, I did a great job. But there's even inside the United States. There are state-specific laws that also are kind of modeled off of some European privacy laws. You do have to kind of think about that, and I actually think that's a great thing because it is protecting us as individuals. It's challenging companies to think about why you need this data in the first place. If you're in DEI, it just stinks because that data matters. You might want to look at it through the lens of a person who is bisexual, and you might want to just really kind of slice and dice the data, and you don't have it because in a specific country, maybe you're not even allowed to ask for it. Or in different countries, it is just the practice where people do not share it. And so you have to kind of know and understand that that data may not be available to you, which is why you still have to have a good old-fashioned conversation. You still have to have access to things. It's also why employee resource groups are phenomenal because you can self-select into an employee resource group. When you're going in there, you can have real conversations inside of a community that allows people to listen and learn from each other. And so that is kind of like the art and science of there are processes, there are technologies, there's data points that you can and should put in place, but they will never replace the value of human interaction inside of DEI.

Phil Wagner

No. That's so, so good. That's so, so good. So I have, I think, probably one final question, which is, you know, we talked about the science. I'm wondering a little bit more about the art, or maybe the framing is the impact of the work. I'm wondering how your measurements, assessments, or work sort of impact the lived daily experiences of employees. I mean, how do you turn the insights that you gather into actionable outcomes that are realistic? How do you turn those insights and actions into maybe the implementation of social support specifically? You and I had a very specific conversation a few months ago on specifically like trans identity and how somebody who lives as trans in San Francisco that looks a lot different than what it means to be trans in Guatemala or Thailand, or Ethiopia. So how do you know how to best implement meaningful social support provisions to employees who are geographically dispersed?

Tara Borchers

I think that when you have the perfect answer for that, Phil, also call me back.

Phil Wagner

I got you. So I got a running list here of things to call. I got you.

Tara Borchers

We're learning together right back to that earlier conversation. I think, once again, it is about being intentional in conversations with people who are trans. Either the people who are inside of your organization who you're trying to support and also organizations that support people who are trans. But that is intentional work. That is about really trying to seek to understand a person who has a different life experience, perhaps, than you do. And it lives inside of a society that may be more accepting or less accepting. And even if you are a trans person in San Francisco, you still are probably worried for your safety at times, right? Or all the time. If you are in different parts of this world, you are worried for your life, and you are worried for the life of your family and the people that you associate with. Your common everyday fear is very, very different because the risk is very different. So I think when you are dealing with areas that you are less familiar with, and you are in regions where you do not know, you have got to tap other resources. You're never going to be 100% alone are never going to be 100% in DEI, but you can put together something that is 100%, but it is probably going to rely on you to expand your network. Look inside of local groups who are supporting areas. The Trevor Project. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the Trevor Project.

Phil Wagner

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely.

Tara Borchers

Absolutely wonderful group. Right. And for those of you who may not know, the Trevor Project is really committed to preventing suicide amongst LGBTQ youth, and I would assume also adults, but I know that that's often what their hallmark is. Groups like that are groups

that you have to be engaged with. You have to fund. You have to commit to. If that is part of your value system as an organization, you need to make sure that the people who are really on the ground focusing on specific groups are funded enough so that they can do that. That is why inside of DEI as well, you need to be thinking about who your community engagement partners are inside of your organization and having intentional conversations about how you engage in your community, not to just support the person, but to support the groups who support them.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, that's so good. And I think the higher-order call here is to not see any identity affinity as a monolith. Right. Again, all of those experiences, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, gender, all of the isms the identity experiences, those are going to play out differently based on context. And so this is about reading the room, the global room, and thinking and being very mindful. Not to just assume it's all things to all people, but to be very specific and have precision, almost surgical, in our approach to adapt how we implement our DEI initiatives. Tara, it's lovely talking to you. Thank you for the important work that you do. You represent the Mason School so, so well. And I know you're, you're doing a million things, so it truly is an honor to speak with you. Thanks for giving some of your time to be on our podcast. Lots of fun.

Tara Borchers

I can also say this at the end.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, please.

Tara Borchers

I love that you are hosting this. I think it is so incredibly important, and I hope that people pay attention to the conversations because the power is in the conversations and learning. And so kudos to you.

Phil Wagner

Well, thank you.

Tara Borchers

It's wonderful.

Phil Wagner

Thank you. Thank you, my friend. Always good to chat with 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 podcasts or wherever you listen to

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