

## World Changers – The podcast

### Ep.5 The great awakening



#### Elle Bradley-Cox

Welcome to world changers, a podcast exploring the trends making an enduring mark on our world of work, and how business leaders, HR teams and internal communicators can stay one step ahead.

Switched on, tuned in, politically aware, woke. Every generation has its own expression for activism. Whatever you call it, 2020 was one of those landmark turbulent years when it took an angry and bloody leap forwards, being knocked down made us wake up. A year on from the death of George Floyd and in the wake of Sarah Everard's murder, political scandals, social unrest, and a burgeoning climate crisis, where black minority and indigenous communities are disproportionately affected, how much has really changed?

We may be louder at vocalising the injustice as we see in the world, but it doesn't stop them happening. And, as the slow pace of change and reform causes our frustrations to mount, we often look to our employers, hoping to see them throw their considerable power and weight behind the causes we care about. Too often they're found wanting.

I actually chose this theme as my World Changer for our 2021 report. And so, I'm turning the podcast mic back on myself - how very meta - ably assisted by a couple of super-passionate colleagues to answer the question: can we really ban politics from the factory floor? And should we keep the status quo as we pretend to embrace all views, or no views at all, whatever we decide internal communicators are in the seat of power?

Later in this episode, I chat with Sally Bucknell, director of diversity and inclusiveness at EY to get her thoughts on amplifying social justice in the workplace. But before that, my colleague Russ, an inclusion enthusiast and Jacey, a sustainability maven, joined to talk to me about the groundswell of activism and just how involved employers should be. Guys, thank you so much for joining me.

So, we're living in what feels like incredibly emotionally, politically charged times. And companies have jumped on the bandwagon, adding a black square for Black Lives Matter and rainbow-washed the life out of their brands at the so-called right time, only to forget, again, when the moments passed. With so much going on in the world, all our boundaries are blurring. What's the impact this is having in the workplace?

**Russ Norton**

I think for me, the themes that I'm seeing are back to this mounting sense of frustration, where maybe what you hear on the news, and what you see on your social media feeds, and what you gather from your conversation with your teams is still not being translated into action. Things aren't changing, money is not being spent.

So there's this really strange 'say/do' gap between the conversations that we're having, and we're getting used to having. Even though they still feel a bit uncomfortable we're getting more and more used to having these conversations about these topics in general. But still, the change is painfully slow, like wading through treacle. And I think that the outcome is just this sense of frustration.

And I suppose the interesting next step, then, is that when you start to apply that frustration. There's a lot of articles online about the great post-pandemic resignation, as people hand their notice in and look for greener grass elsewhere, that perhaps that grass isn't that green. It's this kind of moment of reevaluation and reassessment of 'are my frustrations founded?'

**Jacey Lamerton**

Yeah, I agree. There's a real risk of such a split in our workforces from the people that have been at home furloughed, kind of "safely" working from home and people that have been out on the front line, at times when we didn't even know what COVID really was. That must have been so scary for people - she says, talking as one of those people that sat nicely at home at a desk! There's that disconnect already. And then, when you add in what you've so rightly said, Russ, that frustration, it points to trouble for me.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

I think so too. You've got two sides of frustration, really, because we're quite polarised. You've got the person who all of this has been 'done to', in one camp. Maybe you got a person in the middle who's like, "I want to do more, you know what I'm doing and I want to try" and then you've got a person who is like, "why should I do more? Tell it to me straight." And it's a real kind of disconnect.

Because we're so polarized, because it's so intense, for me it leaves that bit of the 'getting it wrong' and the cancel culture that comes with that. It's very uncomfortable for the middle camp, who are trying their best but are almost inactive because that they're a bit scared at the moment.

**Russ Norton**

Totally. We know that people are at capacity. We hear it all the time. Work/life balance has gone out the door, workload is so intense right now, people have got a negative brain space to dedicate to wellbeing, to diversity, to inclusivity, to sustainability. And so, all these topics are fighting for such a limited attention span.

And certainly, coming back to offices and workplaces is not going to create the space for that. Those watercooler conversations might start to happen. But unless there is a real concerted effort to carve out some time, and some brain space to dedicate to these topics, they just sort of mull around and kerplunk through your own brain and don't have an outlet. And I think it's one of our roles as internal communicators to push for that brain space. And that time to be carved out and dedicated to this. It's an investment. But it's an essential investment because it won't happen otherwise.

**Jacey Lamerton**

That's so interesting. What gets lost in the communication is the 'why' we're doing this. It doesn't get through because the person, who it's being done to, as you say, Elle, is thinking, "I don't even know if I'm going to have a job next week. I don't care about the planet in 10 years' time." Of course, they do. But they haven't got the brain space to look at it. We've all got to look at what's immediately in front of our faces, which is "can I feed the kids next month?"

### **Russ Norton**

I'm very careful about how I speak about these issues, because I can't speak to the experience of people of colour. I can't speak to the experience of women. But when we had our conversation about gender equality, and misogyny in the workplace, my kind of real aha moment was just how accepted it was. And I sort of knew that sexism prevailed, and that we lived in a predominantly white male system, but I hadn't really come to terms with that. You just expect it, you're prepared for it. You've already thought through your escape plans and your tactics for how you're going to tackle it when it arises. Not if it arises. And that was a real wake up call for me and that, that 'why' wouldn't have settled in my brain had we not really dedicated the time to having that conversation and sharing those stories.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

The other thing is, for the people who are affected by it, they're sort of like: "can't you see it?" or "Actually, I'm sort of 'over' talking about this. I've lived through it my whole life." So, the 'why' is so obvious to them. There's sort of like an impatience. I certainly sometimes feel it when thinking about sexism and people asked me why. But with my IC hat on I'm absolutely in the camp of the guys on the right, who are like, just give me a reason to care, because at the moment, I can't see what you're all banging on about."

### **Jacey Lamerton**

And sometimes it's hard to articulate that because it is so accepted. I find it hard to even know what I'm thinking about things with like that. That's why I think it starts with listening to people and it really does have to be a space. It can't be "come and tell me what's troubling you" because that starts from nowhere, doesn't it? And if what you're worried about is job security, as I say, just saying, "oh, come and talk to us about that", well, you're not going to do that, are you? You need to be asked the right questions, the leading questions and before you then start adding things that are extra value on top of that.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

And then I think that comes back to the employer wanting to care and making this happen. So, I want to talk a little bit about the Basecamp furore and its ensuing backlash. Russ, could you just give us a bit of a flavour of what happened?

### **Russ Norton**

Yeah, for sure. Basecamp are a tech company who do project management software. They're only 57 people, but the CEO decided to announce six new policies externally first. And these were policies such as 'no more political discussion on internal platforms' - it doesn't serve us well. And 'we're not going to have committees anymore'. We're going to disband our committees, including 20 of the 57 people who had stepped up to volunteer to form a diversity, inclusion and belonging committee.

The furore was enormous, both internally the impact to colleagues was humungous, but also the reaction externally as extraordinary to see the critique and to see people go. "really? Like, now, in this day and age? In

what we assume to be this incredibly woke culture, is that really your stance? Is that really what you're going for?" The end outcome has been that 20 of those 57 people, I believe, have handed in their notice and accepted severance packages, which is a third of your employee base going "I just cannot tolerate living and working in this environment."

And bear in mind that to hand your notice in really is a privilege, to feel brave enough as Jacey said around job security to feel brave enough to hand your notice and find a job elsewhere. That really is a privilege because it suggests having savings in the bank it suggests, maybe having a partner who also earns an income. There may well be people who are still stuck in that culture of feeling miserable feeling like they don't have a voice. I think from the furore that first kicked off, where the critique was quite rightly justified, to now think about this kind of onward, ripple effect is incredible, really.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

Do you think Basecamp's fear was the fear of attack from within? And is that even justified?

### **Russ Norton**

I think so. I think it's that fear of, certainly in the ensuing articles that I've read, and the kind of the post reviews, there's that fear of cancelled culture. There's that fear of debate that doesn't go anywhere. "I'm upset," "I'm also upset." "Great, now, we're both upset." I do think that employers need to embark on these conversations with the absolute intent to learn and improve and change them stuff. Because why wouldn't they?

The other interesting point that's starting to emerge now is that fundamentally, we operate in a capitalist society, our function is growth and wealth accumulation. And if that is our ultimate function, then people will never win within that process. There are some organisations who really do practice what they preach, and they really do lead with people, lead with culture, lead with wellbeing. The problem is so much of diversity, inclusion, sustainability, wellbeing is almost offered as a: "we're going to carry on, on our capitalist growth mission and try and accumulate as much wealth as possible. But to temper your feelings towards this will offer you a percentage back, and it's going to be a tiny percentage, but it'll satisfy our stakeholders, and we sleep at night, safe in the knowledge that our shareholders are happy, and our employees don't really have a great deal of choice."

I do think that ultimately, when, when it comes down to money, and this capitalist system in which we operate, we need to be realistic about how far we can expect change to push and how much employee activism it will take to generate change, if we want that change to happen

### **Jacey Lamerton**

So true. And especially in the sustainability sphere, we see and hear in a lot of our CSR now, all these sustainability and responsibility things. And a lot of that is either because it's been mandated by government, or because increasingly, the only way to get your hands on any funding money is to get your hands on a green loan or business support. So that's actually kind of top down, if it's mandated by government, is even above the leaders of the company.

But, you know, this idea of 'no politics' is so mad, Where do you draw the line? I mean, everything's politics, isn't it? Surely they're not saying that they're not going to do a gender pay survey? I suppose they're too small to need to do one. But you know, those things and equal employment opportunities have been around for so long that we do a completely consider them to be part of businesses remit. It just seems to be slow, like you say, to

get people to accept that. And maybe there is a more of a debate to be had about that as to whether that really is the role of business, or whether it is, as you say, it's just capitalism and wealth accumulation.

### **Russ Norton**

And I think what's unique now is this kind of multi generational workforce. And I don't mean age generations, I just mean kind of culturally and globally aware generations. You've got people coming into workplaces with preset expectations, almost feeling, like a post-sustainability perspective, a post-diversity perspective, where they just expect it as the norm. You've got what I would call, 'our generation' of people who have seen it change, we've grown up in amongst the change and know what it used to be like, and know how recently things used to be very different. They have seen technology and globalisation come into the fore in seeing the rise of CSR, seeing the rise of diversity and inclusion.

And then you've got the very top leaders of large organisations who are still predominantly white, predominantly male, predominantly able bodied, predominantly older. And so, there is this kind of responsibility, perhaps on internal comms teams, to cater for both audiences and allow that flow of information, allow that new generation of folks to understand why it requires a successful business to create the funds to invest in those things that they care about and protect their jobs and their futures. But also persuade the folks at the top that the concerns of the folks coming in are entirely valid and worth spending money on. And so, you as maybe an IC function are kind of stuck in the middle of two very vocal, very determined groups of people. And that's a pattern that I see across lots and lots of large organisations.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

I really want to talk about generations and activism as part of this because I think we sort of think now, to your point, that Gen Z is all about making the change happen. But then the kids always think they did everything first! Is there a bit of a generational culture clash then between these young activists thinking that actually people over a certain age are just beyond caring because they're old, they're retired, they're on their way to retirement or they made their money and therefore they don't care. Jacey, tell me about this.

### **Jacey Lamerton**

I know because I'm 51! My Mum's generation marched to Aldermaston, and they burned their bras, and they brought in the first wave of feminism. And, you know, I mean, you could go back, back and back, can't you? There was the peasants revolt! But as you say, everybody thinks they've done everything first.

I feel like all the activism that there was in the 60s, which I don't remember, and the 70s and 80s, that I do remember, there was just such a groundswell, and people were much more likely to take to the streets and protest. I've protested, and done direct action things so many times, and I didn't see that in younger people so much, until the Extinction Rebellion people came along. And then that's a direct action again, and oh, my God, are people shocked about that!

There was fighting in the street against the black shirts before the war and stuff, so it does go back. But I don't know. It's not so much a generational thing. It's an attitudinal thing. And, and maybe some of those people that are, let's face it, my generation in their 50s, and maybe into their 60s are going to be in those positions of power. Maybe they've had it ground out of them? Or maybe they're so focused on that purpose there is to make money for that company, that the politics is something that you do outside of work, that's something else. And certainly for me, while I've taken to the streets for, you know, animal rights, and to support Palestine and things

like that, I don't really take that into work, interestingly enough, and I do see them as separate. So, I wonder if that's where the differences is, that disconnect?

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

I'm thinking about those people who are kind of very, very comfortable, at home. I'm thinking about my parent's generation, actually. And I think I sometimes excuse their behaviour and say they're all the products of that generation, they don't know. And it's up to me to tell them, but they're a bloody nightmare when I do tell them. But I know that's not a universal experience for everyone else, because I know exactly to your point Jacey that there are people who have been and protested who care who give a damn about this stuff. Part of me thinks I'm in the wrong for excusing them really. I just think it's a really interesting question. When you get to a certain age, at what point do you not change? Or do you not want to listen? And is that the person? Is that the generation? Is that my expectations on them? What do you think?

### **Russ Norton**

I'm interested because I don't think it's a generational thing, either. And speaking as my own perspective, as a gay man, one thing that really struck me from the kind of leadership courses that I've been lucky enough to attend with the likes of Stonewall was this idea that you have a work persona and a home persona, that those are two different people, but those people can learn from each other.

It's almost like having a drag persona or having a character that you play in order to get on at work. I suppose that originates from the times when it wasn't safe to be yourself in the workplace. So, you have to assimilate, you have to hide or edit yourselves. I see women doing this, adopting what I would describe as masculine traits in order to get on at work and get on in certain organisations. And you could say, that's a great thing for female empowerment. But you could also say it's kind of reinforcing a stereotype of what a successful leader looks like, which is the male kind of archetype.

I think it's going to take the cultural acceptance to change first on the outside. And then for people to kind of wake up to the importance of these things on the outside and then go "crikey, is my work persona, actually completely at odds with my outside persona? And how much of that do I need to bring into work and stop editing myself to fit into the culture in which I find myself? How brave am I willing to be to be a vocal voice of dissent and say, perhaps we could do something different here?"

### **Jacey Lamerton**

I think as well, we kind of risk forgetting that actually, there's a lot of politics going on at a very senior level isn't there? And when you think about lobbyists and that you know that that level of activity that most of us don't even know is going on. I made a list: Westfield Shopping Centre, Selfridges Bicester Village, Next, JCB, Boden, Richer Sounds, Microsoft, Flamingo Land, National Express, they're all Tory party donors.

Tony and Guy, Bet365, Vitabiotics, and, you know, when you go into a shop and you see those weird videos playing of inventions and it's JLM - Labour Party donors. Now it's like, how many people know about that? And what's the purpose behind that you want to ask, don't you? And that stuff is all about politics. It's all about activism in its absolute sense. We don't even know it goes on.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

At the top of the podcast, I say internal comms is in the seat of power with this. And I do believe that because I think we tap into the fact that we know employees have this real sense of distrust when we're not honest.

We just see it don't we in everything we do. And when it feels very performative. How do we make sure that what we do is also what we say if we if we can't, you know, like Jacey said, we can't control that lobbying, for example, but how can we try and be as authentic as we can be to make our messages hit home?

### **Russ Norton**

I guess if I was going to answer that, I would say that we need to know our audience. And we need to be very switched on to the mistakes that others have made. What I love about the TikTok generation, the meme generation, is that their activism comes through humour and mickey-taking. I feel like, those are lessons that we can learn in terms of if your people are burnt out and exhausted and at maximum capacity, and you offer lunchtime yoga, that you're going to get teased, because that's what the kids are teasing people about on TikTok and Instagram these days. I think it's important for internal comms teams to be switched on to those platforms and those attitudes, and know the pitfalls that they're we're walking into and be ready to go. By all means, organise that lunchtime yoga, but know that the unintended consequences might be greater cynicism and mockery.

### **Jacey Lamerton**

Exactly, you've got to know those people, you've got to have your people on the frontline, on the shopfloor, that you can go and talk to, and you can get a real honest sense of, of how things are landing, what people are talking about, and take the ego out of it, and be strong enough to report that back upwards and say, "No, this isn't going to land. I suggest we do it like this, or I suggest we'll leave it until we've addressed this problem."

I think that's really important. To go to people, "my doors always open" just isn't good enough. You have to go to people, and talk to them, and ask those proper questions. And also, I think we need to stop this idea that everybody has to have a say about something. Somebody important dies and suddenly, we're all some kind of world leader saying "RIP so and so" on Facebook, as if we're Barack Obama or something. It's ridiculous. But also, with topics as well, all these businesses felt they had to put a black square on their socials last summer. But then what's happened? Don't feel pressured to put the black square, if that's not the hill you're going to die on. Just pick some things that you're going to stand for and do them really, really well.

Pick a couple of things to go big on. And that's fine. Because when you look at the companies that are really known for their purpose, people like Patagonia and people that we work with, like the Co-op, they're just known for the things that they do. Nobody expects them to be great at the other things, but they're revered because of the things they do, they do them really well.

### **Russ Norton**

And activism and change can happen at different scales. Black Lives Matter, and the MeToo movement were maximum volume moments in time, but then the Stop Asian Hate campaign came along. And all those brands, as you say, that put the black square on Instagram, now kind of question "should we have supported the Asian community as well as the black community?" When does it end? How many other communities are there out there that we're expected to be supportive of? Actually, the answer is, well, if you genuinely care, all of them,

and if you don't genuinely care, then perhaps you shouldn't have participated in in the first one. Because ultimately, silence is compliance.

But that speaks volumes, if you didn't have a genuine voice, when those issues were absolute maximum volume, perhaps you weren't qualified to have any voice at all. And I do think that what all of this activism should generate, as Jacey is saying, is listening is rather than speaking and drowning out the voices of the people that really matter. It's just listening, asking questions, "what does it really feel like? How are you doing?" I think that the time has come for real, genuine listening with intent,

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

I sort of talked a little bit at the top of the podcast about how I think it is part of the role as bigger businesses to play into this because, ultimately, governments don't have enough money. They need corporates to help. And so I guess, in a way, we're part of the resolution to some of these problems.

But I think your point is important Russ. It's about listening first. Once you've done that listening and you found the causes that are truly important to you as a purposeful business, do you truly believe that that then leads into better business performance later down the line?

### **Russ Norton**

Absolutely. And I think going into any of that purpose driven, kind of organisational design and not really caring will have a net worse impact in the long term. Because, it's a bit like the VW emissions scandal, that's really scarring.

If you go out there and say "we are the greenest possible, we are the most inclusive ever. We're so switched on", and super-duper lovey-dovey, but then all your employees say like, "oh, crikey, no, all they care about is cash and all they care about is fiddling in the numbers", that's gonna have a worst impact in the long term.

Of course, it's about balance. And I think they're getting the balance, right. The balance of sustainability, inclusivity, listening, feedback, acting on feedback, and then channelling it into optimising your workplace. That's what brings those results. I don't think it's just doing the do or saying the say. It's actually listening, changing, evolving, adapting, constantly improving. That's where the optimization comes from, in my view.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

Well, thank you, both of you, so much for joining me today. Really interesting conversation and I hope our listeners get a lot out of it. I certainly did think so. Thank you.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

Sally Bucknell is a thought leader and an agent for change on the diversity and inclusion agenda. And it's her job to advise the leadership team at global professional services firm EY on how to accelerate parity in the workplace. Sally's work on diversity and inclusion is pioneering, its core to the firm strategy. And Sally is at the heart of driving this with a clear passion for equality and making sure that the firm is representative. What does she think about the Great Awakening last year? Well, I'm going to put it to her. Sally, thank you so much for joining me.

### **Sally Bucknell**



You're welcome. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

So, turbulence in last 18 months has really brought activism to the fore, both inside and outside the workplace. I mean, gut reaction, is this a good thing?'

**Sally Bucknell**

So it's interesting that you use the word activism. Yes, it is a good thing. I think it has provoked conversations that were too uncomfortable to have before but are impossible to avoid now. It has prompted the leaders to consider the challenges around inclusiveness, and things like insiders and outsiders to the organisation, from a more emotional standpoint, rather than from an objective leadership standpoint.

And it's connected them therefore, on a way that it hasn't before. So it's certainly, I was going to say, awakened a lot of discussion, but I'm trying to use the woke word because it hasn't really done that, it's made us more curious and more interested to understand the issues in a way that perhaps as an organisation we felt wasn't our remit to do before.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

It's really interesting. And I note you picked up my word activism. But I love 'curiosity'. I think that's a really good way of framing it. Well, I was going to ask, are you an activist? Have you been an activist? Do you think there's a place for activism at work, maybe we will reframe it to curiosity and are any topics really off limits?

**Sally Bucknell**

I'm going to come back to your activist points, it's a good word. I quite often say that to be a good D&I, person, or somebody who provokes change in this area, you need to be a bit of activist, a bit of an advocate and a lot of change maker. And I think if you're too much in any one of those, I don't think you are as effective as if you can move between the three. Activists perhaps suggest that you're aligned to a particular cause. And you have a particular focus and a particular priority, and maybe in a role in an organisation, there's a lot of priorities in this space. So to be too wedded to one can be problematic at times. If you can advocate for all priorities, and still have some space for your activism, that's great.

But then if you can really remove yourself one step even more and think, well, how does change happen around here? And what are the levers of power and the levers of influence and the levers of change, then that's when you can really start to make the rubber hit the road, I think. So you do need a bit of activism, but you need it to be in a healthy balance with the other two. So I'm not unhappy with your choice of the word at all.

Is there anything off limits? I don't think so. But I think organisations are careful around politics and diversity and inclusiveness. And I think you can inadvertently take a side. And that perhaps plays out when there's particular conflicts between two underrepresented groups. And you may want to support one part of your community and inadvertently, therefore, diminish the experience of another part. And that is something in this very complex world that can happen. So I don't think it's off limits.

But I think you have to be very tuned in to the nuance of some of the phrases that are used some of the positions that are taken, and therefore the implications for others, we are talking about people's identity and things that matter, right to the core of who they are. And words and language matters. As I said, I don't think it's

off limits. But I think we have to be very skilful, and considerate of all of the differences when we take a position on something,

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

I think you're right, I actually think that we can be quite choice in the channels or communication streams we use to help that. So if you were, for example, writing a story about somebody's identity, but there were many different inflections of that identity, actually, maybe a story isn't the right channel for it. Maybe it's a podcast, and a debate between several members of that community?

**Sally Bucknell**

Working on the belonging campaign and the storytelling campaign that you brought to us has really made me think about this, because I do agree, I think the debate and the discussion is so healthy, I think if we can get people to talk about the story from their position, and the impact it has on them, and those around them and their world and get others to listen and be curious is really important. But I think the storytelling has also got a place in this medium.

So I'm not sure you're right in saying that it's perhaps not the right place. Because what I hear you say when you ask about stories is what do you want us to know about you? And what do you want to tell us that we perhaps can't see or can't hear routinely and giving people the space to tell their story lets them share their difference and the impact and the things we can learn from as an organisation, as a change agent that perhaps we wouldn't ordinarily uncover. We're a big accountancy firm, and we rely on data. And we rely on analytics, and we rely on measuring gaps and outcomes. But hearing it from somebody's heart and somebody's voice in the way we have done through the medium of storytelling has really given us a different way to look at the problem. So it's been really powerful.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

I guess, thinking about this sort of activism at work, particularly in the past 18 months, like you said before you perhaps wouldn't have come to this before. Has it affected or, or even expanded your remit? And what you think about when you're planning for your people?

**Sally Bucknell**

Oh my goodness, Elle. This has always been a busy job. We've got 17,000 employees, if you look at just the EY in the firm, and we've got, you know, 300,000 or more than that, I think globally, and we have so many different communities and worlds colliding in our workplace and perspectives to include that it's always been a busy job.

But over the last 18 months, a real success has been that inclusion has been at the top of everybody's agenda, and how do we really make a difference, rather than how do we superficially make ourselves feel good about the difference that's been achieved, is now the question on everyone's lips. We're spending more and more time understanding the lived experience, but understanding all the cultural nuances that are happening, all the behaviours and preferences that go on in the organisation, that means some people feel they belong here and others don't. And it's got more and more complicated and more difficult to deliver to everything.

If I'm perfectly honest, I sometimes feel like saying, we've been working on this for a long time. We don't need to start from scratch. And we've got a lot of people coming along, saying the world of D&I started a year ago, isn't it now, with George Floyd and the firm is now working on this agenda. But we really have been determined

to make EY more diverse and more inclusive for a long time. I've been in the role for about seven years. But the D&I function and our work has been going on for at least 10 years, and we've made great progress. It's quite difficult when people say yes, but my lived experience still isn't good enough, and therefore the whole firm is wrong. And you know, as a human being you just bridle, you react a little bit against that. And I sometimes find myself getting a bit defensive.

And I think the important thing is to say, just listen, what is it that they're experiencing that means the gap is still there, and every experience is valid. But generally, we're making great progress. And this has accelerated the pressure on all of our people to be even more inclusive. And so that can only be a good thing.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

Yeah, I think you're right. And it's so interesting. You talk about the gaps there, because I did want to talk about that. So I think we're all at different stages of engagement. You know, you've got the people having it done to them, I suppose, and are feeling it and are feeling frustrated that other people don't see what they see. And then you've got the people in the middle who desperately want to help but they're a bit, sort of, stuck in the treacle and don't know what to do. They're listening. But then what's next? And you've got the other people on this side like, 'Well, why is it my problem?' And I'm interested, are those groups equally split at EY? Does one group much outweigh the other? And how are you converting the people who think it isn't their problem?

### **Sally Bucknell**

I think the short answer to your question is I think we are fairly equally split. I think one of the successes we've had recently but also it's an ongoing challenge with diversity and inclusiveness is the more you talk about diversity, the people who don't consider themselves diverse, think, okay, I can tune out now because this conversation is going to help others, not me. And let's be honest, you're more likely to say that if you're a white man, or you think they don't really mean me, because they're talking about women, or they're talking about ethnic minorities, you know, people with different sexual orientation if they're straight, but they're not really talking about anyone who's me, anyone who's in the majority.

And I think we're now talking a lot more about the fact that the difference is more a difference from a bigger norm than a demographic norm. So it could be different from somebody who, in our workplace, for example, extroverts tend to win out here because a lot of our leadership is very extrovert. Or people who work very long hours, uncomplainingly, and willingly because work is the most important to them in their lives, and they don't have anything else like carers or families or hobbies or side hustles that require them to spend more time on it. And there are many white men who are introverts, and there are many white men who want to balance their lives differently than what we call the sort of 'success stereotype' at EY. So the more we talk about it like that, that difference isn't just a demographic difference. It's a difference from a norm that seems to get on better here than other people. So, okay, so I would like to learn how to get on better here without having to conform to that norm, and we get more men involved.

But we also have 31 employee communities under our six networks, and about half of our employees belong to a network or a community. And there is definitely that half of the population who are more interested and more engaged in this conversation than those who aren't involved in networks. So there is a split in terms of engagement. One of the key pieces, of course, is that we need to make this conversation move into the space that does matter to all our employees. And that is their relationships with clients and their everyday working.

They said, when we talk about being inclusive on a team, or when we talk about being inclusive and who you select for engagements, then all of our people pay attention to that.

And also when our clients say to us, if you're going to propose for this work or tender for this work, it's important to us that you bring diversity and inclusion demonstrably to us that our people sit up and pay attention to it. So the more we can have this conversation in that client space, rather than back in the office, then the more effective and the more inclusive the conversation becomes of all of our people.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

It's brilliant that your clients are now saying this to you. Is that a recent change?

**Sally Bucknell**

It probably was happening before a year ago. It's accelerated in the last year. There have always been some organisations who are ahead of this; I'll call out you know, the organisations who have focused on social responsibility. And particularly it's moved a little bit from 'we would like visible diversity so when you show up don't bring five white men to the pitch'. And there's also some client sectors who particularly are more diverse, you know, perhaps with female-led organisations. So we're back to demographic diversity here who have been calling for that more. Now, the conversation's got more sophisticated.

So they want to know how we are bringing inclusion to life, and how when we show up with a diverse team how we make sure that all those diverse perspectives are brought to a conversation, so they get the benefit of different viewpoints and different perspectives to the work that we deliver, and therefore get more value from us. And that's a much more sophisticated conversation than 'who's walking through the door?'

So we are getting a lot more of that it is massively variable, hugely variable. Public sector is exceptionally good at it in the UK, they really do hold us to account in terms of diversity. There are some global organisations who interestingly find it more difficult to talk about diversity. And I think that's because a minority group is very different around the world and some protected characteristics that we respect in the UK and the West, frankly, sexual orientation, it's unlawful in some countries to talk about or to be homosexual or not heterosexual. So sometimes I think organisations get a bit concerned about what to talk about and what they can talk about if they're global. And so say nothing. But that is generally changing. I think.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

So, so interesting. And it sounds like since the pandemic hit, you know, that there has just been so much change happening in workplaces, it almost sounds like you've had no trouble in keeping up the momentum, because you have got this very engaged population?

**Sally Bucknell**

Sounds like it's perfect here, doesn't it? We have gone a long way to go on our journey, a long, long way to go on our journey, I'm in the very privileged position of talking a lot to people who care a lot about this agenda.

So I can tell you lots of stories about the good that's happening. I imagine if you walk around our workplace, you can speak to a lot of people who don't feel it yet. So we are nowhere near through on that journey. But one thing that the pandemic has done is really, I mean, we were fantastic. We moved to home working overnight. And our leadership started off with this drumbeat saying, 'Oh, it's great. We're all working at home now, look at

us all in the same boat'. And then our voices came out. And again, through our belonging campaign and our storytelling campaign, people said, actually, I'm sitting on my bed all day in my one room, or I'm at the same time caring for my isolating family members, or I live completely on my own. And I'm new to this country, or I'm having to go back in the closet at home, because I'm at home with my parents, and they don't know this part of my identity or whatever that part of your identity might be. And we suddenly realised that we're not all inhabiting the firm, and our workplace in the same way. And that was a real eye opener. And so at that time, we started to do a number of things, we started to do drop-in sessions for people to chat about the particular problems and meet others who are going through the same thing. We improved our support and mental health, physical health, connection support and toolkits for our employees, we looked harder at accessibility features for those with different abilities, the pandemic accelerated a lot of the infrastructure that we needed to make the workplace more inclusive. And there's no intention of going backwards on that.

And in fact, we realised that we probably won't be going back to work in quite the same way, there'll be people who won't be sitting in the physical office workplace in the majority of their time like they used to. So all of that infrastructure and support doesn't go away when we change the physical location of where we work; those differences still persist for our people. So it accelerated it. And it's continuing on an upward trajectory of support.

It's one of those things, the more you do, the more gaps that you realise there are. We can have as many policies, for example, about making everything accessible or making sure that audio equipment's switched on for people making sure that subtitles appear for other groups, making sure that the right equipment's available, but it's the practice and the execution of those that we need to keep a finger on the pedal on. So how do people escalate things when it doesn't happen? How do we make sure that people comply and understand the policies and the behaviours that we want?

We think we've got a lot of the infrastructure in place. It's just the behaviours that we need to continue to work on as people move again, perhaps to a new way of working. I think the pandemic actually improved our momentum. And I think now we need to make sure we don't go back to normal. And undo it. At the moment I'm not getting any sense that we are going to undo anything but is a good watch that we need to keep.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

When you were talking at the beginning there about how actually everyone was in the same boat when they started working from home. But then you said something really interesting that people started piping up about this and speaking up does really require that that psychological safety really in a strong foundation. I mean, were you surprised at the amount of people at EY who felt strongly enough to speak up and talk about this stuff? Do you still think there's work to do?

### **Sally Bucknell**

That's a really good question. I think speaking up is a great test of psychological safety. There were a few things that happened which really impressed me. One of course is our employee networks and they are run by quite junior staff and they read the room really well, they read that they needed to connect with people.

And of course, showing my age here. But they're so much more switched on to the power of social media connections. So WhatsApp groups, but also Microsoft Teams functionality lent itself well to this. So there was a big spiral in the grassroots-level connection. But at the same time, quite quickly, our business units contacted all

the senior leaders and said, these are the five people you must ring. And I want you to ring them every week and check how they are. And there was sort of a structured approach to it. And of course, when someone found out they'd done it, they replicated it around the business.

That structured approach died off a bit, but it created some connections. So I remember some of our junior people saying they got a phone call from a partner who they knew the name of, but they hadn't spoken to them other than a 'Hello'. And to get this phone call, first of all, they were like a rabbit in the headlights. But after a while, how people are generally quite confident, bright, ambitious, they thought, oh, I'll make the most of this opportunity. And really did use it well, so that went well. There are other parts of the business where it didn't happen so well. And it had to be enforced or really strongly encouraged.

So again, it's never uniform. But good practice does spread quite like wildfire around here, and no one wants to be a part of the business that's left behind. So yes, it worked fairly well, I think. Again, you will be able to find people who will tell us they didn't feel as well-connected. But I think generally, well, in fact, I do know for a fact that our people will tell us that we handled the pandemic and the lockdown and the support for them exceptionally well. So we should be proud of that. But without being complacent about it.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

Most definitely. Well, normally, at this point on the podcast, I ask our guests, who would they nominate as their World Changer for 2021. So is there somebody out there who has really inspired you in the past year, and you'd recommend?

### **Sally Bucknell**

There are lots of people who've inspired me. I was thinking about this quite hard. But I think I want to call out a guy called Torsten Bell, who runs the Resolution Foundation, because throughout this lockdown period, the Resolution Foundation under his leadership and his voice, particularly said to us look at this as an opportunity, what can change? We talk about this EY a lot thanks to one of the partners I worked with about establishing reality and giving hope.

And so they have looked at the power of working in a more creative way. But they've looked at things like, what about a four-day working week? What about universal basic income? How do we improve this world, so there are no left behinds? And we really do close the gap and think hard about the archetype of a working world that we value and protect, actually not working for everybody. And what do we need to do to think about it differently and to be that voice?

And I've noticed their voices getting louder and getting more mainstream, I think it's been fantastic to do that, because it's a difficult space. And be clear thinking and to appeal to both organisations and individuals and unions and government in a way that I think he's got the respect of all of those communities, has been amazing. So I would say he's probably got the potential to be a 2021 World Changer and has certainly being a 2021 world agitator.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

I mean, to have that power over those many different people and inspire them because it's something that, you know, we all want or we say we want, you know, social justice, but actually drawing the line and saying this is how we'll do it. It's pretty impressive.

**Sally Bucknell**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

Well, Sally, thank you so much for your time. I've really enjoyed talking to you, as always. Some really interesting thoughts there and come back soon.

**Sally Bucknell**

Thank you very much.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

A huge thanks to our contributors. If this episode stoked a fire in you about activism, do come and chat to us over on Twitter @scarlettabbott, or drop us an email at [hello@scarlettabbott.co.uk](mailto:hello@scarlettabbott.co.uk) we'll see you next time for another dive into world changers 2021. World Changers is a podcast by employee engagement consultancy scarlettabbott, hosted by Elle Bradley-Cox. Find out more at [scarlettabbott.co.uk](http://scarlettabbott.co.uk)