

## Episode 3 Executive Culture: Diversity & Inclusion, withCarolynn Johnson

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**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:00:00] I'm a black woman. Based on the average age of the rooms I'm in from a leadership perspective, I'm young. I'm 4 foot 10, right? So like all the things that people might say, "Oh, that's not good" based on what leadership characteristics usually are. Yeah. I'm kind of like on the other side of the line. Um, part of my full potential is leading and not leading as a woman, not leading as a black woman, but simply leading.

I am well aware that women like me, like Stacey Abrams, we are the norm. If people will look at our talents and not our gender, our skin color, or our height, but look at our abilities and look at how effective we are. We are the norm. When you look at it that way.

**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:00:48] Welcome to The Business 360 Podcast where we will take a 360 degree view of all things business in under 30 minutes. I'm Rushab Kamdar, an entrepreneur, speaker, consultant. Now, I can add podcaster to the list and coming soon YouTuber. Oh man, saying this out loud, I'm starting to question my life decisions

On today's podcast, we are welcoming Carolynn Johnson, who is the chief executive officer of DiversityInc Media. Now, if you haven't heard of DiversityInc and you already a working professional in a fortune 200 company, I guarantee you, your company either knows of, or is a client of DiversityInc.



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For the last 20 years, DiversityInc has been the gold standard of measurement for effective diversity and inclusion. Through its benchmarking and consulting services, the company advises leaders of fortune 200 companies about important issues related to diversity and inclusion and how those issues are directly tied to profitability and competitiveness.

Carolyn herself has an amazing resume. Prior to becoming DiversityInc CEO, in her 17 years with the company, she's also been the chief operating officer and the chief revenue officer. Carolyn also has been the director of the DiversityInc foundation, a nonprofit that funds scholarships to financially disadvantaged students.

On top of that, she's also on the board of directors for Inroads, an organization that aims to fix the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in corporate America. Naturally with all these achievements. Our conversation with Carolyn today is going to focus on executive leadership. Carolyn, welcome to The Business 360 Podcast.

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:02:27] So, Rushab, first, thank you for having me. Um, I, uh, I joke with you all the time, but I'm going to say it on camera. Uh, best class president one could ever have. Um, we, we, we, we, we're all lucky to have you, um, continue to be amazed by, by, by your success. So thank you for having me today.



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**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:02:46] Thank you so much. And for those of you that don't know what Carolyn is talking about, we did our MBA together. And so she's just talking about our time while we were in, in that program.

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:02:56] The executive MBA program, the power house.

**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:02:59] The power house. Yes. I'm thrilled to have you on. And, um, you know, what I want to do is for our listeners, I would love for you to describe DiversityInc and its mission.

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:03:12] Sure. Uh, so simply put, um, DiversityInc is a data consulting and strategic advisory company. Um, our mission is now and has always been in the 20 years that we have been around, uh, to bring education and clarity to the business benefits of diversity. Um, so here is how it works, Rushab. Well, we extract valuable data from the largest and most prominent companies. If you go to our website, diversity.com, you will see companies like ATNT, PricewaterhouseCoopers, EY, Boeing, um, Wells Fargo. Um, across industries, um, whether they are focused on US operations or their global entities, um, we have a trusting relationships with them where they give us confidential proprietary data.

Um, executives from these companies share that data because they want to compete. You best human capital, um, uh, competition in the marketplace. Um, and we know that, uh, the talent that is in the marketplace right now is increasingly



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non-male and increasingly non-white. Uh, we also publish two websites, diversityInc.com, which I just mentioned a few moments ago and then diversityIncBestPractices.com. Um, and your listeners can learn more about it, about both of those websites by just visiting diversityInc.com or clicking on my bio on LinkedIn.

**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:04:31] That's amazing. So, as I mentioned in the intro, you have 17 years at DiversityInc and you wore many hats while you were there. You've now been the CEO for, I think, a year. Describe your journey to becoming the CEO.

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:04:46] On May 7th, 2019, right? Um, at Cipriani on Wall Street, which is where we typically have our event, um, I was named CEO at the annual DiversityInc top 50 dinner. Um, it was awesome. In the room, there were 26 CEOs and other senior leadership, um, uh, members of senior leadership teams that represent 7 million US employees.

And you should know that, um, the data that we collect and analyze is for US operations only. So 950 corporate decision makers were present or present. Um, I am a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. hence the hat. I'm super proud. Um, and my own international president of the organization was there.

Um, but the chapter of my life title leading at DiversityInc didn't start there, Rushab. The journey began in 2010 where my now founder and chairman Luke



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Visconti, um, tapped me to be his successor. And so, um, this has been a very long succession plan, uh, where we were very thoughtful about the areas of the business that I needed to really focus on to make sure that when he did hand me the baton, I was ready to effectively lead.

Uh, I was honored and scared all at once. Um, I also didn't know if I wanted the responsibility, right? Sometimes people tell you they see greatness in you. You don't see it. And you're like, I don't know if I can do this. Um, because what he made look so easy day in and day out. I was like, can I do that? Um, so at the moment, um, I was pulled on the surface, but beneath I was going absolutely insane.

**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:06:25] And you know, to, to go on that, that point, uh, you said the succession plan was going on for almost 10 years. And in that time period, a lot can change. So what challenges did you face while you were climbing that top seat? Um, and how did you overcome those challenges?

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:06:43] Right. So, um, you know, I think, you know, there, nothing is a coincidence, right? And so we talked about the timeline, we talked about expectations, um, how he would support my growth. Um, how he would serve as a mentor, a coach. Um, sponsorship wasn't something that we were talking about a lot then, um, we talked about it a lot about a lot now. Um, but just



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an overall support system. Um, and so I got comfortable with the idea based on the commitment that he made and said yes.

Um, and then as we know the best well laid plans, uh, you know, they go awry. Hey, so, um, in May 2014, uh, Luke had a stroke and all while I was still learning the business. Um, this rocked my world and it changed everything. Um, personally and professionally. At the time I had a two-year-old daughter. Um, Luke and his wife, Nancy, are a set of godparents to, um, at the time one daughter, but now I have two children.

Um, and so it was hard, but if I was going to be the strong support system that he and his family, um, needed, that the business needed, that the space of diversity and inclusion needed, um, there was not going to be any time for crying crying, right? The training wheels officially came off. Okay? Um, and with Luke paralyzed on his left top, his completely, um, on his left side, I had to lead, learn, sell and execute simultaneously. Um, and I've got to tell you, Rushab, that in May 2014, my life changed forever.

**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:08:19] Well, I mean, that's a testament to leadership, right? Uh, at the time of trials and tribulation, how someone overcomes these adversities, um, you know, and so now you took that mantle for the past year. You, by title, are the CEO. Not many people have been in the shoes of a CEO. So as CEO, what does your day to day look like?



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**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:08:42] Um, well, it's not glamorous at all. Um, it is a battle for time. It's a battle for time. Um, um, and iron will to make each moment, each engagement, each opportunity count. And, um, and that doesn't matter who's sitting across from me, whether it is a client, um, whether it is one of my coworkers who is going through something because, uh, dealing with COVID-19. Like, I am fortunate. I am blessed that I have a family to go home to. Yeah, some folks that they live alone, um, they don't have a support system. And so making sure that I have time to make every person feel like they are important, that they count for what is important to them is also important to me. I would tell you that that's where I spend a lot of my time. The work is easy. Connecting with people and making sure that they feel valued, that's, that's the harder part, but that's the part that's the most rewarding.

**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:09:40] Well, that's a good transition to the next question, which is soft skills, such as people skills, social skills, emotional skills, and character, and then combined that with emotional intelligence, which is one's ability to be self-aware of their own emotions and other's emotions. Those are highly valued today in a leader. So how do you express soft skills and emotional intelligence, um, as, uh, the CEO of your company?

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:10:05] Well first, um, first things first, I do it my way. Right? Um, you know, there's this whole concept of fake it till you make it right. Um, and while I was figuring out, cause a lot of times, uh, you know what you're



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feeling, but you don't know what to call it right? And so I make sure that my intentions are clear upfront. Um, and I make sure people know that I am not warm and fuzzy, right? But when I am doing this or saying this, this is, this is what I mean, this is how I intend, this is what I'm trying to do to help. I think that first and foremost always helps.

Um, and you know, these skills can not be taught, right? You have to be in the moment, you have to experience people. You can't be on autopilot. You can't listen to what others say about them. If you're going to be an effective leader, you have to experience people as they are. You must meet them where they are and don't overwhelm them with the things you think are important before them. But share with them what you think will help them get to the next best, the next level of what their best selves or their best professional selves are. Um, and then you add COVID to the equation and, uh, it takes a lot of energy to connect with people through a camera, right? Uh, but you have to figure a way to do it.

And so you find yourself researching organizational cultures and individual styles a lot more, just so you can connect with people if it's important. Um, and so to express my soft skills, um, I seek feedback. Um, I observe and I listen to those who have, um, an exemplary rapport with others. Um, further, I'm committed to listening more than I speak, and it is absolutely important to lead with empathy.



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**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:11:49] Well, you talked a little bit about people, which brings me to culture. And I know you mentioned culture as well in your answer. I want to kind of take a deeper dive into that. Culture is integral to employee morale and thereby the success of any company. So how would you describe the culture at DiversityInc? Not only under your leadership, but also under COVID?

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:12:09] So the good news is that, uh, um, we are a group of folks that, uh, we're already, um, working onsite at clients', um, canvases, um. We were already working at, um, you know, from different states, right? Because all the talent you need, any CEO will tell you all the talent you need is not going to be in the city or state you were headquarter.

Okay? So, um, we were already used to working remotely, um, but still, um, together, uh, you know, good relationships. And so, uh, that was, you know, a plus for us. Um, and I, I've got to tell you that, uh, from the time that I took over as the CEO to now, um, unfortunately we've seen some folks go, but some amazing people have joined. And so the same way that the marketplace looks at our assessment as the gold standard for data and consulting, my team is the gold standard for, uh, a truly effective, smart. Um, uh, can do, uh, and, and caring group of people that understand culture and work with leaders to make sure that they understand there's too and can make it its best.



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Um, so to your question, I consider the culture at diversity to be that one of unquestionable trust.

**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:13:29] Now I mentioned culture under COVID. Speaking of COVID, DiversityInc is doing well in the midst of this pandemic, which is a testament to you, especially in your first year as a CEO. But that being said, are there any challenges that you have faced during this time?

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:13:45] Yes. Um, a lot. I faced a lot of challenges. Um, the Diversity top 50 event, uh, we, we started it in 2009 and, um, in 2020, that was the first year that we had to go virtual. So not being able to be in the room, feel the excitement of the companies that ranked for the first time or went up on the list or were number one. Um, that was a challenge. Um, we often in this interesting world where there's more bad news than good, um. Not being able to celebrate the good work that people had done, that was a challenge. So that, that I would tell you that that was probably the, the, the greatest one for me. In my business utopia, reports are generated on time, colleagues are never sick, uh, business and family obligations never collide. So for me, the common challenge is dealing with the world the way it is rather than the way we would like it to be. Um, and it's unfortunate, I have to say that, um, the right type of awakening took the murder of, of George Floyd in the street like it's not filmed. Um, and, you know, I just, I, I've, I've seen the world from a very different lens because it's about data.



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It's not about emotion, it's not about marketing campaigns, but I am finally seeing a change in behavior and policy as a result of the very unfortunate loss of that man's life and what it has, what is done to his family and what it has done to friends, um, to his community, um, and, and to many others. But, uh, we have been doing this work and where we were the right organization at the right times help companies figure out how to navigate, um, what better looks like from a corporate social responsibility perspective.

**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:15:43] This question is a personal perspective and opinion question that touches on today's culture and political climate. You are a woman and a person of color, who is a CEO of an organization that partners with fortune 200 companies. What would you like to say about that?

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:16:00] A couple of things. First, I'm a woman. I'm a black woman, right? Um, and so I think that sometimes we have to be very intentional about owning who we are and not that you were doing it, Rushab, but I'm proud of that. Um, and so the intersectional issues that come with being a black woman, and let's just talk about a couple other things. I'm a black woman I'm, you know, based on the age, the average age of the rooms I'm in from a leadership perspective, I'm young. I'm 4 foot 10, right? So like all the things that people might say, "Oh, that's not good." Uh, based on what leadership characteristics usually are. Yeah. I'm kind of like on the other side of the line. Uh, but yet and still, um, I



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think that, um, that is something that, that uniquely qualifies me to have the kinds of conversations that these leaders need to hear.

And so that reminds me of a conversation that I had with, uh, the, uh, the CEO of Southern Company. His name is Ton Fanning. Tom fanning. And the theme of the 2019, um, event was Unapologetic Leadership and dude is unapologetic, but he is approachable and there's a difference. Um, he's a really down to earth. He's committed to treating every employee fairly and allowing each person to realize their full potential. Um, part of my full potential, um, is leading and not leading as a woman, not leading as a black woman, but simply leading. On the opposite side of that coin, however, I am well aware that women like me, like Stacey Abrams, a politician, a lawyer, voting rights acts, um, voting rights activist in Georgia, um, who is like this center of all things powerful. Um, like, like Dolores Huerta an advocate for immigrant and Latino rights in the United States. Like the late Wilma Mankiller, who was the first female chief of the Cherokee nation. These women, myself, and many, many, many more are considered rare. Truth is we are the norm.

When people open their eyes, ears, and hearts to see us, we are the norm. If people will look at our talents and not our gender, our skin color, or our height, but look at our abilities and look at how effective we are. We are the norm. When you look at it that way.



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**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:18:29] So you brought up that usually in a room full of CEOs, you are usually one of the youngest. Uh, so you identify yourself as a millennial.

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:18:38] Yes, sir.

**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:18:40] What advice do you have for any aspiring executive and/or entrepreneur that is in the fairly young age spectrum?

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:18:51] The advice that I would offer is one, understand and give a lot of attention to your purpose and what your power is, right? Because without understanding those two things, you really can't be effective. Um, own the fact that your purpose will change over time. Um, it will be added to along the way you may accomplish certain things. Um, I interviewed Arne Sorenson, the CEO of Marriott International, right before he went out to have surgery, um, because he had pancreatic cancer. Um, he's doing very well now. Um, and one of my favorites, um, leaders hands down. Without understanding your purpose and without being able to attach your passion to that, you're not going to be able to feel good about the work that you do. And you're not going to be able to draw others in who are destined to do that same work. So first things first, uh, you know, before you identify a company to go work for a department in which you're going to take over and understand your purpose, understand your passion.



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And I would also say that be kind, right? You never know, and especially in this environment, you never know what people are going through. Um, but you can make all the difference in their day in a good way just by being kind. Um, and pulling on, on that very thing in you that is kind anyway. I think sometimes people are mean because it's like the pack mentality. Uh, go against that, be kind, and you will start to create, um, a group of supporters, um, of people that when you're not in the room, they'll have nothing but great things to say about you.

Um, when you're not in the room and there's an opportunity for you that you've never dreamed you'd get, that they will be putting your name in the hat to be able to take it on. So I would say, understand your purpose, your passion, and how they're aligned and be kind that is advice I would give to anyone. Um, no matter if you work in the mailroom or if you are the chair of the board for a publicly traded company.

**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:20:55] Carolyn, keep up the amazing, great work that you and DiversityInc are doing. Uh, you all are change makers and making an impact in this world. And with that, I really want to thank you for being a guest on The Business 360 Podcast.

**Carolynn Johnson:** [00:21:10] Thank you for having me, Rushab. Take care and have a great day.



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**Rushab Kamdar:** [00:21:16] It's important for executives to ask, "What type of culture do we want to create in our company?" Now I've owned many businesses, and I can tell you for a fact, that company culture is the most important factor to the success of a business. The reason is because culture touches on a number of areas. A company with good culture should make the people feel respected, valued, appreciated, and accepted.

So what does this mean? When the company's culture is telling you that you are respected, they're saying to you that you have a voice and are being heard. When they tell you that you are valued, they are saying that you have an integral part to the business's mission. When they tell you that you are appreciated, they're saying that your hard work is being noticed.

Now, when they tell you that you are accepted, that means regardless of your background, race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion or physical appearance, you are welcome and viewed as an equal. This is called diversity and inclusion. What many executives and business owners fail to realize is how diversity and inclusion not only improves the culture, but how it also improves the bottom line.

The funny thing is that many businesses that have implemented diversity and inclusion measures in their company have actually not done enough. That's a pie in the face. When we talk about diversity in a workplace. We're talking about



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individuals with different genders, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation, bringing a unique and valued perspective to the company.

And when we're talking about inclusion in a workplace, we're talking about making all employees feel respected, valued, appreciated, and accepted. In other words, the employees are empowered. So you might be asking, how does diversity inclusion actually improve the company and its bottom line? Well, if you're in front of me and you asked me that, my first response would be well, who cares how much it improves your bottom line. Just implementing a diverse and inclusive environment should be reward enough.

That being said, there are financial advantages. So let me tell you how. A diverse and inclusive company culture creates trust in the company and its leadership. Trust will lead to employees feeling comfortable and expressing unique viewpoints from their different backgrounds. These unique viewpoints will help in two areas. First, it will foster new ideas and innovation. Second, it will lead to better decision-making. Now you put all these positives together and you're going to have a motivated workforce who are willing to go that extra mile and therefore increasing the performance, which results in higher profits.

Even more importantly, having excellent company culture that promotes diversity and inclusion helps with mental health. Now, imagine you work in a company that has a toxic environment, you won't trust the company, you won't express your



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viewpoints. With the lack of employee engagement, there won't be any ideas shared, stifling innovation. You're going to be demotivated and you're going to do the bare minimum. So to hit the point home, I'm going to throw some numbers at you. Now, this is research conducted from Deloitte, Gartner, BCG and McKinsey. First, diverse companies enjoy two and a half times higher cash flows from their employees. Second, diverse management teams have had a 19% increase in revenue. Third, in a company with two teams who want ethically diverse and one that's not, the ethically diverse team outperforms it by 35%. And forth, again, if you have two teams in a company, one that's gender diverse and one that's not gender diverse, the gender diverse teams are 19% more likely to outperform the other team.

I can keep throwing numbers your way. But you get the point. It's our job to keep moving in the right direction. Let's become change makers.

Thank you for joining us on The Business 360 Podcast. To learn more about our guests, go to [thinkbusiness360.com](https://www.thinkbusiness360.com). In life, I follow two things that keep me grounded. Number one, if you only listen to someone's successes and not their failures, you've only heard half the story and number two, compete with yourself and help everyone. You stay classy, business heroes.



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