

Transcript

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Dexter Davis: Welcome to IMPACTful Dialogues, an Ecolab podcast that elevates inclusion,

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mindfulness, purpose, awareness, collaboration and trust through executive conversations.

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I'm your host, Senior Vice President of Global Diversity, Equity and Inclusion,

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Dexter Davis. Welcome to the fifth episode of IMPACTful Dialogues. Today,

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we'll be speaking with Rich Szponder to discuss the role of allyship and promoting understanding

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and advocacy for underrepresented groups, and his impact in his new role as executive sponsor

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for our Pride employee resource group. Rich, thanks a lot for joining us today.

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Rich Szponder: Thank you.

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Dexter Davis: Y'all know Rich is our senior vice president of HR,

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Global Supply Chain. You've been at Ecolab for a while, quite a few years,

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I believe. And in numerous different opportunities here, I would say, Rich,

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before we jump into it, I've been here for a couple of years and have the opportunity to

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visit some of our manufacturing plants with you, boy, a deep experience and understanding about

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supply chain and different folks who work in the supply chain from our frontline associates,

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to our executives, it is just really an eye opening to me how important it is to be able

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to navigate and work with different work groups within especially our supply chain within the

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organization. What is your approach to that and how did you get so good at doing that?

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Rich Szponder: Oh, thank you. I love being out in the field. And I think it's my role and

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the role of my team to really advocate for our frontline associates. And the closer we can be

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to the frontline, the better we can kind of understand the challenges, what's working and

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what's not working and advocate on their behalf. We encounter a lot of different perspectives when

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we're out. And so getting feedback is really important, the more we can put ourselves in

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their shoes and understand what they need, I think we can better advocate on their behalf.

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Dexter Davis: 100% agree. And you know, think about those business we had,

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and I remember asking question, I think what speaks to that, obviously,

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we're both Human Resources, understand the value Human Resources, because they relate to folks who

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are really close to our people, which are our most important asset in any organization. But

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I remember I asked you a question I said, so how do you tell somebody who really good HR

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professional in the plant? I'd love you to share a little bit of what she said there.

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Rich Szponder: Yeah, definitely. I think I think I think I've probably told you that

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a good HR partner in the plant is one who's spending a ton of time out on the floor that

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really knows their people knows what's going on. And is out on the on the floor of the

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plant or the warehouse more often than they're in their office or in meetings,

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right? It's really that interaction, one on one with the team that matters most.

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Dexter Davis: And what else you said in that too was really to really know the person. Like,

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know when their kids are at a sporting event and really knew when their husbands or spouses,

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all those kinds of things. And I thought that was really apparent. And then I

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remember going to those plants, and when you had those HR professionals who are

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there to do with the people, you just saw it operations do better. I mean, because

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you're bringing a lot of folks with different perspectives. But when you know your people,

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and you understand your people, that really is what creates that inclusive environment,

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and truly is one piece of leadership. So I thought that was just a good example of how that is and

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how important it is. And I think you picked up on that right away, we're out there. That's one way

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you can pick that up. And it's a really tangible way for us to see that. Because sometimes,

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when we talk about inclusive leadership and being inclusive, it's simple. A lot of times

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it's really getting to know your people, and knowing yourself and create an environment

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where people can be their best. So I thought that was a good example in supply chain of how you're

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able to pick that up just after all your years of being in supply chain of how important that is.

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Rich Szponder: Yeah, absolutely. And it's one of my favorite things to do. Just a few weeks ago,

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I had the chance to get out to a few more sites and to walk around with the team with a site

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leader with the HR partner and just talk to our frontline and ask what's what's going on,

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what's frustrating you? And, you know, hearing how we can provide support. It's,

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it's one of the most rewarding parts of my job,

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and I love that my team loves to get out as well and do the same thing. Dexter: When you say your team,

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you love your team that gets out there and do the same thing. How would you say your approach is to

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really kind of we're talking about that inclusive leadership. How do you get to know your team?

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Yeah, I think we can always do better, and I remind myself that I can, I can always be doing

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better. But I like to know something about the individuals on the team.

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First, they're amazing and their jobs are really really challenging, but I think who they are

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as individuals is what makes them great at what they do. And so I want to know

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about that I want to know, not just what they're interested in and challenges are inside of work,

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but outside of work as well. I want to hear, you know, what their, what their face with,

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what do they need from us in terms of balance? What are their passions outside of work that

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maybe they can even bring to work and leverage. We've had some of our team members, for example,

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who are super passionate about, you know, creating videos. And we've leveraged that to create some

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cool videos. So getting to know the team, and who they are as individuals is super important.

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Dexter Davis: And I would say this is my observation view of working with

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you. I think you have ability to build trust quickly. Why do you think that is?

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Rich Szponder: I hope that I'm transparent, I like to think that I'm transparent, maybe sometimes I'm

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too transparent. And maybe say too much. But I've always, I think erred on the side of transparency.

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And I'm not afraid to share the bad news either. I see a lot of leaders who seem afraid to share

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the bad news or kind of put a positive spin on on everything. And sometimes we have to

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talk about the tough stuff and have the tough conversations. I think that helps to build trust,

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because it then gives us the opportunity to talk to our teams and ask for their reactions, what

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they think the solutions are, as well. But I think transparency is really important in sharing what's

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going really, really well what's going great, but then also talking about the tough topics as well.

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Dexter Davis: Good. In 2015, you transition to talent development

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training within our Global Supply Chain function, and has since remained in HR and

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talent. What motivated your move to this segment of the function? And how was your

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early career shape your leadership approaching in people-focused aspects of supply chain management?

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Rich Szponder: Wow, going back almost 10 years. So, around that time, I had an opportunity I

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was I was leading the logistics workstream for an integration that we were doing. And my colleague,

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Joellyn Veninga, was leading the whole work stream for that integration for HR. I was so incredibly

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impressed by how we treated our people during that process. It was a really big challenge. It was a

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big integration. We were integrating what had been a fierce competitor. And that integration,

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just the way we treated our people capturing their hearts and minds, was really kind of my

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inspiration as that project came to an end. And I was thinking about what do I want to do next?

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That really stayed with me. And for me, prompted my move into or my desire to move into the HR space.

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I think an L&D role was a great place for me to do that. We were focused on leadership development at

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the time at all levels. This is prior to some of the great programs we have in place that we were

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building programs for our frontline leaders, for example, which I think is one of the most critical

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leadership roles we have in the supply chain. We were even building leadership development for our

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executive leaders. And so it was a great place for me to enter into the HR function do work

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that was unbelievably meaningful for me with an organization I was already quite familiar with.

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Dexter Davis: You mentioned like leadership development,

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that piece of it. What's been your experience throughout your time, especially in supply chain,

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of really understanding how to talk about leadership development based on

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the audience cycle? Leadership development, I'm guessing, on the frontline supervisor is

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important. And that's something but also your most senior supply chain executives, what would

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you say is a common thread when you think about leadership development no matter what the level?

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Rich Szponder: Yeah, I would say probably the idea of servant leadership. So TPM

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is our continuous improvement philosophy in supply chain,

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Dexter Davis: What is the TPM?

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Rich Szponder: TPM is Total Productive Management. And there are a number of different pillars that

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make up TPM. But there's some foundational things that we put in place first, and one

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of those foundational items is what we call HPO, High Performing Organization, a critical component

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of that is the idea of servant leadership. So much so that we even encourage on our org charts,

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for those to be flipped, and to show the site leader actually at the bottom of the org chart,

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this idea that I am here for you, what do you need from me to be successful?

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And I think that servant leader mindset really permeates through all levels of leadership in

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our organization. But I would say that's definitely the common, the common theme.

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Dexter Davis: And from that servant leadership and that High Performing Organization, what do

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you think is a key foundation to really create the kind of environment where that can really happen?

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Rich Szponder: I think you've got to be, you've got to be open minded. You've got to listen more

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than you speak. You have to be open to differing perspectives, the idea of of curiosity, knowing

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that great answers can come from anywhere in the organization. For example, sometimes it's our

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frontline operators that have the best ideas on how to drive improvement in how our equipments

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running. So the idea is that those those ideas become from anywhere and the openness to creating

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diverse teams and creating consumer environments where those diverse teams can really thrive,

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we have an incredibly diverse population in the front line. And that's a benefit to us. That is

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a tremendous benefit. But we have to have the inclusive and respectful work environment to go

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along with the diverse teams or we're not going to get the benefits of having such diverse teams.

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Dexter Davis: Absolutely. And I think that you speak to that so well. How important that is,

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and I think about the work you and I did when we were working on, had you been into the TPM,

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which I think has been really something that's been really cool. And I think what also was really

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good about it, you're putting to a point where you had servant leadership, where the plant managers

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on top and everybody but those those teams that were developing, the plants that really

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focus on engagement and inclusion are both on different parts that different levels within the

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organization. And I think that's a good example of really putting ideology into practice. And I

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think that's something to be proud, and I think supply chain is moving in the right direction.

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Rich Szponder: Absolutely. We've been looking I think, for a while on the right way to reach our

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frontline with all the great work that we're doing as an organization around DE&I. We heard when we

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traveled together, right that for a lot of our frontline associates what they see as Ecolab is

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the site that they're in. And there's so much so much that we do as an organization, and how

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do we bring that to them -- especially in the space of DE&I? So I think the Engagement and

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Inclusion teams I'm just so thrilled with I mean, every day I'm seeing pictures and

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events and things happening in the frontline, from our teams. And it's been phenomenal work.

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Dexter Davis: I would agree. And I think it speaks to making sure everybody has a

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voice here. And that we really care and want to hear that. And I think that's

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so important for I think all of us as leaders to remember that each person,

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even the folks sometimes closest to the customer or creating the product for the customer, we got

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to make sure those voices are heard too. Good. All right, as a key participant in our Pride Employee

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Resource Group, which advocates for LGBTQ+ community, both inside and beyond our four

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walls, you've recently become an executive sponsor. Could you share your experience

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with Pride? And what prompted you to accept the role of executive sponsor?

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Rich Szponder: Yeah, definitely. First Pride is doing some absolutely amazing things,

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really exciting things. I was part of the Chicagoland chapter as a co-lead.

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And when I relocated to the Twin Cities here for my role, I missed that. I missed

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that involvement, whether it's the resources that Pride is working on to help Talent Acquisition,

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working toward putting some best-in-class practices in place when it comes to gender

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transition in the workplace in North America. The Ask Me Anything events that Pride does just

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educational events and community involvement. There's so much happening within Pride that's

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really innovative and exciting. So that was a main reason for me wanting to take this role.

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I would say there's a there's a very personal component to me, as well. Back when I was still

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part of the energy services division, I was asked to take on a Pride leadership role. And I said no,

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at the time, and I said no, because I wasn't comfortable being my full self at work. And I,

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I always, I always regretted that decision a bit. But I was I was scared at the time. And

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over the last couple of years, that's really changed a lot. And thinking back to last year

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during the Pride Parade, when I was walking in the parade, I had my husband there with me. It

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was a really great time and super impactful. And it didn't hit me until like a month or so later

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when I was at the ERG Summit. And a slide came on the screen, and there was a picture from the

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Pride Parade and I thought, "Woah! there's me, there's my husband in an Ecolab shirt,

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there's one of my managers, there's our CEO, there's some of my great friends, and we're all walking

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together." And I was thinking back how it wasn't that long ago that I wouldn't even been talking

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about my life outside of work. And I thought about how much energy we put into, you know, not being

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ourselves or hiding ourselves, and it's energy we can spend doing such better things, but it takes

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a lot of energy to kind of hide who you are. And I think the personal reasons for me wanting to do

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this in Pride is it has a great membership. A lot of our membership are allies, and

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we need allies. allies have such an important role in the process. I also want to make sure, though,

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that our LGBTQ+ associates feel comfortable being themselves at work. I know what that feels like

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to have to either hide who you are, or not share really important parts of your life with people

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you really care about at work. And if there's something I can do to help more Ecolab associates

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feel more comfortable being themselves at work, then that's the way in which I want to contribute.

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Dexter Davis: That's awesome. And like you're saying, it speaks to all the voices being able

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to feel confident to be their authentic selves, and it's our jobs as leaders to

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create that environment here. And I think you know, how important executive sponsor role is

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in leading these ERGs and make sure that we stay on top of top of things and make sure we're,

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we're clearly articulating the needs for all of our associates. And this is so off script

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question I have for you, too. But given all the backlash around DE&I, what it means all the stuff

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you hear in the news. Why is it so important, even more so that we as an organization,

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stay focused on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion -- especially because as an executive

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sponsor for Pride? You saying those words means a lot, especially in this time with your story.

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Why is it so important that we stay focused on the importance of creating that environment

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where all of our associates, everybody, feels like they can be their authentic self at work?

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Rich Szponder: Yeah, I, I really don't understand the backlash to DE&I. I don't know how you can't

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see all of the great aspects of DE&I. And I don't know anyone who wouldn't want someone

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to be able to come to work and, and be there their whole selves. And that's ultimately what

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it's about. I think there's a lot of fear of the unknown in the backlash. And, you know, to that,

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I say, be curious, ask some questions, I think there's fear of making mistakes,

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or if we don't talk about this, these things, nobody make mistakes, everything will be fine.

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But I've seen the tremendous work that a diverse team that has an inclusive

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environment can do. There are so many compelling reasons to help our diverse teams thrive. I

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really struggle with all of the backlash. And the backlash comes from a place of I think,

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fear, and just a lack of understanding of what DE&I really, it's, it's about creating

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a respectful workplace where everyone can, can devote their energy to things like their jobs,

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their families, their interests, versus having to hide parts of themselves.

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Dexter Davis: And I think that speaks to also like how each all of our associates, not just diverse

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associates, play a role in creating that culture where we can do that. And I think more and more,

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the more you talk about your Diversity, Equity and Inclusion strategies, as inclusive of all and that

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we all play a piece of it. There's no reason why you can make an impact on it. And I think

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it's also demystified that you said, like, there's fears of this fears of that. But really, the goal

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is really, how do you create an environment where people can really be their authentic selves. And

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then that authentic self creates opportunities for people to reach their potential, which also,

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by the way, means better business, because everybody's engaged and everyone moves forward. So

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it's something that's there from an understanding the right thing to do. But also there's that great

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business value in what we're doing. And if you ask somebody, have they ever understood

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or ever been a situation where they felt left out? You'll hear answers from anybody knowing

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what that feels like. So created environments where people don't feel left out to feel like

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they belong. It just makes sense. Like I said, from a heart perspective, but it makes sense from

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a head perspective because people perform better and diverse teams perform better. So I'm glad to

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be at a company that we're staying true to that and made it really clear that that's something

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that's important to us and they really aligned with our purpose and our values. So appreciate

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you taking the this step up to leadership being an executive sponsor, because it's such a such a key

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role that our executives are playing a piece in this and appreciate your transparency as always,

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and talking about your story. Alright, so I'm coming close to June and Pride Month is coming.

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You mentioned the Pride Parade that Ecolab has been sponsoring in the Twin Cities and

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how energizing it's been. And I've been lucky enough to go to the last couple of two Parades.

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And that really just shows how the importance of that and how important it is for our organization,

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but for this month is "Pride Is For Everyone". Emphasizing that we empower all associates to

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bring their entire selves and ideas to the table with allyship and creating connections

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that nurture an inclusive culture that supports innovation and creativity as part of your role,

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right? And how can individuals become allies for the LGBTQ+ community?

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Rich Szponder: That role of ally is so incredibly important. I'm touched that

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such a such a heavy population of our Pride membership are allies. If I didn't have allies,

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allies were critical to me being able to talk more about myself and share things about my

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life. And there are days I still hear those voices in my mind telling me don't say that,

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don't don't share that. But it's gotten a lot easier. And it's nice to have allies. So I think

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that allyship aspect is incredibly important. And I like that we got to focus on that this year.

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I mentioned earlier, that concept of curiosity, I think it's okay to ask questions, I think,

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you know, moving from kind of a place of judgment to a place of curiosity and asking questions,

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seeking additional perspectives. That's the way to become an ally for someone in the LGBTQ+

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population or any other marginalized group, it's show some show some curiosity. So many

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of the Pride members that I've gotten to know are there because of family members, friends,

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who are part of the community and so they're showing their support by being part of the Pride

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ERG. And so I think the more allies the better, and it's just going to continue to create that

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safe, loving and open space for members of our community to continue to feel comfortable at work.

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Dexter Davis: Good. And what would be one tip you would give all Pride allies

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here at Ecolab? Because sometimes people say they want to be an ally, but don't really know what

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that means. So what is one thing, action, you would say to somebody who wants to be an ally?

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Rich Szponder: I would say, and this is this is a tough one. But I think it's a powerful one.

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Speak up when you hear or see something. That is, that's not right, that, you know, is not right,

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I had a conversation with someone recently, who was really impacted by something that was said,

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in a meeting, and nobody spoke up. That's really hard to do, I fully appreciate how hard that can

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be to be the one that speaks up. And, and there are a lot of things you can do as an ally. You

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can go and learn and do research. And you can provide a safe space. But I think I want to

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challenge I think I want to challenge allies to do some of the more difficult things and

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that's speak up when you hear something or see something, it's incredibly hard to do.

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But it's probably the thing that will have the greatest impact for the person you're an ally to.

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Dexter Davis: And you're right, and that that goes beyond just Pride. That's allyship in

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general. And I think it's easier to say I'm an ally than something that has to be an ally. And

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I think that's a good example of how you can be an ally which is really powerful.

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Rich Szponder: Thank you so much.

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Dexter Davis: Appreciate the conversation and thank you all for listening. Our next

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conversation will be with Adam Johnson, senior vice president of Enterprise Sales

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Institutional. We will discuss the power of knowing people in personal and professional

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relationships and how it fosters strong partnerships and positive work cultures.