

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): I find that there's a lot of talk about belonging, but it's sometimes very abstract and folks don't really know how to get to it. Mm-hmm. , and what I love about this concept of employee resource groups is that it's a really tangible way to impact the employee experience in a way that is true to the needs of that community.

Jade Pichette (they/them): I'm Jade Pichette, they / them.

Erin Davis (she/her): And I'm Erin Davis and I use the pronouns she and her.

Jade Pichette (they/them): Welcome to Uncovering Belonging,

Erin Davis (she/her): a podcast that explores the professional and personal stories of unique voices of what it means to belong and the journey

Jade Pichette (they/them): to finding our authentic self.

Erin Davis (she/her): It is my distinguished pleasure to welcome Gwenna Kadima

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): thank you so much for having me.

Erin Davis (she/her): Gwenna Kadima, (she / her) is an award-winning Toronto -based, BIPOC Career Activator and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Consultant empowering marginalized individuals to achieve their highest professional potential through targeted macro and micro intervention. Gwenna catalyzes equality at the individual level as a BIPOC Career Activator, offering seminars, workshops, coaching, and other culturally relevant career development services to BIPOC students and professionals.

Simultaneously, Gwenna addresses systemic workplace barriers as an E D I consultant, developing and executing intentional DEI strategies and programming. Her areas of expertise are sustainable, employee resource, group enablement, and inclusive employee program design. Gwenna thank you for being here with us.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): Erin. Jade, thank you so much for having me. I am very excited to be here today.

Jade Pichette (they/them): I know that this is the first time that you and I are getting to meet Gwenna. How did you get into this work?

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): Yeah, it's funny with me coming into equity, diversity, and inclusion work. It was kind of by accident. So for a bit of context, I grew up in Edmonton, Alberta.

Uh, my dad is from the Congo. He's Congolese, and my mom is ex-generation white, Albertan. And so growing up as a mixed-race, Black woman in the prairies was at times very isolating. I didn't have a lot of consistent ties to my Black side, and didn't know a lot about African culture. So what really had me come to this initial understanding of my own identity as a black woman was after my first year of school at the University of Alberta, I took a summer internship in Camden, New Jersey.

And if you know of Camden, it's a couple of hours outside of Philadelphia. It's just across the river, and it was one of the areas that were really impacted by drug trades in the 1990s and was quite a large, marginalized community. Mm-hmm. And for me, as this half-Black girl who grew up in one of the whitest parts of Edmonton, Alberta, this was truly the first time that I was in a community that was predominantly people of.

And that summer, seven weeks only was really a shift in my understanding of my sense of self and my own identity. I felt like I could be a very different and much more comfortable version of me, which for the first 19 years of my life, I didn't even realize was something that I was missing. Hmm. And it was one of those moments where you realize it in the absence, right?

Mm-hmm. , because as soon as I came back to Edmonton, This light bulb moment of recognizing what a space like that meant for me, my sense of self, and my overall health and wellbeing. Hmm. So that was happening simultaneously with me being in my business program, knowing, okay, I like the people stuff. I like what's going on in terms of understanding how we work together, and how we collaborate.

Really focusing on the human side of how we go about our work. And in that never really felt like I found the exact career. Until compounding this understanding of self and what was going on in my personal reflections with a perfectly timed course on gender issues in the workforce, which full transparency was not the most intersectional, but was amazing as a grounding topic for me to understand that these things about identity and how we show up and who we are is actually a point of discussion within the workplace.

Mm-hmm. And so being a part of that course was enough to really sort of put the pieces together for me. In that I started to reach out to, at the time, the few

practitioners of diversity, equity, and inclusion who were in Edmonton.
Mm-hmm. I feel like I met basically as many of them as I could and have still maintained a lot of those relationships to this day, and really recognizing the work that they did.

And combining that with the sense of belonging and the sense of authenticity that I was able to bring forward in what felt like a more inclusive space really is what encouraged me and gave me the momentum to wanna be able to create that for others.

Erin Davis (she/her): I love that. And you raised this really interesting question, at least for me.

Have the people that we work with, do the people that we interact with on a day-to-day basis, have they spent the time to understand their identity? And is that potentially part of the privilege of not necessarily having to unpack that and just sort of inherently having the sense of belonging because everyone around you is just like you.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): Yeah, absolutely.

Erin Davis (she/her): So when you think about doing this work, how have you found a sense of belonging in different spaces?

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): So, when I think about having started my career at Accenture, it's one of those spaces where before I even truly knew the concept of an employee resource group, it's something that myself and a few peers naturally gravitated towards.

Hmm. Because what we had found is really remarkable about the organization is that they've had a foundation for ERGs for quite some time. When I was with the org, there was 12 of them in Canada, and although Accenture Canada always had an African American ERG there was this concept of, oh, Black employees in Canada can just hang out with the North American E R G.

What we really found was missing was this understanding of. The nuances of the Black experience being in Canada versus being in the US due to so many different factors between demographics and history, and also just day-to-day and cultural differences across the country. So what has always been an anchor point for me in terms of belonging is creating those spaces that are for us.

But also by us. Mm-hmm. , because having a bunch of Black analysts and consultants, so early entry level employees within our Canadian office, being able to say, Hey, what we need is different than maybe what our friends need yourself at the border. And having the space to create that in a way that's truly meeting our needs was kind of the catalyst for me to take this concept of what belonging felt like that summer way back when, and bring it into a workplace setting very tangibly, because I find that there's a lot of talk about belonging, but it's sometimes very abstract and folks don't really know how to get to it. Mm-hmm. , and what I love about this concept of employee resource groups, business resource groups, whatever you may call them.

Is that it's a really tangible way to impact the employee experience in a way that is true to the needs of that community because there's so often these grassroots initiatives that are built by us.

Erin Davis (she/her): Mm-hmm. , I love how you said, spaces for us by us. Yeah. There's that magic and the gift of offering that space to others. So I love that. Um, I'm gonna turn it over to Jade:

Jade Pichette (they/them): I wanna thank you so much already. So many of these pieces that I'm taking out of what you've talked about, you know, the absence that is often felt when we aren't even aware of what we are lacking to build that belonging and then we enter a space that brings us that, and sometimes that happens within employee resource groups within the work.

Sometimes it's other spaces that we find outside of work. Sometimes it's moments. I mean, I was just on a panel and the other two participants were also, uh, trans femmes who were neurodiverse and who were non-binary. And that's happened twice in my entire life where that was the case. And that sense of being not the only one is a powerful thing.

Um, so you've talked about absence, you've talked about the power of employee resource groups for us, by us, um, in disability communities. We use nothing about us, without us. What are some other barriers that you are seeing for people to achieve that belonging?

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): I find right now that so many folks are very, very focused on leadership, which is absolutely critical.

And I've had moments where I have seen the strongest representation from senior leaders, and it's amazing and it drives so much. But in those moments that will truly make or break your sense of belonging with the people that you

spend the most time with, that care and that attentiveness when it comes to really those culture makers in the middle is such a big part of the equation that I find is often missed and something that I recognize takes a level of maturity in an organization's e d I journey to get to that point of thinking about every single individual within this construct as a change maker. But it is something that I find when I've had my moments where I felt most out of place or most excluded.

It's not because of the folks with C and their title, but it's the folks that I see on a day-to-day basis that I spend the majority of my time with, who more often than not usually haven't even received the inclusion 1 0 1 training.

Jade Pichette (they/them): I hear this in my work as well all the time. This idea of almost the quote-unquote frozen, middle, or what I tend to say is the place that DEI goes to die.

Mm-hmm. Um, what do you see where those culture makers and those in the middle actually do make that change? Because I know that we have people, managers who listen to our podcast and want to be that person, but don't necessarily know how to be.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): There's really two sides to this question, right? One, it's about the onus on the individuals, which in an ideal world, everybody is like the listeners of the podcast and they're committed and they're ready and they wanna get this right.

However, on the flip side, we have to recognize that if we're still in this world where we have to give the business case for diversity, just hoping the best isn't going to get us to the results that we need. Right? So thinking about sort of the two sides of this answer, Really, the spaces where I've seen us be able to bring the most people along for the ride is around driving that accountability.

Mm. From a very tactical process and from a tactical performance recognition perspective. Because again, if we go back to the business case and we bring it back to dollars and cents, the areas where we see the most sort of buy-in for individuals to really be on board with this widespread across an organization is when it's been formalized in the way that individuals are actually recognized, evaluated, and rewarded.

Hmm. But when we think about the folks where they don't need all that, they know they get it, they're here for the right reasons. What I find has really just made it so tangible in a way, if I think about my own experiences and what we

see from the research is truly having those people that are genuinely invested in understanding.

What are the things that matter to each of us? And taking the time to individualize and know that it will take effort and it'll take work, and we might not always get it right, but making it very clear that the intention is to be better and not to cause harm. And to really listen is one of those things that despite the awkwardness or despite those discomfort, really comes forward.

And so to take that very tangibly, Thinking from a personal prior experience. I was working with one of our summer analysts a few years back when we were at Accenture. Lovely lady brought forward immediately. She is like, I have been burned in so many workplaces because I have ADHD and my teams have never known what to do with me.

I've gotten slapped on the wrists for so many things that I've articulated in the past, but have not been heard or understood. And so for me in that moment, myself and the rest of the team, immediately were like, okay, game, face on. We get it. We're here. We're present. Thank you for sharing this. Let's do everything we can.

And yet still me, midway through this summer with our summer analyst, find myself getting frustrated in these moments of. I've already told her this before. Why isn't this like, I swear I've mentioned this. This isn't happening at the rate that I expected. All of these things that frankly she had warned me and I had this moment of pause to realize I'm missing something in the vulnerability that she gave forward at the start of this summer to say, this is what I need, this is how I show up.

It was such a moment to one call back to that individual experience, but also totally got myself in gear and it felt awkward as could be in the moment, but immediately Googled effectively managing employees with A D H D, supporting employees with A D H D. And I was genuinely shocked by the number of resources available and the folks that have gone of their way to put forward their time and their effort to educate individuals like us.

And so taking all that forward, coming back and saying, honestly, I have not served you properly. I have not shown up in the way that you need me to. This is what I suspect is going on. Here's what I've learned. Here is what I am committing to changing. Does this resonate with you? Is there anything else that you need from me?

Let's actually have this discussion because I have failed you as an inclusive. And so really having those moments of being able to acknowledge when you get it wrong and get your act together asap and really show up and own that and chart a path forward are the moments that, for this analyst, for example, made it very clear it meant the world to her.

But as I reflect for the folks that have been the same for me, That vulnerability and humility in saying, I'm going to figure this out. I'm here for you, have meant so much more than the moments where folks have said all the right things in that very sort of superficial way.

Jade Pichette (they/them): Love just so much of what you just said there.

Our team at Pride at Work Canada, we're currently discussing leadership and what does leadership mean, and the number one thing that came up was accountability. And that's what you're describing here with that story. You're describing humility, you're describing vulnerability, you're describing transparency and accountability.

And how we show up is those small moments. And I think those are the moments that we build trust, that we build connection, and that trust and connection really go into this sense of belonging. Agreed. So moving forward, we really wanna look at what the future looks like, and so I know Aaron's excited to talk about this.

Erin Davis (she/her): Thanks, Jade. Now I wonder if we should worry less about how do we imagine that future that we're all sort of as practitioners working towards and just be more present in the now.

Jade Pichette (they/them): Fair point.

Erin Davis (she/her): And so I pose this question to you, Gwenna. I'm sure you have like a vision of Utopia, but I wonder if you see a bit of this, uh, juxtaposition between sort of the like big, airy, fluffy piece, but also these like tangible.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): I love that we're all working in this space where I've heard this for freeing so many times of I'm just working to become obsolete. Like I don't even, I shouldn't have a job by the end of this. So I love that. That is the goal, and to me that's sort of the definition of that utopia you're talking about, Erin.

And what I also recognize though, is that we'll be working at least for a little while, and for me personally, I try really hard to anchor myself in the tangible as much as possible because I recognize that although there are these huge systemic changes that we need to make and these huge shifts that will require all of us.

That change is going to be slow, and for me is part of how I think about this work. Again, sort of focusing on the tangible, yes, I do the DEI consulting work. I focus on the organizations and the systemic change, but I also think about my work as a bipo career activator, which is fully focused on that micro and really working with individuals to help them recognize that full transparency were operating in these spaces that were not made with us.

And it's gonna be a while before we see those shifts, so it's crappy that we have to be in these situations. But what are the ways that we can at least take some ownership and have a level of control over how we navigate these spaces, regardless of who built them. So I appreciate you calling this out, Erin, because we need that vision.

It's a huge thing for us to really understand what is the big piece that we're driving towards. But I also recognize that within our own capacities, especially recognizing the emotional labor that comes within this work, that there's only so much that we can do in a day. And so for me, it's really about why I focus on the specific areas I.

Career activator work and employee resource groups, because to me, that's where we get really tactical and where we can see those changes on a day-to-day basis for the folks that are operating in these systems today.

Erin Davis (she/her): I wanna pause for our listeners to reflect on this. Yes, we get the long-term vision, but if we're gonna truly make the change to get us there, it's about activating what's within our own capacities.

Jade Pichette (they/them): Definitely.

Erin Davis (she/her): So what is your one piece of advice that you'd like to offer to organizations working towards a world that is inclusive for all.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): When you inevitably have those individuals within your organization who are raising their hand to make change, empower, and invest in them.

Erin Davis (she/her): Mm-hmm.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): because again, back to this forest bias, you need to have marginalized folks at the center of this work. However, it's very important that you don't just leave us out to dry and be fully responsible for creating this change that we are already subject to as the ones who are limited or damaged by it. Mm-hmm. , but also now it's our responsibility to fix this problem that had been impressed upon us. Absolutely not. So when you see those folks, whoever they are, that. I wanna see this partnership with this community organization, or, Hey, I think that we could have a better experience for our interns, or we can think about new ways that we're going about recruiting talent and maybe driving towards those goals. Or, you know what? It's Ramadan and nobody said anything. Can you help me spread this message? There is so much validity and so much power in grassroots activation, especially within corporate workspaces, that truly to have that meaningful change. Let folks like us, roll with it, provide the coaching, provide the resources, whatever may be needed to maximize that impact.

Erin Davis (she/her): Mm-hmm.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): and what I do wanna call out and make sure that this is really conveyed at some point is that when I think about the best version of something like an employee resource group, which is fully a very good example of what grassroots activation can look like, but there's so many. A big part of it is really to recognize that there's a limit to what your ERG leads should even be doing in the work.

Absolutely, and this is a space full of rampant burnout and overexertion and emotional labor, and that we really need to recognize that these grassroots leaders who are doing this either side of the desk or as a small component of their overall work. They are known a proxy for having dedicated resourcing and support within A D E I function in an organization.

The onus shouldn't be fully on these people who've raised their hands as volunteers to create, activate, and execute upon your D E I strategy, whatever that looks like. They need the tangible sports from the organization as well.

Erin Davis (she/her): Amen. I love that.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): I would actually really love to add to that point, Erin.

Erin Davis (she/her): Let's do it.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): The thought that has crossed my mind in the moments where I've experienced immense burnout as I have been asked to be the black employee or be the e r G leader, whatever it may be. Are recognizing that this is not just a point of passion for me, passion is a huge part of why we end up investing and for many of us becoming practitioners in this space or fully dedicating to this space, but it's also deeply a matter of survival.

Erin Davis (she/her): Totally.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): And every time that I am brought into these forums, I am very cautious of who I end up doing this work with because I don't want to be in this position where I have to convince individuals that somebody who identifies like me, or similarly to me or across any level of marginalization deserves to feel safe and deserves to feel welcome.

Erin Davis (she/her): Exactly.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): For us, it's not always just a matter of passion. It's also this component of, if this work does not get finished, if we do not complete this work, then I can't be in these spaces safely. Hmm. I cannot show up. I cannot feel comfortable to even take up room. And so I really wanna emphasize this because being invested in DEI is being very different than being invested in financial strategy.

Mm-hmm. , there's no personal consequence to somebody. Financial strategy for fiscal year doesn't pan out right. But there is that deep, and this sort of speaks to that emotional labor, which a lot of folks not in this work, I don't think fully realize is that there is also this level of safety and protection and just baseline survival that really drives a lot of us in how we do this work that is really critical.

Erin Davis (she/her): A hundred percent. Thank you for raising that. And we are now at the best part of the podcast. But you know what? All the podcast is great, but we get to do rapid-fire.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): I am ready for the soundtrack. Play the music to start. Yes. I know what's coming.

Jade Pichette (they/them): If you could recommend one book, what would it be?

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): I have been loving the Red Rising Trilogy by Pierce Brown, dystopian sci-fi fiction. If I have those days where I'm like, I just need to shut off and I cannot deal with this work anymore, I am heads down and cannot wait for the sixth book in the series to come up and complete the trilogy.

Erin Davis (she/her): A break is a very good thing, so thank you for that. Next question, what brings you joy? No matter what

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): Spaghetti!

Erin Davis (she/her): I think we're getting like more food-related answers to this and I love it.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): There is nothing that makes me happier than spaghetti . Any form, any version. Cut in however you want. I take any type of pass at all. Like there will be moments where I'm on the phone with my best friend and she can tell and in some sort of mood, and the response will literally be pause.

Gwenna, have you had your spaghetti yet? And I'm like, no. That's why I'm so mad.

Erin Davis (she/her): Love it.

Jade Pichette (they/them): We all need that carbs fix once in a while. So I know this is a challenging one, but what's your theme song for today?

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): I know this will be the second shout-out in the podcast, but it is so worth it. What else can I do from Encanto by Diane Guerrero and Stephanie Beatres, because to me it is the anthem of authenticity, going away with perfection, creativity, and just. Joy and every single time love that song.

Erin Davis (she/her): I think I need to watch Encanto this weekend. Next question, who is someone that inspires you and how they create belonging but doesn't receive enough credit?

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): Big shout out to Denise Pinto. She was one of my colleagues at Accenture and she is one of the lead facilitators in Accenture's Innovation Hub.

Her facilitation style, which is just effervescent and warm and so welcoming, and back in 2020 when was real rough for a lot of folks, she facilitated the session with all of the Black analysts and consultants and the way that this woman created a. For all of us to really feel heard and safer and a sense of community as we went through what was an extremely difficult time for our community, is something that I bring forward consistently.

Erin Davis (she/her): Can't wait for you to share the episode with her.

Jade Pichette (they/them): And to close out today. What's one call to action you'd like from our listeners?

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): So for the folks that are leading the charge in creating more inclusive, equitable spaces, rest. REST is resistance. I am so obsessed with Tricia Hersey and everything she does through The Nap Ministry.

Just a reminder, need to rest. You have the right to rest. Pick up a little sci-fi, eat some spaghetti, whatever it may be. On the flip side, if you do not identify in that same way, just say thank you and acknowledge mm-hmm and support those that are doing this work and putting their all into it.

Jade Pichette (they/them): On that note, Gwenna, I wanna say thank you for all the work that you're doing.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): Not a setup, not a, not a setup.

Jade Pichette (they/them): So grateful for this conversation. I really look forward to us talking more.

Gwenna Kadima (she/her): Yeah, of course. Thank you so much for having me.

Jade Pichette (they/them): My goodness. Erin, thank you so much for bringing Gwenna onto the podcast today.

Erin Davis (she/her): I love Gwenna so much. I've been so fortunate to see her grow in the last number of years from us having this conversation in a coffee shop in Edmonton to seeing her doing this work every single day.

Jade Pichette (they/them): Her discussion of employee resource groups was great, but all the other pieces that she brought to the conversation today was the thing that I walked away with. Mm. Everything from the small moments to how

she missed something when it came to a colleague with ADHD and trying to support her in a good way.

Erin Davis (she/her): Yeah. Like she Googled: "supporting people with ADHD."

Jade Pichette (they/them): Yeah. The amount of resources that are out there is something that people just don't realize. Um. Mm-hmm. and those of us who are working in the D E I space, sometimes, we're not experts on everything, right? We just know how to look for things. , I feel like that's half of our job.

Erin Davis (she/her): Yes.

Jade Pichette (they/them): Another thing that I think struck for me was her call.

Erin Davis (she/her): I love that. So to our listeners, make sure you are taking time to rest

Jade Pichette (they/them): and if you can eat gluten sometime for pasta too.

Erin Davis (she/her): Yes,

Jade Pichette (they/them): I definitely owe her a pasta date, a spaghetti date at some point.

Erin Davis (she/her): I love it.

Thank you so much for tuning in. We hope you enjoyed, learned and uncovered deeper belonging with us. We would also like to thank and share a brief message from our sponsors, Pride at Work Canada.

Jade Pichette (they/them): For 2SLGBTQIA plus people in Canada to confront today's economic challenges. They need good jobs with rising incomes because of stigma, stereotypes, bias and discrimination against 2SLGBTQIA plus people. Empowering community members with skills is simply not enough of a strategy. Pride at Work Canada operates as a member services agency for employers offering institutional education and guidance to organizations that make a commitment to supporting 2SLGBTQIA plus inclusion. The vision we share with our employer members is a Canada, where every individual can achieve their full potential at work, regardless of gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

For more information about our membership and programs, please visit our website, prideatwork.ca.

Erin Davis (she/her): Many thanks to our production team editor and producer Shawn Ahmed. Communications, Luis Augusto-Nobre Marketing, Paulo Lima, and Production Support. Connor Pion. And of course, most of all, we'd like to thank you for joining us for this important discussion.

Connect with us on LinkedIn and let us know what part of today's episode resonated most with you. For more information about today's guest's links reference in a transcript, check out our show notes, which are available on Pride at Work Canada's website. Thank you so much for coming on this journey with us to uncover belonging.