

The Fearless Thinkers Podcast | Season 2, Episode 8
Practical advice for Pride with Kathryn Clubb

Masami Cookson: Welcome to Fearless Thinkers, the BTS podcast. My name is Masami Cookson, and our host is Rick Cheatham, head of marketing at BTS. On today's show, Rick sits down with Kathryn Clubb, Global Partner and CEO of BTS North America.

Kathryn was formerly a managing partner at a large consulting firm. She also worked in private equity and led a medical device company through commercialization.

Hey Rick. How are you doing today?

Rick Cheatham: I couldn't be better. What's going on in your world?

Masami: Well, I just got back from Maine, where I watched my partner's sister go through her college graduation.

Rick: Oh, wow. That's a biggie. My daughter actually just graduated from UT as well. How was her graduation?

Masami: It was really beautiful. It was also interesting to hear about the perspective of students who went to college during COVID: a very reflective moment, but also a celebratory one.

Rick: Speaking of celebrating, happy Pride Month.

Masami: Yes, happy Pride.

Rick: That's actually what our episode is about today. We have Kathryn, a proud member of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Masami: I can't wait to hear more.

Rick: Well, let's jump in.
Hey, Kathryn, welcome back to the show.

Kathryn: Nice to see you, Rick.

Rick:

I am so excited to have you here today. We're right on the edge, as we're recording this, of Pride Month, and it seems this year it's more difficult than ever for companies to celebrate Pride.

From your perspective, why do you think it's important that they do?

Kathryn:

Like American Independence Day, it's really important to remember that Pride started as a protest. It was an early morning riot on Christopher Street in New York in 1969, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people rioted after a police raid. It was a watershed moment in a collective coming out and demanding to be taken into account and respected as human beings.

Pride is a month, like Black History Month and Asian American and Pacific Islander Month to raise awareness, to recognize accomplishments, to celebrate progress towards equality and dignity, but also – more importantly – to see what else there is to do. So, in a year like this where it does seem harder, where it feels like some things are going backwards, it's really important to remember how far we've come, double down, and figure out what we can do to move things forward.

And it's important for companies to take a stand in those areas as well, because one of the most powerful levers that we have in society are our organizations. Until further notice, most people will actually work for a living, and that's where people live. And the economic power of companies in states and across our nation can be really rallied to do the right thing.

Rick:

That very important reminder that came in the beginning of what you just shared, of where this all began. For you personally, what does Pride Month mean?

Kathryn:

Well, as a member of the LGBTQA+ community, I remember Pride during the AIDS epidemic. I remember the heroic people who fought to have AIDS actually recognized as a terrible disease, and not a gay disease, so it would actually get funding and research attention. And my marriage is now recognized by hospitals, insurers, mortgage lenders, and [more] importantly by my friends, family, and

society. So, I remember how far we've come and I pay attention to how far we have yet to go.

Rick:

Oh, that's amazing. Let's go a little bit deeper into the roles that leaders play in navigating issues of exclusion and underrepresentation within their employee populations.

Kathryn:

I see a lot of leaders – a lot of people wanting to do what is best. The problem with this topic is that most people don't know because they don't have the lived experience. So, within BTS, I take my guidance from the people closest to the work and from our LGBTS ERG, and I can give you two examples.

Our recruiting group changed our application. Right up front in the application, the form asks for the candidate's pronouns. It's just like any other fill in the blank form on the form. We have had candidates tell us, no matter how they identified, that it felt inclusive to be asked. I didn't do it, our recruiting team did it because they understand what's important to our candidates and the types of people that we're recruiting.

A second example is that our employee resource group proposed helping our employees with the struggle around pronouns. We admitted we don't know how to do this, and we worked with an educator from the Human Rights Commission on the topic of pronouns. We did two webinars. We had another session where we talked about what it meant to us. And so, we were able to work with the amazing organization of the Human Rights Commission to really help us understand what this meant. One of the big takeaways from that is it's not about grammar. It's about recognizing and seeing someone.

Rick:

It is interesting to me to think about things that those of us from, I'll just say, another generation, can sometimes see as completely inconsequential. The thing that always surprises me in those scenarios is just because it doesn't matter to me doesn't mean I need to object to it mattering to you.

Kathryn:

What leaders and companies get wrong, even though they're very well-intended, is in large part because they see the world as they see it, not as others see it. So, you're absolutely right. What's important to me may not be exactly as important to you.

We all have habits and best practices, and those habits were formed – and those best practices became best – at some point in time when they worked, but they don't work anymore because the times have changed.

The best thing to do is stay close to your employees to see who they are and figure out what works for them. Exhorting people to speak up in a meeting when they don't feel like they have the voice to do it is pressure, not encouragement. Me figuring out how to ask the questions that get people included, inclusion happens only day by day. No one act, no matter how symbolic, can change a culture to be more inclusive in a moment. What we're seeing people trying to do is make policy changes, which are necessary but insufficient.

In our case, it's how we onboard people to teams, how we define the roles of what people will do on those teams, how we get the most junior person operating as an equal with the most senior person, not because they have the same stature or even life knowledge. However, they're gonna be closer to some piece of the work than the people who have been there for a long time who will be closer to a different part of the work. We only know by listening.

Rick: That's such great advice, just the act of asking is probably helpful.

Kathryn: You have to keep asking because the first time you ask, people aren't sure you're serious. Is this a passing trend? Is this some podcast you listened to and got a new question to ask from somebody? Or is this something you're gonna continue to ask? Asking questions that people can actually answer is an art. But if I can be very specific and say, "You've seen a lot of these things before, what do you think would be important to include in this?" that's a question people can answer.

Rick: Well, so it's easy to see in the news companies or even individual leaders actively making choices to not support Pride. But I'm always more curious about what are those of us with good intentions potentially doing wrong as we try to celebrate Pride?

Kathryn:

One of the things that people do wrong is not balancing the principled with the specific and practical. And what I mean by that is you kind of need both. **You need to make the declaration that all people matter.**

All people of LGBTQA+ can live freely and fully in a company like BTS. That's a principle, that's a declaration, and that's important. And it's gotta be followed up by the practical. People have to be able to put their pronouns on their Zoom names. People have to believe that they will actually have their pronouns used appropriately, as a matter of respect. There's gotta be ways to get groups of leaders to feel supported in doing things they've never done before. And when we all try to do it at the same time, I think it works better.

One of the advantages of a month like Pride is it gives us a time to focus, to develop ourselves a new habit that can be more inclusive. Declare that you're gonna do it, do it with others, and make sure that people will give you room, space, and even forgiveness when you do it wrong.

I have a young friend, practically family to me – we have lived through over a number of years from a transition, and I love them to pieces, and I still stumble over “they” and “them.” When we at BTS were having the HRC and talk to us about pronouns, I decided to do a little homework, and I talked to my young friend and I learned two things.

One of the things I learned that is just important for business is that employees who use pronouns other than he and she get talked about less within their organizations. Their accomplishments get highlighted less in talent reviews. People don't talk about 'em because they're worried about using their own pronouns. The impact of that is those employees go more unseen, and that's not okay. We are leaving talent, you know, in the back room if we are not seeing and taking the full potential of our employees into account.

The other thing I learned – and I knew it, but I may have gotten it for the first time – of how completely invalidating the wrong pronouns can be, because it is an absolute external demonstration of not being seen, recognized, and valued for who they are. And when I thought about that for this young friend of mine, who is like family, I had a realization that I can never stop having – from

their point of view [of] what it meant to be misgendered.

Rick:

It's a journey for all of us, which I think is an important thing to remember. The power of local leadership, especially an initiative like this, really matters. I tend to always close the show with, "I'm a mid-level leader."

I don't have the power to drive radical change in my organization, but I want to be better. What's your best advice?

Kathryn:

It's not novel, it's not new, but representation really, really matters.

One of the things that I was really positively impressed by a couple years ago in Pride at BTS is leaders were invited to tell their own stories. There were any number of people who had gay children that they'd worked through the coming out process with. I didn't know that there were people who had trans children and they could talk about their own struggles. You look at these people and they look like they're normal straight people, and it's like they don't have any of these issues and they do, right? And so, what I would tell you is that representation matters and stories matter.

Before I was at BTS, I was at a large consulting company, it was kind of the era in the country, and certainly the era in this company, of "Don't ask, don't tell." The fact of the matter is who I decided to love did not change my quality of consulting one way or the other, so it really didn't come up as a topic.

And then I left that company but I got hired back to actually run one of their very, very big milestone programs. And I had an employee come up to me from Europe who I had never met and tell me that they were very sad that I had left, and it was really important to them to know that there was a gay partner among the group. Here I was thinking I was like so stealthily, you know, working in this organization, not asking, not telling, you know, not being, you know -

Rick:

Not asking or telling.

Kathryn:

...out there about anything. And how ridiculous of me to think that it was not known, so.

But what I regretted in that moment is actually not being out because I really got what a difference it would've made to this employee and so many more employees to have somebody who was, you know, a partner in this organization being out. I mean, it wasn't extraordinarily long after that when, you know, it was very, very okay to be out in that organization, and I think one of their CEOs at some point was also openly gay. But representation matters, the story matters, people's personal experience with the LGBTQA community matters.

The thing people can do immediately for Pride Month is tell your story. Listen to other people's stories, ask about their stories, and understand that their experience is gonna be very, very different from yours. And that's providing the richness that we need for the diverse, meaningful, vibrant organizations that we're all trying to create.

Rick:

Wow, that is great advice, so thank you for that. I always walk away from our conversations learning a lot and being inspired. We have to do this again sooner as opposed to waiting another year.

Kathryn:

Sounds good to me. Thanks.

Rick:

All right, have a wonderful day.

Masami:

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