

Introduction

00:00 Jean

Hello, everybody. I'm excited to bring you this week's blog post. We have been publishing blog posts and interviews for the last 52 weeks. This is our anniversary issue.

When we started the blog, the world was in the middle of a global pandemic. Two weeks earlier, we had watched George Floyd's gruesome murder under the knee of a police officer. Like millions of others, I was personally destroyed. At that moment the world changed. Suddenly, I knew I had to do more. My phone was ringing.

I had spent several decades doing research, consulting, and teaching on how to foster leadership and racial and social justice. I had received generous support for my research for nearly a decade from Dr. Maconda Brown O'Connor. The responsibility I already felt to pass along what I had learned felt even heavier.

So we started the blog. Twenty-four weeks later, we launched Pathfinders, a membership program for those who are committed to leadership for racial and social justice. These blog posts are an essential feature of the program. Members read one post every two weeks, discuss it online, and then engage in practice exercises about it.

After Pathfinders got off the ground, we refined and launched our diversity, equity, and inclusion survey.

You will now hear from four leaders; three are from Pathfinders and one is engaged in the DEI survey in her organization. They openly share their experiences and learning with you.

I've been delighted and gratified at what our team has been able to accomplish these past 52 weeks. It humbles me to reflect on what people have gained, and especially the four leaders you will hear from us. They willingly partnered with us to advance their learning to benefit themselves, their organizations, and the people they serve.

Next week, we will resume our normal blog posts, bringing you insightful interviews and information about leadership for racial and social justice in whatever setting you find yourself in. This week, we celebrate our members and what they have learned.

Hope you enjoy hearing what these four special leaders have to say. We would love it if you would leave comments below. We're glad you're here.

What specific problem were you wanting guidance to solve?

3:34 Sylvia Epps

As a leader at DIR, I see part of my responsibility being to ensure that DIR is a safe space for everyone. Or at least, you know, that I'm working towards cultivating that. And I felt like Pathfinders has been a steppingstone in my own development towards that goal, as well as some of the other folks who have engaged in it with me who are also DIR staff members. So that was a problem, like how can I get some help, some training, some practice experience, engaging in conversations about race.

4:09 Sabrina Strawn

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are very important to the Alzheimer's Association. It's also very important to me. Recent events have made that more and more clear, even though I considered myself an ally prior to a year ago or two years ago or prior to the election of the past president. It became, to my mind, it became a critical issue.

4:37 Cristina Vetrano

I did have a number of staff approach me early on when I started at Ronald McDonald House-Houston, saying that they didn't really feel like folks felt that they could be open about any thoughts that they had. They didn't feel like they could be their authentic self. And the advice I was given was really for people to be able to be really honest, they felt like we needed to seek out a third party to help us to do a survey for all of the staff.

5:08 Erika Young

I'm very passionate about advancing and being a champion for diversity, equity, and inclusion, typically in the companies that I work for, or have worked for, and I was trying to find a way to really strengthen my knowledge base and outside of the company provided training. So I was wondering, you know, should I take college courses? Or is there a certification that I could pursue? And last year, I got an email about this offer. And so it was just the right offering at the right time for me.

What were the pain points to not having a solution?

5:52 Sylvia Epps

Pain point for not having any effective way to lead, engage in, cultivate productive conversations about race meant the issues around race at DIR would go unaddressed. I think this is particularly important, because DIR is an African American owned firm with 70% of the staff being minorities. So the assumption, unspoken, I think assumption had been that there wasn't a race issue at DIR, we're all more alike than we are different. But that could not be farther from the truth.

6:34 Cristina Vetrano

I think my pain points were more that it was hard to have a plan. You know, I really work at any sort of goal that an organization is going to have, is that we're going to do it based on data and information that we have. And so I didn't really feel like I had the data and the baselines to even begin to plan, to know what we should do to improve at Ronald Mc Donald House-Houston.

6:57 Erika Young

I always do this work on the side of my desk, it's something I do outside of my regular day to day job. But I know that I am, as I mentioned, very passionate about it and thinking about it as something I can do professionally. But I want to be taken seriously. And I want to be well equipped. So one of the reasons that I am interested in pursuing more training and development in this area is so that I can have the right knowledge base so that I can be well equipped and really be able to have a significant impact and drive change as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

7:39 Sabrina Strawn

Even though someone considers themselves to be relatively unbiased, I think since we grow up in a biased -- to my mind -- we grow up in a biased world, we say things and do things without realizing that we're perpetuating the problem. And I wanted to do what I could do to be part of the solution. To be more effective in advocating and taking action to increase equity and inclusion.

8:14 Sylvia Epps

Those are skills that most people are lacking when it comes to race, in particular, because we can't take our own personal experiences away from the conversation at hand, even if it's not our own personal experience of race in the workplace. So that is a true pain point for me as a leader, not getting a solution to this problem. We created a workspace that does not align with our core values, which, for example, is to provide a supportive and learning work environment for employees. And they don't feel like they can talk about race in the workplace and that it's a safe space to do, I don't think we are adhering to our core values. So that's a personal pain point that I took on myself. And I brought some other folks along with me. There are other folks who are committed to figuring this out as well. But I didn't... When I saw Pathfinders come up, I thought, well, I gotta give it a shot. Because it is really important to me that we get this done right. Or that we're trying to.

What was it like to partner with us?

9:24 Erika Young

I find it to be a collaborative learning experience. I have quite a bit of engagement with other peers, colleagues, but I really love the fact that you get direct coaching through the course and through the program, through consultants and experts and you get direct learning from Jean Latting and it's a great opportunity to build on the learning.

9:50 Cristina Vetrano

So working with Jean during the survey process was a dream. You know, I really just appreciated her guidance. And I appreciated her at a number of levels. One was that she has such a good sense of the data. But more importantly, she really has an amazing amount of emotional intelligence to just understand where people are coming from, she can sometimes just feel kind of a backstory to why someone is asking a question that they were asking. And so, not only was she able to help us think through what the survey should look like, but just guiding us as a group in order to get to a place that we could really take advantage of the information.

10:35 Sabrina Strawn

I'm a reader. And I very much appreciate having the opportunity to read thought provoking material. I also would be a perpetual student, if I could. So I really appreciate the opportunity to go through written exercises and think about the material. And also to provide comments to the rest of the group of Pathfinders and then participate in small meetings. But in my experience, being a member of Pathfinders goes another step toward helping us be more effective. I think we're held to account and that part of the exercises and part of the small group discussions includes what action steps we're going to take. So I appreciate that further step.

11:27 Sylvia Epps

In addition to that, we also have the opportunity to challenge ourselves, however it makes sense for us. So we leave the group meetings with tools to help us practice what we just learned, or at least sit with them to reflect on what we just learned and think about how we get implement it in real time. And I think one of the great things about being a member of Pathfinders is that you know that everyone is there to talk about race, or to hear conversations about race so that they can eventually talk about race. So it's like coming together not knowing exactly how people interpret it, the things that are the topic for the day, but then being open to hearing how all of those perspectives really help you help the individuals become stronger, as they talk about race.

When did you realize that you were getting results worth your while?

12:29 Cristina Vetrano

We just had the opportunity to see the results from the survey, and they really exceeded my expectations. And the part that I thought was so interesting was the way that Jean was able to break out the data, so that we could see it in so many different ways, age, ethnicity. It helped me to see just how people's views are different, that I wouldn't have seen just from one version of the survey. And so it's really already given me a lot of insights, without even seeing recommendations yet from our DEI committee, but just really giving me a much better sense of where the staff stands today.

13:17 Sylvia Epps

Even though we've all been around each other for about six years, and have, what I believe, a strong rapport and some trust there, there was still a need to build trust with each other in this space. And that was very evident from the beginning. Just in, folks are being hesitant to speak, not sure if they wanted to share or add a perspective. But about the third or fourth session I saw a shift and some of it, was just I think folks being more comfortable. And Jean was doing some prodding, not heavy prodding, but just some light prodding. And the discussion started to go deeper if people were being more open and more vulnerable with each other.

14:07 Erika Young

Each module requires some action. If you know anything about Dr. Jean Lattig, there's going to be an opportunity for you to walk the talk and put things into practice. And we went through a module that really dealt with the type of environment, the type of culture that individuals create. And one of the exercises really dealt with finding out if people enjoy working with me. So I actually solicited feedback from coworkers. And got some feedback that I didn't quite expect, that I was able to then kind of follow up on and learn a little bit more, so I can make some behavioral changes and that was very beneficial. In terms of some of the results that I saw kind of going through the program, I was able to get some tangible feedback that I could act on and improve the way that I work with others.

15:03 Sabrina Strawn

I could see the fruits of the action steps that I took, first of all, that I was taking action steps. I wasn't just watching and reading the news and thinking to myself "that's terrible," but actually taking action on a personal level. And I have seen myself become a better friend, a better ally, and also become a better manager.

What big wins have you achieved by partnering with us?

15:37 Cristina Vetrano

I think a huge win that we had was the participation that we received from the survey. So, we were hoping for at least 50% participation, we had 63% participation. I think we've got a lot of employees that are really engaged and excited about it. They also really appreciated the fact that we did utilize Jean, that we had a third party that really gave them an opportunity to really be honest, and they have a lot of confidence that all of that was anonymous for them. So they can be really honest with their information.

16:16 Erika Young

I had the opportunity to put things in practice, with every module that we actually complete. So there's an opportunity to have a direct impact. But I would say for me, the big win was really learning the visualization exercise and approach. And also just the connection to others in the program. I'm establishing relationships with people who are also passionate and also dedicated to this work. So that's also a big win in my view.

16:51 Sylvia Epps

Getting to a point within that group, where they saw me as a participant with my own struggles, and not just their supervisor, their leader. That was a big win for me. And that's a wall that I can work tirelessly to break down and say look, you know, in this space, I'm one of y'all, there is no power dynamic here. And it won't make a single bit of difference to some folks, until they decide they're able to see, to remove that power dynamic and see me just as a participant. When we made that kind of shift, or when they made that kind of shift, the conversation went to a place where I was hearing what I thought was very candid feedback that I could actually do something with, as opposed to high level, vague feedback; folks not really wanting to give real examples because they don't want to reveal anything or start something. And I saw those walls being broken down. And for me to be effective, I have to be able to have a space for folks to let down those walls and talk to me about the real issue without any kind of nervousness, any kind of fear, in any kind of way, especially when it comes to race.

18:05 Sabrina Strawn

It's given me the courage to act upon the things that I knew were lacking in my life that I mentioned earlier. I've become intentional in mentoring my direct reports, who happened to be two young people of color in their first professional work. And I'm in addition making a point of utilizing my networks to help several African American women to have increased career opportunities. And last, but definitely not least, is I've made new friends.

What would you say to someone thinking about partnering with us?

18:43 Sabrina Strawn

Pathfinders provides a framework for bringing your intellectual and emotional assets to bear on a crucial challenge that our society faces that have equity and inclusion. You'll have the opportunity to talk about hard topics with others who are there for similar reasons. And then you have the opportunity to put the teaching into practice through personal exercises, group discussions, and being held to account for walking the walk.

19:11 Sylvia Epps

Pathfinders gives you a safe space to just jump in and try it. You may get it wrong. You may get it right the first time, but you're going to get better either way as you keep going throughout the process. Even if you're comfortable talking about race, if you're comfortable leading courageous conversations, asking the tough questions I still recommend Pathfinders. I just believe we cross paths with so many different people, and that the opportunity to deliberately talk about race will help their world in general, help in all kinds of environments and circles and industries. Because right now we're just talking to folks who think like us. And we don't engage with folks who don't think like this, think like us. And so I feel like Pathfinders, you don't know who's coming to the table, all you do know is that they've signed up to talk about a conversation about a racially charged environment. So that's what I think, that's what I would say to someone, jump in, close your eyes, open them up, but jump in and get ready for a ride.

20:10 Erika Young

I would say, being a member it's a very unique experience. And being vulnerable is a big part of it. So you know, you're sharing information with others and learning from others. So it's...be ready to dig into yourself, and also be vulnerable enough to share that with others I think is a key component of the program. The other thing I would say is make sure that if you are stepping into this program that you're willing to invest the time to get the full benefit. It's comprehensive. And I think that if you try to shortchange some of the steps, you may miss out and so just be willing to invest some time in it.

21:04 Cristina Vetrano

I would say I cannot imagine using anybody but Jean.

21:25 Jean

[laughing] That's good enough. I'll stop. Thank you.