

Change Conversations

Actions Speak: building an inclusive culture

Michele C. Meyer-Shipp, CEO, Dress for Success Worldwide

Debra Lee, Chairman & CEO Emeritus, BET Networks, Chair, Leading Women Defined Foundation and Co-Founder, Partner, The Monarchs Collective

Hosts:

Emmanuel Acho, FS1 Sports Analyst, former NFL Linebacker, and The New York Times Bestselling Author & Host, Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man

Jimmy Etheredge, CEO – North America, Accenture

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00:01	Michele C. Meyer-Shipp: The leaders have to be vocal and speak up around these topics. They cannot be silent. We all have to get comfortable being uncomfortable.
00:08	Jimmy Etheredge: What I think is important for companies today, is they want to create an environment where people can be their authentic selves. And in order to do that, they have to feel seen and they have to feel safe.
00:20	Debra Lee: We can't talk about this another 20 years. We need to change it. We need to have people at the table and people enjoying the equity of the company and the perks of the company and create Black wealth.
00:37	Emmanuel Acho: Welcome to another episode of Change Conversations. I am so excited about this one. The theme: actions speak. Why? Because actions always speak louder than words, especially as it pertains to building a culture of inclusion in the workplace. I'm Emmanuel Acho, author, sports analyst, former athlete, and Jimmy, it's always good to see you, brother.
01:03	Jimmy Etheredge: Thanks, Emmanuel. Hi everyone. Jimmy Etheredge here, CEO of Accenture North America. And listen, it's no secret that corporate America has a diversity problem, and that diversity problem starts at the top. If you look at the Fortune 500, you can count the number Black CEOs in this country on one hand. As of today, just four Black Fortune 500 CEOs, two of which are women. And today, we want to talk about the impact of these numbers, but perhaps more importantly is how to create a future where companies look more like the communities where we live and play and work. And we're going to be joined today by two Black CEOs. So, I'm very excited about that.
01:46	Emmanuel Acho: Yeah. I love it. Not enough has changed since the Civil Rights Movement, because board rooms all across the US are still dominated by white males. And while women and people of color are trying to continue to grow in

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02:14	<p>those spaces, they are still vastly underrepresented. MLK said it himself, and he said it best. Change does not roll on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle. And there's still a lot of struggle ahead.</p> <p>Jimmy Etheredge: So, Emmanuel and I are very fortunate to have two guests with us today who have made it their mission to give more people a seat at the table. Michele C. Meyer-Shipp is the CEO of Dress for Success Worldwide, and the former chief people and culture officer of Major League Baseball. She's the first person to hold that position, and at the time, was one of the highest ranking women in the league. And Debra Lee is one of Hollywood's most celebrated executives. She's the chair and CEO emeritus of BET Networks. She's the chair of the Leading Women Defined Foundation, and she's co-founder and partner of the Monarch Collective, which is a consulting firm committed to empowering Black executives. Thank you both for being here.</p>
03:06	<p>Michele C. Meyer-Shipp: Thank you. Happy to be here. Yeah.</p>
03:08	<p>Debra Lee: Thank you. Great to see both of you.</p>
03:10	<p>Emmanuel Acho: Likewise. So great to be a part of this wonderful conversation, but let's start at the top. Let's start with the C-suite. Let's start with the decision makers, because talk is so cheap in society right now. Jimmy always talks about, we have to go from optics to outcomes. What do you all think still needs to continue to change to promote a more inclusive and diverse society? Particularly at the top?</p>
03:37	<p>Michele C. Meyer-Shipp: I'm happy to start. It's interesting. I would say that the conversations that have started over the past two years as we've been dealing with the racial reckoning around the nation and around the world, that conversation must continue. One of the things, Debra, I don't know if you're hearing it, but you know, people are saying that the conversation is starting to wane, or the conversation is starting to dissipate. I think it's really important for leaders to continue to have the candid conversations with their employees, with each other, and continue to raise awareness and discuss the hard topics, and continue to make sure they have a strategic plan to drive diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, both inside and outside of their organizations.</p>
04:22	<p>Debra Lee: Michele, I totally agree with you. We've been talking about diversity and inclusion for so long, and then a year and a half ago, when George Floyd was murdered, I think it really made our country and our world see that we still have a long way to go. And so, one of the things I've committed myself to do, through Monarchs Collective, is try to get more Black folks on corporate boards. And I love the fact that conversation has become more intense. It, again, has been going on for 20 years, but it's become more intense.</p>

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	<p>And then you have California issuing regulations that you have to have a certain number of people of color or women on your board. You have NASDAQ saying you need that to go public. You have Goldman Sachs and BlackRocks saying they won't take companies public unless they have people of color and women. So, there's pressure right now.</p> <p>I understand completely what you're saying, Michele, about the pressure waning. It's a hard topic to keep up. I've been serving on boards for over 20 years, and I've heard race discussed more in the past two years than ever before. And some boards are better at discussing it than others. For some, it's still a very uncomfortable topic. But if you're talking about police brutality, social justice, redlining, all the things our country and our Black community have dealt with over the years, that's unusual for boards to have that conversation, and they don't want to have it every board meeting.</p> <p>And after George Floyd's murder, you saw a lot of companies write checks and start programs, focus on diversity or internships. And then the young people said, "Well, what about your boards? We're what about your C-suites? Why aren't there more people of color in your C-suites?" So, I hope the conversation continues and the pressure continues. And I think this next generation is going to keep the drum beat going. At least I hope it is. I mean, too many companies have hidden in the shadows for too long. But now people are saying, "Well, let's look at your board numbers. Let's look at your executives." So, I hope that continues.</p>
6:46	<p>Emmanuel Acho: Debra, let me ask you a quick follow up, because you said something that's intriguing to me. Whenever my family and I go to medical missions trips in Nigeria, I'm first generation American. And so, we do a lot of medical work in the villages of Nigeria. And I'll try to recruit people to come with me, but for those that are too intimidated or busy, they'll cut a check. So, let me ask you. What is more important right now for the sake of inclusion and diversity? Is it a check or is it a conversation?</p>
7:14	<p>Debra Lee: Wow, that's a really good question. Checks are always good. I don't think any HBCU, any social justice organization are going to turn down checks. Checks help them do their work. But that's not enough. If you're not looking inward and having the conversation and saying, "Well, what does my senior team look like? When I walk into my senior team meetings, do I have Black executives and Latinx executives and LGBTQ executives and women? And that's as important, and maybe more important, than writing a check. Because I think if you get that part right, those executives and those board members will make sure the check writing continues into the right organization. So, I think, to answer your question, getting the look and feel of the inclusion and diversity at these companies is the most important.</p>

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08:21	<p>Jimmy Etheredge: Well, I think that's one of the reasons, Emmanuel mentioned that sometimes I'll talk about moving from optics to outcomes. But one of the things I've heard people talk about is diversity is about counting the numbers, but inclusion is about making the numbers count. And we had sent Marshall on an earlier podcast, and I liked her analogy of diversity is being invited to the dance, but inclusion is about really being asked to dance.</p>
08:44	<p>Michele C. Meyer-Shipp: That's right.</p>
08:45	<p>Jimmy Etheredge: What do you see in the way of inclusion? I mean, you've got a lot of experience in corporations. What do you see that organizations need to be doing more of, to be more inclusive? Not just making transparent what their numbers are.</p>
08:59	<p>Michele C. Meyer-Shipp: So much, actually. I mean, there's a whole list of things, but I'll give you some of the highlights that speak to me, and that I've seen resoundingly across every organization I've touched. And that is one, the leaders have to be vocal and speak up around these topics. They cannot be silent. So, when I think about the different organizations that I've been in, and there's been a tragedy or a murder or a killing, the buzz on the CDO circuit is, "Uh-oh, is your CEO going to say something? Is your CEO going to say something? Oh, mine is afraid to speak." "Oh, well maybe yours should speak first."</p> <p>Everyone needs to speak. The leaders need to speak up. Silence suggests that we don't care. So, speaking up is critical. And then the second thing is that leaders inside of the organizations need to create spaces for, and Emmanuel, I know you've set this up and you've done a lot of this, hosting courageous conversations, right? We have to host courageous conversations across difference, and our leaders have to be a part of those conversations.</p> <p>So, our friend, Tim Ryan, who started CEO Action many years ago, I mean, I was involved in that launch. And that was one of the best things that happened for corporate America. The companies that signed up for CEO Action and hosted the days of understanding, that made it so much easier for us when these tragedies and these horrific things happened. We had already been having courageous conversations. So, it wasn't new to us to bring together a group of employees with the CEO and say, "Okay, we need to talk about this. This has happened." So, having those conversations, educating leaders.</p> <p>Because one of the other things that happens is a lot of times you get a CEO who gets it, but his or her leadership team, or some members of that leadership team, don't get it. They don't feel comfortable. They don't know what to say. They say nothing, or they say the wrong thing. So, it really is important that leaders are educated and given support, and tools, on how to have these conversations. It starts from the top, and it has to trickle all the way down.</p>

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	<p>The bottom line is the leaders role model inclusive behaviors. They pass it down and they pass it to a friend and so forth and so forth and so on, and it continues. I think the key phrase that I like to use with everyone who works in any organization is we all have to get comfortable being uncomfortable, having courageous conversations across difference, having conversations about what helps us all thrive, so that we can do it together as a collective.</p> <p>I love the word courage and going back to the initial question on creating that inclusive environment, one of the things I don't want to forget to mention is it's incredibly important that organizations ask their people what they need to feel engaged and included, because we don't know what we don't know about one another's experience, and the leaders at the top are not experiencing the day to day of the line employee. So, I am a huge fan of employee engagement surveys in many different formats, focus groups, things of that nature, because your employees will see things and experience things that you may not appreciate. We have to get comfortable being uncomfortable. We have to have conversations across the organization, from leadership all the way down to an individual contributor, so that everyone is able to share their insights on what makes the workplace inclusive for them, and then we work together to create that environment.</p>
12:19	<p>Emmanuel Acho: Jimmy, I want to come to you for a second because Michele and Debra, you also eloquently speak on the fact that you shouldn't be afraid of saying the wrong thing. But with the NFL billion dollar owners that I've talked to over the last year and a half, the fact of the matter is, they are. That's just the reality of the situation. I think they take the old standardized testing model, where you are better off giving a non-answer than a wrong answer, if you all remember the old SAT. Jimmy, why didn't you have that of saying the wrong thing, as the resident white man? Can you just speak quickly to your lack of fear and just making sure you spoke?</p>
13:05	<p>Jimmy Etheredge: Well, the fear is there. There's always the fear of saying the wrong thing and offending someone. But what has helped me is, first of all, I have a lot of friends, good friends, that don't look like me. So, I have people that I can ask, "How does this sound to you? Am I missing something here?" And that gives me some of that courage.</p> <p>And as Michele said, I've always been a fan of awkward conversations. If I'm having a challenge with a project, the quickest way to fix things is to have those awkward conversations. And so, what I think is important for companies today is they want to create an environment where people can be their authentic selves. And in order to do that, they have to feel seen, and they have to feel safe. That's where the part of silence is an issue.</p> <p>It really struck me a day or two after the George Floyd murder. I had an employee that I was on a call with, and afterwards, she asked to have a quick</p>

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15:01	<p>chat and she's like, "No one is talking about this at work and it makes me feel so uncomfortable. Like, how can we not talk about it?" And I do think it's hard because a lot of corporate leaders have been through plenty of HR training on how to be very careful about what you do. But the thing that I think goes alongside with courage, that Michelle mentions, is grace. I try to extend grace to others. I try to meet them where they are, and I do my best to assume they're going to do the same with me. So, there's going to be sometimes that I might not use the right term and candidly, that's why I like doing this podcast, because I think it enables us to talk about and ask questions that other people are still getting the courage to engage in, and they can see it's okay.</p> <p>Emmanuel Acho: I appreciate you sharing that. Michele, let me go back to you. If you could give one or two actions that an organization could take to build an inclusive culture, what would they be?</p>
15:14	<p>Michele C. Meyer-Shipp: One is, we have to all become more self-aware. We have to educate ourselves about the issues of the day and find people we can talk to, to bounce things off of. Like Jimmy, like you just said, you have friends you can run things by, ask questions of, read books, watch movies, get in dialogue. It's really important that we all become self aware because we don't know what we don't know about one another's experience. And we don't know what we don't know about one another's history. So, we have to know our facts and educate ourselves.</p> <p>And some of that, our leaders in our organizations can help us do by bringing education and podcasts like this into our organization, but some of it is on us to do on our own. I think the next thing is we have to facilitate spaces in our organizations to have these conversations. Jimmy, I love what you said. I jotted it down. Being seen and safe. If we can create spaces for our employees to be seen and safe and heard, I think it makes all the difference in the world. And giving grace is incredibly important because we're never going to always get this right, but we have to give each other grace, be compassionate, get comfortable being uncomfortable. And we will get there.</p>
16:27	<p>Debra Lee: To follow on to what Michele said, we have to learn how to disagree in a graceful manner. I don't want to leave this discussion with folks feeling like we all have to have the same views on issues. That's not the case at all. But we have to learn how to disagree and not come out of that disliking each other or holding grudges. We have to learn to speak up when someone says something that's just not right.</p> <p>I'm on a board, and we were talking about racial equality, and one of the white members of the board said, "I don't see color." He thought he was being very liberal with that statement and very inclusive. And I said to him, "You have to see color. How do you respect our differences? How do you respect our</p>

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	<p>different backgrounds? Everyone sees color, so to say something like that is just putting your head in the sand and trying to give off image that you shouldn't be trying to do."</p> <p>The other thing I would say is hire, hire, hire. Let's stop talking about it. Or appoint, appoint, appoint. Find the board members, put them on the board. Find the executives, hire them. Set goals. Not quotas, but goals. Say you want the board to be 50% women in 2025, or you want 1/3 of the board to be people of color or half of the board. I mean, we really have to shake things up. And the way to do that is bringing these people into companies.</p> <p>So, we have to talk about these issues. We have to bring people into the company, and we have to hold executives and CEOs accountable. We can't talk about this another 20 years. We need to change it. We need to have people at the table and people enjoying the equity of the company, and the perks of the company, and create Black wealth.</p> <p>Mentoring is usually the answer. I think people run away from the word mentor, because it sounds like it takes a lot of time. You can befriend someone who doesn't look like you. You can take someone out to lunch who doesn't look like you, on a regular basis. Just say, "I'm going to do this. I'm going to get a group of diverse executives together, get to know the people at the company, and be sure to bring more diverse people into the company."</p>
19:10	<p>Emmanuel Acho: I love that. I love that. I kind of stamped that thought with, we have to be able to disagree, but there are some things we can't disagree on, like human life.</p>
19:18	<p>Debra Lee: Right.</p>
19:18	<p>Emmanuel Acho: And the value of human life. Because oftentimes, especially in this day and age, when we talk about disagreement, people will be like, "Well, let's just agree to disagree. Like George Floyd shouldn't have been there in the first place." I've had so many of those conversation and it's like, "No, no, no. We can disagree whether or not pineapple should be on pizza. We can't disagree about the value of a human life."</p>
19:38	<p>Debra Lee: Right.</p>
19:40	<p>Emmanuel Acho: So, Debra, thank you so much for joining us. Michele, thank you so much for joining us. This was so enlightening, as always.</p>
19:50	<p>Jimmy Etheredge: Emmanuel, Debra's comment that we have to learn how to disagree in a graceful manner and not come out of conversations disliking each other or holding grudges, that really stood out for me. What went through your mind when she was talking about that?</p>

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20:05	<p>Emmanuel Acho: Yeah, that was one of the biggest points that I remember from this conversation and I will think back on. Two thoughts went through my mind. Number one, let's not pervert that sentence. We need to understand what we can disagree on. We cannot disagree on matters of life and death. We cannot disagree on matters of racism, systemic injustice, police brutality. Now, we might disagree on, "Well, how do we want to approach these things?" Some preferred MLK, some preferred Malcolm X. So, we might disagree on a pathway to success, but we cannot disagree on the fact that we need to ultimately end at success.</p> <p>So, I loved what Debra had to say about that. And I just want to make sure that like anything good that we don't pervert that because there's so much truth, and necessary truth, to understanding. We have to learn how to disagree, but we also need to know what we can and cannot, and what we should and should not, disagree on.</p> <p>Jimmy, how do we keep this conversation front and center, though, in your mind? You've been dealing with this, now, for years. I say dealing with this because, at first, it was just kind of a casual conversation about diversity and inclusion. And now, we've taken this conversation much more seriously. Thankfully. How do we make that this conversation doesn't just come and go with the headlines?</p>
21:32	<p>Jimmy Etheredge: Well, that's a great question, and I know one of the things that we talk about a lot is how do we take this moment and make it into a movement? And that means how do you keep this momentum going? And I think one of the things that will help is transparency. And so, I think it is an improvement that you've got a lot of organizations who are being transparent about how they're doing on diversity, who are using social media to talk about their values and how things that happen outside the four walls of the company, in the communities, in the country, how those are affecting us and using their voice and their platform.</p> <p>Now, we talk about what's important here are outcomes and not just optics. And so, at the end of the day, that's what's going to be most important is how we make those outcomes happen. And certainly, one of the things I've learned through some of the discussion that we had with Debra and Michele, and from some of our earlier guests, is just this importance that inclusion has, along with diversity.</p> <p>So, while I'm excited about the level of transparency I see in a lot of organizations now, around diversity, what's also very important is that sense of inclusion. And are they doing the things that they need to culturally to enable people to feel seen, to feel safe and connected, and to be able to be their authentic selves at work every day. And if we're able to do that, then we are going to see a movement.</p>

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23:12	<p>Emmanuel Acho: Yeah. I love that. It's all about making it a movement and not growing weary and doing good. So, that was a phenomenal thought to wrap things up. Well, thanks again for joining us on this episode of Change Conversations. Remember to subscribe on Apple, Google Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. We'll talk to you next time.</p> <p>Be sure to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts, to download part 2 when it's available. I'm Emmanuel Acho. We'll see you next time.</p>
23:38	<p><i>Credits</i></p> <p><i>Thanks for listening to Change Conversations with Jimmy Etheredge and Emmanuel Acho.</i></p> <p><i>This podcast is supported by Accenture, and produced by Laura Regehr and Alexis Green at Antica Productions.</i></p> <p><i>Stuart Coxe is Executive Producer. Nina Beveridge is Head of Production.</i></p> <p><i>Mixing and Sound Design by Reza Dahya.</i></p> <p><i>Join us for our next conversation. Let's make equality for all a movement, not a moment.</i></p>