

EEP Renee Freeman: Coaching Leaders to Embrace Inclusion

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SPEAKERS

Renee Freeman, Maria Ross

Maria Ross 00:03

You're an executive who believes strongly in creating a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace. Now what many executives fear taking action in this space because they're afraid to fail in public. My guest today is Renee Freeman, principal and founder of Freeman consulting, a diversity equity inclusion and belonging expert or D E IB, who coaches executives on fostering a nuanced understanding of the importance and value of inclusivity and belonging in the workplace. Renee conducts workshops focus groups and listening sessions for local and global organizations. And today, we talk about effective frameworks for D E IB in your organization. We discuss visible and invisible diversity, what are micro aggressions, and the difference between leadership and management when it comes to people. Before forming the company Rene spent more than a decade working for IKEA and other global and multinational organizations. She's among a select group of professional facilitators used by the Museum of Tolerance to address highly publicized anti semitism incidents, and viral acts of online hate and bias. She's a Pepperdine University Master of Science and organization development alum and serves as executive co chair of the ms o d Alumni Council. Renee is also an expert in various group dynamic methodologies, which serves her well in her work, and is MBTI and human subjects training certified. If the topic of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging strikes a little fear in your heart, in terms of how to apply it to your everyday work, this episode is for you.

Maria Ross 01:54

Welcome, Rene Freeman to the empathy edge podcast, we've been actually talking for a half hour before we started recording. But we definitely need to have a real live coffee date sometime.

Renee Freeman 02:05

I'm up for that. Good.

Maria Ross 02:08

It is so great to have you on and to talk to us a little bit about your work in DEI and what you've seen from executives that you've worked with, especially. Before we start, can you tell us a little bit about your story. And what brought you to this work?

Renee Freeman 02:28

Absolutely. And just before I start just for those who can't see me, let me just describe what I look like. So I am a five foot four woman as somewhat medium build. I have a burgundy sweater on. I have a short cropped hair I self identify as African American. And I'm sitting here in Southern California. I work for premium consulting. And I'll talk about that a little bit in just a moment. But I do want to do a land acknowledgement. And so I am sitting here in the Los Angeles area on an succeeded unseeded land of a Tonga. That's a little bit about me.

Maria Ross 03:04

Thank you. And so how, what brought you to this work? You've been doing this for many years, you've worked with a lot of companies, a lot of executives, on on, you know, I don't even know how to say it getting a handle on DEI, embracing it, creating cultures that where people can thrive and feel included. What brought you to this work?

Renee Freeman 03:25

Yeah, that's such a good question. And there's so many different ways that I can I can answer it, but the one that I'm going to answer for this particular point is just kind of the inspiration of my father. And so I was born in Los Angeles area, but right after the first set of Watts riots, we moved to the Redlands area. And so I was raised around Victorian houses and orange trees and all of that. And my father back in those days started one of the first African American history courses back in the days when there weren't ethnic courses available. And so fast forward, I eventually went into really wanting to understand humans and dynamics and how to groups interact with one another, and had had a long history of working with companies that were either multinationals or large brand names like Ikea that were global. And the aspect of diversity and inclusion became really understanding the entire wheel of diversity, equity inclusion, including global aspects of how we interact as countries and individuals within countries.

Maria Ross 04:33

I love that. And so what are what are some of the tools or frameworks that you use that have been really effective in helping helping leaders on their personal journey of embracing DEI but also being the catalyst to create inclusive cultures?

Renee Freeman 04:50

So one of the things that you know that I'm a big fan of is it's important to create safe spaces that are also brave. Where executive skin do you want to call Ball in private. So this aspect of so often we're asked as leaders to be perfect. Right? Right off the bat. Yeah. And being able to have somebody to talk to and be able to challenge our ideas is important. I mentioned IKEA a little bit earlier. So one of the things that one of my early leadership memories is, and one of the things that I hold with me to this day, is we used to talk about, we manage things, we lead people, and so that there's this big difference between management versus leadership. And so anytime you're able to look at and be able to go, okay,

is this an individual I'm interacting with? Or is it a thing, right? So we manage spreadsheets, when we have projects, we manage all these different things. But when we're interacting with individuals, it's all about leadership. And we talked about diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, it's a leadership skill. And so going into your question, there's multiple different things that we use. So one would be selfless instrument, circled a little bit back to that in just a moment. Another would be really looking at the entire aspect of the diversity wheel. And so what does it mean to challenge yourself as an executive to really do deep study in various areas of diversity, so that when they come up, you're not having that awkward feeling of, like, LGBTQ, like, I don't feel safe in this space, I'm afraid that I'm going to stumble, I'm afraid I'm going to say the wrong thing. Right. And so having a coach is really helpful in that space, because so much of it is those appreciative inquiry questions of what does that mean to you? What did you mean by that, and being able to process that information, both on paper as well as outloud?

Maria Ross 06:57

You've mentioned in the past the diversity wheel as a de IB, continuous improvement model. I think it's based on the work from Maryland loader and Judy Rosen Rosenthal, can you tell us a little bit about that and why that's an effective framework.

Renee Freeman 07:12

Yeah, it's a great framework, because on the outer end of the circle is going to be organizational dimensions. Beyond that is your your global dimensions. But as we come closer into the circle, you've got external dimensions of diversity will be things like marital status, parental status, things like that. One more circle in are the ones that most common we think of is associated with various laws, or, as most common talked about within diversity. So things such as race, ethnicity, physical abilities, things like that. And our personal identities are created around these, but also the intersections of these. Also, when we're thinking about these, we want to talk about what aspects are visible, and recognize that and what aspects of these are invisible. And what are our assumptions that are connected to those that we have, that we that they are visible. And so one of the things that you and I talked about is that there is an assumption quite often that race is visible. If I look at somebody, I'll know what race they are. And the reality is that race is a social construct. And so you don't know what race somebody socially identifies as, until you have a conversation with them. And they choose to self identify to you.

Maria Ross 08:33

Well, and you making me think of also diversity vector of neurodiversity. And as someone who who had a brain injury in the past, there's things people can't see, because from the outside, someone might, quote unquote, look fine. And there might be things in the way that they work or the way that they're able to meet goals, the way they interact with others in their workplace that could be impacted by neurodiversity issues. But maybe they don't feel comfortable enough in that environment, to admit to people that they have this challenge. And so I love that you're, you're talking about this from both the visible and the invisible, because that's where it gets really complex. And it gets so complex. I think for people sometimes that they want to just sort of go well, there's no way to know what everybody needs. And it's going to take, you know, especially leaders, it's going to take so much time to figure out the individual needs and motivations and challenges of every single person on my team. What do you say to a leader like that? I mean, I know what I say is that's kind of why you're the leader. That's your job. You're no longer just doing the work. You're meant. You're like you said you're leading people now. So

what do you I'm sure you you deal with executives that get overwhelmed by what they deem as like, how am I gonna get any work done? If I'm dealing with all this other stuff and trying to get to know people and understand all their individual needs? What do you often say to them in response to that?

Renee Freeman 09:59

On my face, first response is DEI can be really fun if you're doing it right. Doing it right. There was probably not a lot of fun, right? Um, and that's what I find happens with with most executives, right? It was just this aspect of Oh, like, I didn't know that. Or I didn't even know that. I didn't know that. So I couldn't ask a question about it. Because I didn't know that I didn't know it. The other piece is oftentimes when we're talking about business pieces is we can talk about money as going in a barn door, right, like horses going into the barn, in the back of the barn is the door that you want to keep closed, right, so that money stays in. So oftentimes, we think of things like HR departments as the ones that are in charge of keeping the barn door closed, right? legal departments keeping the barn door closed, so that money doesn't leave out the bat. DEI, to a large extent is about being culturally competent, so that you don't get those lawsuits, right. So it's about many different things. But that is one of the things. And when we're not culturally competent, we unintentionally create microaggressions. Let's pause on that word microaggressions. Because oftentimes, folks will say, Well, why is it called micro, it's hurting people, when the reality is that a macro aggression is something that's very intentional. And overt micro aggressions, generally are unintentional, and oftentimes, well intended. And so it's about recalibrating language and bringing your awareness. The other aspect, I would say, before I drop this analogy of the barn door, which is, historically, we know that a lot of money has been lost from products that have been brought to market. And those are products that are not culturally competent. And so when we think of the famous Gucci sweater, for example, this is the ski sweater that had a turtleneck, and somebody at some point decided, wow, would be really cool, since it's gonna, if you pull up the top of it would be really cool. Since it's going to be keeping the lips warm, we should put lips on the inside, we should make that sweater black. And we should make the lips red. Oh, my, at some point, somebody should have felt safe enough to be able to say, Oh, that looks a little bit like blackface, that might not be a good idea to bring the part. Right, right. Our job as executives is to create that space so that those voices do get heard. But also to culturally be aware, and I'll just do one more example. Because there's so many. There's a famous, very famous example of a children's shirt. And somebody said, Well, what would be really great is to have these gray and blue stripes going down. And oh, I know what we're gonna do. We'll put a A star A sheriff star on it. At some point, I'm wearing January, decorative team. Yeah, somebody you know, that's working in the organization, should your job as an as an executive is to create a safe enough space that somebody is able to go, Hmm, that looks a little bit like a holocaust shirt, that might not be a good idea. Again, when we think of diversity, equity inclusion, oftentimes we think of this aspect of heart, hands. And when we think of heart and hands, and we think of

Renee Freeman 13:46

part of our job as executives is to understand when individuals are speaking from head, arms or hands. There's conflict that occurs in those areas. So hard people come in going oh, yeah, like, it's all about the people. Right? And this is the reason that we have to do it. And head folks were like, We want to know the numbers. Hands folks are like, what are we going to do about it? Right? It's okay to and I think of them as doorways, it's okay to speak from any of those three, but you then need to visit the other

two. Right? So it's not okay to speak just from the heart. You do need to know the numbers in business. It's not okay to speak just from the head. Because you do need to know what the people aren't, you know, is there harm that has been done? All of that as part of executive coaching. All of that is responsibility for your leaders to obtain cultural competency at every level.

Maria Ross 14:45

Now, you've talked about your approach and what was really fascinating to me about our pre call discussion was something you mentioned at the beginning was which was giving executives a safe space to fail in private and You know, there's many different approaches to this work, some, some are a little more in your face, some are a little bit more, you know, you figure it out, talk to us about that component, and how effective that has been for you. Because another thing that you've said in the past is that guilt and shame doesn't get you to belonging. So talk, talk to us a little bit about the empathy you're meeting these executives with, as they as they embark on this journey that for many of them might be new and uncomfortable.

Renee Freeman 15:30

So remember, a few minutes ago, I said, we don't know what we don't know. And so it's difficult to ask questions around something if we don't even know that we don't know it. And so my job is an executive. And again, if we go back to the models of diversity, we would say that we have an executive that that has chosen a particular area, let's say they want to learn more about what it is like to be Asian, right? My job is to help the aggregate that information, right and ask questions. What is Asian mean to you? What intersectionality of Asian here in the States, you're in another country? Being Korean being made? So what what does that mean to you? And what is the nuance? So di at its best, is a search for nuance, and helping the brain think through all the different ways in which it is using one swipe to cover an entire group? And what does it mean to have fun in the curiosity? I oftentimes say to folks that in business, we're taught so often to judge and we did we need to make judgments at certain points. But what does it mean to kind of look at, okay, the brain makes judgments, and the brain has curiosity. But the brain can't do both at the same time. So what does it mean to be mindful of at the point in which I make a judgement, whether that's on a group or a topic or anything else, that have actually cut off those curiosity questions? And are their curiosity questions that I can ask in a respectful way, that will help inform my, my process as a leader? The other aspect is having an understanding of what aspects of so when we think of diversity, right, it's the full spectrum of diversity? What aspects within that space? Am I part of the majority group? What part say my part of a minority group? Or an answer served group? And to what extent when I'm sitting in a majority group, is that cutting me off from new voices that I need to hear? So in other words, for me as I'm just going to choose one of my my group identities where I'm part of the majority, As a cisgender? Person? What am I not hearing that I could really learn from, from folks who self identify as transgender? If I'm not asking that question, and self reflecting, I lose out on all that information.

Maria Ross 18:19

That is, that is such an interesting observation, because I also think back to your analogy of the open barn door. One of the other things we're losing out on by not addressing this and and educating ourselves and getting curious about it, is what goes out. The other side of that barn doors talent, is innovation is is the contributions that people could make if they felt like they belonged. And so, you

know, there's been there's been a lot of studies around the fact that like more diverse leadership teams, for example, make better business decisions. Have you been privy to any of those research studies? And what's your thought on that? How do you how do you make that case for executives that this is important from a bottom line perspective as well?

Renee Freeman 19:10

Well, as I mentioned, a lot of my work is global. And I'm doing anything from executive coaching to helping folks with diversity, equity, inclusion roadmaps, and one of the processes is really being able to show whether that is, you know, what's going on in your handbooks? What are we communicating on the website? How was that landing with various constituencies that a that we have? But also, who do we not have? And how can we reach out to those folks? How are we reading our website as an individual? So I'm going to pause on that for just a moment. I had a this was coaching somebody who was a coach, and they were projecting out on another group saying, you know, diversity, equity inclusion is really important. Like let's reflect on that, let's look at what your team's website looks like. And the team's website was not diverse at all. And so what does that mean for us to just kind of sit in reflection as far as our own self as instrument, we use the term self as instrument, that aspect of as a coach or as a individual inside of an organization, all the things that we do all the interactions, whether that's a facial movement, or something that we say verbally, all of those have an effect on the client group. So as good practitioners, we need to constantly be honing that craft. Because at the end of the day, we should be making progress and not do harm inside the client.

Maria Ross 20:46

They think that's such an important message of we want to, we don't want to do harm as we embark on this journey. And I think you've probably gone into companies where their previous DEI efforts that may not have been so successful are littered with good intentions. What is it the road is, you know, the path to whatever is littered with good intentions? What are some of the what are some of the biggest stumbling blocks you come across? As you're as you're helping these organizations, as they can, you know, as they might be confused as to what they think dei is and what it actually is, in practice, what are what are one or two of the most common ones as we wrap up our conversation, so that we can give listeners just a little little caveat to be mindful of.

Renee Freeman 21:34

So I always say that there's no such thing as a dumb answer. But my job as somebody who's coaching you is to help you reframe it, right? So shame and blame is not a access point to belonging. And if we're trying to create inside an organization is belonging in innovation, and all those yummy things that come from inclusivity. Really being able to create a space where folks can process is important. And as we said earlier, they can fall in private. And you do need a coach for that. Right? You do need to be able to have somebody that goes, Well, I would phrase it like, what is the core of your question? What is it that you really want to know? Okay? Well, you said it like this, here's what I would suggest, right? If you say it like this, you're still gonna get the information, and it's not going to cause harm with your employees, or it might land better with your employees.

Maria Ross 22:32

And you've also talked in the past about confusing communication channels. So we saw a lot of this after the George Floyd murder, for example, and I commented on this as a brand strategist, the social memes are great. And that's really great that you're showing your support. Now, what now? Are you actually having a conversation? And is that conversation, translating into action? So tell us your thought on where people think they're having? They think they're, they're quote unquote, doing Dei, right? But yet, it's not a conversation. I know, you have thoughts on that. I have

Renee Freeman 23:09

very strong. So I'm a big believer in it doesn't matter how many books you read on the AI. It's really about knowing what to do when everything goes wrong. Right. So when somebody feels hurt or feels pain from something that somebody has said, the other aspect is really understanding how to diagnostic diagnose what's going on inside of a, let's say you're doing a learning circle. If your diagnostic as a practitioner is Oh, like, there's racism that's happening in the group. But really what's happening is colorism, then your intervention is going to be the the wrong intervention. The other aspect of this is this piece of making sure that when we are I lost my train of thought sorry.

Renee Freeman 24:17

The other aspect is really understanding what when you're in a conversation, and what is the conversation. So we have lots of different this is a wonderful thing right now, right? We have lots of different communication styles, and communication channels. We have social media. We have writing an email, we have podcasts, we have all these different spaces. But that's not a conversation. When we're talking about diversity, equity inclusion, it's the nuance and the search of nuance, and the being able to hear what's being said by another individual and be able to respond to it and say, Well, this was what I heard you saying, and that other individual being able to go well, that's not really what I meant. But really what I meant was something more like this. That's what a conversation is, so that you're verbalizing, but you also know how that's landing with somebody else. And that they're able to give you feedback on what it is that that that that they're hearing.

Maria Ross 25:23

I love that, because I've talked about on the show many times and actually interviewed a gentleman named Edwin Racz, who runs the Center for building a culture of empathy. And he does trainings for people worldwide on this facilitation technique known as empathy circles, which he has taken to some of the most divisive political rallies in the US in the last few years, and got people actually listening to each other. And I went through the training, and it's a very, it's a very intense exercise in isolating your active listening muscle. And it's all based on you talk to me, and I reflect back what you say, without discernment without judgment, just to make sure I heard you, right. Because I could go flying off in the conversation, reacting to something that actually was not what you intended to say yes. And so it's this ability to check in and it takes more time to have a conversation. And I know I do these in my empathy trainings, when I do leadership workshop trainings, we do it it kind of as a joke of people talking to each other about one of their favorite hobbies, and having someone reflect back and you know, nine times out of 10. When I do them, the person goes, no, that's actually not what I say. So we do it like with a safe topic, right? But you can imagine if you extrapolate that out to a conversation about, you know, someone reporting a sexual assault, or someone you know, who comes to you and says they deserve a raise, and they were being looked past for that raise any of those difficult conflict laden conversations,

we often have that lens of we think we heard what they said, but we didn't, because we don't take that time to stop and reflect back what they said. So I'll put a link again to Edwin's episode in the show notes as well as to the empathy circle.

Renee Freeman 27:12

But, but it also reminds me of the work that I do at the Museum of Tolerance, right? So when you're having these large learning, listening circles, and you've just finished listening to all costs survivor, or sometimes we have groups that have just finished listening to a former White supremacist, I will, how did you process that information? How did you hear them, and really being able to co create within the group an understanding of how individuals are processing the information differently? Based on what historically, their families traumas have been? Like?

Maria Ross 27:44

Yeah, absolutely. Well, Renee, it was just wonderful to get your insights. And thank you for doing that the work the work that you're doing, and supporting so many executives on their journey to create a more inclusive workplace culture. And you know, not just for the benefit of the organization, but also the benefit of themselves as human beings, right. So we take these things that we learned for the workplace and for our success in the workplace, and we apply them in our quote, unquote, real lives. So our personal lives, I guess, I should say, but thank you so much for sharing your insights today. Just as a final wrap, we'll have all the links to connect with you in our show notes. But for folks on the go right now, where's a good place they can go to learn more about you and your work.

Renee Freeman 28:27

The best place to reach me is on LinkedIn. But you can also reach me at Freeman consulting and Associates. And that's Freeman see a.com

Maria Ross 28:38

Wonderful, thank you so much for joining us today. Thank you. Bye, Maria. And thanks everyone for listening to another great episode of the empathy edge podcast. As always, if you like what you heard, please share it with a friend or a colleague, or a co worker. And don't forget to rate and review if you have an opportunity. Until next time, please remember that cash flow creativity and compassion are not mutually exclusive. Take care and be kind