

## Talk CNY S1E4 Transcript

Andrew Fish 0:06

CenterState CEO is central New York's leading business leadership and economic development organization committed to creating a region where businesses thrive and all people prosper. Welcome to CenterState CEOs semi monthly podcast Talk CNY, presented by NBT Bank.

Kate Hammer 0:21

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Melanie Littlejohn 0:45

As business leaders, we can invest in training, and do the work on diversity, equity inclusion on the front end, or we can pay later for the consequences of not doing that work at all or doing it well. But one way or the other, you'll pay.

Andrew Fish 1:09

Melanie Little John, Vice President New York jurisdiction, National Grid joins us today to talk about the importance of companies investing in and doing the real work associated with diversity, equity, and inclusion. I'm Andrew fish, Senior Vice President of member and business experience at CenterState. CEO.

Kate Hammer 1:26

I'm Kate Hammer, business coach and member at CenterState CEO, and we are your hosts for Talk CNY. Melanie, thank you so much for joining us today. It's an honor to have you here- important topic- but just so our listeners know, you, National Grid have been such great partners with CenterState CEO over the years, you were our board chair for a number of years, you helped us as an organization around this topic, and pushed us in really important ways. So I'm just really thrilled to have you here and excited to have this conversation.

Melanie Littlejohn 1:56

Thank you. Thank you for having me. Appreciate the dialogue on this really important topic.

Andrew Fish 2:01

Absolutely.

Kate Hammer 2:02

Yeah, you know, let's start by getting a clear understanding on what DEO is. So could you define that for us, so make sure everyone's on the same page, and we understand what we're about to spend this whole episode digging into.

Melanie Littlejohn 2:18

So diversity, equity, and inclusion- I want to think about this analogy that someone shared with me a long time ago, one having a dance, being invited to dance, and then selecting the music. Right? So diversity, equity, and inclusion is how we bring together different people from different backgrounds. Equity is not about doing the same thing for everyone. But based on someone's set of experiences, life data, creating equity, evening playing fields. And inclusion is how do we collectively utilize all voices, to make things work to pay, create better sheet music, if you will. And you can only do that when you have collective voices around the table. So I think it's important that we think about diversity from makeup, to create and fairness for all, and then including all voices to make that whole picture come together. Organizations have done sometimes one of them.

Andrew Fish 3:39

Yeah. Important to do both. Yeah. So I had mentioned how much you've helped us as an organization. But obviously, you are a leader and National Grid, a leader across not just the state, but that entire corporate footprint. And this is something that you've brought to the work there, right. It's been something that you've put forth as important and share with us why why is this work so critically important human aspect, and from the, you know, good business practice aspect.

Melanie Littlejohn 4:03

I think, if we don't recognize this is just as important in terms of managing your p&l. Shame on the business community. Shame on on a business community, if we don't recognize the value of being responsive to customers, or developing products and services that speak specifically to some community, some group based on who they are, shame on us. If we don't recognize that DEI is about how we build the strongest and most solid performing teams, and creating a culture that everyone can thrive in, man, shame on us.

Kate Hammer 4:48

Let's actually jump back a few years in time because we saw a bit of progress for a minute we saw some activity, and then we saw something changed. So a recent article for senior executives takes a look at corporate DEI progress since 2020. In that year DEI job listings grew by more than 123% according to research conducted by Indeed, and in June 2020, during Pride Month, companies across all forms of media changed their logos to show

representation for the LGBTQIA+ community. Yet, since the beginning of 2023, we've seen a reversal of those investments. As many tech companies pull back Meta, Amazon, they're seeing DEI cuts, making DEI cuts. Twitter had a DEI team that went from 30 to two, what's your take? What's happening?

Melanie Littlejohn 5:42

It was a moment that organizations who were not serious (number one, I said, Okay, now, you're gonna pay me later?) you're going to invest. For those that are culturally serious. They're not going to erode their DEI efforts they're going to lean in. Is this unusual? No, is DEI one of the first things that organizations cut when they're looking for dollars? Yeah, but sometimes that's because they didn't do the diversity piece, mixing it up on the front end, because if you mix it up on the front end, you would have more collective voices around the table to say why leaning in now is just as important, as it was in June 2020. Or as we watched what happened with George Floyd and we stood in suspended animation. Right? Those were the moments that we had our awakening to see how DEI has been politicized makes organizations sometimes a little nervous here and a retreat. Those numbers? Not shocking at all. Tragic, but not shocking. But how do we continue to build and reverse that and change it? Is the bigger and more important question.

Andrew Fish 7:09

You've done a lot of intentional DEI work in National Grid, specifically, you've led some of that you've asked us to come in and help on some of that, just because outside perspective is always important. I know we do that when we do our own internal work, despite having you know, Dr. Juhanna Rogers, who's fantastic in her work we're gonna be talking with next episode, we still bringing that outside perspective. So you've done that. Have you seen a difference? Have you seen progress, you have any stories that you want to share as it relates to some of that DEI work National Grid, an industry that traditionally when you're thinking lineman, Frontline, and you're thinking all those other things has not been very diverse, either from the standpoint of, you know, racially diverse, gender diverse or any kind of diversity? So what how has that experience been?

Melanie Littlejohn 7:53

I think, since Dr. Rogers came in, and yeah, it is important to bring in someone outside of the house to come in to say, alright, I see dust bunnies in the corner.

Andrew Fish 8:04

Sure.

Melanie Littlejohn 8:04

Right? And organizations that have serious will invite external guests to do the analysis to help organizations do their own soul searching.

Kate Hammer 8:17

Find those blind spots-

Melanie Littlejohn 8:19

You've got to find the blind spots, right? And you need someone else to call it out. You know, you need someone else to call it out. And, and then help think about, what's the plan to help moving it forward, because calling something out isn't good enough, right? You got to call it out. And then you have to figure out what you're going to do now that you call it out. And that's what Juhanna, Dr. Rogers helped us do, call it out and create a plan. And one of the biggest outgrowths of our plan was hiring a Chief Diversity Officer, not just any Chief Diversity Officer, but one that was courageous and intentional and also had a global view. And that was one of the fundamental things that really helped shift and change and give life to National Grid's DEI efforts. Are we there? Absolutely not. Are we on the journey? Absolutely. Is the journey hard? Talking about any difference is hard. Very hard, but we have to, we got to call it, call things out and have courageous and constructive dialogue. And so the work with Juhanna Rogers, that enabled our Chief Diversity Officer to come in to help build this plan that has accountability built into it. So sometimes we got to be reminded of what accountability looks like. And that's what working with the CDO, and Dr. Rogers has done. It's helping us bring in accountability. This work is not for the faint of heart. But those who can do it and stay committed to it and not reduce their DEI team from 30 to two? I think you have a good shot at making some inroads, but you got to stay committed.

Andrew Fish 10:33

We're going to take a quick break here, this important conversation is going to continue but first, we're gonna have a note from Talk CNY's presenting sponsor NBT Bank.

NBT Bank Sponsor 10:41

Hello, this is NBT Bank's Chief Economist, Ken Entenmann. And I'm excited to chat with Andrew on an upcoming talk CNY episode about how to make sense of the conflicting messages we're getting right now from the markets. If you're trying to make heads or tails of recent market activity, tune in for our conversation about how to interpret conflicting numbers, what to think about persistent inflation, and more.

NBT Bank Sponsor 11:04

So, continuing this conversation, as we look out into the next 3, 4, 5 years, where does the DEI corporate landscape need to be? What needs to happen? You've talked about some of the steps that can be taken, but big picture. Where should we go?

Melanie Littlejohn 11:24

So people believe what they can see. Right? So I want to start from the boardroom, to the frontline employee. Who's working? Who's leading? What policies did you have that may have restricted how you engage or what you did, or communities that you developed in or products? How has that change based on who you're giving a paycheck to? I think that's how we will know small step change, because Rome wasn't built in a day. And there's lots of history that we can't erase. But we got to acknowledge and recognize. So that's how I think we will begin to see DEI taking hold in three to four years. It is about our continued leaning in and not running from the room. If we don't do this now, and keep it going. And it no will it be solved in our lifetime? Definitely not mine. Right. But it will not be solved. But we can make a dent. Right? And hopefully in my great grandchildren's lifetime, things would begin to change in a way that is so substantial. That when we talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, the parameters will look different. Maybe it's you have grass, and I don't. Maybe it's you like blue and I like orange. Right? Maybe the parameters of diversity begin to change that we're leaning in on and it's not race, gender, age, national origin, sexual orientation, religion, you know, maybe it's none of that.

Andrew Fish 13:28

We can hope.

Melanie Littlejohn 13:29

We can hope.

Andrew Fish 13:31

Melanie, thank you so much. Wish we had another hour to keep going in this conversation. And this has been tremendously helpful and appreciate your perspective and your partnership.

Melanie Littlejohn 13:41

Always.

Kate Hammer 13:41

Thank you.

Melanie Littlejohn 13:41

Thank you.

Andrew Fish 13:42

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Kate Hammer 14:10

Join us in two weeks as we continue this conversation around diversity, equity and inclusion and creating better workplaces for communities for all with CenterState CEO's, Dr. Juhanna Rogers. For new episode reminders every other Wednesday, be sure to subscribe on your favorite podcast listening app. If you're enjoying Talk CNY consider leaving a quick review or five star rating.