

Steps to Change Podcast: Evelyn Espinal

Allen

Hello and welcome to this episode of Steps to Change, the podcast where we explore learning and development topics, organizational behavior change strategies, and practical ways to inspire people to act differently. On this episode, we're discussing the growing headwinds that face DEI efforts in the US and around the globe, and ways organizations can continue their efforts as the landscape shifts. Joining us on this episode is Evelyn Espinal, the founder and CEO of Ideas Global. Welcome, Evelyn. How are you?

Evelyn

I'm doing well, Allen.

Allen

And thanks for joining us on this episode, Evelyn. And for the listeners out there who may not know you, tell us a little bit about yourself, your background in the DEI space, and the great work that you're leading on at Ideas Global.

Evelyn

Thank you for that opportunity, Allen. It's always hard to know how much you speak about yourself when you get this question. But I've had the pleasure of working in corporate companies, mostly Fortune 50s, multinational companies for the last 35 years. It's shocking to say. I've particularly focused in roles that are around inclusion, engagement, employee satisfaction, and diversity.

In the last role which I held was the head of, Global Head of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for Unilever, which I actually just left in July to start my own business, Ideas Global. IDEAS stands for Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Activism and Social Impact. And it is a social network which I'm building of ED&I practitioners. The idea being that in these times of challenge and struggle, we need to come together as a community to learn from each other, to support each other. And I'll be doing similar podcasts and other learning opportunities for the members of the network.

Allen

Wow, Evelyn, I mean, just the 35 years of experience in this space, I'm sure you've come across a lot of, you know, evolutions of the DEI approach and, you know, headwinds that if they face the past, which we'll pick up on as we go throughout this episode. But, you know, congratulations on, you know, starting a wonderful, a wonderful organization like Ideas Global. And I wish you all the success as you continue on this journey.

Evelyn

Thanks, Allen. I'm a little scared, a little terrified. You know how that is. The comfort zone is to stay in corporate America, to stay in the roles that I've been doing all of my career. But actually, I think that the times call for difference. I think this is a moment where the future is a little uncertain and uncharted, and we all get to step out of our comfort zones and be brave and try something new.

Allen

Absolutely, and that's going to be a key theme that we're going to pick up on as we go through this conversation, right? Trying something new, be brave. What's the phrase they say? Jump and the net will appear or something like that.

Evelyn

There you go, there you go.

Allen

So, I think that's very much maybe where a lot of us feel like we are at the moment. So great. So wonderful to have you as we talk about really, really topical subject at the moment. We know that the DEI sector is facing a lot of headwinds in the US and around the globe. And so, I just want to spend a little time thinking about what those headwinds are and then picking your brain about some ways to strategically address them and maybe some bits of wisdom that you can share for our listeners to take away if they're sitting in a space in the DEI sector.

So, on that first bit, let's think about the headwinds that we're currently facing. What are some of the headwinds that you see as key challenges with the DEI sector?

Evelyn

I've had a wonderful opportunity in my new role to talk to lot of Chief Diversity Officers and other practitioners in this space. I'm hearing a lot of common themes on what the challenges look like now and in the future. I think one of the things that's happening is that DEI has become highly politicized. I think that people are using it not necessarily for what it's intended to be.

So, just giving it different definitions, applying it to situations where you actually wouldn't necessarily apply DEI for, and creating what I would say a weaponization of a process and a system that is really intended to prevent discrimination and harm to be done to people within the workplace. So that's, I think, one of the biggest themes that I see.

I think the other is the backlash that the consumer and employees are putting on for companies that are not necessarily doing the right thing around DEI. So, we know that DEI comes into play when you're thinking about eliminating discrimination in hiring practices, when you're thinking about eliminating bias in decisions that are being made around people's careers.

But it doesn't necessarily mean that we need to be signing, you know, corporate mandates around how we're going to treat certain communities or making outlandish statements about how much money we're going to spend in a particular area. So, what I see happening is people are really tired of companies making false statements, moving, being so reactionary, coming into the space not for the right reasons. And then as we see, not having the fortitude to stay in the space when things get a little harder.

And then lastly, we're seeing that uncertainty that comes with the new administration and uncertainty just into how far the attack and the challenge will go. Because we already know from the

past four years ago, what we see this administration challenging education, challenging DEI programs, challenging training. So, we can expect more of that to come.

Allen

Evelyn, I want to pick up on the politicizing of DEI. It's that vocal minority in a lot of ways that's really making those kind of strong noises to say DEI isn't good, DEI should be reduced, DEI is not what it says, right.

Evelyn

Yes.

Allen

But interestingly, if you look at the data, we know that, you know, of the Fortune 500 companies, many of them are actually doubling down on DEI. They're not moving away from it. The reality of the situation is the data says that actually there's still a lot of people who believe it's important.

Evelyn

Yeah, so back in June when companies like John Deere started to make public statements that they were pulling away from DEI, I did my own research to sort of look at, what are these companies that are being so vocal and they're pulling away? And one of the common threads that they had is that they had first acknowledged their commitment to DEI after February 2020. So, you could see that it was a reaction to what was going on in the media, what was happening in society.

And at the time probably had all of the right intentions. But the minute that they received any sort of pushback, such as Robbie Starbucks, who is being incredibly vocal, then their board members are the ones that were saying, look, we really need to pull back and protect the integrity of the company, right? And I think if you are doing something for the wrong reasons, that probably is the right thing for you to do.

I think the difference that I see is those companies that have stated values, that are longstanding values around the culture that they have, around the way they treat their employees, around how they view the importance of their entire consumer base. Those are the companies that are doubling down. I had an opportunity a few weeks ago to meet with the President of HRC, the Human Rights Campaign, and many of the companies that were pulling out were citing, and we're no longer going to fill out the Human Rights Campaign assessment.

And their data said exactly what you're saying, that the majority of the companies, 80 to 85 % of companies that are already using their services are doubling down, are seeing that this is a moment when you are being attacked, when there are these challenges, the best thing to do is to lean into what you truly believe in. And that companies that were doing it for the wrong reasons, that didn't really have the level of innovation and insight around what goes next, what else to do, are the ones that are beginning to pull back.

Now, I do think Meta is a different case. Just last week, Meta has issued a statement that they are going to be dissolving their effective immediately. They've dissolved their team. Their Chief Diversity Officer is now going to focus on engagement and accessibility to areas that are firmly entrenched inside the DEI space, by the way. But they've also said that they are not going to be looking at diverse slates, in terms of hiring and yet they want to continue to ensure that they have fair outcomes in their process.

So, I think it's gonna still to be seen, so how are they gonna do that? If that's not the piece that was working and you can imagine the reasons that it's not working, right? If you've got a bogey on your back to make sure you have a diverse slate and you are putting candidates in there that are not at the level that they need to be, then that's a process that isn't working, right?

And so, if their data tells them that process isn't working, I firmly believe they need to change it. I think it's gonna be really interesting to see what companies like Meta, who have had their commitment to diversity for longer than the last four or five years, how they are going to manage the new tide.

Allen

And so one of the headwinds that stand out for me in what you were just sharing there is actually almost a folly of the DEI sector itself, in a way, right, we we we sometimes we we drive things forward for all the, for all the kind of, you know, as I say maybe the right reasons but actually we needed to take a step back and say what are we actually trying to achieve here, what what's the mission about and is this bringing everyone along, if you will, so that people feel like, you know, the kind of, the core elements of DEI are useful rather than something that feels divisive?

Evelyn

You know, I think that's exactly right. What's coming up for me is ESG. When you think about ESG, you have the UN's focus on the global goals, which are baked into many companies' focus on ESG. You also have government standards and requirements that look at whether companies are actually doing what they say they're going to be doing in ESG. That's something that does not exist in ED&I.

ED&I doesn't have an authoritative body. It doesn't have one standard of approach. It doesn't even have standards of metrics and measures that you need to look at. So, it does lend itself for companies to sort of bump around and try to figure out what is the right thing for us to do.

I think this is a moment for us to rethink that and whether what should emerge are coalitions of DEI practitioners with the experience of not only succeeding but also failing and learning from those failures to come together and say, what's the right approach here? What are the common elements that are working effectively across multiple companies that we should be putting in place? And then what are the nice to haves that may have a good impact, but honestly are not going to move the bottom line? And then lastly, what are the things that are truly fluff and that we shouldn't be doing, and that if they are important to our employees, our employees should be leaning in?

Allen

Mm hmm. Absolutely. It looks like you've got a clear mission here that Ideas Global could probably lead right there. It sounds like, you know, yeah.

Evelyn

Did you read into that?

Allen

No, I mean, we joke, but actually, I mean, it sounds you're absolutely right. I agree with you, right? We need some sort of common language, if you will. And on previous episode, we talked about the rebranding of DEI, right? That's one of the kind of pivots that people are doing because of these headwinds.

Evelyn

Yes.

Allen

And so, you know, maybe that's part of this process, less of a rebranding, but more of a, you know, let's come together. Let's get a common language. Let's have common standards so that, you know. This isn't this isn't a new conversation, if you will. Right. You know, DEI has been, you know, something that has been throughout key moments in time. And I just like to hear your reflection on your, you know, on your years in this sector and kind of maybe for the listeners out there who this is sort of their first time these kind of headwinds feel, they've felt them. But actually, we've been here before, not to be reductive of the challenges we're facing, but we have been here before. And it's a journey, right.

Evelyn

Yeah, you know, I think you can't talk about DEI without looking at the history of the US, right? I think global companies outside of the US look to the US to see what they're doing. And it's because we've lived a life that's been entrenched in issues of diversity and different groups coming together and trying to find common ground. From the Emancipation Proclamation to, you know, the Supreme Court saying that it's illegal to prohibit same-sex marriages.

Our legal system has also been completely entwined in what diversity and inclusion means in the US. I think if we find a place where it starts to enter the workplace, we go back to the 1960s. And this was a time of a social movement where legal changes were happening that were reshaping the corporate world. So, in 1961, we had President John F. Kennedy signing an executive order.

I think it was 10925. I'm testing myself on that. But it was the first time that you saw the language affirmative action. And it was the first time that we were acknowledging that there were inherent challenges in fairness of how one group in our country, Black Americans, were facing the same challenges that another group in our country, White Americans, were. And they were being disadvantaged, right?

Then in 1964, we had the Civil Rights Act. And this was when it became illegal to discriminate in hiring and promotions based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. That is a critical pivotal time

in our history. And what you see after those times are companies bringing in people to help them decipher what does this mean for us, right? I came into this work in earnest, not in a consulting firm, but into corporates in 1996, after Texaco was sued by six black employees, they were charging racial discrimination and Texaco settled that lawsuit for nearly 180 million back in 1996. So, you can imagine the backlash that that formed.

Allen

Mm-hmm.

Evelyn

Companies immediately bringing in people to say, well, we don't want to be in that same situation. Let's make sure we're not doing the same things that Texaco was doing. So, in those moments, it's the top part of the S curve when there is investment and interest in bringing in the expertise and bringing in support people around building the strategy and determining what actions need to be taken.

But inevitably, external challenges come, and you start to see that ebbs and flows and people pull back and you wait for the next resurgence, right? And so, for us, the next resurgence was the Me Too movement and Black Lives Matter, right? So, where we are right now is I think we are beginning the dip of the S-curve. We're starting to see more and more companies questioning, what is the approach that I should take and being very vocal in the difference I would say that from the past is how instantaneously information is being shared, right?

So, Meta put out an internal email and that email came out in the morning and by 2 o'clock in the afternoon, it was available as public information for anybody to Google and be able to read exactly what they're saying to their employees. So that instantaneous movement of information makes it even harder to navigate this field and to figure out what's my next step.

Allen

OK, so lots to think about in terms of those headwinds and historically how those things have showed up and how the different chapters of DEI have evolved.

Evelyn, I was at a conference last month where I was listening to a CDO talk about why data is going to be really important for strategic focus and driving DEI initiatives, you know, against the coming headwinds that are coming down the line. And one of the things that was really interesting that they said was, you know, is that if you know the problem you're trying to solve for, so for example, if you can tell within the data to your leadership team, we are seeing attrition specifically in our black and brown employees, let's say, right? So, we're seeing the number happen down the line, this is a problem.

So, we need to solve that problem by creating a type of inclusion or equity program or really addressing that systemic issue that they're dealing with. And what stood out for me there was that's a way when people are saying, you know, why are we doing DE&I work? If you have that set of data that says in our organization right now, we have a problem like this, so we need to be doing initiatives that are going to reduce that problem. And I'd just be curious to hear your reflections on that data

piece and how it can be useful to lean into that data when you feel like maybe you don't have the buy-in from leadership, if you will.

Evelyn

Yeah, I tend to come from the medical model of doing organization development work. Diagnose, diagnose, diagnose, right? And the way for you to diagnose what your issues are is to look specifically at your data. I was currently working with an organization who is global and has a large office in Turkey. And the CEO of the company went to Turkey to see what were the issues that they were facing. And this company has also said that they're pulling back from diversity at the moment that they really want to focus more on profitability.

And the head of HR was giving a fantastic presentation, and she focused a lot on the diversity work that they were doing. And the CEO asked her, why? Why are you bringing up, like leaning so heavily? Why is your strategy leaning so heavily on DEI?

And her response was beautiful. It's like in my neck of the woods, the issues that I have to deal with is diversity of race and ethnicity, diversity of religion, diversity of social economic class, these things impact my workforce every single day. I can't ignore that. So, if there's not a corporate global initiative that completely makes sense, but locally, we need to do what's right for our business in order for you to see the profitability that you want to see. So, when the data substantiates the decisions that you're making and the work areas that you're focused on, what better position do you want to be in than to be able to look a CEO in the face and say, here's what my data is telling me.

That's what you do whenever you're thinking about, I don't know, product segmentation. It's what you do when you're thinking about how you're deploying your workforce, your sales force. So, it isn't any different than decisions that are made in how the business is run.

Allen

I love that. Love that. Diagnose, diagnose, diagnose, right? There's a big sentiment of people feeling afraid about the headwinds that are in the DEI sector, right? They're nervous. There's a lot of emotion and visceral connection to this conversation and absolutely there should be, because this is emotional for people, right. This is people's lives that we're talking about, right.

Evelyn

Exactly.

Allen

This is people's lived experiences and it's hard to disconnect those two things. But actually, one way to support you know keeping driving forward against those headwinds is that data can really help make, move it into an objective space where you can maybe reduce some of that emotional fear or anger or what have you by leaning into, you know, what is objectively that we're trying to solve for. So, you know you can still, you know, create solutions that are going to help people individually but then you're being looking after yourself as somebody in the DEI space, who you know this stuff can be really raw and hard every day to wake up and address. So just thinking about that as a, as a, way

to think about the work, you know, how can you go up to an objective level to help you keep moving forward when it can feel really, really tough, right?

Evelyn

Yeah.

Allen

I want to turn our attention now to thinking about, you know, listeners out there who might be sitting in CDO roles or, you know, working in the diversity space in their organization, or just passionate about it, given all these headwinds that we've talked about, what ways would you be encouraging people in the diversity space to be thinking about strategic planning to either overcome these headwinds or to continue on with their mission within their organizations?

Evelyn

So, I think the first thing that comes to mind is what you mentioned in terms of the rebranding, right? At the end of the day, what's important is that we're concentrating on the impact that our work is having on the organization and its employees. And a Rose by any other name is still a Rose, right? So, the reality is that if there is backlash in your organization around the word equity, around diversity and inclusion, if you need to change it to engagement and accessibility, change it to engagement and accessibility.

Just ensure that the work that you're doing is still focusing on having the impact of bringing fair outcomes for your employees, whether that is through their benefits program or through their promotion opportunities or through the hiring process, right?

So, I think the second thing that I would focus on is building your external network outside of your organization. We have some incredible CDOs, people that have just a huge experience of wins and losses in these columns and truly know that this is a moment in time and things would get better. But you can always get bogged down by the reality of what's happening in your organization and perhaps lose sight of the hope of what's coming next.

And the best way to, I think, to not lose that hope is to connect with other people who are in different situations than you are, outside of your industry, smaller organizations, larger organizations, to give you a different perspective, but making sure that you are talking to other folks so that you're not reinventing the wheel, so that you're not feeling that you're the only one going through this and asking yourself, am I crazy? Right?

So that you've got friends in the industry that are going to get your back who you can call to vent about the conversation you just had with your CEO and getting their perspective on the conversation they had with their CEO, right?

And then I think lastly, is keeping that hope alive, right? I always think about letting my light shine. That's one of those things that inspires and keeps me focused. And so, ensuring that you are putting yourself in a situation where you have work-life balance, where you are feeling healthy, where you're thinking about what's right for you personally within a challenging and stressful work environment.

Allen

Absolutely, I think, I love that notion of a community is going to help get you through tough times. You know, we sometimes it can feel like you're an island in this, in this work and that all the approaches you're trying to take are just hit, you know, coming up against brick walls, if you will.

But when you remember that there's other people out there, you know, who can give you advice, as you say, vent, let it all out and help guide your thinking, I think that could be a really, really powerful way to remember that there's support out there.

And you know, the hope is so important, right? That hope is a really crucial part. For each of us to remember that today I'm going to wake up and I'm going to keep driving forward because I'm going to have that hope that actually what I'm doing now is going to make a difference today, tomorrow and further down the line, even when it doesn't necessarily feel like it might be.

Evelyn

Yeah.

Allen

So, building on that hope, Evelyn, let's move on to like action planning, right? So, we've talked a lot about the headwinds that people are facing. We've talked about strategies they can think about, but if all of this is just thoughts and words and there's no people putting into action, then nothing's going to change. So, from your perspective, based on the things that we've been discussing, any advice for people out there listening to help them achieve the above strategies? What would be your suggestions for how to put these plans into action?

Evelyn

You know, there are four key things that come to mind for me. I think one is for companies to be thinking about the impact that they have on communities. There are ways that companies can start working with young people in high school, in college, to encourage them on the right field of study, to support them in the skill building that they need to have, to even help them understand through internships what it's like to work in that corporate setting. I think more focus on that will give organizations a natural larger pool to hire from for open opportunities.

I think the second is around the impact and fairness that the benefits for the organizations have. So, are your benefits taking into account the diversity of your entire population? Are you, let's say for example, you're relocating somebody to an assignment. Are you considering just legally married spouses? Are you thinking broader than that? Are you thinking about the accommodations that people need to have?

So really focusing on the fairness of your benefits. I think looking at your talent processes to ensure that they are providing equitable outcomes and having a positive impact on your organization. So, what's the outcome of your succession planning, of your promotion opportunities, of your learning opportunities? Are you being fair and equitable in how you are managing those processes?

And then I think the last one, which to me is one of the most important ones, is looking at the quality and skill of the managers that you have in your organization. Do you measure the impact that they're having on their teams?

Are you looking at, you know, there's an example that I can give you of an organization that I worked in where we looked at the gender appointment ratio. And we actually looked at specifically for each manager for every opportunity that they had to hire to promote. or to expand somebody's opportunities? What percentage of the time that they do that with a man versus a woman? It's a lagging indicator, but it raises consciousness and awareness of patterns of bias that can be operating within your organization. So, the more that you think about getting that data down to the individual level and showing people this is the results of your action, this is the impact that you're having on our business. Science says that that's the best way to get the behavioral change that you need for your organization. So those would be the four for me.

Thinking about community impact, focusing on the benefits that you have in your organization and ensuring that they're having an impact that is fair and equitable. Looking at your talent processes and ensuring that the outcomes of those are being fair and equitable and focusing on those important manager roles, those leaders of leaders, leaders of teams making sure that they're clear on how their behavior is supporting the values and the exposed goals of your organization.

Allen

Yeah, I love all that. That's a really good food for thought there. And I'm thinking about the work that Steps does. And I'm picking up on that last point that you talked about. So having all these strategies are super important.

But if your leadership and your management teams and your people people don't necessarily know what that looks like from a behavioral perspective, of actually, how do I show up and do this in the best way? How do I reduce bias in my thinking? How do I you know, go out there in the communities and be the best player that I can be?

It's all well and good to say this is what we're going to do. But if people don't know how to show up in that space, you know, that's really where Steps is valuable and we can come in and use our approach to kind of bring that learning to life for people and connect those dots between sort of theory and behavior, right.

Evelyn

Right

Allen

And I just think as well what I'm hearing more and more from all the clients that we're speaking to is all of that and really clear messaging from leadership saying and this is why we're doing this. This is why it's connected to the values of the organization. And this is a non-compromising approach, right? And it's absolutely the driving North star for what we're trying to achieve.

Evelyn

Non-compromising and unapologetic. If this is aligned with who you are and what you think that your organization needs to do. Then do it. Stand behind it.

Allen

Absolutely. Those are some great words of wisdom, Evelyn. Thank you very much. And that's about all the time we have left for this episode. Thank you, Evelyn, for joining us. This has been a really engaging and thought-provoking discussion. Do you want to tell the listeners where they can find out more about you or connect with you on socials?

Evelyn

Sure, sure. So, the best way to contact me is at Evelyn at ideas-global.com. The organization is new, it's thriving, and we're looking for more people that are interested in connecting and really wanting to work together to have a better day for DEI in the future.

Allen

Absolutely. And we'll put all those details in the show notes for people if they were maybe driving their cars and couldn't write that down, if you will. But you can find all those ways to link with Evelyn in the show notes. And thank you listeners for joining us on this episode. If you'd like to know more about Steps and Steps to Change, make sure to visit our website, find us on LinkedIn, sign up to our newsletter. All those links will be available in the show notes.

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