



SEASON 4

EPISODE 13 PART 2

[INTRO]

[0:00:05.8] ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to Happy Porch Radio, the digital agency podcast for progressive agency owners and web professionals.

Season Four is an exploration of diversity in our industry, especially gender diversity. This season your host, Barry O’Kane, is joined by some wonderful cohosts for conversations with agency leaders and diversity and inclusion experts.

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:32.3] BOK: Hello and welcome back to Happy Porch Radio. This is the second of a two part conversation with Dan Robertson. Dan is an expert on workplace diversity and inclusion, unconscious bias and inclusive leadership. Be sure to check out the previous episode for part one. So, on with the conversation.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:56.7] KV: I’m really wondering about when we look at really small teams, we’re a team of nine and you know, a lot of agencies are kind of on the smaller end of the spectrum to much larger organizations that might have a women’s group for instance or an LGBT network. It seems like we need to expose ourselves to people that aren’t like us in order to mitigate our bias, which is I can see that that’s a really sensible and good idea.

But when it comes to mitigating the bias in say recruitment, there seems to be a bit of a clash between it feels like in the small team, you do need people that you get on with and people that you kind of have shared interest with and similarities because you’re going to, there’s not many of you and that culture is kind of important in the small teams.



How do you manage actively not recruiting people who are like you but maintaining a culture where everybody kind of gets on? I mean, I know getting on with people and people who are like you are not mutually exclusive but there seems to be a bit of a clash there.

[0:01:59.3] DR: Yeah, super interesting question Kate actually. You know, in many ways, having people who are similar to you, particularly in small teams and actually, even if we take these big institutions, you know, institutions that employ thousands of people. Really, they are kind of micro businesses because most of us work in small teams anyway.

It's a really interesting question about – I suppose the balancing act. I suppose, what I would say is, when you have people who are similar to you, that has lots of positive consequences in terms of being in a team. One is, people who are similar who can predict their behavior, organizational decision making can be a lot quicker and in many ways, it can be a lot more efficient, bringing people in who are different and maybe on the edges of being quite different from this. Sometimes that can be quite difficult to manage those differences actually and decision making can slow down.

I suppose what I would say is, it's a balancing act and I think at some point, as the team kind of expands, we need to think about where are we on the scale of let's say, at one end, you've got similarity and one end you've got different.

Do we feel we've got an equilibrium, even we've got tiny team of just you know, four or five people or nine or 10 people? If we feel that when we've got you know, six or seven or a bit similar, actually then, the eighth person that we hire, then we can afford to have a bit more difference.

It's kind of, I don't know what you know, a metaphor would be but it's that kind of whole metaphor perhaps of having a tap, which is lukewarm, got too much cold, have it got too much hot in there? Constantly readjusting to make sure that we've got that balance, we've got too much hot, that's not good. When it goes too cold, that's not good either. I do think this can apply much – definitely to small teams as well as larger organizations as well.

[0:03:56.9] BOK: I think the challenge that, I know Kelly raised this as well in a previous episode, in our experience of recruiting, we pick the most talented artist for the job and that has



to come up higher priority than whether our diversity and inclusion metrics are kind of equilibrium. That's a kind of tricky one to balance really, isn't it? I don't think we do a bad job when it comes to having a mix of people from different kind of walks of life and backgrounds and skillsets and personalities.

But I can see how that might be a struggle for a lot of quite specialist roles and for smaller teams as well.

[0:04:37.1] DR: Yeah, I think that's why I think, I don't – I am not a fan of quotes actually or positive discrimination, in fact, when we look at some of the models of that, globally, I'm not convinced that's the defect in terms of vice mitigation and promoting cultures, which are inclusive.

For me, as somebody who runs a global consultant business, the thing that has to come above everything is talent. Do people have the right skills, the right competences, et cetera. What I would say though is two things really. One is, how do we define talent, what does talent doers look like? Does talent always look like what we already have. What is the mold of talent?

The other thing that I would say is, just as we have our own biases, what we find is I suppose an interesting question is, what is the message that we're giving to the marketplace that we value diversity inclusion? There's lots of work around essentially positive action, which is not the same as positive discrimination but positive action going out to the market or when we're advertising. Even do something very simple, which is cost zero.

If you put on a job advert, you know, where an equal opportunities employer, that essentially means nothing to nobody because we're so used to that. The signaling of that is probably quite redundant but if you said for example or we wrote the sentence too, you know, "we at company X are absolutely committed to diversity inclusion, we recognize that we're under represented by X group. We welcome you to apply." You're actually going to find that your attraction strategy goes up. Now, of course, you're still making sure that you absolutely prove the best, you're not hiring people just because they're X or Y but what you might find is that you get more diversity applying and then that kind of helps you to increase your opportunity to hire somebody who is a bit different that still has absolutely the skills and the talents that you're looking for.



I guess my encouragement to organizations would be, how proactive are you in terms of seeking and reaching out to talent and not just kind of using traditional methods.

[0:06:56.7] KV: That's really interesting. That's positive action as an alternative to positive discrimination. Is there anything else as well as the – being explicit on the job spec. Is there anything else that people can do other than kind of reaching out to say, women in tech groups or you know, that those kind of things to do a better job here?

[0:07:17.0] DR: I mean, these things that definitely do work actually so. I mean, they sound very simple but they are really quite effective and again, they almost cost zero and one of these just thinking about the imaging. Let's say for example, you know, I was looking for rolling tech and go to a company's website and on the website, you know, all the images used are, they're all male, I don't see any women imagery, if I was female, that would send quite a negative signal towards me and obviously if I was male, that will send a positive signal to me. I would just encourage, you know.

Without going into the zone of political correctness because what I'm describing here is the zone of what the evidence is saying is working actually, which is if people do see images of themselves on websites, if you have brochure, that kind of thing. That will have some kind of positive effect actually, that will encourage people to apply so looking at those things helps as well.

Without going too techy, language itself actually is divided into two parts and language is very gendered actually. You only need to learn German or French to realize that, you know, actually words and sounds are either masking words or feminine words but even in the English language. Some words appeal much more to men, some words appeal much more towards women.

Those words are embedded within job descriptions and personal specs, lots of companies now are using systems like text AI, which is the AI tool, which is designed to, you can simply just scan a job description or person spec into text EO and that flags up some of the gendered words and the word then is you take them out and just neutralize what a person spec or job description looks like, fairly simple to do but again, has shown quite positive effects in terms of who actually ends up applying.

What we call my system redesign or devising system through things like you know, being mindful of words, images and you know, being proactive, that kind of thing.

[0:09:22.3] KV: Cool. Speaking of words, if we find ourselves in conversations on a day to day basis, within the workplace where we might find colleagues to be quite bias in their approach to something, within a professional setting, how can we address that? Do we kind of call it out from an educational perspective or is there a better way of dealing with it?

[0:09:44.4] DR: Yeah, I would just say call it out but when I say I would call it out, we definitely would call it out but I think it's important, you know, we are in a world now where everybody is super sensitive of what they say. And what that leads to is a kind of a narrative around political correctness where people say, "Well, I can't say this, I can't say that."

I mean, one thing says you know, the world of work will be, it would be incredibly dull and uninteresting if we can have fun, if we can have a joke, if we can just kind of – I would just say on the thing, if we can take the piss out of people we know, life would not be very interesting. I think that we don't want to suck out the passion and energy of what work is about but what we do want to do is have a framework around us, which enables us to first of all, identify and then call it out. For example, it's not fun to tell jokes or make comments about people's sexual orientation, it's not fun to tell jokes or make comments about people's race or their gender or their religion or their disability.

It's not fun to not invite somebody for lunch or for coffee because we perceive them as being introverted and the stereotype around that might be, they're a bit boring. You know, I think what we can do is have a framework say, there's loads of areas where we can have fun but when we're having fun based on somebody's identity, that's no/no. I think we can call it out but we don't have to call it out in an aggressive way or a finger pointy way.

We can call it out in a way, which we feel is appropriate and say to our colleagues-Look, we're all on a journey here, nobody's perfect but we – whether they're formal or informal because many organizations have values, which are not necessarily written down but you know, is about saying, what do we value in this organization and you know, we value our colleagues and so, it's just a simple thing sometimes to say to colleagues.



Just be mindful of that, how you might see something as being quite fun but the other person might take it in a way, which is quite intimidating or hostile to them. I think we can – I think we have to call it out actually because if we don't call it out, whether we like it or not, we send a signal that it's kind of okay to make jokes whether it's based on appearance or could be anything, it could be based on somebody's appearance or their body size or you know, we often stereotype around people's social accents.

Yeah, I do think we need to call it out but I think we can call it out in a way, which doesn't – well, we've got a balance between how forceful or not we need to be depending on the scenario.

[0:12:35.7] BOK: Interesting you're using the word framework there to sort of be able to I guess, a framework to be able to call it out. Is that, when you're saying a framework there, do you mean something as explicit as let's sit down as a team and talk about this and talk about where the boundaries are and what we're comfortable with and introduce language that makes, that's kind of when we actually have it, calling out or when somebody needs to say something with we've set a baseline, we've understood that if I say, very simply –

If I say look, I'm uncomfortable with that. That means that I think we've strayed into this area. Do we need a sort of formal or informal conversation with the team around that or is it something more just do on an ad hoc as you know, over time?

[0:13:20.3] DR: It's a bit of a balance. I mean, I think sometimes we can go over bureaucratic on this but I think at the same time, we need some rules I guess. I suppose if you think about health and safety. Actually, I'm not sure how this is a good example because people do talk about health and safety police but I think actually, know that we have a set of rules, which is sometimes you know, just kind of stuck on a wall, health and safety rule might be I don't know, make sure you wear your seatbelt or don't run down the stairs, walk down the stairs or you know, these are very simple things, we call it micro behaviors or micro rules.

I don't think it's a bad thing actually to have a set of rules around inclusivity and they could be based on a set of values so you know, a rule might be, which we would have in an organization would be you know, actually, if you have a disagreement with somebody, you know, a rule



would be you know, we're not going to shout at each other, we're going to disagree in an adult way.

That's not necessarily a principle of inclusivity but it could be. There could be other rules around inclusivity, which is about saying, something very simple, one of our clients organizes lots of the social activities and one of the rules that they have is that they ask each team member to make a suggestion for a social activity, which they do on a monthly basis. That's become very inclusive because their previous social activities were really defined by a certain group of individuals and again their intention was really positive but their social activities were very male.

Drinking, football, things even like hunting, you know, those sorts of things, which on surface you can say, well, anybody can go drinking, anybody can go hunting, anybody can play football.

The reality of life is that those things are actually very male centric. The intention is not to exclude but lots of just check out because they're just not interested there because they're very male and they become very quite competitive.

Just simply by rotating ideas for social activities, frees it up and so, you know, we're not all going to go to necessarily love all the ideas but the rule is, even if you don't love an idea that someone comes up with, we're going to engage in it passionately and with respect because the next time we will suggest something, which we would expect somebody else to engage with as well.

I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing actually to have a set of rules, which are written down in an informal way, just as we would have a rule around or we might call a policy around flexible working for example, we have a rule around that, whether we encourage it or not, it doesn't matter but at least everybody knows what the rule is.

[0:16:08.2] BOK: Another sort of very slight tangent from that is if again, thinking about team working with a team and I want to sort of tackle our biases or basically challenge us so that we're not having a sort of group thing, we're not all looking at the same problem or the same thing in the same way.

I wanted to tie that back to what I thought was really excellent advice when you said at the start early on in the conversations about kind of – when we're talking about mitigating bias and just exposing as an individual exposing myself to different things, to rewire my brain as you said but then also, being able to introduce that kind of thing to the team.

[0:16:47.5] DR: Again, I think with the team, you know, you could do some very simple things, you could bring some workshops with team members and those workshops could be – because particularly when you're working in a small team and I've worked in many small; teams, you know?

Historically, I used to work in a number of charities, you know, these are teams of 10, 12 people and over time, you get to know your team members and you know, you form some good relationships with your team members and then we kind of assume that we kind of know who each other are, in many ways, we do. What's really fascinating is –

We've ran many workshop where we do this kind of dinner, even though you've worked with people for 10 or odd years or maybe five or 10 years. We've ran these sessions where we say, tell us one thing new about yourself? It's really fascinating in terms of things that people tell you, that you think you've got a complete picture of who this individual is but you don't, they might tell you some trivial stuff in terms of actually started a new hobby or they've started a new thing in the weekend.

Or they might be something, which is really quite personal in terms of things like actually, when they were a child, you know, they really felt a sense of exclusion because of their body weight or they might tell you that actually they have a cousin who has a severe disability and that is really given some real insight into what it means to be disabled. So I think if we facilitate whether we again, we can call them lunch time conversations or workshops, it keeps us getting to know our colleagues and not assuming because we've known them for two, three, four, five years. We got to know everything about them.

You can even have workshops where you pose a particular question and that question could be a question around anything you like but it could be anything from what's your stance on the NHS to what's your stance on immigration. You have to be mindful of the sorts of questions you ask because otherwise they can poise some really heated debates but what they are really



designed to do is to get a conversation going and not to assume everyone has the same perspective on life essentially.

And then of course, you can still respect their perspective. So there are tiny things that we can do but the point about this is that in terms of change, what we're aiming to do is to create a set of habits or organizational rituals, which apply to tiny organizations what is larger ones, which just constantly build and keep us on our toes. So they build perspective and insight into people who are similar to us and people who are different from us.

[0:19:29.0] BOK: Thank you so much Dan. Once again, we are running out of time. I want to keep going for longer and longer but I think that is really valuable. I really enjoyed that. Thank you so much for your time.

[0:19:40.9] DR: No worries. Can I give a final tip for managers?

[0:19:43.6] BOK: Please do.

[0:19:44.6] DR: Which I think would be even in tiny teens is if managers are doing one to one, ask a fairly open question like a checking question, "How's it going?" and also say, "Is there anything going on for you outside of work that I need to know?" that is a really interesting question because you are not prying into people's personal life. You are not saying, "Is there anything about your identity that you should tell me?"

It is broad enough to say, "Is there anything about what's going on for you outside of work that I need to know" and that opens a door for people to say, "Actually, there is something that is going on for me that I need to tell you" and again, it can be something fairly trivial or it might be something quite significant but it is a really good way of building trust and openness between colleagues who have worked together for quite a long time and who wouldn't necessarily instigate that conversation with their manager without the opportunity.

And also, if you do it in a one to one meeting, it gives that conversation some context. So it doesn't feels out of sync.

[0:20:48.7] KV: I love that. That is great advice.



[0:20:51.1] BOK: Thanks again Dan that is brilliant and just very finally, just remind our listeners if they're looking to find out more about the work that you do, where should we point them?

[0:20:58.3] DR: <https://www.vercidaconsulting.com/>, they can check out the website and if people want to email me, they can email me via the website and we've got lots of free booklets and tool kits and all of that so I am more than happy to just share and give information out.

[0:21:14.5] BOK: All right, thank you. As usual, we'll link to those and a couple other things we have mentioned in the conversation on happyporchradio.com. Thank you very much Dan and thank you Kate as always making the conversation better than I do.

[0:21:26.8] KV: Thanks very much for having me again.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:21:35.6] BOK: You can get all the links and notes from this episode on happyporchradio.com where you can also find out how to send us questions, feedback and get involved in the conversation about this series.

If you enjoyed the show, please share with anyone else who might enjoy it too. Thanks for listening.

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