

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh



Episode #: 25 **Title: Creating Inclusive Leadership and Valuing Diversity**

Guest: Jennifer Brown

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Guest Company: Jennifer Brown

Debra: This is Debra Ruh, and welcome to Human Potential at Work. I'm excited about my guest today. I met Jennifer a few months ago and was very, very impressed with the work that she's doing.

So Jennifer Brown is joining us today, and Jennifer is a passionate advocate and social entrepreneur, totally committed to guiding leaders and organizations to create healthier workplace cultures that resonate with current and incoming leaders. So I'm very excited to have this diversity and inclusion conversation, not just from the business perspective but really from a perspective that works for us all.

So welcome to the program, Jennifer.

Jennifer: Thank you, Debra. Thanks for having me.

Debra: Yes. Jennifer, there's a lot we want to talk about today, including your upcoming book, but before we started the program you were talking a little bit about diversity inclusion is usually, at least with your corporation, you're having these conversations, generally you've been having them with corporations and businesses and you're actually really trying to expand those conversations. Do you want to start just for a minute telling us about that, and at the same time telling our listeners more about you and your corporation as well?

Jennifer: Sure, thanks, Debra. Thanks for the opportunity to share about my latest and proudest creation, I think, given the work that's gone into it. The book is called "Inclusion: Diversity, The New Workplace and The Will to Change." We're very excited about it being released in early November. And yes, I have been serving large companies as a consulting firm, for about a decade. So we've been mainly working with large corporate for-profit organizations, because they're obviously able to pay us because they have budgets that are allocated towards diversity and inclusion specifically, and they're investing in their workforces and workplaces with programs and initiatives, and they have a real need and a hunger to do this better. So it's been really a huge education to figure out how do we create change around diversity and inclusion for an organization of 300,000 people globally. It's

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a huge challenge, and I will never be able to claim success, but it's really not about that. It's really about progress.

But you did ask, why is it bigger than the business world and the corporate world, and I do believe that the whole conversation about bringing our full self to our workplace, however we define that workplace, whether I am a solopreneur, whether I'm a business owner or just getting started and I'm founding a business. How do I embed the principles of inclusive leadership and how do I monitor my environment, however I define that, for the valuing of diversity. And for making sure that I as a leader and as a human being, am being as inclusive as I possibly can and valuing diversity in everything I do.

You can practice that in any environment, in any realm that you define, and not only in your professional life but of course your personal life as well. There's so much. It's such a dynamic space. There's so much in the news, there's so much pain and challenge, especially in the U.S. as a country right now, in our election cycle, in what is just happening this week in the news, that I knew is on a lot of peoples' hearts and minds. And there's a real intersection between the world that we live in and our work as professionals, whatever kind of work we do, how are we embodying a commitment to what we'll call D and I or I and D, in every realm of our lives. And that's what really interests me.

I'm a woman, obviously. I'm a person that identifies as LGBT. I'm a Caucasian. I am upper middle class. I have different aspects of my own story that what leave into what we call my intersectionality. And all of us have these diversity stories and this mix of what makes us who we are. So at the end of the day, we bring that into everything we do, in all of our endeavors, and who we mentor and how we're role modeling behaviors. You know, however you define your life as a leader.

So that's really, really relevant, and more and more so. And then you take that into the business world, and of course it has huge ramifications for how businesses grow and thrive and continue to resonate with their audiences and customers and their employees.

Debra: Right, right, I agree. And it is interesting and I've been very engaged in this election cycle. I know you're like me. You're a CEO and you're a social entrepreneur as well. And so there's a lot of things about our work that are very complimentary, and I know this is really the first time in my professional career that I've actually talked on social media about who I'm going to vote for and why I'm choosing to vote for one candidate over another. I typically shy away from politics and religious discussions and things like that.

But you made a few comments as you were answering this question, that I'd like to dig into a little bit more. For example, in the diversity and inclusion world, I of

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course really speak to disability inclusion. That's why even I was hesitating over the word diversity, because I'm so used to saying disability, but --

Jennifer: The other "D" word.

Debra: Yeah, it's the D and I. And so I remember the first time you and I talked, we talked about one thing that I've seen over and over, is when we're talking about diversity and inclusion or as you say, inclusion and diversity, one thing that often I was seeing professionals not speaking to, the disability prong of it. So I think that's important, but I also just want to comment on something else you were saying, about how important to not just be speaking about it from the business but it's about who we are.

And so one thing that I found in the work that I've done is I will work with individuals and large corporations that really want to focus on the disability portion of this conversation, and a lot of them become advocates. Major advocates over these issues. And I think it's so interesting as you brought up, what we bring to our daily life. And even as you started talking about the different labels that we could apply to you, Jennifer. You know, I'm a mother of a child with a disability, I myself have struggled with depression and ADHD. They've actually made me a stronger person. I'm a CEO. I have all these different labels as well.

But one thing I really find is to really add the most value in any conversation, whether it's in the workforce or it's a conversation like we're having right now, I need to bring my whole self and I need to allow you, Jennifer, to bring your whole self. And so I really agree with what you're saying, about this is not just the chief diversity officer's job. This is really something that we all need to bring into all of the conversations we're having. Do you want to comment on that?

Jennifer: Oh, yeah. I couldn't agree more. Yeah, if we wait around for the office of diversity to solve all of our challenges organizationally, it's going to be a long time and often those teams are tiny, as you know. You might have a huge, multinational company and the diversity team will be two or three people, if they even have one.

Debra: Right, right.

Jennifer: So it's absolutely up to each of us, and I believe a couple things. What leadership does, and this is why I enjoy my work with executives so much, is every move that an executive makes specifically, to do the kinds of things you're talking about, has enormous ripple effects. Sort of an exponential impact, because of the position and the platform that they have.

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So working, if you will, at the top of the house, if you think of organizations has a hierarchy, the more you can transform those folks to find those diversity stories, understanding inclusion and exclusion as it's been experienced by them so that it's personal, it's not just an intellectual argument that this is good for business but it's also a personal connection that they've made to it, if we can create more leaders that are speaking about it, that are sharing, that are open and transparent about their own learning, that are fluent and culturally competent in terms of how they talk about their own intersectionality, that choose very carefully what they say and how they talk about diversity and inclusion when they communicate to the work force from the executive's level, those things, I think, will shift cultures.

We have a lot of work to do there, because as you know, Debra, I don't need to point out, when we look at org charts in many companies, it's largely white and heterosexual and male.

Debra: Right, right.

Jennifer: In the business world. And I think that audience has perhaps the longest road to travel, in terms of discovering their diversity story and their connection to the conversation and developing the skills and the courage, frankly, to become a champion.

Debra: Well said.

Jennifer: And yet, if we can tip that scale, I think it will transform organizations. And everyone is watching them. I do a lot of focus groups and interview a lot of what we might call the rank and file and a lot of diverse talent, so women and people of color and LGBT people that may or may not be out at work, because remember, 50 percent of LGBT people are still closeted in the workplace, according to a study that was done last year. All of that talent is watching every move that leadership makes and trying to decide, does the company really mean what it says. Are we really committed? Are we really ready to walk the talk? Or is this just another slogan? Is it another something we're feeling compelled to do because our customers are pressuring us? Whatever.

So the question of intent on behalf of the leadership of the company, and that can be the CEO as a person, is very much being analyzed all the time.

Debra: Yes, all the time, I agree.

Jennifer: So we really need to make sure they're on point, and that's a lot of the coaching work I do, trying to write those talking points. But I wish I didn't have to write the talking points, because I wish they could just say, I know exactly what to say. I've done the homework, I've grounded myself in this and as a leader I believe this

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is important, and I'm going to put my money where my mouth is and I'm going to hold people accountable for it and I'm going to drive change from the top, in the very unique way that executives can and should. That's their job.

Debra: I agree, I agree. But I do think -- obviously, I wish they also understood the talking points, but the executives that I work with, they do not. And they get very, very nervous about all of the different talking points. Also, what I find often is with the D and I organizations, like you said, even if these gigantic corporations, even if they have a team, they don't have any authority, they have no budget, they're under-resourced.

I also think it's a good point that you brought up about we're watching. I think as human beings, we've all become more sophisticated. And sometimes it's hard to believe that, when you're watching all the media and the election cycle. But I believe a lot of people have become more sophisticated, and I also have a need to believe -- well, I absolutely believe that the world works better when we all can participate. But understanding all of the different prongs of diversity and why it's so important to the bottom line of a business, the innovation, the creativity, the productivity. Doing D and I right can add major value to a corporation, but I see a lot of it not being done right.

That's one reason why I was really drawn to the work that you're doing, Jennifer, because if you do this conversation right, it is so good for business. And it's good for business in a way that adds tremendous value, in so many different ways. From the corporate social responsibility to the workplace of choice, to future of work, all the different buzzwords. But at the same time, when employees are happy, they're more productive. We know that. We've seen study after study.

But tell us more about this book. I have written multiple books. I know how hard it is to birth a book.

Jennifer: That is true.

Debra: Yeah, and once it's live you have to market your baby away and that's very interesting too, but tell us what your intention was for the book. What do you hope will change, by people reading this book and learning more about the way you think that D and I should be implemented?

Jennifer: Yeah. The book is -- honestly, it is a brain dump from me of everything I have gathered in my database and intellectual capital and my gut and intuition around organizational change. How it really happens, what are the drivers for change. Change kept coming up as a theme. And so you'll see that the word change is actually not only in the title but it's in every chapter title too, and it reminded me that originally I'm an organizational change practitioner. I have a master's degree

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in OD. And it's the science of looking at the system, the organization. So how do organizations have all the various stakeholders and complexities and how do they change from point A to point B and what are all the factors that go into that.

And then if you overlay diversity and inclusion and trying to create an inclusive environment where everyone can do their best work and that's the goal of change, that is a particular aspect of how to drive change around something that may make some people feel defensive, another thing that is poorly understood. Something that causes reactions in people. So it is not always an easy topic. And then when you're trying to drive organizational change around it, it's on steroids. You have to consider a lot of aspects, both emotional and intellectual aspects of creating change around that.

It's tricky because it's constantly shifting. I think the demographics of the workforce are shifting, the generational diversity we're seeing with Millennials and Generation Z behind them, who are bringing in different assumptions and expectations into the workplace, is kind of accelerating this conversation too, which is really exciting for some of us in Gen X, and baby boomers who have kind of been waiting for the impetus for change, and knowing that the conversation really has not accelerated to the degree that we want it to, as you pointed out.

So the book is meant to be equally helpful for an executive that picks it up and says, I'm getting a lot of pressure from my CEO to understand this and drive this, and I don't even know where to start, I don't know anything about this topic. All the way to the person in a small office somewhere where they're not able to be fully who they are in their workplace. And that could be somebody who's a parent of a child with a disability. It could be an LGBTQ person. It could be somebody wanting to transition gender identity. It can be someone who is in a multi-cultural household or has personal or emotional issues, mental health challenges. It can be all of what makes us who we are, that we filter out when we come into however we define the workplace, and all the cost of filter all of that in order to, you can call it assimilate, you can call it fitting in to be successful or adopting the accepted paradigm in your workplace.

We all do it and we all pay the price for doing it, and really we pay the price and the organization pays the price. And so everybody's doing this dance and it's not really helping anyone. And we've got to kind of create the dynamic, as I say, from the top down and the bottom up. And so the top down is that executive that needs to learn, and the bottom up is that person that I want to empower and I want to give the tools and the confidence to be more bold about all of who they are and to value that and to help others in the organization value that.

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We often say, in the LGBT community, it's hard to be counted for the numbers that we actually have, because there's no way -- it's an invisible aspect of diversity, similar to disabilities often, but not always, and therefore, harder to count. I know the conversation is happening a lot in the executive level to say, well, it's not that many people so we really don't need to do anything about it. And it just makes our task that just more difficult.

So I'm a real believer, and this is why I'm very overt about who I am, and if you follow me in social media or you read -- in my book, I try to challenge myself to weave my story in wherever I can, because I do believe that in doing so, I am giving permission and encouragement to those that haven't really thought their story was relevant. And my big point is it really is relevant, and not only what you think is relevant about you but there's a lot of other richness that's relevant about you, that could be inspiring to others.

Many of the leaders I work with say, oh, that story is boring or it's too painful or I don't want to talk about it. That's in my past. That's not relevant. And I say, you know, you just never know what is going to resonate with someone, especially somebody younger. When you think about the kinds of leaders and the model that they need to see in order to, what we say, you got to see it to be it. For them to see a non-traditional leader and somebody who's made it and somebody who is authentic and has owned their story and does talk about it, is so powerful.

And similarly, when leaders don't talk about who they are, it has a ripple effect of, is this not okay to talk about it and I can never be that kind of leader as I move up through the ranks. So when Tim Cook came out as the CEO of Apple, I would imagine, and I don't know this for a fact, but people who knew him and maybe a lot of people at Apple knew who he is and about his life, but he hadn't really talked about it. And the question might have been raised, did he really need to talk about it, and what about all those years he didn't talk about it and what message did that send to people, young people, around, gee, is it safe for me to be who I am.

Every move a leader makes and every decision that leader makes matters, and I just thought that was fascinating and I was so gratified when he did reveal about his life and he said, you know, I'm a private person and I would not have really done this, but when I did realize it was my legacy and it was so critical, it would make such a difference to others, that when I knew I really needed to. And I think that's a beautiful lesson in leadership. It's putting yourself last, it's putting others first, it's saying how can I be best in service of this larger goal. It's not just about what I'm comfortable with or not comfortable. Hey, if you're not uncomfortable every day, you're not leading.

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Debra: That's right, and you're not taking risks. And I recently really started talking about some of the challenges that I personally have faced. Everybody knows I have a daughter with Down Syndrome, and both of my parents became disabled. Once again, I'm just speaking to just a segment of this, but diversity is important for all of us. And I've started talking about struggling with ADHD and struggling with depression. Ever since I can remember, I had depression, which so many of us do.

And at first I thought, well, I'm not going to talk about it because it sounds like I'm a whiner. And then I thought, well, I'm not going to talk about it because I'm not really as disabled as other people. But the reason why I did start talking about it is because if we are not transparent about what makes us unique and what makes us really more powerful to the workforce and to society as a whole, I think like you said, we make it not okay to talk about it. So I just think it's really, really important that we do talk about what makes us unique.

And by the way, those particular challenges have made me a much, much stronger CEO, social entrepreneur, better at everything that I do. And so I think it's important.

I know we don't have a lot of time left, but I'd like to ask you a question. If I'm a leader and I recognize that I need to really understand inclusion and diversity better, where do I even begin? How do I start to have a powerful conversation, a real empowering, authentic conversation, without causing total havoc because I use the wrong language, I use the wrong words?

I know if you look at this from the disability snapshot, people are terrified of what to say. Now you look at the biggest aspect of D and I and LGBT and how do we begin the conversations without really screwing up and making things worse?

Jennifer: Yeah, that's a common question. I think that fear of saying the wrong thing holds back a lot of dialogue that really needs to happen, in order for learning to happen. We know this is true. Anything we avoid, we're not going to be progressing along. So I do think the conversations need to happen, but they can feel awkward.

That's a whole other podcast, but let me try to give a couple tips. Pay attention. Read everything you possibly can. Consume media that is not about your own culture. So what movies are you watching? What blog posts are you reading? Who do you follow on Twitter? What kind of sitcoms are you watching? How are you familiarizing yourself with cultures that aren't the dominant culture? So if you are a person in the dominant culture, how much are you investing time cross-culturally? Who is in your social network? Are you tuning into liberal media? Are you in an echo chamber of your own thoughts and ideas and philosophies?

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I know again, to feel comfortable, that's what we may seek. However, to be leaders, we need to be leading cross-culturally. And when I say culture, I don't just mean race and ethnicity. Gender is a culture. LGBT is a culture. People with kids and parenting and all these interesting aspects of who we are. I always think of it for me, I envision myself as an ally. Somebody who aspires to know enough to be dangerous, but who shares very openly that I am still learning. And I want to be coached, I want to be informed, I want to be corrected.

But in order for that dynamic to exist, you do have to have trusted relationships with people that have had a different experience than you. So when you look at your network and you say, who am I surrounding myself with, is it everyone who shares my story? Is that challenging for me? Is that teaching me what I need to know? Am I sort of living and walking the talk, as I say this is important to me, but I look at my life and very little in my life reflects that commitment. That's something you can shift over time.

Debra: Right, great advice.

Jennifer: As an LGBT person, allies, straight allies, have been such an important part, and I know in the disabilities community, allies have been a huge part of raising awareness and supporting. But I try to say, okay, I know the LGBT community; that's very comfortable for me. How can I go and be a white ally for my colleagues of color? What do I need to learn and what kind of statistics and research and information do I need to be fluent in, to talk about the black experience, for example, in the corporate world?

I need to know that information, because I don't want to lean on somebody unfairly and say, can you explain the whole thing to me because I just don't know. To me, that is not doing your homework. I think we've got to give ourselves a foundation on everything, and there is no dearth of perspectives. I mean, we live in an age where it's right out there for you to read.

And to really step up and be an ally. Say I want to be an ally for inclusion and I have a lot of learning to do and here's my diversity story, here's my privilege and what I've been privileged to experience in my life and what has helped me, and here is where I haven't been privileged relatively and here's what that has meant to me. And I think being transparent about that and leading with that as leaders, in terms of what do you talk about when you get up and address a group. If you're an executive, do you think to start your keynote with a story about these kinds of things?

Because when you show that, people will actually step forward into your network and say, I want to help that person. I want to equip that ally with what they need to know, so that they can be a part of the change. But we have to go first.

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Debra: You're right. You're right, Jennifer. So Jennifer, I know we're at the end of our interview. I think we could do 30 more podcasts, because you are fascinating, fascinating to talk to.

Jennifer: Yes, we could.

Debra: But Jennifer, tell our listeners how they would find you. How would they find out?

Jennifer: Sure, okay. So we have a website up called InclusionTheBook.com. Real easy to remember. And if you all put your info in, you will become a part of our mailing list and we'll let you know about our launch activities and when the book is released you'll get information on it, be able to order it. And also, just to keep up with me and conferences I'm speaking at and it'd be wonderful to say hello. So I really do value those one-on-one connections and enjoy when people come up to me and say, oh, I heard you on Debra's podcast; I wanted to meet you. So please do get involved with our book launch in that way.

And then you can find me on Twitter, I have the handle JenniferBrown, which is nice to have, and then we're also on LinkedIn in Jennifer Brown Consulting, Facebook, and if you'd like to inquire around consulting services that my team and I can provide, please do look at JenniferBrownConsulting.com, which is our company website, and you can reach us that way at Info@JenniferBrownConsulting.com. So lots of ways to get into our orbit and partake in a lot of free stuff that we share. And obviously, there's a lot that's going to be helpful in the book for people who are passionate about this, but there's also white papers on our website that are very specific to the corporate environment. So anyone who's a practitioner or a change agent and needs some thought leadership, please do visit those resources under "thought leadership" on our website.

Debra: Great. Thank you so much, Jennifer, for people part of the program today.

Jennifer: Thank you.

Debra: I think you added a lot of value.

Jennifer: Oh, thank you, Debra.

Debra: Thank you.

Jennifer: You're a wonderful advocate, too.

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Debra: Thank you.

Jennifer: I appreciate your work, so I'm grateful for that as well.

Debra: I think it takes all of us.

Jennifer: Yes, it does.

Debra: Thank you, Jennifer, and thanks to our listeners, and remember, when we celebrate and accept ourselves and others, we can all reach our full human potential. Thank you.

Thank you again for watching Human Potential at Work With Debra Ruh. If you'd like to know more about my work, you can visit us at www.RuhGlobal.com. I'm available to speak, to do training, to do strategic consulting, and I would really be honored to work with you. You can also visit my speaking website, which is www.DebraRuh.com. You can find both of my books on Amazon and other channels. Thank you again for listening, bye-bye.