

Season 3 | Episode 1

# Making DEI Sustainable in the Workplace



## Rob Parsons

Manager, Content and Brand  
Paychex, Inc.



## Stacey Gordon

DEI Strategist & Author,  
CEO and Founder of Rework  
Work

## Full transcript

### Rob Parsons:

Welcome to Pulse, a Paychex HR podcast, where HR professionals find insights on today's top issues and inspiration to build and lead effective teams in a healthier workplace. I'm your host, Rob Parsons.

### Rob Parsons:

This episode is part of a special series we are running on diversity, equity and inclusion, and I'm pleased to welcome my co-host for this series, Dr. Thelá Thatch. Thelá leads the DEI effort, initiatives, and programs here at Paychex. With a PhD in public policy and administration from Walden University, and more than two decades of experience in human resources, talent management, and organizational development, Thelá is passionate about building cultures where an authentic commitment to inclusion, equity, and diversity thrives. I can say that I know that firsthand. Thank you for helping out Thelá.

### Thelá Thatch:

It is so amazing to be here with you, Rob, and thank you for being my partner in the diversity, equity and inclusion journey. It's been great.

### Rob Parsons:

And a journey it is. I'm learning more every day, how further back on the journey I actually am than I thought. Our guest today is Stacey Gordon. Stacey is focused on improving workplace cultures and her mission is to reduce bias in global talent acquisition and management. As a LinkedIn instructor, she offers diversity, inclusion, and career-related online courses, which have been viewed more than one million times. Her new book, "Unbias: Addressing Unconscious Bias At Work," is the next step in her vision to make all the difference in the world. Drawing on decades of experience and research, "Unbias," is an action manual for you to remove barriers and ensure equity throughout your organization. Stacey, welcome to the podcast.

**Stacey Gordon:**

Thank you, thank you. Excited to be here and to be able to participate in this conversation and just honored that we are able to have the conversation about my book, And that you saw fit to invite me in to do this.

**Rob Parsons:**

Oh, it was very much our pleasure, and Thelá had some great perspective on this, so I want to serve up the first question to her because it's telling, and it shows why this topic is so important.

**Thelá Thatch:**

Thank you, Rob. So again, Stacey, congratulations on your book, "Unbias." I am so encouraged by the book and encouraged by your efforts on the book. I've learned so much reading the book in just how you simplify concepts around DEI to make them actionable and practicable — excuse me, practical to organizations. So, congratulations, number one. And one thing that I thought about when I knew we would be interviewing you today is just my experience as a woman of color working in diversity, equity and inclusion, it literally has been personally exhausting. So, understanding the personal toll equity work can take on anyone, why are you so committed to DEI work?

**Stacey Gordon:**

It's ... I pause, I laugh really, right before answering that question, because I want to answer it in the facetious way and say ... but it's actually true, which is that I'm committed to this work because I'm Black. I am a Black woman on this planet, and I have three daughters who are going to go out into the world, and I would love for them to be able to get jobs and not have to deal with the trials and tribulations and the BS that we have had to deal with. And that really is part of it but I think also part of it is that I don't see a world where I'm not doing this. So, I know I get asked, "Well, how did you get started?" It's like, I feel like I was always doing it even though that's not really accurate, but in my head, that's how it feels.

**Thelá Thatch:**

It sounds like it's your purpose, you're walking into your purpose. Rob, I know you had some thoughts too.

**Rob Parsons:**

I - I did and what I really like Stacey is because to me, it seems like such a big challenge and when I'm faced with big challenges, I love a process, I love a framework, a step-by-step gui- When I'm working on the car, I love a guidepost to help me manage and deal with this because when I try to take on something so big, it gets overwhelming. I really love the framework you introduced in "Unbias," it helped get my head around really the scope of the challenge. I'd love for you to tell our listeners about this framework overall, and also just a little bit about your journey arriving there, because it didn't just fall out of the sky. This was something obviously built over time and took a lot of work.

**Stacey Gordon:**

It definitely did and so thank you for that, because it evolved over time. I looked at what it was that I was constantly having to tell people and work with people on and strategize on. I would say, "Where does this keep coming up?" I realized that I think what really solidified it for me, I was already working on sketching out this framework, but what really solidified it was last year, when George Floyd was murdered and I was getting all of these calls from people, and it was like déjà vu. Every single person was saying the same thing like, "We need to do unconscious bias education, and we need to hire a chief diversity officer, and we need to set up a DEI council." It was literally like that trifecta over and over and over again.

**Stacey Gordon:**

I had so many of those calls, I would say to my assistant, Joy, I was like, "Didn't we talk to these people already?" She's like, "No, no, that was somebody else. It's just very similar, it's the same thing, I know."

**Stacey Gordon:**

So, in looking at that and seeing that all of these individuals wanted to jump into action, they wanted to do these things, and none of the things that they wanted to do were wrong, but it was just that I realized it really gave me clarity in realizing that, yes, you want to do these things, but you don't know why, and you really don't know how. So, then I would say, "How do I get people to back up before they get to this place where they think these things need to be done, and actually figure out why they need to be done, how they need to be done?" So, it's also part of the reason that ... Well, before I say that, I'll just say, because I haven't explained the framework, have I?

**Stacey Gordon:**

So the framework, it starts with awareness, we go into alignment, and then action, and then advocacy. In my mind, it was the four A framework, and I realized I've never ever called it that because they all may start with A, but it really is, it's a DEI framework. It is like, we need to start with awareness. And for those individuals that aren't even at the awareness level, they're still in status quo, they're in stasis. They have not even made a decision to move forward at all. So, starting with awareness is that place where you can even acknowledge that, yes, we might have a problem. Yes, we might have areas that need to be looked at, and it's determining, using data to figure out the what, the why, the how. Then you can get to alignment with — because at that phase you're like, "Okay, now we see what some of the concerns might be, but now we have to agree to do something about it."

**Stacey Gordon:**

I think that's a missing step so many times, because again, we jump into action and say, "Let's do these things." But when we haven't given real buy-in to the things that we want to do, what we end up with is short-term success, but long term, it's not sustainable. So, that's why we've got to get to alignment, then to the place where you can actually take the action. The advocacy is the sustainable part, that's where you have to iterate. You have to look at things you have to review and you have to keep it moving in order to be able to make sure that we're not backsliding and that ... Because as new people come into a company, you change the culture every time. People leave, people come in, and it's constantly changing.

**Rob Parsons:**

That's especially a great point for smaller organizations, where single individuals can just make such a huge difference, such a huge impact. I loved that point about the danger of jumping into action first. I think that I would fall into this camp. We know this is the right thing to do, let's do it. Your chapter on awareness was challenging for me. You bring up some potentially uncomfortable truths for organizations. How do you recommend HR managers help organizations manage some of those potential difficulties?

**Stacey Gordon:**

We've got to hit it straight on, head on. That is that conversation about, it sounds so cheesy and I hate saying it, but it's like, you've got to get comfortable being uncomfortable. That is true because I think the next step with that is, if you get comfortable being uncomfortable, eventually it's no longer uncomfortable. It's the new normal, and you start to change how you feel about these conversations. You can dive into them and have them because you get used to it. So, you have to have them, you have to have the conversations and what I find is, and what's interesting, I went to the SHRM Talent Conference a few weeks ago, and I did a session for a few hundred HR leaders and talent acquisition folks. Someone came up to me afterwards and said, "You know, Stacey, you're the first speaker that I've ever heard who said, 'Be honest.'" I was just like, "What?"

**Stacey Gordon:**

But that's really the message, is we've got to be transparent. We've got to be honest about the hard things, because once you face it, then you can fix it, but you can't fix what you can't face. So, we've got to have the hard conversations. Once you identify it, okay, great, now we know what we have to do. We should be happy that we know what it is because now we can fix it.

**Rob Parsons:**

It's okay to not be okay.

**Stacey Gordon:**

Right.

**Thelá Thatch:**

Wow. I just had to switch to my phone, so my apologies. I'm switching video, but I heard everything you said, Stacey, and great points. Thank you so much for the framework that really has guided me and the work that I'm doing at Paychex, and as I mentioned before, simplifies how to wrap my head around all of the various challenges when it comes to the four As.

**Thelá Thatch:**

And I loved your point about the danger of jumping into action first, before awareness and alignment. So, how do we exercise that discipline, that patience, to get things in the right order?

**Stacey Gordon:**

Yeah, I think it really takes having the conversation, and just understanding what the journey is. So, for many, they're just in a point and don't necessarily know what the purpose is of what it is that they're doing and what the end result is, what the expectations are. So, once you get a better idea and understanding of that, it's helpful because then they get to see, "Okay, where are we in this process?" Then they understand why they need to either go back and start an awareness, or move forward to action.

**Stacey Gordon:**

But without really getting a grounding and an understanding of where they are on the journey, it's difficult to do that, because it's like standing in a forest and not having a map. Well, how would you know where you are? You're just standing around a bunch of trees. So, really I think of it in that framework, that it's like really looking at what is our journey? What is our starting point? And then what is our ending point? With the understanding that, that ending point isn't necessarily that you're going to stop, but it's the end of this particular journey and the beginning, right, of now, maintenance.

**Thelá Thatch:**

Great point.

**Rob Parsons:**

I'm curious, Stacey too, as you talk about that, I get the feeling a lot of these journeys start from the bottom up and not from the top down. What's been your experience in - in how this works in organizations?

**Stacey Gordon:**

A lot of it works in the middle because the individuals in the middle — the middle managers — they're the ones that are struggling. HR is struggling because they have to manage the expectations of the leaders who think that they're just going to snap their fingers, hire a chief diversity officer, and it's going to get fixed. But then they also have to manage the expectations of the individuals who are individual contributors, who are saying, "Why aren't you doing something? We need to do better. It sucks to work here. Fix it." So they're in the middle like, "What do I do?" So, they are usually the ones that call, because they are the ones that are struggling the most.

**Thelá Thatch:**

Great question. So, what are companies, in your opinion, doing wrong when they try to align DEI to business strategies and practices? What are some of the top pitfalls that you see?

**Stacey Gordon:**

I mean the top pitfall is not doing it at all. They're not aligning DEI to business strategy, so that really is the missed opportunity for a lot of companies. Somebody asked me yesterday, where do I think DEI is going to go over the next few years, and do I think that we're going to continue to see renewed or continued support for DEI in the workplace? And I got to be honest, I don't think so, unless we align DEI to business strategy, because business strategy, it's always going to have to be taken care of. But if you don't align DEI to business strategy, then it's going to be another initiative that's going to always be on the cutting, the cutting block.

**Stacey Gordon:**

We go into a recession, which is quite likely with all the stuff that's going on, right — you're going to have companies say, "Well, I can't do this right now. We don't have funds for this. We don't have time to focus on it." It's going to get pushed out and left to the side, and it's going to be a long time before somebody can come back and pick it up and start over again. This is why we've been in this cycle. People keep saying again and again, "Here we are," but it's because it has not been aligned to the business strategy, and so it won't ... If we can embed it in there, then you can't extricate it later. So, I think that that's really the part of it, is that it's not so much the — If they start doing it, they're not doing it wrong, but the problem is they're just not doing it.

**Rob Parsons:**

That's such a great question, Thelá, because I think you're exactly right, Stacey. If people are doing it just because they think it's the right thing to do versus it's the right thing for the business, it is going to fall away. If it's not a coherent part of the business strategy, as soon as times get tough, it's going to slough off.

**Thelá Thatch:**

Right. Wow. So in — any words of advice to heads of diversity, equity and inclusion who are concerned that the business ... Or to our HR, everyday HR person, or all leaders — let's just make it general — what advice do you give us?

**Stacey Gordon:**

I think that it's one of the reasons I'm actually in the process, almost done, of creating a course called "The Why Of DEI." It's really about, for leaders to understand why this is important because when the leader gets it and when they can be empathetic and when they can understand it and when they can be authentic in their decisions, it then makes it ... You then have the support and the buy-in. A lot of people right now are talking about, "Oh, we've got leader buy-in." No, what you have right now is a check. They wrote a check, that's fine, that's not buy-in. It might actually be monetary support, but it's not the buy-in that you need.

**Stacey Gordon:**

You need there to be a real understanding of why this is important for this specific company and if your leaders cannot articulate that, nothing that you do is going to be sustainable. I know that sounds harsh and it sounds defeatist, but it is accurate because, here we are, constantly having these same conversations over and over and over again. So, if we want to make it sustainable, we've got to look at changing the way that we're doing this work instead of continuously doing what we've been doing, because that's the definition of insanity.

**Rob Parsons:**

Yeah, it brings us right back to the-

**Thelá Thatch:**

It's a lot.

**Rob Parsons:**

-very first question about how exhausting it can be because it's banging the head against a wall sometimes.

**Stacey Gordon:**

Yeah, and I would like to move the wall.

**Rob Parsons:**

That's a great point. Now, I'm running up against time here and there's still so much to discuss. I think we've talked a little bit about awareness and about alignment, but there's still those whole points about action and advocacy, which I think are really key. So, can we continue this conversation in the next episode? Can you join us, Stacey and Thelá?

**Stacey Gordon:**

Sounds great.

**Thelá Thatch:**

I'm excited, let's do it.

**Rob Parsons:**

Excellent. Well, Stacey, thank you for so much for joining the podcast today. Thela, thanks for co-hosting and thank you for our listeners for joining. I encourage you all to read Stacey's book "Unbias: Addressing Unconscious Bias At Work," published just this past year." You can order yourself, your ERG, your executive team, or book club at [www.unbiasbook.com](http://www.unbiasbook.com). You should also look Stacey up on LinkedIn and take advantage of her exceptional training programs. Thank you all, and please stay happy and healthy.

**Speaker 4:**

This podcast is property of Paychex Inc. 2021, all rights reserved.

**PAYCHEX**<sup>®</sup>

HR | Payroll | Benefits | Insurance