

## Agency for Change Podcast: Lillian Forsyth, Co-Founder and CEO, Lead With Equity

### **Lillian Forsyth:**

No one knew exactly what they were doing, or where they were going when they first started.

### **Announcer:**

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

### **Lyn Wineman:**

In today's climate it isn't enough for businesses to create policies around diversity and inclusion, because consumers are asking more of companies they do business with. But I can tell you it can be really challenging for leaders to know where to start, how to lead an organization through that journey, and perhaps most importantly, how to cement inclusion and equity into the fabric of their company culture. So today's guest is helping leaders do exactly that with her organization, Lead with Equity. Through coaching, workshops and consulting, she and her co-founder help business leaders affect real change, engage and retain those in underrepresented populations, and hold themselves accountable for their results.

### **Lyn Wineman:**

Hi everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president and chief strategist at KidGlov. And on this episode of the Agency for Change podcast, we're speaking with Lillian Forsyth, co-founder and CEO of Lead With Equity, which helps people develop the skills and mindsets they need to lead more effectively, inclusively and equitably. Lillian, welcome to the podcast.

### **Lillian Forsyth:**

Thanks Lyn. I'm excited to be here.

### **Lyn Wineman:**

I am excited to connect with you. You have such an interesting career that I just can't wait to hear about Lillian, but for our listeners who aren't familiar, can you tell us a little bit about Lead With Equity?

### **Lillian Forsyth:**

Yeah, so I am co-founder and CEO of Lead With Equity, and our mission is to help leaders make space for the voices of historically marginalized people to drive change in organizations.

### **Lyn Wineman:**

I love that. I love a good mission statement, Lillian.

### **Lillian Forsyth:**

And what does that actually look like in practice? We do a lot of training and coaching work with leaders. So we help leaders to learn the mindsets, the skills, the behaviors that they need to lead in a way that is more inclusive and more equitable and also effective. And so we do training, we do coaching. And then we also, because we know that training doesn't necessarily drive long-term behavior change, we work with organizations as well on supporting those leaders and holding them accountable. So that looks like things like performance management systems or consulting on leadership development, organizational culture surveys, that type of thing.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Ah, Lillian, that is a good point. It is. And we know this in marketing too. It is one thing to create a great plan. It is completely another thing to execute on that consistently and over the long-term. So that's great to hear that you add in those things. So I understand that you spent some time living and working in Vietnam and Cambodia throughout your 20s. Can you talk to me about that experience and how did that shape who you are as a person, but also influence your decision to found Lead with Equity?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

Yeah. I was speaking with somebody earlier this week who asked about, she said, "My formative years," and what she was referring to was middle and high school, which was formative in a lot of ways. I grew up in St. Louis and that's when I got involved for the first time in this equity and inclusion work around training specifically. But for me really the most formative years were my 20s when I lived in, like you said, Vietnam, Cambodia, and I lived in places that were completely different from the way that I had grown up.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

And a couple of ways that that really shifted the way that I thought about the world. One is learning a different language. We don't have a high value on this in the U.S. I think that's starting to change, but being able to speak in a different language, you start to understand the different perspective that that language gives you access to. So, for example, in Vietnamese they have multiple different words for the word love. English we only have one. And it's interesting. It's like, "Well, why is that? How did that come about? And what does that say about the perspective that you can take when you're using this other language?"

**Lillian Forsyth:**

So that was a big thing. The second even bigger thing was that, so I am a white American. I have very pale skin and red hair and the first place that I moved in Vietnam immediately after I finished college was a smallish city, 150,000 people or so and I had a job at the university. There were less than 10 folks from other countries outside of Vietnam who lived in this town and we all worked at the university. So the experience of just moving around the space was something where on the one hand I was hyper-visible, like people would stare, people would point, people would come up to me on the street and touch my skin or my hair without asking. So I had that experience, and at the same time being invisible in a lot of situations, like people would talk about me right in front of me as if I wasn't in the room.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

And even when I moved to Ho Chi Minh City and it's the biggest city in the country, I lived in a neighborhood where there weren't a lot of folks from outside of Vietnam and so I had a very similar experience, and it was hard. And even though I learned the language, I met friends, I was working in the

community, I never really felt like I belonged. I never really felt like I was fully a part of anything. And I think that experience made me really reflect on the stories I have heard from friends in the U.S. who are not white or friends who have grown up outside the U.S. and moved there at a later age that, "Yeah, I often feel invisible or hyper-visible and I don't belong."

**Lillian Forsyth:**

And so I think it allowed me to have a small window into what that feels like, but at the same time, having to really grapple with the privilege I had, that at any point if I wanted to, I could leave that situation. And so that experience really was very formative for me in how I think about inclusion and equity and belonging, and really set the stage for me to continue my interest in that work over the course of my career, which most recently has been working with Lead with Equity.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow. So Lillian, you actually had a chance to feel what it was like to walk in somebody else's shoes. I can see why you would refer to that as your formative years that really drove you in this. I think often about how hard it is to navigate the American healthcare system or anything to do with the IRS or taxes, or even getting a job and filling out online forms, what that would be like to go through as somebody who was not an English speaker or didn't have access to or practice with those things. So I appreciate that experience.

**Lyn Wineman:**

So I want to take this a little bit further and maybe a little bit personal if you don't mind, but on your website, you talked about how your marriage actually also helped fuel some of your most rewarding growth and understanding of your own biases. If you're comfortable, can you talk about that a little bit more?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

Yeah, I'm happy to. And I think when we talk about bias in the U.S. often the first thing that our minds go to is race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, some of the bigger topics that we're talking about in the diversity and inclusion space. But for me, it was really understanding that we have a lot of different biases based on the way that we grew up, our family history, our culture, the media we're consuming. And so two that I'll highlight that came up in the early years of my marriage.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

So my husband is from El Salvador. He moved to the U.S. when he was in his early 20s and we met when we were in our early 30s. And in the first couple of years of our relationship we had some really challenging and learning conversations for me around education for one. So he hadn't had the opportunity to go to college, although he later told me he had wanted to but wasn't able to do that. And in my family, it's like, education is-

**Lyn Wineman:**

It's just assumed. It's not even an option. Yeah.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

Yeah. I mean, my grandfather has a PhD and put himself through that college as a son of immigrants. And there's that value in my family. And I didn't realize it when I first met my husband, but I had this bias that folks who had more formal education were smarter. And I wouldn't have been able to tell you that if you had asked me, but it showed up sometimes in the ways that I interacted with my husband. And so we had to have that conversation early on. And having that conversation made me reflect on my values and I still value education but being able to broaden what that looks like and think of it more as a privilege and an opportunity and access to money and all kind of connections and other things, as opposed to just a marker of intelligence.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

So that was one. And then the second one was, so during the early years of our marriage, my husband was out of work for a little while. And he worked in the hospitality industry, and I would get so frustrated. I hated the way that he was approaching the job search, because I had worked as a waitress in college. And so I had this experience of you go to the place, you build the relationship, you talk to the person, you give them your resume. You don't take no for an answer. That's what you do. And I told him, "Well, you should try this. It worked for me. It could work for you." And he kept not doing that and kept not doing that. And I didn't understand why.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

And finally he told me that there had been many instances in his work life in that industry where he had been discriminated against blatantly in hiring, in or on the job, in other ways. And so he didn't want to take that approach because he didn't think it would work for him because it hadn't worked in the past. The hard part and the important part of that conversation was that it took him a while to tell me. It took a while for us to actually have that conversation. And what he said was, "I didn't want to bring it up because I felt like you wouldn't understand. Because it's just such a different background and experience from what you've had, I didn't think that you would get it."

**Lillian Forsyth:**

So for me it was an important lesson in... How to say this? It's like when, I will speak from my perspective, I'm coming from a place of privilege, it is incumbent on me to build that trust and to build that connection and to be open to that communication from somebody else. It's not his responsibility to teach me. It's not his responsibility to make that connection. It's incumbent upon me to do that. And that definitely influences the way that I think about my work and things that I tell clients to this day, but our relationship is stronger because of it.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow. Lillian, what a powerful perspective and those examples that you just suggested are maybe they seem subtle things. They're very important things. But sometimes when we think about bias and DE&I, we think about these big issues that we see on the news and you saying that just makes you realize, it actually gives me chills a little bit, that bias happens on such a subtle and kind of a below the radar type of level. And I guess that's what you are doing to help people, but I really appreciate those examples.

**Lyn Wineman:**

And I want to just take this to the next point that it feels like right now because there's so much pressure and such a spotlight on DE&I, many companies just feel like we need to, we have to have these policies in place. But prior to coming on the show, you had talked a little bit about how simply having a policy is

the wrong way to approach this, that you have to bake in the practices a little bit more. I mean, how should we be thinking of DE&I instead?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

Yeah. I have a client who they're doing a big anti-racism project and we're helping them with one part of that. And what they say when they define that term is that it's an approach, it's not an end game. And I love that because that's the way that I think about inclusion and equity. It's, an approach, it's not an end game. Policies are important. I don't want to take away from that, because policy change can change people's behavior because the incentives and the motivation has changed. And policies can implement things like checking for bias in systematic ways so that you make sure that all of us have these biases and we don't necessarily see them, but you make sure you're controlling for them. But if you put the policy in place and then that's it, that's not going to work because life changes, culture changes, needs of your employees change.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

The younger generation is more and more open to this stuff and eager to make change changes in organizations. So the way that I like to think about it is, and there's a reason the company's called Lead with Equity, it's an approach. It's every decision we make, every policy that we're thinking about, every conversation we're having it's who is in the room, who is included, is this driving equity or not. And the more that organizations are able to take that approach to this work, the more it just becomes, "This is the way we do business." And I think if we can get there, that's where we're really going to move the needle on this stuff.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Oh, that is really good. I remember there was a point in time at KidGlov we were really starting to dig deep because I mean, I hate to admit it, but yet also I don't know that KidGlov was unlike a lot of other companies. We kind of felt like, "Well, we're not doing anything wrong, but we weren't working on DE&I." And in the early days there was a lot of conversation around it just feeling icky to talk about. And I know icky is kind of a weird and juvenile thing to say. It feels icky to have these conversations. And a young woman said to me, "But it's important for us to have these conversations."

**Lyn Wineman:**

And I realized early on, I need to have the conversations and there will come a time where I make a mistake and I do something that makes somebody feel like they're being treated improperly. And what I have realized is when they bring it up to me, there's no question. If I've made them feel bad, I've done the wrong thing. And I need to be open to that and learn from it. So I appreciate what you said. So as we think about some of these unrecognized biases, Lillian, what would be some first steps to seeing and addressing the issues?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

Yeah, I think training is a good first step for this kind of stuff. I know a lot of organizations have done training around unconscious bias, but training that incorporates things like storytelling and videos where you can really see into other people's experiences and perspectives, that can be really helpful. Harvard University has their Implicit Association Test which you can take across a lot of different identity areas and just have a better understanding of your own unconscious or implicit bias. So those can be helpful.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

So now you're aware of it, beyond that it's how are we building in, again, those systems so that you're not necessarily going to get rid of all your biases. You might, if you slow down, be more aware of them, but there's a lot of research that says we can't necessarily get rid of them because our brain is wired to make quick decisions. And so the next step after you're aware is then to make sure that you're building in systems where you have different people's perspectives at the table, or you have other ways that you're checking for bias at various points throughout your policy or your decision making or your organization.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Really good points. So now you have some great posts on the website medium.com about equity and inclusion. And there's one in particular that I think is really relevant to our discussion today. It's called, *How do I measure inclusion, equity, and belonging?* And we'll put that link in the show notes, but could you give us a high-level summary of what goes into measuring these things?

**Read the article from Lillian here:**

<https://lillian-forsyth.medium.com/how-do-i-measure-inclusion-equity-and-belonging-695fea931302>

**Lillian Forsyth:**

Yeah. I think that diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, a lot of times they get all lumped together into one, but the outcomes that you're looking at and the thing that you're going to assess are different depending on what you're looking for. So diversity is about representation. And you can measure that by if you have certain outcomes that you're looking for, what is the representation of different types of folks at different levels of your organization? That one is fairly simple. For equity it's really about what are the outcomes of the systems within your organization? So examples like compensation systems, promotion systems, what are the outcomes of that, engagement retention. And two things that you can look at there, one is the actual systems themselves and the data associated.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

So let's say you have promotion data, or you have retention or engagement data. You can look at that and you can look across different demographic markers and say, "Well, who are we retaining and who are we not retaining?" And if you see inequity there, then there's a problem with the system and you can go and look at where that problem might be. The other way that you can look at equity and especially the way that you can look at inclusion, which is all about how people behave in the workplace and the environment that creates, is through employee surveys.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

So you're asking employees and we have one, I believe this is the article you're referring to where it goes through the 10 different things that we look at in the workplace for what employees need to thrive at work, to really feel like they belong and are included and not have equitable opportunities. And so it's anything from wellbeing, to the resources that people have access to, to the recognition people are getting, and you can survey employees to see the impact that those behaviors and those systems are having on them.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Ah, that's really good. So we've talked with a lot of leaders about the impact the pandemic has had on their businesses. And many companies are going remote now, either partially remote, full remote. I think

KidGlov will be hybrid now forever because people have proven that they can work productively from home. I'm wondering if you saw any impact on DE&I initiatives during this time. And do you feel like they took a backseat as companies kind of grappled with this new way of working?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

I feel like no, actually, because I think that with the onset of the pandemic and the people who could work from home being sent to work from home, there were also simultaneous or very close in time events like data coming out about the pandemic in particular with respect to health outcomes, economic and job outcomes, and the disproportionate impact on people of color, on women. The murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and others all in really quick succession, I think made it impossible for white America in particular, but others as well, to ignore those ongoing systemic issues that have been in place for a long time and have been literally killing people of color at higher rates.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

I think because of that, employees from all different backgrounds really started to put more pressure on their employers to do something meaningful when it comes to DE&I. Initially you saw a lot of public statements and that type of thing, but I know from research that employees are looking for real change and have continued to push for that in a number of different ways. And so I do see the clients that I'm working with and the people that I'm talking to as they're crafting their future of work policy, whether it's hybrid or work from home or whatever the policy is, they're thinking about inclusion. They're thinking about how can we construct a new work environment in a way that it's going to work for more people?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

And so I think in some ways it's been an opportunity for companies to rethink the way they do things as we're thinking about do we go back to the office or how do we deal with the office in this new paradigm?

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah. Lillian, I think employees and prospective employees in this kind of workforce development climate have gotten very savvy. Even we've noticed people coming in and not only asking, "Do you have a DE&I policy, a sustainability policy?" But actually asking the question, "Do you have a budget that you put behind these policies?" Because you as a company put a little money behind it or a lot of money, that speaks to the fact that this isn't just surface level, it's really important to you. And I've seen those surveys too that say, "Employees really want the companies they work for to stand for something positive." And we see it from a marketing standpoint too, that consumers are showing higher levels of trust for companies that are more focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and that represent diverse groups in their advertising.

**Lyn Wineman:**

So we're seeing all of that. And I think it's just a positive outcome of maybe several difficult situations. But Lillian, I met you back in January because KidGlov was really lucky to be part of an anti-bias training you facilitated in conjunction with the American Association of Advertising Agencies, and we got to talk a lot about bias in advertising and you were fantastic. Our staff loved you. And that training was really, I think, almost life changing for us. But one of the things we talked about was making space for the voices

which you talked about earlier in the show, making space for the voices of historically marginalized people. And what are ways that people from any industry can help do this?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

Yeah. The first thing is to be aware of who is in the room. Whether it's a real room, a conference room, in your office, it's a virtual room, it's a Slack room, just be aware of who is there and ask the question, why? Why are some people here and some people are not here? Why did we all go to the same college? Why do we all seem to think in the same way? What can we do to change that? The second thing is to look at who's actually taking up space in that room. So I worked for one organization where there were, just as an example, a number of women on the leadership team. And there were also a number of men who were really, really vocal. And so the women we tended not to speak very much and any individual, any leader can notice that and notice what is the dynamic that that creates and what is the outcome of the decisions you're making in those meetings as a result of who is taking up more space and who is taking up less space.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

In that particular leadership team, I also had two people, in particular my boss and another colleague, both of whom were white men, who would specifically ask folks for their perspective, folks who hadn't spoken up much or folks who tended to be a bit more of a listener as I usually am. And the impact that that had was that I felt, and I would share, I always had something to say, I just didn't necessarily need to interrupt one of my male colleagues in order to say it. But when I was proactively invited to share my perspective and that person, that leader, that colleague made sure that everybody was listening and paying attention, it made me feel like what I was saying was truly valued and was truly appreciated by the organization, and I saw this on other colleagues as well, and the dynamic shifts.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

So I think first thing is being aware and second thing is doing something to change it. Not necessarily that everyone who's not speaking up wants to, there might be other ways that folks want to participate and that's great too. You have to be respectful of that. But if there are people who are not taking up much space, it's incumbent upon us to ask why is that and is there a way that we might change that?

**Lyn Wineman:**

Really good points. At the core, that advice does not sound that revolutionary, but it is right. It is. We're all hardwired with these different practices and listening and making sure everyone has an opportunity. It's not necessarily the way we've all been taught to work in business. So I think that's great. So Lillian, for those who are just beginning their journeys of identifying their biases, learning more about equity and inclusion, as we mentioned earlier, these topics can be challenging to discuss. What is a good way someone can prepare for a tough conversation, whether it's with a colleague or a boss or a spouse or a family member?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

We have a training on difficult conversations at Lead with Equity specifically because they come up often in this work. And so the first thing that we go through with people is, what is the mindset that you're approaching this conversation with? It can be really easy to think, "Oh God, this is going to be a hard conversation. I really don't want to do this." But if you can get yourself into a mindset where you really believe that this conversation is an opportunity for me to deepen my relationship with this person,



because we've all had those challenging conversations, whether it's around these topics or something else where once you get through it, on the other side, you have a deeper understanding of the other person and vice versa.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

So if you can start with approaching it from that mindset, it's about building a deeper relationship with this person and I can see that deeper relationship on the other side, that can get you over the hump to start having the conversation. Second thing is to prepare. I am a big fan, this is silly, but I learned this from a previous organization, of recording yourself on your phone video and saying what you want to say and playing it back and seeing, 'does this come across the way that I am hoping will come across?'

**Lyn Wineman:**

Really good idea. And we've all got a phone in our hand almost all day every day, just do it and practice. It's such a good idea.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

Yeah. Credit all goes to the company that I used to work for which is called Own The Room. They use a lot of video in their programming. So that practice prepares whatever you need to do to prepare. It might be chatting it over with a colleague or a friend and getting their perspective and then deciding how you want to move forward. Third thing and I notice a lot of people this is an aha for them, when you're about to have the conversation, ask the person if they're ready to have it.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Oh, such a simple thing, but important.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

It's such a simple thing, but imagine that, let's say, I want to have a challenging conversation with my husband and I have been working from home all day and he's coming home from work. He gets home from work very late. It's 11 o'clock at night and he's getting home from work. And the first thing when he walks in the door, I'm like, "We need to talk about this thing." Not the right timing. And to give that person the opportunity to that, to say, "No, I'm not ready to have a challenging conversation right now. Can we table this to another time?" It just gives a little bit of agency back to that person.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

And then the last thing is to not be attached to whatever the person has to say. I think when we're for these conversations, it's like, "I'm going to say this and then they're going to say this, and then I'm going to say this, and then it's going to be resolved." We all do that in our heads. And that can get in the way of really listening to what the other person has to say.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

So I think to approach it with asking if you can have the conversation, say what you want to say, and that I'm doing this because I care and I want to deepen our relationship, and then stay quiet and just listen to what the other person's reaction is. And you can move on from there. Maybe there's a solution. Maybe there's not. Maybe you take some time away to both think about it, but being able to listen without attachment is really important.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Really good advice, Lillian. I think, too, it occurs to me that if you can really listen without attachment, which is maybe a phrase I've never heard of before, but as I think about it, it almost feels like it takes the pressure off of you as well when the pressure comes from trying to control the situation, but the reality is you can't control it. You can only control the way you present yourself and the way you receive the information. And once you accept that fact, I do think it ratchets down the pressure and you are free to listen a little bit more because you're not trying to impact the outcome. So for what it's worth.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I'm learning from you even as we're talking on this podcast, Lillian. You are a great teacher. So people who are regular listeners know that my favorite question is coming up next. And that is, Lillian, I am inspired by motivational quotes. I like to jot them down. I like to pop them up on my computer as a screensaver. I like to share them on social media. I just like these words of wisdom. And so could you give us a few of your own Lillian Forsyth words of wisdom for inspiration?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

It's a lot of pressure. The one I want to give you is a post-it that I have had on my computer here for the last year and a half since we've started Lead with Equity. And that is, "No one knew exactly what they were doing or where they were going when they first started."

**Lyn Wineman:**

Oh, powerful.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

It's been helpful for me as a new business owner, as an entrepreneur. But I think also as I'm thinking about this work, it's we're all trying to figure this out together. No one knows what the future is going to look like. We're building it as we go. And to just give yourself that grace, that starting is better than not starting even if you don't know exactly where you're going.

**Lyn Wineman:**

So good. I'm so glad I asked you this question, because I think now I need to put that on a post-it note and put it on my computer. So thank you for that Lillian. So for anybody who would like to find out more about work, about your company Lead With Equity, how can they find you, Lillian?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

Yeah, they can find, we have a website [leadwithequity.com](http://leadwithequity.com), all one word Lead With Equity.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I'm super excited that you got that URL because URLs are not easy to get these days.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

That is very true. I was surprised that it was available. And you can also follow us. We're on Instagram, we're on LinkedIn. You can find us at [@leadwithequity](https://www.instagram.com/leadwithequity), same thing, all one word. And I'm on LinkedIn as well. Lillian Forsyth, you can look me up. I love connecting with people and whether you have an idea for

how we could collaborate or have something in common or not, I love to connect with people either way.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's fantastic. So, Lillian, as we wrap up this great conversation today, what is the most important thing you would like people to remember about the work that you're doing?

**Lillian Forsyth:**

I think it's really that piece around this work being an approach and a mindset rather than an end goal or an end game. Of course, there are going to be goals along the way for your organization. There are going to be decisions. There are going to be policies, but as long as you continue to embody that mindset of, "I am approaching my work in an equitable way. I'm leading in a way that inclusion is always top of mind." I think that's where you're going to be able to identify what are the right goals, who do I need to be working with and be able to reach them.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Lillian, that is fantastic and I have so enjoyed this conversation. I fully believe the world needs more people like you, more organizations like Lead With Equity. Thank you so much for sharing with us today.

**Lillian Forsyth:**

Thank you, Lyn.

**Announcer:**

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities, or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from, visit [KidGlov.com](http://KidGlov.com) at [K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com](http://K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com) to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.