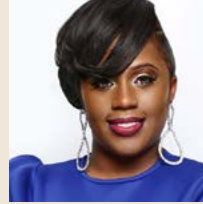


Leading With Inclusion With Dr. Deanna Kimbrel



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Full transcript

Rob Parsons:

Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Paychex HR Leadership Series. I'm your host, Rob Parsons. I lead the content team here at Paychex, and we write extensively on a variety of HR topics, covering everything from HCM technology to team engagement, to compliance with state and federal regulations. Joining me today is Dr. Deanna Kimbrel. Dr. Kimbrel has led the inclusion and diversity strategy here at Paychex for the last two years, focusing on enterprise wide education, systemic interventions, and cultivating a sense of community and opportunity for all. Dr. Kimbrel holds a doctoral degree in management and organizational leadership, and has over 13 years of experience in OD, HR and higher education. Deanna, welcome to the podcast.

Deanna Kimbrel:

Hi Rob, thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here today and talk to you about inclusion and diversity, or diversity and inclusion here at Paychex and also in just industry overall.

Rob Parsons:

Fantastic. Last we talked, it was actually face to face and not via Zoom meeting. We were actually in our cafeteria at corporate headquarters. A lot has changed in the last few months. How have you and the team been holding up?

Deanna Kimbrel:

Yeah, that... It seems so long ago.

Rob Parsons:

Yeah, right?

Deanna Kimbrel:

Yeah. But we've been holding up really good and really pivoting to arise to the occasion of working from home and still meeting our overall objectives. So I think that we have pivoted well, so yeah, we're doing good.

Rob Parsons:

Excellent. Good to hear. Something I found really interesting last time we talked, and you brought it up, that you made a very conscious decision to call our strategy inclusion and diversity, not diversity and inclusion. Can you explain to our audience why you made that decision?

Deanna Kimbrel:

The decision to lead with inclusion, it was an easy decision just because we want to make sure that we are an inclusive environment first. Oftentimes when people hear diversity first, diversity and inclusion, a lot of times they are thinking about the numbers. So some people think we just need to have a particular quota, when in actuality, we need to have an inclusive environment to ensure that we are attracting and able to retain the diversity that we want. So it is really a strategy to look inward instead of outward. Instead of saying we need more differences, we need more perspectives, we actually need to be more inclusive and then we will get those differences that we need to leverage in our business.

Rob Parsons:

I like that. I very much like that it's inward facing, which also plays into the fact you described it to us as a leadership strategy, and not necessarily just a business strategy. Can you expand on that a little bit?

Deanna Kimbrel:

Yeah, absolutely. Inclusion and diversity is going to start with leadership. Number one at our senior-most leadership, our CEO, we need to make sure we have the commitment of our CEO to become more inclusive, or to start to change our culture and start to embed inclusiveness into our culture. We need to have the support of our senior leadership and our CEO, because they are the leaders and they are the ones who are going to be the catalyst of change within the organizations. And really leaders at all levels. So, they are responsible for cultivating the environments that we need for inclusiveness. And it starts with them. They are our role models, and they are the ones who will actually be implementing the changes that we want to see.

Rob Parsons:

And I've seen that firsthand. In one of my own leadership classes you came in and spoke with all of us frontline leaders about this very topic.

Deanna Kimbrel:

I think at all levels of leadership, it needs to be understood. And it also needs to be role modeled for everyone else in the organization.

Rob Parsons:

I like how you talked about it being role modeled, because to me that means it's not just some kind of objective checklist that I've got to go through, but there's a more personal layer there, that personally, as a leader, as a manager, I need to understand and make certain commitments that maybe I wouldn't have to make with other types of business activities.

Deanna Kimbrel:

Yeah. Yeah, that's a great point, Rob. When we are thinking about an inclusive leader, or the inclusive leader, it really is a holistic approach to who you are as a person. And it also starts outside of work. So, learning more about who you are, about the biases that you have, about the society around you and how you understand things, how you make decisions in and outside of work, is all a part of becoming an inclusive leader. So it's a win-win situation. Rob, you become a good person, a better person, a more self-aware person, as well as a better leader in the organization.

Rob Parsons:

Are there some examples of where this approach to inclusion and diversity really works? That you've seen it just take off and just produce results quickly and really effectively?

Deanna Kimbrel:

I think that there's several places where we've seen inclusiveness start to work, and start to become a part of the culture. I would say in my time here at Paychex, I have talked to a lot of different groups, and a lot of those groups have started what we call inclusion committees. So that means being the leaders on their teams to bring awareness around inclusion, to celebrate diversity, to have difficult conversations. And we've seen one team in particular in our Lehigh Valley location really, really take off with inclusiveness, including others, encouraging employees to use their voice, and just creating a more engaged environment where people are starting to feel like they can be their full selves, bring their full selves to work. So that is really a good example of inclusion at work.

Rob Parsons:

And you've also built out a virtual community. We're fortunate here at Paychex that we have technologies and tools that make staying connected possible, even though we're all quite a ways apart from each other. Can you talk about how that community got started, and how you're maintaining its vibrancy? Because people are absolutely throwing in, and communicating, and supporting each other there.

Deanna Kimbrel:

I kind of started that space. The thing about inclusion, it is a cultural change. So in that process, there is some disruption and a lot of people need support. Who can I talk to about this? Where is a safe space? So I created this space to network throughout the organization, so regardless of where you are located, but a safe space to have conversation, share ideas, share thoughts, share resources around inclusion and diversity. So it really started out very small. When I first came into the organization, I was asked to do a Mylink article. So the publication that goes out into the entire organization. And a lot of people said, I want to be involved, I want to learn more, I want to be involved. So I got all these emails and I'm like, hmm, what do I do with them?

Deanna Kimbrel:

So I created this email group and say, well, this is the way that we can stay in touch. At the time, I didn't have anything for people to be involved in. However, I wanted to create a mechanism where we all can stay in touch and we all can talk to each other. And so it kind of grew now, and now we're up to almost 400 people throughout the organization in about a year or so. So it is really growing as a tool for people to communicate, and share resources, and share the passion that they have around inclusion and diversity.

Rob Parsons:

So in terms of this community you've been building, Deanna, do you think it helps that you're a dedicated resource focused on this strategy? The reason I ask is, many of our listeners are an HR department of one, and they're wearing a lot of hats, and it's tough to be perceived as creating a safe place when you are also responsible for so many other HR duties. Can you give those HR leaders some advice on how they can approach that, and make people feel safe and welcome in such an environment?

Deanna Kimbrel:

Yes, Rob. I think that it is important that the HR leaders, even if they are the only one in the organization, they also find others that are passionate around inclusion and diversity, and just work with them to create a group, and create a space, where they feel comfortable with discussing these issues and bringing awareness. So I think that HR leaders can't do it all. And even in my role, I can't do it all. So I really lean on those that have a particular passion around inclusion and diversity in the workplace to be the leaders of these groups, to cultivate these groups, to share their experiences. And with our inclusion and diversity community, there's not much that I really do. People have really just poured into it on their own. I just really started the group. I created the space, but also allowed people to pour into it without judgment or without, oh, we can't say that, or we can't do that, and really protecting that space. So I think that once people have that space, they will start to grow and develop it on their own.

Rob Parsons:

It reminds me of culture and how people are constantly working on their company culture to be more resilient, to be more nimble, to be more innovative. It feels like you're trying to, and HR leaders interested in this, are trying to do the exact same thing.

Deanna Kimbrel:

Inclusion is really about our culture, and embedding inclusion into our culture, and making it a part of every decision that we make. So inclusion and culture go hand in hand. Our culture project manager, the person that leads our culture, Tom Bachman, him and I are partners. And we really try to ensure that inclusion is embedded into our culture, and it is something that is always at the forefront of all the business decisions that we are made. And I tell a lot of people, inclusion is a journey, so there's no one place. And just like our culture, there's no one place where we will stop working on our inclusion. I haven't seen an organization that would consider themselves fully inclusive. So just like our culture, we are consistently making it better.

Deanna Kimbrel:

Some people also ask about numbers, so what are the numbers associated with it? And we can definitely, and we definitely do, have numbers in regards to our diversity, but it is also a journey of becoming better and better, and I'm seeing the benefits of that. So it's a little bit harder to measure in regards to quantitative data. We can measure it through qualitative data, but I think it's just a matter of becoming better and better at it.

Rob Parsons:

And I love that concept of a journey. I would never say our culture is done. We are constantly trying to reinforce it through the organization, every new hire we're trying to immerse and bring aboard, so yes. How could you... You don't just do inclusion and then you're finished.

Deanna Kimbrel:

You have to keep going on with it. And as time changes, people change, our society changes, so will our culture. So will perceptions of inclusion and diversity. So with all those things, we have to keep evolving. And it's just like innovation. It is just like innovation. So what are the new ways? What are the different ways that we can start to be more inclusive or to cultivate our culture a little bit more? So, yeah, again, it is a journey.

Rob Parsons:

So what do you think is happening out in the world right now? Out in the American business world, we've got a pandemic, we've got people closed or working from home. A lot of stresses. Now we've got the racial climate in the US that is changing, to say the very least. We've got Pride Month, and recent Supreme Court

rulings around LGBT rights. There's a lot of dynamics around this space. What do you see happening in the professional world? What are HR leaders doing to respond to these external forces?

Deanna Kimbrel:

I would say that we see a lot of change happening, and we are really going through some growing pains as a society, even as a world. So the way that we previously thought about things, we thought about work, we thought about interacting with each other, have all changed and we have to respond to that. So we really have to pivot, which is very challenging in all aspects of HR. And I think that this is an opportunity to grow, to develop, to innovate and to partnership. So what are different ways we can do the things that we've always done? What are better ways? What are more innovative ways? So I think it is really an opportunity for us to grow. I think a lot of times as professionals, we get caught in the automatic, "This is the way we've always done it. We continue to do this way. We know that this works."

Deanna Kimbrel:

But these times, although they are very difficult, are forcing us to change. To be better, to be faster, to be stronger. So I think it really is a great opportunity, also for us to become more aware of race and how it impacts us on a daily basis, as well as gender, and as well as all of the different diversities. How do we start to be more inclusive and really start to have these conversations that we were always told we shouldn't have? Or, those things shouldn't affect work, when in actuality they really do? So I think it's now a time that is forcing us to be better.

Rob Parsons:

I think that awareness factors are a huge deal. I suspect there's a lot of companies out there that think they're inclusive, and probably aren't. What should HR leaders look for to see warning signs, or see hints that their company needs to start addressing this more consciously, more proactively?

Deanna Kimbrel:

Yeah. I think the main thing that an HR leader can do is listen to the voices in the organization. What are people saying? It can be through a survey. It can be through interviews. I would say, take a more qualitative approach. But what are people saying? How can you get down to getting the authentic voice of the organization? And that will really tell you where you are, and what work you need to do.

Rob Parsons:

That's a great point. The authentic voice isn't always easy to get.

Deanna Kimbrel:

Especially when you talk about inclusion and diversity, because there is a particular fear around disclosing yourself, or maybe just pointing out certain things that may make others uncomfortable. So there is a particular fear that people have associated with talking about these things. Or they don't feel like it's appropriate, or different things like that. So I think that it is really hard to get the authentic voice, but that is what is needed in order to really have a true assessment of where you are.

Rob Parsons:

What other steps should an HR leader take if they want to start this journey to inclusion? Let's say they are starting to become aware. They're starting to try to pull information. They're seeing that things aren't as good as they should be, that there isn't that true commitment to making change. How does an HR leader motivate the organization to start that journey?

Deanna Kimbrel:

I think it starts with the conversation with senior leadership about what they are willing to commit to in regards to inclusion and diversity. What is their tolerance for disruption around the culture in regards to inclusion and diversity? And it really starts with what is our commitment going to be, how are we going to start this off? So it really is, again, an authentic conversation with the CEO. What is our appetite for this? And what are we willing to do in regards to resources, in regards to transforming our culture? So it really starts with what do we need to do, and what are we willing to do?

Rob Parsons:

That takes me right back to what you were talking about, it being a leadership strategy. Like so much we see in companies today, if it doesn't come from the top, it doesn't matter how good it is or how right it is, it's just not going to take root. It's not going to work.

Deanna Kimbrel:

So you have to really have that buy-in first and foremost, and also what are the resources that are going to be dedicated to making it happen?

Rob Parsons:

What are some other barriers that I should be looking out for? Say, I've got buy-in, and say I know this is the right thing, and I know it's going to be a journey. I know it's not going to be easy. What are some of those barriers to inclusion that I can anticipate and try to plan for?

Deanna Kimbrel:

I think the number one barrier that we all have is stepping outside of our routines. At work, we usually have a routine and it depends on the work and it depends on the job, but usually people are so used to doing their job one way, it's hard to get people to step out of that routine. So how do we get people to step out of their routine and think a little bit differently? Another big thing is educating people around inclusion and diversity, and that starts with biases.

Deanna Kimbrel:

So you have to start asking people to do the work to understand their own biases so that they can start to mitigate the effects of those in the workplace, which is very hard because people will be at different places. Like I said earlier, it is an individual process and some people are willing to understand and grow their mindset around that. Some people are not willing to. So how do we get people on board, but also how do we keep people accountable for inclusion and diversity, and having inclusive mindsets and checking biases? So I think those are some of the biggest barriers, not only bringing awareness that bias exists, but how do we get people to reduce their own biases and also reduce biases in the moment when they happen, when decisions are being made? So I think those are some of our biggest challenges, or anybody's biggest challenge.

Rob Parsons:

Yeah. And those are huge challenges, getting people to rethink how they act in the moment.

Deanna Kimbrel:

Right.

Rob Parsons:

That's a big deal, Deanna.

Deanna Kimbrel:

I don't want to say it's impossible, but it is a big deal. And one of the things that we can do, too, is to input mechanisms. So what are things in our systems that will make people have those hard stops to think a little bit deeper, examine their own biases? For example, in the hiring processes, there are several interventions or process changes that we can do that will allow people to make better decisions. It can be maybe panel hiring, removing personal identifiers, requiring percentages of diverse candidates. So there's several different things that we can do that will allow us to address biases in the moment.

Rob Parsons:

There's probably so many more details, and so much more we could cover that we're not going to be able to deal with in a half hour podcast. Where would you recommend HR leaders go to learn more, to find some of these resources, and build up their own skill sets and build up some of these processes within their own companies?

Deanna Kimbrel:

Yeah, Rob, and I think that there are several places. There is tons of information out there even today. There are so many different resources. So for an HR professional, I know a lot of HR professionals, they work with SHRM. That's a good place to get some content. There are several books. I would focus on topics, focus on biases in the workplace, unconscious bias, implicit bias. A big one in the workplace is microaggressions, so what are some resources around microaggressions in the workplace? And just for anybody that doesn't know, microaggressions are those subtle things that happen that get in the way of people building effective relationships. And there's things that hire people or that hurt people. It can be traumatizing to some people. So for example, things like, "So you're really articulate for a black girl." And it's like, hmm, it's intended to be a compliment. However, it can have a negative impact, a negative connotation.

Deanna Kimbrel:

And then people don't say, okay, there's microaggressions going on. They say, I don't feel respected. I don't feel valued. And that gets in the way of us partnering and cultivating those inclusive environments. So there's microaggressions to look into. There's inclusion and diversity books, but I would really focus more on topics. There's information about civil rights, because that plays a role into our intentions around implementing inclusion and diversity. So there's several, several different things that people can look at, but I would focus on the topic and I would also focus on the year. So things 2016 and above, I would focus on those. Publications like the Harvard business review, I would focus on that because that's real time information that comes out weekly, and they also have a particular section of their publication that is dedicated to all inclusion and diversity work.

Deanna Kimbrel:

I do a lot of work with Gardner. That's our market research firm that we work with, so I get a lot of work information insights from them and also run strategy with them. There's several places—you definitely want to stay informed on current events, because again, they are informing the impact of inclusion and diversity every day. And so, yeah, those are just some of the places. And as you start to dig deep and create a network around inclusion and diversity, you'll also start to find more and more resources out there to help you.

Rob Parsons:

That's fantastic. And I love how throughout your conversation, or our conversation, you touched on some of the values that we hold so dear here at Paychex. Accountability, and respect, and partnership, and innovation. I think it takes me back once again to the importance of culture, and the importance of acknowledging that we all have lives outside of the workplace. That's never been more obvious than it has been these last few months. And that we need to be aware that what's happening out in the world is impacting what's happening here at work as well.

Deanna Kimbrel:

And I think that what is happening in our world has really took the blinders off. We are no longer able to blur the lines between work and home, so we can go to work and be someone different, and be home and be someone different. Where we are now, we have to be who we are at work and at home, to take that mask off and it's rebuilding so much for us, and also providing that different lens that everyone has a different experience. Although we may all be experiencing COVID and the social unrest, it's all going to mean something different, look like, feel like something different for each of us.

Rob Parsons:

And the faster we accept it, the better off we're all going to be.

Deanna Kimbrel:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Rob Parsons:

Well, Deanna, thank you so much. This was, this was a very fast half hour. I really appreciate you coming on the podcast today.

Deanna Kimbrel:

Thank you, Rob. Thank you so much for having me, and I'm just looking forward to seeing how we grow as a society, as organizations become more inclusive and more diverse and actually are embedding that into their cultures.

Rob Parsons:

Thank you, Deanna. And thank you everyone for listening today. Once again, this was the Paychex HR Leadership Series, and you can also join us for the Paychex Business Series hosted by Gene Marks, where we talk about a variety of small business topics that you might find interesting as well. Thank you once again.

Rob Parsons:

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