

Talk CNY S1E5 Transcript

Andrew Fish 0:06

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Kate Hammer 0:21

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Juhanna Rogers, PhD 0:45

It's not just about hiring that one person and all of the responsibilities can fall on this Chief Diversity Officer, that's going to make everything better. But it's about leveraging the resources that you do have to continue training like any other professional development opportunity that you provide for your employees having the opportunity to hone in and dive into what it requires to be an equity minded person so that you can lead and grow. Opportunities within your organization need to continue to be invested in.

Andrew Fish 1:15

Dr. Juhanna Rogers, CenterState CEO, Senior Vice President of Racial Equity and Social Impact, joins us today to talk about the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion programming for businesses and how this work creates stronger, more resilient companies. I'm Andrew Fish, Senior Vice President of Member and Business Experience at CenterState CEO.

Kate Hammer 1:36

I'm Kate Hammer, business coach and member at CenterState CEO. We are your hosts for Talk CNY.

Andrew Fish 1:42

Welcome. Juhanna, thank you so much for joining us today, especially given that you know you're not feeling 100%, we really appreciate it. As we've said here before, the work doesn't stop. Right? So thank you so much for being here.

Juhanna Rogers, PhD 1:53

Absolutely. Thank you both for having me. And no, it doesn't so cold and all. We're here. We're here to talk about it.

Andrew Fish 2:02

Awesome.

Kate Hammer 2:03

Yeah, thank you so much for despite that, you know, this is the season right? And the season's almost over, hopefully. Hopefully spring brings renewal of health, and all that good stuff.

Juhanna Rogers, PhD 2:13

All that good stuff.

Kate Hammer 2:15

Yeah. But today, we are talking about DEI, the work of DEI and even specifically, what that means here at CenterState and how that work flows out from CenterState into our community. But first, let's just define that a little bit more, especially if someone hadn't tuned in last episode to listen to Melanie Littlejohn from National Grid. So could you define that for us? And just give a little bit of context about what is the work that you do?

Juhanna Rogers, PhD 2:50

Absolutely. So DEI: diversity, equity and inclusion, right? And so I'm Senior Vice President for Racial Equity and Social Impacts here at CenterState CEO. And for the last almost three years, I've been working with business leaders, organizations and their employees, and creating spaces where we can have critical conversations around diversity, equity and inclusion everyday, for the last three years. What that means is looks a little bit different, I would say probably the first six months... so if you can imagine in 2020, you know, we were sheltered. And at home getting the work done, as we say, around us, you know, issues related to social racial, gender inequalities was just all around us. And CenterState, specifically, prior to COVID, had been talking about how do we provide opportunities for our business leaders to engage in more critical thinking around diversity, equity and inclusion, then my colleagues had already formed a group trying to think about what could we offer produce, you know, collaborate with someone with to offer some type of services. And so when this starts to happen, and I know I have the skill set, but I was kind of just burnout, let's say, right? Because I think prior to 2020, doing DEI work meant that you were consistently at least worth fighting in this precarious position of trying to drive change, and folks being pretty resistant to what that meant. Although many organizations were open to having conversations about difference. We really weren't ready to go deeper into conversations on what created those differences. How did race identity, sexual orientation,

ethnic diversity, how did that shape our lives in the day to day basis? And so I think what happens in 2020 is that we're all stuck at home glued to the television and on the news just consistently, were these narratives about, you know, who were our frontline workers and work disparities and who could afford to stay home with their families and all of these social matters, came a very tangible topic that we couldn't turn our eyes away from. Right? And so I stepped in even someone like myself stepped up and said, you know, Rob, team, I would love to have the opportunity to create that space. And we did, designed with a curriculum specialists designed thought about the challenges with business leaders, the fact that many of them probably had limited experiences, yet they needed to drive their organizations towards change. And so how do we create that safe space, acknowledging that? I would say 85% of the clients who reach aren't anti the work, but they had the opportunities to come together and think about acknowledge what their limitations are in a safe space, right? We don't show up at work to admit what we don't know, often, right? And so how do we create spaces where they can get come around the table, talk about their limitations, acknowledge the gaps, but also do it in a way where they're surrounded with folks that can drive the opportunities to have the hard conversations. And I think the core of CenterState was businesses across the region across the state provided a foundation for folks that come to the table and engage with an organization that they could trust. And then they met the RESI team, who was in that environment, I think, really pushed them to say, hey, we're here to support we want your businesses to thrive. But we also know that particularly in this region in this space, acknowledging the elements of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and all it embodies, is really going to help us move forward. Right? And I think that's what we set out to do, then for sure.

Andrew Fish 6:59

So, you know, when we think about this work, we talk about how much it changed in 2020. You have been engaged in this for much longer than that. Talk to us about the why. Why is this so important for companies to engage in? Why is this important for companies to invest in? I mean, not just from the fact that it's, you know, socially responsible, and it's something that we need to do as a society. But there's, there's business case behind this too, right. I mean, there's, there's, there's real tangible outcomes for companies that do this work.

Juhanna Rogers, PhD 7:28

Yeah. And it's funny, when you just ask that question, I thought about what it must have been like, I was still in school at the time, my primary education, probably where I met when people were saying the same thing about the World Wide Web.

Andrew Fish 7:43

Hm. Yeah.

Juhanna Rogers, PhD 7:45

Why do we need this? We've been doing business the same way we have been, you know, we make telephone calls. Why? What is this thing, the internet? Why is it necessary and important? And I'm quite sure there were leaders that were like, Oh, my God, I could see the future in this and how it will change our communications, our ability to create relationships, not only nationally, but internationally. I think we need to pay attention to this. And I could imagine that with some businesses, like we're gonna do what we've always done, because it's been working. And I make that parallel to what we're seeing now. Right? We know that the demographics of our country is changing. We know that the diversity that existed in this country is only going to continue to grow and expand. We know that the generation behind us millennials, these X's, and so forth, are looking and asking questions that when I went out for a job interview or problem, you all went out, you weren't asking about a company social responsibility, diversity and leadership, maybe opportunities for growth, sure. But they are pretty clear that they want to work in spaces that reflect a more diverse community. And not only that they want to live in places in spaces that are receptive to diversity. Gone are the days where redlining and pretty homogenous neighborhoods are desired. If you look at the demographics, folks are moving closer to city centers, right? And in a real way. And so the business case for me and many others that are driving this work is that if we are not prepared to respond to the growing diversity in the diverse needs or desires of our future workforce, then how are we going to sustain the work that needs to be done? If we aren't speaking their language, if we aren't thinking about influencers and Tik Tok and every other platform that is becoming a way for these young folks to drive themselves to create opportunities for employment for themselves, then what happens to the workforce that we need? To keep the manufacturers or the accounting firms or the insurance companies, I'm working at these, historically, predominantly white, male dominated spaces in places, then how do we continue to sustain them if we aren't thinking about bringing others in to fill the gaps? Right? And we already see that we know there's huge needs in workforce, not only in our Central New York community, but across the country, right? And I'm like, well, what are you doing differently to foster relationships with different types of people? And how even if you do foster those relationships, are you creating the culture within your organizations that they could see themselves as a part of? That's where people want to work.

Kate Hammer 10:47

And obviously, there's a great deal of risk, to forego that to not make some steps forward. So what does happen? What is the risk? What can go wrong to not be mindful of this and be actively pursuing DEI?

Juhanna Rogers, PhD 11:03

Well the greatest extremes, right, are the cases that we've seen where companies are putting out advertisement or employees are caught on video doing something or saying something that could be perceived as discriminatory towards another group? Right? If you're not, I think a mistake, there's a couple of things, there's corporate responsibility, and ways that we haven't seen it now for producing products that are not culturally attuned to different demographics, right, we've seen the commercials or campaigns that folks have designed. And folks are asking who's at the table with you, when you're coming up with these products? Right? So, there's a continuation of making those types of mistakes. There's also the need for organizations to think about the training of their employees. Right, and how we are not just diversity and bringing people in, but how are we working with the staff that we have to begin to think about their organizations the work that they do from a more inclusive standpoint, we have some clients that say, "Well, we're a pretty homogenous company, you know, we're predominantly white, or where we live is pretty homogenous. We don't have a lot of diversity in our community, so we can't do the work." And my response to the team's response, oftentimes to that is that there's diversity within that, are you beginning to acknowledge the different that women are playing in the organization, the different needs that they may have, you know, thinking about ability status or sexual orientation? Right? These are all topics that diversity, equity and inclusion encompass, right? And so how are we training our workforce to think about that, because these are gonna be the folks that become the managers, directors, vice presidents, right? And so they need to understand these skills, too, as we look towards the future, right? I was having a conversation yesterday, it's not just about hiring the one person. How do you train the people to think more inclusively? And, you know, in some spaces in places doing that in the school system isn't thought to be important. Right? So then what happens when they go to work?

Andrew Fish 13:19

Juhanna, you talked about the risks that companies could face and you know, the Mis-messaging or the, you know, discriminatory actions. And, and it's not just the mitigation of the risk, but it's also the benefit. We've gone through this work here, we're still going through this work, we have a lot more to do here at CenterState. You've led us through this process, you brought in some great outside facilitators, because frankly, when we started this work, we also looked around, and we were relatively homogenous as an organization, when you think about, you know, our staff, and we've made intentional strides towards changing that. And it's not just to hit a number, right? It's not just to say, Oh, look, we're doing better. It's actually about bringing in that diversity of thought bringing in that different perspective, and ensuring that the work that we're doing for a community which is diverse, right, when you look at Central New York, that that programming and those thinking in that in that thought exercise is bringing that rich and and in really robust tapestry forward. And so, you know, it's really important that this is done for not just those

reasons of mitigating risk, but also going forward and bringing in that extra benefit or really the true benefit of that diversity of thought. So talk to us a little bit about when you do this work for outside companies, the process that you go through with them. Do you have any stories that you can share, as it relates to some of the successes that you've seen with some of this work, where we've gone in and helped these companies take on these issues?

Juhanna Rogers, PhD 14:44

Yes, absolutely. We believe in dialogue and creating space for dialogue. And so one of the first things that we do with companies and we're planning this initiative to talk about time commitment, and the logistics of our process. And so many of the clients we train have been virtual, because for the first two and a half years, it's only to do we're doing it now, a little bit more now in person. But we asked people to put their cameras on and engage. Many times, in my previous life doing this work, folks would be in the room, and it was easy to fade to the back, right? I don't have anything to say, you know, one or two people are often the ones talking. And I think it's been something about the virtual environment where the spotlight is on everybody. So we challenge our participants to really engage, even ask the tough questions. And we create a foundation for doing that by starting off with a little bit of education. And acknowledging that, depending on who you are, what you look like, where you grew up, your exposure to this topic is probably diverse, right. And so if we're all walking into the room together, many times my colleagues that identify as white or European, you know, they haven't had this conversation with folks of color before. And many of my folks of color haven't had this conversation in front of their white counterparts. Right, they may be used to having it in their own personal lives. But at work, it's also very new. And so we do a lot of work to establish the space as a safe one. We do have a team of dynamic facilitators from across the country that come in, it's not just like you're gonna hear from Juhanna, we have racial, social justice, gender health equity, we have workforce development, folks that have spent their careers thinking about equity, even probably one that wasn't a trend or popular to do so. And so they have a lot of experience engaging people in conversations around this. So we spend our sessions one and two really talking about and asking the tough questions, thinking about what has happened historically, that may be impacting their industry, but they hadn't really connected the dots to writing. And we did a lot of light bulb moments, a lot of aha, there's a lot of I didn't know that I didn't understand that. This is why right, getting folks to think about this didn't start with George Floyd. Everything hasn't been, you know, romantic and wonderful. Since the civil rights movement, there's still stagnation. Following that process, we really go into an organizational assessment and our next sessions where we give participants the opportunities to look at what they've, what they're doing in their organization, what they know about identifying where the gaps are, and then talking about how those gaps may be preventing them or creating barriers to hitting the performance indicators that they really want to see. Right? And they're doing this for the first time as a team, right? So we work

with either senior leadership, we try to pull together, and we'll work with directors and managers. And then we're talking about priorities and strategies, tactics that could help them address what gaps there are, right? And so over the course of the engagements, not only are you expanding your understanding of what has happened historically, and what it means today, right, and then thinking about how that shows up within your organization. And then talking about some things that can change it and all a lot all along the way. We have experts that are working alongside of you with small teams to begin to process and think about these matters and different ways to ask the challenging questions, but also to reflect back and listen to your colleagues and understanding where they are. Right? So after the session is over, hopefully, we've created a team environment where you can talk about these issues, you can acknowledge where different folks are in regards to where their strengths and weaknesses are in relation to the topics. But then you kind of have this support circle that you can come back to and talk about what's working, and how do we reengineer right, in ways that reinforce that the folks participating in our sessions are gaining the critical skills to do the work. Right? And not that every time you have a question you need to necessarily return to us to get an answer. But we're honing your skills to be really diversity minded leaders within your own organization, not to say that everybody's perfect, and they probably do need to call us back sometimes. But people walk away, thinking more in depth about how the issues or social issues, how redlining and neighborhoods may be impacting the the type of retention and attraction strategies they have in place, who the community resource groups that they need to be connected to in order to provide more supportive outreach for their diverse employees. We have those kinds of conversations.

Andrew Fish 19:39

Not just going through that training, but really giving them the tools and resources to carry that work forward. And that's important, right? I mean, as I said, this is not work that we have completed at CenterState CEO, you know, put air quotes around that it's work that we are ongoing and doing absolutely. So we're gonna take a quick break. We're gonna continue this important conversation. But first, here's a note from tocsin wise presenting sponsorm NBT Bank.

NBT Bank Sponsor 20:01

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Kate Hammer 20:32

So, continuing this conversation, I feel like we have a really good understanding now of process of what it actually looks like to go through that. Can you give us an example of a success story or two of the companies that you've worked with?

Juhanna Rogers, PhD 20:47

A couple of things popped into my head? Right, I was walking into an SU football game, I think it was SU, they were playing a lot out of state this last football season. And a woman walks up to me. And she goes, (and it's interesting, because we've been working, you know, primarily virtually with our clients and so you don't really see people beyond what you can see on the screen. But she noticed me and she walks up. And she has tears in her eyes. She was from a local company). And she says to me, Juhanna, That experience changed my life. Right? Now, let me just be honest about this. Most of the time, in doing this work, you get one or two responses, like Okay, thank you for coming. Like hurry up and go, you've dropped the bomb. And now let's try to figure it out. But what she went on to just talk about is that she was someone that wasn't sure why all these conversations were taking place and wasn't resistant to it. But she just really, you know, those are her words, but she really couldn't put it all together. And it was the time that she spent with the team meeting our team and working with her own, that really got her thinking about all of the things she hadn't considered in her life, because she didn't have to write and she she just went on for a few more minutes and just talked about how that was hugely impactful. And for me, that is the moment that I aim for. Right? Because if you get the focus- work isn't you attend the workshop, and you're going to walk out of the door. And now you can do everything right. But if you can engage in know that, you know, this is a process and you're learning and you're engaged in this process, it's going to take you reimagining or being open enough to reconsider how every other person experiences our community. That's, that's gonna help you so much. So in the long run, right? Because then how do you build your team? How do you lead conversations with your team, you're gonna start considering other factor. The other client that we work with was a regional airport. And I have the opportunity to see the airport from a different perspective entirely and work with a number of different stakeholder groups across the organization. And when I got to the leadership team, you know, they really got to the point where they were doing the organizational assessment. And the walls are filled with ideas about what they could do differently, and how we also provide organizational assessment where we'll talk with some of the employees of the organization and really take the temperature of how they're feeling working in that environment. And sometimes there's a huge disconnect between what the employees feel and what the leaders of that organization understand about their experience. And so in this session with these leaders were Regional Airport, it began to crystallize, right, they couldn't necessarily understand where their employees were coming from. But by the time they had gone through our process, and then got to the section where they're assessing what was

going on in the organization. It was like a huge aha moment. Right? This is why they may be feeling this way, or I know we're having town halls, but no one was saying anything. Thank you, Juhanna, for seeing that. And so as I went back, I had the opportunity to go back through this airport, this time as a traveler, you know, I saw the differences on the walls. We're bringing different groups into the airport to put up artwork, and it was just like, I see them doing the work. It's great. It's not just that they were talking about it, they're really leaping into the work. And that always makes me feel like this is why we're doing this.

Kate Hammer 24:34

What do we wish that companies would do right now? What's that one next step to take after hearing this episode, and wanting to take action?

Juhanna Rogers, PhD 24:46

Maybe you've stood up a diversity, equity and inclusion committee, as well as all of what has been happening over the last three years. Have you trained that committee? Have you created spaces for other employees to engage in conversation, or think about the work? Have you begun, even if you're doing a great job, really done some organizational assessment and seeing how the stand up of different events, organizations, initiatives that you may have started to address, some of these things are working effectively. If you haven't call us. I think it's important to keep investing in the work. Keep the budget lines there. Because as I think I said in the beginning, it's not just about hiring that one person and all of the responsibilities can fall on this Chief Diversity Officer that's going to make everything better. But it's about leveraging the resources that you do have to continue training like any other professional development opportunity that you provide for your employees, having the opportunity to hone in and dive into what it requires to be an equity minded person, so that you can lead and grow opportunities within your organization needs to continue to be invested in.

Andrew Fish 26:02

Great. Well, Juhanna, thank you so much for your time this morning. Really important conversation. And I'm excited for folks to hear about this and take action.

Juhanna Rogers, PhD 26:11

Thank you and look out for more of the events and things that we're hosting for not only organizations but individuals that want to attend and engage in the work with us. We have more of those opportunities coming up as well.

Andrew Fish 26:24

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Kate Hammer 26:50

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