

Business Better (Episode 28): The Business Fundamentals of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity with Erika Caesar from The Bancorp

Speakers: Virginia Essandoh, Erika Caesar

Virginia Essandoh:

Hi, Erika. Welcome to our podcast, I'm so pleased to have you join us here. We're going to just get right into it. I'd like to have you start by describing your role at Bancorp as assistant general counsel and chief diversity officer.

Erika Caesar:

Well, first thanks for having me, Virginia. I'm so happy to just be here with you today and talk to you a little bit about diversity and inclusion. As you mentioned, I wear two hats at the Bancorp. The first is the legal one, and that is in the role of assistant general counsel. In that capacity, I advise the Bancorp's business and corporate functions on a wide range of legal and regulatory matters. And I also oversee certain functions that are specific to the legal department. So that includes managing all of our outside litigation and talking to council about that, and just making sure that we have the appropriate strategies in place. The second hat is chief diversity officer. In that capacity I oversee and really develop the strategies that the company has around developing and maintaining a diverse workforce, and really cultivating an inclusive culture. As part of that particular role, I help to lead the internal diversity and inclusion council that we have here at the bank, which really drives the implementation of those D&I strategies.

Virginia Essandoh:

That's great, Erika, I think before we continue in the conversation, it's always good to level set and make sure we understand definitions when we talk about diversity, inclusion and now equity, which is becoming more part of the conversation. Will you start by explaining how diversity and inclusion and equity is defined at Bancorp?

Erika Caesar:

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's a great point that you're making, I always try to level set with folks because I think diversity and inclusion and equity are often conflated. So, how we define diversity is really, it's something that's factual in nature and it relates to representation. So do we, as a company reflect the customers that we serve and the communities in which we work? At its core diversity is really the broad spectrum of visible and invisible differences between us. Often you'll think about race, gender, disability, age, but it also includes other things like skills, communication styles, experiences, and so on. And we know that those differences really lead to a variety of perspectives and it's beneficial to have that type of diversity. Now, the issue though, is that diversity alone really isn't enough, right? There's a lot of value in having a diverse workforce, but you need something that's really going to unlock that value, that allows everyone to bring their variety of perspectives to the table and to thrive.

Erika Caesar:

And inclusion is the key that unlocks that value. So inclusion, or an inclusive culture acknowledges and respects the unique characteristics and shrinks of each individual. And it encourages contributions from everyone. And it's the type of culture where differences are really celebrated and valued. And then there's also equity, right? And at Bancorp we actually view equity as a sub-component of inclusion. Some companies have it as a standalone branch, but ours is under the rubric of that second factor of inclusion. So when we talk about equity, we talk about removing those barriers that might exist for certain

populations. Just making sure that there's a fair and level playing field for everyone. And there's a lot of different ways that you can do that, but those are essentially the three definitions that we abide by at the bank.

Virginia Essandoh:

That's great. And that's very helpful, I think for people to understand and to hear so that they understand the difference between the three, they understand that they each have to be worked on and focused on. It's interesting that you talk about the importance of inclusion, and we also believe at Ballard you can't have diversity until you understand the piece of inclusion. And we try to focus on the key elements as well of inclusion, which includes how you're creating teams. How do you have a collaborative team structure, an inclusive team structure? How do you have advocacy and support from your leadership, right? How does leadership buy into it? It also recognizes that you have to have awareness, cultural competencies, sense of awareness throughout the firm. You often hear that inclusion really empowers people to bring their true selves to work, empowers them to produce their best results. Right? The importance of inclusion is key.

Virginia Essandoh:

I like the fact that you have incorporated equity under the context of inclusion, because equity is the conversation that's happening more and more in organizations. And again, I agree that we should be having this conversation, and understanding that equity is about equal access to opportunities. Oftentimes, and I'd like to hear your thoughts on this, people view equity as taking something away from others and giving to another group, right? And we have to work hard and be deliberate about changing that perception as to what equity is. It is removing barriers and obstacles, as you mentioned, that's just one part of it, but it's the other part of providing equal access and opportunities, while at the same time removing obstacles and barriers. I want to ask you, do you run into people thinking that equity means a removal of something, or someone, or someone else is losing out? I'm just curious to know what you think about that.

Erika Caesar:

It's so timely that you're raising that. I just had a conversation earlier this week about that misconception, right? Often D&I is framed up as a zero sum game where if one particular group has a program, or initiative, or some targeted strategies focused on them, that another group is losing out, right? The concept, or the misconception that everybody cannot advance at the same time. Right? And I think that, that really needs to be dispelled. You can have strategies, or goals that are universal with respect to your organization, and then realize that with under those goals some constituencies are struggling more than others. And then you have to figure out why are they struggling, right? And that's really what equity is about, figuring out, okay, well, we have this universal goal, this group is doing particularly well, but that group is not, and what barriers might there be in place that keep them from achieving that same goal? And equity is about not only identifying those barriers, but then working to remove those so that everybody can reach that full potential and that goal that you have in place.

Erika Caesar:

So, that that conversation is one that is always ongoing, always evolving, and something that we certainly pay close attention to as we look through our structures, and how we not only do performance, but how meetings are run, and things like that, to make sure that we are being as inclusive and equitable as possible.

Virginia Essandoh:

That's great. That's helpful. Thank you, Erika. We also know that companies are in different places in terms of diversity and inclusion, and their goal toward equity. There are companies that are just starting out, jump-starting these initiatives. There are companies who are very sophisticated and are along the track of beyond just starting out. And we also see that some companies are just focused on the compliance side of diversity, inclusion. Others are focused on trying to get, or build awareness amongst the leadership and folks in their business. And then, toward the far end, there are folks who are seriously working on fostering an inclusive culture. They're at a more mature stage. Where is Bancorp at this point in the process?

Erika Caesar:

While our program is in its early stages our level of advancement is mixed. There's really not a one-sized fits all assessment that applies to our D&I efforts, except to say that our goal is always transformative in nature. Everything that we do is designed with the intent to have a positive lasting impact on our work culture and the communities that we support. At our company we actually have a comprehensive D&I strategy that has five key pillars: organizational commitment, workforce practices, supplier diversity, community engagement, and transparency. We've done a tremendous amount of work in the organizational commitment, workforce, and transparency issues in particular. So just to name some of the things, we provide tailored D&I training at all levels of the organizations at a periodic basis. We have cultural connections communications for heritage or cultural days or months and those communications highlight employees and things that individuals can do to learn more or to be supportive. We have seven employee resource groups that allow employees to connect more and at the same time really further their professional development and to support company objectives. And we also have an internal D&I site that has a host of information and resources for our employees. And the list goes on.

We also have initiatives under way that are in earlier stages and that aren't as advanced. It's an evolving process and there will always be things that we can work on to get better. I should also note that encounter similar variances as we look at our workforce on the whole. Some employees are very familiar with the concepts of diversity, inclusion, and equity and can probably recite them chapter and verse. Others may not have encountered them before and are just now becoming familiar with them as we push to make sure those values are incorporated throughout our organization. As we plan and implement different initiatives we have to take that into account and aim to meet people where they are.

And that's really just the nature of having a diverse workforce. We have people with different life experiences, backgrounds, skills, and we have to find a way to empower them to further inclusivity and equity in a way that plays to their strengths and contributes to the overall success of the organization.

Virginia Essandoh:

That's true. We'll never achieve... Because the work is always evolving, right?

Virginia Essandoh:

And so if it's not one issue, one year, or month, it's another issue a different year, or month that we're trying to tackle. So it's an evolution, it's an evolution and a journey indeed. What recommendations, or advice, would you give to a company that's just starting out on the journey toward diversity and inclusion? They might not have a chief diversity officer. They might not even want to say that they're just beginning the process. What advice would you give to a company just starting out?

Erika Caesar:

The first bit of advice I would give is just identify your key stakeholders here, right? The people who are going to be most instrumental in setting up some kind of a formal program, or some initiatives surrounding diversity and inclusion. Common key stakeholders and an essential key stakeholder is senior management, right? Whether that is your CEO, or president, or some other senior leader within the company who is willing to speak out and to be a sponsor for, and a voice for the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion. So figure out who is that leader. There are also other key stakeholders, right? So diversity and inclusion really pertain to your workforce, and what your workforce is doing, what your culture is doing in large part. And so for that, you need HR at the table, right?

Erika Caesar:

So, who's the leader in that respect? Who can provide information and help inform strategy as far as what's happening in the workforce from the time that someone is recruited through the time that they are either promoted, or they end up exiting the company, who can inform from that perspective? And then there are other key stakeholders internally, whether that's marketing, or folks who are involved in outreach to the community. So figure out your key stakeholder base, I would say. Also, I would say most companies don't really have to start from the ground up. What we found is that we actually had, before

we started our formal program, we had a lot of things in place, and in those different functions within our bank where we could leverage them into a more formalized program.

Erika Caesar:

And that might be data that you normally have to collect in connection with EEO reporting, or it might be trainings that you have your managers undergo just as part of your normal leadership process. Things like that. So, figure out what nuggets you already have, and leverage those to build on. I would also say just lean on the experts, particularly for companies who are just starting out, don't feel like you just have to do it on your own. There's a lot of quality research out there, quality guides out there, and consultants that you can lean on to help you in formulating a program that makes sense for your institution, and for where your employees are in their diversity and inclusion, understanding, and efforts. So those are the three key things that I would tell companies.

Virginia Essandoh:

Thank you. That that is fantastic and very helpful. So let's talk about, and I'll give you a few seconds to think about it, some of the landmines and challenges that come up. What we find is in this work, there are things that you can do wrong right away. There are also landmines that we can offer to companies that are just starting out, to be careful of, and to pay close attention to, I think we started earlier about talking about equity and how that conversation has to be talked about in the right way, so that people aren't automatically turned off. But can you think of any landmines, or particular challenges that companies should be aware of when they're starting their diversity and inclusion journey?

Erika Caesar:

Right. One potential landmine is gearing your efforts towards a particular group and leaving other constituencies out of the conversation, right? And so, I'd be very careful to develop, not to develop a program that's in response to just one particular incident, and you just focus your efforts on corrective action in connection with that, right? So make sure you have an understanding of your employee population. You should know the makeup of your employees and your customers as well, right? What are the demographics, race, age, gender, and so on. And make sure that your strategy is all encompassing. So that's one particular thing I would mention. A couple of challenges I would say is making sure that inclusivity and equity are practiced at all levels of your organization. There's usually a lot of emphasis on top-down strategies, and that's not wrong. Senior management and executive level support are essential to meaningful change, right?

Erika Caesar:

But if you truly want a sense of belonging and value for diverse perspectives and experiences to permeate throughout your organization, everyone in the organization needs to take ownership. And you might find that people need help figuring out how they can do that in their roles. And you can address that through tailored training, or maybe even some off the shelf training that's offered by different companies. But one thing that we definitely drive home with our employees is that everyone can contribute, and everyone is responsible for contributing to our inclusive work culture. And how you do that just differs, right? Depending on your role within the institution, but everybody has a responsibility.

Erika Caesar:

Another potential challenge I would say is that you should really prepare for what are the needs and wants of your various constituencies? Right? Many companies, ours included, use surveys to gauge employee engagement and solicit input as far as their diversity equity and inclusion programs. But if you're going to do that, you need to be prepared to address the feedback. It could be deflating to employees if you ask for their input, they provide it, and then there's really no follow-up. It doesn't mean that you need to do whatever your employees want. Right? You still have to keep in mind what makes sense for an organization of your size and your characteristics, but you should at least be willing to have the conversation and to acknowledge that they provided that input, and be able to tell them, look, we can't do these things for these reasons, but we can do this, and we do hear you. I think that goes a long way towards employees feeling like they have a say in the organization, and that they're being heard, and seen, and valued. So those are the couple of things that I would mention.

Virginia Essandoh:

Those are great. I just want to follow up on a couple of things that you said. I agree, it's so important that if you ask the questions of your workforce, that you follow-up on it, but oftentimes we don't ask the question. And at Ballard I think that in hindsight we assumed everyone was on the same page, we were all working from a baseline place, then we realized that we probably missed a step in our diversity and inclusion journey. And that step was really identifying what the issues were, not just assuming everybody knew what the issues were, and not assuming we had all the answers. And so I agree that it's important for an organization to do a baseline assessment of the different demographics in your organization, and understand what strategies make sense for those populations, and what strategies are less important. I think it's surprising to find out that a lot of best practices are driven based on what everybody else is doing, and based on a formula.

Virginia Essandoh:

And so companies that can create, with legal counsel, I might add, it's very important that you get legal counsel in helping you craft the questions that you're asking.

Erika Caesar:

Sure. Sure.

Virginia Essandoh:

Companies should indeed ask what the issues and what the challenges are so that you not only can repeat that back to your leadership of your organization, but sometimes it's a proving it that there are issues with the leadership of the organization. And then you also talked about the importance of once you get the information, doing something about it. And my recommendation to companies would be, even if it's just, we heard you, we received the feedback, we are working on the next steps. Sometimes I think we get bogged down in trying to come up with the solutions before we acknowledge that we received the feedback. That step one, after you receive your feedback from your workforce would be, we have all the data, we are taking a close look at it. Thank you for your time and submitting the data. We will be back in terms of our next steps, as soon as possible, instead of waiting until you figure it out before you get back to the workforce. I think that's important, and also advice that I am giving myself.

Virginia Essandoh:

The other point you talked about, you talked about training, and that it's absolutely right. That's one way to bring people along, recognizing people are at different places. I would just recommend to companies that you're very careful about the training and the trainers that you use in your organization. Spend just as much time vetting the different programs, and the topics, and the context, and the content of what your trainers will say. I think a lot of harm and damage has been done in the past in organizations when they didn't scrutinize the information that would be shared with the people in the organization first of all, and we hear some of that in the news now. So that's one advice I would get, is pay close attention to who you're bringing in, and the content of what they will be sharing with your people.

Erika Caesar:

Right.

Virginia Essandoh:

Go ahead.

Erika Caesar:

I'm sorry. Can I just add to that?

Virginia Essandoh:

Sure.

Erika Caesar:

So one thing I wanted to comment I want to make about training is, I absolutely agree with you. It's important that your leadership, whoever is leading the diversity and inclusion efforts with your organization, or someone in senior management should really review the information, make sure that it is inclusive in the way that it discusses the topic, and just vet it, don't be afraid to tailor training to the needs of your employees. One thing that we found prior to formalizing our diversity and inclusion program is that we were using off the shelf diversity training module that everybody had to take. And when we went and looked back at it, it really didn't hit on a lot of the things that we'd discussed in terms of what we view diversity, equity and inclusion to be, the transformative nature of using inclusive practices.

Erika Caesar:

And it also, just didn't talk about what we as a company were doing, is doing, because it was off the shelf. I'm sorry, let me say that again. It also didn't talk about what we as a company were doing, because it was an off the shelf module. So what we decided was that we were going to make a concerted effort to develop a tailored training course for our employees. So we spent a number of months just building a course from the ground up. And the course not only covers what is diversity, and inclusion, and equity, and why is it important for our organization? But it also covers what we as a company are doing, and what individuals can do to further it within our culture and throughout our relationships that we have in the community.

Erika Caesar:

So we actually just launched it in January, but the feedback we've received is overwhelmingly positive because it hits on a lot of things that are really relevant for our company. And some of it is in response to that feedback we received from employees through our surveys, employees who just wanted to know more about what they could do as an individual, or who wanted to know more about what the company is doing. And so don't be afraid to take the time to craft something that is for your employees in particular, that can be just really compelling and really impactful in moving the ball forward, as it pertains to inclusivity and equity.

Virginia Essandoh:

Thank you for that, Erika. Another thing that you mentioned, which I think is key, is making sure that the messages, and the training, and the conversation permeates throughout the entire workforce, not just at the senior leadership level. And that is key. Oftentimes companies focus on managers, or middle managers and higher, and not necessarily put as much emphasis and focus on everyone throughout the organization. And so what we've learned at Ballard, and what I've seen in a lot of studies, especially when you talk to, for us lawyers of color, especially when you look at the studies around lawyers of color, the experience in their organizations, the experience in their law firms, are purely based on some of the interactions they have with their assistant, or their staff, right? And so if you're not educating everyone about how they play a role in diversity and inclusion, it could be just the person who you engage with in a hallway can really impact the experience of belonging that you have in an organization.

Virginia Essandoh:

So I agree, it's key that the all levels of the workforce are engaged. And the last thing I'd like to pick up on was something you said around, be careful not to exclude. Everything that we're doing is about inclusion. Everything that we're doing is about this mindset of making sure everyone feels a part of how diversity and inclusion can enhance them. You don't want any group to feel left out because that is not helpful for the cause. And so, even in terms of how business resource groups are established, or affinity groups are established in organizations, we have to be careful not to exclude. And we try to be intentional to say our business resource groups, or affinity groups, they're open to everyone who support the goal, who can support the goal and objectives and missions of the business resource group, or the affinity group.

Virginia Essandoh:

So I think that's key. That's often a question we get when we're advising our clients about how to create affinity groups, should we exclude, should we just let it be for this group only? I would say to avoid that desire to make sure it is, and ensure that it is for everyone and people who support the goals can play a role in it. So I just wanted to mention that. So as we wrap up, Erika, is there any advice that you would like to give businesses regardless of the stage that they're in, in their efforts in diversity and inclusion?

Erika Caesar:

Yeah, a couple of bits of advice. The first one is just a lesson I believe everybody learned in 2020, which is that you have to be nimble. You have to be versatile. D&I is constantly changing, and shifting, and evolving, because people are constantly shifting, and changing, and evolving. And so whatever structures or programming you have in place has to be able to flex depending on the circumstances. So that's the first thing I would say, just make sure that you're not being so rigid and stuck to a particular plan, be willing to deviate, or to build up on that, to address whatever the current needs are of your organization. The second thing I'll mention is that you should really go at a pace that makes sense for your company, right? There are a lot of companies that are doing amazing things when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion, but all of those strategies may not make sense for your company.

Erika Caesar:

So consider your, what makes sense for your employees, for your company, for your business objectives, and take those into account when setting up a framework, don't be afraid to keep it simple, particularly if you're just starting out, just keep it simple. And then you can always build upon that. I wouldn't recommend going all out if you're just starting out. I wouldn't recommend just doing everything because if you're doing everything it's likely that some things might be getting lost in translation, or might not be as impactful as they could be if you took it at a slower, more measured pace, and made sure that your employees were really getting the principles behind the efforts. So those are the couple of things that I would mention, but I'll probably put a greater emphasis on being flexible and being nimble. I don't think that that can be overstated.

Virginia Essandoh:

I would agree with that. Absolutely. Well, Erika, thank you for your time. Thank you for joining us for this podcast. We really appreciate your experience. You're in the trenches work that you're doing at Bancorp. We are proud that you are alumni Ballard, and thank you again for your time.

Erika Caesar:

All right. Thank you so much, Virginia. I loved being here and talking with you about it.