

CUES 114: If Diversity Is Our Strength, Inclusion Is Our Superpower—an Interview With Michael Bach

James Lenz 0:04

You're listening to the CUES Podcast episode 114.

Hello, CUES Nation, Welcome to the show! My name is James Lenz CUES, Professional Development Manager. On behalf of Credit Union Executives Society, we thank you for joining us today. As you know, we use this podcast forum to speak with credit union industry leaders and cross-industry experts for a wide range of perspectives on trends and topics relevant to you.

Our guest for today is Michael Bach. Michael is internationally recognized as a thought leader, motivational speaker and subject matter expert in the fields of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. Having received numerous awards throughout his career for his work, Michael is the CEO of the Canadian Center for Diversity and Inclusion, which helps employers create inclusive workplaces in Canada and around the world.

He is also author of the book, [*Birds of All Feathers Doing Diversity and Inclusion Right*](#). In this episode, Michael shares his support why it is so important for organizations to have a diverse executive team. He will also share some action steps towards creating a more inclusive, representative and equitable society.

In addition, you'll have a chance to hear from a member of CUES podcast nation. One of our listeners submitted a question and we'll tackle that and more in this 114th episode of the CUES Podcast. Here's my interview with Michael Bach, CEO of the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion.

Hi, Michael, thank you for spending some time with CUES podcast nation today. Welcome to the show.

Michael Bach 1:52

Thanks so much for having me. It's great to be here.

James Lenz 1:54

Now, in an effort to get our listeners to get to know our guests a little bit I often ask my guests if they have a mantra or success quote that they live by professionally. Michael, do you have a success quote or mantra that you'd be willing to share with our listeners?

Michael Bach

That's a great question to start off with. I would say that it's a bit funny, but "what doesn't kill you didn't try hard enough." I'm, you know, a person who is constantly focused on moving forward and success and change. And I try to keep things a bit light in the work I do. And that's one of my favorite mantras.

James Lenz

I like it. Now, how do you define leadership? It's neat to follow a little bit about your evolution as a professional and now as leader of your organization. But can you explain what you mean by leadership and maybe give an example?

Michael Bach

Yeah, when we talk about leadership, we tend to talk about leaders, you know, the CEO, the C-suite executives. But I think that leadership is a behavior that can be exhibited by anyone in the organization because we all have the potential to impact our co-workers' experience in the workplace. Regardless of whether or not we are subordinates, whether we work directly with a person at all, we have the potential to impact that experience. And I would say that leadership is about how you act in an organization, in an environment, in a community, in terms of the way you treat other people because you set an example. And that's what leadership is, you lead by example. And it is about your own behavior regardless of whether or not you think you have any, any power in the organization. You have a lot of power.

James Lenz

Very nice. Now, Michael, you are the leader of the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion. What experiences led you to creating the Canadian Centre for diversity and Inclusion?

Michael Bach

I've been working in diversity for about sevenish years at that point. And I felt that there was really a gap in the Canadian landscape as it relates to diversity inclusion. There wasn't a single organization where I as a diversity and inclusion practitioner could turn to in order to access resources and really figure out what I was dealing with.

Keeping in mind Canada is the second-largest country in the world physically, but we've got a population that is smaller than the state of California. So, we have a very large country, small populations spread out quite dramatically. And then there's lots of different groups underneath the umbrella of diversity.

So, there was a real challenge in in looking at this conversation holistically across the country. So, I started to sort of scribble on the back of napkins what I envisioned would be helpful for me as a DEI practitioner and led that into some iteration and eight years later, I am now the CEO of the organization. And we're doing pretty good.

James Lenz

And just as a side note, where did you receive a lot of your training from?

Michael Bach

I went to Cornell University and did a Master's certificate in diversity management.

James Lenz

Wonderful, wonderful. We have a program through eCornell right now. A lot of our members are going through at the current time with this recording.

Michael Bach

So fantastic, great school now.

James Lenz

And so Michael, if you could share with us how your organization helps other organizations today. I mean, what resources does your organization provide?

Michael Bach

So, we're an educational charity and meaning that we provide employers with educational opportunities around diversity and inclusion that comes in the form of monthly webinars, which we do at least two a month on a variety of topics. We do, at least historically, we've done in person events twice a year; we're now doing those online. And we do an annual conference, again, which we're doing online, but normally, it would be done in nine communities across the country.

So, we we look at it from a scaling perspective of, you know, a webinar, it's one hour, it's, you know, it's informational. It's not necessarily a deep dive. Our community of practice events get a little deeper, and then our conference gets much deeper. It's a full-day exploration of one topic. So, each of those kind of builds on the other. And then we do our own research. We develop toolkits. Again, the whole focus for us is on, how do we help employers create inclusive workplaces by creating resources that will help them with that work.

James Lenz

Thank you for sharing that. Michael. It says on your website, if diversity is our strength, inclusion is our superpower. What do you mean by that?

Michael Bach

I live in the city of Toronto. And one of our mottos in the city is "diversity is our strength." And Toronto is a very diverse city. We have people from hundreds of different countries that call Toronto home. And I came up with that slogan, as I was working on my first book, because it's not enough to just have diversity, we have to have inclusion. We have to create spaces where people can not only exist but can be welcomed. They won't face racism, violence, sexism, homophobia, etc. And I think that in order for us to make sure that our spaces are welcoming, we need inclusion as our superpower. It's our our special strength, this thing we can do that will get the most out of our people, that will create higher levels of engagement and productivity. It is the the secret sauce, if you will, on top of diversity, because we talk so much about diversity and probably not enough about inclusion.

James Lenz

And just for clarity purposes for our listeners, could you define diversity and inclusion?

Michael Bach

Sure. So the word diversity is about difference. It is about all of the things that make a person unique. We tend to historically look at underrepresented or marginalized groups: women, people of color, people with disabilities, Indigenous people or Native Americans, LGBT people. But the truth is the word diversity is about difference of all kinds. And that includes straightway able-bodied men, not to say that they're marginalized or underrepresented. That's not the point. It is to say that they are different from me. As a gay man who lives with a disability, they are different from me. And so diversity is about all the things that make you different.

Inclusion is about creating space where all of those things are welcome, where people can come to work, or go to a community center or a school or a credit union, and be welcomed and be embraced for who they are.

Just before we recorded this, I was actually on a call and was talking with the person about me and my husband. And at no point was there any hesitation in their voice. They referred to my husband as my husband. We are legally wed. And that is an act of inclusion in making sure that there wasn't a pause, that they didn't change the language and say partner instead of husband, that I felt welcomed in that conversation. And that's what inclusion is all about.

James Lenz

All right. And you know, now would be actually a good time based on what you just stated recently. We had a listener question that pertains to the subject we're talking about here today. And it is Russ Siemens, I'm going to go ahead and play his audio right now and wondered if you could respond to his question.

Russ Siemens 9:50

My name is Russ Siemens, and I'm a director on the board of Innovation Credit Union in Saskatchewan, Canada. And my question is this: "The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion says that encouraging and promoting awareness of what racism is, and what it isn't, is a necessary requirement for effectively addressing systemic racism. So, what can credit unions do to lead in the discussion and understanding of what systemic racism is, and equally important, what it is not? That's my question."

Michael Bach 10:25

So, it's a great question. And we're living in a time when we're having conversations about systemic racism. And I'm personally very pleased that we're having these conversations. I think the first thing that credit unions can do is acknowledge that systemic racism exists, that our countries, the United States, Canada, are built on what is effectively racist principles.

We're colonized countries. We came to these lands, our forefathers came to these lands and took the land from the Indigenous peoples of these lands. We have to acknowledge that. We have to acknowledge that there are systems of racism in place in every aspect of society.

Owning property, credit as a whole, these are concepts that may or may not be foreign to Indigenous peoples. And so that's the first step.

Then it's examining everything that you do as an organization and figuring out where there are opportunities for change, to be more inclusive, to break down those walls of systemic racism. And I'll give you an example. These are very benign examples, but they're ones that I think really articulate the situation.

So, every university in Canada and the United States has an English department. They then have a languages department. Now to my understanding, English is a language. And yet, we have a separate department for English because of course, it is supposedly the dominant language in our countries. Canada, however, is a bilingual nation. We also have, I'm in the city of Toronto, as I mentioned, and something like 48% of the citizens of Toronto don't speak English or French as a primary language. It's debatable whether or not English is actually our dominant language. But having a languages department versus an English department is a constant reminder that English is the preferred language. It's the better language. And that's a benign example. But it's one that really articulates, maybe we could put English under languages to acknowledge and recognize that all language has value.

Another example in universities would be that every university has a classics department. But what's covered under classics? It's exclusively Greek and Roman. There is nothing under classics that covers anything from Asian communities, African communities, of the whole Ibero American or South American communities, Indigenous communities. Why? Why don't we get classics that cover indigenous experience? That's a classics class I would love that I would love to take. But again, it sends a message that the Euro-centric approach to life on earth is the better, is the preferred. And it's a matter of breaking down those systems.

So to answer this question, it's about looking at everything you do and figuring out where the barriers are and then dismantling them. And it really is very much hitting reset. Blow it up and start over. You may find that the best way to do things is the way you were doing them. But as long as you've done that in consultation with different communities, then you will get to the right answer versus making the assumptions on their behalf.

James Lenz 14:08

Great articulation there, Michael, and I think you're gonna bring up a lot of discussion from a response. I think it's even, you know, unexpected from that example, but it just showcases an example of how to use that kind of thought and logic and other forms and practices. So yeah, thank you.

Michael Bach 14:25

It's important to remember that what we're not talking about necessarily is individual acts of racism. You know, I call someone the N word. That is an individual act of racism versus the systems of racism that our countries are built on. And that's what we're trying to focus on.

James Lenz

All right now. Can you articulate to our readers a few reasons why it is so important for a business or an organization to have a diverse executive team and what are some you know, list off, but what are some action steps to create a more inclusive, representative and equitable society?

Michael Bach

Well, the reason why it's important is simply about talent. If you, if you look at the numbers, and I'm going to do these off the top of my head, I don't have them written down. But people of color in the United States make up roughly about 40-42% of the available workforce and in Canada, it's about 23%. If you look at the number of women who have graduated with undergraduate degrees, it's now 60% of undergraduate degrees are taken home by women, but it's been over 50% since 1979-1980. If you just look at the sheer numbers, you cannot tell me that if you look at an executive team that is predominantly or exclusively straight, white, able-bodied men, that you actually have the best and the brightest, you don't. Statistically you don't, because you don't have a representative amount of talent. So the number one reason is about talent. It's about making sure that you are in fact hiring and promoting the best and the brightest.

The number two reason is the customer. And it is about who is walking in the door to do business with your organization. Credit unions, as an example, are a relatively North American concept. You know, if you go into China, as an example, that concept doesn't really exist in the same way it does here in Canada or the United States. So, you then have an uphill climb in terms of convincing newcomers to our lovely continent that they should, instead of going with Bank of America or TD that they should go with a credit union. So, it's about the customer. It's about the changing face of the customer. In the United States, we bring in a million newcomers a year and in Canada, it's about 400,000. So that's 1.4 million new potential customers every year. It's about who the customer is. It's about making sure that you're recognized as an inclusive organization for customers.

And the third is your brand. And how are you known as an organization, which of course impacts the customer and your talent. Because of course, if you're known as a homophobic organization, as a sexist organization, etc., I'm not applying to that organization. And ... or I'm not doing business with that organization. It's a circle. It's a three-legged stool, and each piece is interconnected. And it's a simple business case. It's not about the right thing to do. I don't use the social justice argument of the right thing to do. And that's because, simply put, it assumes that we all know what the right thing to do is and it assumes we all agree that it's the right thing to do. It's the right thing to do for your business. It's the right thing to do for your top and bottom line. The social impact happens. But I believe that in order for it to be long term, it needs to be part of your operations and you need to look at it from a business perspective.

In terms of what you can do to be more inclusive, and I outlined this in the book, there's sort of a six-step process that I've outlined.

Write a business case. Why does it matter? Why are you focused on this?

Conduct some form of assessment. Understand what the challenges are that you're facing.

Develop a strategy. How are you going to address the problems that you have identified,

Execute on that strategy. This is where we do the hard work

Measure. How are you going to know if you've been successful? Everything you put in your strategy should have some form of measurement, and then rinse and repeat.

Understanding that diversity inclusion is a journey without a destination. You are constantly on this road toward something and the finish line is just constantly moving. So, you have to go back and revisit your strategy. You have to conduct an assessment every few years. You have to come up with a new strategy, etc., etc., etc. It's a constant effort.

But the whole point is, it's work. I promise you: If you do nothing, nothing will happen. If I don't go to the gym, I don't lose weight. Trust me, I can speak from experience. But if you do nothing, nothing will happen. And this is the number one failing of employers that I've seen, not just in Canada, in the United States, but around the world in doing this work, where they think that a potluck lunch is somehow creating an inclusive environment. It is not. It's lunch. So you need to put in the effort and treat it as a real business priority.

James Lenz 19:40

Great clarity, Michael. In this conversation that's, you know, 30 minutes long, I'm sure by the end here, but it's more than that. It's going to bring out a lot more discussion. Thanks to you!

In addition to that, I was going to bring up what you just mentioned your book. It's entitled birds and we ... by the way, you said your first book, so that means you have a second book that you're writing. So we have to connect with you in another episode here the future. But Michael, you authored the book entitled [*Birds of All Feathers Doing Diversity and Inclusion Right*](#). Can you share some insights for our listeners in case they want to consider purchasing it?

Michael Bach 20:17

Yeah, it's a how-to guide. It is very much sort of the roadmap. When I wrote it, I envisioned a variety of different readers, I envisioned CEOs and C-suite executives. I envisioned middle managers, entrepreneurs, sole proprietors, people who are just looking at this diversity and inclusion thing and thinking, How do I do this? And so, I wrote a book that said, here's how you do it. Just read these 200 pages, you'll be fine. It really isn't that challenging. And I wrote it in a way that is simplistic to some extent, and it really does have all the answers in very, very concrete ways so that there wasn't this, "Okay, I read the book and then I have to hire Michael Bach to write my strategy." No, you don't. You don't need to do that. You can write it yourself. Here's the process. It's also a fun book. Like I use a lot of humor in it. I fancy myself funny. I don't know if I actually am. But you know, whatever. It's a good thing I'm reading a book. You don't have to wait for the laughter. And it is a quick read. So, it takes about I'm told it takes

about two and a half, three hours to read it. If you listen to the audiobook, it's about five hours because I talk really slowly during the audiobook. But it's, you know, I think it serves its purpose of helping anybody who reads it to get their brain around their role in addressing diversity and inclusion.

James Lenz 21:50

Terrific. If listeners want to get a hold of you, your organization, your book, can you share best means to doing so?

Michael Bach 21:57

Absolutely. If you want to get in touch with me, you can go to my website, michaelbach.com. Or you can connect with me on social media. I'm @diversitydudemb.

James Lenz 22:09

That's fantastic. Thank you, Michael for being such an enthusiastic and insightful guest on today's show and sharing your insights with CUES Podcast Nation.

Michael Bach 22:17

Thanks for having me.

James Lenz 22:19

Thank you for listening to this show, CUES Podcast Nation!

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You may also recall that Michael Bach received the training from Cornell University. At the time of this recording CUES has a full class of participants currently going through our first offering of our diversity, equity and inclusion Cornell certificate program. To find out how you can earn the prestigious diversity equity inclusion certificate program that CUES offers, visit cues.org/ecornell-dei.

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