

Adriele Parker:

I was using a screen, what do you call those things? Like those little green screen filters on Zoom?

Baratunde Thurston:

Yeah. Yeah.

Adriele Parker:

My fro disappeared and I'm just like, well, clearly you don't have anybody with my hair to tell you, you should actually consider it.

Baratunde Thurston:

How are you cutting my hair off?

Welcome to Lenovo Late Night I.T. An unfiltered, no nonsense show about technology. I'm your host, Baratunde Thurston, and tonight's episode is about diversity, equity, and inclusion. It's part of the national conversation now. But are we talking about it in the right way? Why is hashtag tech so white and what can we do to disrupt this monoculture? I'll tell you one thing we could try, which is to have a tech show with three black people. What?

Okay, I'm the only excited one apparently. Tonight we're joined by Dr. Larry Anderson, Chief Information Officer for the office of the secretary at the US Department of Commerce. That's right, we got the feds in here. And yes, I made sure my taxes were all paid up before I walked in the building. Now, throughout his career, Dr. Anderson has focused on key issues like IT, investment management, digital transformation, robotic process automation and mergers and acquisitions. He's also a bass player and a third degree black belt. So we're going to make sure he stays real happy during this conversation, right, Larry?

Lawrence Anderson:

That's right.

Baratunde Thurston:

All right. Also with us, hailing from Brooklyn, New York, my old hood, is Adriele Parker, a diversity, equity and inclusion practitioner with over 14 years experience in strategy, recruiting, learning and development, career development and operations. She's worked with tech companies of all sizes on their DEI initiatives, helping leaders and teams foster inclusive work environments and develop DEI strategies. In her spare time, she upcycles thrifted clothes. I don't know what that means, but it sounds dope.

Adriele, Larry, I want to talk to y'all about the basics. What is DEI? And I say that in the context of when people hear the word diversity, that's often code for race, which is often code for black people. But I know it's more than just that. So who are we talking about and what are we talking about when we say diversity, equity and inclusion? Adriele?

Adriele Parker:

Yeah. So like you said, when people hear diversity, they usually will default to two categories. It's usually race and ethnicity or gender and sexuality. And usually when it's ethnicity, it's black people. But we're really talking about our collective mix of differences. So that could be your political affiliations, it could

be your religious beliefs, your socioeconomic status, where you were raised, how you were raised. So that collective mix.

When we're talking about equity, we're talking about ensuring that we're actually providing fairness. And so people often say leveling the playing field, but it's more so about looking at each individual person and ensuring that we're giving them what they need to thrive to get ahead. And then inclusion is really the outcome when everyone that's part of this diverse mix of people feels as if they're treated with fairness, equity, and they feel included. They feel as though they belong, as if they can be their true selves in a space, in a working environment.

Baratunde Thurston:

That sounds great. Do you have any disagreements with that?

Lawrence Anderson:

None at all. She described what D, E and I is perfectly, and so we can start there as the basis of this conversation.

Baratunde Thurston:

What do you think people misconceive about DEI? Where are their misinterpretations, confusions, bad faith or innocent?

Lawrence Anderson:

I think diversity is really about having diverse thoughts because we need to think a way out of the problems that we have both in technology but also in this country. And having a monolithic culture and the same people trying to solve the problems that they created is really not getting us anywhere. We need to come in with a much different mindset. We need to have diverse minds to actually solve some of the big problems that we have.

Baratunde Thurston:

So I want to know how we're doing. You've been at this for a while, you've been working especially with tech companies. How is the tech industry doing at this D, E and I thing?

Adrielle Parker:

Well, if we're looking at the data-

Baratunde Thurston:

Yes, let's do that. Let's look at data. What a novel approach.

Adrielle Parker:

The numbers have not moved much. We see a bit of a roller coaster, but there's no sort of linear-

Baratunde Thurston:

It's not up and to the right.

Adrielle Parker:

Right, right.

Baratunde Thurston:

I thought everything in tech went up and to the right.

Adrielle Parker:

One would think, one would hope. But no, unfortunately, we're still struggling to see truly diverse groups of people within organizations. And even when they come in, then it's like people forget about the equity and inclusion pieces. And so they're left kind of flailing about trying to find their way, trying to find comfort in this space. And often, they can't find their way and they leave. And so it's just this ongoing cycle because again, we're so focused on the diversity piece. Recruit, recruit, hire, hire. You get them in, but then you haven't created an environment or a space for those folks.

Lawrence Anderson:

Part of the problem is that we don't really embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion. We start by saying it's important and we adopt some initiatives temporarily, and then we check some boxes to say, "Oh yeah, we recruited a certain amount of women, certain amount of LGBTQs, a certain amount of Hispanic, certain amount of African-Americans." And then that's it, right? And then it gets to your point about the inclusion part. But we haven't really committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Adrielle Parker:

I would say that one, it's typically the easiest thing to pull resources from, to pull funding from because historically there just has not been a lot of support behind it. I think that in some instances, people actually don't want to change up or switch up their monolithic workplaces. They're okay with homogenous workplaces. But it's like people forget that humans are running an organization. You need people. You have to support your people, you have to put resources behind it, and it has to go beyond the performative pieces. You actually need to put in resources, funding behind professional development, training people, educating people, not just about race or diversity, but about the skills that they actually need to get ahead. So you may have some other-

Lawrence Anderson:

No, I think you're right. It's almost like a chicken in the egg question. Where did it come from, Larry? Well, it started this way. But that's something we have to constantly, I won't even say the word fight because it's not about that. It's about educating and being ever vigilant. And this is the key point. The companies that adopt diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, they do better. And the evidence suggest that, the data I'm sure that you have, suggests that they do better, they perform better, their numbers are better. And so it makes good business sense to adopt diversity, equity, inclusion and make it be a part of your fabric of your organization.

Baratunde Thurston:

And I'm wondering if the sales pitch, what versions of it you've seen? What I've heard when I encounter people who are resentful or resistant is there's this narrative of you want to take this thing away from me and give it to somebody else who didn't work as hard for it. I don't like that. How do you work with that? That's not just data, that's emotion. And so telling someone your business is going to be more

innovative is one thing. Assuaging their fears about losing their identity is a whole nother thing. What works?

Adriale Parker:

There's no one size fits all approach, right? And I think it really depends on who you're speaking to. Sometimes it is just talking specifically about numbers and proving to them that by creating a more inclusive culture, a more diverse group, or having a more diverse group of people, that they will actually see their financial targets be exceeded. And then you do, of course, have that emotional camp where you have to really appeal to someone's fears, which is unfortunate and frustrating in a lot of instances. I've had people tell me that they feared reverse racism. And I'm like, that's not even a real thing in the grand scheme of things, where people were like, "Well, I'm fearful that I can't be promoted because our organization is trying to hire more diverse people and I am a white male. And so where am I going to go? What's going to happen?"

Lawrence Anderson:

I think the challenge is it requires extraordinary leadership. Who's speaking to us about the goodness of being our better selves. Not just for the sake of business, but because it's the right thing to do. And there are not a lot of leaders who are willing to take on that extraordinary thing, and that's unfortunate. But the way we get to fix this thing is not by edicts, it's about extraordinary leadership.

Baratunde Thurston:

Well, and you've both spoken to the inertia in the industry, the fact that overall, the numbers haven't really changed that much. But especially in your work, they must have changed enough to keep you engaged in the work. I don't imagine you just wake up every day wanting to bang your head against an unmovable wall. So what has been working where you've seen things work?

Adriale Parker:

I think people are certainly more receptive to the idea of DEI, and now it's actually being talked about. There's a lot more visibility with DEI. The things that work very easily are workshops. People love workshops, discussions, cultural celebrations. And if you can start building the momentum with that, then you can slowly sneak in some more strategic stuff like the leadership, enablement and engagement, which is really what moves the needle in this work.

Lawrence Anderson:

One of the points you made that I wanted to pick up on is the sourcing aspect of diversity. The organizations that we are part of, government and also private sector organizations, they're looking in the same places. Certain people may not be plugged into those executive recruitment firms that would even see certain opportunities that'll be out there. At their lower levels, let's talk about the internships and the unpaid internships that you're kind of expected to do. But that keeps out African Americans or people who don't have means to be able to not work or work.

Baratunde Thurston:

Can't afford to not get paid.

Lawrence Anderson:

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Yeah, yeah. And so that's a leg up on the persons who are able to actually work in unpaid internship, they have a much bigger leg up.

Baratunde Thurston:

The chief diversity officer, effective, ineffective?

Adrielle Parker:

Depends on what they're walking into and how much freedom they've been given. It's challenging and we see a lot of turnover. You can look, I mean CDOs don't last very long in most organizations. It's really unfortunate.

Baratunde Thurston:

And where the position is effective, what are the ingredients to make that effectiveness?

Adrielle Parker:

Buy-in from other leaders. Recognizing that DEI is not an HR issue. And so if you have a CDO, they should be sitting in on any other executive meetings. But a lot of times they're not.

Baratunde Thurston:

Within the IT and sort of tech leadership of a company, what can those leaders do, especially with data analytics to help this DEI initiative, not just stay as an HR silo kind of initiative?

Lawrence Anderson:

So it depends on what you mean by that question because that can take on two different answers. One is in terms of how we recruit. But it's also important in terms of our customer facing solutions or applications that we develop. How we actually incorporating diversity and inclusion in that. Are we being inclusive in our way of thinking about how we deploy our solutions for our user community? So diversity inclusion is not just for what's happening in the organization, but it's also as it pertains to the community that you're serving, and are we actually making get allocations for certain people who may not have the resource that we think, like the smartphones or broadband connections to be able to use some of these applications that are now a requirement in this digitized world? So we got to be thinking about that, also.

Baratunde Thurston:

So I want your thoughts on this, but I want to stay on you because you work for the federal government.

Lawrence Anderson:

Yes.

Baratunde Thurston:

And my mom worked for the federal government in technology.

Lawrence Anderson:

Sure.

Baratunde Thurston:

She was a programmer. And your customer base is everybody.

Lawrence Anderson:

That's right.

Baratunde Thurston:

In theory, you don't get to pick and choose, I just want the top 10% of this zip code. You got to serve everybody. So what kind of unique challenges and opportunities does that create as you think about DEI?

Lawrence Anderson:

So it is a technical challenge, which I think was the gist of your question. We have to think about the things I just talked about, how we deploy technology. But it's also a cultural question about who we're trying to serve and not just think about the service that we provide as a monolith, but also diversity of the community that we serve and make sure that our product rollouts have the things that actually can serve the American people across the diaspora of the types of people and types of community we're actually serving.

Baratunde Thurston:

What sort of generational shifts are you noticing in the way we approach the importance even of diversity in the workplace? Are there any generational shifts that you can kind of categorize?

Adrielle Parker:

This new generation is coming in and they're like, they want things exactly how they want them. I want to be myself. What you see is what you get. And so a lot of people, especially this younger generation, will come in asking questions up front, "What are you doing about DEI?," during their interview processes.

Baratunde Thurston:

Which generation is better?

Adrielle Parker:

You won't catch me.

Baratunde Thurston:

So it's time to play a little DEI knowledge game. I think of it as a DEIQ exam.

Lawrence Anderson:

That's good. Okay.

Baratunde Thurston:

Thank you so much. All right, I'll be here all week. I'll ask a question, I'll offer you three options and you just choose amongst them and then I'll judge you heavily if you get it wrong.

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Lawrence Anderson:

All right.

Baratunde Thurston:

Number one, making the workforce gender diverse would increase global GDP by how many percentage points, 12, 16 or 26? Adriale.

Adriale Parker:

12.

Baratunde Thurston:

12?

Lawrence Anderson:

I'm going to go 26.

Baratunde Thurston:

You said 12, you said 26, and the answer is 26. That's \$28 trillion a year. All right, next question. Women currently hold what percentage of tech jobs? 28%, 36%, or 42%?

Adriale Parker:

28.

Lawrence Anderson:

I'm sticking with 28.

Baratunde Thurston:

All right. You both going at the low end and you are sadly both correct? It is 28%. Next question. How many Fortune 500 companies have a black CEO? None, six or 20?

Lawrence Anderson:

Six.

Adriale Parker:

20.

Baratunde Thurston:

Optimistic, and wrong. It is six, just over 1%. All right. Sometimes a B is added at the end of DEI. What does the B stand for? Biracial, belonging or blockchain?

Adriale Parker:

Belonging.

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Lawrence Anderson:

Belonging.

Baratunde Thurston:

But it could be blockchain. All right. How do you think you foster belonging in the workplace?

Adrielle Parker:

So when it comes to belonging, you're actually encouraging people to contribute. And whenever possible, even helping amplify their voices if you recognize that they're not able to do that on their own.

Baratunde Thurston:

Good, good. Next question. We're still playing DEIQ. What percentage of tech employees say they'd be less likely to quit if their company improved its DEI practices? 33%, 67%, 90%?

Adrielle Parker:

67%.

Lawrence Anderson:

I'm going to stick with that too.

Baratunde Thurston:

And it is 67%. That is a clear majority. True or false, tech is the only STEM field where women are less represented than they were in 1990.

Lawrence Anderson:

I'm going to go with a false.

Adrielle Parker:

I'm going to say true.

Baratunde Thurston:

It is true. A lot of this has to do with the plummeting retention of women in tech. Do you have any anecdotes or data around why we're actually losing more women in tech than we used to?

Adrielle Parker:

Yes. So the first answer is that the sense of inclusion and belonging that we were just talking about doesn't necessarily happen for women in the workplace. The bigger answer, and I think what's quite pressing and what a lot of people think about is that a lot of women are wanting to start families and their organizations aren't necessarily supporting them to do that.

Baratunde Thurston:

Got to choose.

Adriale Parker:

Yeah, you have to choose. And most people are going to say, "I'm here for my family," and hopefully their work will be there later should they decide to return.

Baratunde Thurston:

What percentage of homepages have accessibility errors? 51%, 78%, 97%?

Lawrence Anderson:

I'm going to go with 78.

Baratunde Thurston:

78.

Adriale Parker:

Same.

Baratunde Thurston:

All right. The answer is 97%. Basically, every website has skipped this step. What percentage of Fortune 500 companies have made their diversity and inclusion data public? 0%, 0.4% or 4%? We're just moving that decimal around.

Lawrence Anderson:

I'm going to say 4%.

Adriale Parker:

Four.

Baratunde Thurston:

Four. Which in my book rounds down to zero.

Lawrence Anderson:

Wow.

Baratunde Thurston:

That is abysmal. Yeah. Why do you think it's so hard? Again, I'm looking at you first because you consult with so many of these companies. What's up?

Adriale Parker:

Fear. You mentioned it earlier, right? So if you show that data, people are going to want you to do something about it and you're not going to want to do anything about it.

Baratunde Thurston:

Please don't hold me accountable.

Adrielle Parker:

Exactly. So I think that's the biggest thing is that you put the numbers out there, people see it up front and it's like, wow, this is really stark. And then what's next? What are you actually going to do about it?

Baratunde Thurston:

You sound like my mom trying to see my report card. You try to hide it for a day, couple days, but eventually, she's going to get access to the grades and you got to do something about it.

Adrielle Parker:

Exactly. And it's interesting because a lot of these organizations will even hide it internally and it's like, but the numbers are the numbers in reality.

Baratunde Thurston:

Okay. What percentage of Gen Z are non-white? 25%, 48%, 82%?

Lawrence Anderson:

I'm going... Ooh, sorry. It's you first.

Adrielle Parker:

No, it's okay. I was going to say 48%.

Lawrence Anderson:

I was too.

Baratunde Thurston:

I bet you were because the answer is 48%. TikTok generation, most ethnically diverse in US history so far. All right. This one's a doozy. A diverse workforce benefits companies in which way? Greater productivity, increased profitability, improved efficiency, higher employee retention, improved talent acquisition, maybe faster market growth, higher innovation revenues, higher cash flow per employee, increased competitiveness or all of the above?

Lawrence Anderson:

All the above.

Baratunde Thurston:

All of the above.

Adrielle Parker:

All of the above.

Baratunde Thurston:

You see what we did there?

Lawrence Anderson:

Yeah, smart.

Baratunde Thurston:

Okay. You passed. You passed the DEIQ exam. Thank you so much for taking that with us. I like your applause.

Adrielle Parker:

Yeah, sign language for applause.

Baratunde Thurston:

Very inclusive applause.

Adrielle Parker:

Learned that from being on Zoom a lot.

Baratunde Thurston:

Yes. One out of seven people live with a disability. And when we talk about DEI, I feel like we often don't talk about this community. Do you think disability inclusion has been left by the wayside in terms of the general DEI conversation?

Adrielle Parker:

I think so, yes. And it's interesting because I hear a lot more people talking about neurodiversity these days and less so about physical disabilities, which is what we often think about. But both have been sort of forgotten, unfortunately.

Baratunde Thurston:

I've heard it said this is the largest minority group in the country, depending on how you measure it. It's like a group that any of us can join at any moment.

Adrielle Parker:

Absolutely.

Baratunde Thurston:

Based on age or injury or illness of some kind.

Adrielle Parker:

And it's part of DEI, right? Sometimes you'll hear people say DEIA, which includes accessibility or access. And so I'm starting to see a few more organizations add that on.

Baratunde Thurston:

I don't think we need to add more letters.

Adriale Parker:

Yeah, we just need to do the work.

Baratunde Thurston:

We need to make these letters do their job.

Adriale Parker:

Right. Exactly, exactly. Yeah.

Baratunde Thurston:

Folks who make a lot of our technologies are solving their own problems as opposed to asking what your problem might be and how they can help, asking what your problem might be, how they can help. I remember when design thinking was this huge thing and we're going to build with and not for, and we're going to have workshops and use post-it notes and engage with communities before we foist solutions upon them. What happened to that?

Adriale Parker:

I think there are people still doing it, but I think a lot of times, people are looking for the quick and fast solution. And I know you can probably talk more to this because you're in it the day-to-day. But there's like this desire to just go, go, go. Do the thing, put it out there, we'll fix it later, right? We'll think about how to make this more accessible. We'll think about, I was using a screen, what do you call those things? Like those little green screen filters on Zoom.

Baratunde Thurston:

Yeah. Yeah.

Adriale Parker:

My fro disappeared and I'm just like, well, clearly you don't have anybody with my hair to tell you, you should actually consider it.

Baratunde Thurston:

How are you cutting my hair off?

Adriale Parker:

And you're cutting my hair off and I look. So I think just those small things where it's like, "Oh, just throw it out there and we'll try it again later," or we'll fix it once someone brings up this issue versus what you said, really thinking about upfront the user, the person that's on the other end of it, and not just making them afterthought.

Baratunde Thurston:

There's a moment of delight and happiness when something actually caters to your needs and you're like my fro's intact. That's a great moment. You see me the way I am.

Adriale Parker:

Absolutely.

Baratunde Thurston:

Did you want to add anything on this?

Lawrence Anderson:

Yeah, I wanted to just say that we got to be really careful about this digital transformation effort that's going on across the federal government and in the private sector, that you can leave whole swaths of the population out. There are huge challenges associated with the technology that we're implementing, but serving the people that we're trying to, or working for the people that we're trying to serve. So we really got to be thoughtful about that and, intentful about how is this actually going to work? And so the user experience is really about that. It's not about just technology. It's about how do they experience this technology and let's put myself in the persona of those people from their perspective, how they work, how they actually operate, what they do. And then we can start building from there, from the outside end rather than from the inside out, as opposed to what we've been doing in the past. We've been building from the inside out, rather than the outside in.

Baratunde Thurston:

So the DEI thing, it can be about employee experience and workshops. It can be about marketing and how you talk about yourself publicly, who you include in your ads. But if you're not putting it in a product, to me it still feels literally superficial. And with tech products as we've been discussing, there is a lot more work we can do in terms of the DESF. Cutting off your fro, not cool. You have great hair and nobody should be taking that from you. The data that goes into facial recognition, which is powering some of that is a part of the problem. Predictive algorithms that kind of siphon some of us off into a certain type of housing, a certain type of job opportunity versus others. Where do you think we are in terms of moving upstream into the product itself to make sure that we are injecting some of this DEI and just fairness, justice, equality at that stage of the game.

Adrielle Parker:

There's a lot of work to be done, quite frankly.

Lawrence Anderson:

So this is almost like how we started this conversation in the first place. We've talked about the fact that we have not made a lot of progress in the area of diversity. And as we get to the more sophisticated products and more sophisticated things we're doing and artificial intelligence, it's even less diverse.

Baratunde Thurston:

So what do you want to see in the next five to 10 years in terms of how we approach DEI, in particular in tech?

Adrielle Parker:

I would like to see DEI be integrated into everything that we're doing. It doesn't need to be, oh, we have to go do this DEI thing or check off this box. It should just be sort of second nature for everyone. Really thinking about these things day-to-day and figuring out how it fits into your specific line of work, I think is what I want to see people doing in the next five years.

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Baratunde Thurston:

Larry, what do you want to see?

Lawrence Anderson:

I don't see a whole lot difference in that. I'd like to see more measures that we start to develop more sophisticated ways of measuring our progress in terms of how we're doing. Because if you don't measure it, you know can almost forget about it. Your incentive to actually continue it is not there. I like to see companies publish their DEI data. Let's see that number go up from 4%, maybe 40. And you actually published that stuff.

Baratunde Thurston:

We'll keep moving that decimal point.

Lawrence Anderson:

Yeah. But let's get some light into this thing and get some accountability in terms of what we're doing here.

Baratunde Thurston:

Thank you for elevating this conversation. Larry, Adriele, it's been such a pleasure.

Lawrence Anderson:

Thank you.

Adriele Parker:

Likewise.

Baratunde Thurston:

And that's it for tonight's episode of Lenovo Late Night I.T. Shout out to our guests, Dr. Larry Anderson and Adriele Parker. I'm Baratunde Thurston, and I'll see you next time.