

## **Broad Matters Season 6 Episode 5**

### **“A Look at DEI in the Workplace” with Quinetta Roberson**

Ken Szymusiak:

Welcome to Broad Matters, a podcast bringing you thought leadership, innovative perspectives, and real world impact from Michigan State University's Eli Broad College of Business. I'm Ken Szymusiak, Managing Director for the Burgess Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation. Today, Quinetta Roberson joins me in the studio. She is the John A. Hannah distinguished Professor of Organizational Behavior with a joint appointment with the Broad College's Department of Management and the College of Social Science's Department of Psychology. Her work delves into both domains, uncovering the financial impacts of diversity and improving diversity practices in corporate settings.

Quinetta Roberson:

For me, Broad has always mattered. Having been in this field for, oh, more than I want to admit, but over 20 years, the research that has been coming out of Broad over those years has just been amazing. There's amazing scholars here that do work that not only moved the field forward from a research standpoint, but also from a practical standpoint as well.

Ken Szymusiak:

Quinetta first appeared on the podcast in 2021, and I'm eager to talk with her once again and hear about the projects she has going on now. Welcome to the podcast, Quinetta.

Quinetta Roberson:

Thank you for having me. I'm happy to return and talk about what's on my mind and the research I'm working on.

Ken Szymusiak:

Round two. Back by popular demand. So, before we dive into your work, I would love to hear about your time at the BetterUp Uplift Summit, which was a recent event, and I saw you were part of an amazing lineup there alongside some global business leaders, including Prince Harry, who was all also in the lineup. You have a nice photo with him. What was that like?

Quinetta Roberson:

So, we're best friends. No.

Ken Szymusiak:

Hanging out a lot.

Quinetta Roberson:

So, BetterUp is a coaching platform and they have a number of products and coaches and services to deliver personal and professional coaching to individuals and they'll contract with individuals, organizations, et cetera. I am on the science board for BetterUp because one of the things they believe in is for all of their work to be evidence-based and driven by science, which I really enjoy and I really believe in. And so, I'm on the science board. There's several other PhDs throughout the country and they invited us to give a talk as part of this event. It's post pandemic, they wanted to celebrate their existing client base, but also draw in some new people to tell them about all the things that they can do to help transform organizations, transform people's lives. And Prince Harry is the Chief Impact Officer for

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BetterUp. He actually did a session that closed the event, and so I knew that I would get to hear him speak, but I didn't know that we would get to chat over a drink.

Ken Szymusiak:

That's awesome.

Quinetta Roberson:

Yeah.

Ken Szymusiak:

How interesting. Really cool organization to get involved with too. Congrats on that. That's really neat.

Quinetta Roberson:

Thank you.

Ken Szymusiak:

It sounds like it was a really interesting conference to be involved with. Can you tell us a little bit more about what your talk was about and the impact you've had at BetterUp?

Quinetta Roberson:

Part of my role in the science board, I'm one of the diversity, equity, inclusion experts, and so they wanted me to talk about DEI. But one of the things I like about my partnership with BetterUp is that they're very innovative. And so they said that they wanted me to do two sessions. One, they wanted a session on diversity, equity, inclusion in some form. And the other one they knew about my secret superpower, which is I'm a trained sommelier. And so, they wanted me to do a wine tasting. And when they said that, I said, "You want me to do both together at the same time?" And they were like, "Wait, can you do both at the same time?"

So, I did one session which was called the Inclusivity Edge, which is about doing the hard work of inclusion and kind of managing the risks in order to experience the return. And that was just a good session but the one that everyone really loved, I did a session on implicit bias through a wine tasting.

Ken Szymusiak:

Oh interesting.

Quinetta Roberson:

And that was a crowd favorite.

Ken Szymusiak:

Tell me more about how you do that with wine tasting.

Quinetta Roberson:

So, if you think about different wines, right? people have all of these biases.

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Ken Szymusiak:

Like regions and brands, and-

Quinetta Roberson:

Yeah, some people are like, I only drink red, or I hate Chardonnay or-

Ken Szymusiak:

Only things from France.

Quinetta Roberson:

Exactly. I'll give you an example. One of my biases, if you say Moscato to me, it's like you cursed at me, right? But thinking about where did those biases come from, why do we have them? What's the impact on our behavior? And so, we could talk about the lines and the biases we have, but then talk about the specific types of bias and how they translate into the work environment and how it comes into us managing talent, recruiting and retaining people, and just the way we interact with others.

Ken Szymusiak:

Oh man, that sounds like an awesome session. So, let's talk a little bit about your research on DEI, because we've had conversations before and you've always been really so evidence-based. And what you're seeing now is DEI is a really talked about subject across corporate America. I don't know who's leading the way here and how can companies do it authentically?

Quinetta Roberson:

It's interesting because as you noted, many companies are talking about it.

Ken Szymusiak:

Yeah, they're saying the words.

Quinetta Roberson:

They're saying the words. And so, then the question is, are they doing the things? Right? And in my work, I try drawing on my finance background to think about what's the impact? Is it changing something? Be it culture, be it the way work is done, be it some kind of performance outcome. And so, it's separating the DEI work that is performative to that is more impactful or creates value in an organization. So, it's interesting, you ask who gets it right or who does it?

And I get that question and I'm hesitant to say any one company because what I find sometimes happens is that when a leader hears me say that they go to find out what the company does and then just tries to plug and play. They're like, I'm just going to mimic that, right? Without taking into consideration why did it work for that other company? What's the context or what was the challenges? So, one of the things that I've been trying to push organizations towards, and now I have evidence to show it in my work is that DEI has to be embedded in the organization. It has to be part of the DNA of the organization, what it does. So, it's not like a company says, look, we're doing our work. Now look,

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we're doing DEI. Those don't have to be separate. They should actually be tied together in order to drive strategy, in order to drive the business, and in order to actually see some kind of real outcomes from it.

Ken Szymusiak:

Right. That makes a ton of sense. And I know you've just worked around this concept of customization, which I think is kind of the angle this plays into, right? You can't copy and paste. If a company is trying to get serious about this and you have a hundred employees, whatever it might be, right? Each one of those employees is in a different place as well in terms of how they interpret what this messaging means. Is there work you're doing on that front or advice or ways to think about this for a small business owner who's thinking strategically about implementation or customization for how do they actually make DEI something that resonates with their employees?

Quinetta Roberson:

I like the way you phrase that because often people hear it and think like, ugh, this is going to be tough or it's going to be expensive.

Ken Szymusiak:

Another HR thing maybe.

Quinetta Roberson:

Exactly. It's a cost center, but I usually encourage leaders to first think about what's their end story? What does this look like on the backend? And that takes in consideration our particular culture, our particular strategy, what we're trying to achieve so that maybe we want to move the needle on culture, or maybe we want to move the needle on innovation. Taking that into consideration and then knowing what the end goal looks like, we can start to back into how to do it. So, one of the questions I usually ask a leader is, tell me at the end of a fiscal year, how do you tell that you've been successful? Because then we can start to build it into the metrics, right? I don't believe in doing DEI, just for the sake of it. The other thing is that, like you said, employees are all different.

They have different starting points. And so, we have to take into consideration how does work get done in our particular organization? We call them in the diversity space “fault lines”. What are the differences that influence how people work together or don't work together? So, in one organization, maybe that's gender, but maybe in another organization that's how long you've been in the organization. Maybe, in a university setting, it's whether they're in the tenure process or not. So, we have to think about what are those dimensions of difference that matter? Also, where's the diversity of thought and then how can we leverage that in order to move us forward?

Ken Szymusiak:

I think there's an unfortunate reality out there now, which is the default is just race, right? Oh, DEI is to fix our racial biases. There's so much more to explore in a given workplace.

Quinetta Roberson:

Exactly, to over focus on bias, right? When we get into an organization, we're grown, right? We've kind of got some biases set in, so to say, "We're going to do some training to change them." It's pretty aggressive, right? Or I shouldn't say aggressive, ambitious, but to think about how do we get people to do perspective taking. To stop and say, “I don't, don't know what to do in this situation, but let me think

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about it". To push through their fear of doing something wrong, just engaging with other people in order to create those synergies, and that's where the magic happens.

Ken Szymusiak:

Yeah. No, that makes a ton of sense. And I think oftentimes people just think, we don't have a initiative in place. Let's just do the opposite of what we're doing now or something like the drastic things. But a lot of times you may be doing the right things, you're not labeling it or not thinking about the right way, right?

Quinetta Roberson:

I very rarely, if at all, say the term best practices. We often hear about the practice, we don't hear about what makes it best. People, when I ask, I'm like, "Tell me how you manage diversity in your organization." Usually the number one thing, if not in the top three, is diversity training. And so, I say, "Well, tell me what it gets you. How has your organization changed?" And people were like, "oh, I mean-

Ken Szymusiak:

We can point to it to people that press us, right?

Quinetta Roberson:

Exactly, which is more about compliance rather than using it in a way that's going to make us better, faster, stronger.

Ken Szymusiak:

Yeah. Yeah. That's really interesting. I think there's people like you said, who aren't approaching from the right perspective. How do you use this to make your organization better?

Quinetta Roberson:

Yeah, and not just kind of haphazardly grasping practices, but thinking about what's the purpose? What are we trying to achieve? How do we do this in a meaningful way? Because otherwise, it becomes a cost center. Yeah, you're spending money and there's no return on that investment.

Ken Szymusiak:

So, let's continue on this thread about the impacts of DEI in corporate America. And when there are new CEO or managerial announcements by a company, you've done some research on how the media responds to these types of things.

Quinetta Roberson:

My new kind of interest is in corporate governance and understanding about diversity on boards and diversity in leadership. But a lot of my research is "me search", where either I experienced something, I see something and I want to know more about it. And so, I remember when there was a recent CEO announcement, a Black woman, and I looked at the announcement and it was like, "oh, she's going to help us tap into diverse markets and she's going to help us expand our reach across our customer segments." And I was like, huh. So, that's what she's bringing. This is a CEO. So, I just went and looked at some other announcements and I found one for a man, and it said, "He is a visionary. He was going to

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propel us into the future." So, I'm like, why is he propelling and she's just like, oh, helping us reach another market segments?

One of the doctoral students in Broad, we looked at over the last 10 years, CEO announcements based on race and gender and the sentiments. So, we actually use a archival database and looked at whether the sentiments in terms of positive or negative, they differ based on gender or race. Interestingly, for women and people of color, the sentiments in the announcements are more negative, meaning the words are just not as positive of valence. So saying again, “propel” versus “they'll help us” or something.

Yeah, exactly. What's interesting though is that there's some data to show that when women and people of color are announced as new CEOs, investors are actually willing to pay a premium. So, we wonder if the sentiment is low, but the investors are not picking up on it. They're willing to pay a premium, what's going on? And so, where we are now, there seems to be a media bias, right? And now we want to unpack that why-

Ken Szymusiak:

I was going to ask you that. Does it depend on the outlet? Did you notice any differences if you had a CEO announce across multiple media channels, do you see language use different there or not?

Quinetta Roberson:

So, what we did in order to control for that is to look at the company announcement.

Ken Szymusiak:

So, their PR.

Quinetta Roberson:

Right? So, we don't get necessarily the noise of other news outlets, however we know about the sentiments. What's the words? Yeah, what are they saying? And so, we're actually partnering with a professor in the engineering school who does a really cool analysis technique that's probably not new to other disciplines, but new to us, but natural language processing to look at the actual words in the announcements and see patterns in the data.

Ken Szymusiak:

Interesting. But there tends to be positive response from markets in many respects but maybe it's a way that investors are, they're used to seeing the fluff of visionary and oh, great, it's another one of the same person they had last time. Maybe there's something there, right?

Quinetta Roberson:

Yeah, and the other thing is we looked at up to three days after the announcement, the people were going to invest. They might not be reading the same thing we're reading. They may be just, “new CEO, let me invest”. They don't necessarily pay attention to that. So, we're going to look at a longer timeframe to see if it gets to investors. The other thing is maybe it gets to other stakeholders. Maybe it's customers who are like, oh, I don't know. This company's going to go down or something. Maybe it's the general public. So, we're actually going to try to tap into other stakeholder perceptions.

Ken Szymusiak:

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Yeah. So, this is a good segue because we were talking about the use of technology in your studies, but let's talk about the use of technology in DEI training efforts.

Quinetta Roberson:

Yes.

Ken Szymusiak:

Okay.Cool.

Quinetta Roberson:

And I have to give credit to the PhD students because there were two students who had an interest in virtual reality, and we were talking about using virtual reality in diversity training and could it be more effective? So, what we're doing now is an initial study where we have a virtual reality experience and using it to see if putting trainees in that context helps them to develop skills for perspective taking, right? That they're more able to put themselves in someone else's shoes to understand, and therefore, that impacts, it positively impacts the way they interact with others.

Ken Szymusiak:

Yeah, that'll be a really interesting space because people do tend to adopt their personas. That's been kind of proven if they spend a lot of time doing VR work. So yeah, if you can think about integrating training, you can develop empathy or actually being in someone else's shoes.

Quinetta Roberson:

The other thing is that there's all this data debating whether diversity training is actually effective. If you look at research on diversity training, and actually in practice, there's a lot of emphasis put on the training event. When people come in the room, what happens, and then they leave. But there's very little attention to pre-training environment. So, what do they know beforehand or how can I get them excited about it? And also post-training. Do I create opportunities for them to use it?

Ken Szymusiak:

And what biases they have going in, right? Getting people to think about those, yeah.

Quinetta Roberson:

Yeah. And so, what happens then is people are thrown into these training environments, they're apprehensive, they're concerned, and again, they're scared to make a mistake, but in the virtual reality world, it's kind of more of a safe space. So, they can practice things, right? They have this space to kind of understand what works, what doesn't work. I could have made a better decision, or maybe there would've been a course of action that was more effective. It's not so high stake.

Ken Szymusiak:

In your room with 50 people, you're afraid to actually ask the questions.

Quinetta Roberson:

Right.

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Ken Szymusiak:

Yeah.

Quinetta Roberson:

Right, speak up. And then one of the things we note in our research too is you've got the opposite. Sometimes you've got the overzealous trainee, and I can say this, having in the past done diversity training, there's some people who come in who are like, “I'm going to be your co-facilitator”-

Ken Szymusiak:

Yeah, yeah, they're going to shut down everything.

Quinetta Roberson:

They're like, “I know all of this. I'm just going to show you all I know.” But then the learning is stifled in that way as well because they're not willing to receive and kind of experience all that they can in that moment.

Ken Szymusiak:

Interesting dynamics that people have in those types of settings. We've talked about a lot of different research projects, and I know you're really active. Which ones surprised you the most recently? Or what's got you most excited about the things that you're working on?

Quinetta Roberson:

So, one of the things that has surprised me the most - It's a bad surprise, but then it becomes a good surprise. And it's that I look at what firms do in terms of managing diversity and performance. I look at specific types of diversity practices and how to make them more effective. I look at how leaders can be more inclusive. And what I've found is that I think people are taking the easy route to some degree. Meaning again, there's all of these concerns that swirl around us, right? We have biases and will people say that we're biased, and how long is this going to take? And how much money is this going to require? And will we really see a benefit? Or is there an outcome? All of these things which make people say, I know we should do diversity work, but I don't know if I want to roll up my sleeves and do the hard work. And that's what's been most surprising, that it seems that leaders and companies in general have an interest, but then they're apprehensive about either beginning the journey or how to intentionally push forward in the journey.

And so, the good part of that to me is it gives me a space to be able to inform companies of how to do that. It is not rocket science. I'm going to say that. Maybe, some diversity practitioner will say, "How can you say that?" It's not rocket science, but it does require a certain amount of strategic thinking, intentionality, and purpose. And so, in doing that is thinking about one, if you haven't started, where do we start? And it doesn't require a lot of money. Like I said earlier, thinking about what does the end story look like, and how can we create accountability throughout the organization, throughout the enterprise. But then also it requires us to, if there's a company already on the journey, how to push forward because maybe an organization gets stifled and kind of spinning their wheels. Where do we go next? And it's understanding that once we put a DEI practice into place, doesn't mean that that's set for life. We can look at the metrics, we can use analytics to see what's working, what's not working, and make a change. It's a whole learning exercise.



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Ken Szymusiak:

It's the same way you'd approach innovation practices or something, right? You don't want to box yourself in. There's so many levers.

Quinetta Roberson:

Exactly. Yeah, and there's many different routes to an outcome. The other thing, I'm glad you noted that because it's also that if I go back to my experience as a financial analyst, what I had to do was a lot of scenario planning. I had to do a lot of pro forma statements. If-then, what happens here, et cetera. If we and companies want to buy some new property planner equipment or do some new action, we go through this a whole evaluation process. When we do talent things, we don't go through the same thing, that same rigor all the time.

It becomes a go no-go decision. Like, let's try it, and then the analytics we use are utilization rates. Did people use it or not? Did people like it or not? But I'm like, we need to have that same level of rigor and analysis as we're thinking about how to do this. So, that's why I approach DEI, just like any other aspect of the business, how do we drive capabilities? So, how can we become more innovative? How can we have greater market reach? How can we be more efficient? Right? There's all of these things that it can help us do that then will translate into performance. But we've got to think about again, tying it, embedding it into what we do.

Ken Szymusiak:

Right. It's not just hiring a consultant for a three-hour workshop, right?

Quinetta Roberson:

No, it's not.

Ken Szymusiak:

I think this is the unfortunate reality of where the market's at right now, or is almost like, yeah, it's just a strange thing where people are just like, well, I got to start this now.

Quinetta Roberson:

Over the last three years, there's been companies that make a commitment to diversity or a commitment to social justice, and now there's studies going on to see what that commitment looks like. And a lot of it is donating money to social justice organizations. Which again, it's a form of commitment, but it doesn't change anything internally in the organization. And that's what we hear a lot from employees and organizations that they're like, “our company is great about promoting social justice out there in the world, but we don't feel like we have social justice inside.” How can they walk the talk? But relative to the people who are really critical for getting work done.

Ken Szymusiak:

I think that's a really interesting thing. What's the one thing you hope your research does to help business leaders?

Quinetta Roberson:

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My dream, my kind of ideal world is I don't have to talk about DEI anymore. We don't have to think about it as a separate thing because organizations are doing it as part of managing talent. That's what I hope I can get business leaders to do, where it just becomes part of their leadership on a daily basis. Both short term and long term, right? But more immediate or more practically, I want business leaders to think of it as part of the business. So, it may not yet become unconscious for them. It doesn't become part of their rote activity, if you will, but that they at least think about it, that as they make business decisions, they're actually doing the perspective taking or they're thinking about it in a number of different ways. And it doesn't become something that's siloed or something that's considered a drain on resources, but it's actually considered to be a value creating activity in organizations.

Ken Szymusiak:

Okay. That's great. We'll get there.

Quinetta Roberson:

Okay. Hopefully I'll still be doing research.

Ken Szymusiak:

Well, thank you so much, Quinetta. It's been great talking to you today. How can we keep up with your work going forward?

Quinetta Roberson:

I don't think anybody's going to read my scholarly papers. So, I will usually engage in conversation with people on social media. I'm on Twitter, which is QuinettaPhD. I'm on LinkedIn, which is Quinetta Roberson. Some of those platforms, I've been debating whether I should still view on them or not. But what is valuable to me is being in conversation with people from all around the world who have an interest, and maybe not have an interest, right? But to engage in debate, and so to be in conversation in those different ways.

Ken Szymusiak:

Awesome. Love it.

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