

# Embracing Abilities, Expanding Possibilities Podcast

## Episode 5: DEI through HR: Making it Foundational, Conversational, and Real

*featuring*

Rhonda Robinson, Senior Director of Human Resources  
Chatia Shelby, Human Resources Manager  
Jamal Malik Jones, Human Resources Generalist

### Full Transcript

#### Sara Ray Stoelinga:

Hi, this is Sara Ray Stoelinga, and you're listening to the Embracing Abilities, Expanding Possibilities Podcast from Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford.

We are one of the largest affiliates of Easterseals and transform the lives of early learners and individuals of all abilities through access to expert, educational, family, and community supports. I am the President and CEO, and in today's episode, you'll hear from members of our human resources team, Rhonda Robinson, Jamal Malik Jones, and Chatia Shelby, in conversation with our host Reema about our work to embed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, or DEI, into the very DNA of our affiliate.

This podcast is meant to discuss why DEI is essential in all organizations, how to make DEI foundational and a living conversation within your organization, and most importantly, why DEI is not a tagline, it's a way of being.

#### Reema Saleh:

On today's podcast, we have three individuals from the human resources team at Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford, to discuss the topic of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Can each of you please introduce yourself and what you do within your role at Easterseals?

#### Rhonda Robinson:

Hello, my name is Rhonda Robinson, and I am the Senior Director of Human Resources for Easterseals.

#### Chatia Shelby:

Hello, I'm Chatia Shelby. I'm the HR Manager for Easterseals.

#### Jamal Malik Jones:

My name is Jamal Malik Jones. I'm the HR Generalist here at Easterseals.

#### Reema Saleh:

Rhonda, what is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, usually abbreviated as DEI? And why is it important at Easterseals?

#### Rhonda Robinson:

DEI was actually created in response to a need just to better engage with our staff and address issues related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. We strongly believe that, by fostering an environment that is welcoming to all, as we do with our students, we can truly unlock the full potential of our team, and we also want to make sure that we're here to assist them in thriving in what they do on a day-to-day.

Reema Saleh:

Why is that important not just at Easterseals, but in all workplaces?

Rhonda Robinson:

It's become important because our focus really needs to be on ensuring equitable representation as well as opportunities for all individuals. We think that the central premise of DEI is truly centered around the idea that every individual deserves a fair treatment as well as an equal opportunity regardless of their background or identity.

And we also strive towards creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all people, especially those who have historically been underrepresented or discriminated against due to their identity or disability. As you know, one of our pillars is disability. We want to make sure that not only do we represent it internally, with our staff, with our students, but also holistically as an organization.

Reema Saleh:

There are many aspects to all of your roles as HR professionals, but one important initiative that you've spearheaded together is a commitment to raising awareness about DEI. Chatia, could you tell me how and why this initiative was started?

Chatia Shelby:

Well, just to piggyback a little bit on what Rhonda said, under her leadership, we formed a new HR team, and after we came together, we really assessed some of the gaps that were in the organization and we quickly realized that DEI was one of the gaps that we wanted to help support for Easterseals.

So we worked together. Jamal Malik and I came together to really think about, how can we start this initiative for Easterseals because what we stand for, we want to make sure that we're not just seeing it, but we're living it as well. We wanted to kick that off with a small initiative because DEI is a huge undertaking within itself, but we wanted to start somewhere.

We teamed up together and looked at what we can do first. And with anything, as long as you have leadership endorsement and support, you really can drive it through. Under the leadership of Rhonda and Sara Ray, who were very supportive from beginning to now, we were able to collectively come together and try to build something that represents everyone that work at Easterseals and bring awareness so that we could learn and foster and co-create a community where everyone is appreciated.

Reema Saleh:

What are some of the ways that you all are raising awareness about DEI at Easterseals?

Jamal Malik Jones:

Right now, we collaborate with our communications department and Sara Ray to just push out monthly communications to our staff. We also have worked with communications to create a newsletter that will show the monthly themes, DEI themes that we want to acknowledge and celebrate for that month.

What we do there is send it out to our whole entire organization. We receive feedback, and with that feedback, it keeps that open conversation, that open dialogue with our staff. We want to hear back from them to let them know what we can improve upon, or if there's something that we weren't even aware of, that they could let us know so that we could always keep that DEI conversation going.

Reema Saleh:

That's great to hear. Can I ask what DEI has meant to Easterseals staff or the wider community?

Chatia Shelby:

This initiative that we started, we wanted to make sure staff had a voice in the way it looked, the way it rolled out, the way it stayed alive in the organization. My takeaway from the feedback that we've solicited from staff is that DEI means to them that there is a sense of belonging in a larger community, a sense of acceptance and appreciation of differences, and one of the takeaways that I've received from the feedback, whether it was tough love or just a congratulatory email for starting the initiative, is that they want to make sure that it stays alive and it's tangible throughout the organization.

Reema Saleh:

Rhonda or Jamal, do you have anything to add on what DEI means for Easterseals?

Rhonda Robinson:

One of the themes that our new HR team has really tried to be consistent on is bringing Unity among the teams and the programs. Jamal Malik talked about how DEI has been represented in different programs, but we were looking and are continually looking for ways, and not just in the DEI space, but in all things that we touch related to HR, that there is a consistent, unified front that we're doing what we're doing across all programs, that all are represented and that all belong. That's important to us as a team that we make sure that communication that is given is not just for a specific space or a specific county, but it's across our organization as a whole.

Reema Saleh:

Yeah, I think that's such an important point on how to make sure that it doesn't get siloed or stuck in just one space.

Rhonda Robinson:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Reema Saleh:

Jamal, what do you think it's meant to the Easterseals community?

Jamal Malik Jones:

Well, I think they have been really looking for a HR department to really engage with them. I don't think they've ever had this level of engagement before. As soon as we started receiving feedback from after we launched it, I felt like that was already a success in itself because we were already answering or meeting their needs as a HR department.

Reema Saleh:

How long has this initiative been going on?

Jamal Malik Jones:

We recently rolled it out in April of this year, and so far, we are on our second month. Like Chatia mentioned before, we've gotten feedback and we are constantly trying to improve upon this initiative as this initiative is always going to be ... It is the open conversation.

Lately, our rollout has just been monthly newsletters with themes, and then, within that newsletter we celebrate some of our staff that might fit underneath that DEI theme or just acknowledge or educate our staff about things that they wouldn't have necessarily known before. It's a newsletter that is meant to

celebrate, educate, and bring awareness to our community about the different types of people and the different types of activities that we have going on, and just to bring it back to that message of just truly unifying our organization.

Reema Saleh:

Yeah, that's a wonderful way to characterize it, like an open conversation for people. Can I ask how you feel the programs evolved since it's been rolled out?

Rhonda Robinson:

One of the things that I believe has really been helpful for us, Reema, is we decided, with the leadership support of Sara Ray, to roll it out to the programs, first to the leaders. I think having that inclusive relationship collaboration with our leaders initially before we rolled it out to all staff was really important because our leaders are really the face of our organization.

We wanted to ensure we had that partnership with them before we rolled this out. We did get really good feedback from our leaders, and again, it's looking for that consistency and unified front as an organization, but one of the things we've learned as an HR team is, if we are able to collaborate with our leaders right off the bat about initiatives, benefits, training and development, then, we are actually halfway into our goal, because once the leaders are on board, they are actually our brand ambassadors for whatever we are trying to actually launch.

Reema Saleh:

Yeah, that makes complete sense. I want to ask, why do you think the human resources team is the right team to lead this initiative?

Rhonda Robinson:

We all, the six of us that are on this team, small but mighty, bring our own DEI, actually, to the table. We all have, as you've heard earlier, different backgrounds, experience, expertise, and I think that we all have great passion around DEI as well as HR in general, so we are strong HR professionals that understood the need in our organization, but also already too, as Jamal Malik and Chatia have talked about, roll up our sleeves and really get in to understand what the need was for the organization.

It is and has paid off because we're not just the HR team, but we're a part of this very unique organization and want to make sure that we are all also bringing our own values and our own expertise to the table to ensure that our DEI initiative is successful.

Reema Saleh:

I definitely want to ask more about that. What does DEI mean to each of you as HR professionals?

Rhonda Robinson:

What I will add, I actually have a background in non-profit, as I do today, but also in for-profit. In corporate America, DEI was not as close and dear to my heart, I'll have to say that, and I'm just being honest when I say that. I felt like it was definitely an initiative that was important, but it didn't really speak to me, and it wasn't until I came into the private sector and sitting in this seat, understanding the work that we do every single day in all of our pillars, that it became very near and dear to me.

I love when I go into our locations and I see the work that our staff do on a day-to-day for the clients that we serve. DEI became extremely important to me because we want to make sure that we're reaching not only our team, but also the people that we serve. I became even more committed to this initiative personally because our team, actually, they do some very rewarding and very, very exhilarating work on a

day-to-day basis, and I think the smallest thing that we can do as an HR team is to support them in their efforts.

Reema Saleh:

I think that's wonderful to hear. I feel like sometimes, HR things in non-profit settings can feel a little top down, but I think that's wonderful to hear how it's more supportive, how it's often staff initiated.

Rhonda Robinson:

Yes. It's also one of the things Chatia and I, as the leaders of HR, we have really tried to make it mandatory and important for our team, the HR team, to really get into our sights.

Reema Saleh:

Yeah, I think that's really important, integrating it into just different aspects of work.

Chatia Shelby:

Absolutely, just reflecting on the question, Reema, that you add, and for me, in that reflection, I think back, and DEI have become very amplified over the last few years in the workplace in general.

What's more important is not just using DEI as a tagline or what have you, but it is important to make sure that we have a welcoming and productive environment for all of our employees throughout their full employee life cycle, so from the time that they click our website to the time that they may exit the organization, we want to make sure that there's inclusivity and they feel like they are a part of a organization where they have a contribution to their overall success. Jamal Malik, what does it mean to you? I would love to hear.

Jamal Malik Jones:

Yeah, DEI is very important to me, especially because I work very closely with our recruitment process, so I just know what a person coming into the organization might be looking for when they are trying to see if an organization is for them or not for them. I remember, when I was looking for jobs, I would always scour a website of an organization looking for, do they have DEI programs or any other programs where I can see myself in them and see myself actually in an organization.

Part of why I think DEI is important, especially when it comes to that recruiting process, is people want to know if they're going to be in a safe, diverse environment where they feel valued and respected, and I think, with us kicking off this DEI program for the whole entire organization versus just programs, it gives us an opportunity to really invite in a whole world of different staff who ultimately could be a positive for Easterseals.

Reema Saleh:

I think that's so important. The way you described DEI, it makes Easterseals a more welcoming environment for people who are already here, but also that it makes it more attractive for new people to come and for people to just bring those other talents, those new perspectives into the workplace.

Rhonda Robinson:

Absolutely. With recruiting specifically, I think it's definitely going to be an added bonus. I recently have been doing a lot of recruitment fairs and whatnot, so I get a lot of those questions, like, "What are you doing for this," and, "What are you doing for that?," and I'm glad that we put this initiative together, because now, I can speak on it,

Reema Saleh:

I think you've all raised a lot of really important points on, DEI is not always easy. There's not a one size fits all approach. And Chatia, you talk a lot about this where DEI can sometimes become a slogan, something that doesn't always have the backing that it needs. It can get muddled. How do you think your team is keeping DEI real and tangible to people?

Chatia Shelby:

Thank you for asking that question, Reema. If anybody knows Chatia, you all hear me say, "I'm keeping it real," because as I said before, we don't want this to just be printed and posted somewhere or put on the shelf and just forgot about, so we need to remember that that fostering diversity, equity and inclusion is an ongoing process.

When we get tired or when we get busy, we still have to keep it in the forefront of us. We have to stay committed. We have to make sure that we're always looking at ways that we can continue to evolve this initiative throughout the organization at all levels.

Reema Saleh:

Rhonda, what's keeping it real look like for you?

Rhonda Robinson:

What I will say in conjunction to that is being intentional. It's really important for us as an HR team for this not to just be a tagline. We've already come up with the next DEI on, I'll say, project, we're going to roll out in the summer, more to come this week, actually, but an all Easterseals summer outing for our entire staff as well as their families, and that is an opportunity for us to be intentional on presenting DEI in-house, though, really giving back to our staff, celebrating them for all that they do, but just a day of fun a day to relax with not only their colleagues but also with their families. Reema, we want to make sure that we are being extremely intentional with this initiative and that will be some work on our part as an HR team.

I also want to just mention a little bit about the recruiting piece. We do tell Jamal Malik quite often how important his role is in our team as well as in our organization, but we want to add this DEI tagline to even our marketing materials for recruiting staff. It's important. We know that it's important for new candidates to understand our stand and our policy on DEI.

It is not just a tagline for us, but we want to make it a part of our brand. There's more work to be done in that space. I think that introducing it to our internal team, our retaining and current employees was really important, but it's also important, as we recruit, as we look for new candidates to be a part of Easterseals, we want that to be a part of our brand and a part of our benefit package. We are the organization and employer of choice, and here are the reasons why DEI will be a part of that as we talk about the why in joining our organization.

Reema Saleh:

Right. I think that intentionality is really important for people. I think you've all highlighted this in some way, but a lot of the DEI initiatives coming out of your department were really supported by leadership at Easterseals. How has that helped you all with this initiative?

Rhonda Robinson:

When I first started with Easterseals, Sara Ray Steolinga, our CEO and president, decided to join our HR team meetings. This was back in June, July of 2022. I think she really thinks that she's on the HR team,

which is an amazing thing for us because it really helps us provide initiatives right to her during our meetings.

She has been extremely supportive in all of our initiatives that we've rolled out, Reema, and we are extremely blessed and very thankful for her support when it comes to presenting it to other members of our senior leadership team. They also have been extremely supportive. They come with great ideas and they all want to be a part to, as well as rolling out the initiatives that the HR team has introduced. We are indeed very, very thankful that we don't get a lot of pushback.

Reema Saleh:

Jamal, I'm going to jump to you. What are ways that staff can be actively involved either at Easterseals or in other organizations looking to place a greater emphasis on DEI?

Jamal Malik Jones:

Like we mentioned previously, they share honest feedback. Sometimes, the feedback is interesting to read, but we appreciate it for what it is because that's coming from their experience and from what they have learned. We really just really try to take it in, don't take it personal, and then, we want to make sure we are also providing responses to that feedback because we don't want them to just think that they're just sending their feedback to a random inbox.

Recommend diverse candidates. We have a wonderful referral program that we try to promote. If we have current staff and they know this is the program that we are trying to promote, we definitely highlight, please promote people within your own community to Easterseals and let them know about the many different programs that they could look into while they are researching Easterseals.

Right now, within the programs, they do have many different employee resource groups. For our academies, they have a Black teacher group that meets up Black History Month to celebrate that, and I'm sure they have other different resource group within those programs. We can always be good allies when it comes to DEI. We always need supportive staff who might not necessarily come from a diverse or a different background than other employees, but they are supportive and they listen and really try to be open to this initiative that we are pushing out.

And then, lastly, something that we do want to work on is just probably training and educating just overall. We are training ourselves and educating ourselves as we are delving deep into DEI. That's definitely another step of just engaging with our staff is, not only do we want to push out this information, but we also want to educate them on something that they may have never known before.

Reema Saleh:

Rhonda or Chatia, do you have anything you'd want to add to that?

Chatia Shelby:

One thing I want to add is, there are many groups. Like Jamal Malik said, create or join the employee resource group. That can happen within the walls of Easterseals and also venturing out into the community. Whether there are groups that can be created and started on your block or in whatever community, whether it's church or whatever, DEI needs to live in every space of our lives, so finding different ways to get involved and build connection. Professionally, I would say there are a lot of groups on LinkedIn that our staff can get involved in to learn more about DEI and where they stand and what's their learning edge with that, so staying in tune with DEI in every aspect of our lives and finding different ways to introduce it to the greater communities.

Rhonda Robinson:

Reema, the one thing that I would add, and I do agree with both Jam Malik and Chatia, if I look at DEI from a holistic perspective outside of Easterseals, I would say to any HR team, even a CEO, CFO, it's important to have the supportive leadership when you're rolling out initiatives like this. It's also important to have a plan.

One of the things that, Chatia and Jamal Malik, I watched them do, is really make time. They did a lot of research ensuring that we were supportive, but also being very respectful in representing all of the different DEI characteristics that we have as an organization.

The advice or guidance I would give, just if you're thinking about presenting DEI as an initiative, is to really do the work. Jamal Malik and Chatia did the behind the scenes roll up your sleeve work to ensure that this would not just be a three-month thing, but that this would live on for years and decades to come for our organization.

Reema Saleh:

What hopes do you have to grow the program for the future?

Rhonda Robinson:

One of the things that we've talked about in the past, and we know that it will be important for us to do this, is adding ambassadors from our different programs to this initiative.

Having a face of others that are in programs to represent our DEI initiative will be really, really helpful. It will be that person that sits as a change agent within their local programs to partner with HR to roll out future initiatives and projects. One of the things that we will do for the Easterseals summer outing in August is we will reach out and ask for volunteers, solicit volunteers to assist us in this project.

We cannot, as an HR team do any of this by ourselves. It's important that we partner with our leaders as well as staff in our programs to roll out any initiative from the HR space. Having that firsthand frontline people that are in our programs to really partner with us will just make the initiative and the projects even more successful.

Reema Saleh:

That's wonderful to hear looking forward. This has been pretty successful at Easterseals, and I want to know what lessons you all hope that other organizations can take from this?

Chatia Shelby:

It's never too late to start. No matter how limited the resources are within the organization, there are always ways that DEI can be embedded, and two, any organization, I think that non-profits may struggle the most would say, like Rhonda said earlier, but even with limited resources or capacity, DEI, it is there. If non-profits look at their mission, it's already embedded in there, and now, let's take these words off the paper and put them into action and make sure that we are working towards DEI in whatever their mission is and everything that they do.

Jamal Malik Jones:

Just piggybacking off of Chatia, I would say just also being consistent in communication with the staff in regard to DEI. DEI could easily get lost underneath the carpet with other things that employees are focused on. One thing, I think, we're really great about is just being consistent with our communication, whether it's us pushing things out to our organization or us receiving feedback and making sure that we are responding to them, letting them know that they are heard and it is something that is on our radar. It could easily get lost.



Rhonda Robinson:

Thank you, Jamal Malik. I think I'll add, just, to you and Chatia, two words that ring through my head as we've had this conversation today, and that's consistency and communication.

As a team, we have really looked for opportunities, and we continue to look for opportunities to remain consistent and to also be very communicative. And then, the last thing I'll add is that we do have this open-door policy with our staff. We have a staff, as Chatia talked about, that are very vocal when they need to be, and we have been really blessed to have opportunities and platforms where they've given feedback, and we've taken some of that feedback for the better, right? Because it is our goal, not to just have an HR initiative, but to also ensure that our staff are well represented, that they also are heard.

We have a "Ask HR" mailbox that our staff are able to send concerns, but they are also able to provide feedback when it comes to things like DEI, or benefits, or training and development, or, "Where's my latest check?"

From everything and anything, and I think the whole goal that I'm really trying to hone in on is that partnership with our staff, with our leaders, is really important. DEI will not be successful if we are not in partnership with all of our staff and our leaders, and it has definitely taken the support of our leadership, our senior leadership as well as the leaders of our organization, to be in the place that we are.

I believe that because we're at this place and we've done the work and we're continually doing the work, that our DEI initiative will continue to be remarkable, exceptional, but also, it will be a pillar part of what we do as a brand.

Reema Saleh:

I'm so glad you touched on that. I feel like it's the thing where DEI has mattered at leadership levels, but also just at staff levels. That seems to be how you all have made it this consistent thing and it's not running out of energy.

Rhonda Robinson:

Yeah. If you've ever worked with a Jamal Malik or Chatia, you will never run out of energy. The ideas the creativity, it just continues to flow.

Chatia Shelby:

I have to say it starts from the top. We feed off of Rhonda's energy.

Jamal Malik Jones:

Absolutely.

Chatia Shelby:

Absolutely.

Jamal Malik Jones:

Absolutely.

Chatia Shelby:

It's collective.

Jamal Malik Jones:

We all know what we're doing is essentially good for the organization. It's not one of those projects where we feel like, oh, another project. No, this is exciting. We get to engage with our staff. I admit, I think that's why I joined human resources because I like to talk to everyone, I like to know what's going on. This is just something that is exciting, and hopefully, that energy from us is trickling into our staff because we want them to also get excited about it.

Sara Ray Stoelinga:

Thank you for listening to this episode of our podcast, featuring members of our human resources team, Rhonda Robinson, Jamal Malik Jones, and Chatia Shelby in conversation with our host, Reema.

This is the fifth episode in an ongoing series exploring the pillars of our work, disability, and early learning, and the undergirding that makes that work successful. This episode was produced by Silva Content Solutions. For more information about Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford, please visit our website and follow us on social media.