

Culturally Responsive Leadership: Advancing Equity in the Workplace with Dr. Kevin Wright

Announcer: You're listening to HR Mixtape. Your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Dr. Kevin Wright, a senior racial equity facilitator and consultant known for his expertise in advancing organizational equity. Kevin works to shift organizational cultures toward inclusivity. His work is rooted in supporting marginalized communities and transforming systems to promote equity.

Shari Simpson: Dr. Wright, thank you so much for sitting down with me today.

Dr. Kevin Wright: Yes, thank you for having me. Glad to be here.

Shari Simpson: So we got to chat a little bit before we came on about you pursuing your doctorate. It's something I'm working on now. And I think it's just one of those pieces in your story as you got to this place of wanting to focus on culturally responsive supervision in the DEI space. What else led you there? I think it's so fascinating. I'm learning a lot about culturally responsive curriculum design right now. So it's definitely top of mind. So I'd love to hear your story and how you got here.

Dr. Kevin Wright: Yeah, most definitely. So when it comes to culturally responsive leadership, supervision, culturally responsive curriculum or pedagogy, one of the things that has always fascinated me is the opportunities that it creates in order to expand our skill set, to expand how we approach the work. and to also expand how we show up for not only ourselves, but also for the people that we're working alongside. I think it's very easy to navigate with, you know, the default dominant white culture within workspaces, and it's just like, okay, there's nothing inherently wrong with how certain things are managed in the workplace, and at the same time, We got to think about how, how are we truly not only recruiting diversity, but also how are we welcoming and integrating that diversity? How are we making sure that we're honoring that diversity in the workplace, knowing that there's other ways to go about handling business?

Shari Simpson: I love that. For those that don't know, maybe you can walk them through a very easy definition or description between kind of traditional supervisory ways versus having a culturally responsive viewpoint of supervision.

Dr. Kevin Wright: Yeah, most definitely. So traditionally, supervision says that we need to focus on tasks, we need to focus on processes, protocols, and policies. We need to focus on deadlines. And that is what we value. That is what we center. That is what we prioritize. Whereas culturally responsive supervision says that like, yes, all of that is important. We're not saying to get rid of that. We're not saying to take that away. We're not saying to not value, center, or acknowledge that. We are simply saying do all of that and invest in the relationship with the people that are working alongside you. So

therefore, if you are valuing deadlines and tasks and policies, procedures and protocols, also value the people that are doing the work and producing the labor that contributes to all of that. And that's going to show up in different ways. Sometimes when we think about doing this work, we think about like, oh, we just got to get straight to business. And it's just like, well, what would it look like if we took the time to truly humanize one another? Think about how can we support each other? And then also thinking about the different ways that come from our cultural backgrounds that can further enhance the way that we show up when it comes to doing this work and doing it together.

Shari Simpson: You know, I was watching something on the news the other day, and this woman was talking about, it was an actress, and I'm completely blanking on her name right now, but she was talking about how she shows up differently in different places and the masks that she wears. And one of the examples she gave is that she's originally from Africa, and the community that she grew up in is very sarcastic, and that they give compliments by being sarcastic to somebody. And she was giving the example of, you know, so when she's home, you know, she's very rough. She's very sarcastic. She has this persona. But when she's, you know, working in the States, she's different. She talks differently and responds differently. And it really kind of honed in for me that idea of, you know, sometimes we define culture in this huge, like, up-in-the-sky thing that we don't understand. And that's such a simple example, just the way that they give compliments, how different it is. When I think about that, I think about the space that we have to sit in with HR and introduce things like being culturally responsive in our leadership practices. What are some missteps that organizations are taking as they try to implement these types of changes?

Dr. Kevin Wright: I would say that there sometimes is a lack of intentionality. And what I mean by that is, is that sometimes what I've noticed in my experience is that organizations will be told straightforward to their face, like, hey, this is a problem. This is an issue. We need to address it. And instead of thinking about, OK, we have this issue, we have this disparity that's being experienced by people from marginalized communities in our workplace. How can we address this? Many organizations are still navigating this mindset that it is okay to think with a very technical lens. So therefore, you have a problem, I need to come up with a quick solution, so then therefore we can just move forward and just continue productivity. So therefore, I've noticed that one of the biggest missteps is that organizations will jump to a quick fix as opposed to a sustainable solution. So therefore, the intentionality piece is missing. So it's like, oh, we're going to address problem X this way, moving on. And we'll do it by rewriting this policy. Done. And it's just like, cool. Thank you for rewriting the policy. And we need to know and understand that it's going to take more than policy revision to address this issue. Not to say that policy revision isn't important. It's just that this is where culturally responsive supervision takes a yes-and

mentality, not an either-or mentality. So we're not saying policy revision or bust, we're saying policy revision and change behavior, policy revision and culture development, policy revision and care, intentionality, and humanization.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, it's that switch from kind of a traditional way of looking at leadership to a more adaptive leadership style, where you're really thinking through, you know, if you've ever read the book *Upstream*, right? Like, what's the core of the problem, not just the symptom. So that's, it's just really interesting to make that shift. How have you worked or coached or consulted on organizations where, you know, DEI is important for them, but they have leadership that's hesitant or resistant to kind of introduce this more empathetic or this more care way of looking at supervising their employees.

Dr. Kevin Wright: Yeah. So when it comes to resistance or hesitance, I know and understand that it's coming from somewhere. Like I personally have never met a person that has been resistant to something simply just cause. One piece of advice I've been given by my mentors is that when you are in this work, whether it's DEI or not DEI related, but especially when you're in this DEI work, Sometimes when you are coming across people who are resistant or hesitant, it's because of the fact that sometimes they usually don't understand what's really going to be the outcome if they do this type of shift related to DEI, or they're trying to avoid something. And sometimes that avoidance is rooted in some type of assumption. So there have been times where I have worked with organizational leaders, c-suite executives, and I've just simply sat down with them just like, Hey, just you and me one-on-one off the record. Like as a matter of fact, let's leave the office space. Let's go across the street to a coffee shop or something and just talk shop. What are you trying to avoid? So it's not me asking, like, why don't you support DEI? Why are you anti-DEI? Like, no, no, no, because that's very assumptive and that's very, you know, punitive in my perspective. I think it's accusatory. Rather, I ask, what exactly are you trying to avoid? What is something that you are concerned about if you did take this approach? What is something that you are concerned about that may impact you or your ability as a leader to actually show up in this way? I start with questions like that. And usually, once I'm able to lean into those types of questions, the people are usually able to let their guard down with me and let me know, well, I'm concerned about how much it's going to cost. And it's just like, Oh, okay. So the cost was money. Let's talk about the investment that this will take financially and how this will actually boost your fiscal responsibility in your organization. Sometimes I've come across people that said, Kevin, I just am afraid of making a mistake. Like I don't want to be a person that is perpetuated as a racist. And it's just like, okay. And what exactly do you think you would do or what do you think you are doing now that would ever give someone the impression that you are racist, right? And I would add any other is or -ism to that. So what are you doing or what do you think you would do that would give folks the impression that you're racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, et cetera, et cetera, anti-

Semitic, whatever. And let's start there because, again, we're trying to get to the root of, like, where is your concern coming from? And I've noticed that many times, most commonly, folks are just afraid to get sued and afraid to get canceled. And it's like, well, that is not my approach. I am not here to perpetuate cancel culture. I am here to think about how can I inform you, how can I educate you, and then how can I help you do better, especially from when you start to know better. So therefore, if you are afraid of being quote-unquote canceled, we need to first put that on pause and just start with what exactly are you needing support in? Are you needing support in understanding the difference between diversity, equity, inclusion, or are you just needing more of an understanding of like how this is going to impact your organization's finances? Or is it another concern of yours? Regardless of what it is, let's open up the conversation about what that actually looks like for you. And then let's think about what can be your first and immediate next step. Because I've also noticed that people will try to think about the long game very very frequently, but not think about like, so what's gonna be my first next immediate step in regards to getting to the long game outcome? So that's why I always try to make sure that when engaging with folks who are highly resistant or hesitant, I always ask them first, what exactly are you trying to avoid? And usually what they're trying to avoid is an assumption.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, you know, I've, I've talked to other HR professionals who've had to have those tough conversations. And it's interesting, because one of the things I've kind of uncovered is that when a consultant comes in, the leaders are almost more apt to have those transparent, open communications with the consultant. Because, like you said, safe space, you know, off the record, those kinds of things. What approach, and I loved all of the examples you just gave, because those are great talking points for our listeners. Is there any other advice you give, though, to that HR practitioner who isn't getting that same type of vulnerability when they're trying to have the conversation? Because maybe they have all the knowledge already and they don't necessarily need to bring in a consultant, but they're not, they just can't bridge that gap with that leader.

Dr. Kevin Wright: Yeah, so one of the things that I have seen and I have also done in practice is to ask simply, so where is the disconnect happening? What is it about diversity, equity and inclusion that does not sit well with you? And if we're beyond resistance and hesitance and it's just a blame like, no, I'm not budging, I'm not doing this, you can't change my mind, et cetera, et cetera. You know, those are very difficult conversations to have. And I always leave with questions where it's just like, but why? Like, can you just give me one reason as to why you definitively are against this? Right? Because then this raises the question, are we talking about what's within the best interest of the organization? Or are we just simply talking about what's in the best interest of yourself? Because I've noticed that in DEI-related spaces, sometimes people confuse equity with personal preference. People will, leaders, organizational leaders

will say, oh, well, that's not equitable. So therefore, we're not going to create ERGs. We're not going to revise that policy. We're not going to look at the gender wage gap analytics. We're not going to do any of that because that's not equitable. When in actuality, what they mean is, that is not something that I want to do. So we need to take the time to also be very careful with our language that we are using because I've noticed that many times people are saying one thing but totally meaning something else. And that's why I always try to encourage people very explicitly Just say what you really want to say, because I don't think we're talking about equity. I think we're talking about personal preference. And that's why it's very, very crucial to ask was just like, what exactly do you have to lose if we were to do this? What exactly are you afraid of if we tried this? And sometimes people are afraid of failure. People are afraid of making a mistake. People are afraid of looking bad. And they're just like, well, what if this doesn't work? And then I always come in and simply ask, but what if it does? You ready? So the thing is that when I have seen situations like that, I always encourage the HR leaders to always lead with a mentality of leaning into possibility as opposed to leaning into limitation. Because that's something that I've noticed that many organizational leaders are doing, where they are leaning into limitation because they want to basically make sure that they make themselves look good and make their organization look good. And the thing is that DEI work, just like any other type of business practice, will involve some type of risk. So therefore you just got to think about why is this risk in particular, not suitable enough for you to at least try on. The worst that can happen is that you fail, but then you can learn from it. The thing you just got to think about is what risks are we willing to take knowing that this has the opportunity to serve and benefit, advance and resource so many people who are currently working in this organization and folks who have yet to even come through the doors to start working for this organization.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, there's lasting impact to the DEI efforts across the board, from financial impact, which we know from research, to team cohesion and feeling that you are in a place where you can see yourself, you can see others, you can grow that way. As you've worked with leaders, what are some ways that you have helped leaders stay kind of at the forefront of DEI and the things that we're learning. So I'll give you an example of something that I do. So, you know, I've talked about this before on the podcast, is I am very diligent now in looking up idioms and turns of phrase before I say them. Because over the last couple of years, I've realized there's this rich history in a lot of them that is terrible and it comes from a very bad place, very racist practices or just things I didn't realize that I was saying that were perpetuating you know, this image. And so that's something I spend a lot of time on is language and how I use it and being cognizant of it. Is there other things that you help leaders think through from that DEI lens to stay current, to be more cognizant, to be culturally responsive?

Dr. Kevin Wright: Yeah. One of the things that I tried to be very

intentional about is bringing current events, but also historical events to the forefront. So people understand that like, hey, a lot of things had to happen just for us to get to here. And we still have the audacity to want more, but let's break that down. So, for example, there was one time I was in a conversation with a C-suite executive, and he told me up front, Kevin, I don't understand how racism is still an issue. I don't see how bias is still a thing. I mean, we've had a black president, so, like, I think we're good, right? Like, we've had several women in political office, so, like, we're good, right? You know, it's, I think this country is way, in a much better place than what it used to be. And it's just like, OK, I can see some validity in your in your statement. And at the same time, I want you to think about two different things. Let's unpack the last thing that you just said. You believe that racism doesn't exist because our country is in a better state than what it was before. What is that before that you're referring to? Because I always when I'm just like, what are you trying to say? Just just please just be explicit. And this person was very comfortable with saying like, well, you know, slavery isn't a thing. I'm just like, okay. So we're basing the entire basis of racism on one of several acts of injustice and oppression. So, okay. So enslaved black bodies are now working on plantations, picking cotton. Okay. True. And at the same time, is that the only form of oppression that has manifested in this country that we now know as the United States? And then if you want to talk about slavery, it's just like, OK, that iteration of slavery doesn't exist anymore. And yet there are still other forms of slavery that do exist, even in the year 2024. I mean, I'm from the state of Nevada. And on our ballot, one of the questions actually was asking, do you want to strike out slavery as a form of criminal punishment in the state constitution? Which 32 percent, I believe, said that they still wanted to keep it. So luckily enough, that's getting taken out of the Constitution, even then, even just the conversation about slavery is still in our laws, in our policies, in our procedures, in our state constitutions. So, and I bring that, and I brought that up to him, and he was just like, oh my God, I had no idea. I'm just like, well, I understand. One, you're not from Nevada, and two, you were only thinking of one particular event that was rooted in oppression and dehumanization and anti-Blackness. I have another question for you. When you come into work every day, how often do you think about your hair? And he said, I don't think about my hair at all. It's just a regular buzz cut. I'm just like, OK, would you ever come in with a different hairstyle if you ever wanted to? And he said, you know, back in the 80s, I had a nice, a nice mohawk. So you know what, if I ever I think I would come in with a mohawk to work one day. I'm just like, okay, and you would feel comfortable with that, right? And he said, yeah, why? I mean, it's just hair. I'm just like, it's just hair, pause right there. Did you know that there was a situation where a black woman was discriminated against simply because of the fact that she had dreadlocks? And that is why now people are fighting for the Crown Act." He was just like, no. I'm just like, yes. We live in a country where people of color, especially Black folks,

have to now defend something as simple as our hairstyles in the workplace because of the fact that in some places it is considered disruptive, it is considered unprofessional, it is considered uncivilized. And we are still fighting for the Crown Act to be federally recognized. It's passed in several states, it's passed in select cities, but it has not passed federally. So therefore, hair discrimination is something that is now on the table. It's not even just race anymore. It's not just gender. It's not just sexuality. It's something as simple as hair. And when I brought this up to that gentleman, he was just like, OK, I have so much to process and I have so many questions. But I'm going to check myself, Kevin, and do my own work because you did tell me that I need to be mindful of how I show up asking questions as a white man. I'm just like, yes. So again, it wasn't a conversation that was based on childish attacks or any type of like, wordplay antics. I wasn't trying to trap him. I was simply asking questions. And then I told him about two things that are factually true. So it's just like, Hey, you didn't have this information, but now that you have this information, I want you to think about what are you going to do with it? So for him, he changed his, his, his mentality, uh, all of a sudden, because he realized that like, okay, you know what? I've been in relationship with Kevin for about a year or so. I thought I had this down pack, and yet I still thought racism really wasn't that big of an issue. But here he is dropping more facts on me. I still have more to learn. Now, again, that required a lot of vulnerability from him and myself. because of the fact that I was vulnerable enough to tell him about how, like, hey, you're bringing up some very anti-Black sentiments, and I need you to understand, like, why exactly many of your sentiments are very problematic. And then two, he had to be vulnerable enough to accept this feedback and then not take it as an attack on his character, but simply a critique about how he can be better, especially now that he knows better.

Shari Simpson: So much knowledge and just one reply there. I'm completely inspired by the work that you do because I think it's so important to be able to have these conversations with our leaders and open their eyes to all sorts of things that they didn't know existed and that they should be cognizant of. As we wrap up our conversation, what's maybe one piece of advice you really hope that our HR community could walk away from this conversation with?

Dr. Kevin Wright: I would say the biggest piece of advice is learning how to be okay with change and understanding that progress is going to take time. I understand that many people, especially folks from historically marginalized communities, have been demanding several systemic and transformational and workplace-related changes for several years and for several generations. And we've gotten some progress, and at the same time, we still want more, and that is okay. and at the same time, finding ways to be okay with the fact that this is a marathon, not a sprint. And I know that's very cliché, because even when I hear it or even say I roll my eyes, because you just saw me do it, and at the same time, like, it is true. And as much as I

have my own qualms with that statement, I also understand the beauty and the truth behind that statement. Because the only reason why I've been able to sustain myself, my livelihood, my health, my own personal joy, in this work is because I've had to constantly remind myself it's a marathon, not a sprint. And I'm doing a lot of work that is building on the shoulders of giants that my ancestors were in this fight many years before me. So I can't lose sight of the fact that, you know, they went through significantly more struggles than I did. So it's just like, It's not to have a comparison argument, it's just more so to be mindful, like, hey, you know, they did so much for me to have the audacity to talk on a podcast about this work while doing this work, where it's just like knowing that they were navigating a society where their voices were always trying to be silenced in all mediums. So I remind myself of the beauty of the work that I do, knowing that it is tedious sometimes, it is hard work, and at the same time, it's also hard work.

Shari Simpson: I love that. Kevin, thank you so much for taking a few minutes of your day with me.

Dr. Kevin Wright: Yeah, thank you so much.

Announcer: I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.