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DEI: Naked Conversations - Podcast episode two

This is the second episode of our podcast, DEI: Naked Conversations, and here Alex, our Associate Director for Innovation and Leadership, chats to DEI consultant Janet Houlis about his understanding of DEI and why it's important for the future of Waterstons.

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

Janet: Hi Alex, it's great to have you on the DEI Naked Conversations podcast today. To kick off, it'd be great if you can tell the listeners a little bit about yourself, how you got to be where you are, and also share something that we do not know about you.

Alex: I'm Alex Waterston, the Associate Director of Innovation and Leadership which means I look after how well we do new things and how well we look after people.

How did I get here? I've been at Waterstones for nine years and I arrived here by accident; I never intended to work at Waterstones, and I never intended to move back to Durham, but I did both of those things.

Before that, I made computer games and mobile apps, and worked in digital agencies. Then I made a terrible mistake and moved to London. I couldn't afford it and ended up moving back up north, to move in with my parents where they gave me some contract work. The Business Development Director at the time, a chap called Alistair, offered me a job and I (to my chagrin) was desperately enjoying it so I stayed and I've been here for nine years, which is longer than I've been anywhere.

Something that people don't know about me is that I came very, very close to once sending a blank CD to be pressed. When I was making games in the first job that I ever made, I burned a disc that was to go off to the pressing for distribution to shops and just managed to catch before it went out of the door the fact that this disc was blank; it would have gone to Sony and a million and a half copies would have been printed of a blank disc.

J: Ah, wow, quite an escape then [laughing].

A: It was [laughing], it definitely was.

J: So, how do you see your role fitting into the company's three year strategy?

A: My role is about making sure that - as part of that three-year strategy, and the growth that we want to see, and where we want to be - that we are doing new, interesting, dangerous, and risky things.

Not dangerous in the physical sense, hopefully, but things that maybe have more inherent risk than we're used to. So stuff that's a bit different, or a bit out of our comfort zone, or a lot out of our comfort zone, or maybe is working in a way that we wouldn't usually work, or maybe doing things in a way that we wouldn't usually do them.

That's one part of my role, then the other half is making sure that we have the leadership structure in place to make sure that we can look after all of the people that we are going to bring on board as we go through this journey of growth, and everything else.

Making sure that everybody has all the skills, are looking after people and really are treating people in what I guess we would describe as the Waterstons way.

J: So, what's your definition or understanding around diversity, equity and inclusion, and what does DEI mean to you?

A: For me, what I want Waterstons to be is an incredibly safe and inclusive environment for people to do amazing work, for people to be able to do the best things that they can basically.

We need to have diversity of thinking in that we need to have lots of different types of people working in the space, and we need to give them the opportunity and the support that they need to be able to do brilliant work, so that we can service our clients and we can do a much better job for them.

To me it's about giving people the same level of opportunities, doing the right thing, really bringing people on board, taking them on the journey, and allowing them to do their best. That's really what it's about for me.

J: It's often said that diversity without inclusion won't stick, so from an employer or a client/customer perspective, how can Waterstons foster a culture of inclusion?

A: I think that's a really excellent point because a lot of my role, from a leadership perspective, is about making sure that people do feel included. A lot of the way that I have led people in the past, when I have had people reporting to me, is to make sure that everyone feels included and part of the process, and part of what we're trying to do; everyone in the team has ownership of where we're going, everyone feels as though they have the right to speak up and to talk about what's important to them; and everyone feels as though they have all of the tools and the support necessary to be able to do their job.

Alice, who used to work for me and was instrumental in the development of our own diversity initiative at Waterstons, used to say "diversity is about being invited to the party, and inclusion is about being asked to dance" and that really rang true with me, that's so important.

We can have the greatest wealth of diverse people coming through the door and providing such incredible different insights, and their own strengths and weaknesses, and everything else, but if we're not providing that safe environment for people to work in, they're never going to stay.

J: It's so true, and I think one of the things that I've found coming into Waterstons having been in and worked in lots of different companies, was this feeling of belonging. How bizarre, and like wow, I never thought I'd experience this by talking to the people, but not just by just talking, by interacting, having the conversations made me feel as if I belonged.

Do you think that Waterstons recognises just that with the people that they've got?

A: I definitely think so, but we can definitely do better at this. The feeling that people get of being in a huge, great big family at Waterstons is something that's been baked in there since the beginning, and making sure that we treat people as well as we possibly can, has always been at the root of how Waterstons has operated.

Our people, fundamentally, are the only asset that we have, everything else is negligible in any other terms, so we have to look after people.

J: There's a lot of people, and certainly within the HR field, talking about placing people at the heart of what they do, and that means in every single, everything that you talk about in your company impacts on people.

A: We've always been 'people first', forever, and that's it, that's a huge part of what we are. This is another layer on top of that, which is making sure that we're not just treating everyone equally, but we're also helping to lift people up.

J: Definitely. So, how do you weave DEI then through innovation and leadership? And what do you see are the benefits for your teams, your clients, and your customers? Because a lot of time people talk about DEI and sometimes it ends up being a tick-box exercise, but how do you weave that through?

A: So, for us, I mean for me, I get very uncomfortable about the prospect of building a business-case for diversity or inclusion. I understand some businesses, that's necessary; at Waterstons it really isn't, you know, we don't want it to be necessary.

But there are some side-effect benefits of us having lots of diverse people. A diversity of thinking means that we are going to create a lot more ideas, we're going to be more innovative, and when we are innovative, that level of inclusion that we've got is going to make sure that the things that we're creating are inclusive for other people.

You hear about hand sanitisers that don't work on any other skin than white skin tones, you know we want to avoid those problems as much as humanly possible.

J: I think technology obviously plays a huge part in all of that as well, doesn't it, in, and that's your business. Certainly the groups that I move in, and what I'm reading, I hear how important it is to use technology more to help in some of the solutions in driving DEI. What's your view on that?

A: I have mixed views on that, I guess. Technology is a tool that we can use to make it easier for people to be included, that's definitely true.

Remote work allows us to be much more inclusive for people, we can look after people who are single parents, or working mothers, or working fathers, or whatever it is, that's definitely it. But it's not a means to an end, it's the tool that allows us to do those things, it's a tool that allows us to be more inclusive, or gain access to more sources of diversity than we usually would.

It's interesting, Waterstons has always been a consultancy-led business in the past, and consultancy is notoriously difficult for people with neurodiversity. We spent a lot of time talking to each other, but now because we're growing, and we're doing more things, and we have more services and more offerings, people don't necessarily have to be client-facing, they don't have to talk to other people all of the time, or the people that they do, are people that they can be familiar with.

So, from that perspective technology has benefitted us massively. We have a lot of people who do monitoring of tools, if anyone needs talk to them from a client, it's because something's gone so catastrophically wrong that, there's someone else who can deal with that problem.

It has provided us with benefits, but it's a tool, it's not, it's not the mechanism by which we become more diverse.

J: That's cool.

Shifting the conversation just a little bit, in terms of looking back, May 25th 2020 - so almost two years now - the killing of George Floyd was a massive wake-up call for me, and set me on my 'Road to Damascus' experience that brought me to the conclusion that I needed to be the change that I wanted to see: a game-changer, especially when I think of my own grandchildren. During that time, what was your experience? What came up for you?

A: When I think back to that whole time and the Black Lives Matter movement that rose to prominence off the back of that, I actually think about my kids. We had conversations with them about what was going on in the world, and that was a trigger for us to start these difficult conversations with the - they were five and eight at the time.

Lila, who was five, didn't really understand what it was, and she couldn't understand why people were being mean to each other. Molly couldn't understand that either, but she had a better grasp of what might be happening; and she made a huge Black Lives Matter poster that sits in our window. She sat and worked on it, she talked to her friend Dorothy about it, and they did things together, and it became a thing for them and they started thinking about it.

It was really important and instrumental in getting the kids involved, it made me realise that we needed to talk to them really early about what was happening in the world, and that they were old enough to understand it, and that talking to them early enough actually meant that they would do things as they grew up which would help with some of the inequality and inequity in the world.

J: That is absolutely fantastic, and that's what I've always felt, that when this happened and I thought 'God, my grandchildren, what am I going to do, and what conversations do I need to start, we need to start telling them'. Because we probably underestimate them, as I know that the kids today are far more intelligent and ahead of us than certainly I was in my time, and so never underestimate that you think that they won't understand, actually they probably do.

A: Absolutely. Lila is seven now and she listens to everything, she listens to all the conversations. She told me once that if she's ever bored and she's doing something, she just sits and listens to what's going on around her. So she knew that something was happening, and she knew that things were changing, or that people were talking about things differently, but actually talking to her helped her to be able to understand to a degree what was going on, or at least start to listen to things in a better way.

J: It's so important, isn't it, for creating those spaces where people can talk, and where we encourage people to talk, because we are human, we may have different views on things, but having that space where we can talk.

During that time, and certainly now, through all the work that I do, I can see the importance of just creating the space to listen and to talk to people, which is so, so important.

In your opinion, what do you feel leadership, the role that leadership needs to play to make a difference, ensuring that Waterstons evolves or risks a shrinking candidate pool, reduced market share, and ultimately lost profitability?

A: I think all of those things are definitely possible for businesses that don't embrace diversity. Things like Tech talent are in such incredibly high demand at the moment, if we can get ahead of that: if we can help people from different socio-economic backgrounds who don't usually go into IT, to actually learn to train, to go through apprenticeships, we can look after them, or we can help them, or we can help late career-changers who are coming back from maternity-leave or want to change jobs later in life and things like that; if we can help those individuals to have a good experience of work and to train them and to teach them how we at Waterstons work, that's only going to have massive benefits.

When we look after people, it only pays back in dividends for us, they look after us, it's absolutely the case; and the better we can do for people, the absolutely the better they will do for us; if we look after our people, they will look after our clients.

We really have to make sure that we are doing the best by people. If we can broaden our talent pool, because there are so many incredibly intelligent people out there who maybe just don't have the skill set for this but are client-focused, or are good relationship people, or have all of these attributes that are beneficial to us, we should absolutely take advantage of that.

And that runs alongside all of the policy stuff: and a lot of our clients are demanding diversity policies, and are demanding that people are doing more, absolutely rightly, as we do with our suppliers as well. So, we have to be doing more, from a really fundamental, mercenary sort of viewpoint, we actually do, we haven't got a choice.

J: Certainly the whole recruitment piece, is really important as well, as you mentioned, and that there is such a demand now in the tech space, and I'm sure that you've been involved in the hiring process here at Waterstons.

What things does Waterstons do well/need to improve on when thinking about DEI?

A: We have a lot that we need to improve on, I'll be really honest.

I think it's fabulous that we've come a long way, and it's really important to understand that we've never been overtly bad, we just haven't understood everything that we need to do in order to be good, that's actually where it is.

This conversation that Alice started is fundamental to us being good and becoming better at it. There are things that we do well; we take care of our people incredibly well, the flexibility that most of us have is hugely important for people who are carers, or have needs whatever they are.

The flexibility in the ability to work remotely is massively important to us, and we've done that for 28-and-a-bit years, since day dot. The ability to, at the drop-of-a-hat go and pick your kids up from school, or even just to wait in for the boiler repair people to turn up and fix the boiler, is enormously powerful to us, and those are the things that we have done well.

We've concentrated on what people are like as individuals and what their personality is like, and what attributes they have, rather than the skills that they have - unless we've really needed specific skills bringing in. We've looked at training people up on the job so that we can bring more people in.

These are the things that we have done well, and we need to continue doing those and do them even better. But we need to take more ownership of our recruitment pipeline, to make sure that it is more diverse.

When we do that, it does work, but when we just rely on the recruiters to do it, it generally doesn't. We need to broaden the number of sources that we work with to make sure there's a range of people coming through the door. So, these are the sorts of things that we need to do, to improve on; and they're all tangible, manageable, achievable things, truly they are.

J: Coming in and being involved with the things that are being done by everybody across Waterstons, you guys have got quite a lot of things in place and there's some good stuff, and for me that's great.

I've worked in some places that are slightly different to that shall I say, so it is refreshing, especially as it feels everyone has that commitment, and absolutely understands the need to know why we need to have more inclusion because when you do, you will naturally get diversity as well.

It's really nice to see, but as you say this work is no walk in the park, and there is always room for improvement, there's always things that can be done, so, but I think you guys have made a great start.

A: I'm really glad about that, I really am, we just mustn't get complacent. We've just always got to be doing better.

J: And that is the thing that I see with lots of organisations, either that things have been turned into a tick-box exercise, because either their investors are saying 'look, we want to see this, this, this and this', and so they can right, right, right, and we'll put this in, that'll do it.

But for me, it doesn't feel like that here, it's not tick-box, that you're absolutely wanting to do it because you understand that when you start to attract the more minoritised ethnicities, when you start to attract them, then you need to be able to look after them as well once they arrive.

A: Absolutely.

J: So, we mentioned earlier about the shrinking candidate pool, and that all businesses are facing at the moment, but when looking to attract and build diverse teams to reflect the communities you serve, do you think it's important to be bold and intentional to include under-represented populations?

A: Yeah, I absolutely, I do.

J: And why?

A: think if we rely on other people or the organisations that we're working with - our recruitment agencies or the universities that we feed from, we're just slopey-shouldering the problem, so we really need to be intentional about it.

We really need to put a line in the sand for the recruitment agencies to say that they need to supply this level of diversity in the candidate pool that they're sending across. When we do that, it does work and people do actually listen to that.

We do need to be much, much bolder and more intentional about it. It's very easy to say it's not my problem, it's the university's, or it's the school's, the schools are not getting enough women into tech. That's not actually true.

We can do better: we can own the pipeline from a much earlier stage, we can provide scholarships, we can help people to go to university, we can help them through university, we can pay them, do all of these other things that will give us benefits longer term. And these are all things that we need to, and are looking at, at the moment.

J: Yeah, for me, I always remember that saying: if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got.

A: Exactly.

J: So, if you're recruiting from the same pools, or from that little pond, you'll always get the same fish that come out looking exactly the same. There's a big sea out there, let's look at it, and look at different places, and consider things that we never would have thought of before, because there are people out there that may not have a degree, but they've got that life experience.

A: Absolutely.

J: And they absolutely can serve in some way. That's an area I find, in terms of recruitment, that there's lots going on at the minute. So, what's your take on Waterstons' DEI journey so far then?

A: It's been weirdly exciting and slightly scary, and in some ways it's moved rapidly, and in other ways it hasn't moved as quickly as we would have wanted.

I think we've done a lot, but there's always a sensation that we could have done more, that always is the way. We have seen some benefits in what we've been doing: there has been some positive output; people have been talking about it more internally; we've had fewer conversations about why 'people first' isn't enough, actually we had a lot of those at the beginning; people have come and talked to me about how we do better recruitment, people have come and talked to other members of the DEI group about how to do better recruitment; we've brought you in; we've done a lot in that time, we really have.

It always feels like you could do more, we're always thinking 'oh God we should have done this', 'we should have done that', 'we could have focused on this'.

I spoke to someone in DEI from a law firm last year, and it was very interesting talking to them because they were like: 'you have to have some patience with this'; patience feels a bad word for me as well. I'm not a patient human being at the best of times, but when it comes to making sure that we're doing the right thing by people, I think patience is difficult. But also, I can understand that sometimes impatience is counter-productive, sometimes. You know, you push harder and the rock pushes back.

J: Do you think that there's a danger that the organisation views DEI as more a HR-initiative?

A: I really hope not, but I think there is a risk of that, for sure, I really hope that doesn't come to pass.

I know the board is very much on board with what we're doing, or what we need to do. Michael, the CEO, is part of our DEI group; we have representation at the board as well through our People and Culture team.

Part of moving from 'HR' to 'People and Culture' was to try and help with this problem. We have so many people in our diversity group at the moment that the meetings are, which is a wonderful sign and a good problem to have, it truly is.

Representation is from across most of Waterstones at this point, so I hope it doesn't get pushed into a box like that. It is on the table at the boardroom, so I don't think it will, it gets talked about a lot, questions are asked about how will this affect diversity when we want to do new things, and that's a good sign as far as I'm concerned.

J: Well that's great to hear that it is on the board's agenda. For me, it's critical that the board is seen, and from the top-down that everybody absolutely sees that the board and senior managers, all the way down, are on board on that.

A: Absolutely.

J: So, what do you feel then in terms of keeping it on everyone's agenda? Because I am very much aware that everyone's busy.

You've got the DEI group, which is a voluntary thing, so how do we make sure that we keep DEI on everyone's agenda, and keep up the momentum to drive change? Because that sometimes can be quite tough.

A: For sure.

There is a quote, I forget who it's from but my dad uses it all the time, and it's about how a board needs to keep talking about its strategy until it believes fundamentally that everyone is absolutely sick-to-death of it, and then you need to talk about it some more.

This is part of our strategy. Diversity is part of our strategy, it is baked in there. We need to be talking about it until we are blue in the face, we need to bang the drum forever and never stop, we can never become complacent about it.

It has to be in all of the conversations that we're having about big things: if we do an acquisition, we should be talking about the diversity of the company that we're acquiring; if we open a new office, we should be talking about how we make sure that the diversity in that office is good; if we start a new service, we should be making sure that we are looking at diversity for the new service offering that we're creating; when we bring clients in, we should be talking about diversity with them.

All of these things should be happening, and it's going to be difficult. It's very hard, at the best of times, to talk about our strategy as it is anyway, so adding this to it and making this part of the thing that we're doing is adding to that. But it is crucial that we do that, the visibility of what we're doing is so important; the visibility of the strategy as a whole is massively important, and the visibility of this is just part of that.

J: I couldn't agree with you more.

Alex, thank you so much for a great conversation, sharing your insights; it's been a pleasure talking to you today. We absolutely do need to be brave, embrace diversity, equality and inclusion to remain relevant.

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 atnfo@waterstones.com