

## The Power of Language with Pam Jeffords

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 Pam Jeffords, the managing partner at Diversity Works Group, leading diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts globally. Known for her innovative approach, Pam has consulted across sectors and holds multiple board roles.

Shari Simpson: Pam, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today. Thanks for having me. I thought we could start by having you share a little bit about your history, your journey, what you do now, and your passions. I know that's a heavy question, but just a couple sentences on that.

Pam Jeffords: Absolutely. I actually started my career in sales for technology. So being one of the only women in sales, you know, I realized that there was a lot of women's organizations and I was happy to be leading them and be involved in everyone. And around 2011, CalPERS and CalSTRS came out with a ranking by state of how poor we were doing in D&I by state, and Colorado was ranked last. Wow. Yes. So it just so happened that my company had just been sold. I had been involved in a lot of women's groups through my company. And so about 100 women and I got together back in 2011 and said, what's going on? Why are we last? We were stunned. Colorado is so progressive. And that launched my career into diversity, equity, and inclusion. And I've been in this world ever since.

Shari Simpson: Wow. You know, I have a near dear heart for Colorado. My sister lives in Colorado Springs. My son is in Colorado Springs. That's hopefully where I will retire someday. Lots of love for Colorado. We love it. We've been there since 2001. Wow. So in your space in diversity, equity and inclusion, I feel like we're at this place right now in time where, you know, coming out of the pandemic, we had all of this financial backing into DEI. Now we're seeing organizations kind of pull back on that, but the expectation of employees hasn't changed. They still want those same initiatives. So I feel like we're in this kind of weird polarization right now with DEI. What are you seeing and how are you advising people to tackle that? Can I be kind of edgy on this?

Pam Jeffords: Of course. Well, I think what, in my opinion, that happened is that with all the energy and enthusiasm, people were doing it wrong. And now we're kind of catching up to this, wait a second, the intention was never to piss people off or do things that were illegal. But when I talk to people about what the new laws that are coming out that are supposedly anti-DEI, these things were actually always illegal. So when you talk about quotas in the United States and companies who set quotas like, we're going to hire 20% blank, that was always unlawful. It was always unlawful to say, if you have two candidates and everything else being equal, hire the woman. That has always been an unlawful statement. And that's now catching up because

instead of it being inclusive, it actually excluded several groups and they got angry. And now they have a platform, you know, with the political climate that we have in the United States, now they have a platform to push back and we're seeing that happen. But for those of us that have always been doing what I say, doing DEI right, we're thriving. Our organization is growing. Our clients are doubling their spend. So I think we need to go back and say what's actually working and what's not and what was unlawful always and not do that. So I think that's where the division has been.

Shari Simpson: What role do you think the civil discourse that we're seeing has played into that, positive or negative?

Pam Jeffords: So, you know, the civil discourse, I think, regardless if you had any DEI efforts, would have always hit an all-time high right now. And I think some of it goes back to we have to unlearn what we taught ourselves 20 years ago, which was that if you sit down with two people and you talk about your ideas and your opinions, at some point you're going to come to a common ground. That's what we were told. That's wrong. That is not the case. And you shouldn't ask people to respect someone else's opinion. You can ask them to be respectful, but we need to use the word civil instead. Because civil, I can be civil. But if you ask me to respect someone's opinion who's coming, regardless of where it's coming from, let's say it's coming from the Middle East and from upbringing there that somebody doesn't believe I, as a woman, have the right to drive. you shouldn't ask me to sit down with them to come to some understanding. Why would we do that? What's the purpose of that, right? But can you ask me to be civil to that person? A hundred percent. And so we have to stop using this word respect so casually and instead say, the baseline in the corporate world is civility. Can we all agree with that? And then respect, you know, yes, we need to be respectful, but we shouldn't need to seek understanding of each other's opinions on topics that are like that. Now, if it comes to sales credit or a process or procedure, sure. But those kind of arguments, those were the god of the good old days when we were just arguing on sales credit. Now you're talking about people's values and their beliefs. And I don't think in the workplace we should ask people to seek to understand and respect, but we should absolutely require civility.

Shari Simpson: I totally agree. I think that we've, we have lost this ability to, or maybe a better way to phrase this, we've stopped teaching people how to argue. You know, like having arguments leads to innovation. Having your ideas challenged gives you that cognitive dissonance to start to wrestle with what transformation needs to happen. And you're right. There are plenty of scenarios where we're not going to agree. We're not going to come to the conclusion. We're not in a contract negotiation. This isn't a UBA we're working with, you know, like we are going to hold our opinions, but we can absolutely be civil. I mean, how many HR people sit in organizations where they don't agree with maybe the political view of an organization if they're taking it, but they still have to show up and do their jobs and treat their employees with respect to the roles.

Correct.

Pam Jeffords: And I think, If we really were to start back and say, what would I do over? I would challenge companies not to have corporate values because that word values, it says we want to have these shared values. Well, what does that mean? Do we all need to be pro-life or pro-choice? Is that a value? Yeah. So instead it's like, what are the core behavior that we're expecting of our employees when they come to work, and really allow those values to be your personal values. And we don't have to share values. And so I often, like if somebody wants to talk to me about politics, or if they say a comment, I might jokingly say, well, I think you and I watch different news channels. And I say that because I don't want to say, oh, we have different values. Because the minute you start to challenge someone's values or talk about their values, we get, I mean, our backs raised, we get super excited and upset thinking about the words we've been using in the corporations. And instead just saying, here are the expected leadership behaviors we expect every employee to have. Let's just call them behaviors. Why are we labeling them values? Because it's very confusing to most people when they hear those words like values and respect.

Shari Simpson: So talking about language, and I didn't give you this question in advance, so if you don't feel like answering it, I completely understand. Language is so important, right? How it shows up, what it conveys, we're trying to articulate. SHRM recently made a change to how they talk about diversity, equity, inclusion by pulling out equity, and their intent was really to focus on being inclusive and that equity will come from that. What's your perspective, you know, that because of that, language is so important? I do believe words matter.

Pam Jeffords: We have an entire course called Words Matter. I disagree with how SHRM did it because it was very abrupt. It didn't seem to have much backing on why they were doing it. And I think it was wrong. I think many people felt it was wrong. In fact, in my session yesterday, I didn't bring it up, but it was the top three questions I got about SHRM. So I don't understand why in this particular moment when everything is so polarized, did they add fuel to that fire? So I am not, I am a member of SHRM until my membership runs out and I'll be canceling as many DEI people I believe will, because I feel like they added to it as opposed to helping to people to seek to understand. So when we talk about words matter, I'm a big believer of that. But I always caution people that we're never going to have a vocabulary that is not going to upset people. And I am intentionally not using the word offend, as many people do, but upset. And I think most of us, I don't want to upset anyone. I'm not intentionally running around trying to upset anyone. But do I know certain things that I do upset or potentially offend? Yes. I know I have a horrible potty mouth. I'm, you know, multiple generations from Louisiana. I try not to curse if I know someone doesn't like it. But most of the time I do, and I know in my head I'm probably going to upset someone. But for the most part, what we're asking people to do is if you know something is going to

hurt someone, Do you try to avoid it? And the answer is yes. But do you walk around never saying anything that might upset anyone? There's thousands of cultures out there, something you're going to say or do. But when we talk about inclusion, it's just understanding and attempting not to hurt someone, if you know what it is. And so I always tell any sessions I'm having is raise your hand if I say anything that you say, you know what, Pam, you had me until you said that, because I do like to know what words I'm using that either bring people in or push people away. And then I'll make the choice. Am I going to keep saying that word or phrase or am I going to say, you know what, That's going to offend such a small portion of the population. It is important to me to use this language or it's my authentic self. And I do believe we're kind of coming up with the word. I think there should be some type of authenticity allowance that says, if we're good people and we want people to be authentic, we don't want robots walking around. What's my authenticity allowance that you're going to give me to let me just be me knowing I'm not trying to hurt anyone. I'm not intentionally trying to hurt anyone, but just let me be me and throw a curse word in every now and then.

Shari Simpson: Right? I love that example. So, um, those who have listened to the podcast for a while know that I'm married to a fireman and that I have three military sons. So cursing is a regular occurrence in my household and in my vernacular. So I feel that to my soul because obviously the audience has not heard me curse on the podcast. So I have to be very cognizant of that. So, um, you know, words, words do matter and, and you don't necessarily know what's going to be the wrong word in the wrong moment. I think, As part of my own DEI journey, one of the things that I really appreciated is learning about turns of phrase. You know, now I'm really cognizant of like, hey, what is the origin of that phrase? Where did it come from? Is it something I should be saying as a middle-aged white woman? Or is there history that I don't know? I ran into a pretty funny situation with my sister I was visiting and my niece, who's four, was deciding who was going to push the cart and she started to sing Eeny, meeny, miny, moe. Her face clearly articulated that I was having a moment with her singing that. And my sister was like, what, what is happening? I know that face, something's wrong. I, and the funny thing is she had just taught my niece that song, you know, like two days ago or something. And so I gave her the background of it and she's like, Oh my gosh, I had no idea. And what was cool is to see her go home and have the conversation with the four-year-old and her two seven-year-old boys about a language, about how when you learn something new, that it's okay you didn't know it before, but now that you know it, you're responsible for it. That's the important part, I think, in so much of this is knowing how to be authentic, but also not dismissing things when you learn it.

Pam Jeffords: Right. And, and, and not assuming that everybody is a horrible person. Like you can separate something that was bad or done bad from a bad person. Yeah. And, and most of the time it is, and we do a whole session on origins. I like to open up as an icebreaker. Do

you know where these words come from? And some of them, you know, like, um, HR uses, um, grandfathering all the time. Yeah. And now I've always know where it came from. I'm from Louisiana. Right. And it meant that it was the way it was the Jim we call him Jim Crow law. Right. Which is stopping people from voting. Yeah. Which said what it became legal only if your grandfather voted. So when you think about the origin of grandfathering. anyone in HR should not use that word any longer. And honestly, most people don't know what it means when you say, oh, grandfather, you ended that. Why can't you just say, you can still have that plan? Or I'm going to, if it's a retirement plan, I'm going to let you stay on that benefit plan or that retirement plan. We can just say the words and actually it makes more sense to somebody because most of the time when you hear somebody use it, they'll say, oh, grandfather, you ended that plan. Someone will say, what does that mean? And they'll say, you can stay on that plan. So I think you have to decide, when it comes to HR, I think HR should not use that word because they know the origin of it, they know it's upsetting to people, so let's stop using it. But there's other words like, there's a phrase that people my age used to use that says, open the kimono, which means open up someone's dress, look under their dress. And you used it in finance to say, let's share the books with people. So a lot of people in finance will say, let's open the kimono or look under the kimono. And so when you think and break that word down, why is that upsetting? Especially the younger generations coming and going, what the heck did you just say? They're like, well, you know what I mean. They're like, yeah, let's open the books. So when I hear somebody say that, I say, can you like peel an onion? Can you open a curtain? And they're like, Pam, everybody's so sensitive because kimono, and is it only Asian people that are offensive? I said, let's take the word kimono out. Would you ever say, let's look under someone's dress and see what's under them? They're like, of course I wouldn't say that, Cam. Then why are you saying? So they're getting confused that the reason open the kimono is not a great term is because it's the word kimono for Asian and it's a race, racism or ethnicity. I said, nothing to do with that. You're saying you're going to look under someone's dress. Yeah, so let's back up and then they're like, shoot, you're right, Pam. People still use paddy wagon to refer to police cars. And in the day, if you said that around Irish people, they probably would kind of just not say much, right? Now you're going to get a big reaction. And you have to understand, you know, when Irish people came here, they were treated that they were slaves. And so you would round up the Irishmen in the paddy wagon to arrest them. And so you go back to them and you go, why would we use paddy wagon? Why would we say that today? So a lot of the terms that are used very often, we don't know the origin to. And to your, the point you made is perfect is when someone points it out, that's when you decide, all right, am I going to continue to use it? Yeah. And the last one I'll give is a lot of people, you know, sitting on zoom and teams these days, they'll make a reference. Like if I have to sit on another zoom call, I'm just going to shoot myself in the head. And I'll say, given

the percentage of people who die by suicide, the likelihood that that gesture or comment is going to upset someone, again, not offend, upset, is very high. Yeah. So now that you know that, would you self-harm? Like, can't we just say, if I have to sit through another Zoom call, I'm going to eat a bag of M&Ms or I'm going to... You know, eat a whole cake. But why do we say, I'm going to jump in front of a bus, shoot myself? Because again, the percentage of death by suicide is so high. Gun violence is so high. Why do we say that? And so I challenge people to say, just think about it. And especially if somebody makes a reaction, like if they go, oh, yikes, or wow, or ouch, then you have to again decide. Is that so important that I need to keep saying it? Or is it such a part of my authenticity, like cursing is to me? The answer is, for most of them, no, right? And so then you start to drop those, right? And you start to drop them because again, you're just trying to be kind to someone else.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. So I want to switch gears just a little bit. We're sitting at the expo floor at HR Tech here in Las Vegas. How do you see technology influencing DEI?

Pam Jeffords: Well, we have an entire half of our team is dedicated to AI when it comes to DEI. So from a corporate world, we've been using AI for the last two to three years to evaluate equity within performance reviews. So it just wasn't possible before or it was very, very costly. But now I have a client who has 40,000 employees. We download all the performance reviews and we look at the inequities across gender, race, ethnicity, and level. And some of the things that you find, it's just so powerful because when you have data, as you know, data is powerful. We all may think something's happening, but until you see the data, you don't take action. So we just did a review for our client and what we found was for all their directors, then the directors are so overworked and we knew work-life balance was an issue. So we were looking to see if they were giving any guidance to the directors on how to manage and how to delegate. And what we found was out of all the directors, All of the men were being given guidance on how to delegate and they were using the word delegate. You need to delegate more often. Here's how you need to delegate. 100% of the women were told to ask for help. Oh my goodness. The word delegate was not used once with the women directors and it was consistently used with the men directors. And when we looked at it, you can say, maybe try to argue that it's the same thing, but it's really not. And when you're positioning women as having to ask for help, it's a bias. It's letting them know that they have to somehow convince people, compared to if you're telling the men to delegate, it's empowering them to delegate. And so when we showed this to the leaders and we said, we're looking across, here are all your directors. Not one time did you use the word delegate with your women, but here's how many times you said you told them to ask for help. And in every case, your men were told to delegate. And that type of data is so powerful. And we just couldn't do that before without AI.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, that's so fascinating because as we see more predictive analytics come out, right, we're going to see more of that

stuff surface. And it's just amazing what's still left over that's not intentional. Absolutely. And again, once you're aware of it, and I'm sure that conversation was like eye-opening for those leaders.

Pam Jeffords: It was, and again, it's not intentional. Unconscious bias is in all of us, right? And so when I said that stat to them and I said, all of the women directors were told to ask for help, the first thing they said is, okay, Pema, how do we get the men directors to start using the word delegate to women? I said, well, I didn't say it was your men direct, your men. And they're like, what do you mean? I said, your women, all your women were told to ask for help. That means they're women bosses and they're men bosses. But in their head, they assumed I was saying men aren't telling women to ask for help. It's no, women were telling women to ask for help. We all have this in us. And I think that's the shift we need to make, is that somehow we have positioned white heterosexual cisgender men as you are the problem, you are the villain in this scenario, when it honestly is all of us. We all have these biases and we have to really challenge ourselves to say, how can we use AI to take out the inequities that are just going to happen?

Shari Simpson: Well, it's so true that we come to the table with bias. I think back to earlier in my HR career, that there was a bias I held about women crying at work. I was like, you're weak. I don't want to give you responsibilities. You can't handle it. But I didn't have the same kind of reaction or view when men would yell at work. I'd be like, oh, they're just frustrated. Oh, they're just whatever. And it took me some growth on my own journey to realize those are the same things. Those are just heightened emotions. One's coming out as yelling, one's coming out as crying, but we're looking at them and we're assigning these different, you know, abilities or traits to them. And it's like, wow, you know, it really drove home for me when I figured that out that I was like, okay, it's the same thing. It just manifests in a different way. And I've created the story that they're different.

Pam Jeffords: That they're different and that it's okay for a man to yell, but when a man cries, that's not okay. And so I think society is pressuring men in a very dangerous way, too. I mean, we talk about death by suicide, it's doubling for men. It's 10 times more likely to happen to men than women. And we're looking at our middle and upper middle class white men not going to college at greater rates. I mean, every other demographic group is. So there's something happening. I think this expectation of men is just as dangerous as the expectation of women in society to stay home with family or not want to progress. So I think we have to push ourselves. And most people think it's intentional or there's malice, but a lot of them are just so subtle that you just It really takes a good ear to hear them. My son, you know, after the whole Me Too in Hollywood, I think it was Oprah and Reese Witherspoon and several other stars got together and they were talking on a show and my son and I were watching it. And I think it was Reese Witherspoon, who I love, she said something like, if you're going to tell a joke at work, you should first go home and tell that

joke to your wife and daughter. And if you would, then you can tell it at work. And my son just kind of, and I thought nothing of that. And my son goes, Mom, I would tell a joke to you before I would tell a joke to dad. And he's the one who caught the gender bias. Why would we assume a joke was okay for our sons or okay for our husbands? And that really, that hit me hard because it is, where we just assume men and boys, they can handle it. Just test the joke on your daughters. We have to eliminate those kinds of biases that, again, presume that our boys can handle these toxic, bad environments or that they should. So it's fascinating.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. I, having, having raised three boys, you know, one of the things I, I kind of uncovered that I had done as a parent is I definitely had that mentality of rub some dirt on it. You know, don't, don't throw like a girl, right? All those terrible phrases. And, and I have changed that vernacular obviously as I've grown in my journey. And it's funny now because anytime I hear a phrase like that, it's like, Oh, you throw like a girl. I'm like, Oh, like a competent athlete who's worked really, really hard at her craft. And, you know, I get those sideways looks sometimes, but I'm like, we have to think about language, you know, it's important.

Pam Jeffords: Well, and people get upset with me, you know, and they'll push back and they'll say, gosh, Pam, you know, every word is changing. I say, but you know what, it always has. Like, if you look back at the period pieces from the early 1900s, we do not talk like that anymore. We, you know, we don't use, I always joked, we don't use the word fortnight anymore. Fortnight means every 14 days or every two weeks. And it's a very simple word, Fortnite. But we changed it to every other week. Yeah. We changed it to something longer because Fortnite was weird. I feel like we should bring it back, though. Well, now Taylor is. I was like, Taylor Swift is a Fortnite. And I was like, she's bringing it back. But we don't use groovy anymore. There's so many words. And so people get upset, especially pronouns become a huge conversation when I get into these, especially when I'm talking to boards and leaders. And they're like, Pam, I don't understand the pronouns. And why do they need to push it in my face? And I back up and say, how many of you used Mr. or Mrs. growing up? And they kind of look at me, and we don't use it as much anymore. But back even when I started in the workplace, it was Mr. Smith, Miss Smith. And you had three ways where you're married, you were single, your first name. And why is that? Why was that not putting in your face? So we have always used something to identify our gender whether it was a Mr. or Mrs. or now a she, her, they, them. And when you break it down and say, we have always done this, they're like, dang, you're right, Pam. And so sometimes you just have to back up and just let somebody just push back and say, in a very comfortable environment, I just don't get it. And then we just, we talk and I'm like, this is how we've always talked, but language does evolve and it will continue to evolve. And words that didn't exist will start to exist and we'll drop words that we're like, why were we saying that the first place, right?

Shari Simpson: Right? For sure. Pam, this was a great conversation.



Thank you so much for sitting down and having this conversation with me. Absolutely. Enjoyed being here.

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