Sarah Morgan 0:03

All right, everybody, welcome to the HR Happy Hour network. This is The Inclusion Crusade with me, Sarah Morgan. I am on a mission to create workplaces where employees feel safe, seen and supported one episode at a time. So today, I have the privilege of speaking with Torin Ellis. For those of you who may not be familiar with Torin, he is a magnificent speaker, first and foremost; a magnificent human, first and foremost, like let me start there. He is a magnificent human. He is a prolific speaker, a long-standing talent dynamo, and an unrelenting force in equity and inclusion work. I am so happy to call him a friend, and I am even more happy to bring him to you today. So, big brother, Torin Ellis, TL, Big Brother, how are you doing today? Welcome to The Inclusion Crusade.

Torin Ellis 1:14

Why don't you repeat that one line, you said that you are seen?

Sarah Morgan 1:19

Safe, seen and Supported.

Torin Ellis 1:22

Seen, safe and supported. When you ask me how I'm doing, I absolutely feel seen. I feel like being in your presence, I am safe, and I absolutely know that I'm supported. I actually want to just take a moment, you know, take the pod in a different direction. You participated in an event for RecFest back in 2020. It could have been 2021, and when we did that event, it was virtual, Sarah. It was three, four o'clock in the morning.

Sarah Morgan 1:59

Mm, hmm, I remember that, yeah.

Torin Ellis 2:01

Three o'clock, four o'clock in the morning, and it was you, it was Kirsten and two other beautiful sisters...

Sarah Morgan 2:07

Janine and Tiffany.

Torin Ellis 2:10

You all said you had never felt safe in the workplace. I want people listening to me to know how much that impacted me at 4am four years ago, and that I still remember that to this day. "Seen safe, supported" that four grown women had not felt safe in any work environment prior to. My hope is that the melody of our voices on this particular day makes individuals feel safe.

Sarah Morgan 2:57

Amen to that. So, let us get into it. For the listeners who may not be familiar with you, tell us a little bit about yourself and your career journey.

Torin Ellis 3:14

So we'll start in 1993 I can do this really, really quickly. I ran the sales teams for MCI Communication from 1993 to 1998. I had one of the top performing sales teams in the entire country. We were in the top 70. I left MCI in 1998 because I felt like I was unappreciated, and I felt like I could do better by myself. So, I started a recruiting company. It took me six months to get my first contract. My first contract was $20,000 and I knew I was doing the right thing. I did recruiting from 1998 to 2010. I am very, very clear that there is a difference between human resources and talent acquisition, and that the two should not try to operate in either individual's silo. In 2011, I started my consultancy focused on diversity and inclusion because I had a five minute conversation, and this is no exaggeration, I had a five minute conversation with a white woman in Delaware. I live in Baltimore. She performed in a particular capacity. I had a client who had an opening in DC. Delaware and DC are an hour away from one another. I said, I can call this woman, and maybe she has someone in her network that she can help direct me to introduce me to that white woman got fired 30 minutes after she hung up the call with me. She called my client and said I could apply for the job in DC. I'm willing to drive an hour. I could do that, but your recruiter said that he was focused on diversity. Because of that, I'm going to file a complaint with the EEOC against you all for racism. And that particular call cost me several millions of dollars, and it was in that moment in. In that moment that I committed to doing diversity and inclusion for the rest of my professional day.

Sarah Morgan 5:07

Whoa, I don't know if I knew that story.

Torin Ellis 5:14

Most people don't know that story.

Sarah Morgan 5:16

You had that experience, and you did not let it deter you from the work, because there are so many people who would have experienced that and would have backpedaled. It's part of the reason why we are in the boat that we're in, is that people face that resistance, or they have that, that, dare I say, f around and find out moment, and they find out. When they find out and they realize that they're not really about this life, they decide to back away and to go do other things. And so we are all grateful. I am grateful. And I'm sure that there are lots of people who would line up and say that they're grateful that it didn't deter you.

Torin Ellis 6:02

The fact that I'm a warrior is not said to impress you, but to impress upon you that I am going to stand in the face of injustice, that there is really nothing this administration, there's nothing corporate leaders, there's nothing that anyone can take from me that hasn't already been taken from me and from my family. So, when I say that I'm unapologetic and I'm unwavering about humanity, diversity and inclusion, for me it's about everyone. It's not about any particular audience or community. It's about everyone. And what are we doing to build these workplaces that you described, what are we doing to make sure that they exist at the best and pleasure of everyone?

Sarah Morgan 6:51

You recently published a groundbreaking report on reducing bias in HR through artificial intelligence (AI), and you and I have done a couple of podcasts together, but it's been a while since then. When I saw that you published this research, I reached out to you immediately, and I was like, "Torin, I need you to come on the show and talk about this, because what I love about your decision to do this research is that so much of the conversation about AI and HR is about the bias that it brings, which then makes HR nervous about using it." And you turn that on its head in this report and in the work that you're doing. I'm very curious, and I want you to share with the listeners, what made you decide to go this route, what made you decide to do this particular type of research?

Torin Ellis 7:50

You hit it right on the head, and I felt like if I used my first swing or my first at bat, because this is our first analytical report, first of many. But I felt like if I took my first at bat and I perpetuated the negative, I highlighted, I amplified the negative, it would really continue to push people to stay on the sideline. And I wanted to bring people off the sideline. I wanted to get people out of their vehicles, into the locker room, get into your uniform. I want you to play in the game. I don't want the train to continue going down the track and you not find a way to get on this train. And so I knew, and felt, Sarah, that if we approached the conversation from a beautiful/from a promising standpoint, that we could draw some individuals in. And truth of the matter is, AI can be used to reduce bias in human resources. AI can be used in ways that are of advantage to an organization, good for an organization. So for me, it was around making sure that we did not do something that pushed people to remain on the sideline.

Sarah Morgan 9:06

One of the things the research indicates is about the potential to reduce bias, but it also talks about how companies are really hesitant to invest because of their uncertainty. What's driving the uncertainty, and how can organizations start to build more confidence in integrating AI into people, HR and talent in the work that they're doing within their businesses?

Torin Ellis 9:37

So if I heard you correctly, you said, what's driving people?

Sarah Morgan 9:41

What's the hesitation? What are they scared of?

Torin Ellis 9:43

There's a couple of things, and I'm not all knowing, but certainly let me share a few of them, one: from an ethical standpoint, people (and when I say people, I'm speaking specifically to HR, not the employee, not other departments. I'm only speaking what I believe through the lens of HR) I believe HR folks are ethically wondering whether or not this solution can do or should be allowed in the organization to do what it says it can do. There are the ethical concerns. I believe that there are the technical proficiency concerns. Gardner has done research for the last five years. In every single year, Sarah, they query a bigger body of HR professionals. You know, it may have started at 2-300, I think last year it was at 1500 to 2000 global CHROs. Every single year, Sarah, technology is in the top three of a concern of HR professionals. So I believe that there's this technical proficiency that is really causing the trepidation for individuals to say, I want to leverage this in our business. You and I have worked together in the past, and you've supported me as it relates to HR document review and other things, and that's why I say I'm a TA guy. I'm not an HR person, so I don't try to pretend to be something that I'm not inside of my engagements. And so I believe that even in HR, we may not use technology as much, but that cannot be a reason for us to not adopt solutions. I believe that HR professionals are asking a very simple question, "is this good for the business? Is it good for our workforce? Is it good for our stakeholder?" And I think that that's an honest ask. I believe that they should be asking that question. But the biggest reason why I feel like people have trepidation is because they are not confident in the data that is being used to formulate the solution that is being presented. There is huge concern around the quality, the integrity, the timeliness, that's not the right word, but the relevancy of the data. There is a big, big concern around this. And so I believe those are the four reasons, four major reasons why HR professionals are pausing in terms of adoption.

Speaker 1 9:44

I want to talk a little bit more about this confidence thing, because I do agree with you very much. There is an issue of confidence in the data. There's also an issue of confidence in, and this goes back to the technical proficiency thing, the confidence in in us as HR professionals, to be able to extract the data, to feed it into AI and have it to do the analysis. How do professionals build that confidence? Because, in my mind, I'm not afraid to try stuff and it not work, right? I try to keep that experimental mindset, because even if I put in a prompt and it doesn't necessarily work that well, I'll try something else. Heck, ask ChatGPT what the prompt should be, it'll tell you, it's smart enough to know what it knows and what it can do. But, how do how do we start to build that confidence within our HR people, in themselves and in the data that is within their their systems to utilize?

Torin Ellis 13:49

When I worked inside of MCI, we were in a call center that had 500 people, Sarah. Most people know that in a call center environment you have high turnover. One of the reasons why, going back to what I said in my introduction, one of the reasons why I had one of the top performing teams, not only in production, but also in tenure, is because everyone in that building knew who I was. I walked around every morning, and while they were seated at their computer with their headphones on, I just tapped them on the back of the shoulder and said, "Good morning." No long conversation. I didn't want to be a disruption. I just wanted people to know: I want you to have a good morning. And was I 100% every morning? No. But my point is, I moved around. You ask, "how is it that we can be better at being technically proficient?" My answer: be curious. Get out of your cubicle and walk around and be a part of technical meetings. Be part of sales meetings. Be a part of philanthropic efforts. Be a part of corporate social responsibility. Sit down in HR and understand what learning and development is doing. Understand what the mergers and acquisition team is doing. I am suggesting that HR professionals get outside of their cubicle, be a part of these other meetings, and understand what is it that they are grappling with. Do we lack in resources? Are we lacking in domain expertise? Is there some technology missing inside of our organization? What have we recently invested in? Is there a new community or geography that we are about to approach? Are we exploring new products and services that are going to come out of our offering as an organization. I believe, as HR professionals, that curiosity is going to lead you to a different degree of effectiveness and awareness and application in the business. It will position you to be more valuable to the conversations, because then you can say, "Alright, wait a minute, given what I heard over here, I want to sit and be a part of these conversations, to bring new technology in. I don't want a CTO to be the only person to bring new technology in. I want to be a part of the conversation, and I want to ask some questions, because I uncovered some data in some of these other meetings." These are some of the things that people are saying. I think that if the first thing that we can do to increase our technical proficiency is: we have to submit ourselves to some degree of curiosity and discomfort. Get out of your cubicle and be a part of other value-points inside of the organization, it will change your professional trajectory.

Sarah Morgan 16:42

I love that, and curiosity is a word that has followed me for most of my career. I'll say, "I'm curious about this." I had an early mentor who made sure, in my first management role, to send me to the finance meetings, to send me to the production forecast meetings. When I tell you I worked in a production facility, I used to be out on the floor watching them fix these machines. I used to be up in logistics, figuring out how things came in and out and where the bottlenecks were, because that let me know: how to staff, what things were, what the things were that I needed to be training my people on. I was with a staffing company. So, it also created opportunity for me to be like, "you know, we have people that could help with this." So now, I'm doing business development and expanding and getting into the business so that we are solidified, you know? So that we become the right hand of this client. So, it's not so easy to just say, "Oh, we don't want this contract anymore." No, we need this contract because they're inextricably linked to us. Now it's going to be very difficult for us to function without them. And that Curiosity has always carried me forward, and I love hearing you say how important that is for HR professionals, particularly in this time as so much of the landscape is shifting and we're having to figure out what our place is going to be. We're having to figure out what impact we're going to be able to have and how we can be of service to the organizations we work within, at a time where everything is up in the air and people are struggling. They're going to be looking to us on how it is that we help to settle that noise. If we're not prepared, because we're not involved beyond the day-to-day of our role specifically, then we're more at risk than we are if we are curious and getting our hands into and listening and learning from all of these other areas.

Torin Ellis 19:15

I will tell you, Sarah, the lack of curiosity is a part of the disappointment in the report, and again, for those that are out there listening, the report is titled "Reducing Bias in HR Using Artificial Intelligence", and it's that lack of curiosity that says only 27% of the people that we surveyed and we queried In our data collection, intentionally asked questions of the vendor: "Will this solution help us with our DEI efforts?" Only 27% asked. So, what I suggest is that HR professionals, if in fact you are curious, completely curious, then you'll be able to go out to a vendor and say, "how is this particular solution going to help us in terms of curating diverse candidate slates or doing market analyzation of head count or available workforce? How is this particular solution going to rapidly move us to pay equity across the entire franchise. And if it can't rapidly do it, will it do it in increments? And what will those increments look like? And how confident are you in the solution in terms of ingested in data, data providence and maturity and all of that relevancy? How confident are you in that data Providence, that it is going to get us to the solution that we are looking for, because pay equity is extremely important to us as an organization? We want to curate personalized learning and development for every single person in our organization. Can your solution do that?" I believe it's the curiosity that positions us to ask the right questions that then become valuable to the stakeholders in our organization.

Sarah Morgan 21:10

In addition to that, it also forces the technology companies that support us to step up their efforts, because a lot of times you get the sales pitch and you fall in love with the bells and the whistles, and you don't let your curiosity lead you to interrogate the things, and then you end up with something that either can't do everything that you want it to do, or it can, and you're under utilizing it. Or, sometimes, the software company just hasn't thought of the thing, because no one has asked them the question. I can't tell you how many times I've ended up on an advisory board for some software company somewhere, just because I was curious enough to challenge them as to why their software couldn't do a particular thing. And I'm like, put me in a beta test, put me on an advisory committee. Let me help you get your software to the point where it can do this, because I need this to be effective in my work. I know other people do too. Those sorts of things can open so many doors that we just don't even imagine. Was there anything else in the findings that were especially surprising to you? You mentioned the 27%, was there anything else that you were like, "Man, I didn't see that coming," when you started to look at the results and what the data was saying?

Torin Ellis 22:50

No, I mean, it was really those two things. Those were, you know, the two things that really, really stood out for us: the high number of respondents that are sitting on the sideline still wondering whether or not artificial intelligence can help them in reducing bias. There's a gift and a curse there, because, you know, for me, if you're sitting on the sideline and that's your position, you could be a very authentic and genuine Individual and say, "Listen, I want those environments that people feel safe, seen and protected in, and so I'm not going to make an investment, because no one has come through and convinced me yet that their solution can do that." So that's one side of it. And the other side, of course, is, you know, we don't necessarily know how to work the solution. We're not technically proficient or whatnot. So, it was really those two things, that on the sideline, as well as people not being intentional about asking the question, those two things really, really surprised me in terms of the research; and Sarah, if I needed to pull a third out, I think the third thing that was surprising, and surprising in a good way, is that a number of people had already made investments in artificial intelligence, and they were waiting to see the ROI of that investment. I think that that's a fair position to take. You already spent the money. We want to evaluate it for six months, 12 months, 18 months, whatever it is. I think 18 might be a little too long. The way that AI is, you know, rapidly improving. But I had to hold a degree of respect for those individuals, because that's a good business decision. And so I think that people, when they read the report, 7500 plus words, a number of different case studies, we hit different sensory points. For people that like to watch videos, we've got links to videos. For people that like to read, of course, we have reading material. For reading people that say it's gotta be academically supported, we have academic research. We have book recommendations. I mean, we really wanted to put together a piece of work that the marketplace could appreciate, that they could refer back to. We wanted to put together a body of work that people could compartmentalize and break it down into smaller, bite-sized chunks. You as that HR professional, you can take the 30 pages or so, and you can go into different meetings with two or three pages and say, "this should be on our agenda." That's the way that we put the report together. And we really, really want people to download it, to read it. Give us comment. You know, tell us what you like about the report. Tell us what you didn't like. What is it that you want us to research? Because we are going to revisit this same subject in q4 of this year.

Sarah Morgan 25:58

You're going to see the progress and impact has been.

Torin Ellis 26:01

We absolutely want to see if there's been any progress.

Sarah Morgan 26:04

Absolutely, absolutely, I love that. And also, I can say for the listeners, one of the things that I have hesitation about when it comes to research and reports is that you sign up to get the report and then the spam of the emails and the follow ups and the calls. This is not that, and I want to make sure to say that out loud for the listeners who may be like, Listen, I don't need to be on another mailing list like I need a hole in my head. In follow up, I think I've gotten two messages since I first downloaded it, one from you, saying, "Hey, what did you think?" And then another from someone with the research group wanting to see if I had questions, which was very thoughtful. I don't even know if it was, if it was a template email, I couldn't even tell, it felt very personal, very welcoming, very inviting for me to say, "these were my questions." But at that point, I had already talked to you, so I was just like, thank you very much. And since then, there hasn't been any follow up. So the drips and drabs of the ways that even the follow up about the research is being done is incredibly thoughtful, incredibly people-centric, and the fact that within the report, there are so many mediums of how it is that you can absorb the data. There are, if you are an infographic person, we got you. If you want audio, we got you. If you want video, we got you. You want long video? We got you. You want some short videos? We got you. And I love that, because we are dealing with workforces that are spanning five, six generations at this point in the way that people consume that information and consume content varies so much and so being able to present A report in a way that is not only incredibly practical and applicable, but also touches on the different ways that we learn and absorb content is (chef's kiss).

Torin Ellis 28:15

Thank you for that. And you know, it's our first time, so we were learning through the process. But I'm happy to share with you, Sarah, that our next report is in progress. We are at the beginning stages, but it is going to provocatively approach Gen Z.

Sarah Morgan 28:15

Oh, I love it.

Torin Ellis 28:21

So that's the direction that we are going next. We hope to have that done, if I'm on schedule, March, April, May. You know, sometime in May, or maybe early June. I would like to get it sooner than that, but we also don't want to rush the process. So, yeah, we're going to approach Gen Z for the next one.

Sarah Morgan 29:05

I love it. I'm already excited. Okay, well, you're coming back to this show. I'm not even asking you, I'm telling you, when the report comes out, you're coming back on. Because, we gotta talk about the babies. Because, yes, we gotta talk about the babies. Time for rapid Fire, not really rapid fire, but more thoughtful questions that I ask of all my guests. So, here at The Inclusion Crusade, as I said at the beginning, I'm on a mission to make workplaces more inclusive one episode at a time. What would you say is your crusade? What's that thing that you feel like you're doing one step, one increment at a time?

Torin Ellis 29:42

One year ago, it was to get HR professionals and others to add one question to the performance evaluation, and that question was, "what did you do to support our declarative statement around DEI?" I felt like, if I could go into an organization and get them to add one question, it didn't cost them anything, but to ask every single employee that one question, that we could change the frequency of DEI and the effort in the organization, because some people would respond and say, "I did all of these things." You're going to have another group of people that are going to say, "Well, I tried something, but it did work, and I didn't necessarily feel supported, or I didn't feel safe, or I didn't feel confident enough in trying it again." And we can kind of work through that. And then you'll have a third group of people, Sarah, that would have said, "I ain't do anything."

Sarah Morgan 30:33

People think, "Why are you asking me this question?"

Torin Ellis 30:35

So now, you at least know how your workplace is approaching the subject. You had to ask one question. That was my crusade then. My crusade now is to convince HR practitioners that we should require a different degree of data collection in our organization that you, Sarah, have a number of dimensions that you bring to the equation. Sure you identify as this, and absolutely I can see this. What is it about Sarah that is in my place that I don't know? Are you a parent and caregiver? Are you a parent of a child with a diversity? Are you coming from a different socio-economic background? Are you homeless or unhoused in the scenario, you're showing up for work every day, but that situation in the evening is tenuous. I want to know more of who Sarah is, because as a leader, I believe personally, the more I know about Sarah, the better I can develop her, inspire her, resource her, and support her. And that if I do those four things, then Sarah, in turn, is going to be more engaged, more productive and happier at work, period. And ultimately, what does that mean? That means that there is a high degree of trust between Sarah and Torin. So, my crusade now is, "can we build trust?" Which is what I'm building in my HR tech solution titled Ngoma. The name of the business is Ngoma, N, G, O, M, A. It means drum beat in Swahili. I believe the people are the drumbeat of the organization. And so, if I can create more trust, then I can build a better organization.

Sarah Morgan 32:39

I got chills form hearing you say that, because that demographics piece, those unseen things, is one of the things when I work with clients on building their culture that we get into. I love to take those demographics, as we start to talk about your level of satisfaction, your level of engagement, how safe seen and supported that you feel. Yeah, the whole organization scored 87, but when I look at the people who have who admitted to having housing insecurity, their experience is different. When we're dealing with people who have said that they have experience racial microaggressions in previous positions. The way that they're experiencing the organization is different. We're challenging organizations to look through those lenses, because if we do not address the needs of the most marginalized inside of our organizations, we are never going to be able to shift in the ways that we think we want to. So, I love that and anything you need from me to help get that over the finish line and done, you got me. I'm on the crusade. 2025 has been a doozy so far. We talked about this a little bit in pre show, but I do want you to share with the listeners, how are you keeping peace and focus with everything that's happening right now? What is your advice to the listeners who may be struggling to feel, not just hopeful, but also focused in the day-to-day work; whether that's the work of their job that they have to do, or whether they are involved in the movement to stop the things that are happening that are threatening to pull us back to times that we do not want to see again. How are you doing that for yourself? What's the advice that you give to others?

Torin Ellis 34:59

I'm trying to operate with a higher frequency and not allow myself to be drawn into the negative and hyperbolic headlines. And so while I understand that organizations are pulling back from DEI, I also understand that organizations are doubling down. While I understand that some people feel like we should do away with DEI and we should say the entire word diversity, equity and inclusion; I also understand on the other side that they attacked CRT. They attacked black history. They attacked every, you know, celebratory month and iteration, absolutely. So, what that says to me is that on the most practical of level is that it doesn't matter what we call it, they are going to find a way to demonize it, to attack it. And so I am trying to operate on a higher frequency, not a "better than" frequency, just a higher one that simply says every time I roll through my timeline on LinkedIn, I don't have to like or comment on someone's post that is highlighting a negative. If it is going to impact my peace and my frequency and my confidence and my position and my resilience and all of the other things necessary, then don't engage with it. It hearkens back to a time, and forgive me, Sarah, but it harkens back to a time where someone reached out to me from Time Magazine or The Wall Street Journal, I can't remember what it was, and I've been in the Wall Street Journal three or four times; but, this person reached out and they wanted me to contribute to an article that was negative around DEI. And what I said to them was, "is the article going to list solutions, or are you just going to talk about the problem?" And they were like, "well, it's really to highlight, you know, the now." So, I said don't want to be a part of that. I'm good, so I what am I doing? I'm trying to maintain a frequency that keeps me positive in exploring, how can I help those that are coming from marginalized and underrepresented communities? How can I be an ally, a better ally, supportive of people from the disability community? How is it that I can, you know, shut up and listen to people from the LGBTQ community. How can I help them from feeling othered? Because I don't have all of the answers. As committed as I am, it's been 14/15, years that I've been in the consulting space for diversity and inclusion. As committed as I am, I don't have all of the answers, so there are times where I just need to find myself down a YouTube rabbit hole, reading papers, finding articles, talking to folks, participating on webinars where my camera is off and I'm simply listening. I am doing things that are in my way, Sarah, making me a better human so that I am full and I am able to go show up and replenish others who may not be as full. So that's what I am doing.

Sarah Morgan 38:15

I love that, and thank you for sharing that, because we cannot pour from empty vessels, and so always making sure that we have the fullness of knowledge, the fullness of joy, is going to be crucial. This is going to be a long haul, not just getting through this moment, but getting through the aftermath of it. This is the time we cannot grow weary in well-doing, so we have to make sure that we are taking care of ourselves and taking care of our peoples. I could talk to you all day, but I know we both have other things to do as we wrap up this recording, I just want to thank you so much for being you and for responding to me with the quickness. Y'all, when I say that I was like, "Torin, can you come on the podcast?" He quickly said, "Yes, here is the link. Get it scheduled. Let's get this done." I'm always appreciative of you, and every time I have a conversation with you, I walk away feeling safe, seen and supported and feeling re-energized to keep going on with whatever it is that I have to do in my day and beyond. I appreciate and just have so much love and respect for you because of that, my my big brother, who never asked to be my big brother, I just declared you that is, is just an amazing person, y'all. I'm glad that I got to share a little piece of him on this episode today. Torin, if the folks want to come connect with you, tell them where to find you.

Torin Ellis 40:04

Thank you. You know, you send a signal and I'm responding to it. You can find me across all of social media. Torin Ellis, LinkedIn, Torin Ellis website, Torin Ellis.com. If you're going to be at Transform in March out in Vegas, I'm going to be an MC in the event, so make sure you are in the main room. Come find me and connect. Let's take a selfie. Let's go live. Let's do something. For anyone who's out there, if you need a voice around DEI, hit me.

Sarah Morgan 40:37

Excellent. Thank you all for listening. For The Inclusion Crusade, there's going to be a quick commercial interlude and a wrap up. Have a wonderful day, and we'll see you next time.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai