

Talking Inclusion With ...

Series 3 – Podcast 5 : Inclusion's Evolution: Past Reflections, Future Readiness

Intro Talking inclusion - the podcast from Inclusive Employers.

Addison Welcome to 'Talking Inclusion with' From Inclusive Employers. I'm Addison Barnett. My pronouns are he/him and I'm director of impact and major programs here at Inclusive Employers. These podcasts are for anyone who has an interest in inclusion and diversity.

In our podcasts, we share life stories and experiences. Learn about best practice and her practical advice for employers from our guests and Inclusive Employers Inclusion and Diversity experts.

Before I introduce our guest, in case you don't know us, we're Inclusive Employers. Our mission is to make every workplace an inclusive employer where every colleague values differences, and can contribute their skills and experiences fully to their organization.

Together, we're taking action towards more inclusive workplaces and celebrating progress towards making inclusion an everyday reality for everyone.

Today, we're taking a different approach to our usual podcast by having a fireside chat between myself and Maddie Wolloton-Banks,

whose pronouns are she/her, who is director of Business Consulting at Grant Thornton. Hi, Maddie.

Maddie Hi. Thanks for having me.

Addison During this special podcast, we're starting off 2024 with a look back over the last five years. Maddie and I will look at the positive steps forward and the challenges that we've experienced. And then closing our conversation with how workplaces can equip themselves for the future.

So let's start our conversation, looking back and thinking about the positive moves forward that have happened since 2019 and the present day.

So, Maddie, what for you has been your highlight of the last five years of something that's really changed in inclusion and diversity?

Maddie it's so nice to start with the positive and the inclusion agendas is so refreshing. So when I was thinking about this, I think the main thing that jumped out for me is the kind of change in inclusion and diversity and from a positioning perspective as a strategic agenda item, now we're in a really different place with that now to where we were five years ago.

And I guess what do I mean by that, I think five years ago, businesses were acknowledging it was important and now they're acknowledging it's fundamentally important to them achieving their strategic objectives. There's probably a bit of a caveat to that, and I might leave that for now. This is something that is a kind of platform and a gear shift, I guess, in how it's being addressed and the place that it's being given at the table.

You know, we've definitely seen that in the way that we engage with clients when we're working on this, in terms of we don't have to go to them and kind of create the business case for the conversation before we start having the conversation, we just can have the conversation and people proactively kind of reach out. So I think that's been a kind of massive step forward.

And one of the kind of side benefits that that we've really seen of that is that people who are really passionate around I & D, are kind of employees in a workforce who are using that kind of free time, accessing, you know, discretionary effort to move the I & D agenda forward in their workplace, are being given a platform and sponsorship that they maybe weren't being given before.

And I think senior leaders see that as an opportunity to really demonstrate their strategic intent around it by giving that sponsorship, by giving that platform. Again, there's a slight caveat to that in terms of that isn't enough. That's not what a whole strategic

agenda item needs to look like, but actually, yeah, reflecting back on the conversations and where we were at five years ago, that's that's a real gear shift.

Addison Yeah, absolutely. And we've seen the same thing. So similarly I was reflecting and that, you know, I've been at Inclusive Employers nearly five years, so I was thinking what shifted from when I started to now? And definitely that we're not pushing on a closed door anymore today. Often we're through the door at the time or the door is quite an easy one to push open.

it's a massive shift and I think if you said to me five years ago, this is where we'd be, I think I would have been delighted to hear it. I'm not sure if I would have quite believed you, because it felt like quite a challenge at the time. Lateley I think also in terms of us, you know, even just in terms of numbers, when I started here, you know, five years ago, we had less than 100 membership organizations. We've now got nearly 500. And that says a lot about the commitment from nearly 500 organizations to be members of us, to work with us, to engage with us.

And they're all coming to us and they're in different places in terms of how embedded inclusion is, where they are on that maturity model. But the drive is there at every single one. And that's, again, really interesting. There's still challenges and obviously we'll pick up

those in the next section. But yeah, it's a very different landscape now and it's become you're making your point about that sort of individuals are motivated by inclusion and diversity who are getting better sponsorship, but they're not seen as sort of disruptors or kind of troublemakers anymore, they're seen as assets, they're seen as people who've got something to give. There's a lot more focus on like lived experience and engaging people with lived experience in this and hearing those voices, which is again, a massive shift.

It's quite interesting actually. In my previous job, I worked in the charity sector in homelessness, and I came from that where there's a really strong culture of client involvement, so we referred to the homeless people who we worked with as clients. And the ideal for us when we were running a service or doing something, whatever we were doing for homeless clients was to essentially 'they' designed it and led it and we were just there to sort of make it happen.

And coming with that mindset into inclusion that really wasn't where inclusion was five years ago, but increasingly is now. So I'm having lots of conversations with clients about lived experience and how they can harness it in a positive way, not crossing the line to an explosive way. We can talk about that later as well. Finding a good balance with it.

But actually it being that literally including those voices and the expertise to shape what you're doing. So as an I & D person, you know, you might be “the” I & D person in your organization, you might be on your own, you know, responsible for a very large and quite complex task. How can you utilize those internal experts? That's increasingly a conversation I'm having a lot of the time.

I think the point as well is that we've not just got that kind of top down sort of leaders and people at the top of organizations increasingly seeing it as a priority, we've still some way to go in some areas. But even just the fact that it's not dismissed out of hand or seen as something that just the H.R. team are responsible for, like people know, it's there, not in the room with them.

But what we've also seen is from a bottom up perspective, there's been such a massive shift in expectations from staff, in terms of what they expect their organizations to be and to do. And we've seen that obviously, one of the biggest shifts we've seen is sort of post-pandemic, that focus on wellbeing and flexible working. It's such a non-negotiable for so many people now, and it's really interesting looking out across the market and seeing the organizations who are saying it's flexible working, but you're in the office four days a week, so that doesn't sound massively flexible. That sounds like one day working from home if you're lucky, like that puts people off. People just won't work for you. And it's so interesting to see that shift again.

If you'd said to probably any of us five years ago, that's where we're going to be, we would not have believed you, and I think that increased expectation from underneath is a really positive force, because when you've got those challenges coming up from your whole workforce, you're struggling to get talent in, and you're seeing all these signs that your employer brand maybe needs some work, it's hard to go, "it's just a nice, fluffy thing, we don't worry about it", you know, it's suddenly it's got some serious consequences attached.

Maddie

And it's not tomorrow's problem. If you can't get the people in that you need to do the work, that can't be tomorrow's problem. That has to be today's problem. And that's such a good way to kind of keep it high on the agenda. As you were saying that, the other thing that kind of jumped to my mind was a different stakeholder group that I think is making a difference is around regulators and the kind of regulatory change.

So we're starting to see, you know, FCA kind of announced an increase in I & D reporting regs and some intention around that, and the kind of CSRD's from the EU, including increased inclusion and reporting requirements, all of that's is just another stakeholder group that's pushing and driving and again, a stakeholder group you can't ignore and it brings into another part of the business rather than being "this is a people issue" - This is actually... OK, it's a people

issue, but it's now also a compliance issue, and that makes it a data issue. Once you start to kind of engage all of the different parts of the business and all those different stakeholder groups, that is where the momentum comes from just now, adding the other thing that was kind of making me smile as you were talking is saying five years ago, if someone had told kind of both of us that we would be where we are today, we would have kind of bitten the hand off for it.

And that sort of made me reflect, actually, and I don't feel satisfied that there's something... there's something to reflect on in that for me is that I'm yes, there's been incredible progress, and I think because organizationally and maybe societally we're so early on in that journey, all that progress does is focus the mind on the progress that needs to come.

So the kind of the winds feel “Yes, good, all good” and so yeah so that was really making me smile kind of chatting through that.

Addison Yeah completely, and I think that's our job as I & D professionals is to never be satisfied.

Maddie Never enough. Yeah, absolutely.

Addison The risk is if you're just always looking at what we haven't done, that you can get overwhelmed, but also you don't want to be too

complacent in looking back what's been achieved so you lose the drive. So it's like I find for me it's almost like where do I need to position myself in the sweet spot between those two things?

So that I feel driven by, you know, there's more to do. But I feel comforted by the fact that we are going in the right direction.

Maddie

Yeah, totally. And it's a self-preservation thing as well as in that you can't swamp self and all that isn't achieved. Yeah, I think we've talked about this before today, but I think that echoes a challenge that businesses have in celebrating success around I & D, in terms of kind of, is it okay to say we've made one step forward, we know it's only one in 100 or a thousand, but shall we just acknowledge that that's the first step and that's a great thing to have done and it's a really hard thing to do without alienating some groups of people who don't feel kind of engaged by that progress.

But... I'm kind of darkening our positive progress with another challenge. But I think it comes from the positive progress that organizations have made.

The last really quick one I was going to call out in terms of positive things that we've seen as a change in line manager populations. So as with kind of all people, change line managers are the key to kind of embedding it properly.

And you know, we know how strongly an individual's experience from an inclusion perspective in work is dictated by the quality of their line manager and the quality of relationship with their line manager, and I feel like we're starting to see a bit and it be interesting to get your thoughts on this Addy, that on the whole, the level of engagement that line managers are doing in the trust and relationship that people have with their line managers is getting better.

I guess the difference of relationships that people have with their line managers based on their characteristics, what makes them who they are, seems to be narrowing a bit, and that is not to generalize. You know, it's still a totally mixed bag, and I also don't think it's necessarily because there's significantly better line manager training in organizations or that, you know, there's been a kind of big shift or focus on it.

But what it feels like is that as a general awareness, it's increasing, that it's having the impacts that our line managers are more empathetic and therefore people are having kind of generally better relationship in that line manager space.

Addison Yeah, absolutely. Line managers are still the squeezed middle. You know, they get the the bottom up pressure, they get the top down

pressure. They're often very busy. They're often the last groups the organizations get to in terms of training and development, which is kind of hilarious if you think about how key they are, in terms of people's experience of the Culture. But you know, you see it again and again. I completely agree, I don't think it's how we prepare or how organizations prepare. Align managers has got better per se. I think it's kind of broadly the same. Some places are pretty good and have kind of good training and stuff in place. Some places it's just get on with it, read the handbook and off you go kind of thing, but it's coming from the perspective shift that we've had in the last five years where, you know, if we think about the pandemic, I know you and I were chatting about this the other day, suddenly as a line manager during the pandemic, you're seeing in someone's home your insight, the kind of inside the house with them. And, you know, I remember in the during the pandemic, I would have calls with colleagues, often with clients where kids were running around, they're trying to homeschool. Things are happening. Sometimes they would need to have a bit of a cry because it all got too much like it... It suddenly.. because we were all experiencing the same frightening event, it suddenly, I think for a lot of people who maybe prior to that maybe hadn't seen things this way, we suddenly saw our colleagues as human and real, and once that, like with any perspective shifts, you know, it's like the kind of perspective shifts we try and get through inclusion work. Once someone has seen that, they can't unsee it, it's fundamentally shifts how they see the world from then onwards.

So I think what we're seeing is a lot of line managers kind of individually toiling away, trying to be very human and connected and do the right thing, not always getting the support and frameworks that they need from their organizations. And I really feel like that's a big gap in a lot of places.

Maddie Yeah, and I guess a flag, you know, to organizations on if they're doing more and you're not increasing the support, what's the risk if they stop being able to do it?

Addison Yeah, absolutely. And really seeing them as that pivotal role. It's so funny how they're like always the ones that get forgotten. It's like people do the top, they do the bottom and then they forget there's this big middle, that's really, really pivotal.

Maddie I really think the key word in that is 'big'. I just think, Do you start by training five senior leaders?... like 10 of your C-suite? And then, okay, then you cascade that to 50 or 100 of your next layer down, then you've got 500 line managers in it.

So whatever your kind of scale of organization is, your line manager population is so much bigger, it's a different scale of operation to then engage, then support them, give the awareness and training, and I really think it is just a size and numbers game that makes it so

difficult to engage them as a population because, it's kind of making me shudder just thinking about it. But as soon as you start, you think about kind of, how do you group them in to make it relevant to their day roles, you have to engage their sponsors and their line managers, you have to give them ongoing support and I mean, goodness, help their diary management and so on. And I genuinely believe that it's when it gets to that scale, that's why you get the let's create a completely for it line managers because that's an easier way of conveying what we're trying to say, but it is nowhere near as effective, and we know that, and it doesn't come with “and here's how we are going to help you manage this along with your role”. And if you don't get them face to face and in a room and in a real conversation, you never get to kind of broach that. And it's just a “here's another thing that's on your list, by the way”.

Addison

Yeah, exactly. Here's another task list. Here's a thing that HR are going to email you about to remind you to do. You need to fill in something on a system. Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I think that that sort of kind of points forward a little bit. So what we're talk about towards the end in terms of what's next, but I feel like for me it's that the lack of really good quality “ROI” around inclusion (So a return on investment), I think if an organization were brave enough to work out the ROI of good quality line management, development and training, it doesn't have to just be, you know, in a room training, proper learning, development in different shapes and form and

where to look at the ROI of the spend on that was obviously significant it's often a bigger population, versus the spend on issues people issues the time used in that. Yeah I think people would be surprised. They did realize actually this is a really good investment in terms of equipping our line managers.

Maddie

That is, I mean, a big kind of challenge to H.R. Functions and the people agenda generally, is how do you demonstrate the value that you add, because we all know organizations spend an enormous proportion of their outgoings on their people, on salaries, on kind of benefits, on all of that kind of stuff, on training. And we all know that your people are the people who are going to achieve the results that you need to achieve, but what I think the people agenda in H.R. functions haven't done as well in the past, is demonstrate how they're helping an organization together in the difference that they're making in the work that they're doing. And I think their inclusion agenda is a bit of a victim of that, because so many of the and measures of success are linked or should be linked to kind of people KPIs, and if that as a kind of infrastructure was well established and working, I think it would flag those issues with "Hey, this message isn't getting past line managers" or "the experience or the behaviors aren't getting past line managers". That would be really easy to indicate and point to. But actually we don't run the people agenda like we run the finance agenda and for lots of lots of good reasons, but I think that's kind of lessons to learn in shouting

about the value, and it's because people are so busy doing it and they're so passionate about doing it and making a difference and they're not passionate about measuring the difference.

I actually started my career as an accountant, so I am passionate, but it really is interesting and fun to be and I like the data in the spreadsheet, but I know I probably sit in a minority there.

Addison

So as director of Impact, obviously Data is.. I'm a big fan of data as well. Yeah, but yeah, completely. There's a lack of good data out there. I think there's often a lack of data literacy or data confidence as well, and that's not in terms of sort of blame anyone. I think it's just a general issue we have more broadly around kind of data competency, but also again, how are organizations equipping people to do that? And often they're not. So you know, finance, for instance, usually very data heavy. Tech & IT - very data heavy, but that's how you work, that's how it's expected that you work in those areas. But actually data like good quality data and reporting and measuring can bring an enormous amount of value to any part of a business. But in our heads we tend to like weirdly separate them.

One final perspective shift for a lot of people in the last five years is around race and ethnicity. What we saw in 2020 with the murder of George Floyd and the mainstreaming of the Black Lives Matter movement, was a tectonic shift in the majority groups understanding

of individual and structural racism. And we saw that much more so then, than in the response to the murder of Steven Lawrence in 1993, or even marked out than in 2011.

What I've seen in our work is a lot more organizations committing to and beginning to carry out the actions required to become an anti-racist organization. And even just the fact that I've been having those conversations with clients, and we have done for a couple of years since 2020, that there even considering that being a through line in their organizational culture, in their strategy to have anti-racism so clearly pulled out in it, is a massive shift and a really, really important one. I guess the balance of that, is that some of that enthusiasm is definitely waned in some sectors. So we saw what often happens when there's such a sort of big tectonic shift in people's awareness, is you'll get a sudden flurry of activity and not everyone keeps that activity going, it will fall on the wayside and it won't sort of be kind of woven through everything the way it's meant to be.

But I think, you know, despite fading might be a touch cynical on seeing all of this activity, you know, after the sort of resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, I've been pleasantly surprised by how many organizations still are genuinely committed to it, and I think as a shift in the last five years, the sort of awareness of and commitment to anti-racism is a really vital one, and one that I hope

we see carry on through for the next five years / ten years into the future.

It just becomes a core element of what we think about in terms of inclusion and diversity.

Addison Okay. So I feel we're sort of heading a bit towards kind of setbacks and challenges now. Well, things have been tricky since 2019. I guess for me, sort of reflecting back. I do feel like overall the movement has been forwards absolutely.

Maddie Totally.

Addison And there's absolutely been progress in the general direction has been positive. But I think some things have surfaced in the last five years that are still a challenge that we need to be working on and thinking about. So I think the big one for me is fear and silence. So people being frightened of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing, and by extension of that, what that means about them as a person. So this idea we've got that if someone says or does something clumsy or wrong or excluding that, that immediately labels them as a bad person for the rest of their lives. And if you're operating under that pressure, unless you're a very courageous person, it's very hard to be vulnerable and learn and try and and to

communicate and reach out to people because that's very frightening to be in that position.

That's not to say there shouldn't be accountability, but I think what I see a lot of in organizations is people who are really well intentioned but are so frightened of getting it wrong, and therefore don't do anything and are often asked silent and don't like push anything forward because they're just so terrified of it breaking and falling over, and I think that's a real big challenge.

Maddie

And we talked about that briefly the other day, and I think as I was reflecting on that, I think that makes sense in terms of the way that we learn.

We've brought a lot of things into people's conscious and incompetence. So people now know that there is a lot they don't know, and that is a scary place to be, whereas previously and you know, still the case for a lot of us in some areas, and for some of us in a lot of areas, things set in unconscious incompetency - there's nothing to be afraid of because you don't know you're going to get it wrong. And actually some of the things that I think I see, is that it's those people who are the most aware, who are the most afraid, and those are the people you want to be the most vocal and the people who, you know, have not invested the time to understand or, you know, for whom that kind of understanding and empathy doesn't

come naturally, are the vocal people then, and you kind of want to flip it, that we've having the wrong people on a very vocal and and I think Addy that I actually would say that we've gone backwards in that over the last five years.

So one of the things that I guess my question around it is, is the inclusion agenda less inclusive than it was? And I think there's a lot of, you know, to make sure we've dropped all the buzzwords into this podcast, cancel culture is very real, and I think what that started in the kind of celebrity sphere, but leaders are seeing it in the business world and they are really conscious of one of the things that could end my career tomorrow is a huge kind of I & D faux pas that kind of really tripped me out that I that I don't even know about. And I think that breeds into that fear, and I think, you know, in some cases not fair is very real. Whereas one of the phrases that I heard a lot more five years ago that I don't hear so much now, is the best thing you can say in the inclusion agenda. Is the right thing, the next best thing you can say is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can say is nothing- And I don't hear that anymore. And I don't think that that resonates with people as true anymore. That does concern me because, you know, and not to be the person to say, you know, to offer sympathy to privileged characteristics too much, and but there is a risk that we alienate people who carry a lot of privilege because of what makes them who they are from the inclusion agenda, and it feels like an agenda that increasingly attacks them. Whereas what we

all know is that the inclusion agenda is for everyone and it will always stay for everyone. And everyone benefits from an inclusive workplace society wherever we're kind of applying that lens. But I genuinely think that now people who carry a lot of privilege don't feel that, and they feel that they might be disadvantaged by the inclusion agenda., and now I think they're too afraid to say that, to learn why that might not be the case. I guess I do worry if that's an area where we've maybe taken a step back, the read it personality in me, it's like, well get on the bus or get off. But actually that's not how people change works. Like whenever we're never going to get there in that way, so I think there does need to be a kind of real refocusing on “We all need to be included in this agenda”.

And to your point Addy at the beginning, it needs to be designed by people who have lived experience so they understand what they are inputting into, but it needs to be facilitated, sponsored by everyone.

Because although we can't all have all perspectives, we all need to have the collective responsibility to own it and we also need to have a collective understanding of the benefit for and, you know, it goes back to the age old change management question of “what's in it for me”? And people ask that and I think feel that like fret a lot in the inclusion agenda, and I see that a lot at the moment. And what I don't see is organizations supporting their senior leaders specifically to give them a safe space to say, I don't know anything about this,

and I know that's not okay, I don't know if this is wrong or if this is right or this is a view I think I have I don't know if I can voice that - People need somewhere, a safe space to be able to learn and grow and reflect. And not everyone does this as a day job. No one has the privilege that we have to do this as a day job, and therefore we need to kind of be creating that safe space for people I think to go, I got that wrong, that's cool and I won't do that again. But let's learn and move and have like failure as a step to success rather than kind of something to beat people with. And with all of the call outs of we need to make sure that failure doesn't come at the cost of individuals and adding kind of emotional labor or exclusion back into the mix. So I don't think it's is a solution to that. That's some of my my worry. Addison Completely and and shaming is incredibly poisonous.

If you shame someone, no one who's been shamed is going to lead them to action. Right. It just it completely shuts down. It's a really damaging approach. I think there's a lot or there can be a lot of immaturity in inclusion and diversity thinking at times in terms of what the bigger implications of it are or what it really means for everyone to be included.

And I can often see where that comes from, because if you are part of a group who has been marginalized and discriminated against and you are often traumatized and injured and you are in a difficult space, it's very hard when you're there to extend generosity and

empathy to the people who might look like or speak like or act like or even be the people who discriminate against you or have done in the past. That's a very hard thing to do. But I think the risk that we're in at the moment is that that immaturity partly doesn't do us any favors because it increasingly means that people are becoming ostracized. You're totally right. And the people switch off from it because they don't feel like it's for them. You know, the amount of conversations I've had with middle aged white men where they said, you know, this is about me. It's not for me. So, yes, it is. It literally is for you. But you have taken on that messaging that you're the bad person and have gone. Okay. That's the thing over there. I'm not included in this. And like you say, it's very hard to get people to change and grow when they're in that space. But also like inclusion is for everyone.

Some of us get inclusion and some of us don't. It's kind of like you were saying earlier about the difficulty sometimes in celebrating inclusion steps forward, is that it can feel... I don't know, say you've taken a big step forward in your kind of parents. Policies and practices are wonderful, but then it might be that you're I don't know, you're Disability Network group or whatever going, yeah, but we've been pushing for X for ages and we haven't got it yet. It's about trying not to see inclusion as a finite resource that people have to fight over, and instead see it as an incredibly abundant thing that everyone can have.

But I think the more people have got those mindsets of it's "us against them" or where "we have to fight for everything, we're going to get" the more combative it becomes, and the thing we need to think about is it's very easy, especially when you've experienced damaging behaviors to replicate them yourself, often unconsciously. And we do that at the individual and group level sometimes.

So how can we build coalitions amongst different groups, amongst different people to properly move inclusion forward instead of it being like, you know, inclusion for some, not for others, which is, you know, something of a contradiction in terms.

Maddie

Exactly, or dividing our inclusion agenda into a range of characteristics. Right? So to your point, how do we build in a genuinely more mature view of intersectionality that helps people to understand that inclusion is for everyone? Because once you start to break down, either you have this privileged characteristic or you don't, or you know, have this privilege characteristic or you don't.

Once you start to realize everybody is a unique make up of their own characteristics that softens that, you're either in or you're out or you're benefiting or you're at detriment. And I think that your point around creating that coalition, I think that the key is and it has to come from collaboration and a focus on intersectionality. And I think the point that you made at the beginning around... we have seen a

lot of progress on inclusion rather than diversity, I think that is really key to that as well.

So we're not talking about what makes us different. We're talking about what brings us all together. And I think again, the more that we can make that the emphasis and the focus, that's one of the ways that kind of softens that threat or that challenge for people who may be feel excluded by it. But it is really hard to focus on the privileged characteristics when you're looking at the inclusion agenda because there's so much work to do for those people who are suffering from discrimination, from those people who are being excluded on a day to day basis. And so I think it's really difficult to make time for that. I guess we need to find a way to make time for it so that we can move it forward and continue to keep it as true inclusion.

And as for everyone, I'm being sponsored by a lot of people who sit at the top of the boardrooms, and he said at the top of these organizations and therefore can effect kind of that real change.

Addison I guess for me, it's about rather than getting drawn into the, what can feel like things like cancel culture and kind of us versus them, there can be something kind of feels satisfying, like it can fail. It's sort of tempting because it's quite an easy and simple way to see the world. Yeah, particularly if you have experience, you know, discrimination and things like that, but for me, it's about like... I fundamentally

believe in the innate goodness of people. That is a really core belief of mine. I sometimes have to remind myself of it, but it is definitely a core belief of mine, and people are a product of their family, their community, their education, their peers, the experiences they've had. You know, we're so influenced by everything that is around us and we have to bring everyone along.

And if we get to the point where different groups are kind of digging their heels in, that's not how we get to coalition, you know? And I guess the hard bit about that message is that if you're a minoritized group, it can feel like what you're being told to do is play nice with the people who've been terrible to you. But it's about kind of zooming out a bit and thinking about that bigger picture and going, "What sort of world do I want to live in"? "Do I want to live in a world where it's different groups pitched against one another"? Or "do I want to live in a world where people can connect and work together to make things happen" and it's trying to sort of focus on those higher ideals, I suppose, to try and guide us in those times when maybe it feels quite easy to fall into the "They said this, they did that" "Yeah, I don't like them". You know, that kind of feeling.

Maddie

And having the trust that everyone else feels the same. I think that I love the way you kind of phrased it in terms of your fundamental belief in the innate goodness of people, because I think it just radiates out of you Addy, that it's so clear in the way that you are. I

mean, I think probably for a lot of people, they will find that hard a belief to hold because of their experience, because of the way that they've been treated or you know, various different things. And actually, I think it requires not only that belief, but the trust that other people have that belief, too. And if you come from a place where that's a hard belief to hold, it's even harder to imagine that other people might hold that way where you don't at the moment.

I guess I don't want to sort of make this about me, but I guess where for me, where it's come from. So as a trans person, as a queer person, as an autistic person, this might sound sort of backwards, but in order to survive and actually to go more than surviving in the world, in order to thrive in the world, I have had to cultivate that depth of belief in the innate goodness of other people and the trust that they feel as well. Like, I have to go first. I can't wait for them to show that I can trust them. And that's not been an easy ride getting there. Absolutely not. But I really firmly believe that's the way to go.

Also, as a leader, someone who is in a senior position in an organization, I very strongly feel the responsibility to role model that as well. I don't always get it right. Of course I don't. But that's really important to me too, is the I have a responsibility to try and show that as much as I possibly can, because it's like if I can demonstrate that probably in a bit of a messy and not always, you know, perfect way, it gives permission for other people to do the same.

Maddie Totally - And it's a really brave position to hold because you open yourself up to the vulnerability of the hurt when that is, when someone indicates that might not be the case or someone and kind of abuse is that belief in you. But it's so essential and I really believe it too. I really do think that fundamentally people are good, and people want to contribute to the positive, to the benefit of other people. And I think a lot of the time where people are demonstrating something that isn't aligned with that, it's a reaction to something that a lot of the inclusion agenda is trying to support. It's probably a good... maybe going a bit philosophical with this around the innate goodness of people, but I think the inclusion agenda is a really good place to start to drive that and prove that almost.

Addison So moving away from philosophy, let's think about the future instead.

So think about the next five years, which feels like a very long time. But I'm sure if we do this podcast in five years time, it'll feel like it's gone in the blink of an eye. So how can we, how can organizations, how can I & D professionals equip for the future? So considering everything we've sort of thought about so far, what are the areas of focus that you would like to see organizations looking at?

Maddie

And I love that question. So one of the... I guess one of the things is a build on one of the first things that we talked about around seeing inclusion as a strategic agenda item and having a place at the top table. And I guess the build for me in the next five years would be making that real and operationalizing that.

So understanding beyond each of your senior leaders sponsoring an employer resource group, what does that actually mean and how do we actually embed that in our business, so that we look at measure and to the data point that we were talking about, and invest in addressing issues or invest in achieving results in the inclusion agenda. So in the same way we would at profit, in the same way we would with our brand. So really investing in the infrastructure to be able to not only demonstrate inwardly and outwardly where you're at with it and where you're trying to get to, but to react to changes because it is a changing landscape. Things move sometimes quite slowly, sometimes very quickly. So to be able to react, adapt and, you know, to operate as you would as a business and in any other regard, that would be one thing.

The other thing that I had an event I went to the other day that I just totally loved and I think we're already seeing, but is not kind of widely held as of yet. A few years ago we talked to a lot of businesses about the business case around inclusion. How would it help a business, and let's demonstrate all of those ways?

And at an event I went to the other day, someone posed that question of we shouldn't be asking what we could gain. We should be asking what we're not willing to lose. So which clients are too important that mean that we won't sacrifice our inclusion agenda for them? What portion of revenue, what way that we work, what value that we hold, whatever is, what are we not willing to compromise to be on the right side of this? Because it's one of those things and again, not to go kind of too deep, but it's one of those things where you look at organizations that are getting it wrong and it has serious brand implications, because people know that they are an organization that had choices to make, and they chose profit over doing the basic right thing to do.

So I think we're seeing short term implications of that. But I also think in the longer term, an organization has to be able to look at itself, look at its history, look at the way it's acted, and be comfortable that it did the right thing, and that it can continue to describe itself as a values led or purpose led organization that so many do.

I'd love to see alongside that strategic agenda item question. I'd love to see that as the basis of it. I'm saying if we truly consider a strategic agenda item, let's put it as the non-negotiable and then let's see which things come up against that, and can't co-exist with it rather than what? How is it going to help us from a profit perspective and

how is it going to help us from an employer brand perspective, which we know it will, but it's the wrong order?

Addison I really love that - I love that kind of mindset Flip.

I think for me it's yeah, it's the, you know, spoken about this before, but inclusion is so interesting, in that businesses treat it, or often treat it unlike any other part of their business and then wonder why it doesn't do what they want it to do. It's like you wouldn't set up a new department, put someone in it, give them no resource, no plan, no access to any strategic direction, and expect it to magically be successful. Look what you've just done there, you've set something up to fail. So it's about taking that mindset, forgetting that it's inclusion, taking the same mindset you have every other part of your business and applying it to this as well. So what's your data? And it probably the answer is patchy or non-existent, but okay, that gives you some way to start with, right? Because you can take that baseline and fill the gaps. What's the data? What's your vision? How are you going to get there? How do you know it's going to work? How you regularly reporting on it? How do you know it's making a difference? The same questions you ask of every other business unit, you should set inclusion up the same way.

I guess the other thing I would say is if I see another one year long strategy and impacts action plan for inclusion, my head's going to fall off. Yeah, like one year is not long enough.

Maddie So we went like in January and it's December and Yeah, yeah. Yet I don't really like that agenda anymore...

Addison It's like that's the thing, like the short termism is like that. Similarly, you wouldn't apply the same short termism to another business unit. So why do it here, especially in the realm of people change, which takes a long time, three year plans, five year plans, ten year plans, like get some long term thinking, really think about what actually is your vision. And then work back in sense of how do you get there and what are the things you need to do and that, will, thinking at that length of time almost automatically encourages you to

A - think bigger anyway as you've got more time, you're not going, my goodness, how am I going to fitness into the 12 months next year. Then it also you think more about what are your regular touch points, you're not just doing something once you're doing it several times, how is that feeding into the sort of timelines and cycles of the organization. So it makes it, almost forces you by thinking that long term too. Weave into everything else and that's what it needs to be. You know, it needs to not be a nice little separate thing over here. It

needs to be absolutely woven into everything in the business. And everyone has responsibility for it.

Maddie

Absolutely - And I love that, and call out a vision as well, because so often and there so much work happening and businesses just don't have a vision for it. It's like you're not going to complete it in five years. So what is the priority? And show me an organization or anything that's completed inclusion? I'd love to know. Let's be really, really specific. Be really clear on, here is where we would be proud to stand behind, and in this time frame, it doesn't have to be. Here's why we would be proud to stand behind forever, because that moves all the time. But against this time frame, this is what we'd be really proud to stand behind, with the knowledge that then we'll have another vision that we are aiming to stand behind as well.

But I actually love that call out to it because I think again, just linking back then to celebrating successes, that gives you a really easy kind of hook to hang that celebration on, because it's contributing towards something that you get to. And you know, as with all things people and similar to kind of culture, you don't have to design that vision in a boardroom at the top of a business, that can be an inclusive, collaborative process that engages your business in. This is where we want to get to. And I know that and there's an element of reticence in that, because I think a lot of organizations feel their employees might feel disillusioned by their inclusion agenda and

therefore going out and asking to kind of almost start again and let's see where we want to be, this might feel difficult, but I think if it's genuinely positioned, resourced facilitator to your point Addy, it's not a person side of desk with no support access to leadership, etc. If it's positioned in the right way, people will see the authenticity behind it and get involved and engaged in it. And we see that time and time again with organizations that we work with, why they say to us, Well, let's do it. But our fear is that people won't engage because they're disillusioned and they always do. They always say, Yeah, yeah, I love that. And I love that kind of call out to the vision piece as well.

Addison I guess sort of the final sort of thoughts, to kind of wrap up these thoughts, I think as inclusion and diversity professionals, it's for us to have high expectations of ourselves and to challenge ourselves and to think of ourselves as a key part of the business. Like genuinely think it not just hope for it, but really feel it, and it's for the organizations to equip their I & D professionals to do that...

Maddie and equipment & support. I think that's a really big support lens on there, because that is a basic element of emotional labour. There is a big emotional burden to carry when you're doing this because you see all of the great, which is to say motivate thing is so inspiring. It's what kind of makes us do what we want to do, but there's another side of things that motivates us, which is the fire from the feeling kind of annoyed or upset or angry at what we see that happens on

the other side of that coin, too. And I think sometimes when you work in this space a lot, there is just a need for support to get it, whether it's kind of headspace, a network of people who do a similar thing, whatever that might look like for you, maybe kind of a coach in your own organization, whatever that might look like, offering those I & D professionals the support and compassion that we would do again in any other area of the business that is so emotionally challenging and emotionally charged. And so, you know, some of the conversations that we have and I'm always really conscious of this as inclusion consultants as well, and I'm sure you in the team are Addy too, but we come off, you know, we do focus groups of clients understanding kind of key issues and you come off of those and they are, you know, in some of them I've cried with the people who have been on them... And sometimes you've managed and supported someone through a lot of anger, and you come off of that and it's like, okay, now can you just go and do a quick weekly budgeting call? It's like..

Addison ... No, I need to go and lie down and cry because..

Maddie so I think there is a real kind of call out that this is an area that people who work in it are super passionate about it, but that passion comes with a toll, I guess as well. And so that support that you were talking about Addy, I think that organizations need to be giving I think needs to be considerate of that as well.

Addison Thank you for joining us for this episode. My deepest thanks go to Maddie Wollorton-Banks, director of business Consulting at Grant Thornton. Thank you so much for joining me today Maddie.

Maddie Yep, and thank you for having me.

Addison For more information about Inclusive Employers, visit the Inclusive Employers website at Inclusive Employers Dot Co UK, where you can also find top tips, resources, webinars and training to help make inclusion an everyday reality for your employees in the UK and beyond.

Outtro You've been listening to "Talking Inclusion with", the podcast from Inclusive Employers. If you've enjoyed listening to this podcast, then please subscribe and leave a review from wherever you get your podcasts.

Find out more about Inclusive Employers at
<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/>