EPISODE 160: PHIL WAGNER – STEPPING UP YOUR D&I EFFORTS

Ken White
From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that help make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. In the last decade, the interest in diversity and inclusion has grown significantly at companies and organizations. For the most part, D&I has been accepted. It's seen as a positive contributor to employee engagement, employee retention, company culture, and a healthy bottom line. While D&I has become mainstream, not every organization has it figured out. For some, diversity and inclusion efforts are simply transactional, a series of workshops or lectures delivered by a vendor. Our guest today says it needs to be transformative in order to make a real difference. In other words, D&I vocabulary and knowledge should be shared among all employees and leaders. As a supportive and inclusive culture organically grows. Phil Wagner is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Management Communication at William & Mary's School of Business. He teaches communication and D&I to undergraduate and graduate business students in addition to working professionals. He says while considerable progress has been made in the D&I space, there are still opportunities for professionals, leaders, and organizations to be more effective. Here's our conversation with Professor Phil Wagner.

Ken White
Well, Phil, thanks for taking the time to join us. Great to see you. Isn't it nice to be in person?

Phil Wagner
It is nice to be back in person.

Ken White
And you're in the classroom because classes have started. How's it been?

Phil Wagner
Filled to capacity 118 bright MBAs so eager to be there, you can feel the energy. It's great.

Ken White
It is it's so fun. So thanks. It's a busy week. Thank you for joining us. D&I DE&I your area this is something you teach, something you're passionate about. We were talking earlier before we started recording, when I said to you, What's the difference between doing this? Maybe right and wrong? And you said there's a transactional model and a transformative model. What does that mean?

Phil Wagner
Number one, I think we back up and say there's just so many different models. Look at the terminology D&I, DIEO, DIEB. I mean, it's constantly iterative. And you look at how things have developed, particularly over the last 20 or so years. It's been a rapidly changing conversation along that rapid sequence of change. I don't think we've paused to make sense of all of the pieces.

Ken White
Right.

Phil Wagner
We know we have to do diversity, equity, and inclusion work, but I don't think we've stepped back to ask what that really means. And so we've done a lot of that transactional stuff. We have built a culture in which we say D&I matters. So I'm going to put on four different lunch and learns. I'm going to have another training on microaggressions. I'm going to do X, Y, and Z. I've done a lot of programming. I've collected a lot of data, and we say, let's respond to that. And so what you've done is we created this culture where people are shamed into participation. They're guilted into participation. They're pushed into participation because we say this is important. But we never stop to explain why. And so where we need to get to, I truly believe, is to really focus on that why. To move from transaction to a more transformational model, one that really stops and asks, Why are we doing the things that we're here to do? And I think that transformational model doesn't build a culture in response to D&I. It says we first build our diversity. We first focus intentionally on inclusion, on support, on culture. Once we've got those locked and loaded, we've invited everybody to participate. That can then be a transformational experience, one that's harder to push back against and one that's inclusive for everybody to get involved.

Ken White
Where does the leader, the CEO? Where does the head honcho? What's the role of that individual in these efforts?

Phil Wagner
I think that's another misconception we tell ourselves. We think a lot about diversity and inclusion crises. Somebody getting canceled, somebody who makes an inappropriate

sexual comment. Cuomo being a great example recently. You've done something, and you sort of tap out. I think we think that in times of diversity and inclusion crises, it's going to be human resources and public relations. HR and PR are they're going to swoop in. They're going to save the day. And I, as a leader, get to sort of just step back and let them do the work. And that's a fundamental misconception. As a leader in the current climate in which we exist, you have to have the vocabulary of inclusive leadership communication. You have to have a knowledge of what the current D&I issues are. You have to have a hand on the pulse of the political and social climate. You are hiring people in that climate. You have people in your organization. We're clocking in nine to five who come in from that climate. So you've got to be well prepared to orchestrate a culture that recognizes it's complicated out there. You got to reflect that complication in here with the nuance of our D&I work.

Ken White
And in the past six to eight to twelve months, we've had several instances where leaders have had to react and say something about what's happening in the real world. That's where that vocabulary, knowledge, and understanding comes into play.

Phil Wagner
Yeah, this is about storytelling. Right.

Ken White
Yeah, it is.

Phil Wagner
As a leader, you need to be able to tell the right story and accurate story and authentic story that exists in response to the public because that public is comprised of storytellers who can get out ahead of you if you're not telling the right story. And so they're increasingly looking for you to figure out how all these things merge, how they align.

Ken White
You thought you talk about authenticity; how does that? What do you mean by that?

Phil Wagner
I think it's a variable that's often missing in D&I work because it's so cheap for us. It's easy to put on again. Those lunch and learns those microaggression trainings, and so that's devoid of an authentic connection, particularly for the leaders who are putting them on. You need to be the person that the people in your organization look to set the tone for inclusion there. And so that's going to require some work on your end, some uncomfortable, deep digging, some self-reflection, certainly some time. But all of those

things are definitely going to work out to make you a better leader in the end. Beyond just increasing your D&I knowledge, they're going to make you more self-reflective. You're going to have a better pulse on the culture within your organization. All of this, though it takes work certainly worth the effort.

Ken White
I would assume some CEOs are afraid. I mean, that's tough to step into some of these issues. Afraid that I might offend this group or not offend that group. What have you? A tough spot to be in at times.

Phil Wagner
Yeah, because things have transpired so rapidly again past 20 years. Look at everything has happened post 911, just politically, socially. The conversation has changed so quickly. It's gone in so many different directions. We have terminology that's on the spot, introduced in 1 second and 20 minutes later, it's expired. It is bewildering to do this work. It requires a significant amount of vulnerability. There's some significantly discomfortable, uncomfortable, I should say, conversations that need to happen. And I don't think we've appropriately prepared people to have those leaders in the making. I don't think MBA programs historically have done a good job of isolating space to really focus in on these issues. And so you've got a generation of leadership that knows that this is important. I truly believe wants to engage in it. They simply don't have the toolkit. They don't have the knowledge to do this well. So, the authenticity piece, how can it be authentic? Because it's changed so much?

Ken White
What are D&I officers doing today? What are they spending their time on?

Phil Wagner
I think D&I officers spend most of their time helping leaders set an agenda. So they work in the nuances of data gathering and collection. But they're also going back to what we talked about with storytelling, helping leaders tell the right story. And I think what D&I leaders are struggling with is that rapidly changing climate, and they're helping those leaders who have not been historically well prepared learn how to deal with the real raw issues in the professional setting. We like to think that the world of work is an apolitical context. Excuse me, but you don't get the luxury of clocking in nine to five and forgetting about discrimination or me too or pay inequity or all of the issues that our employees bring to the world of work. So it's doing a deep dive into sort of that human-oriented perspective that I think D&I officers help leaders get to.

Ken White
A tough job.

Phil Wagner
A tough job, a job that can be fundamentally rewarding and also humiliating, exhausting, because, in many ways, you're always wrong. I mean, you're always outdated because this is a conversation that never has no endpoint. It's constantly growing. It is iterative. And there are so many different pockets or factions of people that have ideas about diversity and inclusion. Who's right, who's wrong? We're always looking for that binary, black or white, right or wrong. This is a space where that doesn't really exist, aside from some significant extremes. And so this is about equipping people to toil in that nuance to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. That's a core component of our curriculum here to take initiative to say; this is all so complicated. What do I do? And to rest in that but to be able to lead through that with clarity and transparency, and authenticity.

Ken White
We'll continue our discussion with Phil Wagner in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. Our post COVID world will require new skills and new approaches, and those skills and approaches are taught in the William & Mary MBA program. We offer four different MBA formats, including the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive, all taught by our top-ranked MBA faculty. The William & Mary MBA will prepare you to succeed and lead in our new world. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary. Now back to our conversation with Phil Wagner.

Ken White
Who makes a good D&I officer today? I mean, some jobs, that job description is so easy, right? The qualifications so simple. Where do we begin with D&I officers?

Phil Wagner
I think a D&I officer has to know that they want to be a D&I officer. Has a strong understanding of the realities of that position, how it has come to be as a sort of now permanent fixture in most successful organizations, and a person that understands that that job description is going to update constantly. As the world around it updates. But I also think that this is work beyond just becoming a D&I officer. I think in many ways, we now have an organizational sphere that expects that every new hire, every emerging leader, every C-suite executive has that knowledge and that vocabulary of diversity and inclusion. So while this focus is good for D&I officers, I really think it's an important focus for everybody because, again, the public is looking to the organizational sphere, and they're expecting people who are succeeding and thriving and becoming leaders in that sphere to have this knowledge, to respond to the climate, to speak the language of diversity and inclusion.

Ken White
So how does that C-suite member or someone knocking on the C-suite door? How do they get the information? What's a good way to train and be well versed so that you're as comfortable as possible in this space.

Phil Wagner
Yeah, this is such a cheesy answer, and it's simplistic, and it's not to be a land-all. But take some time to read. I mean, you have now so many new spaces of knowledge that are being published, new authors of color, new books, new blogs, new initiatives solely dedicated to these conversations. Uncomfortable conversations, conversations on inclusion conversation that take really age-old ideas, but update them for where we are in the here and now. So as a leader, quiet yourself. Spend some time in your own self-development process, dedicating some of that content to this and also another cheesy answer. But as a communicator, I think it has great value. Take some time to talk to your people. Get a pulse for what the culture and the climate is at your organization. That's not just a culture and a climate conversation. That's a diversity and inclusion conversation. Your people, I think, will often reveal to you where you can focus your energy to make that world of work a more inclusive place for all.

Ken White
We hear our Dean Larry Pulley say it because he does that. He'll listen. He says it over and over again. I learned something new. I had no idea. I never thought about it that way. So those conversations, they get anything, are huge.

Phil Wagner
And you have to have that growth mindset because it's really easy to retreat into a shell and be offended or feel like your ideas are outdated; therefore, you are outdated. I mean, you have to be ready for growth, and you have to be ready to encounter ideas that you don't agree with and be willing to not quite know what to do with those. That disagreement there's this great tweet Adam Grant, who's at Wharton, talked about this actually on Twitter this week, and he says, intellectual friction it's not a relationship bug. So just because you find yourself in an uncomfortable conversation in the context of your organization, with people who are bringing new ideas that you have not fully yet grappled with. See that as something of great value, that vulnerable space. You can do a lot with that. And that friction can be actualized for some great good. So again, it goes back to get comfortable with becoming uncomfortable regularly.

Ken White
So you do this for the MBA students. You teach this? What are some of the ideas and some of the lessons that you're trying to get across to these leaders in training?

Phil Wagner

We do this for our full-time MBAs, part-time MBAs, our executive MBAs, our Masters of Accounting students. We teach it to our undergrads. We really strive to have this be an iterative conversation. We don't want to just jump into D&I for D&I sake. Because we're doing what we say we shouldn't be doing, which is just that transaction this matters here do this, and you're good. Well, that's not really how it works. So we start with a very personal place. We work with our students to tell and sell their story well. We help them find their why and speak from it. And that's a really prime space to explore that inclusion element because once a student knows who they are and they've gotten into contact with that framework of empathy, that's required to hear and receive other people's stories and do something with it. Well, then they're primed to move into the D&I space. So we do give them what we think is a modern and helpful language or vocabulary of diversity and inclusion. What do those terms mean? How did they come to be? How has this come to be such a thing in the management enterprise? We give them a history, we give them a vocabulary, and then we give them space to test that out. So we talk about what it means to be an inclusive leader. And then, we talk about what it means to be an inclusive organization. The purpose of an organization is no longer to just generate profit. That original conception always had a clause, which was that holds true as long as the rules of the game are acknowledged. Well, the rules have changed. The rules now require that we have a vocabulary and a knowledge of this work. So we teach our students to go out and engage in that. So we talk about it through public relations. We talk about it through crisis management. In all of those different facets, students are getting an inclusion focus that can only help them in their career. And I think that's really the key point. Focusing on this can certainly help you, and it can't really hurt you. It's only going to make you better in the end, both as a leader and as an organization. So we spend time preparing our students to do just that.

Ken White

Because we know anybody who they're going to employ wants it and expects it moving forward.

Phil Wagner

Expects it, and we'll ask them what they can contribute to that enterprise, and we want them to be ready to say here are some action-oriented items that I'm bringing to your organization. I have a full understanding of what this is, what it involves. Here's how I'm going to roll up my sleeves and help.

Ken White

So you're going to share your expertise, your interest in diversity with a new podcast. It will be launched literally days from now is we're recording on the 3 September. Diversity Goes to Work. Tell us about it, that's exciting.

Phil Wagner
Yeah, really exciting. This came to be after multiple conversations, and our goal is really simple. We want to have casual conversations with friends most of the time. That's really two strangers on the podcast and the process of becoming friends. And that plays out in a really nice way. We've got Alum, we've got experts from all across the nation and the world, and Diversity Goes to Work really tries to push past the noise of diversity and inclusion efforts. And we're not talking diversity strategy necessarily. We're not talking a list of things to do or don't do. What we're doing is really simple. We're cutting right to the heart of the issue, and we're taking a human-oriented lens and using it to examine this work. So really, it's a storytelling podcast. We're bringing people who have lived this experience either as a diversity consultant, somebody with a diverse background, somebody who's experienced this in the real world and is coming back to offer their insights on our podcast. And so we're going to kick things off with an alum of the College, Amandeep Sidhu is coming to speak on what it's like now 20 years post 911. Amandeep is of the Sikh faith, a turban-wearing professional who has had a very successful legal career. And he's got a great story on that first episode of on 911 working in DC, just minutes after the plane hit the towers, experiencing that same sense of collective grief that we all felt as Americans. Yet just minutes after that, being run off the road by a truck because he had Brown skin. And so that duality of identity. We really center that here throughout the podcast will be bringing in consultants, professionals, everyday laypeople, blue-collar, white-collar, C-suite executives, everyday people really with the focus of centering that human element that I think is so often devoid of our D&I work.

Ken White
So we'll hear a lot of stories from a lot of interesting people.

Phil Wagner
Lots of stories from a lot of interesting people with the focus on strategy in the end. Now that we know this, now that we're aware that there's so many different perspectives that we have to grapple with as leaders, what do we take that? And how do we move it forward to actually implement successful D&I work that has real value, in the end, isn't just cheap frivolity.

Ken White
Yeah. What are you hoping listeners get from this?

Phil Wagner
Engagement number one in a low-stakes way, if you pull up a diversity podcast, you never know what you're going to get with us. It's pretty clear. You're going to get to hear real stories, real ideas that come from people who have experienced the discrimination that we talked about, the disenfranchisement that we talk about. But you'll hear it in an

accessible way, and it's really an opportunity for learning, me included. So I'm not there as an expert. I'm there to learn from these stories as well. And that's what I love. I have emerged from every single one of those podcast recordings with my mind blown of new perspectives that I have not yet been able to fully understand because I've never walked in those shoes. So, that's really our goal.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Phil Wagner, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. Companies, organizations, and businesses are seeking professionals who think strategically, communicate effectively and manage ambiguity. You'll learn those skills and more in the William & Mary MBA program offered in four formats, the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program to learn more. Finally, we'd like to hear from you regarding the podcast. We invite you to share your ideas, questions, and thoughts with us by emailing us at podcast@wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Phil Wagner, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.