

Meghan: On this week's episode of Work Trends, we're talking diversity and inclusion with Jason Greer. Welcome to the Work Trends podcast from Talent Culture. I'm your host, Meghan M Biro. Every week we interview interesting people who are re-imagining work. Join us on Twitter every Wednesday, 1:30 PM eastern, using the hashtag worktrends.

Meghan: Hey, Kevin W. Hey, Work Trends community. These are interesting and frustrating times. Politics and unions. Diversity and inclusion. My point of view on all of this is, unless we are starting to bring our whole selves to work and continue to make a stand, regardless of how you look at it right now, the reality is, our federal government is not treating employees really well. I think we need to treat each other better and understand each other a little bit more, and maybe feel it a little bit more.

Kevin: You know, Meghan, that's, the long time discussion is around whether or not employees need better representation in the workplace, because of mismanagement of business leaders. You can look back over the past 100 plus years. Time and again how unfortunately, employees have been taken advantage of in the workplace. Whether it be with pay, with benefits.

Kevin: You know, when you and I were talking about this before doing the show, we didn't really necessarily want to get partisan, and we're not. We didn't get too political.

Meghan: Well hold on, you didn't want to get partisan.

Kevin: Well I mean, we can bring that up. I know. But when it comes to, well we have listeners I'm sure that probably are on all sides of the fence. But the point is that today, there truly is, we can not help but look at our federal government and how it's actually treating its employees today, with the shutdown, right? I've never belonged to a union, but my parents did, and I served them very well over the years when it came to contract negotiations and retirement benefits. Right?

Meghan: Totally. I guess, there's just a part of me that says whether or not you've gone for that yourself, why aren't we just treating people better? Why is that so hard for us?

Kevin: Well -

Meghan: Right?

Kevin: Since you, right. Then you hear statements like we did. By the way, for those listening, this was recorded at an earlier time. Maybe things hopefully improved. But when you have comments from a quote unquote business leader that says, for folks that have been on furlough and are not receiving paychecks, "Why are they going to food banks? I don't understand. Why don't they just get some loans?", when consumer debt it already skyrocketing anyway. It just, it's flabbergasting.

Meghan: Wait a minute. The best one is, "Why don't you go to the grocery store and have them kind of give you some stuff and figure it out for you?". Like, "They'll do that for you, really".

Kevin: They will. But you know what? What's on the other side of it is that there have also been longtime criticisms that unions become bullies themselves to a certain degree and hold employers hostage when it comes to them wanting to finally do right by their employees. There is two sides of it. It's always kind of this management versus employees. But that's what you're going to talk somewhat with our guest today, right?

Meghan: Yes, absolutely.

Kevin: Now before we talk to our guest today, let's get to another bit of related news.

Kevin: This kind of underscores everything, Meghan, that you and I have been talking about for the beginning of this show. That according to a recent New York Times article, the vast majority of federal workers are forbidden to collectively bargain over wages and benefits. That's set by congress. Now these unions that represent them bargain over rules and working conditions, etc.

Kevin: What's interesting is that it doesn't mean that they don't have the influence over their employer, the federal government. But again, it's really complicated when we talk about these issues, right? I think that what we're seeing again unfortunately is this management versus employee scenario. Right now it's, seemingly the victims of this are the federal employees, at the end of the day.

Meghan: Unfortunately this is really happening. Let's get to today's guest, Jason Greer.

Meghan: I am so excited to talk to Jason Greer. He's a diversity training expert and author of the book People Matter Most. I mean, what's not to love about that? He had me at that, by the way. Welcome to Work Trends, Jason.

Jason: Thank-you so much for having me, Meghan.

Meghan: Where are you today?

Jason: I'm actually in St Louis. Just flew in recently. It's good to be home, but it is freezing out here.

Meghan: I know. I hear your pain. I'm in Boston Cambridge.

Jason: I am so sorry.

Meghan: It's just been a nightmarish winter. But you know what? I won't kvetch. I won't complain. I won't drive you all nuts. Let's dive into this topic, all right?

Jason: That sounds ... I just have to say one thing.

Meghan: Okay.

Jason: Tom Brady continues to break my heart. The Rams broke my heart, because they left here, they were scrubs. Now they're about to take on the Patriots in the Super Bowl. What's up with that?

Meghan: He's amazing.

Jason: He's a stud.

Meghan: He's a stud, he really is. Yeah, I know. I mean, and I'm not that kind of person that just falls for any stud.

Jason: Sure.

Meghan: But when you watch him in action and how strategic he is, you have no other way but to go, "This is amazing".

Jason: Absolutely. He just does it. My wife can't stand him, but I love the guy.

Meghan: I love him too. Hey Tom, if you're listening out there, let's hang, shall we? You, Jason, and I. All right?

Jason: Let's do it.

Meghan: On this podcast we talk a lot about the future of work. But I want to talk about the history of work first. I know you've got a lot to say about it.

Jason: Sure.

Meghan: What was your first job?

Jason: Great question. My first job, I was a social worker. I have a bachelors degree in social work from Valparaiso University. A masters degree in social work from Washington University in St Louis. A masters in human resources and industrial relations from the University of Illinois. But my first job was as a social worker for the state of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

Meghan: Shout outs to you, by the way.

Jason: I've done it.

Meghan: Doing the good work.

Jason: I've done it.

Meghan: What a foundation.

Jason: But I'm going to tell you something. If you want to talk about a career that will prepare you for life, I think everybody should have the experience of being a social worker for at least two years. Because it will humble you in ways you can't even begin to describe.

Meghan: Oh the humanity.

Jason: Yes.

Meghan: Tell us, what did it teach you about work, and what do you want to get out of work? Tell us more about your story and your career path.

Jason: I had this dream that I was going to cure poverty. When I was going through school, I had this notebook full of, legitimately, 365 ideas on how I was going to cure poverty. The world was going to be a better place. It's amazing how things look when you're sitting in the school library, as opposed to how things are when you actually get out there in the world.

Jason: On my first case, I'm wearing this immaculate suit that I bought, that I pieced together from TJ Maxx. Right? I go out there -

Meghan: You go.

Jason: I was sharp. I was sharp, you know? I made sure not to hit a certain light, because then the blacks actually wouldn't blend together. I'm out there, and I got called on a case for, a child had gone to school with flea marks on his body, so the teacher hotlined him. Hotlined his family. I go out to the home a couple days later, and I made the mistake of sitting down on a flea infested couch.

Meghan: Because how would you know?

Jason: You know, how would I know -

Meghan: You can't see them, right?

Jason: You can't see them. But also, it lends to the fact that I was so green. I was so new in the field. Because the investigator that I went out with, she refused to sit down. She wore jeans. She wore a flannel shirt. Combat boots. Because she knew if you're going in, if there's a child or people that have flea marks, chances are very high that that house has fleas.

Jason: I was thinking to myself, "I'm the new face of social work. I'm the new face of social change". When I sat down on that couch and I started itching, I couldn't understand why the investigator was laughing at me. I'm like, "What is she laughing at?". I'm sitting there itching, and I realized that I had the fleas. That was humbling.

Meghan: Well, and you connected those dots. But I think more importantly you felt what other people felt.

Jason: I think that's the biggest thing. Here's what social work taught me. Going into, there's a single mother. A single mother of six kids, I believe. Going into her home, there was no way I was going to embarrass her any more than what she had already been embarrassed, right? What I learned from that experience is, people will work for money, but they'll die for respect and they'll die for recognition. That's my company motto. That's what I believe in.

Jason: But I'm also going to say that at a certain point in my maturation as a social worker, I learned that I can have all these ideas, but if I don't have empathy and I don't work hard to understand where other people are coming from, then I'm not really fulfilling my duty as a human being. Let alone as a professional, but really as a human being. Social work -

Meghan: But you have to have empathy to even want to get into this, which I find so curious that you're saying that. But saying it out loud makes you probably feel that somehow more. Is that right?

Jason: Yeah. I mean I think empathy is, it's one of those things that we all think we have it, until we get into an experience with someone that we don't understand. Or they're living in a way that we don't understand. I mean, look, I've been very -

Meghan: Yeah, and then guess what? Too many people go to the judgment thing.

Jason: Oh, and it's such an easy default -

Meghan: Without understanding people, right?

Jason: Yes.

Meghan: You just blabber on and you're not understanding really what somebody else is going through. Or not even making the effort to get to know them, and that stinks.

Jason: Yeah. It's such an easy default. I mean I remember, when I was single, didn't have any kids, it was easy for me to judge parents. Right?

Meghan: Yeah.

Jason: Then after my daughter was born I realized, "Man. This is a lot harder than it actually looks".

Meghan: Yeah. You've got to live it.

Jason: You've got to live it. You've got to experience it.

Meghan: You're living it with all this diversity training work. How did you make the leap?

Jason: Great question. A large portion of my company is devoted to labor relations. Labor relations from the perspective of, we're in the top five percent of labor consultants. Which some people would say that we are union busters. Companies will bring us in if they're faced with any type of union organizing that's happening. We come in, meet with the employees, with the goal of bridging that gap between management and employees, without the hope that the employees end up going to a union.

Meghan: Why is that? What is that ... Talk to us about the why behind all this.

Jason: Great question. I'm a former board agent with the National Labor Relations Board. One of the things that I encountered when I was at the board, there were some union organizers who would come in that truly had a heart for the people. To me they were like the social workers of the labor relations field, right? They work with these people. They love these people. They wanted to make sure that they had proper representation at the bargaining table. Then on the other side of it, I would see these organizers who would come in, who for them it was just another job. "We can't make any promises, we can't make any guarantees of what life is going to be like after the contract is settled. But what we can do is effectively play on the hopes and the dreams of the people who simply want more, and in many cases deserve more".

Jason: I got to the point where I started to feel as though, while unions definitely had their place in the workforce, I got to this place where I felt like, especially in having my experiences as a labor consultant where there were so many issues that were not being addressed and that a union contract can't address.

Meghan: It's also political, let's be honest.

Jason: Oh, it's so political. It's so political.

Meghan: I mean, with politics there's often agendas. With agendas, sometimes we get away from ourselves.

Jason: Very good point. Very good point. Look, labor unions as a whole are a big business. They're big business just like the businesses that they go to organize. But when we get in, and as a consultant you're in, you're living with these environment. I mean if a company gets hit by, has a petition filed with the National Labor Relations Board for a secret ballot election, you're living with these employees, you're living with these managers for anywhere between 21 to 42 days. Then you start to see some of the issues that are going on, and you realize that so many of these issues ...

Jason: Any time I hear people say that employees are complaining about money, well that's just a red herring. They're throwing that out there -

Meghan: There's so much more usually going on.

Jason: There's so much more that's going on. What I discovered was, in many cases what was happening is, you had diversity issues. You had respect issues. You had communication challenges.

Jason: I had a manager call me one day. Wonderful relationship with the guy. He asked me, he goes, "Jason. Can you do a diversity training for me next week?". It caught me off guard because I'm like, "Wait a minute. I'm the labor relations guy. Why are you calling me for diversity training?". He was just honest. He goes, "I love the way you communicate, and you're the only Black guy that I really know".

Meghan: Perfect. Cutting right to the chase.

Jason: At least he was honest, right?

Meghan: Yeah. Well, and guess what? That made you somehow feel closer to this person, and maybe have some element of trust.

Jason: Exactly, because he didn't hit me with any of the platitudes. He didn't hit me with any of the, "Well, we're working to me a more inclusive environment". You know, sort of the buzzwords.

Meghan: Dancing around the buzzwords, yeah. Dancing around it.

Jason: Exactly.

Meghan: Which we're all doing.

Jason: Exactly.

Meghan: I tell you, you know what's interesting? We talk about diversity and inclusion at work. But really the history of different races and genders working together in offices is pretty short.

Jason: It's very short.

Meghan: You know? What can you tell us about the history of diversity and inclusion at work?

Jason: I would say that it's an ongoing challenge. When you consider that the Civil Rights Act was signed, what, back in 1965? One of the things that I say to people is that when we talk about the integration so to speak of the workforce, first we have to look at the integration of schools. My mother grew up in Crystal City, Missouri, which is a small small town right outside of St Louis. She was the first desegregation student to go through that, to ventriculate through that school. My mom's only 76. Mind you, she's told me she's 39 for the past however many years.

Meghan: Nice.

Jason: But she can speak in her lifetime to the fact that she still remembers when things were separate and unequal, right?

Meghan: Yeah.

Jason: Right?

Meghan: She went through it as a human.

Jason: She went -

Meghan: As a human, right?

Jason: She went through it.

Meghan: She experienced that, where a lot of other people are just really reading about it.

Jason: Yeah -

Meghan: It makes a difference.

Jason: I think it makes a difference, and I think that people are reading about it and are amazed that anything like that ever happened. But then you come into the workforce, and I think in theory, let's say that you work for company ABC. In theory, because we all work for that company, we are all treated equally. We all should be judged based on our merits. Based on the amount of productivity. Based on what we provide for the company.

Jason: But the reality is, for many people after they leave, when they clock out at 5:00, clock out at 8:00, clock out at whatever time you clock out, people are going home and they're going into environments that are very much environments that look very much like them. They worship with people who look just like them. They have social activities with people who look like them. Then they come back to the workforce, and now they're surrounded by people from different backgrounds. That in itself can be sort of a different, it can be difficult to bridge cultures.

Jason: I think oftentimes what I find in diversity training is that people just don't want to be honest about the fact. Because especially people don't want to be labeled as being racist, right? They don't want to be labeled as being homophobic. Instead of being able to have an open forum to ask the difficult questions and have the difficult conversations, we stifle it. But then it comes up in different ways.

Meghan: Yeah. It's not going away, and I think we just have to have real conversations like we're doing right now about it.

Jason: Right. I completely agree.



Meghan: What are the hard conversations you think we need to be having?

Jason: I think one of the hard conversations that we need to have is, why does diversity really truly matter to you? I'm not talking about why diversity matters to the organization. I'm talking about, why does diversity matter to you? We run a number of diversity trainings around the country. The title of our diversity presentation is Diversity In The Brain: What's Your Story?

Jason: What I discovered is that oftentimes we get so caught up in saying the right things, that we're not always truthful with how we feel internally about those things that we're trying to say the right thing about, right? I think, it's amazing to me when I go into these trainings. I'm 6'3, 250 pounds. Right? No small man. I'm standing in front of this room, and especially for organizations that have never gone through training with me, and you can sort of see the faces of people as they're walking in. My heart, I'm just going to be real with you, my heart often goes out to white males who go through these trainings. Because -

Meghan: I love it.

Jason: Because -

Meghan: I love where this is going.

Jason: Yeah. You'll see them walk in, and there is this look of, "Okay. What are we about to get into?".

Meghan: Right.

Jason: "More importantly, how bad are you going to talk about me?". Right?

Meghan: Sure.

Jason: Because I -

Meghan: That's real.

Jason: That's so real. I always ask the question in the beginning. I'll ask, "How many of you have been through diversity training?". For the most part you'll see the majority of the hands go up. Then I'll ask the question, "How many of you actually enjoyed the diversity training or trainings that you went through?". Then you start to see a number of hands go down. Then I'll ask a very pointed question, "What didn't you like about the diversity training?".

Jason: There's always this kind of -

Meghan: Well it's more like, "What should I say? Have I said too much? Will I be judged? Will I be labeled?". I wish we could just leave some of that behind and have conversations that are meaningful to everybody.

Jason: I completely agree.

Meghan: Nobody should feel uncomfortable. Not even the white guy walking in the room, right?

Jason: Well and it's such a disservice. I mean, think about this. Whether it's the white guy. Whether it's the African American woman. Whether it's an Hispanic gentleman. Whether it's the transgender woman. Whatever the case might be. Nobody wants to feel like they don't, that their voice doesn't matter. Nobody wants to feel as though, when we're having this conversation about diversity, that that's a conversation that's exclusive to a certain group of people who might have experienced racism. Or that it's exclusive to a certain group of people who might have experienced some type of ism.

Jason: The reality is, the white gentleman has, and the white woman has just as much to say as any other race of people. It's just a matter of creating an environment where we can share, and it's okay to get angry with each other. As long as we're doing this constructively. Because the more we're able to get this out in the open, and to put it on the table, the better able we are to move forward.

Meghan: I'm curious to hear your perspective on how this is playing out in one giant corporation we know as the NFL.

Jason: Oh my gosh.

Meghan: Right?

Jason: Right. Yeah, I'll say this, because I've never consulted with the NFL and I'm not sure that I ever will. I'll just go ahead and give my perspective.

Meghan: There you go. If you're listening out there, tune in. You might hear a different perspective.

Jason: Yeah. If I could get all of the NFL owners in a room, first I would shake their hands and say, "Thank-you for the years and years of wonderful football. Because it's been great. I love football". But what I'd ultimately say to them is, "You just don't realize how tone deaf you are". When I say tone deaf, it's from the perspective of, the audience of the NFL has changed tremendously. The game -

Meghan: How so?

Jason: It's more diverse. It's more economically gifted. You have to be economically gifted to afford some of these ticket prices.

Meghan: Yeah, really.

Jason: But social media has changed things as well. Because it used to be that if I'm a Pittsburgh Steelers fan and I live in Pittsburgh, the only time I'm actually able to voice my opinion about the team is if I buy a ticket to go to the game. Otherwise nobody cares because nobody's going to hear me. These days we have social media, and in the fact that we have social media, now a certain consciousness has come about.

Jason: You have a gentleman like Colin Kaepernick. Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the national anthem because he wanted to bring to light his feeling that we as Americans have not lived up to the promise of America. What has happened to Colin Kaepernick in the meantime is that Colin Kaepernick has been essentially blackballed from the league.

Jason: Now this is where it's really interesting. Because depending on your perspective, depending on your background, people are going to see this in a number of ways. You might have a certain group of the population who are going to say, "Well Colin Kaepernick is being blackballed". I think I said it. It's a Freudian slip, right? "Colin Kaepernick is being blackballed because he took a stance, and because the NFL doesn't want to deal with the collateral damage from a media standpoint, or a financial standpoint".

Jason: You have other people on the other side of the fence who are saying, "Colin Kaepernick is not playing because Colin Kaepernick is not good. His stats don't bear out that he should be able to play, let alone be a backup". But then that's refuted by the number of quarterbacks who are in the league who are not very good.

Meghan: Interesting.

Jason: Right? I think ultimately what we have, I use Colin Kaepernick as sort of, it's a cultural test. It's a cultural test of where we are. Look at what just happened with, I believe the name is Nick Salmon. The young man who was wearing the Make America Great hat.

Meghan: Yeah.

Jason: He was standing in front of the Indigenous elder, Nathan Phillips. What a wonderful test of where we are as a society. Because depending on how you feel, there are some people who said that, "That young man was doing absolutely nothing wrong. How dare the press and how dare people on social media vilify him". There are other people on the other side who were saying, "He stood there with this smug look and he was disrespectful to the Indigenous elder".

Jason: I think it's just amazing to me how we all come from so many different perspectives. But to get back to what you said earlier, it's so easy to get into the judgment game.

Meghan: Oh, completely.

Jason: Because, "If your perspective is not mine, there's something wrong with you. But there's nothing wrong with me", right?

Meghan: Yeah. I mean I think that's really the crux of our problem. That too many people are just judgmental.

Jason: Sure.

Meghan: I think it's lazy to be judgmental. I think it takes more work to see people in 3D and to be open minded and open hearted. What I want to do today is look ahead to the future. Because I think things are changing for the better.

Jason: Absolutely.

Meghan: How do you hope our conversation about diversity and inclusion will have changed when we're talking 10 years from now?

Jason: My hope for our conversation about diversity and inclusion 10 years from now will be that we're talking less about diversity and inclusion, and we're talking more about how far we've come. I think it's so easy to sit back and say, "Well things are getting worse. We have this issue going on. This issue going on. This issue going on". But I always take it back to this. My son Jaden is nine years old. Nine years old. Donald Trump is the first white president he's ever experienced in his lifetime.

Meghan: Right.

Jason: Right?

Meghan: That's fascinating when you really think about it.

Jason: I mean you want to talk about progress? I remember when I was a child. You know, I'm 44 years old. I'm dating myself here. But my mom told me, "Jason, one day you can be the president of the United States". I said, "Mom, do you really believe that?". She goes, "I believe it. The country doesn't believe it. But I think you can". There was this idea that there was absolutely no way that an African American would ever become president, and now we've had two terms, two runs of Barack Obama.

Jason: I'll never forget when Jaden saw, he saw a debate. I was watching the debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. He just kept staring and he kept staring. I go, "Jaden, what are you picking up?". He goes, "Where's Barack Obama? Who are these two people?".

Meghan: You know what? I said the same thing.

Jason: Really?

Meghan: I'm on his wavelength.

Jason: Definitely.

Meghan: We miss him.

Jason: We definitely miss him. But I think for Jaden it was more. It was from the perspective of, "The United States president is African American".

Meghan: Right. Like, "Who are these other people?".

Jason: "Who are these ...", -

Meghan: "What's going on?". Yeah, right.

Jason: "Who are these other people?". You want to talk, I'm sitting there, I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone. Because my mind was officially blown.

Meghan: Blame it on Trump. Just saying. He does have that effect.

Jason: I will not step into that one.

Meghan: No worries.

Jason: But I'll definitely say this though. That we've come so far. I wish that we would take a point in time to just be grateful for how far we've come. It's come with ... Look. When I was 17 years old I was the victim of a cross burning. You're talking 1991. My family is the first family to go to Dubuque, Iowa, under the Constructive Integration Plan, whereby they were going to bring over 100 Black families into Dubuque over the course of 10 years. People didn't like it. The Klan organized a rally against our family. They burned crosses.

Jason: Fast forward to 2019. When I share that story with my daughter, Jada, when I share that story with my son Jaden, and please forgive me, I basically gave them the same names. That is so crazy to them, because they can't even imagine something like that happening. That in itself is progress.

Meghan: Paving the way for the next generation.

Jason: Absolutely.

Meghan: I want to give a shout out to your mom. I want to hang with her. She sounds like a really special lady.

Jason: She's amazing. You would love her. She is an amazing amazing woman.

Meghan: A lot of that is ingrained in you and how you're now reacting and collaborating and making change happen.

Jason: Absolutely.

Meghan: That just doesn't happen by accident.

Jason: No, not -

Meghan: But we can all work towards that.

Jason: I think we can all work towards that. What I share with people, even when I share my story or stories. What I tell people is, "You don't have to have been the victim of anything. You just have to have an open heart and an open mind toward other people". That in itself, and I'll say this even in the workforce. It's going to come with a share of bumps. You're going to get your share of bruises. But ultimately, the harder we strive to understand first our own internal story of what's playing on in our brain when we encounter other people, and when you learn to master that story. Understand that you're going to get it wrong from time to time. But when you learn to master that story, you will find that you will actually be more open to other people. But at first it starts with you.

Meghan: What's your final message to our listeners?

Jason: Keep working. Keep believing that not only are things going to get better, but that you play a critical role in making things better. What I generally say to HR managers and HR professionals as a whole is that I'm speaking as a consultant. I'm speaking as a third party. You don't realize how much value you bring to the organization.

Jason: Because I hear from employees, I hear from executives, we cherish and value HR even when HR doesn't feel like we cherish them. You can make such a big impact in your organization by pushing it forward. By reminding your organization, behind every balance sheet there are hearts, minds, and spirits, and there are people who put their blood, sweat, and tears into making this organization successful. As long as we recognize them, as long as we appreciate them. More importantly, as long as we listen to people, we can move this organization forward.

Meghan: Jason Greer, thanks for stopping by.

Jason: Thank-you so much, Meghan. It was a pleasure.

Kevin: Meghan, Jason makes some great arguments about organized labor and diversity and inclusion, and so much more that you guys talked about. What a great discussion. Man, we've got a lot of work to do.

Meghan: Serious work ahead of us. Jason is awesome, and all we can do is just keep moving forward and doing the work.

Kevin: Absolutely.

Meghan: Let's keep the conversation moving. Join us for Work Trends on Twitter. We are going to be there Wednesday with Jason Green. This is February 20th at 1:30 PM Eastern, 10:30

AM Pacific. Or wherever you are hanging out around the world. Join us and tell us what's on your mind about bringing people together at work.

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