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HOST: The barriers to building inclusion can feel insurmountable. Especially when people are trying to be politically correct by ignoring differences. We are different. We need to notice the differences and learn about them, rather than deny that they exist. According to Ritu Bhasin, that might be the only way to create lasting change. This is The Conversation Piece. And this is inclusion professional Ritu Bhasin, speaking at The Walrus Talks Resilience.

RITU BHASIN: Good evening. My name is Ritu Bhasin and I am an inclusion professional. A few years ago, a friend of mine, a work colleague asked if I could meet with her and a friend of hers from work in regards to some business. I'd never met her friend before. And I agreed and we decided to meet in the business district of downtown Toronto in front of a Starbucks on the day of my friend and I were standing outside of Starbucks, waiting for her friend to arrive. Her friend was running late. And my friend said to me, I have to go. I'm going to call my colleague and ask her to meet you here. And an important detail. My friend is a white woman and my parents are from India. So, she calls her friend and says, I got to go, Ritu is waiting for you outside of the Starbucks and her friend must've said to her, what does she look like?

I have never met her before because my friend turned to me and said. And she to her friend, she looked at me and said, "Oh, well, Ritu is wearing a black business suit is tall with long brown hair." And the key distinguishing feature she managed to muster and let's remember business district, downtown Toronto, lots of people milling around in their suits was the following: and I'm sure the women in the audience will appreciate this "Oh, she's carrying a black patent purse." So, she gets off the phone and I look at her and in my mind is like, hello, razing, distinguishing feature that you could have mentioned to differentiate me from others. I say to her, why didn't you tell her that I'm Indian? Why didn't you tell her that I'm Brown? And she became visibly uncomfortable. And I know this because she got red and splotchy and on white people...

On white people. It shows up real good. I often say that it happens to me too, but you just can't see it as well. So, she said to me, two things that I thought were so interesting as it relates to the barriers that exist in our society to building inclusion. She said, first of all, I didn't know that I was allowed to notice. And the second thing she said is, I didn't know I was allowed to say that. And in that moment for me, it, it really underscored the level of political correctness that exists in our society today. That makes us be afraid of noticing differences and asking and learning about them. I work with leaders from around the world to help them build more diverse and inclusive, inclusive organizations, essentially what I'm teaching is cultural competence. And when I'm talking about cultural competence, what I'm talking is the ability to connect with people who are different than us rooted in culture and culture broadly defined.

So, race, ethnic culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, language, religion, socioeconomic background, class to name a few. And what I can tell you is from working with thousands of people and presenting in front of thousands of people that so many of us have been taught that in order to be truly fair and inclusive, that we should not notice differences or ask about them, that we should be colorblind and noticing differences. And I'm here to tell you today that this is wrong. After today, I would like you to put aside this problematic, unhealthy messaging, and instead refocus your efforts on noticing differences and asking about them. Because until we ask about differences, we will not help to address our biases and blind spots. And I can tell you that most of us do notice the differences. We notice that someone has black skin or Brown skin or wears a turban.



And I should tell you like my people, I belong to the Sikh faith. Since I'm teaching about inclusion, you should know that Sikh is spelled "S I K H," pronounced Sikh, not "seek," that people come from the LGBT community that someone uses a wheelchair. We notice these differences, but we don't ask about them. And the reason we don't ask about them, I repeatedly hear from people is that many of us grew up in homogeneous upbringings. And we're not taught about how to ask. And we worry that if we ask incorrectly that will offend, or we were raised to think that differences are bad. And that if I ask you about your difference, it'll make you feel like the other and you'll feel bad and all be the bigoted ignorant person. So, I won't ask after today, I encourage you strongly to put this aside and start to embrace the power of asking and sharing about differences.

Because until we start noticing the differences and asking about them, we will not address the biases. The blind spots, the misunderstandings, the stereotypes, the assumptions, the intolerances, and dare I say, the isms, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism to name a few that lurk in our minds until we start to ask about differences, we will continue to think things like Muslim women who wear hijabs are not empowered. That women do not want to be CEOs or leaders of organizations that Aboriginals are lazy and want handouts that gay people are born this way or choose to be gay. And that people from the Sikh community, art, fanatical, terrorists, who hide things in their turbines like weapons and bombs and fruit, and you think I'm making this up. You couldn't pay me enough to make this stuff up. So after today, it is, it is critical that we start to asking about differences so that we can interrupt these biases and these blind spots.

And let me just also add in here, it's a hell of a lot more interesting than talking about weather and traffic and excruciating detail, which is what we currently do because we're not asking about differences in our society. Oh, Canada, how boring. Now this leads me to one of the number one questions I get when I'm teaching people that you should go out there and ask about differences, which is really through, how do I ask? So, I'm going to share with you, my tried tested and true formula for asking about differences. And there are two parts. The first part is to say something to the effect of, sorry, I don't know a lot about X. Can I please ask you about that? And into X, we insert Islam, the experiences being Black, coming from the LGBT community, using a wheelchair, whatever the difference is. And we always ask for permission because sometimes the voices of difference don't feel like sharing.

Like I sometimes do not want to be the ambassador for all things Brown. Some days I do some days I don't. The second part is something to the effect of I'm sorry in advance, but some of this is going to come out wrong. And the reason is that some of it will come out wrong. And not that it gives you blanket a blanket exclusion to offend, but at least you're signaling positive intent that you're trying to learn, even though you'll get it wrong. And this is the part where resilience and empathy come in in this politically charged environment in our society today and more so now than ever before. It is critical that we leverage resilience and empathy. When it comes to addressing inclusion and addressing the forms of oppression that exists amongst us, we need both empathy and resilience. For those of us, when we are asking about differences, we need resilience because we are going to get it wrong, but don't stop asking apologize, pick yourself up, dust yourself off and keep asking, because unless you do, you will not build your cultural competency, but you also need empathy because you should know that when you are a member of a community that is always asked about differences, it can be really challenging.

And then for those of us who are on the receiving end of being asked about our differences, quite often, I'm going to throw out there that we too can leverage more empathy. When people come to us with

## The Conversation Piece Podcast: Ritu Bhasin from The Walrus Talks Resilience



open minds, open hearts, wanting to learn without positive intent, let's be more empathetic when they get it wrong. All of us are playing in this sandbox of wanting to build a more inclusive and respectful society. And we all need to be more empathetic and resilient in doing this work, which leads me to the part about sharing, about differences, asking about differences and sharing differences. Go hand in hand. All of us have stories and experiences around our cultural backgrounds. Share them after today, tell people about your stories, because this will help them learn a bit more about you and raise awareness. But when we share our own stories, we invite others and we give them permission to do the same. I can tell you I'm in the business of asking about differences, learning about them and sharing them rooted in culture. And I do this all day long and every day, I think about how blessed and grateful I am to be doing this work because I get to learn about what makes people's heart sings. What makes them motivated, inspired? What makes them, who they really are. And it is a great feeling. And I invite you to do the same after today. Please ask, learn, and share and help to build a more inclusive society. Thank you.

HOST: Ritu Bhasin is a speaker, author, and a Leadership & Inclusion Specialist and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic speakers who have walked and wheeled the stage at The Walrus Talks. If you enjoyed this talk as much as we did, our YouTube channel is the place to find all The Walrus Talks. Until then, sign up to our weekly newsletters to stay in touch. At [thewalrus.ca](http://thewalrus.ca) slash newsletters.