

FRAUD TALK – EPISODE 102

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Anti-Fraud Field

Earlier this year, the ACFE hosted a webinar titled, "[A Conversation About Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Anti-Fraud Field](#)," which is free and available to view for all ACFE members. In this month's episode of Fraud Talk, you'll hear an excerpt where the four panelists share who should be involved in this discussion and why. They also share how anti-fraud professionals can make belonging an integral part of workplace culture.

Transcript

Bret LaFontan: Hello, and welcome to this month's episode of Fraud Talk. I'm Bret LaFontan, video producer for the ACFE. In a few moments, you'll hear an excerpt from a recent member webinar titled "A Conversation About Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Anti-fraud Field." The panel of speakers include our moderator, Dr. Lisa Walker, Monica Modi Dalwadi, Charles Washington and Bethmara Kessler.

Dr. Lisa Walker: Bethmara, I'd love for you to share with us, help us understand who needs to participate in this conversation, and why is their participation so important to this conversation?

Bethmara Kessler: Yeah, the short answer to that question is everyone. We're really all in this together, and until everybody feels represented and safe to be present and be themselves in the workplace, no one's going to be safe to be themselves. Without the active engagement of everyone in the organization and the conversation, we're not going to be able to achieve full equity and belonging for all. I say belonging, because it's not just about inclusion. It's really important that everyone feels a true sense of belonging in the business and on the team.

I think one of the big challenges, just if I can reflect on why this has been such a difficult topic in the workplace, is that many senior leaders including me... I grew up in a world where I felt that deliberate steps were taken by organizations to avoid conversations about diversity at all costs. People were really tacitly encouraged by organizations to avoid conversations, use politically correct language, homogenize into a corporate culture, and quite honestly, color blindness and politically correct language were expected and normalized.

Let me give you two quick examples. Over the years, I've seen HR partners have removed names from applicants' resumes to ensure that diverse candidates wouldn't get excluded from consideration because of biases that might result from gender, race or ethnicity.

Another example is one of my companies had a facilitated conversation between our African American Employee Resource Group and the company's leaders. The first thing that came up was that the group wanted to change their name from the African American Network to the Black Network because members didn't all identify as African American. The conversation that ensued with the leaders was so incredibly interesting because everyone was sharing that they were taught that calling someone Black wasn't politically correct in the workplace, and they felt terrible that when they thought they were doing the right thing, it was really the wrong thing all along.

It's important for us to have open and authentic conversations to help organizations and leaders acknowledge and quickly understand and unlearn some deep-rooted behaviors that have been groomed or accepted for a long time. I believe we can all be catalysts for making sure that these conversations are happening, but for real change in any business, the most senior leaders need to be fully invested in making that happen.

Dr. Walker: Thank you, Bethmara. I'm hearing that it's everyone needs to be included, and it's also about how you're having those conversations. You mentioned that senior leaders need to be involved in the conversation. Charles, I'd love for you to speak, share with us a little bit more about why it's so critically important for founders and senior leaders of organizations to be part of this conversation.

Charles Washington: Thanks. I'd just like to comment to something that Bethmara just said. That's the reason why I didn't get that job was because of my name. I thought that was quite funny. There have been numerous times when I've actually thought that. It's just that my name is typically a Black family name, and so being Black, you can't help but look at that sometimes when you know what your qualifications are and then you may not get the attention that you thought that you would get.

But you know, coming up in my background, which is very vast from a racial standpoint in terms of growing up in an area of segregation, integration, having to have to deal and see some of these things, going to a point where sometimes occasionally, visiting my grandmother and then realizing that... She lived in South Carolina and then realizing, there's a sign in the back of the doctor's office that says, "Negros only." Then trying to understand that. From going to a movie theater and realizing that you're sitting in a different part of the theater than white people. As a young child, it was very difficult for me to really accept that.

Then I look at myself today, and even though some may consider me to be somewhat successful in terms of what I've achieved in my life, but the thing that gets me the most, and where I think our leaders really need to concentrate on or get involved in this conversation that, equality, fairness, equity, it doesn't really work unless it works at the lowest level of the organization. It's really fine for people like me to work my way up the ladder, and I do good, and I learn from that, but sometimes what I see from a leadership standpoint, we really tend to look at equity, we tend to look at equality based on the people that are actually fighting for it the most.

I think at times that I'd like to see us get away from a defensive posture, where we're constantly trying to defend our rights, as opposed to being offensive. We get to a place where we can live and enjoy the rights that have already been bestowed upon us. I think from a leadership standpoint, is that leaders have to begin the conversation. Leaders must begin that conversation. The problem with that sometimes is that we so often think that if the leaders have to begin that conversation, what we fail to sometimes recognize is that those leaders are not immune from having their own biases or unconscious biases as well, so they may not know how to do that.

But to take that step forward, it begins with leadership, and addressing their unconscious bias, and getting them to actually realize. It's almost like alcoholism, you can't fix it unless you admit the fact that you have it.

Monica Modi Dalwadi: Charles, I love your points on unconscious bias. I'd wanted to share, if we're thinking about actionable things that we can do as leaders and as anti-fraud professionals, one thing we did across our entire organization is unconscious bias training. We not only did online sessions that everybody could watch, but then afterwards, we got together in small groups at a local level, and the first thing that our team did was lead us through an exercise where you wrote 20 things about yourself, then you had to go introduce yourself to someone you didn't know, and you could not talk about those 20 things.

Part of that lets you feel what it was like not to bring your whole or authentic self to work, what it would be like, Bethmara, to your point about hiding a piece of yourself or trying to be too homogenous and not have that uniqueness, and it opened a whole other window of dialogue and conversation and had people think differently about what they're doing and how they're doing things.

If people are listening and taking notes, I would highly recommend that unconscious bias related conversation along with the listening sessions.

Charles: One of the things that we've got to recognize and come to a realization with — and I have this experience — bias has no boundaries, bias has no color, bias has no limits. I was attending a course once, and I took this unconscious bias test. I was in the room, and we were all law enforcement. I was in the room with maybe 30 or so other white law enforcement officials, and we're all taking this test. It was a racial bias test, and I failed that test just as everyone else did. I was Black, and I was not expected to fail that test.

It was a good exercise for me to realize that biases don't always necessarily come from the color of your skin, but it also comes from the environments that you place yourself in, and what you've learned over the course of years and it all feeds into your bias, and that's something that we have to be very careful of because so often when we think about bias, we're talking about race, religion, color, creed, but bias has no limits. We've got to be careful with that to the point of understanding that we all have biases, but the good part is we have to recognize that we have them.

Bethmara: I'd like to just add on that because I think that's a really important point. I think bias is also how we perceive things and how we filter things, and sometimes our biases can lead us to not presume positive intent.

We were having that conversation with our Black Network in my organization, and one of the folks stood up and said to the leaders in the organization, "I'm really frustrated because people don't say hello to me in the hall or look at me because I'm Black."

I stood up and I said, "Oh, I thought they weren't saying hello to me because I was a lesbian."

All of a sudden, the whole room broke out laughing because it's so easy for us to assume, like you said, because of your name, Charles, you question, "Is the reason that I didn't get this job because of my name? Is the reason that somebody is not paying attention to me or not talking to me or including me because of the color of my skin or because something I represent?" I think part of the unconscious bias training has to be about us teaching ourselves and wiring ourselves to presume positive intent and come from a place of helping to talk about a conversation instead of shutting down, because we perceive that it's against us. If that makes sense.

Dr. Walker: Yes.

Charles: Very good point.

Dr. Walker: Such great points, thank you all for that. I generally say to the leaders on the teams that I support and coach, "We all have biases. If you have a brain, you have biases. We all do." Something as simple as the reason we remove our hand quickly from a flame or a hot stove is because we have a bias towards keeping safe and a bias against hurting ourselves. In the same way, we have conscious and unconscious biases about so many things, including race.

One of my leaders, who happens to be COO of a major global tech company, after some time of working together, he said to me, for the longest time, he felt that it was perfectly okay, that for his organization they had their diversity and inclusion officer and his or her folks who worked with them to ensure that their

organization was maintaining diversity to the level that they had agreed to, and that they're working on inclusion. After doing some amount of introspection and some really thoughtful work on himself and becoming so much more self-aware, that was an eye-opener for him. That the work around diversity, equity and inclusion, if it doesn't start from the senior leaders, if it doesn't start from the head of the organization, and filters down throughout, it will not work, will not work at all.

That leads us in then to trying to understand who, because we're talking about the essential nature of this conversation, and who are all the folks who needs to be a part of this conversation. So far, we've determined that everyone needs to be, yet, especially in the last couple of months, we've been hearing a lot about including allies in the conversation and how essential allies are.

Bethmara, I'd love for you to share with us what we really mean by allies, who are these important allies and what are their roles? What are some effective ways for allies to show up in the workplace?

Bethmara: That's a great question. In the end, we all should be allies to one another, but at its core, allies are the people that make conscious commitments to work in solidarity with oppressed groups in the struggle for equality. One of the key concepts that always comes up when discussing the role of allies is the concept of privilege. Talk about a difficult conversation and one that's spawned a lot of reaction from folks, the concept of privilege really has. In order for somebody to be a really great ally, they have to be able to acknowledge their privilege and use the power of it to stand up for others, to drive change.

Unfortunately, the word privilege, when it's not really understood, it can spark feelings of being attacked or lead to communication breakdowns. I'll tell you, I personally struggled with the concept before I completely understood it. I was on the board of an organization called the Matthew Shepard Foundation, working with Judy Shepard, who is the mother of Matthew. Some of you may remember, Matt was killed in a vicious anti-hate crime years ago, and we were working on a number of initiatives to drive hate crime legislation.

We were talking about whose voice would be the most impactful in public conversations, and I remember Judy saying to me, "As an ally, not a member of the LGBTQ community, my voice can be heard louder in a conversation than yours." At first, I was taken aback because I got a little defensive about that and, "How can you talk about my struggles more than I can?" Then the lightbulb went off, and I started to really understand the concept of privilege. It's important for us to understand that when we talk about white privilege, we're not saying that a white person's life hasn't been hard, it just means that the person's skin color isn't what's making it harder.

Anybody in a majority group can be an ally to an oppressed minority group, but you have to commit to using your privilege through words and actions to really drive forward momentum in the struggle for equality. If we're silent and not part of that minority group, our silence is deafening, and the inaction becomes detrimental to progress.

A few steps that I take to show up as an ally is, first of all, recognizing and acknowledging my privilege. I do spend time to educate myself about the history of the struggle, and I really encourage everybody to do that because if you don't understand and are uneducated about the struggle, it's hard to be a good ally.

I push for educational opportunities and crucial conversations in the workplace to keep an open dialogue. Speak up when I see injustice or actions that result in inequality. That's hard to do but very important. I amplify the voices of those folks whose voices aren't coming through and make sure that their good ideas are being promoted and that they're getting credit attributions for their work. Finally, I like to go out of my way to truly ensure that everyone feels welcome and included. Sometimes that's as easy as walking through the hall smiling and saying hello to every single person you meet. Allies are really important and play a very important role in this.

Monica: Bethmara, I'd love to be able to add to that for a moment. I think what you said about who's making the statements, the powerful statements and I talked a little bit about the listening sessions that we hosted. Some of our most powerful statements, and they were really diverse groups, were from white male leaders. One of them shared his Irish background, how he knew what it felt like to be discriminated from a family perspective, that he has personally taken a board role in an organization that works to bring equity into academics, across different racial and socio-economic background, and vowed to do more.

It was incredible and he did not initially want to speak in this session. He was like, "This session isn't for me." I had to say, but actually this is for everyone, and the beauty of the virtual environment was that I could be talking to him on instant messenger type of platform and say, "I want you to share something that's authentic to you. This is a safe space for that conversation, but people want to hear from you. They want to understand that you care, and they want to understand your perspective." Once he did, it was incredible. People were thankful and they said, "I get it. Other people in the organization get it and people who don't look like me get it."

Charles: Great point. I'd like to chime in as well. From the ally standpoint, for me, building highlights is really so much to do about building trust in people. I've kind of traveled the world. I've had experiences with different cultures, and I don't think that I've ever been to another country and have worked in a different culture when I did not experience some type of, I would say, a cultural or even a racial discrimination to some point. It used to get me when I go to countries where there's predominantly no other race in that country, but the people that live there, the indigenous people, so why would they be biased of me? I'm just the only person who's here right now this minute.

What I learned over time, is building those allies got me to a point where I no longer had to be so defensive anymore, but I could really get on the offense. By building trust with some of those allies, when you build trust with those allies, they're actually able to carry your story forward. They're actually able to help you on the offense, because in order for us to get away from this point where we are now, we have to get away from being on the defense and concentrate more on the offense, as one would say in a football game, because most games are not won with all the players operating in a defensive mode.

Offense is where all the points are actually scored in most games. Allies really help you build that level of trust so that you've got more people telling your story than just yourself.

Dr. Walker: Such an interesting point, Charles, where allies get to magnify the story, and at the same time, I keep hearing this question, especially as I'm working in organizations hearing. Often, it's not being asked out loud, but you're reading it between the lines. What is in this movement for allies? On the one hand, we know that allies can do a tremendous work in magnifying the story for black people and for folks of color, but what is in this for allies? Bethmara, I wonder if you could share a little bit on that for us?

Bethmara: It's an interesting question because I've spent a lot of time as an executive sponsor of a bunch of resource groups where we've pushed allyship, and the question has always come up in terms of what's in it for the allies. The reality is that we all in some way, shape and form, just like Monica mentioned earlier, there was a white man who was covering and was kind of hiding his Irishness. I had some folks that I've worked with when I've talked very openly about being an out lesbian come to me and send me notes and say, thank you so much for being open and authentic and sharing. I'm Native American and I never told anybody, or I'm a veteran and I've never told anybody.

The thing is that we've all learned what is alluded to talk about, how we need to show up in almost in these homogenized ways. By being allies, what we're doing is we're creating an environment where, as Charles said, we're building trust and we're creating a situation where people truly are feeling like they belong and feel welcome, which back to your point, Lisa, is what makes organizations great and successful. Diversity makes us better and it is so powerful if we truly get diversity, equity and inclusion right.

For allies, it's about being there. Humanity is about being there for other folks and having other folks be there for you when you need it. It's just about being a human being from my perspective.

Dr. Walker: That's beautifully said.

Charles: I agree with you, Bethmara.

Dr. Walker: I literally hear and feel your heart in that. Charles, you were going to be adding something. Did I hear you?

Charles: No, I was just saying that I agree with Bethmara. It's sorta like, no one can live the full benefit of their lives living a lie, one way or the other. Either if you're hiding anything about yourself, there's just no way that anyone could ever be the person that they're truly meant to be or the person that they really want to be if they're fostering a lie within themselves because it's just a hard thing to keep.

In this place of building allies and living to your fullest extent, and this is what racism prevents. It prevents you from living to your fullest extent, because in many cases, people practiced racism, even when they didn't believe it, they just did it because they felt society thought that that was the right thing to do, not because they believed it, but just because they thought that was the right thing to do based on social norms, and to me, that's a good example of living a lie.

Bethmara: It's interesting you talk about that, Charles, because one of the things that was a big lightbulb for me in the concept of privilege is that I actually was closeted for a lot of my career, and it was really hard. I was using generic pronouns and not sharing with the world that I had the most amazing partner at the time, who's now my wife, and three beautiful children who are awesome adults right now. The thing that was most powerful for me was realizing that I was able and I had the privilege of being able to cover my sexual orientation, where in a racism discussion, when we're talking about somebody's race, there's no privilege to being able to cover.

If somebody sees you, Charles, they see that you're a Black man. If I don't do my hair like this, and I actually intentionally cover, I can actually pass as being a straight white woman, which gives me a different degree of privilege. You're right. It's so hard and exhausting to have to cover who you are and make believe that you're not the person you actually are on the inside.

Charles: Sure. Racism is—

Dr. Lisa: Bethmara, I wanted to— Sorry, Charles. Go ahead, Charles.

Charles: Racism has this funny way of attacking people in ways that you really wouldn't imagine. For example, I once moved into a community and I was really concerned about moving there because I had heard so much about this community being racist. I was really thinking about not moving there because I read so much and I heard so much about this neighborhood being racist until finally I met a person who lived there and she said this thing to me, and it stuck with me my entire life, and what she said, she says, "Charles, if you are afraid of white people, don't move to this neighborhood, but if you're not afraid of white people, if white people don't make you feel uncomfortable, move to this neighborhood, and I'm quite sure you will probably have one of the best experiences of your life."

I moved into the neighborhood after I told my wife that I wouldn't, we moved there and it's been one of the best neighborhoods I've ever lived in in my entire life. Racism has its way to take things away that you don't think about because you're only thinking on that defense again, but once you can take it and turn it into an offense, it can truly open your eyes to things that you might not ever experience.

Monica: I wanted to add a comment about the ability to be on the offense, to be an ally, not be a bystander. I remember very early in my career, I was out at a lunch and there was a person who was senior to me, and then an individual who worked for me who was early stage in his career. At that lunch, there happened to be a lot of flies around and I was swatting some of them away. The senior person said, "Well, you should be used to that. You're from India."

I was just beyond just taken aback at that point, because that's not actually where my family's from or what I'm used to. The more junior individual said, "What do you mean by that? How could you say that to her? What are you trying to imply?" It suddenly opened this window, but to have somebody who really was just like, "No, we're not going to stand up for this."

In the workplace, in your community, if you see someone say something, do something. The ability to just to stand up against that, make a comment, be the ally to that individual is so powerful. This is almost 15 years later and I would not get that image removed. And I'd say I need to do this and more for other individuals. As a leader, I need to make sure that individuals of diverse background have opportunities that they don't have a way that they feel like they're being held back because of their color.

Dr. Walker: Yeah, Monica. That situation really demonstrated the power of someone noticing and speaking up. As Charles talked so brilliantly about racism, the lie, that we have to be intentional about dismantling the lie. We've already established that this is a critical conversation. We've established that everyone needs to be part of this conversation, including and starting with the very leaders of the organization and building systems and processes and creating opportunities across organization so that everyone can be involved, not just in the conversations, but in the actions that will increase equity, increase justice in the workplace.

Monica, if we are going to have these really important and often difficult conversations in the workplace, we have established that they're essential, are there some specific considerations that we need to make to ensure that everyone is included in these conversations? From your standpoint, how are those happening? Share a little bit about that with us.

Monica: Sure. Happy to, Lisa. One of the things we did before our listening sessions is we set a whole series of ground rules. We said that we wanted this to be a safe place for people to share and have a respectful dialogue. We wanted to get people's thoughts on systemic racism, how our communities have been impacted and provide resources throughout the conversation. Then we wanted to hear what needed to change within our organizations to help individuals move ahead if they felt that there was a change that needed to be made.

We made sure it was an open forum. It was not a presentation that was occurring, and we tried to have two individuals facilitate who were not necessarily at the very top of the organization because we wanted everyone to feel open to be able to speak and have dialogue. We had it be optional, but I did ask some specific people to join in the conversation so we could have a lot of perspectives. Then we shared resources during the conversation, books to be able to learn more, articles, blogs, any information that's out there. One thing that I would recommend to this group, if you really want to be able to take action, is there's a CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion.

We've taken the pledge as an organization to make meaningful change and we've put on the site itself and with our pledge, the actions we're taking. If you go to that website, you can see what all organizations who have signed the pledge have agreed to do, and you can filter by different areas, by recruitment, by retention, by compensation, to understand what are some options that could be available to you.

I feel very proud that we've taken a very disciplined approach, to saying, "Okay, let's look at the data, let's see where we are. How do we change this within our organization? What do we need to do at an education level? What do we need to do at a recruitment level, at a retention level so that we are making

progress?" We follow and we track that. Every single quarter, the way you might if you were a publicly traded company tracking your earnings. To have that type of discipline behind it, we want to make the change, has been really important and we've put our actions and our funds behind that as well.

Bret: Thank you so much to our panelists, for their insights on diversity, equity and inclusion in the anti-fraud field. You can find more episodes of Fraud Talk at [ACFE.com/podcast](https://www.acfe.com/podcast) or anywhere you regularly listen to podcasts. This is Bret LaFontan, signing off.