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Breadcrumb

1. [Home](#) /
2. [Print](#) /
3. [Pdf](#) /
4. [Node](#) /
5. [Entity Print](#)

Insight navigation

- [Latest insights](#)
- [Latest news](#)
- [Articles](#)
- [Case studies](#)

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DEI: Naked Conversations - Podcast episode one

In the first episode of our podcast, DEI: Naked Conversations, our CEO Michael chats with Dawn, Associate Director for People and Culture, and DEI consultant Janet Houlis about their backgrounds, the Waterstons journey and how the business is developing.

Categories

Sep 2022

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Podcast Episode One

DEI: Naked conversations

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Please note: transcript has been edited for ease of reading.

Michael: Hi, I'm [Michael Stirrup](#), the CEO at Waterstones. We're on a DEI journey, and in this podcast series we want to share with you some of the discussions and ideas we've been having around DEI. In this first episode, Janet talks to me, and also Dawn Ward, our Associate Director of People and Culture.

Janet: So, welcome [Dawn](#), Michael. It's great to have you on the first DEI Naked Conversations podcast show today. Do you want to tell the listeners then a little bit about yourself, how you got to where you are now, and also share something that we do not know about you at all.

D: I'm originally from Leeds, and studied in Newcastle. And I'm a bit, I think I'm a bit dull really because people always say how did you get into HR, but my dad did HR, so I was like oh I want to do that; and that was from being really little, which is probably a bit sad. In terms of career since then, I started out in manufacturing, so probably was in roles in that industry for about ten years, which is obviously very, very different to tech. I made the move across to Waterstones in 2019. Something that people don't know about me? I'm [laughing] - we get asked this quite a bit in inductions, and people ask for something interesting, and I'm running out of things to say now. What don't people know about me? I'm into like lots of different sport and activities and stuff, so boxing - pre-pregnancy - and surfing [laughing], not so much now. And I've got two cats and two dogs.

J: Ooh. Michael?

M: So, I was born in London and lived there whilst I was really little, and then moved to Bristol and lived there in Bristol for most of my childhood, and then moved up to Newcastle for university and kind of stayed and never left. So, technically I'm a southerner, but I'm much more northern these days I think than I used to be. But I started at Waterstones over fifteen years ago, and I think prior to that I was working as an accountant - so I'm an accountant by trade, originally - for a manufacturing firm, a big global manufacturing firm, and then for a chemical company as well, and kind of got involved in a lot of ERP software stuff, which led to me getting a role at Waterstones actually. So, I started at Waterstones in a transformation team, a business consulting team I think we would call it now, and doing the accounts as well. So, I've kind of grown up with the company, worked my way up and became finance director, and then last summer got the tough gig of being CEO as well [laughing].

Others: [laughing]

J: A very tough gig I'd say, sorry, very tough gig.

M: But something that people don't know about me, um. I used to be a really keen horse-rider when I was younger, so [laughing].

J: Oh wow.

D: Oh wow.

M: I haven't done it for years, I haven't got on a horse for years, but yeah I used to love it [laughing].

J: So, as we know, DEI is quite 'in vogue' at the moment, with lots of articles talking about the benefits, costs in not committing, and taking intentional steps. How important is diversity, equity and

inclusion to you, and what value does it bring to the Waterstons table?

D: We've talked about it a lot as a business, particularly over the last eighteen months/two years; the working group formed back in 2019 and it's really interesting just to hear I suppose from people's personal perspectives why it was so important to them from a social point of view, less a work point of view.

I guess for us it's about different perspectives and different ways of thinking. We've got lots of really clever people with lots of brilliant ideas, people want to do the right thing, but I think for a business that's grown in the North East and has expanded quite significantly across the UK and into Australia, working across the world with lots of different clients in different cultures, it's about us understanding the different sectors and locations, walking in people's shoes, and particularly for some of us coming from privileged backgrounds, not understanding some of the systemic barriers; so, there's a big piece around education for all of us to think differently.

Some people will have had that personal experience, some people won't, and we've been fortunate that our colleagues have shared really candidly with us some personal stories, and I think that's what's added a lot of value and helped us build trust; people feel confident in asking questions.

DEI can be quite uncomfortable, particularly if you don't understand or if you've had personal experience that's quite painful, or just something you're not as comfortable talking about.

We've had a lot success with people sharing their stories, but it's about us as a business trying to move that forward. It is for a benefit for us, for our clients, but also for a social change point of view as well.

J: Yeah.

M: I think it's just the right thing to do, to start with. I'm really keen and passionate about giving everybody opportunities and really that does mean everybody, so it does make you think about your recruitment practices and all that kind of thing as well.

In terms of the value it can bring to our business, we're consultants by trade, that's what we do, so we sell our knowledge to clients and that diversity of thought we can get as long as our workforce is diverse, we get different ways of thinking, different thoughts, different solutions, and our clients can benefit from that because they don't get the same old thinking from the same old people, they get a variety of thought.

But then, it's good for colleagues as well: you don't want to be surrounded by people who just think the same as you because that's pretty boring as well [laughing] I think. So being challenged, challenging each other, is a really key thing for us as well because it pushes us forward too.

J: And what do you say to people who probably it's a little bit outside of their comfort zone, how do they get comfortable with it?

D: It's hard, isn't it? I think building trust, in what we do as a business, it's a fundamental non-negotiable from a values perspective, and by doing that - by having those honest conversations, people being empathetic and understanding - it feels a safer space to have difficult conversations. And I think people are always worried about saying the wrong thing, which is understandable, so being upfront about that and if you actually do say something that offends someone or that's not appropriate, it's knowing how to deal with it, and trying to help each other have the tools to do that.

We've been really fortunate that we've had colleagues who've shared stories and that's helped me personally think how I might tackle that differently in the future, or if I do say the wrong thing how it's appropriate to address that, and I think it's just about trying to build confidence. The trust piece is how we work with our clients, it's fundamental to our business model, so we need to get people comfortable with working in a kind of trusted relationship with one another.

J: And I guess it's also about building those safe spaces that people feel that no question is a silly question, and that they've got good intentions if they genuinely want to know more, then there is that safe space that they can feel: yeah I can raise this in my meeting, I can raise this as a question.

D: Yeah, and I suppose that's not just about DEI, that's anything isn't it?

J: No, anything.

D: Exactly, it's that becoming a part of common practice, that people can ask questions, and query and challenge appropriately as well where they need to. I think that's a good place to be, definitely.

M: And I think what you say about, you know, there's a fear about saying the wrong thing, that a lot of people have got, and so they might say nothing and then that's like, the only way we learn is I guess by making mistakes.

J: It is.

M: And if you make a mistake and say something wrong, it, you can correct it and you learn from that.

J: Absolutely.

M: So, I think it's really important that people aren't too scared to talk about this.

J: Yeah, and a lot's changed, because I can remember being in meetings before and I'd be too frightened to say anything because either that it would impact on any promotional opportunities or anything for me.

Whereas now, I look at my son, and I look at the generation that we are now, the millennials, everybody's up front and they're the ones that are turning the tables now, and asking us: what are your credentials, how are you proving it, sort of thing. So, it's really interesting and a good time in terms of growth.

So, Michael, the company has a three-year strategy - taking you to 2025 - to rebalance services, you've got a great growth target, which feels great but it's quite challenging, isn't it?

Mission strategy, headlines and statements of intent. But as I read them what stood out for me is: solve business problems, people, skilled, diverse and empowered teams. From a holistic business perspective, how can DEI help the company achieve its mission, and where does accountability sit?

M: In terms of how we achieve it, we need to make sure we hire good people - because our people are our business, completely, one hundred per cent.

So, we need to ensure that we find the best people, and we find them in all sorts of places; our recruitment in the past has maybe meant that we haven't found people in certain places and that's led to the make-up of the business that we've got. But if we can change that and get that diversity of our people and that diversity of thought, that's really going to help us, because it's our knowledge that we're selling, and if we can keep training and developing our people and making it a great place to work, we'll keep growing as a business.

J: And when looking to attract and build diverse teams to reflect the community you serve, why do you think representation matters, not just at employee level, but from the top down?

M: I think it sets examples and shows people what's possible; if you've got a boardroom full of white males, then you kind of think ah I'm never going to get there. But I'm really conscious of the fact that my predecessor was female and a female running a tech business is a really good thing, and I've kindly ruined that which I'm a little bit scared by.

So, we need role models for everybody in the business and people like Dawn, and Leanne, and other people, like Ajai as well, so people from different backgrounds can see that they can get there too, and they can play just as an important part of the business as me or anybody else.

J: That is so true. And Dawn, I've certainly noticed over the last couple of years a shift to inclusion and equity, with focus on removing systemic barriers, so all have access to what they need to thrive. Diversity without inclusion won't stick, so how do you create safe spaces for your people to be themselves?

D: Some people talk about bringing like your best self to work and I think it's not necessarily about your best self, it's about bringing your full self, because you're not always going to be the best version of you every day, and making people feel fundamentally able to just be themselves is a lot easier than it sounds.

We've had conversations with people who've joined the business recently who've shared things with us, that they've said: actually, I was never able to share this in any other employment, and I'm new here, and I feel like I can. And that's a huge success. That's just one example, and we've obviously got lots to do there.

Personally, the first thing is listening, having to understand what those barriers are because I don't know what they look like for everybody else, I just have my personal experience.

Something that I think is really important for us though, to make people feel safe and able to be themselves, is having allies, having support, and having those open conversations. As Michael touched on before, if people don't look like you, if they don't come from your background, if they don't represent who you feel you are, then how on earth are you supposed to feel welcome and included, if everyone's different to you?

There's lots of levers we can pull, and there's lots of things we can try, but the reality is it's a human problem, we've got to tackle it like that. And I suppose building those communities, building allies within the business so that people have someone to talk to, role models, all the rest of it, and just making it feel like somewhere people can belong, be comfortable, and be different if they want to be different, be the same as people if they have the same view, but just being honest about that.

Procedurally, making sure that if, for any reason, they don't feel included or welcome, that we have mechanisms to deal with that and we take that really seriously as well. That might be a bit of a HR-y answer, but actually we do need to make sure that if, for any reason, somebody doesn't feel included, that we have mechanisms to support them and make sure that's dealt with appropriately as well.

Janet: No, it's nice, and I can certainly attest to my experience when I joined you and I think my first meeting was with Alex, and I came off that and I said to my husband: wow! You know, it was great, you know there was something. And then subsequently everyone else that I spoke to there was that warmth, there was that openness, and accepting for me, now, they could see me on Zoom so they knew that I was a black woman.

But it was just because when I looked on the website, it was all a sea of white faces, but it was just so nice that the people that I interacted with made me feel as if I belonged, so you're obviously doing some things right there's some good things that are being done. And I think when it's about people that is so important, because if, without people you have no business.

M: Yeah, I mean there's some stuff that we've done probably without even thinking, and some really big stuff. Like, when we set up the Australian office we needed somebody to head it up, and Charlie, who's gone out there, it didn't even cross my mind, or anybody's mind, that she was a woman, she was just the best person for the job, and I think maybe in Australia things are a little bit different from the UK and a little bit further behind in terms of DEI, but that's quite a big thing for Charlie to be heading stuff out there. So, she's a really, really good role model as well in the business. But it would be amazing to get to a point where we don't have to think about this stuff.

J: Absolutely.

M: And everybody's being treated equally.

J: You don't need to talk about it.

M: Yeah.

J: Yeah, no, I agree.

M: But, yeah, it's a long way to go.

J: It is, there's a way to go, it's a journey.

So, Michael, whilst many businesses have publicly voiced their commitment to DEI, it's being reported that for many this is becoming a tick-box exercise. We know that 'what gets measured gets done'; so, what are your thoughts around measuring DEI commitments and efforts to ensure you're truly creating an inclusive environment? And how will you tell if you're making progress?

Michael: I think the ultimate goal is that we don't have to talk about it, but we're a long way from that. So, I think there's some steps that we've got to take, and probably the first step is around broadening the talent pool that we're recruiting from, making that much more diverse, which we've started to do.

From some of the data that's Dawn's shown us - we are attracting a more diverse candidate base which for me is the start of it, because then if you're attracting people to apply to Waterstons then hopefully you'll then start recruiting them as well, and they'll work their way up the business.

So that's certainly the starting point, that talent pool, then employees, and looking at the make-up of our employees is then the next step along that pipeline of recruitment.

J: And Dawn, to make DEI more than a numbers game, what are some of the things that you are looking to introduce as part of the DEI programme and roadmap?

D: I think a big part of it for us is around role modelling and as a leadership team, as a board, as a business that cares about its people, making sure that we really do live the values no matter what, with a non-negotiable attitude.

But what we've been trying to do is really build awareness and excitement, and get conversations going; so, it's natural conversations, it's not arbitrary tick-box training, it's not we have to do this because we have this standard, or some sort of corporate structure, it's because it's the right thing to do. And we started with bringing speakers in to talk about interesting topics, not necessarily about DEI, although that seems to have been the theme because it's very on trend and often want to talk about.

We've also tried to do some practical things, like build resources so people can do self-learning if perhaps they don't want to ask a question, but they want to go and find out, and make that a bit more accessible.

We've done some procedural things that we needed to do, like assess our policies, and look at some of the language we use around gender, and really challenging ourselves on that. I find that fascinating actually, because there's things that I've just read, which you become quite accustomed to in your career, normal policies and processes, and then [Yvill](#) joined us at the end of last year, and he looked at them with a completely different lens and gave us some brilliant feedback. So, that's been really interesting.

The talent pool stuff that Michael talked about - where and how we attract people - is really important.

We've seen an increase in the amount of data we're gathering, so we can actually make data-driven decisions; is this a good place to advertise? Are we getting the best candidates? Because that's what it's about, it's the best candidates, we're not trying to tick a box here.

One of the things that's worked really well I think so far was people talking about their own personal experiences: building that into our career stories, so that people when they come to find out about Waterstons, they're not just reading a job description, but they're hearing from colleagues about what it's like to work here. And, fundamentally from a leadership point of view, developing our leaders, so we embed this in everything we do.

This isn't about business and DEI, or objectives, and goals, and financial measures, and DEI; it's about this is just our objective as a business, and this is weaved into everything that we do. By doing that, it'll become much more natural conversation and natural practices will start to come in that we'll start to not even need to talk about, as I said earlier.

J: Yes, it'll just be the way, 'this is the way we do business here'.

D: This is the way we do business, yeah, absolutely.

J: Is there a danger then, do you think Dawn, that DEI could be viewed as an HR initiative?

D: Yeah, really big, yeah, really big danger of that. And something that I've always been really conscious of, to the point where, with the DEI group at times I've said I don't know if I should be involved because I don't want it to come across as a [P&C](#) thing, as a HR thing. I think having leaders in the business take this really seriously and get involved, people like Michael, people like [oufLT](#), and other members of the board, and our team leaders, and all the rest of it, is really important. It's a business challenge, it's not, it's definitely not a HR challenge.

M: I think one of the most powerful things that I certainly had was that it was people in the body of the business actually came and presented to the board, said 'you need to start worrying about this'. So, it was not a top-down approach, and it wasn't the directors saying 'we need to do this, you all need to follow', it's actually pushed from people within the body of the business, which was amazing, and it had - I remember the meeting - it had such a dramatic effect on all of us.

J: To me that says a lot about the culture that you're looking to create, isn't it? People feel that that can happen.

M: And that's what we want, everybody should feel like they could challenge any of us and say what on earth they like (to a certain extent to all of us). But that's the kind of culture that we want, a collaborative one, rather than a dictatorial one.

J: Definitely. So, to you both, it's often said that DEI is not a sprint, it's a marathon. What's your view on this analogy, and why the comparison? And what does everyone - and we're considering our listeners as well - what do we all need to start doing to limber-up for the marathon?

D: I definitely agree with that statement: it's a marathon, not a sprint. This isn't a 'one and done', it's definitely not a tick-box for us, and I don't think it's a tick-box for most people in society actually, just speaking to people as you go about your business now, people's attitudes are changing.

For some and for many that must be really frustrating because change must feel very slow, and it shouldn't have taken us, as a society, this long to do the things that we're starting to do now. But I have definitely noticed a shift in attitudes when I speak to people in business and that businesses are starting to take this seriously, which I suppose, whilst may be slow, is positive.

We all learn from each other if we listen and appreciate what's going on outside of our four walls, we all benefit, and I guess from a business perspective our clients then benefit. But I think every day now there's something in the headlines and tabloids about things that are going on in businesses, and for us we just want to make sure we're doing the right thing and taking the time to really listen rather than 'right let's get this fixed now' because we think that it's that straightforward, because it just isn't, it isn't going to be that straightforward for us.

M: It is definitely a marathon, but I think there was a very big hurdle that we had to go over at the very start of that marathon and that was accepting that this was something we needed to do something about.

That was quite hard, and it was quite a big leap for us, because before we'd started looking at this we kind of thought 'we haven't got a problem, we treat everybody fairly, it's fine'. And like you said before, you look at our website and you see a sea of white faces, and ah maybe we do actually, and maybe we do need to do something.

So, that big jump at the start to get the acceptance was, painful is maybe the wrong word, but it was hard, it was, but I think we've got there and people have bought into the fact that it is really important, that we need to change and get better. And I don't think it really will stop, it'll just keep going, and we just need to make sure our behaviours are all there, and we just get better and better and start to lose the unconscious biases that we've got, and stuff like that.

J: Yeah it absolutely is a marathon. And I liked the part that you mentioned about having the hurdles first, because it's true. Whether you're preparing for any type of sport, especially track and field - that used to be my favourite at school - it's never easy, there's sacrifices, there's a pain. Whether people are with you or not, and you know it's the right journey, you know that the end goal is I want an Olympic medal, I want whatever it is that you're aiming for. So being brave, being courageous, even when you don't want to get up, even if you don't want to work, then it's still having that desire to make sure that that is driven; and there's a lot of hard work in it.

D: I don't know if it'll give anyone listening a bit more confidence, but certainly when I joined the business I would have been on the square of 'I don't know if we've got a problem'. From a position of naivety and lack of information, but also working in different businesses that perhaps didn't always treat people in a brilliant way, and I came to Waterstones and you walk in and everyone seems lovely, and friendly, and cares about doing the right thing, so that automatically gives you a sense of confidence and comfort.

It wasn't until I started to listen to people in the business who were saying 'actually what about this'. And - as Michael touched on - people came and presented to a group of members at the board about why this was so important, and hearing about all of that - I wouldn't say that was when I thought we need to do something differently, I think because I'd been talking to people - but much earlier on, I was thinking 'we're alright, this is a nice business, and doing the right thing'. And it's not until you really start to look outside and reflect, that you think actually we could be doing things differently, and differently could be better, and that could benefit everybody.

That's really important, we're not saying anyone's done anything wrong, it's just we're all learning, this is a part of the journey isn't it?

J: Absolutely, all learning. And the beauty of Google is free, that you can go on, surf and do your own self-education, which over the past year I personally have done, spending more time educating my own self, because I think as I was growing up I always used to think 'work will put me on this course' or 'we'll go on that', well, no.

Since George Floyd, and certainly the pandemic, the perfect storm, I've spent so much more time, and investing in my own knowledge, as myself. I don't feel as if I've got all the answers but for me it's that constant self-education, and listening, and that understanding, and being curious.

I think of a baby just being curious and wanting to try things; my grandkids are always doing that, and you're always having to pull them back with warnings like 'no, it will burn you'. But it's having that curiosity, and feeling that you can.

In Waterstones certainly, I feel that you've got some good foundations and good things going in there. And it is a journey, but you definitely are on the right path.

M: Curiosity's a really good word actually, because that's something that goes across our business completely; in terms of DEI, in terms of even talking to clients, and that desire to find out new things all the time, and new experiences, that's something I'm really keen on, that we have in everybody in the business.

J: Excellent! Well, time has flown. Michael, Dawn, it's been a pleasure talking to you today.

There is no doubt in my mind that you've got to start from where you're at, and that is what you have absolutely done; be brave, and embrace diversity and inclusion to remain relevant, and thriving in an ever-changing marketplace.

If you would like to comment on anything covered in this episode, on DEI in general or anything at all, feel free to email us at info@waterstones.com