



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 54: TOBY MILDON – BEYOND BOX-CHECKING: INCLUSIVE GROWTH

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.

Phil Wagner

Welcome, listeners, to yet another episode of Diversity Goes to Work. Very excited to chat with today's guest. We have had multiple scheduling obstacles. We are coordinating across different time zones. There is an ocean between us, but it is a delight to host Toby Mildon here today. Toby is a diversity and inclusion architect and he's founder of Mildon, a consultancy and advisory business. Toby works with businesses to really re-engineer entire processes and systems to minimize the impact of bias and build cultures of inclusion. His work is rich, it is nuanced, and you'll get to hear some of that today. Prior to setting up his businesses, Toby worked as an in-house diversity and inclusion manager at the BBC and at Deloitte.

Phil Wagner

Toby, it is an incredible privilege to welcome you on our podcast today. Thanks for making time to join us from across the way. It's clear that you're a passionate DEI advocate. It's clear you've got a global footprint. Before we talk about your work, though, I want to bring it back to your why. Why don't you tell our listeners a little bit more about who you are? Share your story with us. I'd love for you to connect the important work that you do to your own experiences of inequity.

Toby Mildon

Yeah, thanks, Phil. Well, it's lovely to see you. Thanks for inviting me along. So, I actually kind of fell into diversity and inclusion when I was working at the BBC. So, at the time, I used to work as a project manager in tech. So I was involved in the development of the BBC news website, the BBC Sounds app, which is where people can listen to radio and podcasts, and also quite a lot of accessibility projects. And the senior leadership team were concerned that there was a gender imbalance within tech. So, only 14% of our workforce were women, compared to the rest of the BBC, which had a 50-50 gender split. And to cut a long story short, they had created an action plan to get more women into technology, and they needed a project manager

to implement the plan. And that's where I put my hand up and volunteered. But on reflection, I've always had an interest in equality because I was born with a rare genetic neuromuscular disability. I've had my own experiences and my own challenges of getting into and being able to progress my career with a disability, so I've always been interested in equality, and that was one of the reasons why I used to run the BBC's disabled staff forum, where we would represent the voices of disabled staff working in the corporation.

Phil Wagner

Such fantastic experience. One of the things that I love the most about your work is that you don't mince words. I mean, you're very clear what your focus is and where your passions lie. You've built the inclusive growth culture program, and I really like how you sell it. You note that you're here, and I'll quote for our listeners, right? You're here to stop the box-ticking, media stunting, lip service, diversity initiatives and help you, being your clients, implement real change. So let's talk a little bit more about that box-ticking, the media stunting, the lip service. You know, here in the US, a lot has changed over the past year. I mean, really, post George Floyd, we saw organizations kind of like clamor to uphold DEI at mass. Yet recently, there's been a lot of pushback and backlash. Do you find that companies are still doing the lip service, or is there a broader trend to go silent here?

Toby Mildon

There's a bit of both. There are organizations that are rolling out activities which they're very superficial, and they don't really have an impact. So it's things like a bit of rainbow washing, where during LGBT Pride Month, they might change the color of their logo on their website or their app, but they're not really making any changes internally to make sure that the experience of LGBT plus staff is an inclusive one, for example. Or an organization might sign up to a charter to do with disability, accessibility, and inclusion, but that's as far as it goes. They've put their signature on a piece of paper, but they don't really then take any tangible action. So there is a lot of that kind of box-ticking, superficial stuff going on. And like you say, I think the other end of the extreme is avoidance, where companies are just not doing anything about diversity and inclusion, and they might just be burying their heads in the sand, or they just think it's a load of woke nonsense and it's a waste of time and money to be focusing on it.

Phil Wagner

You've got such a global footprint. So I want to ask you again: here in the States, there's a lot of pushback against the very word you just mentioned, woke and woke washing. Here, it's been used as sort of a US political talking point. Do you find the same disdain for woke globally? I mean, is there a broader or more global pushback to either woke ideology or just kind of that superficial DEI work that has grown ad nauseam? Do you find the same pushback globally?

Toby Mildon

Yeah, there is. I mean, here in the UK, the word woke has been weaponized as something that a bunch of Gen Z lefties are worried about. And I think also we're operating in a political

climate where political parties are creating divisions rather than uniting us. So, I mean, here in the UK, the Brexit did not help, and us leaving the EU, in my opinion. And the narrative that went around that included a lot of scaremongering and fear and creating divisions. And then here in Manchester, where I live, only a couple of weeks ago, we had the conservative party conference, and high profile politicians were making remarks on stage around transphobia and things like that, again, which create divisions rather than unite us.

Phil Wagner

So, in your work, and maybe this speaks to that question a little bit more. In your work, you mentioned some key frustrations that D&I practitioners face in organizations, DEI leaders. What do you think are some of the most common frustrations, and why do they occur?

Toby Mildon

Yeah, so this really was kind of the crux of my book, actually. So when I sat down and started writing my first book, *Inclusive Growth*, I was thinking to myself, what are those frustrations, or what are the missteps that organizations are making? And how could I codify that somehow? And I came up with seven categories, and really, the top seven frustrations were not having enough data, therefore, not able to kind of create robust strategies. Not having enough attention on culture and understanding how behaviors can make or break a culture. Not having proper change management processes in place. Therefore, people felt really burnt out and frustrated about the lack of impact that they were making. Too much of a focus on trying to fix the individual and make them fit in rather than really address the systemic issues or challenges that were creating inequality within the workplace. Not enough focus on how technology can actually help us scale what we're trying to do within the diversity and inclusion space, but also not enough focus on making sure that technologies that we use are accessible. And then, the final two were not collaborating across the whole organization, where diversity and inclusion is just seen as the HR department's responsibility, and it's not a shared responsibility. And then finally, and I was a bit tongue in cheek about this, is kind of celebrating around organizations, saying that they're really inclusive and going out trying to win awards and doing lots of PR stunts, but the reality for staff is that it's not an inclusive place to work. So there's this kind of disconnect or this rhetoric gap that we are creating between what we might be saying to the outside world but what the experience is for staff on the inside.

Phil Wagner

So the inclusive growth framework, then, that's really a model to implement diversity and inclusion sustainably. Those seven core principles, is it just walking out in that order, having better data, executing proper change management, not focusing too much on the awards and the public relations? Is that how we implement the framework?

Toby Mildon

It's more that those are the best practices. These are the seven strategic buckets that you should really be thinking about if you want to be a leader. But you're right. What the framework

doesn't talk about is the how to implement it. And that's actually the subject of my second book, which I'm currently writing.

Phil Wagner

Okay.

Toby Mildon

Because I give away more books than I sell, by the way, so I give my books to my clients, and they're like, oh, my God, I love the book. It's brilliant. It's full of great advice and best practice, but how on earth do we actually implement this in the business? So that's the subject of the second book because now we've got a few years under our belt, we've got a tried and tested methodology, which I call the flywheel. And that's going to be the subject of my second book. And it's how you actually get this embedded into the organization.

Phil Wagner

Can you unpack that flywheel for us just a little bit more? Because that does, again, that gets more into the clear methodology for organizations to follow. So those sort of key stages for organizations to focus on and common mistakes to avoid.

Toby Mildon

Yeah, I mean, first of all, people are like, what's a flywheel? Let's just play it. Clearly, a flywheel is like one of those kind of Catherine wheels that you see at the fireworks display where they spin around and around. And the reason why I call it the flywheel is because this is a process or a methodology that should just be a continuous process. It's not linear. You don't just do it once because diversity and inclusion is something that you need to kind of embed into the organization. So, first of all, the first stage really is around raising awareness, getting people comfortable with talking about diversity and inclusion, because I think a lot of people are very uncomfortable about talking about various topics. There's a lot of confusion about language. Diversity and inclusion has just become an industry in itself, just absolutely crammed full of acronyms and lots of terminology that people are like, what on earth is, what's the difference between a microaggression, a micro inequity, and a micro invalidation? It's like, what on earth is all of that? So we need to kind of clear this kind of language up and just get people comfortable with talking about it and understanding why it's important for the business that they work in. That's kind of stage one if you like. Stage two is then really focusing on your senior leadership team, making sure that they are really engaged in this agenda, making sure they are completely sold on it, and making sure that they are happy to lead this topic from the top of the business. Because as somebody working in HR, you've got such an uphill struggle if you don't have your senior leadership team fully on site or they're just trying to delegate it to other people. Once you've done that engagement piece, you then need to do an assessment of your business to really find out what's going on for your people; what are the real day-to-day challenges that people are facing in your organization? And you can do that through a myriad of ways. But also, you need to do a bit of a gap analysis about what are we actually doing right now on diversity inclusion. How does this compare to best practice, and what are some of the

gaps that we need to plug in to come up with a strategy so that everybody's clear on the way forwards? And then, once you've got that strategy, you can then move on to the next phase, which is implementation. Which I know it sounds a bit simplified, but loads of people actually forget this part. They have great fun developing the strategy, and they put it into a nice glossy brochure, but then that brochure goes into a drawer somewhere, and it gets forgotten because loads of other business priorities take precedent. So implementation is really key, and it's about making sure that you've got a shared responsibility for actually implementing it in your business. And then the final stage is continuous improvement. It's about continuously refining what you're doing, making improvements, increasing quality, and making sure that you're making the desired impact.

Phil Wagner

These are excellent. And again, I appreciate how robust a framework all of this is. Let's talk a little bit about the accountability that's needed to walk out that flywheel, that framework, leadership, accountability, and buy-in. Those are crucial for diversity and inclusion efforts to succeed. So, what advice do you have for how do you engage up the ladder? How do you engage senior leaders, particularly the executive suite, and really get their support in a meaningful way beyond just the lip service? Beyond sure, we'll fund this, you know, taco Tuesday cultural initiative, but to actually get their real personal felt buy-in. Any strategies?

Toby Mildon

Yeah, I mean, you have to really get them to identify with the why. And to borrow the words of Simon Sinek, start with the why. And loads of organizations start from the outside in. They're focusing on the what and the how, but they're not entirely clear on the why. And the thing is every reason why, or the business case, if you want to call it that, is unique for every single organization. Yes. As a senior leader, you could go down and download the McKinsey reports, and you could cognitively understand how diversity and inclusion impacts business performance. Because McKinsey have done the research to show that businesses perform financially better. They're better at innovating, better at decision-making, better at creating relationships with customers and clients, et cetera et cetera. But you have to figure out why it's important for your business. I mean, like Simon Sinek says. He says it's a process of discovery rather than invention. So what I do with my clients is I go on this journey of discovery with them. And the simplest way that you can do that is play the five whys game, where you ask yourself, why is diversity and inclusion important to the future success of our business? And you write the answer down, and then you go, okay, that's great. Well, why is that important? And you just keep going, and you keep asking yourself why five times until you get to the fifth answer. And that should really be the key nugget for you. And then obviously, you want to try and then socialize that across the rest of the senior leadership team so everyone's on the same page.

Phil Wagner

I love that as a teacher, I'm totally stealing that. But I'll give you credit, Toby, for sure; I love that five whys because I'm always trying to do that. I think in the classroom is get to that really

felt personal commitment. And I really appreciate your framing on this very podcast. And certainly, in some of the courses I teach, I think maybe even I included, we're so quick to toss the business case off the table because it is a flimsy platform to build this commitment on. But I like your framing here, that the personal and professional often do collide. And so it's a more why-focused. It's a richer, maybe, yes, business case, but it's personalized. And I think that's really nuanced, and I think that offers a different lens here. And you tee us up for my next question is, as a teacher, I'm always thinking, how do I give my students the space to really reflect and make this personal? And you talk a lot about personal action in your work. You even provide some planning tools with reflective questions. Walk us through some of the key questions that leaders should be asking themselves to get to that deeper sense of why. To that deeper commitment.

Toby Mildon

Yeah, I mean, a good place to start is the exercise that I've just outlined to understand how it applies to your business, but also maybe think about how you can connect with diversity and inclusion as an individual. Do you have a personal connection with it? A lot of leaders that I talk to, for example, they get really passionate about diversity and inclusion because they've just been diagnosed with a health condition or a disability, and they've realized that the workplace is not set up for disabled people very well, or their son or daughter has just been diagnosed at school with autism, or another neurodivergent condition, for example. Or one of their kids has just come out as LGBT, a member of the LGBT community. So they start to have a personal connection to it, and they start to kind of think, well, okay, I wonder what the future of work is going to be like for my kid in the workplace. So there's that. If you can't connect with it personally, then try and think about how you can connect with it on a more rational level. So go out and do some research. There's tons of research out there about the business case of diversity and inclusion, and find something that you feel passionate about. Is it about financial performance? Is it about innovation or creativity and effective decision-making? Is it about building better relationships with a diverse customer base? Find that thing where you can kind of hook onto.

Phil Wagner

So you mentioned this, that so many people come to this work well-intentioned, semi-well-informed, but it becomes a richer journey as they have that more personalized connection. I think a lot of times, we hear diversity consultants giving advice to people who are really kind of just getting started. But I like what you have to offer because I think we're at a new inflection point. I'm wondering what recommendations you might give to leaders who are passionate about DEI. They've started the work. They've started the self-diguring. They know their why. They know some of the vocabulary and the endless list of acronyms. What do you say to them? Because this is a new season, dare I say, there is more pushback, there is more blowback. There's more opposition to this work, including in organizations, than perhaps ever before, certainly in recent history. What priorities do you recommend those folks keep front of mind so they can continue to engage, continue to drive change, continue to do the work of DEI?

Toby Mildon

So, if I'm a really passionate senior leader in a business, first of all, my first priority is to get as many of my peers on side with me. There has to be an understanding that you're not going to get everybody on site because there will be some senior leaders who think it's a load of woke nonsense or they just don't think it's important enough to the business. They just don't see the importance of the priority of it. And that's okay. Focus on your kind of early and late majority and start to work with those that are kind of really eager to work with you, the innovators, the leaders. So, build that coalition around you. So that's kind of phase one. The second phase is actually a focus on behavior because loads of organizations focus on the initiatives, so they'll start thinking about what events they want to plan, even what policies they might want to review, or setting up employee resource groups or things like that. They're not really thinking about leadership behaviors, whether those are inclusive or not, whether those behaviors are creating the right culture or a damaging toxic culture, or if these behaviors are actually aligned with your organizational values in the first place, and there might be some incongruency there. So I think you have to do a bit of an audit about what are the behaviors. Are they helping or hindering us? Are they in alignment with our values or not? And how can we actually go around developing the most senior leads in the business to upskill them in the new behaviors so that they can start to really set the tone for the business?

Phil Wagner

This is fantastic, Toby. You offer such great, nuanced insights. I appreciate how you dig deeper. You've already mentioned your books, the ones out, the ones being written. Can you tell our listeners, as we wrap this conversation, a little bit more information about where to get your work, how to grab hold of the framework, how to seek you out for consulting services? How can our listeners support you? Where can they find your stuff?

Toby Mildon

Well, it's always great to connect with people on LinkedIn. I create loads of content, so the person listening to us today is more than welcome to connect with me on LinkedIn. Send me a message and follow me. Follow my content on there. If the person listening to us right now wants to get a copy of my book, probably Amazon. It's the quickest and easiest way. I know that it's stocked in other places, but Amazon is kind of the main place to go, really, for the book and for just general information about my company. My website is milden.co.uk, and loads of information on there as well.

Phil Wagner

Toby, it's such a pleasure speaking with you. Thank you for making time to chat with me again across the ocean, different time zones, multiple scheduling obstacles. But I appreciate your time. It's been a wonderful conversation, and we look forward to continuing to support your great work.

Toby Mildon

Thank you, Phil.

Phil Wagner

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