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Interview starts

Asif Sadiq speaking

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Megan Wright speaking

That's Asif Sadiq speaking. He's a global diversity and inclusion thought leader and has headed up D&I for some of the world's leading organizations including EY, The Telegraph and, most recently, Adidas.

I'm Megan Wright and in this interview Asif joins me to discuss how the role of leaders – and HR in particular – will need to change for a post-covid workforce.

We'll also discuss why diversity and inclusion is business critical for today's organizations.

At its core, Asif says this is a conversation that's as much about acknowledging our similarities as it is our differences...

Asif Sadiq speaking

One of the things I talk about a lot from a global perspective is that diversity, for example, will always look different whether that be around what's important to people, what's impacted people and so on. But the common thread is inclusion. Inclusion is the same, so how we create inclusion is the same globally. And that's what we really need to get to, that's what the focus should be. We don't need to necessarily just point out diversity elements. We need to make sure we just be more inclusive in how we support people.

Megan Wright speaking

In 2019, you gave a keynote on the value of diversity at one point you posted a question to the audience, you said, "Why are we not changing how we are giving opportunities?" I think it's a really good question, Asif, and I'd really like to ask you that. So why do you think we're not changing how we are giving opportunities to people?

Asif Sadiq speaking

I think one of the biggest challenges we have within the D&I space is that we always look at it from a perspective where we were looking at the structures that we can change or the processes that we can look at to create more diversity and inclusion. But where I think we really miss out in this space is the informal elements that create more inclusion.

Megan Wright speaking

Can you explain what you mean by that?

Asif Sadiq speaking

Let's take a recruitment process. We can create fairness throughout the process, we can challenge unconscious biases. We can put in place elements that ensure that we are creating more of a fair process. But what we were not able to influence, or we don't influence is the informal advantages that one group might have over another.

For example, if someone knows someone within the organization, they're able to have some insights which someone who might not know anyone within an organization will not have. And those are the kinds of areas I think that we really need create more or focus more on, because I think a lot of organizations have done a fairly good job of creating more equity within processes. But now we need to move on into those conversations and the conversations that happen outside of the processes. How do we influence those to create more equity and inclusion?

Megan Wright speaking

So tell me about some of the pitfalls that businesses today fall into. I know you've spoken before about the challenges, for instance of box ticking exercises that things like BAME targets or gender pay parity targets can invoke. How are these things moving on and what are businesses actually doing to overcome some of the challenges around diversity and inclusion that we've perhaps traditionally seen in this space?

Asif Sadiq speaking

What the last 12 months really have showcased in my opinion is, so there's been a bigger push for diversity and inclusion within the workplace. My view has been that some have done it well, some not so well where the danger lies in going back to the exact point that you've mentioned that it's easy to go into a box ticking D&I sort of strategy. And that's the last thing we should be doing. You know we need to really focus on how do we build it into different elements of what we do.

Now, I strongly believe D&I impacts every single part of any business, therefore how do we ensure that it's embedded into our day-to-day work, as opposed to this one-off piece or one-off thing that that organizations do do. Also again, when you think of things like, you mentioned gender equity. One of the things I very strongly believe is that we need to make sure that men are involved in that conversation. Men are championing it as well. And this is beyond men being allies. You know, men should have a stake in it as well, and we need to consider when we look at even programs that we do within workplaces or offerings, how can we be more inclusive?

Megan Wright speaking

We actually conducted a survey of 300 senior leaders in HR, operations and facilities from around the world. And we asked them what issues they thought had become more important to their employees in the past 12 months or so. Now, three quarters of them said equal opportunities and diversity have become more important to their people. That's probably not surprising to you, but I'm interested to get your perspective on what impact you think the events of the past year have had on diversity and inclusion and in particular, the agendas that you've been championing in the work that you do.

Asif Sadiq speaking

Yeah. So I think they've always been important to staff. I think what the difference is, and it's interesting to see that the results of your survey, but I do think it's highlighted to wider audiences within organizations, the importance of diversity and inclusion. You know, if I go back 10 years, when I

spoke to staff they felt just as passionate about different elements of diversity and inclusion, whether that be race and ethnicity, whether that be flexible working. It's just that now it's more people are aware of it, and more people probably understand its importance.

Let's take flexible working as an example. So organizations that embedded that way before the pandemic, when people had to work remotely, they were in a good position. They had technology, they had already a lot of their staff were working from home a couple of days a week. So it was very easy to go into that. For organizations that didn't have that in place, it was more of a challenge. So again to me, it proves that diversity and inclusion is critical for business, but what's more important is that if you embed it in a way that that is part and parcel of what we do within an organization, then as the world around us changes, and as things prompt particular conversations within the D&I space organizations who embed it well, will be in a better position to respond.

Megan Wright speaking

So that begs the question then, how can HR leaders be embedding and prioritizing this, especially as we're coming out of the pandemic and now starting to turn our focus to that recovery period?

Asif Sadiq speaking

So, I think first we have to acknowledge that diversity is not a problem we're trying to fix. It is truly an opportunity that we need to embrace. And I think that's the way we need to view it from an HR perspective. If there is this notion that we're going to go back to some level of normality or whatever normality people believe in their minds, that's not going to happen. I remember having a conversation a few years ago around what is the future of HR? What will the HR professional look like in the coming years with the advancements in technology? It's the same with D&I.

I think when you look at the responsibilities that are going to be placed on a lot of HR leaders, HR staff, one of the critical things will be the whole sort of better understanding, truly embedding and engaging on the D&I conversation, because it will become a norm. And also that you are a voice for both the business and the staff and how do you manage the both those relationships.

Megan Wright: Do you think HR leaders today have the skills they need to be championing this into the future or do you think that there are perhaps skills gaps as well that we need to be considering?

Asif Sadiq speaking

So I think it's a bit of both, right? So I honestly do believe diversity and inclusion isn't as complex as we sometimes make it out to be. I think it is about some of our basic human interactions and how we engage with each other. How do we ask questions? How do we create psychological safety? How do we learn and grow through learning more? So I think we do need a bit of a sort of going back into understanding how do we really build on what we do really well as humans, which is interact with each other, have conversations and learn more. So I think that there is that opportunity.

On the flip side, there is this piece around, if organizations are really going to drive this agenda forward, I think it's really important to ensure that you do have people who are skilled in D&I within your organization. And, it's not something you just give someone as a role because they strongly believe in it and or they strongly have a passion for a particular area of D&I. That doesn't make you a D&I expert or a D&I professional.

I fear that sort of a way of looking at D&I because will it take us back 10 years because what's going to happen if you've not been able to navigate, or if you don't have some of the knowledge and expertise to understand what does work, what doesn't work, what has worked in the past, what hasn't worked and how you can put together programs, initiatives, and engagement that are going to truly impact this space. We might revert back to doing what we did 10 years ago, because that's what the textbook says.

So, I think it's a balance between the two, but I do think, that D&I should never be one person's responsibility either.

Megan Wright speaking

So for those companies that can get this right, what are some of the opportunities and the benefits that they stand to gain? And I guess I'm talking there not just about perhaps the financial or the bottom-line benefits, but also in terms of the organizational culture, relationships with their employees and other particular areas that you've seen in your experience.

Asif Sadiq speaking

I think it's so important to acknowledge that, you know getting this right results in that true sense of belonging for individuals, right? It's where people feel they belong, they can be their authentic self. I found personally that I've learned so much more about individuals that I didn't know, because many people used to leave a part of who they are at the door when they came to the office. But now we have insights into each other's lives that we never had before. And that's important when we talk about creating inclusion and understanding each individual's unique identity.

Megan Wright speaking

And tell me about the role of leaders in that too? How can leaders truly demonstrate that this is what their company values? Because we see time and again, organizations will say one thing, but then do something completely the opposite.

Asif Sadiq speaking

Yeah. I think one of the things we need to really address is what does a leader look like and what are the skill sets of a future leader? And one of the biggest things is, how can we be authentic leaders? How can we show vulnerability? Which goes against every training course that we put leaders on 10 years ago. Training courses talked about leaders that are continuously having all the answers, leaders who are seen as being really strong and resilient and all this kind of things. Now, what people want are leaders who are authentic, leaders who are showing vulnerability, leaders who talk about things that impact them, leaders who stand up and say, "I don't have all the answers, or I got this wrong."

And I think those things are so important because people want to relate, people want to see humans.

Megan Wright speaking

Why do you think that vulnerability aspect is so important?

Asif Sadiq speaking

If I hear my leader, or if I speak about my family, for example, to my teams, it allows them, or gives them at least the comfort to know that it's fine. It's fine to have a difficult morning. It's fine for me to say, "I'm not going to be able to join that call this morning, because my three-year-old is having a tantrum." That's fine.

But we have to show that vulnerability. We have to show that, or even to turn up and say, "I don't have the solution to this challenge that we're facing, but let's discuss it."

Every leader needs to find their own why, how, and what when it comes to D&I. Because what, again, staff want to hear is not the company's D&I strategy, they want to understand why is it important to the leader? How, and what are they going to do to make a difference? So, I think that requires changing that concept of how we train leaders and allowing that flexibility, of course, there's skill sets that we want leaders to have. But there's also the piece around giving them some ownership of their own unique leadership style and how they can create that within their teams.

Megan Wright speaking

What are the sorts of trends and I guess, things that are really on your radar looking ahead at the next 12 months and that kind of post COVID recovery as we've talked about?

Asif Sadiq speaking

I'm really mindful of a couple of things. So the first being that I want us to be more inclusive in our conversations. I don't want there ever to be a perception that we jumped from topic to topic on D&I. It's important that we create an inclusive environment because this is the opportunity, right? That is really important because diversity is not about one group over another group. It is about each and every person who works within an organization and beyond.

The second piece is, I strongly believe that one of the big challenges and opportunities in the next 12 months will be mental health. The impact of the pandemic, working in difficult circumstances for some and so on, is going to be huge. And I think it's really important for us to ensure that we build, and we look at how we can ensure the mental health of our staff and employees, how we can acknowledge the nuances within different groups, communities who have been impacted differently, and how do we build that into our future offerings?

Megan Wright speaking

It's a nice, inspiring note to end on, I think, Asif. Thank you very much for your time.

Asif Sadiq speaking

Thank you.

Megan Wright speaking

This interview is part of Sodexo's Experience Next campaign. It is produced by Longitude, a Financial Times company, in partnership with Sodexo.

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