

DEIA Fatigue: Revitalizing DEI Efforts in Organizations with Dethra Giles

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Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Dethra Giles, people and culture strategist, DEIB champion, keynote speaker, and CHRO at ExecuPrep.

Shari Simpson: Dethra thank you so much for sitting down and talking with me today. It's a pleasure. It's my pleasure. So we are talking all things DEI. At our organization, we actually call it DEIA. So if I say that, you'll know. And accessibility. Yes, accessibility. And I want to start with DEIA fatigue. Yes. How can organizations combat what we're seeing there?

Dethra Giles: Well, we have to back up to why we're at this point in the first place. And it's because so many people jumped on DEIA because it was the sexy thing at the time with no real strategy attached to it. It was, let's have some celebration of whatever month it is and a few potlucks along the way. And then every now and then we'll bring in a unconscious biased person to do some training. It was never attached to performance, profits, or productivity. And as a result, people got tired of talking about it with seeing no results. We haven't seen any substantive change. There hasn't been any change to our systems, and there hasn't been any real change to our outcomes for everybody on a broader scale. And so people are tired of not seeing results. Once we start attaching results to DEIA, that's when people will be ready to re-engage.

Shari Simpson: Do you think that's the biggest challenge then in sustaining DEI programs?

Dethra Giles: I think yes. Part of it is, like many initiatives, if it's the sexy in thing right now, everybody's on top of it. When it's not sexy anymore, no one cares. And so we have to make sure that we get it beyond being what's sexy to the real idea of how does this company make money and this is the way they do that. Until we attach it to a dollar, no one will care.

Shari Simpson: How have you seen, or maybe you have a success story you can share where you've seen an organization not become fatigued, but that they continue to push their DEIA efforts and it's had the positive impact that we know it can have.

Dethra Giles: Right. I'll give you one better. I'll give you an organization that was fatigued and we brought them back from fatigue. Oh, I love it. So this was an organization, I won't give the name because NDAs. But anyway, so this is an organization that did what everyone else did. They put the black box up and all the sexy things at the time to say, yeah, we really care about this, but they didn't. So we went into the organization. We asked, how are you using these ERGs that you have these people in these silos and they're not talking to each other? They're not connecting and they really aren't impacting company strategy. How are you using them? They really said they

weren't. And what we looked at is this organization spent a lot of money paying people to go out into the community and do these listening sessions. So they would go to different communities and say, hey, we're releasing this person into this demographic. And they were paying an external firm to do this. I said, give me the numbers. How much are you paying this external firm? Millions. Oh, my goodness. Millions. I said, why are you paying this external firm to do this, to have these sessions with these demographics, when the ERGs within your organizations are that demographic? Use the ERGs. Immediately, they brought millions back into their budget. And I said, this is what DEIA is. This is how your company makes money. And you are missing it because you have this esoteric idea of what it is, and you aren't making it practical. And their own people in the organization that were the DEI leads weren't having these conversations. Just by doing that, DEI saved that company millions. And not only did it save them millions, it will probably make them millions because this is a demographic they're trying to release into, get their direct impact, make adjustments on the fly without paying for it, and they make money and save money.

Shari Simpson: When you had that conversation with them, was it an aha moment for them?

Dethra Giles: Oh my gosh. First of all, one, they were angry, rightfully so, because they said, we pay people to do this. Why did we have to pay another external consultant to come into our organization and tell us this was possible? And here's what I told them. You don't listen to those people. Yeah, they I'm sure they've been telling you this and you don't listen. And so what do they do? They get quiet. Just I'm not going to argue and fight with you anymore about this. They're tired of fighting. So the people who are supposed to lead the charge, they're tired of fighting. And the people who are getting results are tired of hearing it. And so everybody's tired. And then they said, wait a minute, we weren't listening and they were telling us this. Now, in full transparency, they said we hadn't thought about that. But there are other things we have in mind that would absolutely do the same thing.

Shari Simpson: How do HR professionals reverse this fatigue if they aren't preventing it, right? Let's say they've already crossed that bridge and they're in fatigue state. How do they pull back?

Dethra Giles: Here's one thing I tell, I'm a professor and so I am adamant about my students. I tell my students one thing, you are a business person that does HR, not an HR professional that does business. Until HR people get entrenched in the dollars and cents of their organizations, until they are very intimately familiar with the P&Ls, and the revenue statements and how we make money, who are our top clients. We have to be so entrenched in how the company makes money that they value what we say because we are business people and they know this person knows how we make money and they know how to make us more of it. That will be the only time we're able to pull them back to getting out of DEI fatigue.

Shari Simpson: Well, and it's such it's such a good point. We were

talking to somebody earlier about business acumen, and we were making that connection that when you have business acumen as an HR professional, you open the door for conversations that people didn't realize you have expertise in.

Dethra Giles: Absolutely. It's amazing. Absolutely. That's the one reason people often ask me. I've had my company since 2007. How have you been successful as a consultant? How have you gotten clients like Louis Vuitton, Millwood Hennessy, or Kaiser Permanente? How have you done that? And I tell them, it's because when I walk in the door, I don't ask about HR. I ask them how they make money and where are they losing money. And when they know, oh, wait a minute, this is what she cares about, it changes the whole conversation.

Shari Simpson: What tactics have you helped HR implement that are fresh, new, engaging, a different way of approaching diversity, equity, and inclusion?

Dethra Giles: So one thing I've done is I talk about doing two sessions tomorrow that aren't around DEI. One is called followership, the leadership training you didn't know you needed. And the other is round conflict. When I tell people we need to learn how to fight. Yes. I tell people we run the numbers and it costs U.S. companies about five hundred and sixty billion dollars from unresolved conflict. That's a lot of money. And it's simply because people don't have the conversational competence to engage in an opportunity where we might disagree. What do we disagree about more than our differences? I mean, our similarities, we have that covered, but our differences are killing us. And when people learn how to have those conversations, it's a game changer. And so that's one area, I'm like, if we learn how to have these tough, hard conversations where there's a potential for escalated emotion and disagreement, we could change the DEI landscape. The other thing I talk about, especially in the US, I work with international companies, but in the US we've often reconciled DEI to race. And so we leave out a whole populations of people who are like, well, that's not my issue. My issue is I'm LGBTQIA plus and I can't hide it. I can't fit in. Everybody knows I am or I'm differently abled. And we talk about return to work. The workplace was never accessible for me. So now you know what? I did a talk one time and I said, can you imagine someone telling Stephen Hawkins he wasn't qualified? Right. But that's what some of our organizations do. If you can't come in here, you're not qualified. You would tell one of the most elite minds of our time before he passed that he's not qualified to work in your organization simply because he can't come into your office. Are we serious? And so having those conversations about expanding the dimensions of diversity we consider when we're talking about DEI.

Shari Simpson: What is your take on organizations making the shift to have programs to bring those with records into their organizations more than we've ever seen before? Because it's I mean, there's the Jeffrey Krasenich wrote a book called Untapped Talent, and he's he's very passionate about this. And it's It's fascinating for me to see that. And I'm not going to get political beyond saying that we have

candidates now that have records. And so at the highest level, at the highest role of our country, we're having this debate, right? We're having this conversation. Are they qualified? Are they not qualified? What can they bring to the table? What are your thoughts on that? I mean, not necessarily the political stuff, but organizations.

Dethra Giles: Here's what I will say. We've always had candidates that have records. Right. And I'm so passionate about our justice involved individuals having opportunities. It is so unfair to tell someone, hey, we put you in prison. And with the idea was that was to pay your debt to society. And now that that debt is paid, we're going to hold it over your head for the rest of your life. Yeah, that makes no sense. The idea is that they were paying their debt. The debt is done. Why are we still treating them as debtors? It's not fair. I actually helped a client of mine get a TED talk around this. Her name is Shelly Winter. It's an amazing TEDx talk. Co-chair on it. I've done four myself. I said, you need to do a talk around this. She fought Microsoft and got a position out of California, became their leading salesperson, just as involved individual. This is a person they would have missed. She was their number one salesperson for years running, and they would have missed out on her because she had a record. It's crazy. And then the thing that gets me is we talk about how long does someone have to pay for the things they did in the past? They pull up old posts and say, look, they did this. It was 20 years ago. Why are we still holding over their head? The same issue for justice involved individuals. For some of them, it was they were 19. They're 45 now, right? I am not the person I was when I was 19. It's just crazy. So I think, again, that's another dimension of diversity that we don't discuss as openly as we should. We've reconciled it to one thing, but that's the dimension. There's a war for talent and you're going to leave out a huge population of people? Come on.

Shari Simpson: I like that you mentioned things that are said on social media. I will not tell you what I came across the other day. It was on my own social feed from, I think it was like 10 or 12 years ago. And I was like, I was appalled. I was like, I showed my husband, I was like, this is who you married. What is this? And it just goes to show that people change, people grow, people look back on their lives and are embarrassed at who they were and made a conscious effort to be something different, something positive.

Dethra Giles: And you learn more. I'll give the great example. I'll give an example of myself. I am unapologetically a Christian, but as I've grown in my spiritual walk and actually learning what the Bible says for myself, there are things I believed when I was younger as a Christian that I'm like, that is absolutely not what the Bible says. And so as you grow, you learn more, you become more educated, and you get more exposure, and you realize the information I had back then wasn't accurate, and I made adjustments based on the information I have now, or even talking about just as involved, what's accessible to me now. There were things that weren't accessible to me as resources that are now accessible. I don't have to live that life anymore.

Shari Simpson: As organizations have, like, leaned into DEI and then

pulled back, right? We've seen, you know, it was really exciting to see, you know, chief diversity officers being hired. And then we saw them being let go. And for all the reasons you mentioned earlier, but if you're in an organization now where the pendulum is kind of swinging back and they're like, oh, wait, we actually should have kept these initiatives, but you're dealing with leadership who doesn't necessarily buy in. What is the talk track for that HR person? And I'm a huge proponent of data. I'm sure there is something about it rooted in data that you're going to share. What's your advice?

Dethra Giles: So here, I tell people to do a couple of things. One, talk about DEI with specificity. Okay, people don't like open loops. Their brain just has to fill a loop. And if I confuse buyers, don't buy. And what we're trying to sell is DEIA. And if we make it too broad, too esoteric, too up there in the sky, the executives that have the money to make this stuff work, they don't have the time or capacity to figure it out for themselves. So if we just say, we need more diversity, cool. I'm not going to figure out what that looks like. So we have to be the ones to say, hey, here's what we're missing and here's why it matters. I'll give you the example I use about the organization that had these ERGs and they could save millions. Things like that say, what do we need and why? Oh, we're trying to expand into a Latino market, a Latinx market. Hey, we need to engage because we have no Latinx people in leadership. Now it makes sense. Who's going to guide us through this journey? None of us know this market. None of us know this culture. None of us know what they need and how to give them, get the services to them. We need someone and we need to pay them well to help us navigate this market. Make it make sense for them. Until we do that, they're never going to stop and take the time to figure it out. Now, should they? Yes. Will they? No. Yeah.

Shari Simpson: It's interesting that the comment you made about we won't know that culture. I was talking to somebody the other day about their programs, and they were sharing that their organization has a high Spanish speaking population. And so instead of taking the approach of we're going to bring in English as a secondary language classes, they went the opposite direction and brought in Spanish as a secondary language class. and they added a cultural class as well to understand the cultural dynamics of their Mexican-speaking Spanish population because they realized that there were some cultural things that were happening where employees were saying yes to things like overtime out of politeness, not because they wanted to do it. And it was It was such a simple idea, but also such a great aha moment to go, yeah, why are we doing ESL instead of cultural components and Spanish language training if that's the population that you're going to serve? Absolutely.

Dethra Giles: And here's the thing. That's where we as DEI professionals have to be the ones that make it make sense. And left to their own devices, they will do things. OK, like it's better. Let's make them assimilate. Wait a minute. We're going into a majority Spanish speaking population. The majority of our employees are Spanish speaking. The majority of our clients are also Spanish speaking. Why

would we give ESL classes when it seems like the thing that makes us money? It's Spanish speaking. So the people who don't speak Spanish, they're the ones that need this information. Let's get them Spanish speaking. That's what makes sense. Well, you have the DEI professionals who are saying, look, let's put the dollars to this. You can do more if we train people to speak Spanish versus training people to speak English. Well, it'll probably cost less, too. It will cost less because there are less of you. Absolutely. And then you have this willing. And then, well, here's what that does. That changes the idea and culture of the organization. Imagine how the Spanish speakers feel when the organization says, there's nothing wrong with you. we're going to train these people to speak Spanish. Now, they're even more inclined, like, you know what, maybe I can improve my English speaking skills. Not because I need to, but because I would love to help my colleagues learn my language. And I can help them better if I speak their language well also. And now you have this mutually beneficial thing going on. And then you create this loyalty to an organization that values me and my culture.

Shari Simpson: I think that is a point that we miss in this discussion, that idea around Some of the some of the concepts, right, we've heard of quiet quitting and quiet firing and all the fun acronyms you want to come up with. We're we're missing the piece that employees have decided what they are going to do with their discretionary effort now. And we have an opportunity to do things culturally that can help increase that for us. And we can do things that are going to deter employees from doing that. So what a great example of something that makes you truly feel included in your organization.

Dethra Giles: Absolutely. One of the things I tell people is that we don't talk about this enough, and it's maybe my next talk at Sherm, is that every employee has a shelf life. No matter who they are, what position they're in, they have a shelf life. And we know what that is. Our job as employers is to make that shelf life as productive and extend it for as long as we possibly can. And we do that by creating these loyalties because there we know, for example, a receptionist shelf life is about 18 to 24 months. After that, they're looking for another job or you need to be concerned. Why are they still here? Right. How can we extend that from 24 months to 36 months? Those are the little things we can do along the way to help with it. Yeah, I love that.

Shari Simpson: As you think about metrics, obviously data and metrics are important. I think, you know, originally when DEI was not first introduced, but when it became like a talking trend, the metrics were, you know, how many ethnicities do we have? How many gender do we have? What are the right metrics we should be looking at?

Dethra Giles: The right metrics should be outcomes versus input, right? My metrics are systems. My metrics aren't people, because then we get into the quotas. And that's where we start running into the legal issues. When we have a quota, we need to have this many, this many, this many. But what we need to be asking is, what are the gaps

that we're missing, and how do these people feel it? Those are the metrics we need to be using. Really looking at, OK, new business lines. Who should this business line? What's the niche of this new business line? And who's best to serve that? Who's best to lead that? And then asking the question, for as metrics are concerned, how are we identifying our high per high poles and preparing them for leadership? What are our high potential, high performer employees? And what is our development for succession planning? And then being able to look at that and say, wait a minute, why is this pool only 2% diverse when we have a 30% diverse population within our organization? And that's what we're able to say, wait a minute, there has to be a systemic issue here. Because if 30% of our population is this, at minimum, we should have 20%, even 15%. Why is there only a 3% diverse population?

Shari Simpson: Yeah, for sure. As we wrap up our conversation, and you think forward, what are trends, predictions, ideas that you have around DEIA for the future?

Dethra Giles: I think DEIA is going to hit a dip, which is where we are now, where there's this backlash of, no, we don't want this because we haven't seen results. I really think this is going to sound horrible, but I don't care. The people who were the Johnny-come-latelys, the people who were, let's jump on this because it's sexy right now, will no longer see it as sexy and they'll depart and the real DEI professionals will be left. And I think it will be the real DEI professionals who understand this, who understand how to make it make money, who understand how to sell it, who understand the conversation. These will be the people that actually say DEIA .

Shari Simpson: I love it. Thank you for such a great conversation. I'm glad you were able to join me today. It was a pleasure.

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