

Season 3 | Episode 3

Going Beyond Lip Service in Organizational DEI



Rob Parsons

Manager, Content and Brand
Paychex, Inc.



Joe Gerstandt

Diversity & Inclusion
Consultant
Co-Author of "Social Gravity:
Harnessing the Natural Laws
of Relationships"

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:

Welcome to the PULSE podcast, formally the Paychex HR Leadership Series. We're here to help you keep your finger on the PULSE of HR, by bringing you smart conversations with the thinkers and news makers in our industry. I'm your host, Rob Parsons. I lead the content team here at Paychex, and my goal is to provide you with useful insights and practical information, and hopefully more than a little inspiration.

Rob Parsons:

This episode is a part of a special series we're 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 Ph.D. in public policy and an 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, and I know that firsthand. Thanks for helping out, Thelá.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

My pleasure, Rob. Great to be here today.

Rob Parsons:

Fantastic. Our guest today is Joe Gerstandt. Joe is a leader, helping organizations understand diversity and inclusion. As a keynote speaker and consultant, Joe works with Fortune 500 companies, small nonprofits, and everything in between. Seamlessly interweaving art and science, Joe uses stories and research to illustrate how next generation cultures can flourish both inside and outside the workplace. Joe, welcome to the podcast.

Joe Gerstandt:

Thanks Rob. It's a pleasure to be here with you today and with Dr. Thatch. Happy to be here.

Rob Parsons:

I know when we last talked, you'd mentioned how long you've been doing this work. And it's been a long time, especially compared to how I've arrived at this journey. Can you tell me a bit about your journey and how you got so ahead of the curve?

Joe Gerstandt:

I don't know that I feel like I was ahead of the curve. I feel like it took me a long time in my life to find my way to this work. But I've been doing this work as an external consultant for about 14 years now, and before that I did it internally. I guess my last real job was for a regional healthcare system where I led their efforts around diversity inclusion and cultural competency. Before that I did it in a nonprofit space. So altogether I've been doing D&I work for about 20 years now.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

Joe, so great to have you here today. I'm also curious. I ask this question a lot to my DEI partners because it motivates me, but understanding the personal toll equity where it can take on anyone, why are you so committed to DEI work?

Joe Gerstandt:

I don't know if I have a nice, simple answer to that. I think that's a big, complicated issue, but I think maybe the short version is that it aligns with my values, my aspirations, my beliefs. I think once I discovered it and got some clarity about who I was, this is work that I felt called to do. And I think even doing this work, I'm still a person who benefits from a great deal of privilege. So, I think it's probably a little bit less taxing on me than it is on a lot of other practitioners because I'm not working against racism and sexism and homophobia and experiencing it at the same time. I'm a pretty privileged individual, so I think the resilience and persistence probably isn't as much of a challenge for me as it is for the majority of my peers.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

I appreciate that Joe. It can be pretty exhausting and it's one of those things that kind of sneaks up on you; you don't realize the toll that is taking until you're in the throes of it. So I appreciate that answer and I think that'll help, not only me, but our audience as we continue to do this work. So, speaking about our audience and our HR leaders, in your opinion, what are companies doing right, and what are they doing wrong when they are trying to approach DEI in their organizations?

Joe Gerstandt:

I would say, I feel like there is significantly more organizations doing things right in the past couple of years. I'm not saying every company, every leader has delivered on the promises they were making last summer, but there's definitely a change. There are more ... I think senior leaders especially, that are seriously committed to this work and are doing some of their own work. In the entire time that I've been doing this work, I've never seen this many senior executives talking about systemic racism, talking about white privilege. Those were still kind of fairly divisive ideas in the workplace to five years ago and that's changed pretty significantly. So I think they're being more candid. I think they're being more vulnerable. I think they're being more serious about it. A couple of the big things that I think organizations ... A couple of big blind spots that I still see in organizations are one, around common language.

Joe Gerstandt:

I think we are increasingly gathering together to talk about things like diversity and inclusion and equity. The problem is those things mean a bunch of different things to a bunch of different people. There's a lot of organizations that say big, beautiful things about inclusion, but no one can tell you what it is. And if you can't tell me what it is in simple language, then I don't know what to do with your commitment, and I don't know how you pick your metrics and your strategies and your tactics. And so I think having a common language

and a common narrative, having some clear and concise definitions — I think it's pretty foundational, and it's still pretty rare. Most organizations don't have it. Inclusion is a really popular idea. It's still a vague abstract idea inside most organizations. And it's not super fun, exciting work putting definitions in place, but I think it's incredibly important.

Joe Gerstandt:

And these are big complex topics. They can mean different things to different people. But I think for an organization, whether you're talking about innovation or engagement or inclusion or equity, having a clear and concise definition makes things a little bit easier. The reality is, there are people in the workforce, that when they hear those words, when they hear things like diversity inclusion, equity, what they think is quotas or political correctness or a sneaky political agenda, or we're going to get rid of all the white men. Now, none of those things are remotely true, but someone somewhere has told them that that's what this work is about. One of the ways that you start to get rid of that resistance is you make sure you've got a common language. When we say diversity in this organization, this is exactly what we mean. When we say inclusion, this is what we mean.

Joe Gerstandt:

I think the vast majority of the resistance to this work is misinformed and language is, I think, the most powerful tool for addressing that. The other big disconnect that I see — and it's still pretty significant — is overlooking or being resistant to get to the behavioral component of this work. A lot of organizations ... And we're in a time where a lot of organizations in the past two years have made new or renewed commitment to this work, and most of them do the same kinds of things: diversity councils, employee resource groups, diversity recruiting strategy, put out a statement of commitment, maybe build a formal business case. And all of those things can have value. None of those things on their own really changes the culture. None of those things really changes the way that it feels to be an employee.

Joe Gerstandt:

If you really want to impact the employee experience, if you want to impact how it feels to be an employee, there's no bigger lever for doing that, than by changing the behaviors of the people around that employee, especially their manager. Inclusion is largely a behavioral piece of work. The other stuff is important, the infrastructure and things like that are important, but until you change what individuals and groups are doing, you're not going to change the actual culture. And for some reason, we seem to be reluctant to get to the behavioral piece of this work. And it's really important to get to that piece because that's how we get accountability. Unaccountability is probably one of the biggest ongoing conversations in this work today. We don't know how to hold people accountable, especially managers. Well, if you start setting behavioral expectations, it becomes pretty easy to hold people accountable.

Joe Gerstandt:

Are they doing those things or not? It also makes it a little bit easier for you to make sure that you're hiring and promoting the right people. There's organizations that are trying to do a better job of hiring a diverse workforce. There's not a lot of organizations that are being intentional about also making sure that we're hiring and promoting people who are willing and able to behave and lead in inclusive ways. That requires us to talk about specific behaviors and specific practices. I think the behavioral piece is kind of a pretty important inflection point in this career. I've worked with client companies — and you all have probably seen this in your experience — I've worked with companies that spend two or three years building infrastructure, changing policy and building employee resource groups and saying big, profound things and giving money to the community and they've got a long list of activities to point to — and they might even be getting awards — but if you'd go talk to the employees, they don't feel any more or less included than they did two or three years earlier.

Joe Gerstandt:

You still haven't changed the culture. You still haven't changed the way that people are interacting with each other. And like, changing behaviors is a very different body of work than starting employee resource groups. It's a profoundly different body of work, and it's more difficult and it requires different levels of commitment. But I think it's probably the most important aspect of this work. Sorry, that was a long rambling answer. No, good question.

Rob Parsons:

I wanted to jump in there about 23 times Joe, but you provided so much there and it's really... Our last guest was Stacy Gordon who gave us this great framework for understanding this - this idea of awareness and then alignment and then action, and then advocacy. And your two points really, it fell right into that so nice. That idea about a common language ... I can't think of a better way to get alignment and get people on the same page. And then the idea of real action, not just programs, not just-- like you said, it's good and they're doing it, and they're winning awards, but really, changing behaviors. And I love the idea of accountability. That's one of our own Paychex's corporate values. So important. Can we dig into that a little more deeply? What can an HR leader do to make people change their behaviors?

Joe Gerstandt:

Well, I think one of the things an HR leader can do is start identifying for that organization, what are inclusive behaviors for us? What kinds of inclusive behaviors do we want in our employees? What kinds of inclusive behaviors and practices do we want among our leaders? And you probably can't start by rolling out a whole comprehensive competency model but start somewhere. Identify two or three or four things, and then you start to put those out there as expectations. You start to write them into job descriptions. You start to ask questions about those things in hiring interviews. You start to build those things into performance evaluations and making sure that you're giving people the training and support that they need to integrate and deploy those new behaviors, in those new practices. I generally prioritize starting with leaders. I think the longer I do this work tomorrow, I think it needs to start at the very top of the organization, and then those folks can help you cascade and roll that down and they can play an active role in the accountability piece.

Joe Gerstandt:

But there's a lot of leaders today that will say, that will be quick to say, "Yes, I'm an inclusive leader", but if you ask them, "What does it look like? How does it show up in your behavior? What is it that you deliberately proactively do to be inclusive?" Most of them can't answer that. They're talking about their intentions. They're talking about what kind of person they believe that they are. They're not talking about behaviors. So, setting specific behavioral expectations is the first step in being able to hold people accountable. And some of it's fairly small stuff. Are you doing things to educate yourself and your peers on bias? What kinds of things are you doing to build an increased psychological safety on your team?

Joe Gerstandt:

What kinds of things do you do to make sure that you're not being a bystander? What kinds of things do you do to bring diversity into your network of relationships? Even some of those are fairly small things, but they make sure that people are actively engaged in the work, in educating themselves, and doing a better job of creating a more inclusive container, especially on the team level. A lot of leaders still think of this work as an HR project. And HR certainly has a unique role to play in it, but the work of inclusion is more about leadership than it is about anything else. Leaders have a central and unique role to play, especially on the team level. On that level, they own inclusion. Now there is no bigger variable for how inclusive things are on a team level than the way that that leader leads.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

In your experience, what has been the most effective conversations or instruction that you've given leaders where you've actually seen them turn around and really change and course-direct how they approach diversity equity and inclusion? Basically, what have you found to motivate leaders to actually own diversity equity and inclusion and change the way they operate?

Joe Gerstandt:

And I use that exact language, Dr. Thatch. I talk to them about; they've got to take personal ownership. Your organizations can be as inclusive as your leaders decide that it's going to be. I think when it comes to effective behavior change — I personally believe that if you want sincere, sustained behavior change, there's a certain amount of identity change required. People have to come to see the world and themselves in a little bit of a different way. And I think the two tools that I use for that are, A) making them reflect on their own journey and their own experience. And I can come back and talk a little bit about that because I share my own journey as someone who 30 years ago probably would've rolled my eyes at what I do for a living. I share my own journey of kind of where I came from and what things changed along the way.

Joe Gerstandt:

And then I also think it's important to expose them to stories of others. Business cases are great. In the business case for diversity inclusion — it's big and impressive. I don't think it motivates individual behavior. I think leaders have to figure out their own connection to this work, their own commitment. They need to be able to stand up in front of their peers and say, "This is why this work matters to me as an individual," whether that's my faith or my core values or some personal experience. But in my experience, two valuable things for cracking people's paradigms open, is making them reflect on their own journey and share some of that journey. Where did you grow up? What kinds of things did you learn growing up about people like you, about people different from you? What kind of experiences did you have with people?

Joe Gerstandt:

What kinds of things have changed along the way? And exposing them to the stories of others. The fact is, especially for white male leaders in the workplace, there are things that happen in their workplace that they're not aware of because it doesn't happen to them. Not everybody is heard and seen and valued and treated the same way that they are. Some of those folks need to be exposed to those stories to realize that. And I've seen that also be something that really can change a person's perspective. When they hear someone that they know and trust and respect talking about some of the challenges that they're bumping up against the workplace, sometimes that's the thing that needs to happen. There was a, I believe it was a Harvard Business Review article that talked about how the male leaders that are the greatest advocates for gender equity in the workplace are male leaders that have young daughters.

Joe Gerstandt:

Right? They have - they have a personal connection, and we can say it shouldn't take that, and maybe it shouldn't take that, but it is what it is. Let's work with what works. I think it's so critical to help leaders. And I think you've got to give them some safety and you've got to give them some time and you've got to push them a little bit but help them figure out what their personal commitment to this work is, and then invite them to make some specific and public commitments. That's the approach that I take. And I don't think you ... Everybody's in a different place and we're all moving at a different pace, but I think the more we can invite people, regardless of where they're at today, to be on that journey, and take some steps forward, I think there's a lot of opportunity there and a lot of potential there.

Rob Parsons:

Joe we're at time. And I feel like there's a lot more to talk about here. Do you mind joining us for another episode and we can continue this conversation?

Joe Gerstandt:

Not at all. Be happy to.

Rob Parsons:

That's fantastic. I really appreciate that because I know Thelá's got more questions. I know there's a lot more to talk about here. Thank you so much for joining the podcast today.

Joe Gerstandt:

My pleasure.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

Thank you, Joe.

Rob Parsons:

And thank you to our listeners. I encourage you all to visit Joe's website, joegerstandt.com. There you can learn more about what Joe does, access resources he's made available, buy his book, "Social Gravity: Harnessing the Natural Laws of Relationships," and you can even book him for your own company training or event. Thank you all once again, and please stay happy and healthy.

Announcer:

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