

Paralympic Athlete Lex Gillette Talks Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion



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Lex Gillette

Paralympic Track and Field Athlete for Team USA

Announcer:

Welcome to THRIVE, a Paychex Business Podcast, where you'll hear timely insights to help you navigate marketplace dynamics and propel your business forward. Here's your host, Gene Marks.

Gene Marks:

Hey everybody, it's Gene Marks and thanks for joining us again. I'm here with Lex Gillette. He is a globally recognized Paralympic Track and Field Athlete for Team USA. Competing primarily in the long jump, Lex has amassed five Paralympic medals, four World Championships, and he is the current world record holder in the event.

Gene Marks:

He is the only totally blind athlete on the planet to eclipse the 22-foot barrier in the long jump. Lex recently returned from Tokyo's 2020 Paralympics with a silver medal. And now, has his set sights for Paris 2024. Lex, thanks so much for joining me.

Lex Gillette:

Absolutely. Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Gene Marks:

Yeah, well I'm glad you're here. And Lex, we had spoken earlier, you told me that you had lost your eyesight at the age of eight. Tell us a little bit about this.

Lex Gillette:

Yeah so, I had come home from school one day, went through my normal routine. That evening, as I was in the bathtub, I started noticing that my sight, it was blurred, it was faint. Hop out of the tub, get onto the bathroom counter immediately realized something is wrong because it was tough for me to see my reflection in the mirror. We go to the doctor, they see that I am suffering from retina detachments, which leads to a string of operations, 10 to be exact, in that one year that I was that I was eight years old. And after the 10th one doctor said that there wasn't anything else they could do to help my sight. And they said that I

would eventually become blind. So from there it was go home, go through your normal routine. Eventually, go to sleep at night, you wake up the next morning, see a little less than what you do the day before until one day you wake up and you cannot see anything at all.

Gene Marks:

All right. I mean, it's an awful story, but clearly you have made so much of that. So Lex, this conversation is about diversity. Now, I know you were very young when you went blind, you were only eight years old. So, I just want to make sure that you're aware you're a Black guy, okay? I don't know if you figured that out or not.

Lex Gillette:

Oh yeah. No, thanks for reminding me.

Gene Marks:

Yeah, just don't know if anybody's told you that. I'm a white guy. And I-

Lex Gillette:

Oh, that's funny 'cause I would've thought you were black.

Gene Marks:

Really? Okay. Well, no, I'm about as white as you can get. Diversity is a huge issue. And I have to say, again, our audience are small business owners and I mean, Lex, we struggle with diversity and equity and inclusion in our businesses. I really have not met a business owner, or a manager that doesn't want to have more diversity in their business, but sometimes the way they go about it or sometimes their thoughts about diversity aren't necessarily the right way to be thinking about it.

Gene Marks:

You talk about something called blindfolds. And you say blindfolds currently exist and it limits us. And I was wondering if you can to start this conversation about diversity, if you can expand on what you mean by that.

Lex Gillette:

Yeah so, and literally speaking in competition, as an athlete who is blind, we are also required to wear a blindfold to ensure that there is a level playing field across the field of competitors. So, they want to make sure that sight is not a competitive advantage.

Lex Gillette:

And when you think about it just in everyday life we don't have an equal playing field, a level playing field for a lot of groups within the United States. And you think about it from a race standpoint, or gender, or ability. And so, I think about those blindfolds in the context of things that impede people's ability to see the road ahead with more clarity and truth.

Gene Marks:

Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. And we all have that, and we all struggle with those limitations.

Gene Marks:

So, we struggle with biases as well in our businesses and they impact us. You talk about conscious and unconscious biases. I was wondering if you can give us some examples of what you mean by that, and how you think that impacts both morale and productivity?

Lex Gillette:

Yeah, I think that we're products of our environment and we have our backgrounds, our experiences, things that we've all come to learn, and understand over the years. And I think that now we're starting to see that a

lot of those things are inconsistent, and are not hitting the mark in terms of ensuring that we are providing the best spaces and places for people.

Lex Gillette:

And so, I learned a lot about this at an early age because sure, from literally being able to transition from being able to see and not being able to see, you can learn how to read braille, you can't read print books, but you can read braille. You may not be able to use a computer right out-of-the-box, but you can get a speech software that can be installed on the machine so that you can learn how to use the machine as well.

Lex Gillette:

So, you're able to truly see that oh okay, well, here are some like very concrete accommodations that are available. I think where a lot of the challenges lie is when we get into these societal perceptions, and how the world views us. And a lot of times when I walk through the streets and through the city I would probably be looked at as incapable, or less than. Or people have just a different type of viewpoint. Whereas, a lot of those perceptions are totally untrue. And so we want to get to a space where we all just feel comfortable, and feel like we belong here. And don't have to worry about kind of antiquated viewpoints that tend to hold us back.

Gene Marks:

I mean, this must have become much more prevalent in your mind over the past few years is you don't have eyesight. So I mean, that doesn't remove all the factors that can contribute to bias. I mean, you can hear my voice, you can kind of get an idea of maybe what I look like, or what I sound like, you know what I mean? And we joke about that, but when you take away your eyesight though you still can't see me, so that does remove bias. So, that must have made you start thinking to yourself like, "Man, if everybody was blind, for example, like they make us, why don't we race? That would actually be one step towards removing bias and maybe improving diversity in the workplace."

Lex Gillette:

Yeah. Man, that's an interesting point because I've definitely thought about that before. And I wrote this article a year or so ago, this was during the thick of the pandemic. And I want to say it was a couple months after the George Floyd murder. And I had made a point of, in a certain way, blindness has provided a certain type of protection because you think about biases, a lot of those things are visually triggered, as someone who, as a Black person say, I'm walking inside of a building, and maybe someone who's white, they might clutch their bag. Or maybe I walk in and since I am blind, and I'm just venturing into the realm of imagination here, but maybe there are some people of another race and there maybe they put the finger over their lips. So they won't give the indication that someone is there. And because of me walking in and not only being Black, but being blind and not being able to see those gestures and behaviors.

Lex Gillette:

But that protection isn't there for a lot of people because you are able to see. And yes, I think there is some benefit of everyone being blind, and being able to, or having to make decisions purely based off of that type of experience, not being able to see race. But I also think that it is important for us to see race because, when you do, I think that you can gain an understanding of what each race, or gender, or whatever marginalized group that we are talking about it gives you an idea of the challenges and things that they do face. And that's very important seeing that, so that you can acknowledge it, and then figure out a way to remove those blindfolds.

Gene Marks:

Yeah, it's funny that you say that because, I mean, you're right. There are some pros to removing some of your senses as it is, if you want to try to make an unbiased decision. But, then again, by removing those

senses you are limiting yourself to seeing that actual person on the color of their skin, or their background, or the look in their eyes, which can help you hire that person for different reasons. 'Cause I was literally just about to ask you, "Hey, so wouldn't it make more sense for us all to just put on blindfolds, or just interview people over the phone without looking at them? Or seeing what color their skin, or their background?" But if you're trying to build a diverse workforce, you do want to see them. Or you do want to know what race they are and background, right?

Lex Gillette:

Yeah, definitely. And maybe there's just some interesting way that you can combine both of those elements, being able to have that interview where, say, there is the taking away of the sight so that you're focusing on the conversation, the voice, et cetera, et cetera. And then, also having that opportunity to be able to look as well. I think there could be an interesting way to kind of expand that interviewing process.

Gene Marks:

Yeah, I totally agree. And, unfortunately, there are so many unique questions that you could ask a Black candidate, an Indian candidate, an Asian candidate, a female that's unique to them and their experience. But then, you start treading into dangerous grounds, and potential legal issues, or discrimination issues. And that's well and beyond this conversation, but they are challenges.

Gene Marks:

Let's just assume that we get over some of those challenges. I mean, first of all, tell me why it is important to have a diverse workforce in a company. What do you think it provides?

Lex Gillette:

'Cause we all have something uniquely special to offer the world. And I talk a lot about vision. Vision is our ability to see things before they exist. And I truly believe that vision is meant to change perceptions, mindsets, society, the world. And something of that magnitude absolutely requires just a diverse group of people. We all have different skillsets, talents, abilities that need to be brought to the table. And fortunately, for me, I had my teacher in high school who he met me where I was, as a kid who couldn't see anything of being inside of a PE class where sometimes you might have someone who encourages you to sit on the sideline. "Oh, we got this blind kid in here. We shooting baskets, playing dodge ball, we don't want to get him hurt," anything like that. But I had my teacher who challenged that thinking. "Why does Lex have to sit on the sideline? He only has something wrong with his eyesight. He has total ability in his arms, body, legs. Let's figure out a way to adapt these activities so that he can participate."

Lex Gillette:

And so, I think that when leaders and all of us, when we have that type of mindset, where what can I do to change this situation so that this person can not only see their potential, but unleash their potential into the world. When you have that type of mindset now, you are not only impacting one person's life, but you're also empowering them to take that ability, that skillset, that talent, and to get it out there so that the world benefits, the business benefits. And that, it's going to bode very well for you as you maneuver forward.

Gene Marks:

Lex, what do you mean when you talk about empathetic eyes?

Lex Gillette:

Being able to literally step into the shoes of someone else. Now, I think about when, when my guide and I started to work together in those beginning stages. And he hadn't worked with someone who was blind or visually impaired before. So, I mentioned that blindfold that we have to wear in competition. He decides to put this blindfold on, and tries to walk around just to get an idea of what it is that I deal with on a daily basis. And from him trying that out, it was him getting an idea of what it is that I experienced. And so, that just set

the framework for us building a really strong relationship him seeing that, "Oh, okay, well, he this person is blind. So, that means that my communication has to be very good. I have to use effective communication."

Gene Marks:

Sure.

Lex Gillette:

Telling me that, "Lex water bottle is over there," is not going to be the best use of your words. How can you be more descriptive. And, again, helping people to... Meeting them where they are so that they can be the best them, that best person possible. And so, it's changed from, "Lex, your water bottle was over there," to, "Lex, if you take one step to your right hand side, and reach down in front of you, your water bottle it'll be there waiting for you."

Lex Gillette:

And so, again, I think that when we can take more of the responsibility and say, "How can I change this narrative? How can I assist this person?" Then, that's really going to open a lot of doors for you as a leader and as a business owner.

Gene Marks:

You make me think Lex as well. And I know we only have a couple minutes left, but I hear complaint after complaint for my clients. They want to build a more diverse company, but they can't find people. And I wonder if they're just [inaudible 00:16:16]. For somebody to hire you, if I were to hire you for my company, and I run a company with like 10 employees, because you're blind I would have to teach you a lot of different things, make certain accommodations, do whatever's necessary to kind of bring you up to speed and make sure that you can do your job for me. It just won't be like a snap at the fingers. Like if you just hired somebody who didn't have your disability, do you know what I mean?

Lex Gillette:

Yeah.

Gene Marks:

And I think that it's the same thing if you really want to hire people, people more of color, or gender, or certain backgrounds. The traditional places that we go to, as business owners, they're easy. You hire somebody off of CareerBuilder, or off of LinkedIn. But a lot of these people might not be there for various reasons, but they can be good and smart people. It's just gonna take more work by me, the business owner, to say, "Listen, okay, maybe this person doesn't have a college degree, or maybe they've never been on LinkedIn. But if I brought them on board, and I taught them, and I accommodated them not only will I have a good employee, but I can reach some of those diversity objectives, and benefit from that."

Lex Gillette:

And I think that when you take that sort of approach me as that person, who's on the side of the coin where I'm the employee, that's going through the onboarding process, I can totally sense that energy, and sense that you want me to be here if you're taking the time to teach me, to educate me. And that gives me a certain level of confidence, and that makes me want to step into that space and say, "Oh, I'm gonna give you my absolute best because you're taking time to ensure that I have absolutely everything that I need." So it's only right for me, I feel, that I bring my absolute best and make sure that we're gonna make this happen. I'm going to ensure that I learn all of these things because not only do I want to do a good job for myself, but I want to do a great job for you and the company.

Gene Marks:

Yeah, it's funny. And I had one client I was talking to a few weeks ago who, he hires people wherever he sees them. He runs like a windows and doors company. And he's like, "Listen, I can teach you to sell

windows and doors, but I can't teach you to be smart, or to have the right attitude, or to have energy." And if I find someone like Lex, I'll be like, "All right listen, this guy he's been running track and field all this time, he's not a financial expert." But the stuff that I could teach you, I can teach you. And I can make accommodations. And, in return, I get somebody who's gonna be like a great employee. And, again this conversation is about diversity, will add to the diversity of my workforce, which will benefit my company overall. So, there's a lot in it for me, I guess, is what I'm saying as a business owner.

Lex Gillette:

Totally. And, I mean, it's beautiful because I think that through that interaction, I think that we both are in a space where that blindfold is being removed. And we're able to see that path ahead. And it's just a beautiful type of connection and relationship that can be built between colleagues and whoever.

Gene Marks:

Okay. Well, listen, that offer letter from the Marks Group will be in the mail soon Lex, okay? So keep your eyes [inaudible 00:19:51]. You're going to love I'll on accounting. You think that running track and field is fun. I mean, come on wait 'til you start doing debits and credits for my business, you're going to be just jumping for joy.

Lex Gillette:

Oh I got to do a little bit of math, and things like that in the track world. But, I don't know, accounting is a way different ballgame. And I would not want to be in that space right now.

Gene Marks:

We'll talk, okay? Lex Gillette is a globally recognized Paralympic track and field athlete. He is a author. He is a consultant. He is a public speaker as well. Lex, thank you so much for joining me. And where can we reach you if we want to find you?

Lex Gillette:

Absolutely. lexgillette.com L-E-X G-I-L-L-E-T-T-E.com. And I'm on all social channels. Everything is my name, Lex Gillette.

Gene Marks:

That's great. Thank you. I'll follow you on Twitter. It was great speaking with you. And hope to speak with you again soon. Take care.

Lex Gillette:

Absolutely. Thanks.

Gene Marks:

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Gene Marks:

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Gene Marks:

I'm your host Gene Marks. And thanks for joining us. 'Til next time, take care.

Announcer:

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