

Season 3 | Episode 4

No Excuses: Personal and Professional Accountability for DEI



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Rob Parsons:

Welcome to Pulse, a Paychex HR podcast, where HR professionals find insights on today's top issues, and inspiration to build and lead effective teams in a healthier workplace. I'm your host, Rob Parsons.

Rob Parsons:

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

Rob Parsons:

This episode is part of a special series we are running on diversity, equity and inclusion. I am pleased to welcome my cohost for this series, Dr. Thelá Thatch. Thelá leads the DEI effort, initiatives and programs here at Paychex. With a Ph.D. in public policy and administration from Walden University, and more than two decades of experience in human resources, talent management and organizational development, Thelá is passionate about building cultures where an authentic commitment to inclusion, equity and diversity thrive.

Rob Parsons:

Thanks for helping out, Thelá.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

I'm really glad to be here, Rob. Thanks for having me.

Rob Parsons:

Today, we are continuing our conversation with Joe Gerstandt. Joe is a leader helping organizations understand diversity and inclusion. As a keynote speaker and consultant, Joe works with Fortune 500 companies, small non-profits, and everything in between. Seamlessly interweaving art and science, Joe uses stories and research to illustrate how next generation cultures can flourish, both inside and outside the workplace.

Rob Parsons:

Joe, welcome back to the podcast.

Joe Gerstandt:

Thanks for having me back, pleasure to be here.

Rob Parsons:

It was so great, the end of the last episode, when you were talking about — there was so many layers there — about how important it was to engage the white men in an organization and how to try to build a personal connection for them, so that they even understand what other people are going through. And, I guess just be more empathetic, be more accountable, and really own it because we can't force this effort on people, people have to own it for it to be effective. I really liked where you were going there with that, where we had to cut off before.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

Yeah, Rob. I did, too. I just was curious, Joe, as you were talking about that ... you know, as a Black woman, I just had this pressing issue in my head on what motivates you. I feel like I've asked this in a different way, but I'm going to ask it again. What motivates you to be in this journey, to be in this fight as a white male? What was that pivot for you, in your life, that, where you decided that this was important work for you to do personally?

Joe Gerstandt:

This is another question I don't have a nice, neat, orderly answer to. I think there was a lot of things that happened along the way.

Joe Gerstandt:

I'm originally an Iowa farm kid. I grew up on a small family farm in Northwest Iowa. Pretty rural, pretty homogenous part of the world. I was exposed to very little diversity growing up. I was also exposed to very little positive messaging about diversity. When I graduated high school, when I was 18 years of age, I was at least implicitly racist, at least implicitly sexist, I was blatantly homophobic. I probably had stuff around class, and ability, and faith. And I probably, at that point in my life, I probably hadn't even chosen a lot of that stuff. I probably just absorbed a lot of that from the people around me. But, that's how I began my adulthood.

Joe Gerstandt:

Some of that changed a little bit, serving in the Marine Corps. Some of that changed a little bit in college. I think one of the big, probably the biggest single pivots, was after graduating college and spending a few years in sales and sales management, I made a career change and went to work for a non-profit organization. Nebraska AIDS Project, a non-profit that does, provides service and support for folks living with HIV, and it does HIV prevention and outreach. I went to work on that side of things.

Joe Gerstandt:

I think by the time I went to work there, I thought I was very evolved, very progressive, very open-minded and I was really just getting started. Just about everything in my life changed while I worked for that organization because I was surrounded by people who were different than I was. At that point in time at least, there was very few straight, white men in that work. I was almost always in the minority. I was almost visibility in the minority. People like me don't frequently have those experiences, even though those experiences are completely normal for other people. It's a different way to be a part of something.

Joe Gerstandt:

I was also exposed to new story and new data. I was surrounded by people who were different than I was, and they were being treated differently than I was ... by institutions, organizations, people. Not because of things that they had done, but simply because who they were or who they were perceived to be. And I think, at that

time in my life, I still didn't think a lot of that happened. I knew there was a lot of unintentional stuff that we had to fix — and that's certainly true — but I didn't realize the extent of the discrimination, and the lack of justice and the lack of access in the world. That changed my view of the world. It changed my view of my community and it changed my view of myself.

Joe Gerstandt:

I started to see myself as having — just because of who I was — having access to things that a lot of others didn't. And, I can't understand that and see that, and not do something about it. I just can't. That was stuff that, as I came to see it, I couldn't unsee it. So I honestly think I don't have any choice but to do this work. I don't think I could stop doing it if I wanted to, just based on my view of the world and my view of myself.

Rob Parsons:

I love that. It makes so much sense to me. To bring it back now, I love that you talked about — and you're speaking to it — this work can't be an HR function. It needs to be taken out of HR, it needs to be ... the company, it needs to be the culture, it needs to be the spirit of the people there. But, is there a role for HR to cultivate that culture, to nurture that culture, to help develop, and grow and strengthen that culture? Can HR make a difference there?

Joe Gerstandt:

I think they certainly can, and I do think HR has an important role to play in this work.

Joe Gerstandt:

I honestly think — this is maybe going to be one of the least popular things I say on this podcast — I honestly think the most important role HR could do is to do their own D&I work. I think HR has gotten a free pass on this work forever because they tend to house it. I think there's as much work to be done in HR as there is anywhere. So I think that's the biggest contribution.

Joe Gerstandt:

I think from that point forward, they can maybe play a role in helping the organization develop that common language, put those behaviors in place, and accountabilities in place. I do think they have a unique role to play.

Joe Gerstandt:

I'm increasingly in favor of moving the D&I office, or team, or leader, outside of HR. I think HR makes a better strategic partner than it does a landlord, when it comes to this work. And, as much as HR has an important role to play in this work, a lot of it reaches outside of HR. It's about vendors, and it's about marketing, and it's about other aspects of it. So I think there's value in separating the two. I think HR is pulled in a lot of directions already. I don't think they have any extra financial or political capital. And I think that usually leads to D&I efforts being under-supported and under-resourced.

Joe Gerstandt:

I don't want to be too harsh on HR. I spend a lot of time in and around HR, and so many D&I leaders have come up through HR — there's a lot of overlap there. But, I think HR has a fair amount of its own work to do.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

Yeah, I would agree with that. I've been in human resources. I started my career in recruiting and I've been in HR for almost 20-something years. And I always say it's an inside secret that won't be inside anymore, that the HR staff treats itself the worst. We do the less work for ourselves, and we basically don't apply the things that we've learned to our own teams and to ourselves. And so I agree with you, 100%. If we could start — and I'm speaking to all of my HR colleagues, you know how to find me, I'm on LinkedIn — that we need to practice what we preach. I definitely agree with that. Often, we administer solutions to the business, but the HR people don't administer those same solutions to ourselves and to each other, and hold each other accountable.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

So I started at Paychex in 2005, as an HR consultant, going out and supporting small businesses like the ones listening. And I spent a lot of time, Joe, just trying to, you know, find the human side of HR and making sure that businesses understood that there was an opportunity to just be human, as an HR leader. Or, you know, if you don't have an HR person particularly in your organization, that that leader, that manager can serve in that HR role. And the last thing I'll say about that is inclusion and diversity should be a natural part of the HR role because of the inclusion piece.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

So I appreciate you saying that. It's like one of our dirty HR secrets, that the HR team and anyone in HR would say that, that we treat each other the worst, in HR.

Joe Gerstandt:

Toxic HR departments exist. Toxic D&I departments exist.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

Yes.

Joe Gerstandt:

Those are real things. So I think HR's opportunity is to lead by example.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

Yes, I agree. Well, speaking of HR leaders and small businesses, I want to flip to your book, "Social Gravity: Harnessing the Natural Laws of Relationships," because a lot of what we're talking about is all about relationships. So in your book, you talk about these six laws of social gravity. So how can these laws apply to organizations as they are focusing on diversity and equity?

Joe Gerstandt:

I think one of the big messages of the book is that relationships matter. The networks of relationships that you're connected to matter. The size of the network matters, the diversity of the network matters — it plays a huge role in your life.

Joe Gerstandt:

Inside and outside of work, I think we tend to overlook those networks because they're invisible. But, those informal networks of relationships are so incredibly important. And inside the organization, those informal networks is kind of how information, and opportunity, and influence and trust moves around.

Joe Gerstandt:

I co-wrote it with a good friend of mine, Jason Lauritsen, and we were just trying to give folks simple, practical steps for setting aside a little bit of time and energy to be deliberate and intentional about growing and nurturing a big, diverse network of relationships. And I think - I think that the organization can promote that. I think the organization can talk about the importance of those networks of relationships. I think it can give people some time, and some coaching and some guidance on how to do that. But, I think, I think it's really important.

Joe Gerstandt:

And, I think it's got some specific application to diversity and inclusion. I think a lot of times, organizations have a hard time finding diverse applicants because the people in that organization don't have any diversity in their network of relationships. We all know that that's still a big determinate of how you find out about jobs and

get jobs. So encouraging people — and, this is another piece, another thing that goes back to what inclusive leadership looks like. I think one of the central aspects of being an inclusive leader is continuing to bring more diversity into my network of relationships. And, thinking about what kinds of things I can do.

Joe Gerstandt:

And I don't think we want people to say, "I need to go meet someone from this group this week," or, "I need to find someone from this party that I can get along with." But I think it's largely about relentlessly leaving your comfort zone, thinking about what you do with your social time, your professional development time, your volunteer time and start going to some different places to do it. And you'll know you've found a different place when you feel some discomfort. There's a reason why you don't go there today. In my experience, if you follow that discomfort, your network will fill with diversity, and that's going to be a value to you, and it's going to be a value to your organization. Because the greater diversity of people in your network of relationships, the greater diversity of ideas, and experiences and opportunities you're going to be exposed to. That benefits you, it also benefits your organization.

Joe Gerstandt:

I think people in general know that relationships matter. I think the thing that we lose sight of is that, if we're not intentional about budgeting some time to do it, it's one of those things that doesn't happen. It gets pushed off, and it gets pushed and it gets pushed off. So I think all bit of intention, a little bit of deliberateness, focusing on not only growing it but also taking care of that network of relationships, pretty valuable. On the individual level and the group level.

Rob Parsons:

I think that's so interesting, the importance of the informal side and doing the personal work that it takes. I can see a lot of companies want to do community service events and want to encourage that. I've always got the impression it's to make their brand look better, and for them to show well. But, if employees are really paying attention and if people are taking advantage of it, it really does give you a chance to do what you were just talking about, Joe. Really go to places where I normally would never go and meet people I would normally never meet.

Joe Gerstandt:

Right, right. If you do that and develop an actual relationship with that person, you're going to learn some things about the world because they're different from you, they're having a different experience. You're going to learn some things about their experience, you're going to learn some things about your community. You might even learn some things about yourself because different people are going to see our blind spots, they're going to reflect some different things back to us. So it's a pretty rich opportunity.

Joe Gerstandt:

When I look back — especially the first 10 years or so of my journey — so much of what I learned was a result of not me trying to learn anything, but me going out into the world, bumping into people who were different than I was, often times in clumsy ways, and learning something about the world or about myself. That's been a huge driver of learning and growth in my life.

Joe Gerstandt:

I think it's just one of those things. We talk a great game about leaving our comfort zone, but I don't think most of us are very good about it. We have to force ourselves to do that. But, there's I think quite a bit of benefit there.

Rob Parsons:

I think you're right. I think there's a need, permission to be clumsy because I think that's a perfect way to word it.

Joe Gerstandt:

Absolutely.

Rob Parsons:

Thelá can tell you, I've been banging around a little bit.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

No, you've been doing great. I appreciate what I see in you and what I see in Joe, is that professional courage and bravery to step into the unknown. And that's what I hear you describing, Joe.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

I just wanted to also talk about those social networks and just the importance of the employee resource groups. I think a lot of times, especially those outside of the marginalized groups, they think that the employee resource groups are just ... you know, I had one person describe it to me as "complaint departments," and just people who are just complaining. But, it's really an opportunity for people to be exposed to different views and different thoughts. That's where, honestly, I've seen it work the best. I've seen people promoted through these groups, they learn about new opportunities. We've seen innovation through these groups.

Joe Gerstandt:

Absolutely.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

It's one of the only places some minority employees have an opportunity to have visibility. I've seen, so many times, employees, who, most, they've been with the organization 20 years plus but no one knew they were there until they joined an employee resource group. So it definitely has a lot of benefits, and I love this concept of social gravity and the six laws of social gravity.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

Thank you. I don't have ... you know, you've covered a lot. My next question is more around the future. One reason I got into public policy, was, it was the one thing that I saw as a level of power and influence in organizations. Things like the Title Seven of the Civil Rights Act, which helps to prevent discrimination. We've seen the Crown Act, which allows people like me to wear my braids to work. This was, at one point, taboo. You couldn't wear braids in the workplace, right?

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

What do you see as some of the trends, or I hate to say trends ... Retract that statement. Some of the ...

Rob Parsons:

Evolution?

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

... progress, evolution — that's much better than a trend, thank you — the evolution of DEI, what do you predict the United States, where we will be in the next 10, 20 years?

Joe Gerstandt:

I don't know if I have any thoughts on a national level, I'd have to give that a little bit more thought. The two things that I think are a big part of the future for this work in the workplace are technology and data. I think there's more, there's never been such a rush of people into this line of work as there is right now. There's pros and cons to that.

Joe Gerstandt:

But, one of the pros is people from different backgrounds are coming into this work. There's new technology coming into this work. We're starting to use data more aggressively. I think there are huge opportunities there.

Joe Gerstandt:

I also think we're starting to see more of an organized resistance to some of this work. Some of the misinformed and disingenuous things that are being said about critical race theory right now — and some of it's being pretty aggressively marketed — I think is an example of that.

Joe Gerstandt:

I don't know, those are a few things top of mind that I see, I think for the next few years, are going to make ... I think D&I and the work in the workplace is likely going to look drastically different five or 10 years from now, than it does today. I think that — for a number of reasons — I think we're at a turning point. But, I think those are some of the things in our future.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

Great points, thank you. And, thank you for bringing up the critical race theory, which was actually one of the frameworks in my dissertation. We could talk offline about that. I appreciate you bringing that up.

Rob Parsons:

Yes, for certain. This was a great conversation, Joe. We're at time again — it goes too quick. But, thank you again for joining the podcast today. I really appreciate it.

Joe Gerstandt:

Thanks for having me. My pleasure.

Rob Parsons:

And Thelá, thanks for co-hosting.

Dr. Thelá Thatch:

Thanks for your time.

Rob Parsons:

Yes. And, thank you to all of our listeners. I encourage you all to visit Joe's website, joegerstandt.com. You'll be able to buy his book, "Social Gravity: Harnessing the Natural Laws of Relationships." And hopefully soon, we'll even see a new book from Joe that you can purchase there. You could also book him for your own company training or event.

Rob Parsons:

Thank you Thelá, Joe, and thank you to all of our listeners. Please stay happy and healthy.

Announcer:

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