

Audio Transcript

Episode #:	24
Guest:	Dr. Napoleon Wells
Working title:	Beyond the Talk: How to Weave DEI Into the Fabric of VA Leadership

Dr. Shari Dade:

You are now listening to The Audacity to Fail podcast, a podcast about mis stepping into success. Get ready to dive into conversations and real stories from leaders as they share. How failure activates a growth mindset is an important part of learning and motivation for improvement. I'm your host, Dr. Shari Dade, psychologist with the National Center for Organizational Development.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Thank you for tuning in. Let's get started.

Announcer:

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Dr. Shari Dade:

During the first season of this podcast, we focused on how to approach beginning the conversation of diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, access and justice. And three years later, leaders are now being asked What now? They are being called to move beyond the talk. And yet I know many leaders who struggle with knowing what practical next steps to take that will move us from intention to actions and create the organization that practices the diversity, equity and inclusion that so many of us desire.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Today, I'm pleased to be able to sit with a friend, a colleague and mentor, Dr. Napoleon Wells. Dr. Wells is a clinical psychologist and readjustment counselor that performs a full range of assessment therapy and care management services at the Columbia Vet Center. He served veterans and their families and the advocacy interest of black families. He holds the identities of polymath chess player and black speculative fiction author.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Get ready to join us as we explore the journey of missed stepping into success. This is the Audacity to Fail Podcast Episode 24. Beyond the Talk How to Weave DEI into the Fabric of VA Leadership. Hi, Napoleon. How are you?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Hey, Shari. Greetings.

Dr. Shari Dade:

It's so amazing to have you here today.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

I can't tell you how pleased I am. It's a pleasure to be here with you. You know that already.

Dr. Shari Dade:

I first want to start by letting the audience know that you have supported me from the moment I stepped foot into my career at the VA. Absolutely. And the commitment you have to this topic permeates through the work you do within and outside of our enterprise. So, it's an honor to sit down and have this conversation with you for so many reasons.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Thank you, Shari. I think being in a position where I was and we initially met when I was a leader in VA, I think identifying talent like yourself was easy. You came in and hit the ground running like you, in fact make leadership good sound and easy in that approach. So, it was a pleasure working alongside you and thank you for having me here.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Absolutely. And so, I know you mentioned, you know, when we first met, you were a leader within the VA and were. Is that past tense? Right.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

And so, it's going to stay there.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Where can you share your path through leadership within the VA or how do you and I play a role in that journey?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Oh, well, I started as an intern, then post-doc, then program manager, right out of postdoc, right. For a PTSD treatment program out of Montgomery, Alabama. Big shot to the folks in Alabama for the work that they're doing there. Then from being a program manager, moved into leadership again over at the Columbia, the Dawn VA, which you're all too familiar with over on that side.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Right. So, with regard to DEI playing a role, I think I was always mindful of the reality that we serve a very diverse veteran population who live in a very diverse world and there isn't any mental health specific work that we do that isn't designed to help our patients and their families function within that

real world. So, if we're not focused on the issues of diversity and equity and inclusion, we're not really preparing them for the world that they're moving into with the skills we're trying to build in them.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

And that's the same for the specialists who we train and the professionals who we work with. All of that's coming through the door. How do we gear them toward not just knowing what they know about their specialty, but how do you communicate with people? How do you build rapport with people who are culturally different, who are ethnically different, who are different with regard to age, who are different with regard to the region of the country and a world they may be from?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

I would say that VA at this point plays it a little too safe in our training. And so, as a result, we have some very underdeveloped professionals. You came in and I think one of the things I observed immediately was you had that same point of view, like, I need to know the breadth of the community I'm serving and how to communicate to them.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Absolutely, because a lot of work around health, you can get people invested in that if you speak their language. And part of that comes down to the who are we building? Who are we plucking from with talent? And even how are we going about identifying and bringing talent in and then retaining them the impacts that as well? Yeah, we've got a lot to talk about with your lives.

Dr. Shari Dade:

This talk of lots, lots to talk about. And you know, it's so great that we are focusing in on this topic and I want to be transparent with the audience and share that. We were actually going to talk about something completely different. We were literally up until about two days ago and I had a conversation that really sparked the need to shine a light on how to move from having just these conversations among leaders or among employees into action and implementation of the and I practices, just as you're talking about.

Dr. Shari Dade:

So, when you think about the state of the AI in our system, kind of what you just mentioned, how can the VA better incorporate those DNI practices across the levels and things like you said, training practice, even communicating with our patients?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

I think your organization has given us a model. We have to go to the people who represent the spaces that we want to work well in. In the same way that your organization asks employees how listen, what are the issues? How can we improve them? What do you want to see differently? If you want to see more black women in leadership, you have to go to black women who work in VA spaces and ask them directly what they've been confronted with.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

What obstacles have been placed in their way and in large numbers. And we have to document that and ask black women, in particular Latinx women, a particular person, Asian women in particular, Asian women in particular. Okay, what plan should we put into place? Because we can't just take what their concerns are. They have to be involved collaboratively in the problem-solving space as well.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Can you tell us what solutions would work for you? A lot of the leadership is placed in position out of convenience. You've been here long enough. It doesn't always have to do with talent. It doesn't always have to do with ability. It doesn't always have to do with understanding the system. It's just longevity. And that's problematic. It creates a grandfathered effect.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

So, if you haven't had persons of color, people who are who identify in any different ways, if you don't have the younger employees who have access to that system, they're always barred from it because people stay in those positions for a long time. I think we're going to have to create not just opportunity, we're going to have to go to those who have been shut out and say to them, where have you been?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Shut out? What do we need to do differently for you? Do we need to create specific spaces for you to be in? And then always, because the VA works with committees and then it works with action plans, we have to have committees that are made up of the people who have been shut out action plans that they signed off on.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

And I think your organization in particular, let's go back to those committees every year and look at the action plan every year. I think that's the only way to move VA is to make sure that there is a plan in place. And okay, here is in fact, with this action plan, it's and how many items have we gotten to?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

So, we'll have to be practical in that way.

Dr. Shari Dade:

I think it definitely moves beyond the point of let's just look at the numbers. It really moves into. Let's have a conversation, let's actually immerse ourselves in what we might be missing or those gaps that we may have throughout our enterprise. So, when I when I do think about enhanced DEI capacity in our organization, it really makes me think about it in a similar way to how we approach and learning a new language.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Sure. So, I took multiple Spanish classes out of high school, college, Duolingo, right? Like, I'm in this space and I'm really trying to learn this language. And if I'm honest, much of my ability that I use in to be able to use Spanish has stayed steady at beginner, maybe intermediate level. But that's if I'm being really generous. Right.

Dr. Shari Dade:

And after mentioning this to one of my bilingual friends, she basically said, well, that's because you've never been immersed in the language. Correct. And she was right. Like I had never been immersed into a space where I had to be able to use the language in order to move through day to day. Right. It was always an add on like, oh, you know, I'm studying tonight or I'm doing this or I'm in this class.

Dr. Shari Dade:

And so, it really makes me think about the way that we approach D And I oftentimes we aren't immersed in it. We are able to weave it into our fabric because it is an add on. And so, when you think about the leaders within our system, what are some practical steps that they can take to keep that momentum going after just having those initial talks or maybe just looking at the numbers and saying, oh, we're good, we checked off that box.

Dr. Shari Dade:

You know.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

I think leadership has to be willing to be uncomfortable. And I appreciate your example, right? I think of my own use of the Spanish language. And it came from being from the Bronx. Right. You know, so I have a number of Puerto Rican and Dominican friends immersed in it, but it's given me a certain understanding of how the language is used in different ways, not always.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Just literally, I think our leaders are going to have to be willing to be uncomfortable in the same way, right? If a leader is trying to grow its system and to include different kinds of people, if you want to identify, say, black employees in a given city, say Colombia, where I am, for an example, why one should be at the HBCU, right?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Why wouldn't you be in a space with those next level where those next steps being taken with your employees who are going to be coming in the future? Why wouldn't you be pressing your organization and your enterprise to develop organizations, groups, even treatment spaces for veterans that center on important parts of their identity, and then you as a leader, being present and being uncomfortable and hearing directly that language.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Here's what I need to be mindful of. And so, they're going to tell me what kind of leader I need to be. Our leaders are too far removed. So, a part of the problem is our leaders have to have boots on the ground. They, in fact, have to be involved not just with the numbers themselves, but with the practical day to day human capital.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Come on. Managing relationships. Right. We focus heavily on the diversity piece. I would imagine. And that's really what people mean, right, where inclusion comes down to Do I have all of the areas of that given segment of my population represented. So, it's easy enough if I can find someone who happens to, in fact, I don't know, represent the Latin X community who I get along with, who doesn't muddy the waters for me, who practices in the same way I do.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

So, I've got the diversity covered. Inclusion is no. How do I celebrate your identity? How do I create an environment that allows you to do the best job and to feel fully human and to bring your full self? Because that's going to allow me to understand how I can work with my patient and veteran population. We're not willing to be truly uncomfortable.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

We're not willing to be forward thinking in that way within our enterprise. And so, what our leaders have to do is to literally kind of sit down cross-legged, get into a circle with other leaders who may serve them and say, okay, how do I better serve this population? How do I serve you? How much of your identity have I made a room for?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

It's going to take a lot of practice and not just a lot of listening. Again, I think in every moment we're going to come back to what is our plan going forward. Have that community that you spoke to, have they given you your marching orders? I say all of the time. One, we should never allow people to declare themselves our ally.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

We should never allow people to independently say, I am an ally of said community. The community should dictate to the individual. This here's the list of items I need. Here's the agenda. Go forward and complete this agenda and then you are checked off as an ally. Otherwise, it's just hubris. We allow our leaders to focus on being proud, right?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

So, we're going to have a program which serves absolutely no one in the long term. How do we get to a place where we say no? The plan has been developed by those who know, by those who have lived it. And then we go about implementing that plan on every level of the system of our enterprise.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Yeah, yeah. No, I think you raise a really good point about the willingness to be uncomfortable because it is uncomfortable just thinking about that language metaphor, right? It is uncomfortable for me to think about. Let me just, you know, be immersed in this this language, or let me allow myself to be vulnerable enough to not know how to manage, how to navigate for a while.

Dr. Shari Dade:

And oftentimes that can be a barrier to actually making a move forward. When you think about leaders who may be sitting within their oath saying, you know, I really would like to do this, I'd like to keep moving. But that discomfort is really what's holding me back. What are some ways that you would encourage them to push through some of that discomfort?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Yeah, I think often if you have the appropriate support system and give yourself incentives, then you can do so, right? Anyone who's struggling with the language, I would tell them, think about traveling. Right. Well, what is it going to feel like when you're immersed in a community and you're around the food and the culture and the people and you're enjoying yourself and it's tremendous because you've had those experiences, I would say to a leader, imagine how effective your system is going to be when you bring in all of the possible talent that is already present and living in the space that your system and enterprise are shifting toward, the demographics are changing, you would want?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

to be in front of that. So, imagine what you're going to look like a year or two from now when you've approached each of those areas and you've already had the committees and now, you're a center of excellence for developing DTI practices on the front end. So, I would try to have them determine how you're going to incentivize yourself and then surround yourself with people who are those in those spaces, regardless of what their background is or where they work within my enterprise, where those people who can advise me, the truly uncomfortable part for them is going to be surrendering some of what feels like power.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

I'm going to have to be a student for a period of time, and I would suggest that that's the most important part of the practice of saying What do we need to learn from the communities that aren't being represented? What can they tell us? And then how do we take their agenda and what they've said and then bravely make it a plan.

Dr. Shari Dade:

For sure, This act of surrendering power. Right. And how difficult that often feels for so many people because it does in fact, alarm your system that it's a threat. Right. Especially if we carry the mindset that if I surrender something, then that means someone else is going to be the conqueror, right?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Because it's power, right? You know, if I give up three things, then I won't have enough.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Then what do I have? And, you know, I often think about the just encouraging people to think about when we empower others, it actually does create more power, right? It doesn't, in fact, pull away it power from us. It allows for all of us to be more powerful. And so, I like that idea that you're saying around like the surrendering of power for the greater in order to create more power for all of us to feel empowered in this space.

Dr. Shari Dade:

When you think about teens who are really focusing in on moving the needle forward past the talk through kind of just the conversation of diversity, are there spaces that you think teens can support one another and what do those look like?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

So, what if the teams yeah, what if the teams had the goal specifically of developing what the DEA plan would be for their area for training? Because it and to then expanded how are we better serving our population. Right. And maybe that's the approach if we're going to be most efficient and then we're going to retain the very best talent.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

And if we're going to build the most culturally responsive system, maybe we know exactly what we need and develop those plans on our level. All right. And then expand those plans forward. But I think I appreciate what your organization does where it asks the questions of the employees themselves. Right. Right. We need to know exactly what your experience is.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

So maybe let's go to our patient population because your team has the best access to them. The director doesn't necessarily. Right. So, on that macro level, do we start where we are and then create a plan where we are? What teams can do is to be a little more focused. All right. So, if you're thinking about that language metaphor that you've provided, which is brilliant, again, regionally, there are going to be different dialects, right?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

That you're going to have to learn where you are. Teams are going to have that dialect and then bring it to the middle.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Of course, of course.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

When we're thinking about diversity, we're thinking of all identities within the human spectrum. Yeah, and how those are represented. So, asking all of the questions and we see all of that within our veteran population, we really do have the opportunity if we are very courageous and in a very brave way, to build a system that is completely responsive to all areas of diversity and inclusion.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

So, teams can very likely create the smaller plan that becomes a portion of the major plan.

Dr. Shari Dade:

I do appreciate the idea of allowing the teams to be kind of the starting ground for some of that planning, some of that initiative creation, because oftentimes it's kind of like a crowdsourcing of sorts. Right? Let's source the crowd. Let's see what's needed from the ground there. And then we start to build off of that foundation. And I think it really does hold in step with what you're saying about leaders being able to surrender some of that power, take a seat down and say, hey, what do you all see?

Dr. Shari Dade:

What are your experiences? What might be the needs here? And then allowing that to be the foundation of which the action plan is built going forward?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

I think we've just solved the problem.

Dr. Shari Dade:

So, you if you look at the idea of affinity groups, right, you shoot me for a plan and oftentimes they are looked at as kind of space of just support when actually they can be the spaces of idea generation, right, of action generation, commitment generation. And so I think when we do create these spaces, like using utilizing them as not just like, oh, they're here to support everyone and you guys feel better, but it's a space to really say, you know, these are the things that we might be missing, that typically, you know, this, this majority group or other group that holds the power may not be able to see.

Dr. Shari Dade:

And so, allowing that ability to see, to be in those affinity groups is really important.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

Dr. Shari Dade:

When you think about kind of creating those action plans, how can leaders actively value there, like the true commitment to some of these action plans? What would that look like?

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

That's a difficult question because I think we're in a space where people might say they're committed. I don't know if true commitment can be represented in any way other than results. When we're talking about the VA space and our enterprise, the only way to know is that we've accomplished this thing. And the group that developed the item gave you feedback on what they are noting of your progress is going to be.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

And here's what they're saying. So even though we didn't accomplish it, here's the progress that we've seen. I think identifying the Progress toward action plan, identifying what that progress looks like, has to come down to the community needs that are developing the plans or should be developing the plans themselves. It has to come down to those who are organically on ground level and frontline giving feedback to leadership about the progress that they've made.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

I think that it has to be audacious and the only way we get committed is to make it audacious and to then say, no, we're going to have those who are most affected by tell us how we're doing, has to be like a marriage. Has to be, Yeah, I'm holding room for you. You tell me if I'm over here chopping a tree down and you told me the way to show you love is to help you break these leaves.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

And I'm over here sweating and saying, I'm working hard shop in this tree, but I'm not loving you. In a way. You have instructed me to love you.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Very sure.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

I need you to be able to show you how many these leaves I wake up with you. All right, so my sweat equity over there means nothing. That's just a number I came up with. To say that I work hard. I need to be over here. We're going to count it by the number of bags of leaves that we go to.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

You, to those community, to those communities, those populations, and say, no, you tell me how I'm doing. May not like to hear, but I need to know so that I can try and improve it, because that's how we're going to know if the progress toward real goals that truly impact people, whether training, whether retention, whether recruitment, representation, practice, whether or not it's being.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Made, certainly. Well, this is been an amazing episode. And, you know, it's crazy that 30 Minutes is already here, but it doesn't feel great yet. PLU It's been great to have this conversation with you because I do think it does shift the paradigm and, you know, brings in some different points around action and what could actually happen. The thing that I'm left with is how do we create the things that we aspire to be right?

Dr. Shari Dade:

And oftentimes that does take audacity and oftentimes that that takes moving out of what's comfortable and being willing to be audacious in our movements. And so, yeah, so thank you. Now to probably leave, I'm going to play this game of word association here with you and get your thoughts on a couple of phrases, couple of words, and see where we go from there.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Okay. We got so the first phrase is inclusion.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Missing, not missing. And I think it's missing in almost every segment of American life. That's why I said missing.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Yeah. Yeah. The next is diversity hopeful.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Yeah, hopeful. Yeah. Yeah. I think, you know, it's natural we're seeing more bodies that are diverse in more spaces, but that's where that missing piece comes in as well. I don't know if the points of view, a lot of times those brown and other bodies are kind of trimming and exercising themselves so that they're more palatable to what has been the majority, you know, but the emerging majority needs more space.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

So, I'm hopeful, hopeful. The same for more hopeful.

Dr. Shari Dade:

The last is audacity to fail.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Oh, I think it's the only way to live right, is to be willing to fall forward and out full speed. You know, I constantly tell my son, no, if you're going to pick that direction and be willing to crash, go in that direction. And that's okay, we'll pick you up. So now I think it's an amazing concept. I wish more people

and even in times some days, myself included, that we live that way, you know, that we took a lot more chances, you know, and I will say it here, I'm proud of you and the work that you are doing.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

You know, like I love being able to say no, I know. Shari Damon is the host. No joke. You know, she calls me her mentor. But the reality is, you know, the sisters running around here like Flash, she has good money. She is a superstar. And I love everything that you're doing. Sisters, I'm so proud of you.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Much appreciate it. So much. Appreciate it. Well, thank you, Napoleon, for being on today's episode. And we'll continue to push this push this forward.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

You know, for sure. And until anyone who is in the VA who hears it, if they want to get into a game of chess and they want to lose badly, I'm the man. I'm the best chess player in all of enterprise. They can come in. All right.

Dr. Shari Dade:

All right. Well, thank you.

Dr. Napoleon Wells:

Thank you so.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Much. So, we've come to the end of another great episode of the Audacity to Fail podcast. Thank you for tuning in to learn how missteps can lead to growth and success, be sure to check out the key lessons in the show notes for a refresher. To request services from the National Center for Organization Development, check out our Web site also linked in the show notes.

Dr. Shari Dade:

Remember, if you missed the target 100 times, you have not failed. Instead, you've simply found 100 strategies that did not work, be well and continue to go forward until next time. Thank you.