



Episode 5 – A conversation on race, equity and the black experience in the workplace

[MUSIC PLAYING]

AJ HUBBARD: It's not going to be as easy to just cast it aside and go back to the status quo because the marketplace is demanding something different. That will be the ultimate force of change.

JOHN JONES: Podcasting from Detroit, Chicago and Louisville, Kentucky, this is Eye on I&D, a continuing podcast series from the human capital experts at Willis Towers Watson. I'm John Jones, leader of Willis Towers Watson's talent business in North America, and today, we address the discussion of race at work. Specifically, to foster environments that are truly equitable and inclusive, it is necessary to have uncomfortable conversations about race and more directly, to discuss the Black experience in the workplace.

We are joined by two distinguished panelists today. AJ Hubbard is first up. AJ is the Global Executive Inclusion and Diversity Leader at GE Appliances, a higher company. He brings 25-plus years of HR experience with over 10 years focused on the diversity and inclusion space. And we are thrilled to have him join us today. Welcome, AJ.

AJ HUBBARD: Thanks, John, I appreciate it. Really looking forward to this conversation today. It seems to be on the top of everyone's minds. So I can't wait to get in. Thanks for having me.

JOHN JONES: We're thrilled to have you. Also with us today is Kim Waller, a Director of Business Development at Willis Towers Watson. Kim has a focus on designing programs that demonstrate the true value of diversity and inclusion in organizations. Her passion and advocacy for diversity has spanned her 20-plus-year consulting career. It is so great to have you here with us today, Kim.

KIM WALLER: Thanks, John, really excited to be here and to engage in this discussion. I'm sure it's going to be a good one.

JOHN JONES: Awesome, all right, well, let's get in. It is probably safe to say, organizations have traditionally tried to address diversity in a thoughtful but delicate way. Open discussions about race and the Black experience have not been at the top of the list of activities for organizations up until recently, I mean, primarily coming out of the protests following the [death of] George Floyd. Things have changed dramatically on race since then. So why do you think companies avoided the topic, when gender equity or LGBTQ pride activities may have been easier to discuss?

KIM WALLER: I'll jump in, jump in as an African-American female, right? I think that gender was an easier one. I think it's easier for the majority to relate to gender. If I'm a white male leader, and I have white daughters, I can easily say I see the issues related to gender because my daughters are growing up, and I want a better world corporately and externally for my daughters.

I think the issues of race are systemic, and we're talking about it in the terms of systemic racism now because it's embedded in the fabric of our country, and it is the thing that has been the scariest thing for us to touch. But on the heels of the racial social justice equity movement, it has now been front and center and forced upon us to not look away. And now we have to address it.

AJ HUBBARD: I would say there is a level of fear, I think, that also exists there too with companies that may have come out early and have said the wrong thing or not really taking it seriously to the extent where they have diverse board members and, I should say, C-suite members that are diverse as well. So when you compound that with what you mentioned, in terms of having daughters that they can relate to, there's an unrelatability to this space that doesn't exist kind of anywhere else.

KIM WALLER: Yeah, and you know what's interesting? AJ, I'd love to get your thoughts on this. One of the things that I've noted is, when you start to talk about diversity, it's common to say we can measure gender. And if we start to talk about dimensions of diversity globally, particularly for large corporations, they start with the global manifestation of diversity and then try to retrofit it to the US.

And so on the continuum of the global manifestations of diversity, you say gender, right? The challenge that presents, particularly for companies that have large concentrations of employees in the US, is that you miss the elephant in the room. And again, the recent events with [the death of] George Floyd elevated just exactly the problem in doing it that way.

AJ HUBBARD: Yeah, it's a really good point. As GE Appliances is owned by a higher company based out of Qingdao, China, you're right. The conversations that I'm having there and in India are really focused on women, and there is an element as a result of what's gone on here.

George Floyd's death was so big. I mean, it's resounding, right? It still like ripples, rolling out throughout the US and across the world. I saw a video today on YouTube that literally showed people, crowds of people in multiple countries around the world, that had signs up saying Black Lives Matter. Like, that, I haven't seen that before, where there is a focus and a heartfelt acknowledgment that something's not right right here in the US.

And so you're right. As kind of a global company, this is giving me the opportunity to start to broaden that conversation into other places that it hasn't been an issue. It's a non-issue for them.

JOHN JONES: You know, during our prep conversation, we talked about the generational and the cross cultural backlash from what happened in Minneapolis, right? So how do you think that organizations first responded? And are you seeing-- both in your own organization as well as kind of across clients, how are organizations starting to respond to that?

AJ HUBBARD: Most companies have done a pretty good job of doing the basic, the minimum, the CEO statement to the employees, maybe something on their website, maybe a few dollars given to a nonprofit in the local community that gets them a little fanfare and a name in a paper. And that's about it. I have had many conversations with employees at other companies that have said that's all their company has done to this extent.

I'm really proud of some of the things that we've been able to do because yes, we did those things too. But we also had our CEO and myself actually do a video together, where we actually had a discussion about why this conversation is so hard, what are we looking for leaders to do in this space, in this time. And we put that out there, and it was about eight minutes. And it was, and still, one of the highest rated and most watched video that we put out this year, even in the midst of all the COVID stuff.

KIM WALLER: What we saw with CEOs is that they jumped out because of the force of what we were seeing, the impetus for change in front of us, right? You turn on your TV, in some cases, you look out your window, and you are seeing change happening. And so I think, even with companies that historically would not respond to external events, you saw CEOs coming out very publicly, asserting their commitment to having a inclusive environment, a diverse environment, their commitment to the community.

Because as you start to think about stakeholders, there was a view that there was a surge of stakeholders that they may have otherwise not have contemplated in a more conservative approach-- that we're saying, "It is time for you to step up." And I think with the advent of social media, it then was another wave. And so CEOs owned their voice and made statements.

But we also saw really quickly, within-- certainly within two weeks of the beginning of the protests, companies start taking listening sessions. And your video was an example, right? And the listening sessions have taken multiple forms. They've been small groups. They've been large groups. They've been-- all of them that I know of have been virtual.

But who's leading them, how they're leading them has varied with companies. But really, a desire to get the pulse of the employee or of their stakeholders. So they've engaged in active listening sessions because I think the CEOs and their leaders have recognized that there was a shift, a transformation occurring in our cultural psyche and in our sense of humanity, that they needed to get a better pulse point on. And so almost-- most companies-- and we start to think about things that we would recommend, if companies haven't already done this, that it's really important to engage in some type of listening session to understand how this is impacting your employees and your stakeholders.

AJ HUBBARD: Kim, you know what? I was almost remiss in saying-- the listening sessions, right? Because I have literally, for the last 60-ish days-- I think I wrote it down. This morning, I completed my 14th listening session. Like, we are having these conversations within our organization.

And what's different is it's already started to shift. Because the first round of them were right on the heels of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd. Breonna Taylor is Louisville, Kentucky. So this is happening right here. This isn't some other city, and we're watching it on the news. We're doing that, but it's-- to your point, we're looking outside our windows, and we see the protests and marches happening right now.

And so we immediately needed to have conversations that were really designed around healing. Opening up a conversation to allow, in particular, the Black community to simply share what's on their hearts, that was powerful, really powerful. And it moved people. And we continue to kind of have those, as well as address some of the well-being aspects of that.

So we actually had a Black counselor come in, and meet, and have a session, and talk about some basic coping skills. Because this was traumatic not just to Black people, right? When we watched a man be [killed] on-- in front of our eyes-- you see that in movies. This isn't real life. That's a movie. We watched it play out.

The conversations, though, have shifted internally to be more around, what can I do? How can I help? And I tell you now, we were talking about this the other day. What's happening with the response-- and it's another reason why CEOs really had to get out there-- is because the response is white, and it's young. And so when the CEO's son who's in college is on the front lines, dad has to step up and do something, right? So it hit really close to home for a lot of people in a way that I don't know that other things have in the past. Anyway--

JOHN JONES: Yeah, and I would say that organizations-- I think it did take some organizations by surprise, maybe many by surprise. And it took a little bit of time to get sea legs. And I think that in working with clients, a lot of clients kind of hit their stride and started saying, "OK, we woke up. We figured this out. We need to start talking about this. We need to get out there. We need to be listening," all those types of things. But the question I have for you is authenticity. So how does an organization ensure an authentic response to what's happening?

KIM WALLER: If you were an organization or a CEO that really, this caught you completely by surprise, and it doesn't connect to something that you understand-- and we're all continuing to evolve and understand at deeper levels-- but if you were completely caught off guard, then I think you need to do a whole lot of listening to internally and externally, before you jump out and make a statement that maybe your PR team told you to say. Because the other piece of it is maybe not this week or next month, but ultimately, we are now in a different culture where we hold people accountable for statements that were made not this year, 10 years ago.

And so CEOs that have made statements that have been inauthentic and/or potentially just-- you know, they jumped out there, and they had no intention of upholding the promises, the aspirational statements that they've made, they need to be very careful about that because there is going to be accountability for that, whether it's-- and I'm not-- that accountability isn't even in the terms of necessarily a regulatory body, old school. Popular opinion and social media is going to hold organizations and their brands accountable.

AJ HUBBARD: Yeah, I like that, Kim. And to kind of continue that point, I think authenticity in this space kind of is twofold, right? There's the external authenticity of what did or has your CEO said and done, what have been those messages. Because we know, regardless of what you come out with, the first-- and I say this all the time-- the ultimate scorecard rate for how any company is doing on their inclusion and diversity efforts is who's sitting in what seat, right? It's the board and it's the C-suite. That's it.

You can say all the wonderful things you want. You can give a lot of money. You can have all the great initiatives, but if you do not have a diverse-- at the top-- diverse leadership team, you're going to get called out.

So I think leaders have to be honest in how they communicate. But I think, John, the real authenticity for us is the internal side, right? And so it's the effort, the consistency, and sustainability of the things that we're doing inside, so that when we have a COVID happen, a pandemic, something we've never seen before actually happen, how do we keep our I&D efforts still on track?

How do we continue our mentoring? How do we continue our lunch and learns? How do we continue having our coffee chats and developing our top talent in the middle of all of that?

So I think there's an authenticity that says-- there's an external face, but then there's the day-to-day, what are you doing internally? Are you talking about it? Are you being transparent with the data? What's happening in that space?

KIM WALLER: Yeah, I think that's right. And I will say that I think part of this-- my theory is part of this came from COVID, right? Other than essential workers, people are sitting at home by themselves, largely, isolated, maybe on their computer, and they have a whole lot of time to think without being distracted by, I'm running here, and there, and everywhere, and doing entertainment. People are sitting at home.

And so again, everybody saw it happen on TV. They either looked out their window-- they've been reflecting on their existence in their company and otherwise. They have been exposed to trauma because of COVID. And then all of a sudden, all this happened. And people are like, nope, that's it, right? So the threshold for acting was already at a tinderbox level.

And the thing that I was surprised about-- to your point around what's happening internally-- I naively thought that-- perhaps that the reflection was going to be on external policing, et cetera. But we saw companies pivot, companies and their employees pivot to saying, yes, there is issues of race, and racism, and systemic racism in our external environment. But I'm really more concerned about what's happening in the doors in which I'm employed today. And I think that that elevated the impetus for leaders, and HR leaders, and I&D leaders, and D&I leaders, to now have to activate in a more meaningful way.

JOHN JONES: So I have a question. So knowing that leadership is often white, often male, almost always white and male, and certainly, with the dialogue continuing and, I think, putting pressure on leadership to act, how do you see the white privilege acknowledgment going?

KIM WALLER: The word "white privilege," literally, engaging with clients on leadership activation six months ago, incensed leaders in the room, incensed. And we didn't bring it up. Somebody else had. We as consultants didn't bring it up. Somebody else had, and one leader, a couple leaders were like, "I worked hard for everything that I have. I resent the notion of white privilege." So it was incendiary.

And then I look to now, where it's all over the place. I'm like, who's saying this? Who's saying this? What is happening, right? So that's a shift, and again, I think it's because of the veracity of the movement and just how public it's been, that all of us and all these terms are flooding the airwaves and the narratives, even in corporations, that otherwise, six months ago, four months ago, were absolutely taboo. And now, even Black Lives Matter, I'm like, what are you saying?

But that's one piece of it. As I think about it, in all of the empathy that I have, if I were to transform myself into a white male-- if you think about the average white male, 55 plus, in 1960, we were 85% white. That CEO grew up in a very different world.

So all of a sudden, now, all of these discussions-- first it started with gender. Now we're talking about race. What in the world is going on? Why don't people just come into the office, do their jobs, and then go home, and do whatever you want to do when you get home?

But this integration and this notion that we now need to be corporately socially responsible, and it's all blending because of the younger generation that is coming behind us, if you aren't woke, if you will, this all has got to be unsettling, to say the least. So I have a degree of empathy, but I guess my urging of CEOs is, you'd better find somebody to coach you. You'd better get activated because the market's going to get you, whether you like it or not. So you'd better figure it out.

AJ HUBBARD: What you just said is the real reality of this, is it's not going to be as easy to just cast it aside and go back to the status quo because the marketplace is demanding something different. That will be the ultimate force of change.

KIM WALLER: That's right.

AJ HUBBARD: That we haven't really seen in the past.

JOHN JONES: We talked a little bit about authentic messaging. I really liked-- Kim-- the perspective of, you know, you better get some coaching if you're not on board with this because really-- I think that really makes a lot of sense and really hits home for a lot of folks. Because if this has caught you by surprise, and you are now in the middle of something that you didn't expect to happen, you're not going to change the momentum. You really kind of have to figure it out for yourself and for your organization. So I think that that's an important note.

We've talked a little bit about why it's so uncomfortable. Do you think, based on the experience you've had with clients, and AJ, you with GE appliances, have we seen the discomfort dissipate?

KIM WALLER: Yeah, what I'm seeing with clients is, just as we saw on the street-- and I continue to go back to that as an impetus-- with people owning their power and their voice, companies and their organizations in their listening sessions are-- it's been like this ripple effect, where employees and other managers, leaders are owning their voice differently. And so I don't think it's gotten less uncomfortable. I think the voice of people has been unleashed.

And so companies now, again-- I myself thought this was going to be in a pocket, maybe a week, and it'll be done. But I clearly was wrong, right? And people-- once you activate someone's voice, you're not going to put baby in the corner anymore. And there's a lot of that happening. And so I don't think it's been less uncomfortable, but I just think there's been a wave of activation of people's voices.

AJ HUBBARD: Yeah, Kim, I couldn't agree more. That's been my experience so far. John, to answer your question about, has it gotten more comfortable to have the conversation, I think more people have gotten comfortable voicing their opinions on both sides. But primarily from the conversations I've had, the folks who either were already onboard and now feel a little bit more emboldened to say something or the folks that were in the middle are now speaking up, as opposed to just kind of agreeing but not wanting to say anything.

And so there is a conversation now that is happening with more people, yes. But I think it's more of the people who were kind of already feeling like something wasn't quite right. And now, they've got the muscle to kind of get in the game and do some things.

KIM WALLER: Yeah, I would also say, in terms of the question around conversations being comfortable, uncomfortable, how does this impact organizations, I would say that if an organization has not gone through the process of thinking about what baseline unconscious bias training looks like, baseline-- perhaps anti-racism training or some narrative around that, and equipping its managers to be able to navigate this, it's important that they think about it and think about it quickly.

Because again, my empathy for the traditional white male that grew up, that's 55-plus, he or she may have a diverse team, right? And particularly, depending upon the industry that you're in, they very well may be, just because of the labor pool. And if we don't equip them as leaders, HR leaders, transformational leaders, on how to deal with now these employees that have been activated with their voice, then there's a whole lot of mess that's going to be happening within organizations.

AJ HUBBARD: What you want from your I&D leader in your organization, if you have that role, is you want that person who can push the organization, consult with them, that leaders value their perspective and want to bring them in, that they can build relationships with. But I tell you, this individual will also help. They can't do it all.

So let me be clear. I&D professionals need financing. They need support. They need access to the C-suite if they're not already there, so that they can have real, meaningful conversations with the leaders who can make real decisions in the organization. And so that has to be a part of it.

But what your I&D professional also does is, they can kind of be your internal consultant and your checks and balances. Like, hey, we have a gap here. Because as an I&D professional, one of the things that I'm continually looking at, I'm looking at not just who's coming in the organization and who's leaving, but I'm into the entire lifecycle of the employee within the organization, right?

So I'm-- all of the movement. How do people move throughout the organization? Who's getting development? Who isn't? Who's getting networked? Who's getting those opportunities, special assignments? Like, all of those things are the conversations I can ask about and nudge so that they get done.

KIM WALLER: Yeah, and I totally agree. And I think that organizations, whether they have a person in a chief diversity officer role or not or if they're thinking about getting one, that they need to think hard and fast around why they're bringing them in and equip them-- to your point, AJ-- with the tools and resources so that they can impact the organization in an effective way. You know, there's not probably a leader that hasn't heard the research on why diverse teams outperform non-diverse teams, right? And I'm not going to cite it right now because everybody can sing that song.

But if a company really believes that, then that chief diversity officer is a chief innovation officer, is a chief transformation officer, is a chief people officer. And so organizations positioning that person well needs to equip them, recognizing that if they truly believe in the research on why diversity matters for an organization, that they're looking to that leader to activate that.

JOHN JONES: Really well said, Kim. So ERGs, there's been a lot of conversation as of late around, is this their time, or have they lost their need in an organization? In other words, is this a time where an ERG steps up?

Or is this a time where that we get a little insight and say, "Hey, you know what? Maybe we don't need the ERG anymore because we need everyone to embrace inclusion and diversity. We need everyone-- we don't need to segment. We need to include." So I'm just throwing that out there for your thoughts.

AJ HUBBARD: I can go. Thank you, Kim.

[LAUGHING]

You know, what's interesting about that is, I had this conversation with a few ERG members several years ago, actually, probably about four or five years ago. I don't know if it was E&Y, or somebody had come out with their inclusion groups, moving away from the traditional employee resource groups into these more inclusion groups. And so I literally lightly floated the idea, the concept, hey, what do you think about--

And I will tell you, especially the Black people--

[LAUGHS]

--the Black community was like, no, no, no, AJ, we haven't had our day yet. We still got some things to work through, and we want to ensure that our voices are heard. Because here's the deal, we haven't seen a whole lot of change yet. If we get to a place where AJ doesn't have a job anymore, then I guess that's the time we don't need affinity networks or employee resource groups anymore. Because we will be fully integrated. It'll be a part of every fabric and all the stuff that we say, that will actually be happening.

So that stayed with me because it came with tone and energy, and I felt it. And I said, "You're exactly right. Thank you. Thank you for correcting me and getting my mind right." And so here's what I've seen out of our employee resource groups, a total step up like none other before. The passion is through the roof.

But they're thinking. They're thinking strategically about what is the play, what's the avenue we need to push to get more women in here, or to get more people promoted, or to retain who we have, or how do we connect with this audience, and how do we teach people about that. And so it's kind of a combination of things. Timing is everything.

KIM WALLER: If you would ask me this question, John, four months ago, I would've given you a different answer. I absolutely would have given you a different answer. But reflecting back, for another client, I recently did some research on-- to refresh my memory on the origin of ERGs, right?

And the beginning of ERGs really dates back to 1960, with Xerox launching its first African-American Black resource group, right? And that was a strategic move by Xerox at the time to address inequities in terms of retention, attraction, and promotion of African-American talent to more senior levels. That's where it started.

Now, somewhere along the line, that got diluted. The shift moved from race to gender. We started to say, "We don't have a whole lot, so let's start pulling them together and making them aggregate groups." And that happened up until-- for some companies-- up until recently.

And then we had, again, this pivotal moment in our history. Almost-- as older people were saying, this is a reboot of the '60s movement, civil rights movement, now refreshed to our day but elevated. So the impetus that launched those groups in the '60s at Xerox and IBM-- and they were successful with that because I remember parents who work for those companies that were beneficiaries of that, those ERGs, that got to elevated positions, right? If you ask someone, African-American of a certain age, and they have been an executive, I bet you good money, some of them came from that lineage of those ERGs, right? AJ, I see you agree--

AJ HUBBARD: Yeah, right?

KIM WALLER: You know I'm right.

AJ HUBBARD: Oh yeah.

KIM WALLER: Right? So I think that it's an opportunity to rethink ERGs and to make sure-- to your point, like yours are, AJ-- that they are strategically thinking, that they move from what had started to happen, which was food, fun, and flags, right? We're doing potlucks, and we're doing Coke drives, and we might go to a fashion show. No, stop that. Make sure that you are relative to the business and how that business attracts, retains, develops, engages its employee base.

JOHN JONES: I think that's a perfect spot to wrap up. Thank you for a really great discussion. I mean, this is difficult stuff but clearly, organizations need to be more open and direct with discussing race and the Black experience. I think we've learned, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, we have to encourage dialogue and listen carefully. We need to set a response strategy, assign accountability. We need to educate and equip leaders in particular, in how to navigate this relatively new world of open communication around race.

And we need I&D access in the C-suite. That diversity leader not only needs access but needs funding and needs support for all of this to change for the positive and move forward. So wonderful having you both here today. Kim, thank you for joining us and thank you for sharing all your stories around clients.

KIM WALLER: Absolutely, thank you. It's been a pleasure.

JOHN JONES: And AJ, it's wonderful having you here.

AJ HUBBARD: Thanks, John, so much. I always enjoy it and look forward to the next opportunity. I appreciate you having me.

JOHN JONES: Terrific, and thank you all, our listeners. And we look forward to having you join us for a future episode of Eye on I&D. Take care, everyone.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SPEAKER: Thank you for joining us for this Willis Towers Watson podcast, featuring the latest thinking on the intersection of people, capital, and risk. For more information, visit the [Insights section of willistowerswatson.com](#).