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DE&I with Dr. Felicia Blow, APR, and Vanessa Vancour, hosted by Ronele Dotson, APR, Fellow PRSA

Kathie Taylor 00:00

Welcome to better PR. Wherever you are in your PR journey you'll love exploring the stories from your peers about the many faces of public relations. Better PR is brought to you by In Plain Sight Marketing a public relations and marketing agency in Carson City, Nevada, Renown Regional Medical Center in Reno, and the Sierra Nevada chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. I'm your host, Kathie Taylor. Hello, and welcome to better PR today. Our guest host is Ronele Dotson, a PR and fellow PRSA. And the President of RAD strategies in Reno. Take it away, Ronele!

Ronele Dotson 00:35

Wow. Thank you, Kathie. We appreciate this opportunity to take over the airwaves here for a few minutes. As it advanced preview for the upcoming chapter presentation centered around diversity, equity and inclusion. We're really excited about this topic. And we want to dive into it. It's now my pleasure and my honor to introduce our other guests here I am the host but the people that you're going to hear her from here are the individuals that are in here in this space and doing amazing things. So I've known each of these beautiful humans for many, many years in different capacities, so I'm really excited to introduce them. The first person I'd like to introduce is Dr. Felicia blow APR and PRSA national chair, Dr blows is an award-winning leader and has extensive organizational practices fundraising, strategic planning, and leadership management. She has a 30-year career that has spanned working in manufacturing waste management, environmental services, technology and higher education. She currently serves as the Associate Vice President for Development at the renowned historically black institution, Hampton University. She led this university as a program it was \$150 Million Dream, has no small dreams to campaign and was its campaign director in 2019 and exceeded the goal by raising more than 166 million in support of university priorities. She's earned her no right. She's earned her accreditation in public relations through the UAB she has earned her bachelor's degree in math media arts from Hampton, a Master of Business Administration from Strayer University, and her Doctorate of higher education administration from Old Dominion. Wow, quite a resume!

Vanessa Vancour is the strategic founder of VanCourage, bilingual storytelling and strategic consulting firm for brands, organizations and people who are deeply committed to amplifying these diverse voices and doing things differently. But as I love that statement, Vanessa is a born storyteller, bilingual editorial consultant Latinx marketer who's committed to her 16-year career of bringing diverse narratives and meaningful conversations. She's done this from newsrooms to classrooms, to ad agencies and boardrooms around the world that she's been a part of. And we're very excited to have her and As Kathie said, I'm Ronele. I look forward to hosting this. A founder of red strategies and native event and

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consumer of all things, communication and marketing. So knowing what I know about each of these guests, I am so excited about the synergy that I think you're going to hear not only here, but during our presentation in the early part of October for our membership, so I don't want to talk anymore. We're here to talk about diversity, equity inclusion, pretty big topics. And I'm going to start off by asking this question, for Felicia to kick it off about the role communicators have in the DNI space. Felicia go.

Dr. Felicia Blow 03:47

Thank you Ronele, my dear friend, another lovely human, I constantly say this, what we do as communicators, as strategists, as public relations professionals, we help other organizations find their voice, manage their way through crises, we help organizations do better, be better get stronger, faster, all that good stuff. But the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion challenge before us is within our hands to address because we help people change their hearts, their minds, and their points of view. So the reason I think we have a lead role is that we should be the conscience of our organizations providing the contextual background as to why DE&I is good for business. It's good from a relational point of view and it's just the right thing to do. So I use that phrase because when I started first talking about this many years ago, I started working with it from a chamber point of view. And most Chamber members are small businesses, right? When you think about Chambers of Commerce. So what I said is DE&I is not about black and white in every aspect. It's about green. Whoa. No, it's about money. When you embrace this space, you make more money. So what we do is, that's a small example of how as communicators, we pivot the message to the audience, we help them understand these critical features and factors. And not only that, again, I say this as well, we lift democracies, we would not have these, this republic, this wonderful, shiny star on a hill, had it not been for communicators, people who can motivate and inspire. So that was a pretty long-winded answer, but I'm bullish on us changing the world.

06:02

Love that. Vanessa, any thoughts about communicators? I have lots of thoughts.

Vanessa Vancour 06:09

Yeah, I loved hearing that. Dr. Blow, communicators, marketers, PR professionals, we are all storytellers. And I think what Felicia said about the way that we pivot, or influence perspectives, we are creators of culture, right of how we come to understand people and characters, whether it is through fictionalized stories, or through stories, we're telling about real people and businesses. And that's a pretty big responsibility. When we think about it that way, we're not just trying to garner media attention, if we get placement in the media, that is a very powerful outlet. And it does influence culture in the way that we talk about things and what's trending. And so for me, I think our responsibility is to think critically about whose voices are being featured, you know, when we're appropriately handing over the mic, so to speak, you know, are we centering stories on real lived experiences? Are we centering stories around? In the people's own words? Are we changing those, and I think for me, having worked as a managing editor, there's a lot of responsibility in that role, because that's inevitably being influenced by my own biases, right? I'm deciding as an editor, as a writer, as a creator, we all do this, we're making decisions on what sound bites are the most compelling and the most salient and having to be careful not to take things out of context. And so we have to just acknowledge that we are biased beings. And if we are entering a space where maybe we are not the most expert in, that's an

opportunity for us to invite the person who should be at that table to inform us the way that a campaign or story should be handled. Because I think where we go wrong sometimes is designing things thinking we know it's best without inviting some critical feedback or centering stories in real people, you know, and also thinking about people who are part of those experiences and not just the talking heads, you know? Well,

08:21

and I want to lean into that a little bit, Vanessa, and you can't please call me Felicia. And it's this. It's the stories that we choose to tell. So I live in the southern part of the United States of America, or views may be different from those held and more urban metropolises. But this conversation about D and I the reason I have been so successful, and I really believe I have been and engaged in Marriott Publix is because I meet people where they are: for example, my grandmother. She just turned 100 years. Oh, wow. Clothes and her right. Wow, Happy Birthday husband's dead. He has never met a person who's 100 years old, except for my grandmother. And guess what her name is? It's the most beautiful name ever known lover, Kate guy. And I was like, get such a great name. 100 years ago, her parents were on it. But at any rate, my grandmother still today uses the word colored when she refers to African Americans, Black people. Do you think I'm gonna go up to my beautiful grandmother and say, Oh, Grandma, you can't say colored style up your you are violating my rights and bla bla bla bla bla. So I know, however, where she's coming from. I understand her point of view. So the thing that I've tried to do when I talked to people about DNI is I Say to them, I am not going to beat you about the head for your views, I am not going to judge you, I'm going to provide you with an education that will help you be better, do better, feel more comfortable, I also am going to recognize that you may have a bump or two along the way. But we as communicators can help people understand the importance of giving race in this movement. And if we do that, we bring more people along on the journey. So the stories that we tell Vanessa, I really cute in on your point of view in that in that moment, what are what will, I don't know, move the needle, help us have real lasting, long-lasting impact in a good way on how this DNI movement succeeds? And as doesn't become a trend, or does it become performative?

11:02

I think you've said that really well. And I do like, Vanessa, I have to say that I, you know, not to not say that I didn't ever think of it this way, but the influence that we have with a placement right as communicators, right, we're trying to do that the influence that we're really having on not only society, but in place of all of that, right. So that's important, and it's critical. And so I really liked that. And I'd like to maybe ask you to talk a little bit more about that influence, and how some of the techniques or some of the things that we're learning in today's environment, and what you have focused on so much of your career, what could be some things that we should be thinking about, or what can communicators do differently?

11:48

Like a question. I think, first and foremost, it is acknowledging that we all carry implicit biases, and we all have them. You know, I think, as journalists, we like to think that we're making editorial decisions or creating unbiased media when it's impossible in my lines because we're human beings, and we have biases, you know. And research shows that assumptions. And stereotypes actually tend to be the place we go to for information when we are presented with something new, something unknown, whether

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that's a person or cultural experience, we draw on what we think we know, which may be stereotypes. And so I think, you know, it seems so like comically obvious, but I think our role is to just check our assumptions and our biases on the regular, you know, I think, you know, we're tempted as experts and consultants to walk into spaces being all-knowing, and it can be super scary to walk into a place because our job is to research right and do our homework, we are doing interviews, we are we when we put something out, it's because it has gone through several sets of eyes, and we have researched the heck out of it. And we can still get it wrong. And so I think this willingness to walk into spaces to say, Hey, this is new to me, I did a ton of research, but I need someone to check this is this right? Is this spot on? Am I including the right people? Am I pitching it to the right people at my using appropriate language that is reflective of how this person wants to identify? Or would tell the story? Are we using their words? Are we using my words? So I really just think that just having that ability, that willingness to step into spaces, knowing that while our role is to behave this deep knowledge and expertise on the subject matter, especially for our clients, there's no possibility for us to know it. 100% and to get it right. And I think what I like so much about Felicia is perspective, too is this grace, we have to not only grant ourselves but other people. But I think just having a willingness to have a critical feedback loop where we are open to asking people, am I getting this right? And where other folks are willing to tell us? Yes, you are? No, you're not, you know,

14:05

trying to lean in on get a piece of that too Ronele. I believe, and I will talk about this on October 6, we have to own the real estate that we have. We have to know and accept that we are the critical thinkers that we are the leaders that we have the answers. For some reason, I think we have been beaten into this submission around. Well, marketing really has the most budget or well I gotta go to legal. We have the answers. We do own that space. Tell your CEOs when they need to be doing town halls. That's what I believe or engaging to build the brand of their organizations. I really, for me, the 75th anniversary we're going to talk about it and I was the managing director for a book And I did that initiative that took a ton of work. Because I felt like we did have an identity crisis or self-esteem crisis. And I say this to people all the time. I'm not a hack. I am not a spin doctor. Don't come to me. You need some fixed. Come to me when you need something elevated when you need your brand inspired. And on this question, we can leave weakened Lee but to Vanessa's point, but things we have to do are learn train, measure, and engage, I say all the time, you cannot manage what you do not measure. Because the only thing you're doing is stuff. You don't know if it has an impact. You just doing stuff - almost said another S-word! I think I said that yesterday. But the bottom line is to get your stuff in order. Know your profession, be a great writer, own your space and do it with confidence, professionalism, and consistency. We can lead here.

16:07

And I think what I'm hearing you know the dots between both of these as communicators, we have that responsibility to be able to listen on all sides because as communicators, that's our job. But so you said that our research job, and it's hard to take out your own bias, right? But we're supposed to pause and listen to these audiences and bring everybody together and collaborate at a much higher level than any of us can do alone. Right. So I think you said something else in there. Like it's our what's our responsibility? I think I heard that. What? Taking a little bit further I mean, you know, we should you said that we need to go into those, those offices and we need to be the voice, right? We can't relate.

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We can't wait for legal, we can't wait for marketing, we can't wait, we have to take the leadership role. So how does someone do that? How does someone do that? If

16:57

Well, I do believe you have to become more knowledgeable. So I'm a lifelong learner, why do I have a Ph.D.? I love learning. One of the things I would say that you can demonstrate your effectiveness, just like that is to help your CEO and your organization, your HR, your marketing, understand this notion of something that I use a phrase, the dimensions of diversity, talk about the dimensionality of it, it goes beyond race, it goes beyond ethnicity goes beyond gender. And there are so many different things that make us a light. But there are also many things that make us different. So when you do your homework and you study, you can come in with some Pew Research, some McKinsey research some data from the chamber of commerce that talks about business trends, when you can have your own employee feedback, what do your employees think about your brand? Your stock is going up on going? Right now knows me?

18:01

She does this is why I do adore her.

18:03

I need you to sing more on these interviews those wonderful.

VANESSA: 18:07

She does. I don't know when you do this, that to me. That is what I would say the charges. That's how I look at it. So

18:15

yeah. And the question is, you know, in these leadership moments, you know, folks are working for institutions where they have to convince folks, I think the feedback loops is exactly where it starts. And I think that makes leadership nervous sometimes, because if we want to do better, and we want to know if what we're doing is working, we have to be willing to ask and listen, even if what we're receiving is not what we wanted to hear. And I feel like when I've gotten pushback, it's because they have a fixed idea of what they think it is. And understandably, they might be nervous because the feedback might come in from employees or the target audience. It says actually, you're hitting the mark, or this product or brand or service you're providing isn't all that it's cracked up to be. And so I think that's where I've gotten pushback is leadership that wants to keep doing things as they have been doing because it's worked. It's me now, hitting the margins, it's good enough. And I think if we want to evolve and because we are lifelong learners, and we like telling stories, and we'd like to research the hell out of everything. We have to be willing to have feedback loops that really truly are open to not just listening but being willing to implement or in Pivot if needed based on the people we're serving. Whomever the people who are serving whatever form that takes we have to be willing to take that into account. You know, and I think that's the hardest battle I hear in at least with folks who are within organizations or institutions that are trying to do work that is more equitable or inclusive is getting that buy-in. So if they themselves are not in a decision-making power position, sometimes it is through an economic advantage right How do you pitch something to say, look, we're, for me, at least with Latinx marketing, often it comes to a very,

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like numbers based conversation, it is, hey, you're missing out on 25% of this population. If it's not the right thing to do, it's financially, you know, an advantage to be able to reach more people and provide a service to more people. So if it doesn't compel you for other reasons, I mean, these numbers alone are compelling, right? Like, gosh, you're missing out on such a huge audience. This seems like an obvious overstep, I think there are different ways to as you sort of learning what motivates people in the decision-making powers. All right, so maybe they're not sold on these other things, but you know, what, they're gonna get our numbers, you know, what they're gonna get? It goes back to Felicia is the point, it's something you can measure. And I think that's just learning how to, it's what you do, right? You know how to pitch?

20:55

Well, let me say, one, we know how to pivot to because one other teeny thing, maybe not so teeny, this is the age of the consumer, right? We know all about that. Consumers are driving their companies, right, left, right, center, wherever you are. So the other thing communicators should do is work closely with their HR teams. Because if you have an annual report, or a newsletter, or mission statement, or a diversity statement that says you embrace all this stuff, and you're so great, and you got one of these, and one of those 10 of those, and your literature shows, but your actions, like your leadership team does not reflect what you have, you've got a mismatch. So something's got to give. So that's another place where we, we should have what I call courageous conversations, to ensure that we align what we're doing with what we're saying. And again, I just, this is our time, this is our time, we are the influencers on the space. I know I do. Earn a day, as we say in the country.

22:11

I love this. And I could sit here and talk to you guys forever. And we get to talk more October 6, on I know I will have a whole hour with that. So I don't want to give away everything. But there are some highlights on meeting like feedback loops, dimensions of diversity, how this plays into our lifelong learning, and the pivoting that we always are doing this courageous conversation. So that's what we'll dive deeper in person. And I'm so looking forward to that. But please, if there's something you want to leave a wrap-up some comments, for our listeners here, please do. I just love all of this.

22:46

So I'm going to start by saying this is the 75th anniversary of PRSA and it is history. 75 years is a long time. And we are celebrating that because there are not a lot of organizations that have stood this kind of test of time. However, it's not about the past. It's about what we're going to do going forward. What kind of organization are we going to be? What kind of professional are you going to be? Who are you bringing behind you? And what kind of world will they live in from a comms PR point of view? That's the kind of stuff I want to talk about lean into? How is AI going to change what we do? How is globalism going to change what we do as communicators? So I'm looking forward to the next 75

23:32

That's awesome. And happy birthday PRSA.

23:37

Yeah, I just wanted to add that, you know, in the in-person dialogue, what we will talk about is exactly that. So now that we've you know address some of these key issues, or we've talked in greater depth about our responsibility, where do we go right, what do we do with this and how can we leave you with some actionable items and we'll give you those at the October 6 event.

24:01

Awesome. Well, thank you both. I am so excited to see you both in person here for event and with that, thank you for your time your energy and resources now for this and then going forward at all that you continue to do for not only your organization's but for the communities that you embrace and that are around you. There are lucky and fortunate to have you both.

24:25

Thank you so much. I can't wait I can't wait to see you.

Kathie Taylor 24:30

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