

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

For people to recognize how. I think if you look at challenges specifically for Black women in leadership, it really comes down to the unconscious bias that so many people have and I think actually everybody has some type of unconscious bias. That is what has been, I would say, the biggest challenge for me to get to where I am today and not necessarily what my challenge was to get to the C-suite, but specifically to get to leadership roles.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Welcome to the Stronger by Association podcast. This podcast will share stories about how associations are solving problems in the United States and around the world. This is brought to you by American Society of Association Executives, ASAE. A membership organization of more than 46,000 association professionals, industry partners in the United States and 50 countries. Our members make the world safer, better, and smarter.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Welcome to the Stronger by Association podcast. Today we have a terrific episode planned. We're going to talk about the power of Black women leaders. In this [CEIA 00:01:10] focus episode, we will have four Black female executives from the association community to discuss equity and inclusion trends, how they guide other Black professionals and how associations can respond. I'm so pleased to welcome, Robb Lee, Chief Marketing and Product Strategy Officer at ASAE, back to the podcast to join us for these interviews. Thanks for joining us today, Robb.

Robb Lee, Chief Marketing and Product Strategy Off:

Pleasure to be here, Mary Kate. Thank you.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

I'm also so thankful that we have Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, and CEO of the Pediatric Nursing Certification Board. Sheri, thank you for joining us and for bringing this topic to the podcast.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Thank you for having me, Mary Kate.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Sure. And can you share more about the topic that we're going to discuss and how you brought it as a really interesting point of conversation?

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Sure. There's so many Black women who aspire to be noticed. They aspire to be heard. With all of the events that surfaced in 2020, it left Black women feeling that there was even more of a weight on their shoulder. We're dealing with systemic issues of racism, discrimination, that is happening across America. You know we're dealing with gender inequities. We're dealing with trying to make our organizations more inclusive bodies and the things that are happening within our own culture within our organizations. And that lead to more and more conversations with Black women who were finding and looking for a space to share this information. And then also wondering what the end result would be for them.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

So, after we get through all of these issues that are happening on the society level. And after we get through fixing all of these issues that have now found their space in our association. Where does that leave us, because we too still have issues that need to be resolved? So our conversations, Mary Kate, generally touched on equity and inclusion around the workspace. It also touched on underrepresentation of Black women in nonprofit organizations, but even more so, underrepresentation when you get to the senior levels of these organizations and also having to still work in systems that are just outdated. Where there's so many historical and institutional structures that cause barriers that stop potential women from moving through that leadership pipeline.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

I think that there is an opportunity to hear from this specific group. And when I say, specific, a specific group of Black women executives that can share with you their story, their experiences, their pain, but also their opportunity. And I think that there remains more for us to understand about these experiences and challenges. But I want to applaud ASAE for carving out this space to start the conversation. That is greatly appreciated.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Thank you, Sheri, for bringing this and I'm really looking forward to the conversations we're about to have.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

I am pleased to welcome Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, and CEO of the American Water Resources Association. Welcome Dresden.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

Hi, thank you for having me.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Dresden, we're so happy to have you join us today in our conversation about Black women and leadership. One of our first questions for you is, what perspective on equity and inclusion trends that are being seen in America's workplace today, specifically, Dresden, through the lens of Black women professionals?

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

Wow, that's a great question. Well, what I'm seeing in terms of inclusion is there's certainly an increase in Black women in association positions. I've really seen the rise of that really in the last five to 10 years, but what I'm seeing now in our space is that it's much more intentional and it's much more becoming a goal of associations rather than something that's just a part of make sure that we have a diverse staff or board. It's much more intentional. For example, I was just in one of my CEO groups this week and we were talking about how DEI is showing up on some of the surveys that we're doing, whereas DEI before, maybe three or four years ago, just sort of fit under a staff harassment policy, right? And it was buried under that.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

Now DEI and those kind of goals or initiatives are the real primary target. So we're being sought out in a way that, for me, has been really unprecedented in my career. I think some of the pieces of that, in terms of inclusion, a second point, is that that cultural context of what Black women bring to a workplace, I think is becoming more acceptable. So if you look at that from a cultural standpoint of our hair, our clothes, our language, all of those things, I think, are being accepted in a different way. I, for myself, have very naturally curly hair. In the first 15 years of my career, before many of my important special moments or job interviews, I always straightened my hair because that was what you had to do when you interview for most of your career with mostly White males.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

I never felt confident or secure enough that I wouldn't be seen in a way where I'm being seen for my intellect and my brilliance or my fit for the position, but rather the fact that I am Black and I am female. So there's this inclusion that I'm definitely seeing and it's definitely a movement. The equity piece, I think we're still going to struggle at and I think we still need some time to get there.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

We, as Black women, we are still put in that position where you're still going to have to work twice as hard. You're still going to have to earn trust where trust is not simply going to be entrusted upon you. Oftentimes we're not given the benefit of the doubt in certain leadership positions and there are assumptions that are made about our work product because we are Black and female. All of those things I've experienced as an association executive, particularly as I've come into my own CEO role. And it's very different in observance from my White counterparts and my White colleagues who are also CEOs.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

And another equity position that I think we still need to look at is that it's difficult to be the first, to be the only, or to be the few. Black women are consistently put in positions to be teachers of diversity and inclusion and what that means. And we have to be maybe leaders of the initiatives, or speakers about the initiatives, in all White spaces in our organizations. And that is a weight that we carry. That's not a weight that other White counterparts are carrying. And we carry that weight and we still do our job and at the same time we are not compensated for the extra burden that that looks like or what that feels like.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

And frankly, in a lot of ways as a Black women professional I don't have a choice but to carry that burden, because there's also the complexity of the fact that I must do my part because someone else did it for me and paved that way for me to be here today. So I've got to play that role. And I've got to play that part. And I've got to that teacher [inaudible 00:09:26], and I've got to do all those things, even though, frankly, it feels uncomfortable and it feels unfair.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

I'm curious if you have thoughts on how employers can take a leadership role to try to either support Black women or help lessen some of the structural issues in the way of success?

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

Absolutely. Association employers really need to step up. I think first and foremost they need to create safe spaces. The environment that Black women are living in today, and Black people in general, is very scary. In the year of 2020, I can't tell you how many board meetings or random meetings I had when I'm just seeing on TV someone else being shot or choked out, or a confederate flag roaming through the capital of the United States. But I'm still taking those calls. I'm still having those meetings. I'm still running my staff.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Wate:

And I can't tell you how many times I've started the workday crying and ended the workday crying because, frankly, most of 2020, I've had a broken heart. Most of my colleagues who are people of color have had that and we carry that into that space every day. I can only count the number on one hand how many of my board volunteer leaders and other people that I work with actually ask me, "How are you doing today?" Just, "How are you doing today?" And most of 2020, I was not doing well. I have a nine-year-old son, I have two daughters, Black children, and I lived a lot of 2020 in fear.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Wate:

And so employers need to create safe spaces. They need to understand that extra level of consciousness that we bring into the room. And oftentimes it is pain. Another thing that employers need to do, is they need to be truthful about where the organization is at. I cannot stress this enough, when you are a person of color, a Black woman, and you're looking for a position, and again, as I say, Black women are being sought out for these leadership positions, but oftentimes the organization is not ready to take that new leadership on. They still have biases. They're still not ready maybe to have direction from a Black woman. All of those things transpire in that space. So, when you're a recruiter, and if you are an employer, when you're in that interview process be truthful. You have an all White staff, you have an all White board that hasn't had a Brown person working here in two decades. Be truthful. Because you're not going to allow that executive leader to start out on the right foot without knowing what some of those barriers and trualities are going to be at that organizational level.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Wate:

I think another big thing employers need to do is provide resources and support for what I think a lot of us have termed as the imposter syndrome. That's a true thing. And that's a true thing of all women, but especially Black women because we haven't been afforded the same opportunities as White women in leadership roles. And so we feel that today, and I would say, in a lot of ways even more intensely. Although we may come across as confident and well-spoken and ready to lead, I promise you, it is still there. So resources and support by employers need to be provided and they need to understand what that is about.

Robb Lee, Chief Marketing and Product Strategy Off:

Dresden, first of all, thank you for your candor and your directness. You were speaking to a lot people in the community, not just the association community, but obviously much broader than that too. There's something that I'd like to kind of focus in a little bit on because you talked about some personal struggles. Some personal barriers that you've had to work your way through, throughout your career. Because you talked about, you gave some historical context, is what I'm referring to. And I'm just curious, based on some of your experiences, what might you say to Black women right now in the environment that we have that is so unsettling for all the reasons that you talked about?

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, great question. Thank you, Robb. My advice to Black women is to continue to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. We have had a rise, we could term this as the second civil rights movement. We've had a rise in people accepting us in leadership positions across the public and private sector, but it is still very, very uncomfortable. You are still again, going to be the only, the first, or the few. That takes a toll on you. And you have to be prepared to have that strong backbone. I think another thing you have to try to understand is that there are still going to be people needing you, for them to feel comfortable, for you to be perfect. That level of perfectionism. Black women are not afforded the same mistakes in a workplace than White men. It just isn't going to happen. So, you have to know going into a certain situation that there is always going to be a double standard in how your performance is going to be measured than those of your counterpart.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

My other advice would be to, on top of those two things, is make sure you have a support group. That has been huge for me. Whether it's other people of color or your White colleagues and friends, but you have to have a safe place to go to where you can confidently air your emotional or mental frustrations, particularly if you are in a CEO role. We all know CEO roles are very lonely. They're also lonely for Black women. You need to make sure that you do that level of self-care. Another piece of advice that I would give you is research the board and staff prior to even accepting an interview role. I think it's important that, I know sometimes pictures and bios maybe they don't completely speak for the whole organization that you might be looking at, but you really need to clue yourself in to what you're signing up for to prevent some later surprises or shocks down the road.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

We saw that over the summer. A lot of organizations said they had strong statements saying, "We stand with Black Lives Matter," and there were a lot comments saying, "What has the organization actually done to show that they are taking a stance towards racial justice?" Is this a statement in words only, and how do you determine which organizations are trying to walk the walk and which are just using it as a PR move, honestly?

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

Right. Yeah, I've definitely seen some of those things that it feels more like a popup to generate support for members now, or just trying to support the community at this one time and this one moment in history. That is hard to determine what is genuine versus what is a short term and then maybe what has been a long-term strategic plan and gain toward really adopting DI as a part of the organization. It really needs to be adopted from the board level. That is the biggest advice that I can give.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Water:

If you go into an association and you're in the interview process as a Black women and you ask about their DI and if there are initiatives that are coming from the board of directors and there is a, "No," or a stuttering of words, that may be your opportunity to walk away. I will say that the association community, in terms of support for Black women leaders, I think it has been absolutely fantastic. I personally have found a lot of support, both emotionally and mentally, friendship-wise, that are not only celebrating Black women leaders, but they are here for me when I need it. And I'm actually getting that more from the association community than the people I work with, and for, or manage.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Wate:

Where my association community colleagues, especially in the latter part of 2020, I would get texts and messages all the time, "How are you? I'm here for you today." I think our community, our industry, is uniquely supportive in that way. I do think that one way that association communities can make sure that we're doing what's right, is make sure that there's any offering that's coming out of your association or nonprofit, is that you're making sure that your panels and your speakers are diverse.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Wate:

I can't tell how important that was, I mean, there were some hard years there where I would go and sit on a "diversity," quote, panel and it would be all White women or four White women and maybe an Asian, or something like that. And I thought, "Wow, that's an interesting perspective." So associations when we create our offerings, when we create our programs, you need to make sure that you are reading the room and you are not being racially insensitive in terms of who you invite to the table. That's going to be critical, I think, now and moving forward, especially when we go back into having events and in person opportunities again. We're, hopefully, what I'm imagining is that we're going to see a lot more diversity and leadership at the table in terms of speakers and expertise and keynotes.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Dresden, we appreciate your authenticity in hearing what you called "a broken heart," last year. You know being a Black executive in a lonely world where you say that it is difficult to be the first and only in a few. So for those who are still walking around with those broken hearts, what is the one thing that you want to share today that can help to uplift them as we move into this new year of 2021?

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Wate:

Wow. It gets better. One of the things that I always was told when I was young by my mother is, "This too shall pass. This too shall pass." And many times when I'm going through my day and going through that year of 2020, that's the one thing that I could say to myself is, "This too shall pass." And it did. It doesn't mean it's over. It means that that immediate struggle and what I was dealing with in that day or that moment, it did pass. I made it through and now I'm stronger for it. So, keep finding your strength. Keep making sure that you get the self-care that you need. And make sure that you build a network and community around your people who are going to support you, particularly as you continue to lead. Always continue to lead.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Dresden, thank you so much for your time and for sharing so much of your experience with us. We'd love to have you back on the podcast at another time.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, CEO, American Wate:

I would love it. Thank you so much for the opportunity and thank you for all the work that you all are doing to make this possible.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

I'm pleased to welcome, Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE, Executive Director of the Maryland Psychological Association. Welcome, Stefanie.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Thank you Mary Kate, for having me.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Stefanie, wonderful to have you join us today. What we want to hear from you is your experience with underrepresentation of Black women in senior levels of nonprofit organizations. What's your take on that particular issue?

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Great question. My experience is quite unique because prior to my current role as Executive Director of the Maryland Psychological Association, I spent 20 years doing government relations work. And anyone who's in government relations, whether from the association nonprofit sector or even the for-profit, knows that government relations isn't the most diverse in and of itself. So, imagine coming up in the ranks, not really having many people who look like you. The experience pretty much is wide-ranging, again, not having many mentors who look like me in the association space, but also the unique challenges that come with not taking what's considered the traditional path in government relations. So, traditionally you get your internship on Capitol Hill. You move into a paid position on the Hill. You work your way up. You then go to either an association in a government relations office or a lobbying firm.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

I came in to what I like to call the backdoor, which is running a political action committee. That was my entry into government relations and so I had a very unique path and with that comes the unique experiences of attending fundraising events where I was not only the only Black woman, but the only Black person. And also, in many instances, the only Black person who wasn't serving the people in attendance at the fundraising events.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

It presents a really unique insight into what it means to be the only one, in many cases the first. Throughout my career I have been the first in my position. The first person of color. The first Black woman. The youngest. So, it comes with its own set of challenges. I would say that those challenges have helped develop the person who I am. And that I, in the words of our current Vice President, "I may be the first, but my goal is to not be the last."

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

So my goal in my association career is to help identify other women of color, other Black women, and help bring them through the association experience and share my insight on what it's like when you're the first one. Because, in many instances, it can be very uncomfortable, but there're also instances where you can shine. Because my mother is one to always tell me to sit in the front, no matter where I am, because she wants people to know that you have the education too. You have the background and you belong in that room. That would be what I want to impart with other Black women in this community, that you belong at that table as well as anybody else who is there.

Robb Lee, Chief Marketing and Product Strategy Off:

You know, Stefanie, one of the things that you've just talked about, and thank you again for sharing as you have. You talked about your advice that you might provide for Black women. There are two things

you said that really resonated with me. One of them was that you talked about being only in a variety of different male situations. You also talked about the sense of belonging. Given those two concepts, what is some specific advice that you might give Black women who find themselves in that situation or maybe they are moving into. They are observing that situation and maybe watching you and other colleagues and peers of yours navigate that. What are the things that go through your mind that you might be able to share with them to really help pull people through this pipeline and to the next level, if you will?

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

I would say to acknowledge it. In the sense of, walk into that room and you acknowledge the fact that, yes, you are probably the only one, probably the first. Because while it may be comfortable, it's the reality. Because as much as we have seen the association and their commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion and we have seen the fruits of those labors. There's still, obviously, the numbers are still not there. So, acknowledging that is important. Not to be afraid of it though, because there are so many opportunities that can come with being that only person in the room.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Now, I think any of us who attended college all had that one experience of being the only Black person in that class and being asked to give the Black experience. Obviously, we can't because we're not monolithic. So that opportunity to say, "We don't all think alike, but here's my opinion of it." Because then that gives people the sense of, "Okay, this is somebody who is not afraid to speak their mind." Because some people see people in that situation and they, I believe, feel that they'll kind of shirk, and they'll kind of hide and they won't be vocal and they won't speak up even though it is uncomfortable to do. And that's what I have sought to do. And I also think that, as someone coming into this space who may be that first or only, don't be afraid to reach out to your colleagues who have experienced that and ask them point blank, "What was your experience? How do I navigate that?" You shouldn't have to navigate it alone if you don't have to.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Then my advice to my colleagues who have reached that level of success in the association space is to not be hesitant to share that experience because we can't gate-keep all of our experiences. It's just not fair to our colleagues coming up behind us. We have to be open and willing to say and help people navigate these rooms. Because some of us may not have had help navigating them, we shouldn't let other people suffer because of that. When we know that there's somebody coming into that type of space, we should be more than willing to say, "Hey, this was my experience and this is what I learned from it. And this is how we can potentially help you."

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Stefanie, thank you so much for sharing. Do you have advice for employers, both for addressing systemic problems and for White colleagues, how they can be a better ally for Black women and people of color in their workplace?

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Sure. I acknowledge that in my career I've been very fortunate to have a number of different mentors, again, some people who look like me, but a lot of people who don't. I would encourage my colleagues who are allies in this struggle to be open to that very hard conversation that you may not want to have. And be open to the fact that your experience in a particular room may be different from my experience.

And be open to having the conversation. When we talk about allyship, I would say for me, I talk about it on a global perspective instead of a particular person. So, when I say we need allies to step up, that's globally. That's everyone who considers themselves an ally.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

So, I would hope that allies, people who are truly doing that work, don't take it personally because if you know that you are doing that work then the comments shouldn't hit you that hard. But I also would encourage my allies that if you see a situation that is not right, that you don't just ignore it and that you address it because the behaviors are going to continue if the environment allows it. Where we can really make a difference is when we are calling out behaviors, actions, that don't lend itself to true DE&I. And also in a sense of performance allyship, don't just post on your social media, "Black Lives Matter." What does that really mean to you? And if you are my friend and my ally what are the actions that you are taking beyond posting to your Instagram page that's going to show me that.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

So for employers, I would really encourage them to really do the work of, if it's identifying individuals for your board, or for your association, really put in the effort and the work. I know people want to be careful about how they approach it, and that's understandable, but there are ways in which you can identify individuals for your organization. Because what I don't think any of us want to have is a situation where you hire someone and then the box is checked and your job is done. Because you haven't put in the work to do so.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Unfortunately you leave someone potentially with this sense of they only were hired because they are Black, or a woman, or a certain age. We should not be supporting individuals in that manner. You need to give people the full support and resources that any other employee would have, because we need to get out of this whole mindset of, we're just hiring for diversity's sake. Because then to me that's says, you don't believe that a diverse candidate is qualified. We need to get out of that mindset seriously. Not only as a society but also as an association space. We need to get out of that mindset. And once we get out of that mindset, we will see more equity. But it's going to have to take some work and it's going to have to be some very hard conversations and some acknowledgements as well because we all have implicit biases.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Once you realize that and once you say that to yourself, you then have to ask yourself, "What am I going to do about that implicit bias, because it is affecting how I hire, who I identify as qualified board members. It's affecting who I reach out to as far as potential partners in my organization." Once you acknowledge that and you work towards it, then you are setting the stage to where again we will start to see some real concrete action when it comes to DE&I.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

I always tell people that we have to start somewhere, right? And so your line about being open to being the only one in the room, is a great one. And I love that, because we have to start somewhere. So when that person is the only in the room, what advice do you have so they can see the opportunity of being in that place, in that moment, and they can see it as a good rather than a challenge?

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Great question, Sheri. I would say based on my experience its reframing it as an opportunity rather than a challenge. And not every room is welcoming, I think we acknowledge that. If you live long enough you will have that one experience that is not comfortable and in some cases not even safe. But, if we turn the framework around, and again from your perspective and just say, "I'm going to use this as a challenging opportunity for me. And I'm going to go into that room, and I'm going to sit at that table. And I'm going to introduce myself. And I'm going to contribute to the conversation." The people around that table may still [inaudible 00:34:33] me. They may not care about what I said, but at the end of the day you know who you are, you know what value you bring to that table and you keep that in mind. Because we talk about [inaudible 00:34:47] table, not every table's meant for you.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Some tables you will sit and you look around and you're like, "Yeah, I know, this isn't my table. I need to move." You can probably have 10 different experiences where you go around and you sit at 10 different tables. And you then realize, "You know what, I need to set my own table."

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

I think that's a great point you make, Stefanie. Not every table is meant for you and that's okay too. That's okay too, right. And as humans we're not going to fit in every place and even in our professional settings, but the table that's meant for you is the one that you really need to hone in on. And you need to maximize that opportunity while you are there. I think that's a great point too, not every table is meant for every one of us.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Absolutely. Absolutely. I think for those who are coming into this profession, brand new, again potentially seeking out these opportunities. You have to know yourself, be comfortable with yourself to not only put yourself in these situations, but also know when to take yourself out. Because I love this association community, I shouldn't have to suffer for a career that I love. And as bad as moving myself out of a particular area or as far as expertise goes, or surrounding myself with different colleagues, then that's something that I need to do. But at the end of the day, I need to be true to myself. I think as long as you get to the point where, and sometimes it takes a while, but you get to the point where not everybody's going to like you, not everybody's going to accept you. And you know what, that's okay, because I'm not meant for everybody to like, or accept. But as long as I know I'm doing good work and I am doing work that benefits the community that I love and enjoy. That's really all that matters.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Stefanie, thank you so much for joining us. We're lucky to have you as a member of ASAE board and just a really good reminder for why association professionals acknowledge their bias, acknowledge their privilege and then spend that privilege to help to make the landscape more equitable.

Stefanie Reeves, FASAE, CAE:

Thank you, Mary Kate, for this opportunity and also, if I can take a short plug because we will be recording for new board members for ASAE. So step up, please. We are needed in these leadership roles.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Thank you. Great reminder to all of our listeners, we'll have the application in the show notes.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

I'm pleased to welcome Christene Phillips, MSA, Executive Director, Pediatric Infectious Disease Society. Thanks for joining us, Christy.

Christene Phillips, MSA:

Hi, thank you for having me.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Christy, welcome. Thank you for being with us today. So, [inaudible 00:37:42] path to the C-suite is not an easy one and for Black women that comes with another list of challenges. So, what is it that you wish you knew when you began your career as an association professional?

Christene Phillips, MSA:

I've been in the nonprofit space for over 20 years and in my current role as an executive director for 15 years. Given that my organization is small with only three staff, I was scrambling to find information. I wish I knew the importance of mentorship and coaching and networking as a significant part of building leadership skills and thriving as a thought leader in the nonprofit space. Other things such as building confidence, finding my voice, and continuing to build on my strengths are also critical components that I wish I knew early on. I also wish I knew the importance of stepping out of my comfort zone early on, because I was very, very shy and reserved.

Christene Phillips, MSA:

I mean, I can recall when I first became an executive director at a leadership conference, there were a very few Black people in attendance and this made me so uncomfortable. So much so that I retreated to myself and did not communicate with anyone during the conference except during brainstorming sessions. And even then I communicated very little with the group. I should have taken a deep breath and then continue to see past people staring at me and focused on the reason why I was attending the conference in the first place and the value that I bring to the conversation. So that confidence piece was very, very critical for me to know early on and I didn't.

Robb Lee, Chief Marketing and Product Strategy Off:

You know, Christy, I have a question for you. Thank you for sharing that, because one of the things that you said was that, you talked about finding your voice and that certainly isn't something that only you have struggled with and it's great that you're being authentic and candid enough to share that, and honest enough to share that. But that's a struggle I think that a lot of people have at various points in their career. If you could, and give some specific advice for those that that really applies to, how would you help them and encourage them to find that voice as Black women in the association community?

Christene Phillips, MSA:

So, a lot of great Black women leaders like Sheri, and the others that are on this podcast have, and others outside of Black women too, they have just talked about doing a lot of reading and small presentations, even within your own organization. You know nothing on a national level, but just to

build up that confidence and just taking a look at what it is that you're passionate about and what you would like to advocate for and speak up about and just having that strong voice about it. It really helps to just show people that this is an area that you're passionate about. You know what you're talking about and it allows them to just sort of look at you as the go-to person for that. So building up that is probably what I would suggest as a path forward for that.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Christy, I'm thinking about the conference you mentioned and just how the association could have made you feel more comfortable and what employers can do or what other White professionals can do in the workplace to be better allies and encourage participation?

Christene Phillips, MSA:

That's interesting because that's one of the things that I have. As far as for advice to Black women, I don't know if the conversation has been had at the organizational level. And for me, I didn't have that conversation with my former boss, or board members. I didn't and to be able to have those frank conversations, I think it's as important as you build your network and find allies and sponsors or mentors. It's just essential and it's not an easy conversation to have, but it's one that should be had early on and often just to continue the dialogue. There is someone that's bound to just look beyond your skin color or the fact that you are a woman and really be able to offer some advice to assist you in your path forward.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Christy, I want to just really emphasize on the leadership that you're bringing here today, which is vulnerability. And to be vulnerable and to be able to speak from the heart and put those issues on the table speaks volumes for the people who need to hear this. So let me just pause to say thank you for that.

Christene Phillips, MSA:

Thank you.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

A great leader is really able to draw from a place of authenticity and truth. And this is wonderful and people need to hear this. One of our other panelists talked about walking around with a broken heart, and is still trying to heal when thinking back at last year. It's still healing because those issues are compounded with also being a Black women and being a Black executive.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

And there is the gender, there's the race, there's so many multi-sectional identities that we have to navigate. So, if there was one thing or two that you can tell the person who is still trying to find their way. That rising star who knows that they have what it takes, but they continue to encounter challenges. But they could potentially be our new emerging leader in the Black women CEO space. What is it that you would want to share with that individual to continue the healing process so they can focus on their long-term goal and that is to build up the number of Black women CEOs in associations.

Christene Phillips, MSA:

Well, that's a loaded question. I would reiterate the fact that an ally is needed just to guide you in this executive leadership, nonprofit, organizational growth endeavor. Having that ally or a sponsor, I believe, will take you further than not having someone. I say that in a sense that we talk about mentorship and networking, but if you have this ally or a sponsor they bring you along with them. They are like your friend in the nonprofit space and they will introduce you to things that you may not be aware of, even having a mentor or just within your friend or collegial circle. So coming out of your friend circle is another suggestion that I would have. Oftentimes we're comfortable in that circle and that's our safe space, but in order for us to grow, I think coming out of that safe space and to tackle another challenge or it may not be a challenge, but just doing something that may be a little bit uncomfortable for you would probably help you get past your fear of moving forward or just expanding out, if that makes sense.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Absolutely. Thank you for sharing that.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

I'm just thinking about how in terms of sponsorship we know that leaders tend to choose people who look like themselves or their same gender when they're looking for people to bring into the next generation and we just have to really encourage existing leaders to get out of their comfort zone as well and find diverse leadership to bring along, because the talent's there. Sometimes it's absolutely there.

Christene Phillips, MSA:

I agree. I definitely agree. I think it's a two-way conversation. It's more than just you reaching out to someone, it's someone being willing to see beyond color and to see the potential and be willing to assist in being that sponsor. So I completely agree. It's something that is tough, and you may get a lot of no's, but when you get that one yes, I think that's a start to something great. So just to keep trying, don't give up.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Christy, thank you so much joining us and sharing your experience. I think it's given people a lot to think about.

Christene Phillips, MSA:

Well, thank you. Again, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and I'm hoping that this is the start to more great things.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Christy, thank you so much.

Christene Phillips, MSA:

Oh, thank you, Sheri.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

I appreciate you.

Christene Phillips, MSA:

Oh, thank you. I appreciate it. This was lovely.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

I'm pleased to welcome, Lakisha Ann Woods, CAE, President and CEO, National Institute of Building Sciences. Thanks for joining us, Lakisha.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Thanks for having me.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Lakisha, thank you for joining us today. I want to commend you and all of the other Black women executives that we had a chance to talk to today. I think, one of the questions often on the minds of people is, what are the professional challenges? Each person has unique challenges that they had to tackle to get to the C-suite. So can you share with us what some of those challenges were for you and challenges that you're aware of from others who are in the C-suite today.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Sheri, thanks for asking the question. I believe it's important for people to recognize how... I think if you look at challenges specifically for Black women in leadership, it really comes down to the unconscious bias that so many people have and I think actually everybody has some type of unconscious bias. That is what has been, I would say, the biggest challenge for me to get to where I am today and not necessarily what my challenge was to get to the C-suite, but specifically to get to leadership roles.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

The common comments that I would hear, and I was actually speaking with someone the other day and had to share with them feedback that a former boss had given me during my performance evaluation and he had said to me, "You've done a great job and the only negative comment I have to share is something that you can't control. And that is that there are people who will dislike you and who are threatened by you, and there's nothing you can do about it. I want to tell you that because I think you should just keep doing the great job you're doing, but when you run into barriers note that it's not your fault, but it's just something that you're going to continue to run into."

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

I appreciated the very open and honest feedback from him because he was right. There were people who were always, I guess, in a way threatened by any new idea that would come from me where if someone else had given the idea, it was perfectly fine and a great idea. And so there is some kind of unusual bias that some people have against Black people in general and Black women specifically. I think it's so important if you are striving to achieve a leadership role that you just learn to roll through those challenges, because they're going to occur. They're out of your control. So focus on the things that you can control.

Robb Lee, Chief Marketing and Product Strategy Off:

Lakisha, I'm curious about something. You mentioned these challenges and the unfortunate, but I guess, beneficial news that your boss shared with you around the barriers that you would face. I guess, the

question I really want to ask you is that for someone who's walking into that environment, whether they know it or not, let's presume that they do. That they received similar advice or somehow they obviously have that through life experiences, whatever it may be. What is the specific advice that you might share with someone to say, "Here's how you overcome that?" I know that you did. How would you invite someone else into that in order to say, "Here are the things that you can think about, and here are the things that you can take and build on in order to come out on the other side of this and not just get shut down walking into an environment knowing full well that you may not be accepted irrespective of the content of your character." If I may.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Well, it's important to try to assess the situation. Any company that you work for, you want to get to know the people that you work with. I always say that people fear what they don't understand. And so, the more they can get to know you as a person, it will help them in accepting your opinion as a professional. And so, if you can break down those walls that are sometimes just in the office barriers versus getting to know someone on a personal level, that is one way that has helped me as I grow.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

It's also getting to know people from all different backgrounds. Understanding different perspectives. That diverse mindset, that diverse group of friends, or coworkers or mentors or mentees. It is so important because so often we, you, everybody may look at things through a different lens and it is critical to understand the different ways that people are approaching a certain circumstance. And so, I think, everyone should have a diverse set of people that they have in their close circle and that is how we all as a people will move forward. So, breaking down that, what you don't understand, what you don't know.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Then I also recognize that it's important to know when you have reached a place where you can't be successful. If you're in an environment, we all hope to get to that one job and it's amazing and you love everybody you work with and you love exactly what you do and there are not problems, but then there's that reality of sometimes you're going to run into issues. You're going to run into challenges. But if all you do is face people who you can clearly tell will never listen to the quality of your content. Will never listen to the knowledge that you have to share because they will always see you as different and they will not accept what you have to offer. Then you have to know when to cut your losses and find another welcoming environment that will value your thoughts and opinion. So to me, I always tell people, every company, every job's got luggage. You just have to make sure you can carry it. And if you can't carry it, then you need to get out. That's always an important thing to assess when you're running into these situations.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Lakisha, do you have advice for employers as they try to support employees or create a more equitable environment and perhaps as they try, really for the first time, to not just pay lip service but actually make changes and to White colleagues?

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Sure. Well, I think, what you said was so important, Mary Kate. Not to pay lip service. We've all learned, especially in 2020, although the circumstances are not new to the Black community of what happened

with George Floyd, but last year became a moment where other people paid attention. And a lot of companies thought out and made these bold statements, "We don't condone this," and "We believe in an equitable environment." But if you take a look at their leadership, if you take a look at their staff leadership, of their corporate leadership, it doesn't speak to what they're saying in their words.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

So, it's important for leaders to walk the talk and not just provide lip service. Don't say that, "Oh, we absolutely are going to do better with diversity inclusion at our organization." That needs to be at all levels of the organization. People need to see themselves in a leadership role. They need to see themselves having a potential in a career down the road. So it is every CEO's job to make sure that their senior leadership team is diverse, not just your entry level positions.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

And then you also have to create an environment where, well one, training. Everybody needs training. So absolutely, I think that's important. It's tough to have a conversation sometimes when you're sitting around a room. I could tell you, and my husband is a teacher, and he said, "He'll hear from his students that they kind of dread Black History Month, because all of a sudden all the White students look at the Black students, and say, 'Okay, how does it feel?'"

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Nobody wants to be that person that's pointed out. If you're creating a diversity and inclusion taskforce within your staff team, don't turn to the one African American or Asian, and say, "Okay, well so you're the minority, so we've got to have you on the diversity inclusion taskforce." That's not how it's supposed to work. If it's really, truly something you're trying to tackle, then put it at the very top. And then put people who are diverse, multiple people, not one into the group to try to find solutions. But people have to be comfortable having honest conversations and I think bringing in facilitators, whether they're virtual training, is really helpful.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Lakisha, I've heard you make this statement about being the only before, so does that resonate? Stefanie also shared her experience with being the only. One of the things that we talked about is sometimes the only is an opportunity. So can you give us perspective on how you can make your only an opportunity?

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Yes. Sheri, actually every job before this one I was the only African American or the first African American in the role. Then in this role the first African American woman, or woman in the role. I have found that from my very first association job, I tried to not look at myself as different. I looked at this as an opportunity to just show what I can do. My first job working at an association I'm a product marketing manager, I'm just trying to be exceptional at what I can do and to show the leadership the talent that I had. Part of that was just taking on new responsibilities. Not waiting for someone to bring the work to me, but seeing where there was a deficiency or something that's not being done, which I consider a bonus in associations. There's always other job-related duties that you can assign yourself or you can wait for someone to assign.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

But those opportunities, I have truly found, is the reason why I am able to be in this role at this point in my career because I took advantage of those when I saw there was something that I could do. To be honest, especially like my first role, because that was sort of right out of college and I'm taking on a task that no one's assigned to me. That I also did a very good job with it because I was the only person who looked like me. Then the all White male leadership board, really, I think it resonated with them even more because not only was, "Wow, look at this great job that was done. Oh, that's the Black woman on our team that did that. She doesn't answer the phone." Although I love when someone asks me that, "Aren't you the girl who answers the phone?"

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

So, you have to brush off those kind of comments and remember that you have an opportunity to show how exceptional you can be because you're just a talented person in the workforce, but because you are the only, you stand out. And take that moment. Take that opportunity to move yourself forward. Again, for something you don't control, but take what you don't control to your advantage.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

I think that is a great point and I would agree and I would relate to that. That, although people see color, people also see talent. And also see your ability to attract members. They also see your ability to bring consensus. There's so many other things that people too. I would agree with you that in some instances where we are able to emerge in that light, we need to take it and we need to run with it. And that person needs to know that sometimes that needs to be the focus and somebody will see them. Somebody will see them and will see beyond their color. You know Christy talked about that. She said, Lakisha, that someone has to be willing to see beyond color. I thought that was a beautiful statement [inaudible 01:01:15].

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

So, I think, in some cases if you can focus on the opportunity then in some cases, other things around you will fall in place. That's how it was for me too. I focused on stretching, [inaudible 01:01:29], soaking up as much as I could. Learning from as many people as I could. And that just kept opening the doors, and more doors. Thank you for sharing that.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Lakisha, thank you so much for joining us. As we look forward to another year, do you have any advice for our listeners on one thing they can think about in terms of their daily work and how they can support their colleagues of color and Black women?

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Absolutely. I think that what we learned in 2020, is that we're all, you know many people are still trapped in their homes and they feel trapped. You have team calls or team meetings, but it's important for everyone to take account of all people on the team. Make sure that everyone feels included and this is the time where companies may not notice that they are not being inclusive of all the people on the team. People by nature have a clique. They have the people that they're the most comfortable with and it's important to assign as leaders, make sure that each of your groups, if they don't naturally talk to everyone on the staff team that you are being intentional about reaching out to various people within the company and making sure that they still feel connected. Because this is where certain people may

get a lot of contact with leadership and others do not. So, leadership needs to reach through all levels of their employee base and make sure people still feel like they're being heard.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

You can find your own unique ways to connect. I've done a variety of team building activities for my staff. Then also just making sure that somebody's picking up the phone and checking in on different people, "How you doing today?" Not a work conversation, just a health check. Because if people don't feel like they're cared for and that no one is really concerned about their well-being, then they're not going to produce for you as a company either. And work is work, and we're going to get it done and you want to make sure that people are still getting the work done, but you also need them to know that you do care. That you recognize that you don't, in a pandemic environment, your work and your home have all blended into one.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

And it's important to step outside and remind people, "Take a break." If you have a phone call, make it a walking call. It's spring, this is the time. I told my team on our team meeting last Friday, if you don't have to have a Zoom, don't have one. If you can have a phone call to get the same conversation, take that phone call on the road and everybody get outside with your cell and just talk to people and get some fresh air at the same time. I think just those little bits of just self-care while you're getting the work done is really important and it shows people that you're concerned about them as human beings and in turn it makes everybody more successful.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Thank you so much. Those are wise words I'm going to try to live by and go outside today. Thank you for joining us again, Lakisha. We are so glad to have you.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Thank you. Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

Robb Lee, Chief Marketing and Product Strategy Off:

Thank you, Lakisha.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

All right. Take care, Mary Kate, Robb-

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Lakisha, thank you. You're a breath of fresh air.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Oh, thanks.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

I appreciate you.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Talk to you later.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Bye, talk to you later.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Thank you.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Bye, Lakisha.

Lakisha A. Woods, CAE:

Bye.

Robb Lee, Chief Marketing and Product Strategy Off:

We've had a tremendous conversation today. I would characterize it as tremendously insightful. We've covered so many different aspects of the struggle and the opportunities for Black women. We've talked about being the only. We've talked about belonging. We've talked about dealing with a broken heart in this last year and a half. Sheri had mentioned earlier in one of the conversations about the aspect of the vulnerability of leadership and how important that is as relates to authentic and effective leadership.

Robb Lee, Chief Marketing and Product Strategy Off:

I want to shift the conversation a little bit based on what we've talked about today and on that theme, I think ultimately if we work our way back from having an expectation and seeking the outcome of true meritocracy and equality. What are some of the structural barriers that we likely need to identify? We need to deconstruct and possibly rebuild in a very different way in order to achieve the outcomes that we've been talking about today. I know that Sheri has a lot to offer on this. I'm so excited to ask her this question, so Sheri, what do you think?

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

First, I want to say that no one is perfect. We may strive for perfection, Robb, but we're human and we make mistakes. I think it starts with understanding what those mistakes are when you talk about addressing structural barriers. So we know that organizations are embedded and what I see as fundamentally flawed structures. With that we come of painful histories, Robb, that are often rooted in racism and discrimination.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

So structural barriers for Black women exist because associations don't want to acknowledge the problem. That within our very own organizational cultures that we think so highly of what may exist as harm, marginalization and inequalities. There are many issues to address, Robb, but I'll throw out a few that can be corrected today. Starting with what Christy said, and that is someone has to be willing to see beyond color.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

And to that point I will add that making the presence of Black women more active in your projects is another way to start. More active in your business meetings, your partnership proceedings, your commentaries, your interviews, your panels, your social networking hours. You have to start somewhere and those are just really low-hanging ideas that speak to inclusivity. It has to start by bringing Black women in. You have to invite them to the table. So, don't just invite them to the party, but ask them to dance with you. That is the difference between diversity and inclusion. And in order for us to really eliminate structural barriers, we as association executives, as CEOs, we have to be deliberate, we have to be intentional, and we have to be consistent.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Sheri, thank you so much for joining us today and for all of our guests in these conversations. We've had incredible female Black executives join and be really verbal and share so much of their experience and I think we're all so much better for it. I hope this is the beginning of more conversations that we have.

Sheri Sesay-Tuffour, PhD, CAE, CEO of the Pediatri:

Thank you for having me, Mary Kate. And again, I appreciate ASAE giving us this platform to share this important information and I hope it touches someone in a special way. Thank you.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

Absolutely.

Robb Lee, Chief Marketing and Product Strategy Off:

Thank you, Sheri.

Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

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Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, ASAE's SVP of Public Po:

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