



Episode 1: How to get comfortable being uncomfortable at work

Bringing your authentic best self to work, being comfortable, being uncomfortable, that's a really tough situation.

Podcasting from New York City, near Wall Street, this is "Eye on I&D," a new podcast series brought to you by the human capital experts at Willis Towers Watson. We've designed this series with one goal in mind-- to help you, our colleagues in HR, and those passionate about inclusion and diversity explore the hottest, and perhaps uncomfortable, topics in I&D. Why? So you can help your employees and colleagues bring their best and whole selves to work each day.

I'm John Jones, leader of Willis Towers Watson's talent business here in North America and your podcast host. Our topic today, How to Get Comfortable Being Uncomfortable at Work. I'm joined by two distinguished panelists. First, Chris Moreland, Chief Inclusion and Diversity Advocate at Vizient, a Dallas-based performance improvement organization.

Great to be here.

And also with Suzanne McAndrew, global talent business leader at Willis Towers Watson. Welcome, Suzanne.

Thanks, John. Hi, Chris. This is a topic near and dear to my heart, can't wait to get started.

Terrific. Also, full bios of not only our panelists today but all panelists during our podcasts are available at willistowerswatson.com/inclusion. Before we get into the topic, I just want to make a reference to my Wall Street in the opening introduction. One of the things that I find very fascinating about the evolution of Wall Street in the last few years is the Charging Bull in the Fearless Girl statues.

So the Charging Bull statue, commissioned years ago and a wonderful piece of work of art that has sat on Wall Street for quite some time now, was intended to show the force and strength of the US economy and of Wall Street. The placement of Fearless Girl in front of that bull made the entire thing take on a new perspective. The artist is not particularly happy that his bull now looks like he's running over a fearless girl, or trying to, but it shows how much the world has evolved in the last 10 years in this space around inclusion and diversity.

That Fearless Girl statue was not supposed to be a permanent installation. It was only supposed to be there for a short period of time. It has remained due to the overwhelming desire for people to see that in person and to see those two pieces of art together.

Living in New York City, I remember bringing my son down to that sculpture early on. He was about seven years old, and he asked about the sculpture. And he said, mom, why is that girl standing there? And I thought about it, and I thought, well, how do I tell the story? And it reset the story to say, isn't it amazing, all the possibilities of what we need to do for this world? Standing there fearless, either a young boy or young girl or anybody who can conquer all the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for you.

It's really cool, really cool.

OK. So let's tackle the Getting Comfortable Being Uncomfortable, and I'm not sure anybody can really do that. But I think it's an important issue and one that's really compelling for a lot of people today. We are encouraging people to bring their whole selves to work, and that is not an easy thing to do.

So I know both of you have some personal stories you can share, but I'm going to ask you first, Chris. We talked actually last night over dinner around covering and the challenges with that and your own personal story. Do you want to share a little bit of that with audience?

Be glad to. Growing up in Cleveland, I lived on the east side of Cleveland which is a predominantly African-American neighborhood. The only time that we saw white people was on the news and television.

I transitioned from the east side to the west side to go to high school which was a 100% all-white neighborhood and school. And I remember the first day of class, looking around, and just feeling isolated. Feeling like, no matter what I say, no matter what I do, first of all, everyone is going to see me. Because there was never a day that I walked into that school, where I didn't get stared at just because I was different. And that made me almost like want to insulate myself and not show up.

I almost wanted to hide. And when you're 14 years old, and you're going into high school, the only thing you want to do is fit in and assimilate. But in that situation, it was the toughest thing for me personally to try and do, and I reflect back on that even when I go into a work environment.

So in a lot of organizations around this country, when you are ethnically diverse, and you happen to get into a leadership role, the chances are that you're going to be one, if not the only, ethnically-diverse person sitting in that seat. And so bringing your full self to work and being authentic creates a ton of uncomfortableness, because what you're thinking is that you're actually representing an entire race of people, an entire ethnicity. Every time you open your mouth, you are second guessing what you're going to say.

Not because you're not fluent in what needs to be said or what the topic is, but because in the back of your mind, you're thinking, what comes out of my mouth is going to represent something much greater than me. It's going to represent everything and everyone that looks and sounds and acts like me going forward. So it's got to be precise. It's got to be correct. And so there's that pressure which creates

hesitation which means that, a lot of time, my energy was not what it needed to be, because I was having a lot of personal and internal self-doubt.

And so bringing your authentic best self to work, being comfortable being uncomfortable, that's a really tough situation, and I'm sure that most people face that in some way, shape, or form. But I think, for whatever reason when there is a physical difference between you and your contemporaries, I think it shows up long before your mouth is ever open, long before you even get to the room, and you're constantly trying to solve for it. It's a very interesting topic that I don't know necessarily that we've always solved for in this country.

Suzanne?

Yeah. No, I would agree. I think that it's a topic that we haven't had the full courage to approach, in the workplace or even in our families and with our friends. I think it goes that deep, and I agree with you, Chris. There is a common ground here for all of us around getting comfortable being uncomfortable, because we're human. And the very nature of being human is evolving ourselves and having that human difference show up in a way that we can celebrate.

I recall so many stories of growing up. My father was a musician, so my family and I spent a lot of years on the road with the band. We made it to school. We did start school. But on the road with the band, and there were lots of ups and downs in terms of what we could afford. Showing up at school in high school with pretty much the same clothes, it was difficult standing out.

And then being privileged to go to college, but commuting to school, to a great university, university Maryland, go Terps, and I got a great education for under \$6,000 for four years. That really enables me to unlock more of my potential, but then stepping forward to step back into the workplace. And so many stories early on in my career, having to show up, talk about my family, or not talk about it, covering where I came from. My parents were teenagers when they got married.

Covering that I had a degree but didn't have the full college experience, or having to prove myself in certain organizations, that I actually had the smarts and self-doubting. And then to cross the next step in my uncomfortableness, where I chose to marry the person I love, a woman, and having to really show up with my every day family, friends, and at work. And spending actually years covering my wife, not having pictures on the desk, not telling my whole story.

And then the defining moment for me was when we decided to get married, and like many people, I want that diamond ring too. So I had that ring on my finger, and that was the moment of truth, where people start to ask me about my life. I started opening up, and it was freeing. All of a sudden, there was like a weight that was lifted.

And yet again, it was brought back, because just a couple years later, I recall people just telling me not to share my life with clients, with others, really wanting me to go back to my place. So for me, that powered me to say that I had a responsibility to many people, not just myself, to look for authenticity. To bring my story forward, to find a better way personally to feel empowered, and professionally to bring this topic, which I think sits at the heart of inclusion, forward to my clients and my colleagues.

That's a really interesting story about you navigating your personal and professional career at the same time, feeling as though you have to at some point let who you are out of the closet. And so what that reminds me of is that this whole idea about being comfortable being uncomfortable is not just about me, my story, but it's about your story. Because I think that, in order for you to tell your story, you have to feel as though you're in a space where it's allowed to be told. And for some people, your story is going to make them uncomfortable. Even though it's your story, it makes someone else uncomfortable.

And I think the same way about myself and my experience and my story of how, for so many years, I would not ever tell anyone about my background and my upbringing, about extended family members who did not necessarily have the same opportunities in life that I did. They didn't get to go to college, or they didn't get to go into corporate America and do certain things. They didn't have the same opportunities, and I didn't feel open enough to share that story. Because I thought it would make other people uncomfortable, and I also thought it would be so much judgment on me.

But what I'm finding is that there's actually a ton of value in sharing the stories, because people can relate to your experiences, your stories, and that actually brings you closer versus hiding and denying parts of yourself which actually exist. But it takes energy to hide them, because you almost have to stop yourself from being yourself, when you hide yourself through your stories.

Yeah. No, I completely agree. It's the stress and emotional well-being, which is a big topic, that we all care about, and it shows up everywhere. It's not just someone of color or someone who's gay. I think the Deloitte statistic's 61% of people cover every day-- fear for talking about their kids, fear for talking about certain different family arrangements, for different choices that they want to make.

I think that being authentic is going to open up someone else's discomfort. And I can think of a couple of different stories, where I have decided to bring my story forward, where I show up in a different market as a global leader, whether it's Riyadh or Manila. I start with who I am and why I do what I do, not what my role is, and my family picture is up there. And I'm just helping people get to know me and letting them reserve that judgment, their views, from there.

And what's happened as a result of that, even in cultures that may not be as accepting, I've had people come to me afterwards and tell me their story of their struggle with family and friends. And feeling like at work they can be their full self, that it is inclusive, that they can be out, that they can be safe, which is pretty amazing. Now, there might be another group in the audience who don't agree with that, and I think that's the type of conversation, these courageous conversations, that we have to think about bringing forward.

Yeah. I think there's something to the fact that by sharing your stories, or really anyone sharing their story, allows others to share theirs as well. Corporations, our clients, as they look to expand inclusion and diversity and to attract and retain talent, they're starting to focus on this. But I think that they struggle with how to broker the conversation in the right way.

People want to know about you, Suzanne. If you've traveled to a market, they want to know you, and they don't know necessarily what questions to ask. And sometimes people go, OK, well, I don't really know their background. I don't want to be insensitive. I don't want to ask the wrong question. By being bold and sharing, it creates that environment where people get to not only ask more questions, but they get to share themselves.

I think the question though today that we may be challenged with is, as more and more organizations are encouraging sharing, for lack of a better phrase, do they risk alienation? We are not a homogeneous society. Chris has pointed out before, diversity does not mean harmony. In fact, it's the exact opposite of harmony, but how do we encourage diversity in a way where that people are respectful and understanding, even if they don't always agree?

One of the things that I think we could help ourselves within an environment, in a work environment, is by opening up conversations which allow people to show themselves, be themselves, and explain to other people the context behind who they are and why they do things that they actually do. And so situations like that, where you can actually introduce new concepts in a framework where I can understand the concept and the context around them, allows me to start broadening the things that I used to think were right or wrong. But now, I'm realizing there's a different option here that I hadn't been thinking about.

I think that could be a really important framework to draw into and understand the conversations and the questions behind it, to help people uncover, to understand and relate.

So how do organizations-- if they're on an I&D journey, they're doing the measurements, they're doing the things they're supposed to be doing, and they start encouraging employee resource groups. Right? I want to encourage these groups. I want them to get together, and they start springing up. And people start understanding the logic behind them, and they're finding like-minded individuals. And they're able to share, and they feel less like they're covering as they find like-minded people. How does the organization encourage the dialogue more broadly outside of those groups? How do you see that?

I think it's time to be provocative, to reinvent what we mean by employee resources groups. So take, for example, what we see the chatter happen, outside of the walls of the organization. You have Glassdoor. You have tools like Fishbowl, where people are looking within their industry and talking about, I'm considering getting a divorce, and I need some guidance on how to let my manager know how I'm going to go through that process, because it's going to take a toll and change things.

People are looking and searching for different ways to have what I would call these common ground, uncomfortable, these cross-over conversations that can't happen just alone in the verticals of the employee resource group. I don't know. What do you think, Chris?

I agree. I think that you can absolutely facilitate some of these conversations by being very intentional about topics and people and issues that need to be brought to light. One of the things outside of ERGs and covering that I think will facilitate some of these conversations is the culture that is actually being created in the organization, and we've talked about this before. But having the culture of trust facilitates a conversation that abates the reason that I have to cover.

For instance, if I walk into an environment where I feel like there is a great relationship, and there's great trust, I have no problem whatsoever sharing many, many, many things about myself and my personality, my background with you, because I don't feel like there's going to be judgment. When there is not an environment where I feel like there's trust or appreciation, I feel like I'd better hold back everything, because there is going to be judgment and consequences associated with whatever I say or do or feel that doesn't feel like it assimilates with the rest of the organization. And so foundationally,

I think the thing that can happen within an organization is to look at the culture that is being set up, and sometimes, the culture exists without words even being said.

For instance, if you walk into an environment, and you're dressed a certain way. And people begin to stare at you and look at you, you know that's not accepted, even though no one has said anything to you. In an environment where leaders demonstrate trust, leaders demonstrate willingness to learn, leaders demonstrate the ability to understand things outside of their own comfort zone, then it feels like you can actually extend and be more of yourself at work in the work environment.

And just to get back to your comment on culture and the notion of trust, it's critical. It comes up in our survey results, so 10 1/2 million employees a year respond to our surveys. And when we dig into our normative database on high performing companies, this notion of trust is a huge differentiator of companies who are high performing, I think by 13 points above everyone else. You have to have a place that you can trust, and then you get to things like voice and inclusion underneath that.

Absolutely.

Really important.

Well, it's interesting, as you as you mention that, Suzanne, because I think our data would show that, not surprisingly, men are much more comfortable speaking out at work and less likely to cover than almost any other demographic you want to slice. And the LGBTQ community and African-Americans, in particular, are the most likely to cover in an organization. They're the ones that feel the least safe in an organization, and that's from a Deloitte University survey from a few years back, but I think it makes sense.

The question that I have takes us one step further now. So let's say, organization sets this up and says, OK, we're going to create this organization of trust. We got this. We got the employee resource group. We're feeling so much better about ourselves.

Does an organization care? Should they care, or how deeply should they care about folks that now used to have the more commonplace perspective and now no longer do? And I think maybe, if I think about someone who's deeply religious and may have very strong viewpoints in that space or from a very conservative part of the country, do they create an environment of trust for them, or is it too bad, good luck type of thing? How do you guys see that? Because it is happening.

I think that's--

Be honest.

OK.

You're making us uncomfortable, John.

Way uncomfortable. I think there are certain topics that sit right on the edge of complete discomfort. Politics and religions are two, where people, I believe, shy away from some of those conversations,

especially at work. Because a lot of times conversations tap into a person's core values, core beliefs. Those are things that we don't currently believe are going to be shaped and formed at work.

That being said, I don't know necessarily that it's the place for a work environment to address those issues. But I do think that it is the responsibility of an organization to create an environment where we can live, operate, and function under the same roof, even though we may not necessarily have the same set of core religious beliefs or core political affiliations. I don't believe though that you have to necessarily take a lot of other things off the table at work, at least.

For instance, in a lot of environments, people like to say that they don't believe in the morality choices of LGBTQ. That question comes up quite often, as though there is a choice in that. And I would just say that, for a work environment not to address that, you've created a bunch of controversy. You've just created controversy within your organization by not addressing that, by not declaring that, regardless of your sexual orientation, you will not be judged or discriminated against in this work environment. And there are other topics like that that I think need to be addressed at work.

I think it's a tricky one that organizations are facing more and more as conversations and outside movements are happening that matter and are brought into the workplace. I think that organizations need to step back and look at what is their narrative on what is OK? How are the values standing up? What do they stand for? Are the values clear respect, integrity?

I think as much as organizations just say, well, we just won't say anything, I think people judge. What's not said is almost more dangerous than what is said, and I do think we have to make space for constructive debate and good conversation. It's good for business. Right?

Right.

I used to have a leader at American Express who would say, it's not collaboration till it hurts. You don't want it to hurt too much, but-- and how do we enter into constructive debate? Otherwise, we're not getting two better answers. So I think, within the guidelines of values, we have to look at where do we allow the space to talk, the freedom to have our own opinions, and the guardrails?

So it's almost, it sounds like, it's almost a let's encourage dialogue. Let's discuss differences, but perhaps, much like organizations have total rewards philosophy's and guiding principles, organizations need to have I&D philosophy's, guiding principles, and governance around that.

I agree. I think this is going to come up more and more for organizations. If you read Google's community guidelines, they're posted externally. It does just that. It puts that out there.

I know even at my son's high school, they're changing up the guidebook on the notion of the way words happen around socioeconomic diversity, race, religion, sexual orientation. People want some type of guideline, and yet, it's not a place to help people say, OK, well, then I'll just cover. I will revert back. So I think this is going to be a tricky one for organizations to navigate.

Ultimately, these conversations and what we're tackling here is about attraction and retention of talent, important talent to move organizations forward.

And business growth.

Absolutely, and business growth. We've placed an emphasis in corporate America around this topic, because we think it's not just a good thing to do, but it's going to benefit our bottom line. We're not having those arguments around is this good for business. I think it's almost universally understood that it is, in fact, good for business.

The challenge, it seems to me, and I'm interested to get your perspective here, is around the organization doing the basic measurements of things they think they're supposed to measure and assigning someone to be in charge of it all and then saying, we're now doing something. Because ultimately, it gets down to this discomfort and diversity in the workplace and how do we celebrate that? How do we look at differences? How do address differences and learn not only to tolerate each other but more to celebrate each other? That's really where the rubber hits the road. Is it not?

I think one of the biggest issues that an organization can have is where they have a certain set of values that are on their website, and then there are a different set of behaviors that are happening within the organization. When employees see hypocrisy, I think that's where they completely disconnect and believe that this is inauthentic. We're saying one thing, and we're doing something completely different.

And that get you your trust issue.

Absolutely. When you find hypocrisy in a person or in an organization, I think you completely disengage, because you know that there is no truth here. Where I think there is opportunity for really, really good dialogue and movement and growth and everything else is where like we're doing right now. When you're having the really difficult conversations, but you're doing it in a respectful way, and you're trying to just understand. And I do think that, in a lot of situations like that, it's difficult for companies to make strong statements that are consistent with their core values.

Because there could be a potential disconnect within the organization which would make a person who didn't feel the same way to start questioning, is this the right place for me? And I think that's a really healthy conversation to have, and I think it's necessary. And it's uncomfortable, but I do think that's where some of the growth in progress lies is when you start realizing that, well, wait a minute, there's something going on here that either does not sit well with me or that I have a lot of questions about, and I need to bring it to a head.

Yeah.

Well, you could pretty much say any action anyone could take could potentially make anyone uncomfortable, whether it's choosing a chair in a conference room, greeting on a phone call, looking at someone on the subway the wrong way in New York City. So I think you're right which is really recognizing the circle of uncomfortable as progress in human difference, in human potential, in an organization's potential.

I have one last question. It may seem sort of ridiculous, but I'm going to throw it out there anyway. Does everyone have the right to bring their whole selves to work every day? What part of their whole

selves, depending on their personal philosophies or anything else, is OK? Or is it really OK, and that's where we head into?

It's a great question. Well, there was a great article in the Harvard Business Review a few years back on the authenticity paradox, which it spoke mostly to leadership and showing up in transitions into leadership roles. And where do you need to be a chameleon vs. bring out different attributes of yourself? Now, the other piece of the article points out-- and I believe in this-- people aren't just one person. There are many selves. My family calls me Suzie when I go home. Imagine that.

Right.

I just spoke it on the podcast here. So I think that there are expectations within an organization of who you are, what your role is, what the organization expects from your performance, and what the organization is going to bring out in terms of your potential. And I believe you can show up with who you are. It's how you activate all those attributes of the beautiful gifts and talents that you have in the right context that really matters. And we need to help people understand more how do they do that? I think it's hard.

I was with the group, I remember when I was at American Express, we ran our first women's conference in India, and it was amazing. We had all the women in roles, every level, come to this conference, and we spent time talking about your own personal brand. And it was so hard, because we gave them a piece of paper, did an exercise on what are your gifts and talents.

I was like, oh, wow, what are they? Very few had had a conversation or a moment to think about that. And I think as leaders, we need to get to what those gifts and talents are and then guide our people for where might people be covering. Try to uncover a bit, and then help people tune in to how do you apply your full self in the context in which you sit in the workplace. That's just my opinion.

Yeah. I love it. I would just pivot, Suzie, off of--

[LAUGHTER]

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Thank you. I think there's a couple pieces to that, and I agree with everything that you said. But when I think about is it OK to bring all of yourself to work, every day, for every person, my pivot is, some cases, it depends, and let me tell you why. As a leader, you have the ability to communicate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in a way that sometimes you're not even conscious of.

Leaders communicate based on their attire. So before they open their mouths, they've communicated. They communicate based on how they groom themselves. They communicate based on what they do on the weekends. They communicate based on who they speak to, and who they smile at.

They communicate in all different ways, shapes, and forms. They're creating a culture, and they have a higher accountability to what that culture is and what it looks like. And I think there is an accountability for creating and being intentional about the culture that you want to create.

And so when I think about that question, I always think about second-hand smoke. Right? Second-hand smoke says, it's OK for you to smoke. Do it all the time, if you want to. Please don't contaminate other people with it. And I think for a leader, you have a higher accountability for second-hand smoke.

And so as you bring yourself to work, you have to be accountable and aware that what you do and what you say and who you are has a larger impact on the organization and the culture than if you're maybe a few levels down within the organization. As a leader, you're the topic of discussion at everyone's dinner table. As a leader, you're the person that when you make a mistake it hits Wall Street. But to answer the question and go down into the organization, I do think that there is an opportunity for you to bring more of your authentic self to work within the guardrails--

Right.

Right.

Of the law, the guardrails of things that are legal and moral and ethical within the work environment. But I think the accountability and the awareness of the impact that will have on the broader organization goes up the higher you are in the organization.

It gets to that authenticity paradox. It's not what you want to be. It's what people say about you when you leave the room, and you have a responsibility to set those guardrails and to also set the freedoms within those.

Absolutely.

It's complicated.

It's complicated.

As we-- as we--

It is.

I mean, really, as we talked about this getting comfortable being uncomfortable, there's a lot of discomfort out there. And it does sound, through this conversation, if I'm going to take anything from it, organizations have to get organized and thoughtful about dialogue and conversation in their organizations. Because to get comfortable being uncomfortable requires some hard work by organizations in leadership to advance that discussion, where that you can be, not necessarily harmonious, but you can be diverse in a very positive and productive way. Thank you, Chris, for joining us today.

Thank you, John. It's been a pleasure.

Thank you, Suzanne. Thank you, Suzanne.

Thank you, John.

And join us next time, when we discuss gender in the workplace on our next podcast. So thank you, listeners, and I appreciate you being with us today.

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