Fearless Thinkers: Episode Three
"Do Your Diversity Initiatives Promote Assimilation Over Inclusion?"
with Lacee Jacobs and Mac Quartarone

Masami: Welcome to Fearless Thinkers, the BTS podcast. My name is Masami Cookson, and our host is Rick Cheatham.

On today's episode, we have Lacee Jacobs and Mac Quartarone from our DEI Center of Excellence.

Rick: Hey, Masami. DEI has been one of those things that seems like it's on everybody's priority list for a couple of years, and [it's] not only important and urgent to folks, but it also one of the most difficult things to solve for because the process of creating equitable policy – while at the same time dealing with people's very personal beliefs and perspectives – can be quite challenging.

Masami: Absolutely. Even with the dedication and resources from our own leaders at BTS, there have been many moments that were incredibly challenging.

Rick: Right… In the spirit of full transparency, as a leader of BTS… You'll hear about even some of the moments that I've had in struggling to get this right. So, we might as well just jump in.

Lacee, Mac, thank you so much for sitting down to chat with me today.

Lacee: Oh, happy to be here, Rick.

Mac: Same, really glad to be here.

Rick: Cool, well, I think, in the interest of time, we just dive straight in from the beginning.

It seems like, right now, DEI is one of those things that so many of our clients are either wanting to explore or understand, or they've already actively got programs in flight. I'm curious, as you've gone out and had the opportunity to visit with some of the best and brightest — what are some things that you see that make DEI programs particularly great, and possibly, what are the common stumbles?

Lacee: Well, Rick, one of the things that we're seeing more of — which is absolutely great — is that we have organizations that are willing to commit to longer periods of investing in this work. For example, we have a client currently that decided to do a three-year journey with us. And this work is a journey.
In fact, we would recommend any organization that wants to do this work to fall in love with the journey… Because, as you commit to DEI initiatives, things may seem like they

[get] worse before they get better.

For example, a lot of organizations want do work around psychological safety. And as you are making your environments, the culture, more psychologically safe for employees to speak up, you're going to hear people sharing things that they may not have shared originally, and it may be uncomfortable in the beginning. And that's actually a great thing — for an organization to start to hear people speaking up, and sharing, and having those hard conversations.

Another thing that's great that we're seeing is people are recognizing that you can't just do the one-and-dones; you can't do the unconscious-bias training. It's not enough. You need to practice this work. We need to be willing to get it wrong, to mess up, self-correct, and actually grow in the process.

Some of the things that aren't working is that we still have people come to us and say, "Hey, you know, we have some things that we'd like to accomplish here. We have five different topics. Can you please create something? Five minutes each for these five topics?" And that's just the opposite of what I was talking about. That absolutely is not going to get organizations where they want to be — it is really checking a box. Your people know when you're doing that, and they are going to feel like, "If you're not committed, why should [I] commit?"

Those are just a few things. I know Mac might want to add a couple more things.

Mac: Yeah, in addition to everything that Lacee said, one thing that stands out is sometimes we'll get requests from a client, or even our colleagues, who want to go about doing this work. And so, you end up with someone who just wants to design a program on their own, either, you know, for the client or one of our colleagues, and it's just something you cannot do on your own. It has to be a group effort, has to be a team effort, has to be a partnership.

'Cause if you think about inclusion, that's all about bringing people together and partnering on this. It just requires a certain amount of partnership in order to be successful.

Rick: Well, and I think kind of tying those two things together there is... You know, when I think about traditional initiatives within organizations, this work has a huge[ly] organizational, possibly policy[-related], possibly legal component. It's deeply personal and personally challenging, and sometimes uncomfortable, as you just said, or threatening.

	So, when you all think about this, and, Mac, I think you were just kind of starting to touch on it when you were talking about "It's gotta be inclusive, as the work's even being performed in the first place," but how do organizations kind of walk that tightrope of getting deep into people's minds and hearts and trying to manage policy at the same time?
Mac:	That's a good question, and I can see how it'd be a big concern. The main thing is that, if you think about diversity-equity-inclusion, it doesn't have to conflict with the regulations or the laws. It's all about ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to be a part of the work, a part of the conversations, and making sure that you're not creating an unfair environment. And more than that, that you're actively inviting and welcoming people in to be involved.

So, I don't see it as much of a conflict with any legal issues or, you know, company policy. It's *not* doing DEI that's really in conflict with the laws and with company policies. |
| **Lacee:** | To Mac's point, I believe that… This, again, because it's a journey… Organizations, when they start to do this work, they have to be willing to see what gets revealed in this process — to see where there's a gap between policy and people feeling like they're being treated equitably and even equally and fairly, in some cases.

I mean, equal doesn't always mean equitable, and that's a challenge for a lot of people: making sure that they understand what the difference is.

And, like you said, with human beings, we are deeply triggered when things aren't fair. And so not only are you dealing with something that could be legal, you also are dealing with emotions, which impact performance and someone's ability to work in a way that feels safe and healthy for them. And that's a big deal right now, especially based on what everyone's been through in the past couple of years. |
| **Rick:** | Yeah, that has definitely added another layer of complexity, I think, to all business life. Suddenly, now we're talking... We've all got to be concerned about health and safety from time to time.

So, let's go just a tiny bit deeper into the concept of assimilation. And within that, there's an assumption (and even a belief within our own organization — just being completely transparent) that culture matters, and being part of a community and having a clear identity as a company is going to get us significantly better results. And how do we walk that tightrope of making sure that we're |

	building a great company culture without asking too much of people, from an assimilation standpoint?
Mac:	Well, the thing that stands out to me in what you said was that culture does matter. It just doesn't always matter in a positive way.
	And I think that's important to remember because culture can support success. It can support health and happiness. It can also cause unhappiness and pain and frustration and failure.
	So, I definitely wanted to call that out first. But before I go on, Lacee, did you want to talk about any of that?
Lacee:	Well, I agree with you, Mac. It's something that we need to be completely aware of, and mindful of, and respectful of, because the organization has a culture, and you have individuals [who] are bringing in all of their cultural backgrounds. And so, how does that get integrated? And that's a lot of what we're talking about when we talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion.
	There is a process, again, that happens. And without that awareness, we are trying to force people to fit into a box, and that's not always going to work, especially when people feel very strongly about their cultural backgrounds.
	So, you asked [me] to explain some about assimilation, and there are good examples and then there's some really not-so-great examples of assimilation. There are absolutely ways in which, when we step into an organization, there's not only gonna be an expectation to assimilate — there's going be a benefit to assimilate. You know, this is what belonging feels like — when we are part of something.
	So, there's value in recognizing that, "Oh, when I work here, here are some of the values that this organization has, and I align with those values, and I'm really excited about participating."
	And that's where you'll see people... For example, we work with organizations where they may have something that's representative of that culture that everyone has. It's almost a show of respect for the organization. For example, a hat. It could be some kind of symbol, or, you know, some of the language that you see organizations use.
	Some of that becomes challenging when you are new to an organization and you're walking in for the first time and everyone's speaking in a way that sounds absolutely foreign to you. It's confusing. And because they're so accustomed to operating in that way, then someone else could feel easily excluded. So, without that awareness, it becomes very problematic — the impact, [that is].

So, while some of these things that we do when we talk about assimilation are incredible, and [do] make us feel good, there are those times where it doesn't work. And there are some examples. I'm going to let Mac share a few, and I have some more ideas.

Mac: Yeah, the thing that stands out to me in what Lacee said about the hat being part of the culture and assimilating to that, is — pretty much anyone can get a hat and join that culture and feel like they fit in. But when you have cultural elements that are about personality or about your own personal background, that's when it gets really difficult.

So, for instance, if you work at a place where the culture is very focused on showing yourself off and promoting yourself — being on stage all the time, or being a big sales personality — someone who isn't as outgoing and almost aggressively, confidently extroverted, there's not much that they can do to change who they are to fit that culture.

And the fact is, that when you get a whole bunch of people who all fit the same culture, you get this monolith, where everyone becomes more identical; more of the same experiences, more of the same knowledge and understanding, and it just narrows that background to where you have a very limited scope of what you can contribute.

But, when you open up that culture and you make it welcoming for people of all sorts of different backgrounds — and you're bringing in people with all sorts of different experiences, education, knowledge, personalities, et cetera — then you're opening yourself up to new ideas, new contributions, and different ways to think about things.

And that's where innovation happens. That's where, you know, more success happens. I mean, there's all sorts of research that shows that… it all comes from not having everyone who's exactly the same.

Now, granted, that group that's exactly the same because they think alike, they have the similar experiences, similar language, similar, references, they can operate very effectively and efficiently. But will they be successful? Who knows?

Lacee: A lot of organizations are, right now, hiring for diversity, and they're onboarding for conformity. And that really creates a problem, to Mac's point, because when you create an environment where everyone is thinking alike or expected to be alike, to have the same types of skills and present them in the same way, then you do miss out on the diversity. And it's proven that, when we're on diverse

| | teams, we do walk away feeling more uncomfortable, because all of us know what it's like to have someone just high five us when we have an idea because they think like us, and it's like, "Ah, that's great," versus someone challenging our ideas.

If we wanna get to a place where we're innovative, and really create an environment where there's growth, too, we're going to have to have people in the room that bring something different and unique than we do, and that challenge us. That's the way we want to go. |
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| **Rick:** | It makes a ton of sense, actually.

Well, I, so, so, so much appreciate you taking so much time with me today. Every time I have the privilege of sitting down with you, I see the world in a slightly different way, which is incredibly valuable to me.

So, thank you so much. And we'll probably need to talk more soon, because as things continue to evolve and we continue to learn, I'm sure that there's much more that our audience will want to hear about. So, thank you. |
| **Lacee:** | Thank you, Rick. This has been fabulous. |
| **Masami:** | If you'd like to stay up to date on the latest from the Fearless Thinkers Podcast, please subscribe. Links to all of the relevant content discussed in today's podcast are in the show notes, or you can always reach us at bts.com. Thanks again. |